

The Five Millimeter Phenomenon: The Hornady And Ruger .204

By Dave Biser



The Ruger .204 cartridge is available in 32-grain and 40-grain loads using Hornady V-Max bullets.



The front of the Ruger Model 77 MKII bolt shows the massive, nonrotating extractor.

THE INTEREST

When I first read of the release of the .204 Ruger, I was not overly excited about it. But I have a lot of respect for both Hornady and Ruger. If these two companies do something, sure, they want to make money, but they also probably have good, consumer-oriented reasons to do it. The new cartridge must have a great deal to offer to many. And there was another factor, when it came to me and most any .20-caliber cartridge.

Back in the 1970s, I worked with a guy named Ray. Ray was, as were many of my West Virginia friends, a dedicated hunter. If Ray was not at work, it was a fairly safe bet that he was out hunting.

Often on night shift, Ray would drop by the lab on his breaks and we would talk hunting and guns. Sometimes several guys dropped by, and the whole thing would turn into a gun talk party. Ray kept talking about his wonderful 5mm rimfire. "It will kill everything from squirrels up to and including deer," he said. "It's got more speed and accuracy and killing power than the .22 Magnum."

I started looking into the strange little 5mm Remington cartridge. I soon learned that the .20-caliber rimfire was indeed, in the opinion of many, as good as or better than the .22 Winchester Magnum Rimfire. It had been created by necking down the .22 Rimfire Magnum to .20 caliber. This

might be the perfect round for rabbits, tree squirrels, and the occasional opossum, skunk, fox, house cat, domestic dog, or raccoon that got into the chicken house. It may be especially good for woodchucks or, as we called them, "whistlepigs" or "groundhogs."

I bought a Remington Model 592 rifle chambered for the 5mm rimfire cartridge and hunted with it for several years until 5mm ammo started to become scarce. It was a great small to medium game round, and the failure of the little cartridge to catch on is a real pity. The .20-caliber bullets killed groundhogs, foxes, and even large feral dogs like bolts of lightning. Remington stopped making the Models 591 and 592 rifles only four years after their introduction. In 10 years, no more 5mm rimfire cartridges were being made.

There were .20-caliber centerfire wildcat cartridges around from the 1950s on. The first I heard of was made by necking down the .222 Remington cartridge. Much more recently, Todd Kindler created a wildcat cartridge called the Tactical 20, or Tac 20, by necking down the .223 Remington cartridge. That wildcat is highly regarded by some.

Hornady designed the .204 Ruger by necking down the .222 Remington Magnum case. The .204 case ended up with a slightly sharper shoulder, a shorter neck, less body taper, and a bit more powder capacity than the .222 Magnum. Both the Tac 20 and the slightly hotter .204 Ruger are



This Ruger 77 MKII light stainless rifle is chambered in the new Ruger .204 cartridge. It's fitted with a Burris Fullfield II 3-9x scope with the Burris Ballistic Plex reticle.

capable of .22-250 or .220 Swift ballistics with about a third less powder. A third less powder means significantly less noise and recoil. That is more than a small accomplishment.

Having liked the 5mm rimfire so well, I just had to give the .204 Ruger a try. The fact that it was the first rifle cartridge to bear the Ruger name, and the fact that Ruger and Hornady worked together to bring the cartridge to the market, didn't decrease my enthusiasm at all.

THE HUNTING

I dearly love hunting woodchucks. As a youth, I did not hunt these fat, delicious, buck-toothed critters the way many did, by shooting them at long range with a .222 or .220 Swift. Before learning of the 5mm rimfire, I typically hunted woodchucks with an accurate and dependable Remington Model 552 semiauto .22 with Long Rifle hollow-point ammo. Still on the market today, the great Remington Speedmaster Model 552 is the only .22 autoloader I know of that will successfully cycle shorts, longs, and long rifles. Carrying the 552, I would stalk close to a feeding 'chuck, or more often, take a

stand near occupied dens and ambush the oversized ground squirrels when they came out to eat. I also stalked and killed many in the woods.

The high-speed .22 Long Rifle hollow-point does a credible job on 'chucks. If hit in the head, spine, or chest cavity, the marmots don't go far. More killing power and range are always welcome, however, so I hunted more and more with a .22 Magnum or a Hornet.

Recently, I've started doing a considerable amount of my woodchuck hunting with a .204 Ruger, though my methods have changed very little. I now have more power and range than I had with the Hornets and the rimfires, however, and the power and range are more than welcome.

One morning I arrived just at daylight at the edge of a large field on a nice farm I occasionally hunt. The field has dozens of 'chucks in it, maybe hundreds. I've killed tons of the big rodents out of it nearly every year for decades, as have several other hunters, and we have never put a dent in the population. It's a good lesson in wildlife science: take a hardy species and keep its

habitat in good shape, and it can tolerate considerable hunting pressure and still thrive. Oh, it's always possible to over-hunt a species, but this will not occur with intelligent regulations and informed, conscientious behavior on the part of the hunters.

As I watched the wooded edge of the portion of this field that I could see, a medium-sized 'chuck came out of his burrow and headed into the red clover. I put the reticle on his shoulder and followed along as he slowly moved forward, stopping every few feet to sit up and look around. I could have put a 40-grain Hornady V-Max through his boiler room at any time, as he was less than 100 yards out, and I was sitting against a tree with a good rest across my bipod. I was in no hurry, however.

I hesitated because I thought perhaps some other young woodchucks might come out. I've seen young ones freeze or even act oblivious to the noise at the crack of a rifle, enabling an alert shooter to take two to four young 'chucks from one stand.

I had been watching the whistle-pig through the scope, its rather narrow field of view prohibiting me from seeing what else was going on. I felt the need to look away and rest my eyes for a few seconds. As soon as I looked out across the field without the scope, I saw a red fox. He was crawling along on his belly, putting a sneak on my groundhog. He was between the rodent and the edge of the woods, where the 'chuck's burrow was located.

It was a multiple choice question: Should I, a) shoot the fox, b) shoot the 'chuck, c) try to shoot them both, d) watch the show for a time, or e) try for all of the above? I decided on "d." This promised to be too interesting a production to miss.

The fox was still belly-crawling closer, stopping each time the woodchuck stood up to look around. But

somehow the rodent saw the little dog. Perhaps the fox blinked or twitched when the woodchuck was sitting up, or perhaps the small 'chuck just grew suspicious of a small pile of dirt that just kept getting closer.

The young groundhog let out a sudden, short, shrill whistle and made a sprint at a 90 degree angle to a line drawn between him and the fox. The fox sprinted to cut him off. The fox was much faster, and it looked for an instant like the 'chuck was toast. But just as ol' Zorro was about to grab his lunch in his jaws, the rodent disappeared. The fox overran the previously unseen hole into which the woodchuck had escaped. He nearly turned himself inside out in a feverish effort to get back to where his breakfast had just dematerialized. I thought I simply was going to be able to walk out into the field and pick up a fresh fox skin.

The fox tried to dig for a few seconds, saw the futility of such an exercise, and looked around in a confused and frustrated manner. I could almost hear him cussing the 'chuck, the hidden hole, the field, the green grass, and his own rotten luck.

The fox trotted away in frustration. His frustration wouldn't last, however. In a few minutes he would be back into his hunting, and likely he would eat before bedding down for the day.

In 20 minutes or so another young 'chuck came out of a den about 50 yards farther down the field from where the fox incident had occurred. He was unable to dodge the 40-grain V-Max I sent his way. The bullet was faster and more difficult to escape than a fox.

Speaking of foxes, I can't wait to carry this little .204 in the winter. It will be a great calling rifle. It also will be a great rifle for a walking or tracking hunter. The folks who set off on cold snowy mornings, hoping to pick up a fresh red fox track and follow the trail

right up to the tracks that still have the feet in them, come to mind. That's a hardy sport, and I used to love it when I was in shape. Anyone who has walked down a fox or other smart wild creature in this way has earned a very special trophy.

THE RIFLE

The tough, little Ruger Model KM77 RLFP MKII Ultralight stainless rifle has the new Ruger synthetic stock, a thin-contoured 20-inch stainless barrel, and weighs in at about 6.5 pounds sans scope. Mine wears a Burris 3-9x40 Fullfield II scope with the Ballistic Plex reticle. This is an extremely tough scope with excellent clarity and light transmission. The Ballistic Plex reticle enables a so-so shooter like yours truly to shoot considerably better at long range than he could otherwise. Of course, I further celebrate my shameless enslavement to technology by using a Bushnell Legend rangefinder in addition to Burris' excellent Ballistic Plex reticle.

The more one looks at the Ruger M77 MKII, the more impressive it becomes. The original Model 77 with the tang safety hit the market in 1968. The old 77 featured a bolt with a claw extractor, but the ejector was a spring-operated plunger type that protruded through the bolt face, creating the need for the bolt to push-feed cartridges from the magazine to the chamber. It suffered to some extent from inconsistent accuracy, because Ruger was not equipped in those days to manufacture all their barrels. These problems and others have since been remedied.

The Model 77 Mark II was introduced in 1989. I can remember being a bit perturbed that Ruger had changed from the tang safety that I loved to the three-position apparatus. Little did I understand the many well-researched and well-planned improvements incorporated into the Mark II. These many improvements turned an already very

good rifle into one of the finest rifles ever to enter the firearms market.

Along with other improvements, Ruger changed the ejector for the better. They did away with the plunger and incorporated a fixed blade ejector with a matching channel in the bolt. This change rendered both extractor and ejector more dependable than the original M77 had been.

Another great improvement was Ruger's increased capacity to manufacture its own barrels. Ruger's making of its own barrels brought barrel quality into better control. The M77 Mark II is therefore a more consistently accurate rifle than was the original Model 77. Most M77 Mark II rifles I've worked with will shoot into an inch, plus or minus a tad, at 100 yards.

Ruger's design of integral scope ring bases into the top of the receiver is one of the strongest scope mounting systems in the industry. The company supplies quality rings with most models of its rifles, saving the buyer somewhere around \$50 per purchase, or perhaps a bit more.

Ruger Model 77s have three heavy trigger guard bolts that anchor the receiver to the stock. The front bolt has a patented feature unique to this rifle that appears to be quite an enhancement to accuracy. The front trigger guard bolt is angled at 62 degrees toward the rear of the rifle. As this bolt is tightened it pulls the receiver back securely into the stock, enhancing tightness of fit and increasing accuracy.

Ruger makes quality iron sights available on some of its versions of the Model 77. These open sights are easily adjustable, and are significantly better than the iron sights on many rifles. Open sights are important for backup, especially if one is going into remote or dangerous areas to hunt.

The M77 MKII has a rather heavy, nonadjustable trigger. It did not inherit

the adjustable trigger available in the earlier Model 77. This is, of course, because of the shamefully unfriendly political climate in which modern guns and gun makers have to survive today. Most Model 77 triggers pull at more than 4 pounds. I have stock, 4-plus pound triggers on two of my Model 77s. While I may replace these triggers sometime, they do not make accurate shooting impossible – just a bit more demanding of one’s attention as you shoot.

The Model 77 MKII target and varmint rifles feature excellent two-stage triggers. Those I have worked with pull at between 2 and 3 pounds.

The heavy pull on the regular M77 MKII rifles triggers can be remedied easily by some careful and expert gunsmithing, or by the installation of a quality aftermarket adjustable trigger. I bought a nice Timney #1100 trigger from Midway for around \$60 and installed it in one of my M77 MKII rifles. I could not ask for a nicer trigger. There is little perceivable travel, and the pull is adjustable from around 4 down to 2 pounds or lower.

I believe the installation of a Timney or other quality after-market trigger is safer and less expensive in most situations than is the honing and working of the Ruger trigger. I certainly would not recommend that anyone with less than considerable expertise try to work a trigger. Dangerous consequences have come from trigger work done by folks with questionable skills.

In my humble, semiliterate, uneducated, pseudo-expert opinion, the Ruger Model 77 Mark II is one of the finest, most durable, and most dependable bolt-action rifles on the entire firearms market. ‘Nuff said about this superb rifle.

THE CARTRIDGE

Is the .204 Ruger cartridge a good idea? Are there advantages to this little .20-caliber centerfire that make it compelling for a guy interested in a new varmint rifle to consider the .204? What does this new little cartridge do that, say, a .223 or .22-250 cannot do?

When factory loaded with the 32-grain Hornady V-Max bullet, the .204 Ruger is the fastest commercial round on the market. This little 32-grain projectile has only so-so ballistic properties, but it flies so fast that the trajectory still approaches that of the .22-250 or .220 Swift, while generating considerably less recoil and noise and burning somewhat less powder. I rather doubt that a prairie dog hit in the chest at 400 yards is going to care very much whether he was smacked by a 32-grain, .20-caliber bullet, or by a .224-caliber bullet weighing 55 grains.

Why is recoil even worth mentioning in these small varmint rounds? That was my first reaction when I read of

the fact that the .204 generates less recoil than does the .223 or .22-250. I have shot a bunch of .223s, .22-250s, and .243s with light varmint bullets. I’ve always considered recoil from all of these rounds negligible, even in light rifles.

I did not understand the concept until I actually shot a Ruger .204. Then I realized that light recoil is perhaps one reason why I like the little .22 Hornet so much. The low noise level is another reason. I think these two factors may be two primary reasons for the Hornet’s survival and continued success. You can hunt with a Hornet in areas where the noise of a .22-250 would get your butt booted off or even ticketed. And when you shoot a Hornet, you can nearly see the hole appear in the target, because your view is not significantly interrupted by rifle jump. Recoil is nearly nonexistent.

The .204, while no quieter than the .223, is significantly lighter in recoil. The difference is enough that I noticed it the first time I shot the rifle, though I had not believed that I would. This is particularly significant, as the rifle I am shooting weighs in at about 6.5 pounds. Felt recoil should be even a bit lower in a 9-pound varmint rifle.

Hornady offers two loads for the .204. The 32-grain V-Max bullet leaves the muzzle, according to the advertisements, at around 4,250 fps. The 40-grain V-Max leaves at about 3,950. These velocities were measured on bullets leaving, I believe, 24" barrels. My light 77 with its 20" barrel throws them out at around 4,000 fps with the 32-grain bullet and 3,700 with the 40. I prefer the 40-grain load, as that bullet has better ballistic qualities and flies better than the little 32-grainer. Too, I shoot coyotes when I can, and I trust the 40-grain 5mm bullet to give me the penetration needed on those relatively big, muscular puppy dogs.

Though this little round has good long-range capabilities, I still like hunting marmots, Eastern or Western, by stalking or ambushing and shooting them at relatively close range. Most of the higher ground near where I live has yellow-bellied marmots, also known as rockchucks. Recently, my wife, Beth, and I invaded some lush, green mountain country about a hundred miles from our home area. It was good, high country summer weather, and we were seeing ‘chucks long before we parked and left the pickup.

Not overly far from the vehicle we found a beautiful place and sat down in the shade of a small alpine fir. From our shady and comfortable vantage point, we could see hundreds of acres of mountain meadow and, more important, quite a bit of rocky ground around the edges. Yellow-bellied marmots love to build their dens among the rocks, as do the fascinating pikas, small critters that resemble rodents in appearance but that are more closely related to rabbits.

I don’t shoot pikas. I don’t even know whether it is

legal to shoot them. They are extremely plentiful in some areas, and they enjoy the same basic habitat that is frequented by marmots – rocky slopes that border on good sources of tender grasses and forbs. Pikas seem to stick to higher country, while rockchucks are more flexible and range from above timberline to well below.

While woodchucks store their grass in the form of fat under their skin, pikas dry large piles of greens in the sun and store them in their dens as hay. Thus pikas actively eat throughout the winter while the fat ‘chucks sleep deeply, with low body temperature and slow heartbeat – near death.

Awhile after we sat down, we began to see several ‘chucks and about twice as many pikas moving around over the various rocky slopes in view. I was looking for litters of two-thirds to three-quarters grown young rockchucks (dumb ones, I hoped) from which I might be able to harvest several delicious critters in a relatively short time. I had not eaten Western marmot, but I don’t see why they should not be as delicious as the Eastern woodchuck. The animals are very closely related and their diets are very similar.

As we watched several pikas scurrying and hopping about between the boulders on a nearby slope, gathering grass and laying it out to dry, a huge rockchuck came waddling from an unseen den under a truck-size boulder and headed toward the grassy slope. He was without a doubt the biggest yellow-belly I had ever seen. Beth also was impressed with his size.

“Are you going to shoot him?” she asked.

“Naw,” I said, “if I didn’t kill him instantly he might charge. Would you like to take a shot?”

“You know I don’t like to kill them,” she said.

“We could make a rug of his hide,” I offered. “It would go wall to wall in the living room. Folks would think we’d flown up north and taken an Alaskan brown bear, unless of course they saw that buck-toothed head on one end.”

“You’re crazy. Look for some young ones and let this big guy eat his grass.”

“OK, but I hope he doesn’t crop off all the greenery up here. The other ‘chucks have to eat too, you know, not to mention the deer, elk, sheep, and pikas.” As we chuckled and gave each other a hard time, four smaller rockchucks materialized in the grass near the base of a more distant rocky slope.

“There,” Beth said, “are the little ones you’ve been waiting for.” She was watching them through her binocular.

“Now you’re crazy.” I explained. “They’re miles away. If I kill some of them, they’ll be rotten or eaten by vultures or ravens before I can get over there to pick them up. And you’ll have to camp for two nights waiting for me to haul

my fat butt back here.”

She said nothing, knowing – as she always knows what I’m going to do before I figure it out – that I was going to take a shot or two at them. The Bushnell Legend rangefinder measured them at about 345 yards, some being 5 or 10 yards nearer than that while two definitely were farther. The air was still, thank goodness.

I extended the legs of the bipod and rested the rifle on its top pad. The gun was pointed a tad high, so I spread the bipod legs a little more, and the reticle rested among the young ‘chucks. I placed the second ballistic line below the cross hairs of the Ballistic Plex reticle low on the body of a feeding ‘chuck. The bullet kicked up sod beyond and above him. I had shot over by an inch or two. The little ‘chuck jumped to the side. He and one sibling stood up and looked around for a few seconds.

I would have liked to have released shot No. 2 while Junior was sitting up, but he dropped back to all fours and began feeding again before I could get properly set. This time I put that same ballistic mark on the ground just below the pint-size mowing machine. The bullet took him through the middle (I saw later) and spun him over two or three times. When he came to rest, he was already munching tender green leaves in that big bean field in the sky.

Instead of running, the sibling nearest Junior came over to him and sniffed him. My bullet caught him in the ribs as he sat up to survey the area for danger. With that, the other two youngsters called it a day and beat a hasty retreat to the family den.

“But you always brag about how you take these poor little things at close range,” teased my beautiful conscience, grinning at me cruelly from my left. “You say that you can place the bullets well that way, and kill them cleanly. You almost make a moral issue out of it. How is it that you turned so quickly and easily to long-distance killing?”

“I’m sorry,” I declared, with as much emotion as I could muster, “but I would rather eat tender young whistle-pork and be a hypocrite than buy a hamburger and be a proud purist. I’m a perfectly balanced outdoor sportsman, having neither shame nor pride. But I do have an appetite.”

When I got to the little ‘chucks, I found them too torn up to be worth skinning. I had hit each one a little too far back. One of these days I’ll shoot some in the head at closer range. Then we’ll see if they taste as good as those delectable little marmots back in the fields and woods of the Appalachians. No whistle-pork for us that evening. Oh well, the hamburgers weren’t so bad.

