

# Torture Testing Ruger's 77 Rimfire Magnum Bolt-Actions

By John Anderson



***This Ruger 77/17RM bolt-action rifle in 17 HMR had 500 rounds fired through it in one day, and functioned flawlessly. Accurizing work on the rifle was performed by Iowa gunsmith Gordy Gritters. A similar rifle in 22 WMR underwent the same field testing. Both rifles were topped with Burris 4-12x Compact R/A scopes with Ballistic Plex reticle. These scopes are an excellent choice for trim, sporter-weight rifles and are designed to work well with rimfire cartridges.***

A quick glance at my watch showed it was 6:20 p.m. On the last day of May the sun still was high, with lots of daylight left. But I didn't need the extra time. For the second day in a row I had accomplished my goal of firing 500 rounds at ground squirrels during one day, using a different rifle each of the two days.

This all began when I purchased a Ruger 77/17RM, chambered in 17 Hornady Magnum Rimfire (HMR), and asked Iowa gunsmith Gordy Gritters to customize and accurize it. Gordy explained the steps he took on this rifle in an article titled "Accurizing The Editor's Ruger 17 HMR" that appeared in

The VARMINT HUNTER Magazine®, Issue #55, July 2005, page 35. To summarize, Gordy gave this rifle what he calls a fairly standard "accurizing package" that included pillar bedding the stock, free-floating the barrel, recrowning the muzzle, lapping the bolt lugs, lapping the scope rings, and blueprinting the trigger. Following these steps, Gordy then decided to go a little further by lapping the bore and installing an over-travel adjustment screw into the trigger system. Gordy believes these steps will bring out about all the accuracy that a rifle will produce short of changing out factory parts for custom parts, such as new barrel and trigger.



***These two Ruger rifles were each fired 500 rounds per day during the author's field testing. At left is a 77/22RM in 22 WMR and at right is a 77/17RM in 17 HMR. Each of the red plates contains 500 empty cartridge cases.***

Following his work on this rifle, Gordy test-fired it with a Burris 4-12x Compact R/A scope with Ballistic Plex reticle. His best group, firing the Hornady 20-grain XTP bullet, measured 0.242 inch. Hornady's 17-grain V-Max produced a best group of 0.389 inch and CCI's TNT ammo resulted in a 0.455-inch group. The average for all his groups was around 3/4 inch, includ-



***The Hoppe's Bore Snake pull-through rifle cleaner is a handy and compact device to keep with you in the field for cleaning your rifle's bore during a busy day of shooting. The brown one at left is for 17 caliber and the green one at right is for 22 caliber.***

ing some wind-blown fliers. Gordy believed this accuracy level to be pretty good for a light-barreled factory rifle that retained all its factory parts.

A V.H.A. member who read Gordy's article sent the same model of rifle to Gordy and requested the same accurizing job. This fellow had the foresight to shoot his rifle on paper before having the work done, and then fired it again after getting it back. He told Gordy the accurizing work cut his groups in half. I think this member's shooting experience speaks very well for Gordy's work.

After shooting this rifle in the field, and being very happy with it, I decided that I just had to have a companion rifle in 22 Winchester Magnum Rimfire. So, with a little horse trading, I came into a Ruger 77/22RM. Outwardly, of course, these two models are almost, but not quite, identical. They use the same action with the same bolt face, the same stock, and the same nine-round rotary magazine. The barrels have the same contour but, of course, have different diameter holes in them. The 17 HMR barrel is 22 inches long and the 22 WMR barrel is 20 inches long. Ruger lists the weight for the 77/17RM as 6.5 pounds

and the weight for the 77/22RM as 6 pounds. Presumably, the weight difference is in the barrels. Catalog price for each is \$674.00.

Naturally, I wanted Gordy to accurize and customize this new rifle as he had done with the first, so this gun also made a journey to Iowa. Both times I sent along the Burris scope I wanted to use so Gordy could lap in the scope rings with the actual model I would be using. I chose the Burris 4-12x Compact R/A scope with Ballistic Plex reticle because I like this trim size on a sporter-style rifle. These scopes are compact enough to mount in low rings on these rifles, after the bolt handles were modified. These scopes have an adjustable objective that focuses as close as seven yards,  $\frac{1}{8}$  minute of angle reticle adjustments, weigh 16 ounces, and are 11.3 inches long. I have become quite fond of these scopes and have them on several rifles.

This .22 WMR rifle arrived from Gordy only a few weeks before I was to leave for western South Dakota, followed by a trip to southern Wyoming. Plus, we were wrapping up the July issue of the magazine, and that is always a busy time. The long and the



***The author's Sunbuster shooting glasses are the Maverick style. They add comfort in the field during a long day of shooting by reducing eye fatigue and also offer safety.***

short of it was I ended up with very little time to work with this new rifle, so I didn't do any more before my trip than sight it in.

I wanted to give both rifles a thorough field test, and I concocted the idea of shooting 500 rounds a day through each rifle. I figured that if any problems were going to show up with either rifle, there was a good chance they would appear within a heavy day of shooting like this. I didn't want to simply sit at a bench all day and fire 500 rounds at a target, so I decided to go after the plentiful Richardson's ground squirrels in Wyoming. This plan actually had its origins during a ground squirrel hunt in the same general area four years earlier. During that trip I fired slightly more than 500 rounds of 22 WMR ammo in one day through a Ruger 77/22RMP All-Weather rifle (which belonged to someone else), so it seemed like a good idea to try it again with my own rifles. I gathered up 500 rounds each of Winchester 17 HMR ammo and 22 Winchester Magnum Supreme. The former was loaded with

a 17-grain Hornady V-Max bullet and the latter was loaded with a 34-grain jacketed hollow-point bullet made by Winchester. I've used both types of ammo before so I was well acquainted with what I would be using on the squirrels, and I knew both cartridges would do the job.

The day before Memorial Day I arrived in the afternoon at the Spirit West River Lodge Bed & Breakfast near the town of Encampment. I stayed at this B&B four years earlier and had been looking for an excuse to return. The proprietors, R.G. and Lynn Finney, make you feel right at home. The food is excellent and the rooms are decorated with paintings and bronzes produced by R.G. The lodge is a massive log structure that sits on the bank of the Encampment River, a fine trout stream. The North Platte River, a larger trout stream, is nearby. Hiking and sightseeing are available in the Sierra Madres and Medicine Bow Mountains not far away. All in all, the Spirit West is an excellent place to headquarter for many outdoor activities.

On Memorial Day I did a bit of driving and scouting for places to hunt, then spent part of the day shooting ground squirrels in a cattle pasture. No cattle were in this field so the rancher was willing to let me shoot there. He told me to "get 'em all." I spent most of the afternoon there until clouds rolled in around 6:00 and the temperature dropped, sending the squirrels into their burrows. I'd fired nearly 300 rounds, which I considered a good warm-up for my newest rifle, the Ruger in 22 WMR.

The following morning I drove to another ranch where I had permission to shoot in an alfalfa field watered by a center pivot irrigator. The owner liked the fact that I would be shooting rimfires only, and I liked the fact that the field where I would be shooting

was rather far from the ranch buildings and a cattle feed lot. The alfalfa field was on somewhat hilly land so it was very easy to always have a hillside as a backstop no matter what direction I was shooting. This was the day I would get serious with the 22 WMR. It was clear why the rancher was willing to let a shooter onto his land; bare spots were scattered here and there in the greenery where the squirrels had nibbled the crop down to the bare dirt. I had seen such damage from squirrels before in Montana alfalfa fields.

The alfalfa was taller than I would have preferred, but the magazine production schedule prevented me from being there earlier when the crop would have been shorter. I couldn't do anything about that so I just had to look more closely to spot heads and shoulders poking above the greenery. For the most part, I worked the edges of the big green circle, plus along the service road leading to the pivot and pump in the middle of the field. Surprisingly, it seemed a lot of squirrels lived outside the green circle of alfalfa but meandered over there for lunch. I spotted many burrows and squirrels in the shorter vegetation and sage outside the alfalfa, and it certainly was easier to spot them where they were in more open terrain.

I've hunted ground squirrels enough to know that they aren't as spooky as prairie dogs. Squirrels are much less likely to drop down their holes at the sound of a shot. And a hunter is more likely to have closer shots on squirrels than prairie dogs. A long shot on a squirrel might be 150 to 200 yards, whereas with prairie dogs that is where most shooting is just beginning ... or even farther. However, squirrels are only about one-fourth to one-third the size of prairie dogs, so the advantage of closer shots is offset by the smaller targets. Because of the rolling terrain I

was in, most of my shooting was not long range. The majority of shots were 150 yards and closer, often much closer. The longest shot I remember checking with a rangefinder measured 147 yards. However, wind often is a factor in open ranch country, and even more so when shooting rimfires, so I found it necessary to often compensate for windage. But that is just part of the challenge of varmint hunting with rimfires.

Because of the wide range of distances at which I found targets, I took full advantage of the adjustable objective on the Burris 4-12x Compact R/A scope with Ballistic Plex reticle. The AO will focus as close as seven yards, and such close focusing was a real help on a few shots. Further, the Ballistic Plex reticle was very useful for holding over on many longer shots (the 22 WMR has nowhere near as flat trajectory as a centerfire), and to some extent very handy for holding off for windage. The eighth-minute reticle adjustments also allow a shooter to really fine tune the zero of the rifle.

The shooting was fairly steady, but it was necessary to keep on the move. Sometimes I'd get several shots in one location but at other spots I'd fire just once and then have to move. I sure got well acquainted with the terrain around this big green field. But, one shot or several at a location, the empties began to accumulate in the bottom of a coffee can. Finally, I broke for lunch, sitting on my truck's tailgate. I was enjoying the day even more than a tailgate party at a football game.

I did not baby this rifle. Many times I would crank the bolt as fast as I could if multiple targets were available. However, I did occasionally stop to clean the bore with a Hoppe's Bore Snake Rifle Cleaner. This pull-through device is a quick and handy way to get rid of accumulated fouling. It's a compact and useful piece of equipment

that I would suggest always having along on a trip. Hoppe's is a division of Bushnell Outdoor Products.

As the afternoon progressed, the boxes of ammo in the carton continued to decrease and the empties continued to increase in the coffee can. Things were going well! Finally, about 6:30, I squeezed the trigger on the last cartridge. A hit! And my 500th shot for the day. I did not keep an exact count of hits and misses (I should've had a bookkeeper with me.) but I'm certain that my hit percentage was somewhere in the 80s; more than 80 percent and less than 90 percent. That's as close as I can come to a figure. Next time I'll try to maintain a precise count. The Ruger rifle came through the day's 500-round "torture test" with flying colors. It did not give me one bit of trouble, which is just what I expected. It's nice to have one's expectations fulfilled.

During all my ground squirrel shooting I was wearing new sunglasses, the Maverick style made by Sunbuster. These glasses prevent eye fatigue during a long day in bright sun and the lenses block 100 percent of UVA/UVB rays. Plus, the lenses are shatterproof and come in different colors for different situations, and they can be quickly and easily interchanged in the frames. Of considerable importance for many shooters is the availability of prescription lenses, including bifocals. I found these lightweight glasses comfortable to wear all day long. Sunbusters come with a sturdy carrying case that can accommodate extra lenses as well as the glasses themselves.

That evening I smiled to myself as I thought about the day's shooting while munching a monster cheeseburger at the Mangy Moose Saloon in the little community of Riverside. (These burgers are not to be missed if you're in the area!) The day had been everything I'd hoped for.

The next morning I returned to the same alfalfa field to "torture test" the Ruger 77/17RM with 500 rounds. I was a bit apprehensive about hitting the same spot again, but I reasoned that I had worked over no more than a third of the circumference of the circle of alfalfa the previous day so I figured there might be more than a few squirrels remaining. I was correct. By working over the edge of the green circle farther along than I had traveled the day before, I again found lots of squirrels and lots of shooting. Basically, this day turned into a repeat of the previous day.

Just out of curiosity, I traveled down the access trail to the center pivot where I had found such good shooting the day before. I expected to find fewer squirrels, and I was right about that. However, it surprised me somewhat that I still found a number of targets. Just not as many.

Once again, I made myself take a lunch break, and I continued to drink plenty of water during the day. It was a bit difficult to sit on the tailgate and eat lunch while watching numerous squirrels run around in the low sage outside the green area. I wanted to drop my sandwich, grab the rifle, and continue shooting. But I resisted the urge, knowing that I needed to take a break and relax for a while and eat something. After lunch, though, it was back to the rifle.

During both days I was lucky with the weather, having sunny skies and warm temperatures. In my experience, it seems ground squirrels are a bit finicky when it comes to weather. If conditions turn cool and cloudy, you won't see as many.

For the second day in a row I put 500 rounds through my rifle, stopping to clean occasionally with the Hoppe's Bore Snake. Once again, I was finished before 6:30, with the sun still high. And

again, the rifle performed as it should, without a single problem. Just as I expected it to. I couldn't think of any reason why I should have a problem with either rifle, but I just had to find out. Was it worth the money I spent on accurizing these guns? Every penny! And it sure was a lot of fun field testing these Rugers. Now maybe I need to find out if I can fire a thousand rounds in a day. There is a challenge to ponder!



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