Hot Ticket: 28-Gauge Benelli

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Built on a true-to-scale 28-gauge semiautomatic action, this new model is a dedicated quail hunter's dream.

By Joseph von Benedikt, Editor in Chief

Hunting bobwhite quail is a pursuit rarely enjoyed by today's sportsmen due to dwindling numbers of the birds, and even more rarely by a sportsman equipped with a semiautomatic shotgun. Recently, I was privileged to do both with a new model Benelli.

Quail hunting is the particular realm of the 28 gauge. Take an over-under or side-by-side built on an action properly scaled to the sleek 28-gauge hull afield, and you'll never ask why that is so. You'll know. Other gauges are perhaps more commonly used by most hunters, courtesy of commonality, but hunt the dodging, wily little feathered projectiles long enough, and you'll wean away to a real quail gun. You'll own a 28.

The key to choosing a 28 that you can build a long and lasting relationship of trust with is getting one that, first and foremost, is built on a properly scaled frame—not simply a 28-bore barrel mounted on a 20-gauge frame—and second in importance is, of course, that the so-chosen gun fits you properly. The first is so that your instrument is not clunky and disproportionate, the second in order that the gun handles like an extension of your body. If it doesn't, mounting the shotgun and dropping a bird as it rockets upward through a tangle of brush and veers off through the treetops will be a rare occurrence.
As most of the relatively few semiauto shotguns chambered for the 28 are built on a 20-gauge frame, one might just as well choose the 20-gauge version. However, Benelli has just announced a true-to-size, scaled-down 28-gauge version of its lovely Legacy shotgun, and I was privileged to be the first person in the U.S. to hunt with it. Better yet, at hand was a thriving population of bobwhite quail.

Why, you might ask, choose a semiauto at all? Why not choose a proper field gun such as an over-under, or if you are a purest, a side-by-side?

Personally, given the choice, I’ll own both—I’m especially prone to enamorment with a sleek side-by-side. But considered fairly and without bias to tradition, a semiauto has certain undeniable advantages in quail territory. Most obvious is the extra capacity offered. Quail have a notorious reputation for running in coveys, and like anything that runs in a pack, they can ruin one’s equilibrium rather promptly with a full frontal assault—such as when they explode upward in a velvet thunder of wings, going every direction but where expected.

In such situations—the norm rather than the exception—an extra round on tap can mean the difference between a bird on the ground or a disappointed dog and a foolish feeling.

Speaking of which, if one desires to make a hobby of hunting quail, he’d better be willing to take humiliation cheerfully.

Another advantage of the semiautomatic shotgun is the reduced recoil such a system offers. Not that any 28 gauge recoils very heavily, but anything that assists in fast follow-up shots mustn’t be discounted lightly. More than once I dropped a bird in a cloud of feathers a half-second after missing him clean with the first shot out of the Legacy 28.

The shotgun itself is incredibly...
Benelli R1 Hunting Rifle

I’m not a real fan of semiauto rifles for big-game hunting, but I particularly enjoyed hunting with a Benelli R1 in .30-06 in Texas this fall. It’s a semiauto that handles and balances well and is light enough that it’s easy to carry in the field.

While not super accurate (the rifle I had shot its best groups—averaging around 1.5 inches—with Federal Premium ammo loaded with 165-grain Trophy Bonded Tip bullets), it was accurate enough and functioned without fail throughout the time I had it, no matter the weather or conditions.

Although I don’t like to admit it, the beautiful 10-point buck I shot needed a follow-up shot, and I was glad to have a semiauto in my hands. Not only was that second shot ready before the echo of the first shot faded, but I didn’t have to make any noise that may have further spooked the buck by working a bolt or lever to chamber a second round.

Unlike Benelli’s semiauto shotguns, the R1 is a gas-operated system. In fact, in Europe it’s designated the “ARGO,” which stands for “Automatic Rifle Gas Operated.” The system is sophisticated enough that it allows a slender, ergonomic finished rifle that handles, balances, and shoots very naturally with less recoil than a bolt action in the same caliber. It proved very capable in the field. In fact, the whitetail buck I took with it is the biggest I’ve ever shot, and the hunt is an experience I’ll treasure.

—Joseph von Benedikt

lightweight. So much so, in fact, that at first I was sure it would prove whippy and difficult to control. I was wrong. Although it was light enough to easily carry in one hand—in port arms position no less—it shouldered smoothly, balanced like a gypsy girl on a trapeze, and swung more stably than it had any right to. It also pointed particularly well. The first two quail I shot—the first quail anybody shot—with the Legacy 28 each got up in a thicket of mesquite and darted off in an entirely unexpected direction, twisting and dodging among the gnarly branches. I got on the first bird instantly, missed him, and then dropped him with the second shot. Still relatively unfamiliar with the gun, I had to marvel at how effortlessly I’d got on the bird.

Five minutes later a second covey came up in a soft thud of wings, the shotgun responded as if without me, and a bird dropped as fast as he’d risen. I rested the Legacy 28’s butt on my hip and watched the

The Legacy 28’s inertia-driven system is properly scaled down to true 28-gauge proportions. This is no 28-gauge barrel on a 20-gauge action.

The sleek small-gauge functioned beautifully. Note the slender size of the action in proportion to the gloved hands.
Like Benelli's other semi-auto shotguns, the Legacy 28 is driven by an inertia operating system that is particularly free from fouling problems and breakage.

dog retrieve the bird, musing how I was going to break the news to my wife that I needed a new Benelli 28-gauge shotgun.

Although re-engineered for the pressures the 28-gauge hull generates, the operating system of the Legacy 28 is the same as the rest of the Legacy line: an inertia-activated, very simple design that is easy to clean and maintain and, courtesy of few moving parts, particularly free of breakage and other problems.

Function is as follows: As the bolt assembly moves forward and a live shell is chambered, a pin in the bolt housing rides in a curved track in the steel bolt, causing the bolt head locking lugs to rotate counterclockwise and lock into the barrel extension. When the gun is fired, the gun recoils, but the bolt body hesitates (the “inertia” part) keeping the bolt head locked firmly in place and loading the inertia spring that lies between the bolt head and the bolt body. As the initial recoil pulse slows, the compressed inertia spring throws the bolt body rearward, unlocking the bolt head via the same curved track and pin, drawing the empty hull from the chamber and ejecting it, cocking the hammer, and compressing the recoil spring contained in the buttstock. Finally, the compressed recoil spring thrusts the bolt forward again, chambering a fresh round and beginning the cycle over.

It’s a very simple, reliable system that is insensitive to chamber pressure and tends to cycle most shells, from light target loads to heavy hunting loads, with equal ease. Durability is legendary: There are guns existing in South America that outfitters claim have over 500,000 rounds through them and are still functioning perfectly. We probably didn’t put much more than 300 rounds through the Legacy 28, counting both time shooting clay targets and hunting quail, but I
can say we did not experience a single failure.

The new Legacy 28 weighs only 5 pounds and features a 26-inch barrel with a lovely deep polished blue. The lightweight receiver is finished in a clean satin silver and nicely engraved, with gold accents. Stocks are fashioned from some very nice AA-grade walnut, and the shotgun is available with a shim kit.

Going back to my earlier statement about choosing a shotgun that fits, this kit allows shooters to customize drop and castoff until the stock is perfect. The only thing lacking is length-of-pull adjustment, something that can be had on synthetic-stocked shotguns but would verge on blasphemous on such nice walnut. I’m lanky and have a long neck and typically just add a Galco slip-on pad to whatever shotgun

I’m shooting, adding more length if needed with homemade spacers that fit inside.

As the Legacy 28 I hunted with was in fact the only version in existence in the U.S. at the time, I was unable to bring it home from the hunt and spend the time testing it with different loads and patterning it that I would like to have, but Benelli’s Steve McElvain and I did get to shoot a lot of quail with it. In fact, the quail hunt as well as a whitetail deer hunt with Benelli’s R1 semi-automatic hunting rifle (see sidebar) was filmed as a Benelli On Assignment TV show and will air during the show’s 2010 season this summer. Joe Coogan, the show’s host, and the NRA’s Bryce Towsley were there as well, and I think Joe had as hard a time prying the Legacy 28 out of Bryce’s hands as Steve had with me.

It’s a truly spectacular little quail gun. It handled well, hunted with style, and put birds down with authority when I did my part.

Perhaps I can convince my wife that it’s the perfect quail gun for her...