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The Reliable R1

By Larry Teague

Most hunters know Benelli for its semiauto shotguns, but there's a dependable big game gun in the lineup.

Not all Texas deer hunting involves taking animals attracted to feeder corn or shooting monster bucks behind high fences. There are no feeders and few blinds on the 25,000-acre Stasney’s Cook Ranch near Albany, in the north-central part of the state. The hunting is done safari-style. Hunters drive slowly across sections of the low-fence ranch, sighting whitetails at a distance and then getting out of the vehicle to close the range, usually to within 100 yards or less.

Whitetails don't like it when humans get on their feet and come after them. Most humans don't like walking where everything wants to bite, stick or scratch them.

For hunting partner Joe Coogan, dodging the ever-present mesquite and cactus while stalking Texas deer must have been reminiscent of hunting larger game in the thornbush of Botswana. For many years, Coogan was a professional hunter in Africa. In 1972, he became an apprentice to Harry Selby, the PH who introduced writers Robert Ruark and Ernest Hemingway to hunting on the Dark Continent. Selby's concession covered 90,000 square miles of the Okavango Delta. Today, Coogan is brand marketing manager of Benelli USA and host of “Benelli’s On Assignment” television show on Versus Country.

It was early November 2008, weeks away from the peak of the whitetail rut. I'd been invited there to test Benelli's R1 semiauto rifle and Federal Premium's Trophy Bonded Tipcal ammo. ATK president Mark DeYoung and Benelli Marketing Manager Steve McElvain were hunting different sections of the ranch.

On ours, we spotted seven small bucks in the first two hours of the hunt after checking our rifles to make sure they were still on after the bumps of travel. The next morning, we made unsuccessful stalks on 130- and 150-class bucks that spotted us and took off, waving their white flags. Stalking a mature whitetail is difficult enough for one person, but a tall order for a guide, two hunters and a cameraphotographer. Odds of success go way up when the bucks are preoccupied with does during the rut.

Easing down a ranch road later that day, guide Ray Henieke spied a mature buck trailing a doe through some think woods well off the road. As they are apt to do when they think they're well hidden, the deer stood motionless, giving Henieke enough time to spread the shooting sticks and for me to fire. However, try as I might, I couldn't find the buck in the scope, and seconds later, he followed a nervous doe out of the area.

An hour into the final morning of the hunt, I dropped a 125-class buck with a 90-yard quartering-away shot behind the shoulder. I knew the shot was good, but we could find no blood where the animal had been standing. Broadening the search, we located a good blood trail at 40 yards and the downed buck several minutes later.

That incident serves as a reminder that two animals react to fatal shots the same way. The previous day, Mark DeYoung pulled the trigger on the best deer of the hunt, a 170-class whitetail, dropping it in its tracks.
The R1 rifle uses the same clean-burning ARGO gas system developed for the U.S. military's M4 shotgun.

**Semiautos Get No Respect**

Often denigrated as inaccurate and unreliable, semiautomatic hunting rifles have never been as popular as bolt actions, pumps or even lever guns in the U.S. The perception is that because semiautos have more parts, they are more apt to gunk up, jam or break.

Also, the semiauto does not have the solid lockup of a bolt action, which contributes to its accuracy. Benelli designers wanted a bolt with a sturdier lockup, so they gave the R1 three rotating lugs at the front of the bolt. Close the action, and the bolt rotates, locking in the recess ahead of it.

The R1 uses the same ARGO (auto regulating gas operation) system that Benelli developed for the military's M4 Super 90 shotgun. This piston-driven system has a gas port just forward of the chamber. The gases are hotter and cleaner there, resulting in less fouling and more reliable cycling. In military testing, more than 30,000 proof loads were put through the M4 with no malfunctions. So much for generalizations about autoloaders.

**Managing Recoil**

Introduced in 1993, the first R1 had a wood stock and a very good buttpad that, combined with gas operation, did a good job of reducing felt recoil. Recoil can't be eliminated, but it can be redirected or spread out over a longer duration so the shooter perceives less kick.

The first R1s were used successfully on European-style hog hunts, where shots came often and fast. Several years later, the ComforTech stock was developed for the Super Black Eagle and Super Black Eagle II shotguns. Benelli engineers used high speed photography and computer simulation to design the stock. Chevron-shaped inserts runnig diagonally across the buttstock absorb and direct energy away from the shooter's face. Benelli claimed a 43 percent recoil reduction in the shotguns. The ComforTech stock also features a super-soft gel recoil pad as well as a 1-inch gel pad on the comb. Much of a shotgun's sting is felt in the face. High and extra-high comb pads are optional, to are recoil pads that shorten the length of pull.

R1 calibers include .300 Winchester Magnum, .30-06, .300 WSM (Winchester Short Magnum) and .270 WSM. The .30 calibers represent the upper end of recoil most hunters are willing to tolerate. Benelli says the R1 reduces the perceived recoil of .300 Win Mag recoi to .30-06 levels, and .30-06 recoil to that of a .243 Win. While recoil energy can be calculated (E=1/2 MV Squared) the recoil shooters feel is hard to measure and doesn't affect everyone the same way.

While the recoil I felt didn't seem as light as a .243's, it didn't feel as stiff as the 18 foot-pounds of recoil energy the recoil formula says that particular rig shooting that particular cartridge is supposed to have.

During the Texas hunt, Benelli's Steve McElvain told me his R1 has no trouble cycling Fusion's low-recoil ammo. This piqued my interest, so after returning from the hunt, I tried Federal's 170-grain Low Recoil .30-06 load in the gun. The recoil reduction was significant. This time, it felt like the kick from a .243. I had so much fun shooting the gun that I expended a box of low-recoil ammo in short order.

**Range Testing**

Both the Federal Low Recoil and Trophy Bonded Tipped ammo printed consistent 1/2-inch groups at 100 yards. The first couple of times I fired the rifle, however, bullet holes were on opposite sides of the target. Groups tightened up when I became accustomed to the gun's two-stage trigger.

Common on military firearms and semiautos in particular, two-stage triggers have a lot of takeup. This supposedly adds another level of safety. You pull the trigger back until you feel resistance. At that point, the trigger performs like a single-stage trigger. Measured with a Lyman electronic trigger pull gauge, my sample gun's trigger broke at 5 pounds, 10 ounces.

R1 barrels and bolts can be swapped, making it easy to change calibers. The scope mount is on the barrel, so theoretically you can switch barrels without having to resight. The barrels are cryogenically treated, which alleviates barrel stress and makes the barrel perform more consistent from shot to shot. A shim kit is also provided for customizing the stock fit.

Benelli sees the primary R1 user as a hunter who wants the benefits of recoil reduction without going to a smaller caliber and sacrificing .270 or .30-caliber performance. To shooters whose primary concern is recoil, an autoloader makes more sense than installing a muzzle brake on a barrel, which creates a deafening muzzle blast. The R1 is a hoot to shoot, especially with low-recoil ammo. Put on the shorter recoil pad, and you turn it into a kid's rifle. And it's nice to know a quick follow-up shot is there, just in case.

**Specifications**

- **Model:** R1 With ComforTech
- **Barrel Length:** 22"
- **Stock:** Realtree All Purpose Green High Definition
- **Magazine capacity:** four
- **Sights:** None provided; Adjustable front and rear sights are optional.
- **Overall length:** 44"
- **Weight:** 7.2 pounds
- **MSRP:** $1,689