The Benelli Super Black Eagle Shotgun

By Eric Pittman

A little over a decade ago Benelli introduced a shotgun designed to handle the 3 1/2" magnum 12 gauge shells which were then making news in the world of waterfowl hunting. The majority of non-toxic shot at the time was steel, which is much lighter than lead; thus more is needed to carry the same overall energy downrange and hence the longer shells.

For the most part, if you wish to throw this much lead you're restricted to a fairly expensive autoloader, such as Beretta's A391 Extrema, Remington's SP-10 Magnum, Winchester's Super X2 or Browning's Gold (some models). Others exist, but those are the closest price-competitive models. Other choices include pump-action shotguns, which are available from almost every maker with the longer chambering. Finally, massive 10 gauge semiautomatics and pump-action shotguns are available.

The problem with the latter option is that many ranges do not allow bore diameters larger than 12 gauge under any circumstances. Another problem would be the expense of practice or upland loads, coupled with having to use larger, less common hulls and reloading components. I’d never say it's not possible, but currently discount stores in my area offer 150 rounds of range-legal 12 gauge shells for $16. I've seen single boxes of 10 gauge in the same price range.

Pump-action shotguns have definite advantages, but require user input to make the follow-up shot happen. I have seen and done my share of short-shucking both in the
field and on the range with pumps. I shoot trap with my Model 12 (Trap) and would shoot that game with nothing else; all the other games require a reliable follow up or second shot, and I shoot them with either a double or my SBE. Hunting is rarely any different. The second round being ‘free’ is a huge advantage. This isn’t to say a pump won’t take game, as they certainly have and will continue to do so. To many the pump just ‘feels right’ in a shotgun.

Enter the semiautomatic. This action type provides a rapid follow-up shot, but historically the problem has been reliability. If you talk to ten clay target shooters who own semi-automatic shotguns I bet at least one will tell you they’ve had a failure of some sort attributed to their gun. However, ten percent of the shooters having had one problem among thousands or possibly tens of thousands of rounds still adds up to satisfactory reliability statistics.

With shotguns, semiautomatics come in two flavors, gas-operated and recoil-operated. The gas-guns, as they are commonly called, have advantages and disadvantages. One important advantage is reduced recoil. As some of the gas pressure is bled off during the firing cycle to operate the action, the recoil impulse is lowered and spread over a longer time. The main disadvantage is more small parts (sometimes including an O-ring, a soft rubber part), a gas regulation system that can fail and more emphasis on proper cleaning. Today’s gas-guns can operate a long time before requiring cleaning or failing from powder fouling, but like all firearms they still need to be cared for.

Benelli’s recoil system eliminates some of the care and feeding issues, but does nothing to help recoil. In several thousand rounds I have felt no difference in recoil between my Benelli and my older Browning Citori, which currently has no recoil-reducing modifications. I tolerate recoil well, but this is mostly from experience, not modifications or guns made for the purpose.

Thus far I have put something like 2500 rounds through the Benelli and have had zero failures to load, feed, lock, cycle or fire. Most people will never put that many rounds through a shotgun, especially if they only use it afield. However, that’s not a lot of rounds to a clays shooter, maybe five weeks of intense practice. I clean the gun regularly and carefully, but I don’t shoot the cleanest ammo through it, and frequently fire 200 rounds one day, then another two hundred the next and don’t clean until the following weekend.

Disassembly and care of the Benelli is straightforward. A disclaimer here: UNLOAD all firearms and FULLY READ manufacturer’s manuals before performing maintenance of any kind! Loosen the magazine cap ‘a la Remington 870 style, action closed. The barrel slides forward, and then can be removed upwards away from the bolt assembly. Now slide off the forearm, and then the bolt will come forward on its tracks.

You should find that the entire assembly aft of the bolt face is pretty clean unless you’ve dropped your gun in some mud. In that case it will probably still work, but don’t bet your life on it; clean and inspect first. Clean the barrel and chamber, clean the bolt face and lubricate the internals. Assembly is reverse of takedown. No further action is required for standard cleaning. I have seen no need for further breakdown after 2500 rounds.

At the range and in the field is where the SBE really shines. Despite a nearly 10" long receiver assembly the SBE is light and points well. The interchangeable chokes match the Beretta pattern, and are readily available. The sight plane is very good, with a metal bead and glow-type plastic rod arrangement. Honestly, I don’t know if the glow-plastic is
an advantage. When I'm swinging the gun I don't really see the bead, just the bird (clay). The rib is slightly elevated and dissipates heat well enough for me, though small-squad trap shooting warms it right up.

The gun fits me well, but I'm average height, somewhat overweight and male. Most guns fit me well right out of the box. For those needing adjustment, Benelli provided wedges with my SBE. These fit between stock and receiver and would best be installed by a gunsmith. Most shooters could probably do it themselves, but a smith will be helpful in determining whether the changes made resulted in a better fit.

I did have some problems with the pistol-grip arrangement. It takes a fairly sharp downward turn. This results in my middle and ringer finger bunching up, and my index reaching somewhat to get at the trigger. Gentlemen with larger hands have told me it's fine.

My girlfriend can shoot the SBE, but it does not fit her well. She's slightly below average height, and the long receiver makes reaching the forearm uncomfortable. The length of pull is also somewhat long for smaller shooters. There are smaller-size 3" capable semi-autos out there, and I recommend them as few who don't fit the SBE will be comfortable with 3 1/2" recoil anyhow. I don't particularly like it, placing it in the 'barely tolerable' range. When you're dealing with that much 'kick', good fit is essential, both for accuracy and safety. A dropped, loaded semiautomatic is a bad thing all around, and I've seen it happen.

In closing, I like this gun. Figure on parting with around $1100 for one, but it fits me well enough and it will do anything I want it to do, other than shoot 7/8 oz. reloads. This isn't as much a problem as I once thought, given the bargain-basement price of 1 1/8 oz 12 gauge department store shells. They may not be the highest quality, but I have yet to legitimately blame a lost target on one. Quantity has a quality all it's own, and if you can tolerate them 1 1/8 oz of shot works at least as well as 7/8 oz.

The gun is also flexible. The new tungsten-composites available in 3" hulls may limit the economy of the longer shell and reduce some of this utility, but there will always be those who want as much down the tube as possible. Benelli makes magazine extensions and replacement barrels available, including a rifled model for hunting with the appropriate sabots. Scope mounts are available from B-Square.

Currently the SBE is available in black, camo and wood-and-blue configurations. Fancier models based on the same reliable recoil design are available under other names such as Executive, for those wanting more in the looks department.

I encourage anyone shotgun shopping to at least handle a Super Black Eagle. I also encourage shopping around, as one-game clay shooters likely will find something that more specifically addresses their sport. Still, anyone looking for one high-quality all-around shotgun, or just an excellent field piece, couldn't go wrong with the Benelli Super Black Eagle.