

STAYING IN THE BLACK

THOUGH HUNTING CAN EASILY
BECOME A RICH MAN'S SPORT,
IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE. HERE
IS A LOOK AT FOUR SPORTING
RIFLES THAT CAN FIT INTO EVEN
THE MOST MODEST BUDGET.



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When it comes down to it, a bolt-action rifle is a relatively simple design. Dating back more than a century, this simple, reliable and rugged system of operation has many appealing qualities, such as strong actions capable of handling extremely powerful chamberings and fast follow-up shots. However, when employing expensive materials such as attractive wood stocks and featuring beautifully polished and blued steel parts, these types of rifles can be quite expensive.

For everyday sporting uses—namely, being carried through the woods and getting dinged and scratched and sometimes immersed in water while hunting deer or other big game—wouldn't something a little more utilitarian be preferable? Also, although everybody may want a \$2,000 custom rifle, wouldn't one with a retail price of less than \$500 be more manageable for most outdoorsmen?

BACK TO THE BASICS

To be frank, hitting this price point while still providing a quality product requires manufacturers to employ spartan finishes and more basic materials. However, that's not necessarily a bad thing. For a rifle that you plan on carrying through the woods, this approach might be best.

One of the easiest areas to cut costs in a rifle is in the finish on the steel parts. Although highly polished finishes can be very attractive, they are labor intensive and expensive. In addition, a shiny exterior is not the best thing on a rifle intended for the hunt. Instead, a bead-blasted matte finish combines the best elements of lower production costs and reduced reflection of light.

Another thing to expect at this price point is a synthetic stock. Although densely grained woods can make for beautiful stocks, that particular material is expensive. Also, wood is highly susceptible to the elements because it is prone to warp and crack in damp and wet conditions. On the other hand, synthetic stocks are much lighter than comparable wood stocks and are practically impervious to the elements. They also have more inherent bend and flex than wood and are less likely to crack under stress. These stocks are primarily offered in simple black, although camouflage patterns are available on many at a higher price.

Another feature to expect in this price range is a non-detachable, internal magazine. Although detachable magazines are convenient because they ease reloading and switching ammunition types in the field, a conventional fixed magazine system is simpler, more rugged and generally more affordable. There are two primary types of internal magazines available in sporting bolt-action rifles. One is a "blind" magazine, in which the magazine assembly is

entirely enclosed inside the stock of the rifle. The other is a hinged-floorplate magazine, in which the base of the magazine assembly is exposed at the bottom of the stock forward of the trigger guard and can be swung open to drop the cartridges out of the bottom when unloading the rifle.

STRESSED IMPORTANCE

To handle the extreme stresses created by firing a modern cartridge, firearms must be built using strong, high-quality materials. Although there have been strides in recent years in the development of new, cutting-edge materials for making firearms, ultimately steel is the ideal choice for this chore.

In a bolt-action rifle, the areas subject to the most intense pressure during firing are the bolt, the barrel and, more often than not, the receiver. These parts must be made of properly heat-treated and hardened material known as "stressed steel." Most bolt-action rifles feature an expensive stressed-steel receiver, into which the stressed-steel bolt locks. Obviously, the barrel must be of stressed steel as well.

However, some recent designs have taken a more novel approach, employing a system in which the stressed-steel bolt locks directly into an extension of the chamber end of the stressed-steel barrel. Having the bolt lock directly into the barrel negates the need for a heavy and expensive stressed-steel receiver.

REAL-WORLD APPLICATION

So, what rifles are actually available in this price range? Although it may be hard to believe, there is a surprisingly broad selection from a variety of well-known manufacturers. Following is a selection of four of them, all priced under \$500 retail.

Marlin XL7

With a history dating back to as early as 1870, Marlin is definitely a traditional name in the United States firearms market, known to most people for its popular line of lever-action rifles. However, one of its newest offerings—the XL7—is actually a bolt-action rifle.

The XL7, sporting a paltry \$325 retail price for the .30-06 model, is U.S. made and features a traditional-style action, with a stressed-steel receiver into which the dual-lugged bolt locks.

Weatherby Vanguard



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To keep costs down, the XL7 features a simple, four-round blind magazine. The stock of the rifle has molded-in checkering and a generous recoil pad, as well as sling swivel studs for attaching a sling. The barrel of the 6½-pound rifle is 22 inches long.

The XL7 is equipped with a two-position safety located on the right rear portion of the action. Unique for this price range, the XL7 features an adjustable trigger system called the Pro-Fire that allows the weight of the trigger pull to be tuned and adjusted. Although the XL7 does not come with any sights, it is supplied with a set of scope mounts for the rifle's drilled and tapped receiver.

As would be expected at such a reasonable price point, the Marlin XL7 has a low-key and spartan appearance, featuring a matte finish on the steel parts and a simple black synthetic stock.

Mossberg 100 ATR

Although today Mossberg is most often associated with reliable and affordable shotguns, the nearly century-old company has produced a variety of popular rifle designs over the years. One of its newest, the 100 ATR, continues the tradition.

The Mossberg 100 ATR, which stands for All Terrain Rifle, is made here in the United States and has a reasonable retail price of \$372 in its base form chambered in .30-06 Springfield and sporting a black synthetic stock and matte finish on the steel parts.

The 7-pound 100 ATR features a stressed-steel receiver into which the bolt lugs lock. The rifle has a 22-inch barrel and a four-round blind magazine assembly. The rifle's

safety is a two-position on/off lever located on the top right rear section of the action.

Although at the lowest price point the rifle does not come with any sort of sights or optics, Mossberg is thoughtful enough to include a set of factory-installed scope bases. Once you pick up a scope and compatible rings, the rifle should be ready to go after a proper bore sighting.

Visually, the 100 ATR is nothing more than spartan in its appearance, which should be expected at this price point. Featuring a matte finish on all the steel parts, the all-black rifle has a simple, synthetic stock with sling swivel studs and molded-in checkering on the fore-end and at the pistol grip area behind the action. To help tame recoil, the 100 ATR's stock has a generous vented recoil pad.

Weatherby Vanguard

Weatherby, a name associated with ultra-high-quality rifles with commensurately ultra-high price tags, might seem a bit out of place in this list. However, with its line of Japanese-made Vanguard rifles, the storied company has managed to get its name onto a rifle that fits into this somewhat restrictive price range. In fact, the company recently adjusted the retail price of the base .30-06 Springfield model to \$399.

As with the other rifles in this listing, the Vanguard is simple and straightforward, featuring a black synthetic stock and a uniform matte black finish on all the steel parts. The dual lugs of the bolt body lock directly into the stressed-steel receiver that is machined from a forging, and the rifle has a five-round hinged floorplate magazine and a 24-inch barrel. The 7½-pound rifle features a two-position

safety located on the rear right section of the receiver. The black synthetic stock has molded-in checkering on the fore-end and at the pistol grip area, and sling swivel studs ready to accept a sling round out the package. The rifle does not come equipped with any sort of sights, assuming that owners will want to fit it out with a scope. To facilitate this, the rifle is drilled and tapped to accept scope mounts.

Of note is the fact that, even at the \$399 price point, Weatherby guarantees that the Vanguard in .30-06 Springfield will shoot 1½ inch groups at 100 yards or better if used with either Weatherby factory ammunition or premium non-Weatherby ammunition.

Remington Model 770

The last of these, although the most expensive of the group at \$452, offers the most complete and frankly unorthodox package. The Model 770, sold as a complete kit premounted from the factory with a bore-sighted 3–9x40 mm scope, is ready to go right out of the box.

The rifle features a radical approach to its manufacture, reducing costs substantially. Featuring a nonstressed-steel receiver that is less costly to manufacture, the Model 770 instead has its stressed-steel bolt lock directly into a stressed-steel barrel extension at the rear of the 22-inch barrel.

The bolt itself is interesting, possessing a three-lugged bolt head rather than a more traditional two-lugged body. This allowed Remington engineers to give the Model 770 a much shorter “bolt throw” movement (60 degrees, to be exact) than that of a more traditional bolt-action rifle.

As with the other rifles, the 8½-pound scoped Model 770 has a black synthetic stock, but with some twists. To keep down costs, the Model 770's stock employs a plastic trigger guard molded in to the stock.

However, the receiver and the stock design are not the only ways that this innovative rifle stands out from the pack. Rather than a blind or hinged-floorplate fixed magazine, the Model 770 has a detachable four-round box magazine. This system allows for easier loading and unloading as well as extremely fast reloads in the field when carrying spare magazines.

Although the rifle is understated with its matte finish on the steel parts and its black synthetic stock, its innovative design and inclusion of a scope in the price make it an outstanding choice.

GET OUT THERE

Needless to say, there are some excellent options out there for the sportsman on a budget. Even with a limited amount of money to spend, the motivated outdoorsman can easily pick up a well-made rifle that is sturdy and utilitarian enough to stand up to the rigors of the outdoors. If you have been using a tight budget as an excuse for not getting out there in the field, these four rifles should definitely give you a reason to reconsider. ♦

Michael O. Humphries is managing editor of Wildlife in North Carolina.

THE .30-06

So why is the .30-06 chambering offered in all of these rifles? The answer is simple: It is a terrific cartridge with a long and storied history. Though there are many, many fine sporting rifle cartridges from which to choose, by far one of the most common (and obviously most popular) is the .30-06 Springfield cartridge.

In its most common loadings, the .30-06 Springfield flings a roughly 150-grain .30-caliber bullet at around 2,800 feet per second. The result is a cartridge that is more than capable of taking just about any big game animal in North America.

However, the .30-06 is more than just the sum of its ballistics. Yes, it is an extremely capable cartridge. However, many others are as well. Why is this one so popular, with a person being able to walk into just about any sporting goods or gun shop and find a host of rifles and ammunition loadings for it on the shelves?

The reason is likely due to the history of the cartridge. Dating back more than 100 years, the .30-06 cartridge was adopted in 1906 as the United States military's official cartridge (the “.30” indicates the diameter of the bullet, and the “06” indicates its year of adoption) and chambered in the Model 1903 Springfield rifle. The military's adoption of a cartridge gives it instant credibility in the sporting market, lending an air of reliability and stability to the cartridge. As a result, for most of its more than 100 years of existence, the .30-06 has been an unceasingly popular civilian cartridge.

Though there may be an array of newer and “better” cartridges available, there is a reason the .30-06 still reigns supreme — it is simply an outstanding cartridge.

—Michael O. Humphries

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Marlin: (203) 239-5621, www.marlinfirearms.com
 Mossberg: (203) 230-5300, www.mossberg.com
 Remington: 1-800-243-9700, www.remington.com
 Weatherby: (805) 227-2600, www.399weatherby.com

