

GOING TO XS

Tim Finley tries luxury economy from China via Italy



Every serious airgun shooter should have a spring rifle in their gun cabinet. I'm not talking a £1000 re-blued and custom walnut stocked masterpiece, I'm talking about a rifle they can chuck in a gun bag and take out to the range or field without worrying about scratching it.

Shooting it on a regular basis will keep your follow-through technique honed to perfection. The muscle memory earned through practice then translates into superb accuracy when shooting pre-charged pneumatic (PCP) guns. If you have no follow-through with a recoiling, spring-powered rifle, you'll fail to obtain consistent groups and you

won't hit what you're aiming at.

Also, there are still many shooters who prefer a spring-powered rifle exclusively over PCPs. Sportsmarketing, or SMK as their brand is known, has for many years brought 'over engineered' airguns, built in China, to the UK market. The most expensive SMK spring-powered rifle is their Custom XS20 model. The actions are made to SMK's own tight specifications, and they're finally assembled in the UK by SMK's gunsmiths. This ensures that they comply with the UK power level restrictions and gives the SMK gunsmiths the chance to smooth out the actions.

.22 ONLY

The Custom XS20 is only available in .22(5.5mm) calibre, which I think is a shame, because I prefer .177 as an all-around hunting/pest control calibre, mainly due to my target shooting background. SMK sent me the rifle along with an SMK 3-9 x 40 mil-dot scope, complete with one of their own one-piece mounts. The barrel is shortish, at 405mm or 16 inches long, when compared to most spring rifles.

To finish off the XS20 Custom, it comes with a blued steel barrel weight. For the purists, a set of open sights are an optional extra, but you have to remove the muzzle weight to fit the front sight. I fitted the barrel weight, but for 20 quid, a set of open sights can be purchased.

The muzzle weight is held by two offset small grub screws, which I set on the underside out of sight. The 22 diameter weight slides down the barrel, making it only 15mm longer than standard.

LOADING SAFELY

The safest way to cock a break-barrel gun is to brace the rear of the stock in the top of your leg, with your trigger hand on the stock. Grip the barrel,

cock it, and keep the cocking hand on the barrel. Next load a pellet in the open breech with the hand that was supporting the stock. The hand on the barrel presses the gun into the top of the leg to keep it in position. Close the barrel and you're ready to aim and fire once you've taken the automatic safety catch off, which is positioned at the rear of the action. Automatic safety catch or no, you must never, ever, let go of the barrel during the cocking/loading sequence.

The XS20 can be de-cocked as it doesn't have an anti-bear trap system, which is yet another reason to keep hold of the barrel firmly during the cocking/loading operation. The barrel lock-up on the XS20 Custom was solid with no play in the jaws at all. There is a hefty barrel pivot pin, so much so that the front of the stock has had to be cut out to accommodate it.

The quality of the woodwork looks a million miles away from the Chinese supplied stocks I've seen on other model 20s, or indeed any far eastern spring rifle stock. It was a deep rich brown with chequered panels on the hand grip and forend. The ultra-smooth surface finish was a nice touch too, and it's topped off with a curved, black rubber butt pad.

OPTICS

The 3-9 x 40 scope is sold for the bargain price of £45, and the mounts were SMK brand too, being a one-piece unit, with recoil arrestor screw. This you screw in and out of the bottom of the mount to engage one of the three recoil arrestor holes machined in the top of the action. I prefer this type of arrestor device over the more normal spring pin types, which you have to knock out of the mount if fitting to a flat PCP rail; the screw type is far more versatile and at £15.95 these are a steal.

Once the scope was fitted, I ran the rifle over the chronograph, which showed the care with which SMK's

gunsmiths put the Custom XS20 together. It gave 11.6 ft.lbs. with H&N Field Target Trophy, 15.1 grain pellets. The readings were consistent too, varying less than 15 fps over 50 shots

The safety catch comes on automatically when the rifle is cocked and is situated at the very rear of the action. Push it in from the left side to show a red spot on the end of the safety bar and it's ready to

fire. When the gun was brand new, I found the button a little hard to depress, but after a few hundred shots it was fine. The trigger

pays homage to a certain world-renowned Teutonic unit. There's a large trigger weight adjustment screw behind the curved blade. I left it factory set on the XS20 and as you can see from the groups I shot, it was more than adequate.

Spring rifles, and especially hunting spring rifles, don't need target style ultra-light triggers.



The cross bolt safety is at the rear of the action.



The pistol grip has large panels.



An open sight kit is available as an option.

The XS20's pull weight measured in at 1.25 kg (2lb 13oz) using my electronic Lyman trigger gauge.

The Italian sporter stock has chequered panels on the sides of the pistol grip to give a firm hold. The front panels are perfectly positioned for kneeling shots, or for those shooters who use the 'lock arm' standing position. It has a cheek swell only on the left side of the stock for right-handed shooters.

RANGE TIME

At the range it shot sub inch (25mm) groups all day at 30m from the classic field target sitting position. I managed four shots in 14.3mm until the group pixie reared her pretty head and threw the last one out to 21.4mm. I set up a metal FT knockdown target as well and the 11.5 ft.lbs. H&N pellets made a very satisfying 'Smack' on the kill zone.

I got lost in the pure pleasure of spring rifle shooting and automatically moved into a kneeling position, as this is the position most hunters tend to

use for a vast majority of their shots. I was rattling off shot after shot on the knock-down target then decided to test how good I was on the thing that doesn't lie; paper. I was pleased to shoot a 23.5mm five-shot group kneeling with the SMK XS20 Custom.

The SMK scope was better than I expected for the low, and I mean low, price tag. Under the dust caps the reticle adjustment turrets are finger friendly and it has a mil-dot style reticle. Optical quality was well up to today's economy scope standards, i.e. just what any bargain hunter would be happy with, however I'd pay the few extra quid and get a scope with parallax adjustment. SMK also has a dedicated sound moderator for the XS20 for £39.95. I'd stick with the muzzle weight myself, as sound moderators have very limited use on



The solid cocking linkage is substantial.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Distributor: SMK 01206 795333

Web: www.sportsmk.co.uk

Model: Custom XS20

Type: Spring Piston

Barrel length: 16" (405 mm)

Calibre: .22 (5.5mm) only

Action: Break-barrel

Stock: Italian Sporter, with recoil pad and chequering

Sights: None (Open, hooded front post, rear adjustable notch are optional extras)

Trigger: Two-stage adjustable

Safety: Automatic

Overall length: 42½" (1080mm) with barrel weight fitted

Pull length: 14" (355mm)

Weight: 8lbs 12 oz. (4kg) with barrel weight and scope

Features: Scope rail, recoil pad, Moderator optional extra £ 39.95' Open sights optional extra £19.95

Scope: SMK 3-9 x 40 mil-dot reticle £44.95' One-piece mount £15.95

Price: £229.95

spring-powered rifles, in my humble opinion, although I think this calls for an article to prove it one way or the other! The improvements SMK have introduced do indeed make this rifle a cut above the rest of their spring-powered guns. The Italian stock takes the rifle to another level. This, along with an English tune, make it a true 'top value' gun. Where else can you get a gun of this build quality that shoots as well as this does for under £230? ■