

Savage Arms' Model B17F is a modern-looking rifle and cheapest of the three.



.17 HMR rifles best of the best

Thomas Tabor

In search of a better rimfire cartridge Hornady developed the .17 HMR (Hornady Magnum Rimfire) in 2002. At the time I recognised how ballistically superior that cartridge was compared to its competition but feared the cost would eventually cause its popularity to diminish. How wrong can you be? Shooters, particularly small game hunters, loved the .17 HMR from the outset and that adoration continues and, further adding to its popularity, eventually the cost began to drop.

The .17 HMR was based on the cartridge case of the .22 WMR (Winchester Magnum Rimfire), which was necked down to accommodate the smaller .172" diameter bullet. The end result was a cartridge loaded with a jacketed bullet as opposed to the usual lead bullet of the .22 calibre's rimfire versions, sent on its way at considerably higher velocities than either the .22LR or .22 WMR. Bullet variations began to grow in both composition and weight and while the 17-grain bullet is clearly the most popular weight for the .17 HMR, other weights typically range from a tiny 15.5 up to 20 grains.

Even though I questioned the success of the .17 HMR it wasn't long before I was singing its praises along with many other shooters. But like all cartridges it does have limitations and similar to the .22 LR and .22 WMR, I'd put the .17 HMR in the category of essentially a 100m cartridge. While in a few instances I've made some impressive shots out to about 150m on small game with my HMR rifles, in reality I believe its best performance is achieved within that 100m limit. And when small game is struck by its little 17-grain bullet within that range the results are nothing short of devastating, often leaving an exit hole the size of a 50 cent piece.

Because of the physical similarities between the .17 HMR and the .22 WMR, many rimfire rifle manufacturers found they could easily use their existing .22 rimfire bolt-action designs for the new calibre. As a result, there was soon a flurry of new .17 HMRs hitting the market and that selection has only grown over the past 20 years. But some products are simply better than others and in my opinion the following three rifles are among the best.

Cooper Arms' Jackson Squirrel Rifle
Top of my personal .17 HMR 'best of the best' list would have to be Cooper Arms' Model 57-M Jackson Squirrel Rifle. For the shooter seeking a bit more glamour than the usual production rifle this is hard to beat, but looks are only partly why I chose this one as it's also an excellent performer, capable of pinpoint accuracy. Of course quality comes at a price and a starting RRP around \$4195 makes it the most expensive of my three recommendations.

I've used the Jackson Squirrel Rifle extensively on game ranging in size from tiny ground squirrels often weighing as little as 500g all the way up to badgers, sometimes tipping the scales at as much as 14kg and in every case they were despatched with a single shot. Typically this Cooper model comes equipped with a heavily figured AA grade Carlo walnut stock designed with a roll-over cheekpiece (mine was a special order and came with an upgraded AAA French walnut stock).

The rifle weighs a moderate 2.9kg (6.5lb) and comes with a four-shot removable magazine, though another cartridge can be

.17 HMR rifles - best of the best

fed directly into the chamber to increase that capacity to five rounds. Chequering of the Cooper stocks is done on-site with the Jackson Squirrel Rifle typically receiving a basic pattern consisting of two panels of 20-lines/inch on the grip.

The trigger is Cooper's own design and was set at the factory to about 2lb pull weight which I found exceptionally crisp and free of slop or excessive movement. For all practical purposes the trigger is considered essentially to be non-adjustable and if you want to change that setting, Cooper recommends you use a qualified gunsmith.

The target grade 22".940 x 5.80 stainless steel barrels are matte finished and supplied by Cooper Arms' subsidiary firm Wilson Arms. The silver stainless colouration has been retained on the barrels while the receiver, bolt and other metal surfaces are matte blued (this distinctive appearance has become a company trademark). At the range I frequently achieved nearly ragged-hole shooting performance with the Jackson Squirrel Rifle and found its hunting feats to be on par with those results.

Savage Arms Model 93R17 BTV

Savage Arms is renowned for the accuracy of its rifles, the Model 93R17 BTV no exception, and at 50m I often found my bullet impact points to be almost touching, no matter what ammunition I put through it. Certainly the quality AccuTrigger had a bearing on those results but the Savage barrels and other designs inherent in this rifle also contributed. I liked the fact this model came with a laminated wood thumb-hole stock which was both eye-catching and comfortable to shoot. While all wood stocks are susceptible to changes in impact point due to weather variations and ambient humidity, laminated stocks generally are less affected than more traditional solid wood stocks.

This stock came with ventilation ports cut in the forearm, which I found pleasing,



Cooper Arms' Model 57-M Jackson Squirrel Rifle is a work of gunsmithing art.



The Savage AccuTrigger on the Model 93R17 BTV and B17F are fully adjustable.

This yellow-bellied marmot fell prey to Thomas's Jackson Squirrel Rifle.



The Savage Arms Model 93R17 BTV is attractive and functional.

.17 HMR rifles - best of the best

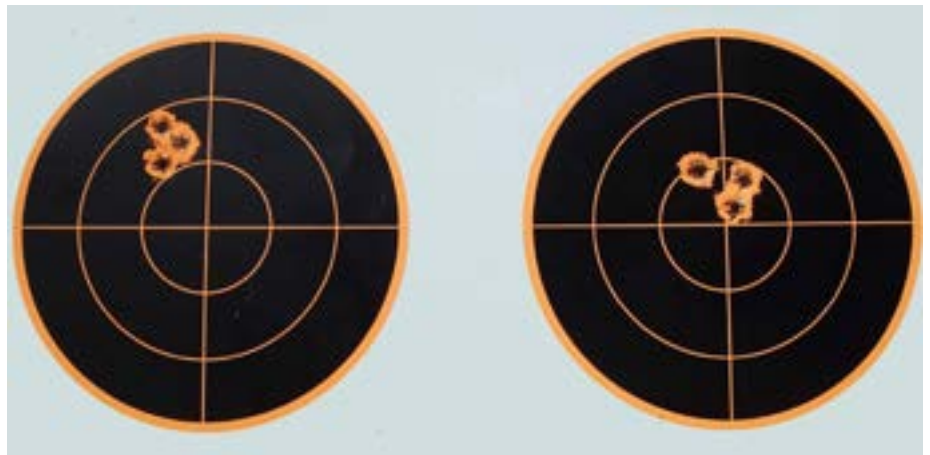
but that porting was only cosmetic. While venting a centrefire rifle stock in this way comes with the advantage of more rapid barrel cooling, a rimfire barrel never heats up to the point where such cooling is necessary.

I appreciate Savage having the foresight to install a thin rubber recoil pad on the stock rather than a buttplate made of metal or plastic. I view this as a safety feature as it discourages slippage of the rifle when placed in an upward position, either with the butt on the ground or in a standing gun-rack. I also appreciated two five-shot magazines being supplied, those magazines made of metal though the carrier the cartridges are set against is plastic.

The only change I'd like to see in this rifle would be an improved metal finish. Mine is a blued model (indicative of the 'B' in its name) and came with a fairly course matte blue finish which many manufacturers have since adopted over a more luxurious gloss or semi-gloss blueing. Essentially this is a cost-cutting measure and while I'm one who likes to save on my purchases, I'd gladly pay an extra few dollars for a more glamorous finish. At a moderate RRP price of around \$740, the Savage Model 93R17 BTV is a rifle any shooter can be proud to own and one capable of many years of service and pinpoint accuracy.

Savage B-Series B17F

The Savage Arms B-Series rimfire rifles were designed for reliable service yet are moderately priced and have modern stocks



While all factory ammo shot accurately in the Savage Model 93R17 BTV, impact points varied slightly depending on the brand.



When a .17 HMR bullet struck a metal silhouette (top centre) it was powerful enough to crater the surface as opposed to impacts from .22LR bullets which only dented the paint.



The Savage Model B17F has a well-designed 10-shot rotary magazine.

with a higher-than-standard comb, top tang safety and target-style vertical pistol grip. The B17F is among a variety of configurations in this series and is available in both

right or left-hand design. For the shooter after a modestly-priced, stoutly-built .17 HMR, the B17F may be the perfect choice and with RRP around \$400, this is by far the cheapest of my trio.

The black composite stock will surely appeal to many, its features including a trigger-guard moulded directly into it as part of the lay-up process. A combination of texturing and grooves in the forearm and grip ensure slip-free gripping and a somewhat oversized target-style bolt knob helps when it comes to quick cartridge cycling. The pistol grip is formed at a slightly sharper angle than many other stocks, which makes shooting from the prone position easier and more comfortable.

Rather than the more common banana-style magazine, the B17F comes with a 10-round rotary version of Savage's own design which is dependable and assures trouble-free accurate feeding. Once this magazine is in place it contours perfectly to match the stock, making it almost invisible. Savage also saw fit to include the popular and favourable AccuTrigger in their B-Series rifles, typically set at a pleasant 2lb pull weight. And that's my top three - open to debate. ●



Each Cooper rifle comes with a three-shot test target, shown here with a couple Thomas shot on his outdoor range.