



Andrew Venables keeps things short and sweet by shortening the barrel of his beloved Blaser R8

I wrote a few issues ago about wanting to get back to basics with my rifle shooting. My reliance on large calibres, scopes, long rifles and prone shooting positions was not helping me on the few hunting trips I can fit in around the busy schedule here at WMS Firearms Training.

I was delayed in the process by a technical issue with barrel shortening and the larger issue of the General Election. I am thrilled to be able to announce that both issues are resolved, with the shooters' party back in 10 Downing Street and my Blaser R8 barrel now 18in long and fitted with a stubby moderator thanks to HPS Target Rifles, near Gloucester, who did the excellent work in addition to loading some superb ammunition for us and our clients to use.

To me, back to basics means using a light, short and handy rifle in a sensible calibre – often known as a scout rifle – with a smallish scope and a decent moderator. Broadly, a scout rifle should be around 39in long and weigh less than eight pounds, scoped and

ready. It should carry easy, handle fast, shoot within four inches at 200 yards and be in a calibre capable of taking most medium-sized game up to elk, wildebeest and moose.

So, what have I got? Well, my love of the Blaser action and de-cocking safety is no secret, so I decided to shorten the .308 barrel of my R8 professional from the factory 23 inches to a stubby looking 18in. You might think that would be too short to be accurate and maintain velocity, but the general consensus amongst professionals is that in .308 you lose between 20-30 feet per second (fps) for every inch you remove between 26 and 18in and length does not affect actual accuracy.

If the 150-grain ammunition was doing 2,750fps average through 23in, now it's doing maybe 2,600, or just five per cent less through 18in. Actual tests I have made over the years have shown an average two to five per cent drop using ammunition from 185-grain to 150-grain respectively when going from 24 to 18in barrels in .308. If we look at muzzle energy, the rifle produced 2,519ft/lb before and 2,252ft/lb afterwards using the full five per cent. We need .24 calibre and above with 1,750ft/lb muzzle energy to be deer legal in England and Wales; if you're in Scotland, good luck.

Going from a ballistic tip boat tail bullet to a lead soft point will have more impact on energy at 200 yards than my barrel chop, and no quarry is likely to know the difference. The effect on point of impact using a 200-yard zero is also minimal, going from 8.3in low at 300 yards to 9.5in using my shorter barrel. All the data was gathered from

Rifles: Shortened barrels



Andrew's reliance on larger rifles and scopes was proving a restriction on hunting trips

our chronograph and Nightforce ballistic programme using a 0.4 ballistic coefficient bullet profile in .308.

So what have I gained now I have quantified the small trade off in velocity and energy? The invention of the moderator has led to shooters using longer, slightly less balanced rifles if we value our hearing and a little privacy, which is fine on the bench but less welcome on sticks, in the high seat or up a mountain.

Now I am back in balance, the Blaser R8 Professional, when fitted with a MaccTecc .308 moderator, is like a magic wand in my hands; short, fast and perfectly balanced for hunting. The MaccTecc, available from Edgar Brothers, is one of the lightest moderators at around 220 grams. I also use an Ase Ultra SL5 on the Blaser, which weighs about 425 grams. I find both excellent; the Ase, available from Jackson Rifles, offers slightly lower recoil for intense use and the MaccTecc is perfect in the woods or on the hill where light weight is preferable.

I will be using modest scopes in the 1.5-10x power range which offers the best optics for my type of hunting, whether a fast shot at 2x power in the twilight woods or a considered shot at 250 yards on the hill at 6-10x power. In truth, I have never felt the need for more than 6x power when hunting, though 10x helps me see the nature of the quarry.



Shortened barrels trade velocity and energy for balance and manoeuvrability

I have been using the Leica Magnus 1.5-10x42, which can be used just like a tactical scope, offering precise 100 unit turrets. This allows me to dial when playing at longer range on targets out to 900 yards with the 18in barrel. In hunting mode, I love the Swarovski Z6i 1.7-10x42 fitted with a ballistic turret, allowing me to instantly change zero to 100, 200, 300 and 400 yards, or anywhere in between.

To balance the handy rifle theme, I also have an old Tikka T3 with an 18in barrel fitted with a Zeiss Duralyt 2-8x42, and a new Savage Axis .308 (which would shorten most effectively) with a MaccTecc moderator and Weaver Kaska 3-9x40. I doubt there is a deer in the country that could tell which one they had been harvested with. Good optics do gain you an extra few minutes dusk and dawn, but it is hard to buy a new rifle that doesn't shoot well these days, and telescopic sights costing £90 to £300 can do the job. However, avoid cheap tactical lookalikes if you hunt.

Anyone thinking of shortening a rifle barrel should note that while .308 Win does shorten well, without undue loss of velocity, calibres like .243, .25-06, .270 Win and .300 Win Mag lose much more velocity if shortened under 22in, offering excess muzzle flash, noise and unburnt powder. Research your own calibre well and listen to professional engineers.

What have I achieved with the shortened rifle? Well, over the years I have harvested a lot of pests, deer and game using various 14in .22 rifles, my scout type rifles and the chopped Tikka. At 37in including the MaccTecc, the shortened Blaser is as fresh as David Cameron's smile. It has yet to harvest game but has already put a massive grin on my face in practice. Not only is it fast and deadly off sticks, clanging 10in gongs beautifully at 400 yards, but it is also making quite a few WMS clients consider shortening their rifles, or buying new handy ones to complement or replace their magnum bench guns. ■

For more information about WMS Firearms Training, contact Andrew Venables on 01974 831869 or visit www.wmsfirearmstraining.com