

Bear Rifles

By Chuck Hawks



Browning BLR Lightweight, a fine bear rifle. Illustration courtesy of Browning.

In North America and Europe, the apex predators are bears. Brown/grizzly, polar and black bear are all powerful predators. Adult male blacks probably average about 300 pounds, but can weigh twice that in exceptional cases. Adult male grizzly bears probably average around 700 pounds and adult brown bears perhaps 900 pounds. Adult male polar bears are about the size of brown bears and very large members of both species can run from 1100 to 1600 pounds. Grizzly and polar bears are known for their predatory behavior and short tempers, while black bears are more omnivorous and, generally, more timid around humans. However, in areas where human and bear encounters are common and bears are protected, such as Yellowstone National Park in the U.S., it is blacks that are responsible for far more attacks on humans than grizzlies.

It makes sense for anyone hunting any of these bear species to be armed with a sufficiently powerful rifle to turn a charge, just in case. However, as always, bullet placement is crucial to a clean, fast kill. Make sure that you can shoot your bear rifle with the requisite precision. The worst situation is a wounded, angry bear that has escaped into deep cover. The hunter is then morally required to finish the animal, as left alone it may be a danger to anyone who happens along. If you start with a bear, you *must* be prepared to finish the animal, regardless of the possible danger to yourself. This is true when hunting any dangerous animal, but particularly so when hunting major predators.

Most bears killed in North America are shot by local hunters, who are usually alone and unaccompanied by a professional hunter. Unlike hunting dangerous game on an African safari, there is no one to "back-up" the hunter in case of trouble. He is on his own, so choosing an appropriate rifle is critical.

Having already written articles about appropriate cartridges for hunting the various bear species (see the Rifle Information page), this article will be focused on the rifle. Suffice to say

that even the best rifle must be chambered for a cartridge appropriate to the size of the bear species being hunted.

In my article "Rifles for Dangerous Game" (see the Rifle Information page), I wrote that, *"Single shot rifles of break-open or falling block type can be chambered for extremely powerful dangerous game cartridges. Because they lack the long action of repeating rifles, they handle very nicely and they are easily adapted to telescopic sights. A fine example of such a rifle is the Ruger No. 1-H Tropical Rifle, which is available in several safari calibers up to .458 Lott. Like the double, the single shot can handle cartridges of practically any length. Unlike the double, however, there is no follow-up shot available without reloading. As much as I like hunting with a single shot rifle, for me this would disqualify the type from consideration as a serious dangerous game rifle."* The last sentence is particularly applicable to anyone bear hunting alone.

Handling speed is at a premium in any rifle to be used for hunting dangerous predators, as you may have to get it into action in a hurry. Thus, many hunters prefer compact and lightweight rifles. The trade-off is increased recoil, which degrades practical accuracy, so rifle weight and cartridge power must be carefully balanced. Make sure that the rifle you choose inspires confidence, not trepidation. A bad shot is worse than no shot at all! Even more important than handling speed is reliability, for a rifle that malfunctions could get you killed.

Along with a fast handling rifle, you need a scope with a big field of view that allows rapid target acquisition at medium to short range. That means a low power scope or a variable with a low minimum magnification. A 1-4x is ideal, if you carry it set below 2x. Only increase the magnification if you are presented with a relatively long shot and don't forget to return the scope to low power after shooting. Carrying a dangerous game rifle with the scope set above about 2.5x can be a fatal mistake if you are surprised by a bear. It has happened to others; don't let it happen to you.

Practically any repeater chambered for small bore cartridges on the order of the .270, .308 and .30-06 has sufficient power for hunting black bear and any high intensity medium or big bore cartridge, from the .338 Federal to the 450 Marlin, can handle even the largest bears. Ditto the various magnums from about 7mm to .375 caliber. In general, suitable bear calibers and loads are those recommended for CXP3 game.

Obviously, there are more capable bear hunting rifles than can be mentioned in an article of this type, so those mentioned in this article should be viewed as representative choices. The rifle weights mentioned below are for the bare rifle, without a scope, scope mount, sling or ammunition. These will typically add over a pound to the total weight of the rifle in the field.

BOLT ACTION RIFLES

The most popular type of hunting rifle in the world is the bolt action. It is typically accurate, very strong and a big selection of powerful cartridges is available. The cam action caused by opening the bolt can extract dirty, oversized and stuck cases that might jam other types of actions. However, the bolt action is also the slowest repeater to cycle. A bear can charge at 30 miles per hour (14.66 yards per second), which means that it can cover 50 yards in 3.4 seconds. Allowing for reaction time, even a very fast shooter with a bolt action rifle can barely get two shots off before the animal is on him and most hunters will manage only one, a point to ponder before choosing a bolt action bear rifle.

Traditionally, bolt action rifles for dangerous game have been controlled feed types, usually based on the Mannlicher-Schoenauer, Mauser 1898, or Winchester Model 70 actions. The Ruger M77 and CZ 550 are Mauser 98 derivatives and the Winchester Model 70 is an improved Mauser type action. The Kimber bolt action is sort of a lightweight Model 70 modified with some Remington Model 700 cost reduction features. These are all controlled feed actions. Controlled feeding is preferred when lives may be on the line, because it is somewhat less susceptible to jamming due to operator error. However, push feed actions, such as the Weatherby Mark V and Remington Model 700, are smooth in operation and can be very reliable. They have accounted for many dangerous game animals of all types.

One of the neatest bolt action bear rifles produced in recent years was the now discontinued Remington Model 670 Guide Rifle, in .350 Remington Magnum. This powerful, fast handling rifle would be a good choice for hunting any bear species. The Model 673 is gone, replaced by the handsome **Remington Model Seven CDL** in .350 Magnum with a 20" barrel. It weighs 7-3/8 pounds. The Model Seven is also offered in .308 Winchester, which is a fine black bear caliber. In addition, Remington offers their famous Model 700 in a plethora of models and calibers, several of which are suitable for bear hunting. All modern Remington bolt action rifles, regardless of model designation, are based on the principles developed for the smooth, push feed, Model 700 action.

Similar in concept is the **Ruger M77 Compact Magnum** bolt action. This 6.75 pound carbine is offered in .300 and .338 RCM calibers for grizzly, brown and polar bear hunters who can stand the recoil. (Most cannot, and still do their best shooting, so try before you buy.) Also from Ruger is the Mannlicher stocked M77 International. This lovely little carbine is available in .308 Winchester and .30-06 calibers, among others; it is hard to beat for black bear hunting. For those who want more weight to soak up recoil, the Ruger M77 Standard rifle can be had in several bear worthy calibers. The Ruger M77 series is built on a controlled feed action, always an advantage in a bolt action rifle used to hunt potentially dangerous game.

Another Mannlicher stocked beauty is the **CZ 550 FS**. Potential bear cartridges include .270, .308, .30-06 and the very potent 9.3x62mm. The latter is more than adequate for even the largest brown and polar bears, but the recoil in a 7.4 pound rifle is attention getting. For those who want more weight to soak up some of the recoil, the 9.3x62mm (and other bear cartridges) is also offered in the CZ 550 Safari Classics Express Rifle and CZ 550 American. The CZ 550 is a lightly modified Mauser 98 type action and features controlled feeding.

The traditional **Winchester Model 70 Featherweight** is another lightweight, fast handling, controlled feed bolt action. The Featherweight is available in bear hunting calibers that include .270 Winchester, .308 Winchester, .30-06 and .300 Win. Magnum. Weight is seven pounds in standard calibers. If you want a .300, the Model 70 is also offered in heavier Sporter and Super Grade versions that help moderate recoil.

The elegant **Kimber Models 84 and 8400** (short and long action, respectively) are lightweight, controlled feeding rifles that are a delight to carry and are chambered for powerful cartridges. These include the short action .308 Winchester and .338 Federal, plus the long action .270, .30-06, .300 Win. Mag. and .338 Win. Mag. However, Kimber rifles are designed for minimum weight (the 8400 weighs only 7.4 pounds in .338 Magnum!) and can be a handful in powerful calibers. Try before you buy, to make sure you are comfortable with the recoil and can still do your best shooting.

LEVER ACTION RIFLES

Many hunters prefer a lever action. Lever guns are usually shorter than bolt action rifles and the absence of a bolt handle protruding from the side of the receiver makes them easier to carry by hand or in a scabbard. They are unquestionably faster to operate, increasing the hunter's firepower. Once upon a time, lever guns were chambered for relatively low power cartridges on the order of the .44-40, but more modern lever actions are strong enough to handle high intensity cartridges. A lever action rifle in .338 Marlin Express, .358 Winchester, .45-70 or .450 Marlin may be your perfect bear rifle.

The **Browning BLR** action is quite different from rear locking designs like the traditional Winchester 94 and Marlin 336, or their Mossberg and Henry derivatives. The BLR uses a multi-lug, front locking, rotary bolt head that locks directly into the rear of the barrel. The lever operates a pinion gear system to cycle the bolt. The Browning is stronger and smoother than traditional designs. Its flush-mounted, detachable box magazine holds four standard diameter or three magnum cartridges. Its solid top receiver is drilled and tapped for scope mounts. It is a very satisfactory bear rifle available in a number of good bear cartridges, including .270 Winchester, 7mm Rem. Magnum, .308 Winchester, .30-06, .300 Win. Magnum,

.358 Winchester and .450 Marlin. Its combination of features make the BLR a premier bear rifle for the hunter who wants something faster than a bolt action, but does not trust autoloaders.

Marlin lever actions are traditional style rifles based on the 336 action. The modern Marlins use a round bolt and solid top receiver that makes scope mounting easy. The rear locking, straight back and forth bolt operation lacks the camming power of a rotating bolt to remove sticky cases, but the Marlin action has a long track record of reliability. Keep the chamber reasonably clean, operate the lever firmly and you should have no trouble. This action is suitable for powerful cartridges, such as the .308 Marlin Express, .338 Marlin Express, .45-70 and .450 Marlin. There are carbine versions with barrels as short as 18.5" and rifles with 24" barrels; blue/walnut and stainless/laminated finishes are available. The Marlin's under barrel, tubular magazine carries more cartridges than typical box magazines and can be reloaded "on the fly," without taking the rifle out of operation.

Henry offers a blue/walnut .45-70 carbine of guide rifle configuration. The Henry .45-70 lever action is based on the Marlin 336 action upgraded with a transfer bar ignition that eliminates the need for a crossbolt safety. The Henry .45-70 can handle all factory loaded .45-70 ammunition intended for use in lever action rifles or equivalent handloads and it is very smooth in operation. It sports an 18" barrel sans ports and comes standard with a ghost ring rear sight. It should make a good bear rifle within the MPBR of the .45-70 cartridge. You will find a review of this rifle on the Product Reviews page.

AUTOLOADING AND PUMP ACTION RIFLES

An autoloader offers repeat shots as fast as you can pull the trigger and a pump action comes close. Self-loaders are immune to the human operating errors that plague bolt actions, such as short or double stroking the bolt, an important consideration. Historically, the problem has been that early autoloaders, like early lever actions, were generally chambered for relatively low powered cartridges. They were also ammunition sensitive and prone to malfunction, especially under severe conditions or if not kept clean. The best modern designs have eliminated, or at least ameliorated, these problems.

One autoloader that has conquered those problems is the **Browning BAR**. In addition to being highly reliable, the front locking, rotary bolt head BAR is chambered for a number of powerful short and long action cartridges, up to and including the .338 Winchester Magnum. It has the power to take down any animal that walks this earth. It is built in a variety of configurations, including ShortTrac, LongTrac, Lightweight and Mk. II Safari grade. All are gas operated and substantially reduce the effective recoil of powerful bear cartridges, making it faster to get back on target. The steel and walnut Mk. II Safari grade is the top of the line. It is

longer and heavier than the other BAR models, but it also kicks less. To my mind, a .338 Win. Mag. BAR Mk. II may well be the best rifle on the planet for hunting the world's largest predators.

The other autoloader that impressed the reviewers at *Guns and Shooting Online* was the **Merkel SR1**. This is a modern, gas operated, front locking action with multiple lugs. In our review it proved completely reliable with standard factory loads and equivalent reloads, although low pressure and high pressure cartridges caused problems. Because it is gas operated, recoil is noticeably lighter than a bolt action of the same weight (seven pounds in .30-06). Available calibers include 7x64mm, .308 Winchester .30-06, 8x57JS, .300 Win. Magnum and 9.3x62mm. Barrel length varies somewhat between calibers, but averages around 20". The stock is adjustable by means of supplied shims. The SR1 is lighter and handier than the BAR Mk. II Safari grade and chambered for similarly powerful calibers.

The only reasonably popular pump action rifle is the **Remington Model 7600**. For those who are used to operating them, a pump gun is the fastest shooting, manually operated action. The Model 7600 is derived from the previous Model 760 and this front locking, rotary bolt design has been in production for decades. It has proven reliable in the field and is chambered for the bear worthy .270, .308 and .30-06 cartridges. Barrel lengths include 22" (rifle) and 18.5" (carbine). The barreled action is blued, while stock material can be walnut or synthetic.

CONCLUSION

These rifles barely scratch the surface of potential bear hunting rifles. Any rifle chambered for an adequate cartridge is a potential bear rifle and most deer hunters will "bring what they own" to the occasional bear hunt. Many black bear, for example, have been killed with .243 caliber rifles, but I would not intentionally embark on a black bear hunt with a .243. I recommend cartridges on the order of the .270, .308 and .30-06 for hunting black bear and I would not intentionally embark on a grizzly/brown bear hunt with a rifle less powerful than a .30-06 shooting 180 grain bullets. For those who can stand the recoil, I consider cartridges such as the .350 Rem. Magnum, 9.3x62mm and .338 Win. Mag. ideal for the great bears.

Most bears are shot in the woods or brush country, where the rifles mentioned above shine. Also, it is considered prudent to shoot at potentially dangerous game between 50 and 150 yards, as it is morally irresponsible to risk letting a wounded bear escape. A wounded bear might become a man killing rogue.

However, grizzlies are occasionally hunted on barren ground and black bear foraging for food are sometimes shot from one hillside to another, extending the range. The latter is a common hunting technique for Spring black bear in the Coastal Range of Oregon and Washington, for example.

For hunting black bear in such conditions, a rifle chambered for a belted magnum cartridge of .264, .270, 7mm or .300 caliber will do nicely. So will standard calibers in the .270 Win. and .280 Rem. class. My favorite long range black bear rifle, for example, is a Weatherby Vanguard Deluxe in 7mm Remington Magnum. This allows shots out to 300 yards without holding over, as far as a blackie should be engaged under the best conditions.

The rifles highlighted above are representative of the sort recommended by experienced bruin hunters. They are maybe a little more appropriate for the purpose than your average deer rifle and are chambered for powerful cartridges, starting with the "all-around" calibers and going up from there. If you are specifically looking for a bear rifle, it might be worthwhile to check them out.