

Van Dyke Critter Gitter



LLOYD HILL

The custom-made rifle business has always been a niche market, and has never been better in terms of volume and quality as it is today. A burgeoning array of aftermarket components has made it possible for even shooters of relatively modest means to build a rifle encompassing nearly every high-tech refinement. It has also allowed a plethora of craftsmen to practice their trade and develop the most accurate and field-proof rifles ever seen. One such craftsman is John Van Dyke of Plainsville, KS, and recently he sent me one of his rifles to wring out—a rifle he calls the Critter Gitter.

So what the hell is a Critter Gitter? It's a fully custom Model 700 Remington that has been blueprinted, fit with a Shilen heavy barrel and nestled into an H-S Precision composite stock. So why does it cost four times what a stock Model 700 does? Well, the comparison is like that between a Ford Taurus off a dealer's lot and its NASCAR cousin. They may look very similar, but the real differences lie under the hood.

Van Dyke starts with a short-action Model 700 ADL receiver; blueprints it, and in my sample he sleeved the bolt; winds

on a 24-inch stainless steel Shilen No. 7 contour barrel chambered in .22-250 Remington in front of a Holland switch barrel competition recoil lug; and coats all of the metal in matte-black Teflon. He nestles this assembly into a modified Anschütz Silhouette stock from H-S Precision, complete with an aluminum bedding block, free floating the barrel.

There is a fair amount of chatter on the Internet and ranges around the country about blueprinting an action. Blueprinting is actually a misnomer, since if taken in the literal sense it would mean adding and/or removing material from every aspect of the receiver and bolt to make it identical to the original engineered drawing. What really occurs is these gun builders true the receiver and the bolt—essentially hand fitting one to the other to ensure that parts like the bolt and barrel mate squarely and evenly within the receiver to minimize the chance of any lost motion or torque from firing to affect the launching of the bullet. In its most common form blueprinting alone will not make a rifle more accurate. What blueprinting does is take out several variables within a rifle's action and provide a measurably stable foundation for assembling the rest of the rifle.

Specifications

- Manufacturer:** Van Dyke Rifles; www.vandykerifles.com
- Model:** Critter Gitter
- Type:** Bolt action
- Finish:** Teflon
- Caliber:** .22-250 Remington
- Capacity:** Four
- Stock:** H-S Precision composite
- Barrel Length:** 24 inches
- Rifling:** 1:10 RH
- Overall Length:** 44⁵/₈ inches
- Weight:** 11 pounds, 14 ounces with scope
- Sights:** None
- Trigger Pull:** Specified by customer; 11¹/₂ ounces on test sample
- MSRP:** \$2,240

The beefy barrel measures 1¹/₄ inches at the front of the recoil lug and has a straight taper to ⁷/₈ inch at the muzzle. It has an 11-degree crown, with a 60-degree chamfer at the terminus of the bore to protect that very critical area from damage during cleaning.

At 11 pounds, 14 ounces, including a Zeiss Conquest 4.5-14X Z-Plex scope with side-focusing parallax adjustment, the Critter Gitter is certainly not a packin' rifle. All that weight checked the recoil of the .22-250 down to a very manageable 1.7 foot-pounds as calculated by the Oehler Model 43 chronograph's software—about on par with a .223 Remington, so watching a bullet impact was easy.

The H-S Precision stock has a flat, square fore-end and is made to be shot from a rest. Its super-high Monte Carlo cheekpiece is actually ³/₈ inch above the line of bore and includes a generous bevel—almost a roll-over—to accommodate even a wide face like mine. There is a cutout or flute at the point of the comb to allow the bolt to be removed. The pistol grip is quite steep and

One of the first steps when blueprinting an action is to re-bore the bolt raceway to a uniform dimension. Van Dyke then sleeves the bolt with barrel stock to fit. A standard Model 700 bolt (top) is pictured for comparison.



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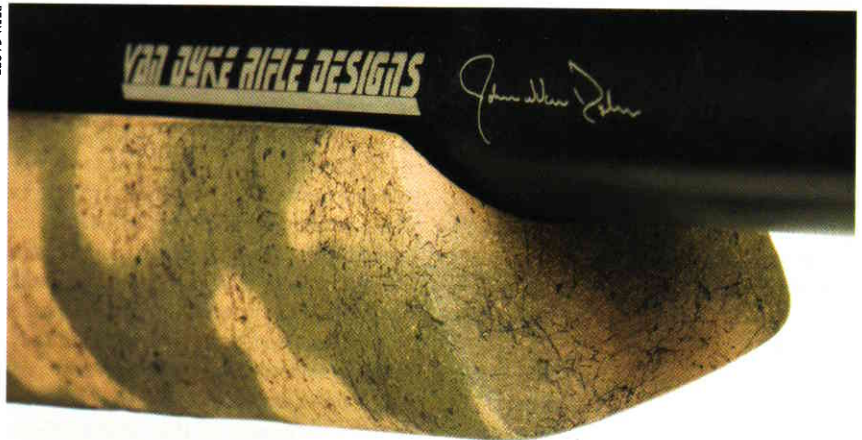
has a generous Wundhammer-style palm swell to fill the hand. On this rifle the length of pull was a full 15 inches including the Pachmayr Decelerator recoil pad, prompting a few comments around the office that maybe this rifle had been made for an NBA center. Because I am a habitual stock crawler, I had no difficulty shooting the rifle from the bench, but it did feel a bit weird. Of course, on a custom rifle the customer can specify length of pull, as well as any other reasonable dimension.

A rig like this should have no problem planting bullets within an inch of each other with any decent load, and the Critter Gitter fulfilled that expectation, provided I did my part. The day I shot it started at a mighty chilly 34 degrees, and a few groups—especially the first two or three—scattered a bit. But as I became more accustomed to the rifle and its 11½-ounce Jard trigger, and the weather warmed to a balmy 38 degrees, the bullets started to cluster tighter. My best groups came with Federal Classic with the 55-grain Hi-Shok bullet. I have no doubt that a well-tuned handload could shrink the ¾-inch aver-

The Critter Gitter has a Jard trigger, one of the best aftermarket triggers available for Model 700 actions. Top-quality components from trigger to barrel set this rifle apart from factory guns.

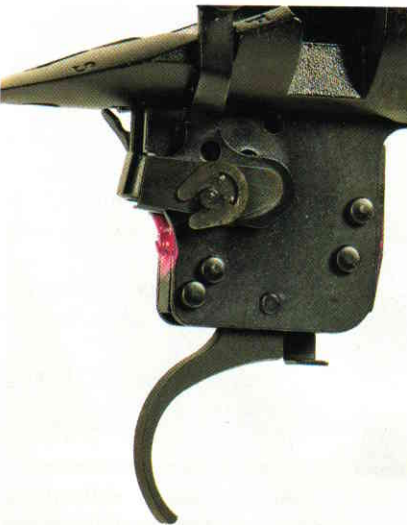
Accuracy Test						Van Dyke Critter Gitter
Five, five-shot groups at 100 yards from a benchrest, measured in inches.						
Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Average	
1 ⁵ / ₁₆	5/ ₈	7/ ₈	5/ ₈	3/ ₄	0.75	
Ammunition: Federal Classic 55-grain Hi-Shok.						

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The modified stock has a wide, beavertail fore-end designed to be shot from a rest. The barrel is free floated to the recoil lug, and the receiver sits in an aluminum bedding block.

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age the factory load delivered. Van Dyke told me he cuts reloading dies with the same reamers he uses to chamber a custom gun, and with suitable handloads the rifle should group within ¼ minute of angle.

My only real complaint with this rifle was its magazine. It worked, but it required some TLC. I found it near impossible to load it by “feel,” snapping cartridges in as I sat behind the rifle much as one might do on a prairie dog shoot. The first cartridge would go in easily; the second needed to be positioned just right; the third would need even more care to get it to seat and feed correctly; and the fourth needed not only a lot of care as to positioning, but a fair amount of pressure to overcome the leaf spring under the carrier. I’m sure Van Dyke could tune this glitch out in a few minutes. Too, up until now it has been probably fed a diet of carefully constructed handloads, and even NASCAR race cars get better fuel than the rest of us buy at the local stop-and-rob.

Not everyone needs or wants a \$2,240 varmint rifle, nor does everyone need or want an ultra-high-performance NASCAR race car. But some of us do. We take solace in knowing that every nuance of our rifle is made as perfectly as can be done by human hand and its machinery. Maybe ¼ minute-of-angle accuracy isn’t necessary to shoot prairie dogs and ground squirrels. But we still derive great pleasure in pursuing perfection. A rifle and a rifleman are all about precision. So are John Van Dyke and his rifles. S

—Dave Campbell

A thick palm swell and near vertical pistol grip place the shooting hand in perfect position to control the trigger. The stock has a tacky, textured finish that is not rough on the hands and cheek, but provides good purchase.

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