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by Scott Mayer

KELBLY ATLAS HUNTING RIFLE

A noted Benchrest gunbuilder offers out-of-the-box hunting rifles that trace their lineage to world-record accuracy.

While accuracy has always been important to me, the ultimate accuracy sport of Benchrest never caught my fancy, which is why it was quite by accident that I stumbled upon Kelbly's on the lower floor of the 2014 SHOT Show. This family-owned business based in Lawrence, Ohio, builds some 500 actions a year, with about 60 percent of them going to the Benchrest community and the remaining split up between hunting, Palma and other shooting disciplines.

A quick check of some of the records fired with Kelbly guns and actions turns up several, including an impressive 1,000-yard, 10-shot group measuring 3.280 inches and a positively tiny 600-yard, five-shot group measuring 0.5823 inch.

Clearly, that kind of shooting stands as a testament to the skills of the shooters and the quality of their ammunition, but it also stands that records like that aren't possible unless you have either really accurate rifles or crazy good luck.

Kelbly's has taken its experience in building record-breaking Benchrest rifles and applied it to the Atlas hunting rifle.



Groups like that are from specialized guns, but the Kelbly's have taken their Benchrest accuracy knowledge and applied it to the demands coming from the hunting market to create ultra-accurate hunting rifles. The result is the Atlas Hunting Rifle, part of Kelbly's Arcas Series of rifle packages designed with the specifications and components needed for achieving a higher level of accuracy.

A "Standard" Action

The Atlas has been called a semi-clone of Remington's Model 700 that's machined to much tighter tolerances and with final fitting done by hand. Bolts, mounts and all parts of the action are made in-house, and every part of the rifle is made in America. While the action's bottom dimensions are the same as the 700's and it features a BDL-style floorplate, that's about where the similarity ends. You can't swap barrels with a Model 700 because the Atlas has a different thread pitch, and though you might have an Atlas drop right into a Model 700 aftermarket stock, you're more likely going to have to do a little fitting for the Atlas's trigger hanger.

Both the action and bolt body are stainless steel, and they're made from different enough alloys to prevent galling as the two parts glide effortlessly despite incredibly tight tolerances. With such tight tolerances I was expecting to see some form of an anti-bind feature, but there isn't one. I thought that might be a carryover from the Benchrest side of the business, where shots can be taken at a more leisurely pace, but when asked about the anti-bind, Ian Kelbly explained that it was precisely because of the tight tolerances that the bolt doesn't need one.

Another interesting thing I found with the action is the thickness of the bridge. There's a lot of metal there, so it certainly stiffens the action, but Kelbly offered that the thickness is there so the front and rear bridges are the same height, making it easier to mount an optic parallel with the bore. The sample gun came fitted with a smooth dovetail rail, and I'm always kind of leery of a scope shifting during recoil along them, so I was glad to find out that you can also order the Atlas Hunting Rifle with either a 0- or 20-degree Picatinny rail that has the cross-bolt notches so a scope can't slip.

Mechanically, one big difference from Remington's Model 700 is the TG mechanical ejector housed in the left locking lug. It's almost like a Mauser's, but with Kelbly's unique twist. A Mauser ejector is a blade that pivots out through a slot cut in the left locking lug that whacks the rim of the case to eject it. Instead of a pivoting blade, the Atlas has a fixed pin in the front of the bolt release that presses forward on an ejector button in the left lug. With either design you can open the bolt gently and have the case just pop loose, or you can really yank



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The Rifle Basix trigger is fitted into a hanger and breaks at a super smart and consistent 2 pounds.

the bolt and send the case flying. The important thing is that you have control so you can easily collect your brass at the bench instead of having to hunt for it, and at the same time, have the robustness needed to ensure an empty case clears the action if you're taking a follow-up shot at a big buck.

The ejection port on this gun is generous and uniquely shaped. Kelbly says there's no functional reason for the shape other than to brand a unique "look" to their guns, but I found it provided good clearance and positioning when thumbing cartridges into the magazine.

The Atlas has a fixed pin in the front of the bolt release that presses forward on an ejector button in the left bolt lug.

Swap Barrel, But Not

In addition to the detail put into the Atlas's action, Kelbly puts a lot into the barrels and how everything is put together. The recoil lug is sandwiched between the barrel and the receiver face, and it's pinned, because many Kelbly customers like changing barrels. "We have one customer who shoots prairie dogs, and he'll shoot a barrel until it gets hot and then just switch," Ian tells me.

All Kelbly actions are indexed at the factory, so you don't have to send the gun back for a new barrel to get the headspace right. So long as you stay within the same case head size, you can simply order a barrel in a different chambering and switch them yourself. And if you want to change to a chambering with a different case head size, Kelbly's will send you the right size bolt and you can switch both the bolt and barrel.

Barrels are from Krieger, and Kelbly hand-cuts chambers on the tight side. The bore lapping is also done by hand, to make sure its dimensions are uniform over its entire length, and there's a recessed, flat target crown that won't get so easily dinged in the field.

Sturdy Stock

Stocks for the Atlas are Bell & Carlson T1000 that have integral aluminum bedding frames that cradle the action. The frame extends back into the wrist and up into the fore-end to add strength and rigidity, and everything is glass bedded to a few inches forward of the recoil lug, because Kelbly believes the bedding helps soak up a lot of vibration caused by firing the cartridge.

As is customary on most rifles these days, the barrel is free-floated in a generous channel, and there are two sling swivel studs so you can mount a bipod and sling separately.

The barreled action is set so deeply in the stock that there's a small channel at the front of the comb to clear the cocking piece. With the action set so low, recoil is straight back with minimal muzzle rise, and you can take a really solid cheekweld and still see through the scope instead of staring at the back of the bolt.

On The Range

Kelbly's also sells March brand rifle-scopes, so I asked that the test gun be sent with one to ensure compatibility and because I have wanted to try one of these scopes since I saw them at SHOT. The Atlas Package does not come with the scope.

The gun arrived chambered in .308 Win. and fitted with a 30mm March 2.5-25X scope in Kelbly's aluminum scope rings. These rings are made from solid bar stock and sliced off consecutively like slices of bread to ensure little variation in the pair and eliminate the need to "lap" the rings on well-aligned bases.

I believe it was Redfield that first offered variable scopes that increase the magnification by a factor of three (3x3=9, so 3-9X power), and it was big news at the time. The March has an incredible 10-times magnification range, which is the highest I have ever seen, but trying to use 25X in the 102-degree heat was problematic to

SPECS

Manufacturer: Kelbly Rifles
Model: Atlas Hunting Rifle
Standard calibers: .223 Rem., .22-250 Rem., 7mm WSM, .308 Win., .300 WSM (short action); 6.5x284, 6.5x55 GWI, 7mm Rem. Mag., .30-06 Sprg., .300 Win. Mag (long action)
Action: Bolt-action repeater
Magazine capacity: Four rounds
Barrel: 24-inch #4 heavy sporter contour
Trigger: Rifle Basix, 2 pounds pull
Sights: None. 20 MOA or 0 MOA Picatinny rail and ring size of your choice
Stock: Pillar bedded Bell & Carlson T1000 stock in black/black, tan/black, gray/black, black/gray, olive green/black spiderweb finishes
Overall length: 44.5 inches
Weight: 8 pounds, 8 ounces
Other: Long action is a \$199 upgrade
MSRP: From \$2,799
More Information: www.kelbly.com

GUNS & LOADS

by Scott Mayer



say the least. Mirage won out and I had to dial things back to 8X so the target didn't look like I was trying to aim through running water. Even at the lower power setting though, the Atlas Hunting Rifle delivered tight, dime-size three-shot groups with Hornady 150-grain Superformance loads.

There were a lot of expectations realized with this rifle on the range. For one, the Rifle Basix trigger was a dream, breaking at a super smart and

consistent 2 pounds pull. With scope, the Atlas weighs just shy of 10 pounds. That, combined with the low bore axis, results in minimal perceived recoil and almost no muzzle rise. Under recoil, the wide, flat forend shifts back smoothly in the front pedestal bag, which is a testament to the Atlas's Benchrest pedigree and is not bad in the hand, either.

Something I noticed and didn't expect, however, is how the bolt feels

when it closes on a cartridge. Often on a closing a bolt-action rifle you can feel the bolt "cam" the cartridge into the chamber, and I was expecting that because of the tight competition chamber and factory hunting ammunition. Instead, the bolt closes like there's no cartridge in the chamber — it just drops closed. Kelbly says it's because of the lengths they go to when lapping the lugs. "Our lugs have 99 percent contact," Ian tells me.

Conclusion

In the field, the Atlas Hunting Rifle is best suited to treestand or other stationary hunting methods. It is a well-made, accurate hunting rifle, and the ability to have multiple barrels and easily switch them out will appeal to the multi-species hunter who wants to do it all with the same gun. It opens up the opportunity to invest heavily in the base rifle and just one scope, and then essentially assemble a "custom rifle battery" without the cost of a bunch of custom rifles.

For more information:
www.kelbly.com