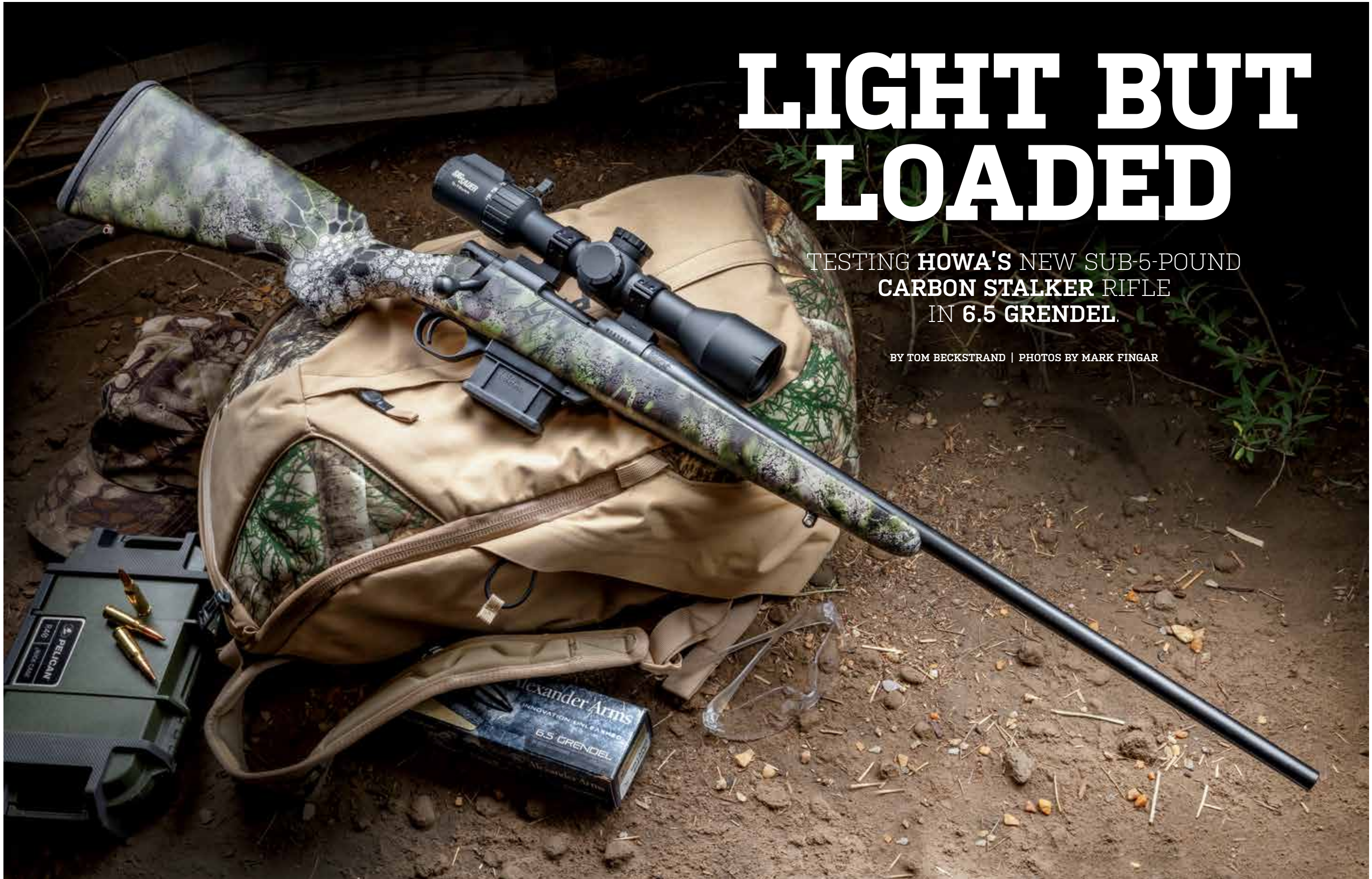


LIGHT BUT LOADED

TESTING **HOWA'S** NEW SUB-5-POUND **CARBON STALKER** RIFLE IN 6.5 GRENDEL.

BY TOM BECKSTRAND | PHOTOS BY MARK FINGAR





Howa's Mini Action is sized perfectly for cartridges like the 6.5 Grendel. Its reduced travel length and overall bolt length make it difficult to short stroke or bind, even when cycling quickly.

LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLES have always been popular because no one likes to tote a heavy beast in the field. However, take the concept of a lightweight rifle too far and actually shooting it becomes a miserable experience. I remember the first lightweight rifle I purchased: a 6-pound, .308 Winchester. I was serving in the military on a sniper team at the time and shot a lot of .308, so I was surprised to learn just how much difference a few pounds of rifle weight makes in terms of felt recoil. While far from abusive, there was a significant difference in recoil between my issued rifles and my new lightweight gun.

What excites my inner rifle nerd about Howa's latest Carbon Stalker in 6.5 Grendel is the balance it strikes between being extreme light weight and being paired with an ideally suited cartridge. This combination makes a lot of sense because it offers terminal performance on critters as large as deer while still being pleasant to shoot and a joy to carry.



The svelte two-lug bolt is an appropriate choice for the lightweight Carbon Stalker. The bolt face features a M16-style extractor and plunger ejector.

HOWA CARBON STALKER

TYPE	Bolt action
CARTRIDGE	6.5 Grendel
CAPACITY	5 rds.
BARREL	22 in., 1:8-in. twist
OVERALL LENGTH	40.75 in.
WEIGHT	4 lbs., 14 oz.
STOCK	Carbon fiber, Kryptek wrap
GRIP	Smooth
LENGTH OF PULL	13.5 in.
FINISH	Blued, matte (steel)
TRIGGER	4 lbs., 3 oz. (tested)
SIGHTS	None
MSRP	\$959
IMPORTER	Legacy Sports, 800-553-4229, legacysports.com

That Action For starters, the Carbon Stalker is built around Howa's Mini Action. There's a slender 22-inch barrel attached, and the whole package was dropped into a carbon-fiber sporter stock. Rifle weight for the model tested was 4 pounds, 14 ounces, with an empty magazine and no optic mounted. Optionally available are .223 Remington, 6.5 Grendel and 7.62x39mm chambers. A 16.5-inch barrel is also offered in .350 Legend. Sling swivel studs adorn the forend and toe, so mounting a sling isn't an issue. The rifle takes

five-round detachable box magazines, and both the bottom metal and magazines are made from polymer.

What makes this rifle unique is that action, termed "Mini" by Howa. Opening the bolt and pulling it to the rear only requires 3.375 inches of rearward bolt travel. For comparison, the Remington 700-footprint short actions have about 4.125 inches of rearward travel and Remington 700 long actions have approximately 4.81 inches of travel. If you've ever shot a



The Howa Carbon Stalker's 6.5 Grendel Mini Action feeds from a polymer, five-round detachable box magazine.

I was once a student at the U.S. Marine Corps Scout-Sniper Advanced Course, and we were shooting a drill that required rapid bolt manipulation for approximately 20 rounds of fire. Upon completion of the drill, I spoke to one of the instructors. He mentioned that I was fortunate to have brought a short-action rifle to the course. Most "Army guys" show up with long-action rifles and have problems with that drill. I asked why and he said, "They short-stroke the long action when trying to shoot fast. It happens at least once every time we do this drill."

short action and then moved to a long-action rifle, the difference in cycling the guns is noticeable. The difference in travel might not look like much on paper, but they feel very different. The longer bolt travel distances can also be problematic in some shooting scenarios. Most shooters will easily recognize the difference in how short and long actions feel, so it bears pointing out that the difference in travel between Howa's Mini Action and a Remington 700 short action is greater than the difference between short and long actions.

When riflemen discuss action length, the debate usually devolves into the differences in rifle overall length and rifle weight. In reality, these are minor differences that shouldn't impact the decisions on which to choose. A more important consideration of action length should be its likelihood of inducing shooter error. The longer the action, the more likely the shooter will be to either short-stroke it under pressure or push the bolt handle off axis and cause it to bind. Longer actions have longer bolts and those are harder to keep straight when cycling aggressively. If all a guy shoots is a long-action rifle, he'll likely never have a problem. The problems arise when the shooter has rifles with both short and long actions.



The stock has sling swivels fore and aft, and the internal recesses correspond to the action's integral recoil lug and flat bottom.

While the differences in action length don't make much difference when handling a rifle at the gunshop counter, lying in the prone and trying to shoot quickly will make the differences readily apparent. The arm and wrist that cycle the action don't like to move very much when lying in the prone. The longer the action, and the more the arm is forced to move, the higher the probability for error.

This experience first made me aware of action lengths and lots of rifle shooting since then has only reinforced this lesson. One of the main reasons I love the Howa Mini Action is its super-short travel. It's almost impossible to short-stroke, and equally hard to push it off its axis and make it bind when cycling. To make the action even more appealing, it has an integral recoil lug so rebarreling is easy, the bottom of the action is flat and beds well, and it has the durable M16-style extractor.

More Than Materials While the stubby action and slender barrel make major contributions to the rifle's light weight, the stock is where the biggest weight loss occurs. The stock is 29¼ inches in overall length and has a 13½-inch length of pull. Yet, it weighs just 15 ounces. Weighing less than 1 pound certainly



grabs a guy's attention, but an analysis of how it's achieved shows good common sense on Howa's part.

Most standard hunting stocks are 31 inches long. When we get into the light-weight category, dimensions change and that's what happened here. Howa cut about 1½ inches off the forend's tip and, since that cuts both the carbon fiber shell and the rigid foam fill inside the forend, the stock loses a good chunk of weight. However, Howa kept the standard 13½-inch length of pull, making this a regular-sized stock even though it's light. The weight savings at the back of the stock come by leaving everything behind the stock's wrist devoid of fill and using a slender half-inch Limbsaver recoil pad instead of the more common three-quarter-inch pad. The narrow recoil pad is especially wise since a surprising amount of any stock's weight comes from the dense rubber cushion. Since none of this rifle's chamberings generate much recoil, the thinner pad provides enough protection.

Internal recesses and inletting appear to fit the barreled action well. There is no bedding compound in the stock, and there are no pillars around the action screws. Anyone looking to wring every ounce of accuracy out of this rifle has those two options available later.

The polymer bottom metal and polymer magazine were trouble-free during this evaluation. The magazine holds five rounds and has a removeable floorplate to


make maintenance a snap. The polymer bottom metal works just fine, too, but if I had the habit of regularly removing the barreled action from the stock, I would get the aluminum replacement available from Diversified Innovative Products (\$120, dipproductsinc.com).

The trigger that Howa uses on the Mini Action is their two-stage Howa Actuator Controlled Trigger (HACT) model. It came set at 4 pounds, 3 ounces. This is way too heavy a pull weight for a rifle this

light. The trigger pull weight is somewhat adjustable, and backing out the screw on the front of the trigger housing can drop pull weight down to just under 3 pounds. My personal preference would be to go lighter still, and doing so would require aftermarket spring kits or a replacement

trigger assembly from Jard (\$135, jardinc.com).

Where the Carbon Stalker in 6.5 Grendel especially shines is hunting inside 300 yards, inside 200 yards for the .350 Legend and 7.62x39mm, or, as a walking varmint rifle in .223 Rem. The rifle is light and any of these cartridges offer excellent terminal effects at the ranges listed above. The 6.5 Grendel can ring steel further away, but the low muzzle velocity means impact velocities past 300 yards make it questionable on game. Should Howa ever chamber this rifle in 6mm ARC — and I think they will — it would be a great combination for deer out to 400 yards. The lighter 6 ARC bullet has more velocity but is still heavy enough to get adequate penetration on medium-sized game, all in a lightweight low-recoiling package.

Howa's combination of the Mini Action and a minimalist carbon-fiber stock makes this rifle ideal for anyone that walks and shoots. Accuracy is very good and the price isn't onerous. This rifle is priced competitively and it works well, even left in factory form. The rifle is also a worthy candidate for custom work. Anyone serious about light and handy rifles will be well-served with the Carbon Stalker. 

PERFORMANCE

LOAD	VELOCITY (FPS)	ES	SD	BEST GROUP (IN.)	AVERAGE GROUP (IN.)
Hornady Match 123-gr. ELD	2,471	22	7.9	.63	.87
Hornady 123-gr. A-MAX	2,519	40	17.3	.88	.95
Alexander Arms 120-gr. TSX	2,547	28	10	.92	1.07

Notes: Accuracy is the average of five, five-shot groups at 100 yards. Velocity is the average of five shots across a LabRadar chronograph placed adjacent to the muzzle.



The two-stage HACT trigger from Howa came set at just more than 4 pounds. It was user-adjustable to just less than 3 pounds.