

Howa XL Lite Chassis Rifle



Factory ammunition tested included: 1) SIG SAUER 40-grain Varmint & Predator Tip, 2) Remington UMC 45 JHP, 3) American Eagle 50 JHP and 4) Hornady 55 V-MAX Varmint Express. Handloads included: 5) Barnes 50 Varmint Grenade, 6) Cutting Edge ESP Raptor, 7) Rocky Mountain Reloading 69 3-Gun Hunter, 8) Speer 75 Gold Tip and 9) Berger 90-grain VLD Target.



Shooting a New .223 Remington



Howa's two-stage HACT Trigger includes smooth initial take-up, and then a super-crisp break with no overtravel. It is delivered set at 2.9 to 3 pounds. It can be adjusted lighter, but doing so voids the warranty.



The XL Lite Chassis includes a LUTH-AR buttstock. The adjustable design allows creating length of pulls from 12 to 15 inches via five click-in positions controlled by a spring-loaded underlever.



Howa's XL Lite Chassis is a streamlined rifle built on a Model 1500 Mini Action set in a HTI glass-filled polymer chassis-style stock. The design weighs only 7.5 pounds.

Patrick Meitin

Howa's lightweight .223 Remington chassis rifle is ideal for serious varmint and predator hunting off the beaten track. Japanese manufactured Howa sporting rifles have developed a reputation for quality craftsmanship at reasonable prices. This should come as no surprise. Japanese automobiles have dominated the market for decades. Today, many of the best sporting optics have roots in "The Land of the Rising Sun." Howa Machinery, Ltd.,

has been producing military and civilian firearms since 1940, including World War II Type 99 Arisaka rifles and parts for Type 38 rifles. In the early 1970s, Howa produced AR-18 and AR-180 5.56mm rifles on license from Armalite of Costa Mesa, California. (The Japanese government eventually forced Howa to cease production.) In 1979, Howa's Model 1500 appeared, followed by the 1500 Mini Action introduced in 2015. Weatherby's Vanguard is built by Howa on 1500 actions, and Sako L61 and L579 rifles were Howa creations.

Howa XL Lite Chassis Rifle



Hornady's 55-grain V-MAX Varmint Express factory ammunition matched Howa's MOA guarantee with a five-shot group. It pushed bullets to 3,031 fps from the 20-inch barrel.



SIG SAUER's 40-grain Predator & Varmint Tip factory ammunition produced a .97-inch, five-shot group at 100 yards from the Howa XL Lite Chassis, with velocities of 3,457 fps from the 20-inch barrel.

Japan's adoption of strict industrial quality control following World War II and a culture steeped in meticulous craftsmanship, means every aspect of Howa rifles are carefully designed, machined and fitted to exacting tolerances. Howa's advanced technical features include cold hammer-forged barrels constructed from pre-hardened steel, and innovations such as the HACT Trigger featuring a light, creep-free trigger pull with consistent let off, a three-position safety that allows unloading the rifle while on "safe" and machined receivers and forged bolts.

American importer and distributor Legacy Sports International guarantees all Howa centerfire

rifles purchased after January 1, 2017, will produce sub-MOA or less three-shot/100-yard groups while shooting premium factory ammunition. That's real confidence.

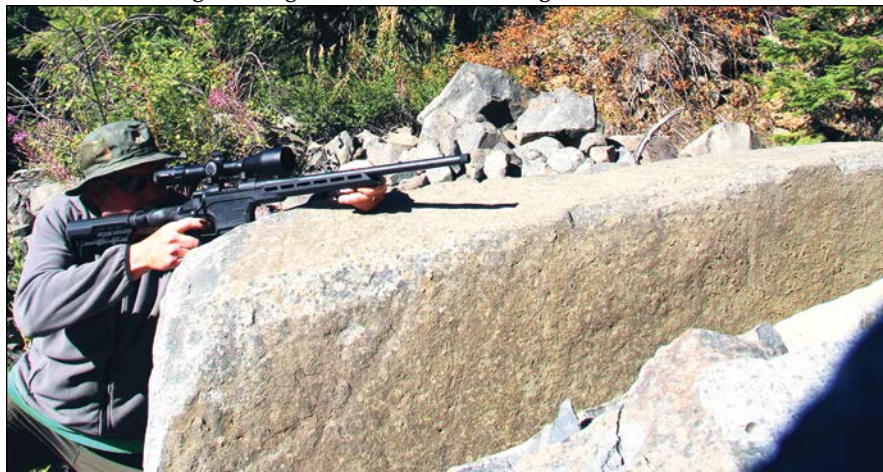
Howa's XL Lite Chassis .223 Remington is built around a M1500 Mini Action held in a EXCL Lite Chassis stock. The glass-filled polymer stock makes for a lightweight package, weighing 7.5 pounds out of the box. It features a LUTH-AR click-adjustable buttstock and a Citadel Folding Chassis Adaptor. The Mil-spec adaptor is made to Mil-specs from anodized aluminum and allows placing the rifle in a more compact case for travel or storage. Rounds are fed from an AR-style, polymer 10-round magazine. The

rifle is also chambered in 6.5 Grendel, 7.62x39mm and .350 Legend (16.25-inch barrel). The .223 Remington's 20-inch barrel includes a 1:8 twist and is threaded for a brake/suppressor. The straight-taper barrel measures .755 inch just behind the thread protector. Howa calls it a light-heavy contour. It is well suited to the .223 Remington cartridge.

The rifle has a sleek profile, with an overall length of 40.5 to nearly 44 inches, depending on stock setting. The adjustable LUTH-AR buttstock allows a length of pull from about 12 to an excessive 15 inches, including the rubber recoil pad. The test rifle was equipped with a Citadel Folding Chassis Adaptor, allowing the rifle to be folded into a 31.5-inch package, but offering a tight, wiggle-free connection. The AR-style pistol grip is a rubberized Hogue design with finger grooves and textured side panels. Overall the grip is extremely comfortable and provides a sure grip, even while wearing slick gloves or when wet.

The EXCL Lite Chassis stock is molded from glass-filled polymer, including an integral trigger guard, detachable magazine well and extended forearm. The generously-vented forearm is fairly flexible, but the barrel is floated with .25-inch side and .625-inch bottom gaps, so the likelihood of the barrel making contact is slim. The

Scoped with a Nikko Stirling 30mm Diamond LR 4-16x 50mm optic, the Howa XL Lite Chassis proved enjoyable to shoot. It offers enough heft to shoot steadily from a bench, but it's light enough for walkabout hunting.





The best group shot was produced by 24.5 grains of Hodgdon H-322 beneath a 50-grain Barnes Varmint Grenade. It grouped into .41 inch. The load was originally developed for an AR.

forearm slots are M-LOK compatible, allowing the addition of after-market bipods or picatinny rails. The polymer chassis lends the rifle its easy carry weight. The adjustable buttstock includes five click-in stops and is controlled by a standard AR-style, spring-loaded underlever. Rifles can be ordered with American Flag graphics, KRATOS Camouflage, olive drab or black (as tested). The detachable magazine clicked in and out

of the magazine well smoothly and positively, with the spring-loaded release catch located in front of the magazine offering trouble-free use. The stock includes aluminum pillars front and rear. No provisions are offered to attach a shoulder sling, but the M-LOK slots offer solutions.

The action is secured by two beefy lug bolts, one behind the trigger and a second in front of the magazine well. These hex-head bolts are metric (M6x1), though a $\frac{9}{32}$ -inch Allen key proved close enough to loosen/tighten these bolts. The front anchoring bolt threads directly into the recoil lug, which sits against an internal cross strut molded into the synthetic stock. The thumb safety lever is located on the right side of the action and is easily manipulated while on the scope. The safety is a three-position system. The rear position prevents firing and locks the bolt, the middle position prevents firing but allows the bolt to be worked and the rifle to



Twenty-five grains of Ramshot TAC beneath Cutting Edge Bullets' 50-grain ESP Raptor produced this .71-inch five-shot group. Patrick uses this load for coyote hunting, as it doesn't shred hides.

be safely unloaded. The forward position allows firing the rifle.

The bolt is cocked on the downward stroke, and de-cocked when opened. A silver knob at the rear of the bolt shroud is visible when cocked, and pulled inside the shroud when de-cocked or fired, so it is easy to see if the rifle is "hot" at a glance. The bolt includes an integral handle, AR-style extractor and ejector and is outfitted with pressure release ports.

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Howa XL Lite Chassis Rifle

Howa's HACT trigger is a two-stage system. About .1875 inch of slack is taken up before engaging the sear. The trigger pull is then ultra-crisp with minimal overtravel after firing. The trigger broke at a touch less than 3 pounds out of the box. HACT triggers are technically user adjustable, though doing so will void the warranty, and I found the 2.85-pound factory setting satisfactory. A glob of white silicone seals the trigger adjustment screw and tells the manufacturer if the trigger has been tampered with. A bolt-release tab is located opposite the safety.

The test rifle arrived set up with a scope and mounting hardware, including a EGW 20 MOA picatinny rail, Diamond Steel 30mm medium rings and a Nikko Stirling 30mm Diamond LR 4-16x 50mm scope. The scope includes exposed locking turrets with positive .25 MOA adjustments and side parallax adjustment/focus with a stacked illumination knob. The illumination system powers off between intensity settings. The reticle was a super-fine mil-dot arrangement.

Shooting was conducted on a cold early morning to beat the high winds that had been whipping up by 10:00 A.M. I'd meant to shoot with one of my suppressors installed, but forgot to grab one out of the gun safe before heading to the range. This also meant the factory loads, shot first, were triggered with cold fingers. The

handloads were shot after the sun had established itself to lend some warmth. A variety of loads were run through the XL Lite Chassis to test Howa's MOA guaranty – though I would be shooting five-shot groups from 100 yards instead of the three-shot groups that are part of that promise.

Factory ammunition included SIG SAUER'S 40-grain Varmint & Predator Tip pushed to a stated 3,650 feet per second (fps), budget-priced Remington UMC 45-grain JHP and American Eagle 50-grain Varmint-Predator JHP (the latter at a stated 3,325 fps) and Hornady 55-grain Varmint Express V-MAX at a stated 3,240 fps. Of these, the SIG SAUER and Hornady product met Howa's guaranty parameters and did live up to the MOA guarantee, even with five-shot groups. They also printed nice round clusters. Budget-priced Remington UMC and American Eagle ammunition strung vertically, despite low extreme velocity spreads. Groups didn't start tight and open up with fourth and fifth shots as the barrel warmed, but were spread randomly from the first to last shots. Velocities fell short of stated numbers, which is not surprising given the 20-inch barrel. (Factory velocities were likely established with 24- or 26-inch barrels.)

Handloads were recipes tailored for my AR-15 and Remington Model 700 VTR SS rifles, both



Patrick assembled loads with 75-grain Speer Gold Dot bullets over 25.5 grains of Alliant Power Pro 2000-MR for shooting Texas hogs with his .223 AR. From Howa's XL Lite Chassis bolt rifle, they bettered an inch.

of which require overall loaded lengths compatible with detachable .223 magazines (the VTR including a little freebore) like that held by the Howa. Barnes' 50-grain Varmint Grenade was loaded over 24.5 grains of Hodgdon H-322 in Lake City brass with Winchester Small Rifle primers. This varmint load shot especially well from the Howa, beating the .5-inch groups this load typically produces from my AR. The Cutting Edge 50-grain ESP Raptor bullet was loaded over 25 grains of Ramshot TAC in Speer nickel-plated brass using the same primer. This load is hide-friendly coyote medicine developed for the same AR, and grouped less than .75 inch from the Howa.

Table I

.223 Remington Handloads

bullet (grains)	powder	charge (grains)	case	primer	overall loaded length (inches)	velocity (fps)	5-shot 100-yard group (inches)
50 Barnes Varmint Grenade	H-322	24.5	LC	WSR	2.20	3,101	.41
50 Cutting Edge ESP Raptor	TAC	25.0	Speer**	WSR	2.25	3,190	.71
69 Rocky Mt. Reloading 3GH	VV-N140	25.5*	PMC	Fed GM205M	2.26	2,829	1.28
75 Speer Gold Dot	Power Pro 2000-MR	25.5*	FC**	CCI 400	2.26	2,781	.92
90 Berger VLD Target	Varget	21.5*	Browning**	Remington 7½	2.34	2,297	1.27

* Compressed charge **Nickel-plated

Notes: A Howa XL Lite Chassis .223 Remington with a 20-inch barrel (1:8 twist) and Nikko Stirling 30mm Diamond LR 4-16x 50mm scope was used to test all loads. RCBS full-length resizing dies were used throughout.

For more data on this cartridge please visit LoadData.com.

Be Alert – Publisher cannot accept responsibility for errors in published load data. Listed loads are only valid in the test firearms used. Reduce initial powder charge by 10 percent and work up while watching for signs of excessive pressure.

A compressed load of 25.5 grains of Vihtavuori N140 beneath Rocky Mountain Reloading 69-grain 3-Gun Hunter BTHPs in PMC cases and sparked by Federal Premium's Gold Metal 205 Match primers proved disappointing from the Howa. This load managed only 1.28 inches from the Howa, surprising only because it typically prints sub-half-inch groups from the Remington VTR (1:9 twist). These rounds did seem to chamber a touch tightly, indicating the Howa includes limited freebore. The Speer 75-grain Gold Dot, seated over a 25.5-grain load of Alliant Power Pro 2000-MR in Federal nickel-plated brass with a CCI 400 primer, are leftovers from a Texas hog hunt. Groups with this load shot just under an inch from the Howa. Finally, Berger's 90-grain VLD Target over 21.5 grains of Hodgdon Varget in Browning nickel-plated brass using a Remington 7½ primer was another AR leftover. They require single feeding, chambering effortlessly but exceeding the 2.26-inch AR magazine limit, at 2.34 inches. I added this load only to see how they would fair in the 1:8 twist barrel. They punched round holes and grouped into 1.27 inches, so I'd say the 1:8 twist was sufficient.

My only minor gripe against this setup was really more about the optic and its mounting hardware than the rifle itself. Setting the rear scope ring on the farthest rearward slot, pulling the scope back against the turret housing and front bell, did not allow an edge-to-edge view through the scope at my preferred length of pull. Shortening the stock helped, but not 100 percent. Extending the picatinny rail rearward a couple more slots would help, though a different scope may also remedy the situation. Ideally, the scope could also have been mounted lower, as I was unable to establish a hard cheek weld. The 20 MOA picatinny rail undoubtedly exasperated this situation. None of this is the rifle's fault, of course, but it's something to keep in mind when setting this rifle up.

Table II

.223 Remington Factory Loads

load (grains)	stated velocity (fps)	actual velocity (fps)	extreme spread (fps)	5-shot 100-yard group (inches)
40 SIG SAUER Varmint & Predator Tip	3,650	3,457	31	.97
45 Remington UMC JHP	N/A	3,282	48	1.39
50 American Eagle Varmint-Predator JHP	3,325	3,176	11	1.19
55 Hornady Varmint Express V-MAX	3,240	3,031	49	1.00

Notes: A Howa XL Lite Chassis .223 Remington with a 20-inch barrel (1:8 twist) and Nikko Stirling 30mm Diamond LR 4-16x 50mm scope was used to test all loads.

The rifle picked up and fed every round slickly, factory and handloads, as long as I remembered to aggressively pull the bolt fully rearward. Otherwise it occasionally came up short. The bolt began to smooth out with use and I'd wager this issue would also work itself out with additional break-in. I also found that the magazine seated most reliably with its base tilted toward the butt slightly during the final snap-in.

The heavy barrel was slow to warm, a plus during high-volume shooting. From a cold start, I could shoot 15 rounds be-

fore I needed to lay off, and it certainly could have been shot hotter. Recoil, such as it was, resulted in a straight pushback without any lift or twisting witnessed in some varmint rifles of this weight class. One of my light sporters in .223 Remington, for instance, required a muzzle brake only because it had an annoying habit of lifting during recoil, making it difficult to spot impacts while varmint shooting.

Overall, Howa's XL Lite Chassis fills a viable niche – an accurate rifle that won't break your back or your budget. **R**



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