



HOWA SUPER LITE BOLT-ACTION RIFLE

By Selwyn Smith

Feature-packed, under five pounds and boasting a 1 MOA guarantee, the latest offering from Howa is a mountain hunter's dream.

Howa have been offering accurate and highly dependable rifles to the NZ hunter and target shooter for over 50 years, with Howa manufacturing the original Weatherby Vanguard Series way back in 1970. These were the very first Weatherby rifles not to be chambered in the famous Weatherby Magnum line of cartridges - to differentiate them from the much more expensive Mark V actioned rifles chambered in their proprietary double radius shouldered cases.

Mossberg, Smith & Wesson and Interarms have all stamped their name on Howa Model 1500 actioned rifles over the years, reinforcing their appeal across some of the biggest names in the industry.

Howa's reputation was born out of reliability and accuracy and the company has been smart enough to leverage its rock-solid Model 1500 design across a growing array of parts and aftermarket accessories. Actions, barrelled actions, multiple stock configurations as well as carbon fibre, wood and tactical design choices have truly elevated Howa's appeal to anyone looking to build a semi-custom rifle with highly affordable bolt-on parts. This functionality, supported by a lifetime guarantee, has launched Howa to recognition as manufacturer of the third largest selling bolt-action rifles in the highly competitive US market.

Hot on the heels of the ever-popular Model 1500 Mini Action and recently released

Carbon Fiber, Howa have just produced what is now one of the lightest production rifles on the planet. The Super Lite, as it's appropriately named, is a mere 4lbs 7oz (that's just 2kg!) Rifles weighing 5.5lbs (2.5kg) are relatively uncommon; those tipping the scales at under 5lbs are truly unique, and so Howa's aim looks to be on the money.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Straight out of the box, I inserted the bolt and closed the action. The action was silky smooth with bolt closure effortless as the lugs seamlessly seated home. I was so impressed with the bolt lock-up that I immediately worked the action again just to feel the bolt's silky closure. The tolerances were better than most production rifles and starting to edge toward my Nesika custom action - not something I'd expect from a rifle costing a lot less than the Nesika action alone. A great start.

I threw the rifle up to my shoulder to assess pointability and fit; it was highly nimble, as expected, and fast to point. The stock was about the shortest I'd be comfortable with - symptomatic of today's trend to buck weight by removing anything unnecessary. An extra inch of stock length would weight virtually nothing, but such is the compromise that Howa have made. Most shooters would probably handle the length okay and it's an ideal size for shooters of slender build as well as youth shooters.

STOCK

Howa have used a hand-laid carbon fibre stock made by US company Stocky's to keep weight to a bare minimum. In the classic style, the stock incorporates a patented bedding lug and solid recoil pad. The camo-splattered finish on this stock is what Howa call 'Spongeblob' (I kid you not); it'll be right at home in both the backcountry and tight bush. The stock is devoid of checkering - the patterned soft-touch webbing coating provides all the grip that's needed in the wet.

BARREL

Howa continue the weight-saving obsession by adding a very slender 20" blued barrel. How slender? A mere 1.45cm at the muzzle! The barrel is suppressor-ready (threaded 1/2-28 TPI) and features a quality thread cap. The 20"



barrel and slim carbon fibre stock give a total length of just 99cm.

ACTION

Howa have scaled down the bolt body profile on the Super Lite to that of the Mini Action, albeit the bolt is slightly longer to accommodate .308-length cartridges. The two-lug standard design has a backup lug machined into the bolt handle juncture. The bolt knob is hollow. An M16-style extractor and plunger ejector deal reliably with spent cases. The firing pin can be removed in the field without any tools - a great feature. The forged bolt retains the immediately recognisable 3-hole gas vents on the right-hand side to deflect hot gases in the event of a ruptured case - reminding us that Howa actions are regarded as some of the safest actions ever made.

The bolt-release button on the left of the ►

LEFT:
The Super Lite's bolt profile alongside the Mini Action - note the Super Lite's additional length to accommodate .308-sized cartridges.

RIGHT:
The bolt release and three-position safety are stamped metal. Note the red indicator on the safety indicating 'safe' vs 'fire'.

BELOW:
Howa's iconic three pressure vent holes can be clearly shown on the closed bolt here - deflecting hot gasses away from the shooter's face in the event of a case rupture.

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ABOVE:
This fat buck was a big haul out of the gully - I was thankful for such a lightweight rifle on the carry out.



ABOVE:
The three-shot magazine weighs virtually nothing. Note the capped windage turret.

action and three-position safety on the right are stamped steel so lacked a bit of finesse. The safety blocks the trigger and allows safe cycling of the bolt in the middle position – another useful feature.

TRIGGER

At just under 3lbs, the Howa Actuator Controlled Trigger (HACT) was pleasantly smooth and quite predictable. The trigger is two-staged, meaning the first stage takes up the slack, and the second stage engages the mechanism to release the firing pin.

Interestingly, I'd almost call the trigger 'three-stage'. Just before let-off, a slight audible click can be heard where the trigger 'sets' just before firing. The slight click, although nearly silent, enabled reasonable awareness of the final trigger release and assisted with range work. The trigger did have a bit of final creep and is factory adjustable only – shooters won't lose any sleep, however, as the trigger is pretty good straight out of the box.

MAGAZINE

The Super Lite features a flush-mounted, 3-round, single-stack, detachable polymer magazine. It weighs virtually nothing and may be the lightest magazine on the market. Two lugs on the front of the magazine frame prevent accidental discharge. I'm not a fan of detachable magazines on hunting rifles – they're right at

home on varmint, PRS or competition rifles but aren't needed on a hunting rifle. I did my best to try and get the magazine to fall out in the field – pushing it only partly home so it sat on one lug. It wouldn't fall out, despite my best efforts, demonstrating that the chances of losing this magazine accidentally are extremely low!

Feeding and loading were effortless, and despite the cheap look and feel of the magazine, it was highly functional – I couldn't fault it. It's a pity Howa haven't integrated this magazine on the Mini Action as those 5- and 10-round magazines that 'hang right down' destroy the handling/balance point and are almost ridiculous on a scaled-down hunting rifle.

SCOPE AND MOUNTING

Frustratingly, Howa have put a one-piece bridge mount/Picatinny rail on this rifle. This adds extra height and weight vs say a lightweight one-piece ring and base set. The rail also increases the height of the scope, which is no big deal, but it just isn't needed on the Super Lite when you're trying to get the scope as low as possible. It will, however, appeal to those hunters who swap scopes between bush and tops hunting or those who add a red-dot or thermal.

Outdoor Sports are the distributors of Howa, Zeiss and many other favourite brands. The rifle came mounted with the outstanding Zeiss V4 4-16x44 scope with the ZBi 68 reticle. In addition to a very user-friendly elevation and windage dial-up system, the reticle is the increasingly common 'tree' style with 1 MOA distance between the hash marks. The illuminated floating centre cross is well designed and allows exceptionally precise target acquisition. The 4-16x magnification, second focal plane, outstanding clarity, Locu-Tech coating (fantastic in the wet) and light weight (only 640 grams) make this the ideal tops/mountain hunter combination.

The rifle also included a Nielsen Sonic 40 suppressor. With a steel core and 5-year warranty, it's a quality unit. At just 300 grams and less than 20cm in length, this is a perfect lightweight suppressor to accompany the Howa.

AT THE RANGE

The rifle came chambered in 6.5 Creedmoor. I've had little to do with this cartridge, but with



a growing reputation for accuracy and ballistic performance belying its size, I was keen to put the rifle/cartridge combo to the test.

The 6.5 Creedmoor was released by Hornady in 2007 and was originally designed to increase the performance of AR-styled platforms competing in long-range target shooting. It quickly garnered serious attention from hunters due to its ability to house long-for-calibre projectiles (high ballistic coefficient) that proved to be effective on big game at extended distances. The Swedes have long understood the concept of a heavy-for-calibre projectile in the 6.5 x 55, which is regarded as an entirely appropriate moose cartridge with the right projectile. The Creedmoor case is shorter than its .308-inspired parent, meaning it will accommodate much longer projectiles in a short action for the same cartridge overall length.

I managed to scrounge a couple of boxes of Sako Hammerhead featuring the Sako 140gr Bonded Core projectile. These are a tough big-game projectile as we'll see.

Squeezing the trigger on the first round, I was pleased to see it hit the 25m paper close to centre. One more fouling shot from the clean barrel and we were on at 100m. I shot 2 x three-shot groups that measured 23 and 22mm respectively. Outstanding.

NZ Ammunition Company also generously supplied some Nosler 140gr Ballistic Tip. I've shot a lot of animals with the Nosler Ballistic Tip, and I hold the projectile in very high regard. This was another outstanding combination with the 2 x three-shot groups going 19 and 18mm respectively – quite outstanding accuracy from an ultra-lightweight rifle with a soda straw profile barrel. Muzzle flip was okay,

and the rifle behaved off the bags reasonably well, given the lack of heft. I let the barrel cool completely between three-shot strings as the skinny barrel did heat up quickly – as expected. There was no point shooting five-shot groups with this set-up, as barrel heat would quickly override any statistical benefit. This also showed the bedding holding true, which was comforting – barrel heat holds no prisoners if bedding isn't sound in such a lightweight rig.

Feeding was meticulous – and what a smooth bolt! Illumination has 10 brightness settings, and pleasingly, every second notch on the outer illumination setting on the parallax turret turned the illumination off, meaning I didn't have to dial the whole range to switch it off. The 16x power setting at 100m on my preferred 1-inch-sized targets was ideal for accuracy work. The windage is capped and needs to be removed to adjust windage – a useful feature to prevent it getting knocked in the field and ruining that once-in-a-lifetime trophy shot.

The rifle clearly has the goods on paper, and I was now confident of dial-up out to 600m with the easy-to-use Zeiss. I'd mastered the HACT trigger quickly, and I followed the accuracy session by sending a fair few rounds downrange standing and kneeling to practise quick mounting for a flushed animal. The Nielsen Sonic punched well above its size in suppressing noise and dampening recoil. Recoil was barely noticeable despite the light weight.

IN THE FIELD

I left the Nosler Ballistic Tip ammunition at home – I knew exactly what to expect from them, so I packed the Sako ammo to see how the bonded core projectile performed under duress.

"There's a yearling fallow under that small ►



LEFT:
Despite the skinny barrel and very light overall weight, the rifle was well behaved off the bench and achieved outstanding accuracy.

RIGHT:
At the range with Nosler and Sako ammo – the Nielsen Suppressor and Zeiss V4 4-16x44 optics were an ideal complement to the Super Lite.

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REVIEW :: RIFLE

I decided to wait until one of them stood up. Hang on ... is that a stick or a branch? Or is it ...? At that moment, the 'stick' moved, confirming a buck was sitting down, antler tips nudging above the short scrub.

BELOW:

A thumper of an old fallow buck. The Howa Super Lite, Nielsen Sonic 40, Zeiss V4 4-16x44 and 6.5 Creedmoor combination are hard to fault.



patch of scrub, top right of the brow." She was sheltered under the lee of the stiff westerly that was thumping off the snow above. This narrowed the glassing areas dramatically - no self-respecting animal would be exposed to that draft. Within a few seconds, she drifted into the thick stuff and was gone.

Another hour of glassing and we had little to show. "They do get a bit of hunting pressure here," Isak remarked as we revised our plan.

It was 10am and mid-August. Yesterday's snow forced us into lower country, and it wasn't long before more animals emerged. Sure enough, we spotted a pair of yearlings two gullies over. They were well sheltered and in the middle of a large face amongst a miserly patch of scrub. Stalking would be interesting.

We charged up the first ridge then slipped across to the manuka face to get some cover. A doe was sitting in the shade, head up, but away from us. The two yearlings really had no idea and continued to feed unawares. I crept forward, 25m at a time, keeping a close watch on the doe for any sign of nervousness. She remained oblivious, as did the inexperienced yearlings. I was 350m out and needed to get closer; with all the animals now sitting down, it was a difficult shot, and ethically, one I'd prefer not to take at that distance. I slipped down the hill and crawled to the last patch of cover. It was now 275m and I had a relatively flat rest.

I studied the animals behind the Zeiss glass and mentally prepped for the shot. The yearlings were still a small target and sat at odd angles, presenting a poor shot. I decided

to wait until one of them stood up. Hang on ... is that a stick or a branch? Or is it ...? At that moment, the 'stick' moved, confirming a buck was sitting down, antler tips nudging above the short scrub. Well now - that's a game changer!

I loaded a round with the safety on and waited ... and waited ... An hour later, the buck had moved its head a couple of times but hadn't stood up. The breeze started swirling and the doe looked edgy; I readied for a hurried shot in case the group bolted. One of the yearlings stood, then more previously hidden deer stepped out into clearings. They remained unaware, and I readied in anticipation. The buck eventually eased to his feet and posed a quartering shot.

The safety was off, and the trigger engaged. Just as I squeezed off, he took a step forward! @#\$%! The shot hit too far back. He thumped out of the scrub and stood side-on trying to figure out what had happened. I'd already reloaded, and the trigger touched off as the crosshairs settled on his front shoulder. He collapsed, sliding a couple of metres before coming to rest. A further eight previously unseen deer bolted and disappeared over the hill!

The Sako Hammerhead Bonded 140gr projectile had destroyed both front shoulders and carried on straight through - impressive performance indeed and a great test on a mature animal at 275m. Isak was watching from a distance and really should have had the camera to capture the action.

The buck had spent most of the winter feeding on greenfeed crops so was in fine condition. We hauled him up the wet, slippery hill back to the hut. The 2km steep slog was made a lot easier with the Super Lite; this is exactly where this rifle comes into its own - a New Zealand tops hunter's dream.

CONCLUSION

Multiple stock colour options are available and chamberings cover the most common short-action cartridges - 6.5 Creedmoor and .308 - with .243 and 7mm-08 due very soon.

With an RRP of \$2,349, the Super Lite represents outstanding value for a rifle with a ton of features and is ideally suited to both the demanding needs of today's modern backcountry hunter and serious bush stalker. ■

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