

CLOSE TO PERFECT

Kilimanjaro Rifles' African model shines on the range and is tough enough for serious use in the field.



This Kilimanjaro African rifle in .375 Ruger fired a three-shot group at 100 yards that could be covered with a quarter.

Conjuring up the criteria for the perfect hunting rifle can be a very interesting exercise. Everyone seems to have a different idea as to what features it should have and how it should perform, but there are a few things that all experienced hunters, shooters, and collectors of fine rifles I have talked to seem to agree on.

Such a rifle should have a classic profile with a nicely figured walnut stock and all-steel metal parts. The action should be simple and strong with the fewest possible springs and plungers that could cause a problem if exposed to too much dirt and grime. It should be equipped with a match-grade barrel to help ensure the rifle will shoot better than whoever is pulling the trigger. It should have a metal finish that is impervious to any conditions Mother Nature can throw at it, as well as flawless wood-to-metal fit and a stock that will not warp or move, no matter what humidity, temperature, or moisture it is exposed to. Last, but just as important, is the “wow” factor when you take it out of the gun case to show your buddies.

Most reputable rifle manufacturers today produce rifles that meet many of the above criteria. Compared to what was on the market thirty years ago, there is a notable difference in triggers, barrels, finishes, and stocks. Thirty years ago you rarely saw any kind of accuracy guarantee. Today, MOA or less is common.

Where most of today's rifles miss the criteria for the “perfect hunting rifle” is the “wow” factor. For example, the actions may be properly bedded but show a lot of gapping in the barrel channel and rear of the receiver. Most checkering is done by machines, so patterns are simple with occasional runovers. If the stocks are wood, they are usually straight-grained with little figure, and if they are a composite of some type, the paint is usually a solid black or gray color. All this has little to do with performance or function, but such rifles simply don't stand apart from the other rifles in your gun cabinet.

At the SCI Show in Las Vegas I was in a conversation with Eric Eike, President of Kilimanjaro Rifles, concerning a planned trip to Africa. The rifles he had on display were heavy on the “wow” factor—they all looked like pieces of art you would be afraid to get wet or put in a saddle scabbard. He had a hard time convincing me these were working guns and not just fancy rifles to impress your hunting buddies.

You couldn't call Kilimanjaro Rifles either a production rifle company or a custom riflemaker; it's kind of a cross between the two. Chamberings offered are from .222 Remington all the way up to .505 Gibbs and most anything in between, including a few wildcats. There is a basic selection of stock designs depending on customer preference. Only Lilja match-grade barrels with target crowns are used, and the customer has his or her preference of action style between the Model 70 Winchester, Sako 85, or the newer Dakota or Kimber. For the big boomers from .375

H&H up to the .505 Gibbs, the Granite Mountain Mauser copy is used.

Two things that make the Kilimanjaro rifle stand apart from other fine rifles are the stock and all-metal finish that will defy anything Mother Nature can throw at it. The stocks used are not only AAA Fancy Circassian Walnut but are formed from a lamination process they call Stealth Lamination. This process not only strengthens the stock but eliminates any chance of swelling or shrinking of the wood that can create a problem.

The metal finish looks like matte bluing but is one of the newer ceramic based finishes that rejects any water, salt, finger-print, or blood that come in contact with it. Just wipe it off and forget about it.

Needless to say, I was sold on the rifle for the Africa trip.

A Model 70 (pre-'64) standard action I had squirreled away was used because of its controlled-round feed system and simple mechanical ejection, and also

because of the three-position safety on the bolt shroud, which I was used to.

The cartridge the rifle was to be chambered for was the .375 Ruger, which I had experience with when it first was introduced a couple of years ago. Its performance duplicates or exceeds the .375 H&H, but it fits in a standard .30-06-length action. Sometimes modern cartridge design is better than the old, and this is one of those cartridges.

In late July, my Kilimanjaro "African" rifle arrived. To say it was impressive would be an understatement. It had a beautifully figured walnut stock with ebony fore-end cap, flawless ribbon pattern checkering, fully adjustable open rear sight with hooded front sight, and wood to metal fit that was flawless.


Hornady is the only current manufacturer of .375 Ruger ammunition and brass. I had a supply of both saved from past testing, so I was ready to head for the range when the rifle arrived.

I mounted two scopes on the rifle using Leupold's sturdy detachable mount/ring system. This way if something went wrong with one scope there was a spare sighted-in and ready to go. I used a Trijicon 2.5-4x and a Leupold VX-R 2-7x, both with 30mm tubes. Both are top-of-the-line optically, and rugged enough to take the pounding a .375 Ruger will dish out.

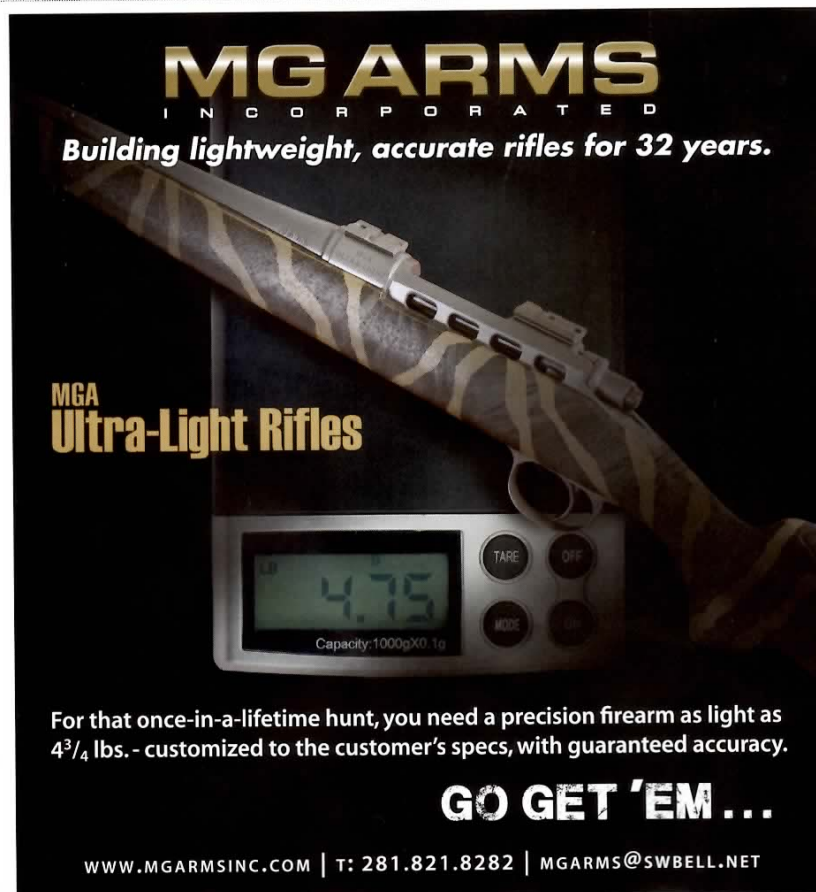
At the range, both scopes were bore sighted and ready to go. The first scope was the Leupold VX-R 2-7x set on 7x. I settled in using Caldwell's Lead Sled and fired the first three shots from a clean, dry barrel before I looked through the spotting scope. What I saw made me open the bolt, put the rifle down, and walk 100 yards to retrieve the target. I put the target in the truck for safekeeping so I could give it to Gene Gordner, the master gunsmith who put the rifle together. All three shots could be covered with a quarter. The load I used was developed when I worked with the .375 Ruger right after its introduction. The load was the Nosler 260-grain AccuBond and RL-15 powder, and it went over the chronograph at well over 2,800 fps. That was not the top recommended load for that powder, yet it exceeded top velocities with the same bullet in the .375 H&H by 100 fps.

I also shot the rifle with a variety of other loads with a different selection of bullets, as well as factory Hornady ammunition, both solids and softpoints. Accuracy was spectacular with any load put downrange, even round-nosed solids.

Besides the African model I used in Tanzania, Kilimanjaro Rifles also offers four other models for serious hunters, so there is something for everyone.

Quality is an understatement when describing the Kilimanjaro rifle. The perfect hunting rifle that meets everyone's criteria might be a wishful fantasy, but the Kilimanjaro African model I took to the Dark Continent is as close to perfect as I have seen. It is one of those treasures you pass on to the next generation. 

Author's note: If you want to see that target I shot with the first three shots out of this rifle, visit Kilimanjaro's Web site: www.kilimanjarorifles.com.



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