

A PERFECT FIT

FIT IS THE KEY WORD WHEN IT COMES TO RIFLES BUILT FOR THE FEMALE HUNTER, AND THAT GOES FAR BEYOND SIMPLY SHORTENING THE LENGTH OF PULL.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RON SPOMER

Men may never know what women want, but rifle manufacturers are figuring it out: Women want rifles that fit.

Good rifle fit has been a problem since long before Annie Oakley began outshooting every man with the guts to challenge her. Oakley was smart. She not only had her clothing tailored to fit her petite, five-foot frame, but her firearms, too.

Men have been tailoring rifles to fit properly for a long time, hiring gunmakers to build stocks longer, shorter, thicker, thinner, lighter, heavier, or with more or less cast and comb height. But this rarely inspired them to recommend the same custom treatment for the women shooters in their lives. Most guys just gave their wives, girlfriends, daughters, and mothers off-the-rack rifles, which were long ago standardized to fit the "average male." Women, in case you hadn't noticed, are not built like the average male. Most of them, often unaware there were gun-fit options, bent and stretched and contorted to make those oversized man-rifles work.

Not any more.

Gunmakers have finally tumbled to the revelation that women not only shoot and hunt, but are doing so in increasing numbers. For several years women have been the fastest growing segment of new hunters. According to the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 1.5 million women

hunted in 2011. That is just 1 percent of the U.S. female population, but 11 percent of the hunting population. Manufacturers of hunting firearms would be foolish to overlook 11 percent of their potential clients.

Dave Fuqua, president of Hill Country Rifles Inc. in New Braunfels, Texas, certainly isn't foolish. "It's not a one-size-fits-all world," Fuqua noted. "There's a big difference in stock fit between a man and a woman." Hill Country Rifles honors this difference by carefully sizing stocks for its female customers. "Standard length-of-pull (LOP) in men's rifles is thirteen-and-a-half inches," Fuqua explained. "The average for women is closer to twelve-and-a-half or thirteen. But fit can't end there. When you shorten the butt, the fore-end needs to be a little shorter to keep things symmetrical. We also like to keep barrel length as short as practical for the cartridge being used." In other words, balance is key.

"The advantage of short-action rifles is handling," the Texas gun builder said. "They're lighter, more compact and easier to handle. With the right bullets, short-action cartridges from .260 Remington through .338 Federal work fine on deer, elk, and most plains game. But we understand when some customers want additional power. Hill Country chambers a lot of women's rifles in everything from .270 Winchester through the various 7mm magnums. With proper stock fit and a balanced rifle, going up in size is doable."



Fuqua makes an additional adjustment with dangerous-game rifles of even larger caliber: “We recommend adding about a quarter to three-eighths of an inch to the length of pull for extra scope clearance. Helps prevent getting bit by the scope.”

Kerry O’Day at MG Arms knows all about this as well. He’s been building lightweight women’s rifles for twenty-five years, longer than just about anyone else in the business.

“Building a rifle that’s light enough for a woman to be able to carry is critical, but stock fit is by far the most important part of building a gun for a woman,” he said. “It’s important to have a straight stock with a smaller grip so a woman’s hands can reach the trigger and fit the fore-end for better control. With that, a woman can certainly shoot a bigger caliber like a .375 H&H. A woman can shoot any caliber she wants to if the gun fits her and she has a little training on how to shoot.” O’Day is proud that eight of the last ten winners of Safari Club International’s Diana Award have hunted with MG Arms rifles.

When it comes to stock fit, Kilimanjaro Rifles caters to the female form like no other gunmaker, as implied by the name of their women’s rifle model: Artemis—the Greek goddess of the hunt.

“This one was designed by women, for women, right here at Kilimanjaro,” company president Erik Eike explained. “Yes, we incorporate all the usual Kilimanjaro features like our Stealth Lamination, Turkish walnut stocks, match-grade stainless-steel barrels and all the rest, but it’s the stock geometry that makes it perfect for women shooters.”

That geometry, of course, includes shortened length of pull, open grip, and a trim fore-end stock, but the truly special lines

are in the buttstock. “We toe-out the stock and give it a bit more cast off,” Eike said. “This has the effect of directing recoil out and away from the sensitive areas of the feminine anatomy. The open grip, moved forward, positions smaller hands for accurate trigger control. All in all, it’s a trim, slim mountain rifle shape designed to be easy to carry and quick-handling.”

Lex and Lina Webernick at Rifles Inc. believe in the benefits of light weight. They specialize in trimmed-down bolt-actions weighing as little as 4.5 pounds. “We don’t have a ‘lady’s’ model per se,” Lex noted, “but we build quite a few rifles for women hunters. We normally shorten the length of pull as indicated by the buyer’s physique, but we don’t modify the cast or comb height. My lightweight stock with its open pistol grip and trim fore-end is very straight in the comb and effective at reducing recoil.”

Taming recoil is a big concern with light rifles, and Webernick addresses it with more than just stock shape. His Quiet Slimbrake II screws flush to the muzzle, adding just one inch to barrel length, yet knocks off 50 percent of felt recoil.

“Most of our female clients get a .270 Winchester or .300 Winchester Magnum in our five-pound Lightweight Strata model. If they’re looking for an African rifle, they go with a .375 H&H in our Lightweight 70, which usually comes in at five-and-three-quarter pounds.”

The open pistol grip (shallow curve as opposed to the steeper angle of some pistol grips) accommodates a greater variety of hand dimensions. It’s easy to slide forward or back for optimum trigger control, and fingers don’t get jammed under heavy recoil.

Sue Fogel, a Washington state hunter, replaced her old Winchester M70 in .30-06 Springfield with a Rifles Inc. in .300 Remington Ultra Mag after Lina measured her for fit at an SCI convention.

“It’s perfect,” Fogel said. “I throw it up, and it just fits. And I don’t get the shoulder aches I got from carrying my old rifle, which was about two pounds heavier.” If recoil is a problem, Fogel never mentioned it. She did mention a B.C. moose she and the rifle collected with a single shot from 275 yards last fall. “That rifle performs as well for me in the field as it does on the bench,” she added. “It just fits so much better than my old gun.”

There’s that “fit” thing again.

It’s one thing for small, custom builders to tailor rifles for women, quite another for major manufacturers to jump in. Economies of scale inspire most big companies to lump women in with adolescents and offer both groups the company’s standard men’s rifle with a shortened length of pull and sometimes an abbreviated barrel to maintain balance. Often this is sufficient. Browning, for example, does quite well with its X-Bolt Micro-Hunter rifles with 12.5-inch LOP and twenty-inch barrels in .22-250 Remington, .243 Winchester, 7mm-08 Remington, and .308 Winchester. The X-Bolt Micro Midas additionally features a stock modified to better fit the smaller hands of many women shooters.

“We care about women hunters, and a glance at the women’s clothing line in our catalog will prove that,” said Browning spokesman Scott Grange. “In addition to our Micro Midas big-game rifles, we have the Micro BL-22 rimfire, plus an extensive line of women’s shotguns.”

At least one major gunmaker is showing a willingness to go even farther in creating rifles to fit women. Savage introduced its Lady Hunter rifle in 2012.

“Women are a small but fast-growing segment in hunting,” Savage public-relations director Bill Dermody explained. “We decided to get out in front before the rest of the industry finds it attractive. And we also believe there’s a direct correlation between a mom who likes to hunt and the likelihood her kids will join in.”

The Savage Lady Hunter was anchored to the successful M110 bolt-action design, after which the real modifications began. “It’s all stock design and weight management,” Dermody explained. “We made length of pull shorter and moved the pistol grip closer to the trigger guard. We also slimmed down the grip and fore-end. Most importantly, we raised the comb. Women, on average, have longer necks than men, so the higher comb allows them to shoot with a more correct “heads-up” form, which should improve accuracy.”

My own wife, Elizabeth, found that an immediate, noticeable improvement, even though, at just over five feet, she’s no giraffe-necked Amazon.

“This just fits,” she said when I handed her a Lady Hunter in the mild-shooting 6.5 Creedmoor chambering. The shorter length of pull was obvious to us both, but only I could see the improved positioning of her head. She merely noticed how easily she seemed to find targets, another reason for a more tailored comb height—it better aligns the eye with the centerline of scope sights. And keeping the head straight prevents the “unbalanced” feeling you get from leaning over a low, poor-fitting comb.



Betsy Spomer with a fantastic warthog taken with her Blaser R8 in .375 H&H. The stock was customized to fit her length of pull.



When you bring the stock to your cheek, your eye should immediately be centered in the scope. If not, the rifle doesn’t fit properly.

Jim Borden, who custom-tailors women's rifles around his super-accurate Timberline bolt-action receivers, uses McMillan Rem Sporter synthetic stocks because "they have considerable cast-off and cant, which makes it easier for women to mount the rifle and see through the scope." Cast-off refers to the bend of the buttstock away from the shooter. Cant is a slight angling of the butt face away from the shooter.

Scope "usability" seems to be a significant consideration with most makers of women's rifles, and I, as a gunwriter, am pleased to see it. Too few shooters consider scope size or mounting height

as it relates to overall gun fit, resulting in slow, clumsy shooting as gunners lift their heads or scrunch lower to search for the scope's center. Dave Fuqua really emphasizes scope fit at Hill Country Rifles.

"If the scope has a large objective lens, then it will probably need higher rings to clear the barrel," he pointed out.


"This will require a higher comb for proper cheek weld behind the scope. Even with standard-size scopes, this is a big factor for the lady shooter because of the way the average female is built. The distance from the pocket of the shoulder (where the rifle sits against the shoulder) up to the cheek and eye, is longer on the

average female shooter. A lady shooter needs a higher comb to keep her head upright to maintain a proper cheek weld. You want to avoid tilting the head or lifting the head off the stock to see through the scope. Most lady shooters who try to shoot a rifle with a low, straight comb have to place the rifle butt too high on their shoulder to see through the scope."

This is why the Savage Lady Hunter has an exaggerated comb that climbs toward the rear. Many women find that the raised, Monte Carlo-style comb on traditional Weatherby rifles improves scope/target acquisition, too.

Fortunately, scopes and scope rings come in enough sizes that they can be adapted to fit any rifle. What's critical is rifle fit. All of the riflemakers interviewed for this article emphasized that women should not settle for a full-size rifle that forces them to stretch beyond their comfort range. They recommended women "test-drive"—or at least shoulder—as many different rifles as they can, striving to mount and hold them with as natural a "heads-up" posture as possible. If getting measured for a custom rifle isn't an option, spend some time learning how a properly fitted rifle should feel, and make your purchase accordingly.

"If you have to stretch your arms excessively, length of pull is probably too long," Scott Grange from Browning said. "If your trigger finger barely reaches the trigger, the grip may be too long or too far back. If the fore-end feels like an overstuffed chair in your leading hand, it's too wide. And if you have to bend your neck forward or scrunch down into the stock, the comb is too high or the scope is mounted too low."

The easiest way to test for proper comb/scope alignment is to mount the rifle with your eyes closed, keeping your head as straight and upright as feels natural. Then open your eyes and see how close to dead-center the view is through the scope. Pay attention, also, to where the buttstock contacts your shoulder to make sure you are getting a good fit. Lower or higher rings can tweak the scope fit to perfection—but that only works if the rest of the rifle feels light, balanced, and under your control, and is tailored to truly fit you. 



Savage's new LadyHunter features a high comb, a stock with cast-off, and a design that keeps the weight in the center and back of the rifle, not out front.



Women often find that Weatherby stocks, with their Monte Carlo styling, fit them well.

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