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THE BEST HUNTING GEAR OF 2012



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BEST OF THE BEST AWARDS



× HUNTING 2012 ×

What separates gimcrack novelty from designs that stand the test of time? Inspiration, innovation, and craftsmanship no doubt play a large part. So does dedication to a job well done. Our winners this year all share those attributes, whether found in a \$3,000 shotgun or a knife that retails for less than \$100.

GEAR KEY

-  AMMUNITION
-  ATVS
-  BOOTS
-  BOWHUNTING
-  CLOTHING
-  FIREARMS
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-  MISCELLANEOUS
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Photographs by TRAVIS RATHBONE

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TRADITIONS VORTEK ULTRALIGHT LDR

\$460-\$480

*TRADITIONSFIREARMS.COM

→ The two most appealing advantages of the 30-inch chromoly barrel on the Traditions Vortek Ultralight LDR (Long Distance Rifle) are its downrange energy and improved accuracy. This muzzle-loader consistently shot the highest velocities,

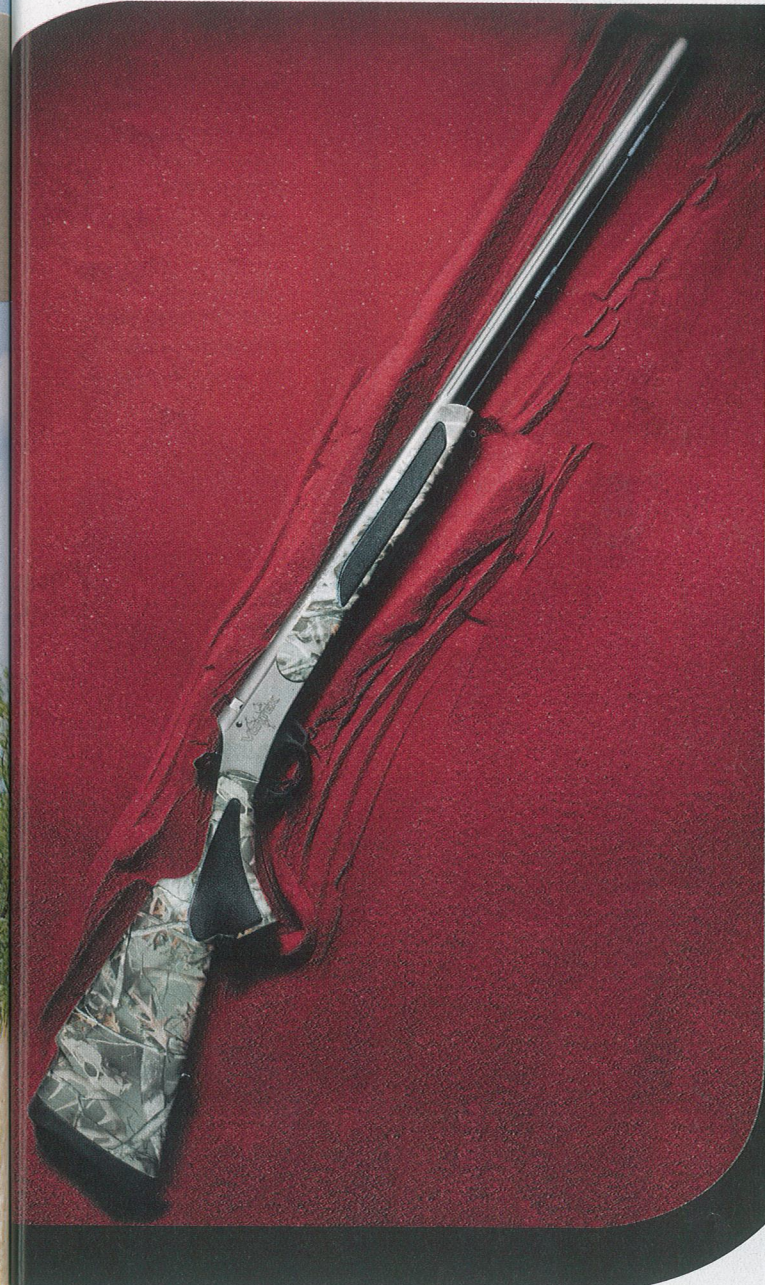
measured with a chronograph, with a number of different powders and bullets. It was as much as 300 fps faster than the other rifles tested, all the while maintaining accuracy.

From starting bullets to seating them on the powder charge, the Vortek is easy to load. Its firm trigger broke cleanly, helping shooters obtain consistent results and impressive groups. Cleaning is quick and easy; the

breech plug can be removed by hand (no tools required), and the drop-out trigger can be removed by backing out a single screw. In addition, the barrel's Cerakote finish improves corrosion resistance.

Even with the longer barrel, the LDR weighs just 6.8 pounds and is easy and comfortable to shoot. For a light-weight gun, the recoil is very manageable, and barrel lift is minimized.

—Brad Fenson



RUGER AMERICAN RIFLE

\$450

*RUGER.COM

→ The Ruger American Rifle is a departure for that company. Unlike its other long arms, it's not based on an older design. It's completely 21st century, and one of those comparatively rare rifles that you can go over feature by feature and find nothing whatsoever to criticize. Ruger was not being innovative to show us how clever it could be; it used its smarts to produce a world-beating rifle.

Sleek, light, and accurate, it feels terrific in the hand. It has an ingenious bedding

system and rotary magazine (highly unusual in a centerfire rifle), an effective recoil pad, a good adjustable trigger, and a matte finish that will not spook game. Maybe most important, at around \$450, it's a rifle that all but the most impoverished can afford. Right now the American comes in a limited number of calibers—.243, .308, .270, and .30/06—but I expect that will change in time. Who knows, they may even make it left-handed.

If the shooting public has the sense God gave a billy goat, Ruger will be back-ordered on this rifle for years to come.

—D.E.P.



BROWNING CITORI 725

\$3,140

*BROWNING.COM

→ Tinkering with a classic rarely makes it better, but Browning accomplishes the difficult feat of making over a legend with the new Citori 725. Fellow tester Peter Kasper, a shooter and a woodworker, loved the workmanship. While he called it "a facelift on an old friend," the changes are much more than cosmetic.

The rap on the Citori has always been that it is overweight and that its action is tall and ungainly. So, Browning engineers trimmed metal from the bottom of the receiver and thinned the

barrel walls. The result is a slimmed-down Citori that weighs nearly 3/4 pound less than the standard model. I hunted with and shot the 725 in both field and sporting models last fall, and it is by far the best-handling, liveliest Citori ever. As if improving the gun's dynamics wasn't enough, Browning also made the welcome change of converting the triggers from an inertia design to a mechanical system. The nicely figured Grade II/III walnut with a satin finish won't show the inevitable dings you'll put on this gun, because the 12-gauge 725 is one you won't want to leave behind on any trip to the field.

—P.B.

