



Bushmaster's New "Varminter" Rifle

by Jeff Quinn

Photography by Jeff Quinn & Boge Quinn

Anyone even remotely familiar with guns will recognize the design of the AR-15 type rifle. It has been the basis for our U.S. military service rifle for over 35 years. The rifle has evolved through the years to include many improvements to Eugene Stoner's original design.

Whether you agree or not with the use of the rifle's 5.56 millimeter cartridge as an effective military round, it can be argued that the civilian version of that cartridge, the .223 Remington, has been one of the most successful varmint cartridges in history. Every major gun manufacturer in the free world who sells a dedicated varmint rifle includes the .223 in their catalog. Many of these rifles are of bolt-action design, and make an excellent platform to show off the inherent accuracy of the .223 cartridge. To a lesser degree, a few manufacturers of AR-15 type rifles have worked to improve upon the accuracy of the AR-15 platform.

While the market is flooded with civilian versions of our military rifle, only a few are accurate enough for shooting small targets at ranges of up to a quarter mile. One such attempt at extracting the last bit of accuracy from an AR-15 is the subject of this article; the Bushmaster Varminter. The rifle is manufactured by Bushmaster Firearms, Inc. of Windham, Maine. Bushmaster has grown from a supplier and manufacturer of AR-15 parts into the largest producer of AR-15 type rifles for the civilian market in the United States, selling twice as many in 1999 as their nearest competitor, Colt's Manufacturing. The Varminter is a new variation of Bushmaster's AR-15 rifle, including all the features needed to turn an AR-15 into an accurate, reliable varmint weapon.

The quality of workmanship in this rifle was immediately apparent upon opening the hard plastic case in which this weapon was shipped. This is one beautiful rifle! There are many, myself included, who greatly enjoy the looks and feel of blued steel and figured walnut in a hunting rifle, but beauty can also follow function in the design of a rifle. Such is the case with the Bushmaster Varminter.

This rifle exudes a quality of functional elegance, with nothing added that doesn't enhance the shooting ability of the gun. This rifle has no muzzle brake, flash hider, bayonet lug, flashlight, laser sight, or simulated grenade launcher. The Varminter, while making an excellent sniper weapon for law enforcement, is not marketed towards the weekend commando with an array of gadgets and frills, but is purpose-built to suit the needs of the varmint and predator hunter.

The list of features on this rifle include a flat top design to offer a superior platform upon which to mount a quality scope sight. Included are two scope riser blocks to help in correcting the scope height for proper eye alignment and cheek-weld. The rifle will accept any scope mounting rings of the Weaver type, giving almost unlimited latitude in a choice of rings.

The Varminter weighs nine pounds with the supplied five-round magazine, the low-capacity factory-supplied magazine making the rifle legal for hunting in those jurisdictions which restrict magazine capacity. The rifle will accept any AR-15 type magazine, including my personal favorite: the 20 round military magazine. The 20-rounder seems to me to have the best balance of bulk and cartridge capacity. The longer magazines can get in the way when shooting from the bench or a prone position.

The handguard on the Varminter is made of vented aluminum and is of the free-floating design, never touching the barrel or gas tube in its entire length. This feature is very important in a rifle of this type. The handguard cannot be allowed to exert pressure upon the barrel during firing, thereby changing the barrel harmonics and effecting accuracy. The handguard is also fitted with a stud upon which to mount a bipod or attach a sling.

While on the subject of the barrel, Bushmaster has seen fit to supply the Varminter with a barrel of excellent design for a rifle of this type. The



"One seriously accurate rifle!" - Three shots - 1/4" group - 100 yards.



The new "Varminter" AR-15 variant from Bushmaster is one of the most accurate varmint rifles of any action type the author has ever had the pleasure of firing.



The heart of the Bushmaster Varminter's amazing accuracy is the beautifully designed and executed barrel. The 24" chrome-moly barrel is fluted along its entire length, with the diameter stepping down from a full 1" inside the aluminum handguard to .745" forward of the gas block.



The Varminter is fitted with a comfortable and practical soft pistol grip. This grip is the author's favorite for AR-15 type rifles because it is a practical aid to accuracy and it is equally comfortable to a Southpaw like the author! The Bushmaster Varminter is equipped with a "flat top" frame that will accept standard Weaver-type scope rings for a virtually inexhaustible array of sight options. Also included are two scope riser blocks for proper eye alignment and cheek-weld. The Bausch & Lomb Elite 4000 6-24x variable scope is an excellent choice for a semi-automatic tack-driver like the Varminter!

barrel is made of chrome moly steel, fully fluted over its entire 24 inch length to increase stiffness and aid in heat dissipation while reducing weight. The barrel measures a full inch in diameter inside the handguard, reducing to a diameter of .745 inches forward of the gas block. The barrel wears an eleven degree non-recessed crown, and is rifled one turn in nine inches, which is a good choice for versatility in bullet weight selection.

One of the best features of this rifle is the two-stage competition trigger. This type of trigger produces a nice crisp letoff, adjustable for weight of pull and overtravel, while preventing slam firing during cycling of the action. For accurate, long-range shooting, this type of trigger makes actually hitting the target much easier.

As with any rifle intended for varmint and predator hunting, the proof is in the shooting. No matter how good the gun looks, or the quality of its parts; if it's not accurate, it's just another AR-15 plinker!

Befitting a rifle intended for long shots at small targets, I mounted a Bausch & Lomb Elite 4000 variable scope. This scope has excellent optics and varies in magnification from 6 to 24 power.

I loaded some of the superb Barnes 50 grain VLC bullets into Lake City cases and proceeded with the accuracy testing. These Barnes bullets are coated with a patented baked-on coating that reduces fouling and increases the lubricity of the bullet surface. They are of lead-core hollow-point construction, and have proven both accurate and effective as a varmint bullet.

All accuracy testing was done at range of 100 yards, at an air temperature of 90 degrees and 95 percent humidity, at approximately 650 feet elevation. It was a typical hot, sticky Tennessee summer day. As can be seen in the photographs, accuracy of this rifle was absolutely superb with the Barnes VLC bullets. Groups measured as large as 3/4 of an inch to the pictured quarter-inch group. The quarter inch group shown is of three shots at 100 yards. This accuracy, keep in mind, was not from a fifteen-pound benchrest rifle, but from an AR-15 type semi-automatic! Factoring in the fact that I was doing the shooting, and the accuracy of this gun borders on the amazing! This Bushmaster Varminter is the most accurate .223 that I have ever fired, including bolt-action varmint rigs.

Functioning of the rifle was flawless during testing. The ejection of the Varminter has been smoothed and tuned to make it easy on the shooter to collect his brass for reloading, and ejection of the fired cases placed them all in one neat pile. No cases were dented or damaged during ejection. Feeding was equally smooth, with no occasion to use the forward assist to complete closing of the bolt. The Varminter is supplied with a soft rubber grip, which enhances the handling and comfort qualities of the rifle.

After the success of my initial accuracy testing with the Barnes VLC bullets, I am anxious to do more extensive accuracy work with Barnes and other varmint and target bullets. It will be hard to improve upon the accuracy already experienced with the Barnes VLC bullets.

I would love to arrange to take this rifle on a prairie dog hunt out West. With the mild-recoiling .223 in this semi-auto action, a shooter could fire twenty rounds without lifting his head off the stock. While the Bushmaster Varminter is not your typical varmint hunters rifle, I can think of nothing better for use on coyotes at long range. Coyotes are usually encountered on the move, and with this rifle a shooter could watch his shots and make quick corrections if necessary. The Varminter balances just forward of the magazine well, making for comfortable one-handed carrying.

For information on the Varminter and other Bushmaster products, call 1-800-998-7928 or view their website at: www.bushmaster.com To look at the excellent Barnes VLC and other bullets go to: www.barnesbullets.com

To say that I was impressed with this rifle would be a great understatement. It is easy to see how Bushmaster has taken over the commercial AR-15 market with products such as the Varminter. Look forward to an update at a later time on this rifle. If Bushmaster will allow me to hang on to this Varminter long enough to do some more accuracy testing and perhaps a little predator hunting, I will report on my findings here at gunblast.com

Jeff Quinn



The Varminter's trigger is fully adjustable for pull weight and overtravel. The excellent two-stage competition trigger aids in accurate shot placement, and is indicative of Bushmaster's attention to detail in the design of this fine rifle.



The superb VLC Varmint Bullets from Barnes Bullets proved to be just the ticket to optimize the amazing accuracy potential of the Bushmaster Varminter. The Barnes VLC bullets are of lead-core hollow-point construction, and are coated with a patented baked-on coating. These are some of the best bullets the author has ever tried for the .233 Remington cartridge.



Author's bench shooting sessions with the Bushmaster Varminter left him in amazement at the accuracy potential of this excellent rifle. The Bushmaster Varminter was able to group three shots into 1/4" at 100 yards with regularity using the super-accurate Barnes VLC bullets. The worst groups shot from the bench rest were 3/4" at 100 yards! The representative 1/4" group shown above (that's a DIME shown for comparison!) show the Varminter to be one seriously accurate rifle!

