

Side-by-side

RIFLES ARE ABOUT THE TECHNOLOGY OF REACH. The rifleman seeks stillness and uses a good deal of thought. Shotguns are different, being about movement, handling and instinct. It's been like that since the first fowling pieces came into use 400 years ago. A serious wingshooter is always looking for the intangible: sweet heft, pointability and feel. Just about anybody can build a smooth-bore that works, but to make it come alive in the hands for that single vital moment is a different matter altogether.

I know quite a few young hunters who are fond of their over-unders. I was like that myself once, and if another good specimen came along at the right price I'd still be tempted. The problem is that some of the young guys can be a touch over the top about vertically arranged barrels. They see the side-by-side as something that should have been left behind with oilskins and bully beef. Sooner or later one of them will ask me what it was like when I was a boy: had the wheel been invented, did we still worship the sun? They don't seem to know that their technology is even older, with some of the earliest doubles being over-under designs. They're also quick to point out that competition shooting has long been dominated by the over-under.

Each year fewer people are seeing the side-by-side for what it can do in the field, which is a pity. If it were invented today it would be seen as a major breakthrough in design. Why? Well, that can buy you an argument any day of the week, but here goes . . .

With an over-under, the frame must be deep enough to take superposed barrels as well as lumps below the under barrel. This tends to make the design just that bit bigger and heavier, and it will always need more room to load. In some duck blinds — you know, the ones with an unplanned shooter, an extra dog and maybe some swamp creeping in — that might be an issue. That extra weight is good if you're shooting half a case of ammo at clays, but not so great after a day walking the hills for a handful of opportunities.



By contrast, side-by-sides break with a shallow gape, and typically have a more slender frame because the bar need only be slightly deeper than the barrel lumps. Not a huge difference to be sure, but whole marketing campaigns have been based on less.

Trap shooters will rightly point out that the over-under generally recoils vertically, while the side-by-side will pull ever so slightly toward the barrel being fired. That might be a factor in competition, but it's scarcely an issue for the field. Many hunters have shot horizontal barrels their entire lives without even knowing this slightly obscure phenomenon exists.

The side-by-side is the easiest of all smooth-bores to carry in either the crook of the arm or on the shoulder. It is the origin of the famous African Carry. To this day the iconic African express rifle — which might be carried a hot and dusty 20 kilometres balanced over one shoulder before a showdown with dangerous game — is usually a side-by-side rather than the more logical over-under configuration. The reasons are simple: comfort, safety and speed.

It's worth noting, too, that the old-school weapon for following up a wounded leopard in heavy cover was not some huge magnum rifle, but a side-by-side 12-gauge. Again speed, rapid target acquisition and instinctive handling, as well as that instant second shot, were the determining factors. These professionals could afford any gun they wanted. What they wanted was the one that pointed where they looked, without thinking.

Opening day is a special occasion, and one where the mad-keen duck hunter prays for hellish weather. Not for him the halcyon days of an Indian summer; he wants lashings of wind to whip up the water and keep the birds moving. Here on the South Island those prayers are sometimes answered and opening day delivers up a weather bomb that threatens to blow the blind halfway to Fiji. When that happens one downside of the over-under reveals itself. Any deep profile catches wind like a sail, and many times I swung my old stack-barrel onto a zig-zagging duck only to find myself fighting the wind. Okay, it's not a serious drama, but on a slow day it can get old fast. I don't need any help to miss.

On the other hand, a single sighting plane is very handy on a lone high bird, where precision makes all the difference. That's why the over-under is the go-to for shooting trap — precise, reliable tracking of a known and predictable target.

Upland shooting is nothing like that. When a big covey of quail busts

OPPOSITE: Double rifle by Krieghoff in .500 Nitro Express.

every which way from underfoot, or there is nothing to be seen of a rabbit but a fleeting blur in the blackberry, lengthy and precise tracking isn't the answer. What's needed then is pointability, handling, speed out of the blocks. I have no idea how you might prove that, all things being equal, the side-by-side has the edge in these departments, but it does. Those twin muzzles don't trap the eye like a single rib. You aim a rifle, but you shoot a shotgun.

The reassuringly large chunk of real estate blacked out by side-by-side muzzles means the eye is free to concentrate on the target; in other words, to shoot like throwing a ball. *Son, just watch the bird*, as my father used to say. Once you start focusing on the rib, and carefully tracking a swerving target, and thinking hard about the swing . . . it's starting to get complicated.

You aim a rifle, but you shoot a shotgun.

Much of this is to do with the temperament of the shooter rather than the gear itself. Trying to be certain of your bird, to be really sure about all those factors simultaneously, is a great way to miss. With broad muzzles the shooter benefits from a wider sighting plane for laterally moving targets — which in the field is most of them, apart from driven shooting. You might call it the Black-and-Smack approach, but the fact that it can be summed up in three words (rather than needing a whole book) says something. I'm at my best when I don't think too much, as my wife will confirm. That's also the reason the second barrel is so often better than the first.

Finally, most shooters have come to believe that the straight grip seen on many side-by-sides was designed to allow the hand to slip back for the second trigger. Perhaps, but there are better reasons than that. A clay target may dip a little in the wind, but in general they follow a predictable trajectory. Wild birds do not.

The more the hands are in line with the barrels, the more controllable the gun will be when chasing an erratic target. You get that from a straight grip, not a pistol grip. Many people write about drop, cast and other stock dimensions, but the heart of a responsive shotgun will always come back to weight between the hands, and the hands close to the line of the barrels. That's where those mysterious qualities of liveliness, feel and pointability come from. The straight grip is not, as many people think, an English affectation. Utah-born gunmaker John Moses Browning knew a thing or two about design, and I have seen his early semi-auto shotguns with straight grips too.



Prairie Still Life, pencil on paper, Bob White

Having said all that, it must be admitted that all of these technical arguments have a touch of the nerd to them. In reality all types of shotgun work, and there are some over-unders out there I'd walk on broken glass to own. It comes down to preference and pride of ownership. It would feel a little weird showing up for a clay competition with my side-by-side, though it will probably happen one day. In the same vein, a day out walking up pheasant, rabbits or quail without my old-fashioned companion would leave me feeling that something was missing.

Like watching a trout take a dry there is something unique and exciting about side-by-sides. There's the short, precise arc to snap them shut, the simple restrained elegance and clean lines. It's that deep echo of tradition — fine wood and engraving, leather cases, baize linings, Turk's head brushes, chopper lumps, splinter fore-ends and straight grip stocks. The quiet way some old guns simply extract rather than eject their spent cases.

Knowing that each part was filed by hand, and many were once fitted using a wisp of soot to test for perfect alignment. No alloy or synthetics, just the precise match of walnut to steel. Actions so perfectly crafted that after a century of use some will refuse to close with even a hint of tissue paper in the breach. Yet the same precision instrument can be broken down into lock, stock and barrels in just a few seconds.

Ladies and gentlemen, I put it to you that field gunning is not a rational sport. If you think it is, try adding up all your spending — guns, ammo, truck, fuel, clothes, gun dogs, dog food, vet bills — to get a cost per kilo for game birds on the table. Then destroy all the evidence because that way lies madness. The fact is we do it because it makes us happy.

For some of us that comes from charm and style (which is why we're attracted to anything in our lives, however logical we imagine ourselves to be), and side-by-sides have all of these in spades. Charisma counts, as any girl will tell you. They haven't gone the way of the horse and cart for a very good reason: they can be very beautiful, and despite a century of new technology there still isn't a better instrument made for upland bird hunting. This kind of gunning has remained almost unchanged for centuries — a dance between dog and game and perhaps two smoking barrels.

When the birds bust wild there is no time, you're in a bubble without thought. You might say that it's the purest form of shooting, like throwing a spear or sending an arrow from a bare bow — a split-second of simple instinct and reflex movement. And, despite its long years, there is still only one shooting tool that can truly take you into that moment.



Vintage Days

NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS — in fact most things on TV — follow a pattern as fixed as a bus route. Every camera angle is known to its smallest measure, scripts are carefully worded in the house style, even the delivery follows a certain sing-song predictability. Hunting on camera is nothing like that. Not even close.

It's not so bad on big game, where the stalk and final close is usually planned. On birds it's complete chaos, and the fact that anything ever goes to air is a tribute to all those involved. It's much, much harder than it looks. Predictably enough, my first TV work was for a bird hunt on national television, shooting a side-by-side against a team of experts armed with the latest (as yet unreleased) Beretta semi-autos. No pressure.

The whole thing began innocently enough. I posted a nice old duck-hunting picture that caught the attention of Willie Duley, who with his father, Greg, runs a high-quality hunting magazine and TV series. The idea was simple enough: a stroll down memory lane in tweed coats, with side-by-sides and old-fashioned decoys on New Zealand's Lake Ellesmere. I already knew most of the team, first-class people with huge experience. Some of the finest waterfowl-callers in the world and crack shots into the bargain.

Of course nothing like this goes to plan. The lake was low, which meant lots of extra roosting places and protected spots for birds to lay up. Big water like this needs big weather to get it pumping, the worse the better. When we put out the decoy spreads the lake was like a millpond, you could watch midges hatch half a football field away. The alarm bells started to ring when I found myself taking pictures of sunsets.

In proper duck weather there is no sunset.

Putting those concerns aside, the evening kicked off with a bang...