

Making the GRADE

TWIN TEST: SMK XS19 & XS20

The XS19 and XS20 Supergrade break-barrel springers are both best-sellers from the SMK stable – but which to choose? **Nigel Allen** takes them both into the field for comparative evaluation...



If there's one thing airgunners can smile about this recession, it's the fact that a little money can go a long way when it comes to selecting your hardware. This pair of break-barrel sporters I've got here have been beating budgets since well before the credit crunch sent Britain's economy into a downward spiral five years ago. Indeed, prior to the launch of the 208 series, these two Supergrade models were SMK's best-sellers for one very good reason – they returned a shedload of value for a meagre investment. If they weren't quite so well-engineered, you'd have every right to call them bargain basement guns. But both the XS19 and XS20 are far too impressive to carry such a label. They're called Supergrade for a reason.

The XS19 and XS20 come in a variety of guises – from standard-stocked and sighted models to those with custom livery, fibre-optic sights or highly effective moderators. Owning an XS19 Custom Carbine Hunter myself for a number of years, I can vouch for both its high standard of finish and its excellent performance. In fact, I've been so impressed with my own CCH that I've invested in another XS19. The internals of this one have been professionally tuned-up, so I can use it on even more demanding field trips when I select spring-power over PCP. At 11.1ft/lb, it absolutely sings...

Now, if I liked my XS19 so much, you may wonder why I didn't 'upgrade' to an XS20 – after all, surely its very nametag suggests it's got to be one

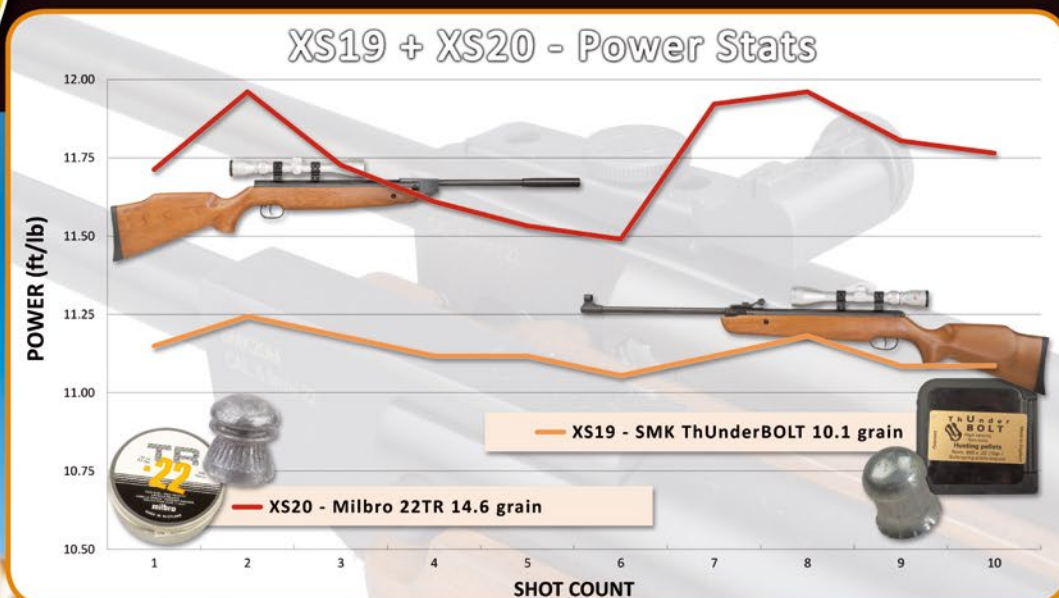
better? The truth is, the Model 19 does everything I ask of it, which is quite a lot. The extra £50 or so that the XS20 commands is certainly easily justified, but by no means does it render its underling a less capable performer. Of that, I have around six years of personal proof!

Though I'm not debating which of these two Supergrades I'd choose, it's still worth pairing them up to consider their differences and similarities. For simplicity, I've chosen the base models of each Supergrade – the £179.95 XS19 and £199.95 XS20 – although I bolted on SMK's silver-finished 3-9x40 scopes to create a bit of a bling effect. Both test rifles were supplied in .22 at my request, as I prefer the more efficient larger calibre in spring guns, but the XS19 is also available in .177 calibre.

Though I'm familiar with the luxury of a tuned-up Model 19, straight out of the box the pairing provided high-end power (see page 18), with the XS20 just slightly ahead on muzzle energy, and good consistency, which proved to be outstanding with some ammo brands I tried. Consistency doesn't necessarily equate to accuracy downrange but, again, both test rifles gave a very good account of themselves. If you're prepared to pay for the better quality brands of pellet – and why not when you've made a killing on the rifle? – you'll get particularly good results with these SMKs. Neither has a barrel restriction at the muzzle, so consequently they can be a bit fussy with

Right: The consistency and power is impressive

Below: Like its stablemate, the XS19 gives a good account of itself downrange



inconsistently made ammo. It's not the fault of the rifle or the shooter, but the pellet. I've established with my own XS19s that if you experience poor accuracy, try a different brand or tin of pellets – it's rarely a rifle issue. In these tests, the XS19 loved ThUnderBOLTs, while the XS20 did the business best with Daystate Rangemaster Lis.

What constitutes 'good' accuracy is down to what your target is, and the distance over which you shoot. If you limit yourself to 25 yards, as many spring gun shooters prefer to, then you'll find it hard to fault these rifles even with less expensive pellets. Find the correct diet of lead, though, and you can achieve 35mm diameter groups out to 35-plus paces with a scope. For these extreme spring gun hunting distances though, I'd probably recommend keeping the XS19, as the slightly less powerful of the two, for field ranges under 30 yards.

In the case of the XS20, an optic is mandatory since the adjustable opens of the XS19 – which can be standard notch-and-post as on my test sample, or fibre-optic on the XS19-18 model – have been swapped in favour of a steel muzzle weight. Finely blued and held in place by a couple of grub screws, the extra mass it brings to the front of the XS20 is very noticeable in a side-by-side comparison with the XS19. There's more stability when aiming with the XS20 for sure.

However, that's not to say that the XS19 is 'wobbly'. Despite being lighter than its stablemate by only 100g, it's surprisingly easy to hold steady, even from a standing stance. Even with identical scopes on board, the balance points of the rifles were a little different. The XS19's would suit someone who prefers a slightly butt-biased weight distribution, while the XS20's balance definitely suits someone who likes their rifle's muzzle to 'anchor' to the target. I'm more of a butt-heavy man, myself, so preferred the XS19, but I have to concede that I got better results out of the XS20 when testing both at extreme ranges.

While both guns look near enough identical twins, with air chambers of 30mm outer diameter, the XS19 feels sleeker overall as far as handling is concerned. The 19's barrel is 15mm diameter, while the 20's is 16mm, and the breech blocks 16 and 18mm wide in favour of the 20. Oddly, however, although both pistol grips are pretty much the same, it's the XS19's forestock that's 2mm wider. I'm sure this helps counter the lack of front-end weight that the thinner barrel offers – and though all these differences are just 1 or 2mm, they're enough to transform the handling, if not the looks, of the rifles when shouldered. If you're a slightly built shooter, you'd lean more toward the XS19 purely on its balance. The XS20 probably suits larger-framed airgunners who like to feel some mass in their



Both Supergrades boast a well-engineered breech



The XS19's open sights are replaced by a muzzle weight on the X20



The short forend slot on the XS19, courtesy of its articulated cocking arm

leading hand, although it certainly isn't such a beast as to be a handful for a lady or junior.

Even though it has the longest piston stroke of the pair, the XS20's recoil feels less lively as much of the movement is absorbed in its weightier metalwork – although 100 shots or so into the test, my sample developed the old spring gun 'cough'. As this added a little too much vibration for my liking, I tamed, though not entirely eliminated it with a dollop of Abbey LT2 Grease on the mainspring.

Yet while it's a little snappier – partly because of its shorter stroke combined with a relatively light weight – the XS19's firing cycle can't exactly be described as a 'kick'. With a good shooting technique, it won't stop you achieving acceptable accuracy results. Both rifles' butts are tipped with solid rubber recoil pads which, while not the most absorbent

of rubber (they don't need to be), are fitted beautifully flush to the wood from which they extend.

In terms of woodwork, you've got a mixed bag on the basic models, as tested. They're hardwood, with a pleasant walnut finish that's extremely durable and practical – though not so practical is the fact that neither boasts chequering of any description. For that, you need to opt for the more expensive 'Custom' models. To be fair, the standard of finish of my test guns was exemplary, with the XS20 in particular displaying a very attractive grain pattern. Each rifle's butt sports a Monte Carlo cheekpiece for the right-handed shooter, with the comb raised high enough for comfortable scope use, while the pistol grip is ideally raked for a good trigger attack. The fact that thumb muscle cutaways are on both sides of the grip makes both stocks semi-ambidextrous – I'd say a Southpaw wouldn't have too much difficulty shooting off the other shoulder.

Their forestocks are both nicely curved and long, with the XS19's being straight-line tapered, while the XS20's is flatter at the belly before tapering up to the breech. Because of the slightly longer air chamber of the XS20, the forend finishes behind the breech block. On the XS19, it extends through it, giving this shorter-chambered model a slightly neater look overall – but there's no denying that each rifle gives plenty of hold options for your leading hand. When you're shooting under field conditions, this is certainly a big plus-point.

One thing that's also worth pointing out is the short length of the cocking slot, underneath the forend, that each rifle sports – even though it's only the XS19 which runs an articulated cocking linkage. Apart from minimising the risk of a split stock, it looks a lot more attractive to boot. That cocking linkage helps in the XS19's cocking effort, too. The first part of the stroke is decidedly effortless, with the main 'grunt' only required right at the end. Although it has a fixed cocking arm, the XS20 is no more effort due to the cocking stroke being slightly longer – plus, of course, its muzzle weight doubles as a handy cocking aid by increasing the mechanical advantage. As for decocking, the XS20 can be, but the XS19's anti-beartrap system requires you to discharge the shot.

Features-wise, there are other rifles in the sub-£200 price bracket which have more USPs to boast about than these Supergrades – but I'm quite reassured by the few that these twin SMKs offer. To me, it shows that the emphasis has been on sound engineering and quality components, instead of simply piling on superficial bling. Their barrels pivot around axis bolts, rather than pins, so you can nip them up to accommodate the inevitable wear over time which would otherwise lead to inaccuracy in a break-barrel. The XS20's domed-bolt is very Weihrauch-esque, while I'm mega impressed by the XS19's pivot, which sports a locking grub screw to ensure maximum 'squeeze' of the breech jaws.

The breech lock-up is A1 on both models, being a sprung-plunger affair that requires a fair old tap on the end of the barrel to get past. When shut, there's no 'play' whatsoever in the breech area.

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The breech lock-up on both models is tight – this being the XS20's



Each rifle's cylinder is dovetailed with 11mm grooves for mounting a scope, with a very impressive 180mm of clamping space on the XS19, and only 10mm less on the XS20 which also boasts three arrestor stud holes for anchoring down the scope's rear mount. There's no form of arresting device on the XS19, however, so you may want to choose a one-piece mount to alleviate the possibility of scope creep. However, given the rifle's relatively low recoil, it's not a necessity – and the lightweight SMK 3-9x40 I tested the rifle with, using two-piece mounts, didn't shift a millimetre.

If you like the hassle-free shooting afforded by open sights – and many airgunners do – then the XS19 is the rifle to go for, as the XS20 is sold sightless. The XS19's supplied offerings are well made, with a U-notch rear that's adjustable for windage and elevation via posi-click thumbwheels and a parallel foresight post that sits in a protective tunnel on a raised ramp. But if opens are really important to you, I'd recommend you go for the XS19-18 model which comes equipped with the more in-vogue fibre-optics for just a tenner more.

Having read everything so far, you're probably still thinking 'what's the difference?' Well, I've left till last the one thing that, for me, splits the rifles – their triggers. As an XS19 user myself, I have no qualms about its trigger, which has served me well for many, many thousands of rounds and dozens of heads of vermin. But when it comes to seeing where that extra £20 goes on the XS20, you can't help but notice its sublime trigger. Well, trigger and safety catch to be more precise – because it's not just the XS20's trigger that shades it, the safety's pretty impressive, too. Automatic, it's a button that pops out of the left-hand side of the cylinder on full-cock, and is easy to disengage with your thumb when you're ready for the shot.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MODEL	SMK XS19 Supergrade	SMK XS20 Supergrade
DISTRIBUTOR	Sportsmarketing 01206 795333	www.sportsmk.co.uk
ACTION	Break-barrel, spring and piston	
CALIBRE	.177 and .22 (tested)	.22 only
OVERALL LENGTH	1,070mm	1,090mm
BARREL LENGTH	425mm	415mm
WEIGHT (excl scope)	3.3kg	3.4kg
TRIGGER	Two-stage, adjustable	
SAFETY	Manual, in-guard resettable	Automatic, resettable via recock
SIGHTS	Post and notch opens, adjustable	None supplied
STOCK	Hardwood, sporter (right-hand)	
POWER	10-11.1ft/lb according to pellet	10.8-11.8ft/lb according to pellet

On the other hand, the XS19's is of the in-guard variety, and manual. While I like the latter facet – I rarely use a safety when hunting – if you need the security blanket of a safety catch, I'm afraid this one's really awkward. It sits too far back, toward the trigger blade itself, when in the 'on' position. On a positive note, though, you can dis- and re-engage it at your leisure. The XS20's can only be reset by recocking the gun – a pain in the proverbial...

Both models' triggers are adjustable, although the XS19's marketing literature doesn't dwell on it, largely because the amount of adjustment is quite limited. For the money this rifle costs, I've got no complaints, and I've certainly tugged on plenty that are worse. A two-stager, it's not at all heavy and it breaks consistently, although there's a tiny amount of what I'd call 'controlled creep' – that is, there's a bit of slip between the first stop and final break-point. It's not inconsistent, though, so you can manage it very easily. I've certainly got quite accustomed to it on my own XS19s.

But when your forefinger tickles the XS20's blade, you know you're on to something very good. I needed to adjust its second stage on my test sample, as it was a bit light and didn't always engage the safety, and I tweaked the first stage to suit my own preference. But once I'd got it to my liking, I found it to rank among the best of the sub-£200 springers I've ever shot. That translates to good accuracy too, and while I have no qualms about the XS19's trigger, when it's compared alongside the XS20's, there really is only one winner.

So does that mean I'm going to trade in one of my Model 19 Supergrades for a 20 model? Not really. Having put both to a side-by-side test, I think the XS20 is probably the better rifle by virtue of the extra fifty quid it costs, but the XS19 is no poor performer and has, for me, already proven itself as an extremely reliable workhorse. If the XS20 Supergrade is fantastic value for money, then the XS19 Supergrade is phenomenal. When it comes to power, accuracy, performance and reliability, both of these models easily make the grade. ●

Dovetailed cylinders with scope-mounting grooves are a convenient feature of both rifles



Triggers can be a deal-breaker, and neither of the Supergrades' can be argued with

