

# HEAD *to* HEAD!



Underlever springers have an inherent accuracy that rivals PCPs – **Stephen Keeler** proves it with a pair from BSA and SMK

**POLARIS**  
V  
**XS38**

***"The XS38 is full powered...Hard nosed hunter"***  
**Stephen Keller**

★★★★★★★★

**O**ne of the interesting effects of the recession we have experienced is the notion that shooters are making something of a return to 'the old faith'; they're going back to the more cost-effective sport of shooting spring-powered airguns in spite of the dominance of the PCP market for the past decade. And it's widely accepted that underlever rifles have the inherent accuracy top trump in rival to PCP guns, due to having fixed barrels and independent propulsion. The SMK XS38 Custom Deluxe and the new BSA Polaris bear testament to this...

## FIRST SIGHT

Two things immediately struck me upon first seeing the guns. Firstly, the striking resemblance to under-and-over centrefire 'doubles rifles', which is no bad thing at all. Secondly, the attention to detail and quality of both guns is remarkable. Notably, the Beeza sports an embossed logo on the trigger guard, while the XS38 bears a hooded front-blade sight to allow extra protection in the field. Both feature sensible sporter stocks, too, though the BSA would benefit from a slight raising

of its cheekpiece, and the SMK could do with a little more attention to its forend grip.

**XS38** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

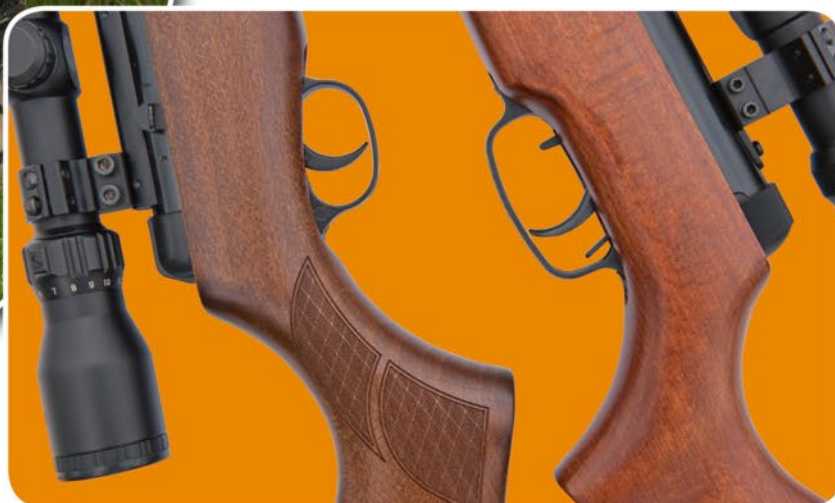
**Polaris** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

## SAFETY FIRST

Both manufacturers have put an obvious effort in emphasising the safety of these rifles. The Beeza has a clever rotating breech system that eliminates the old bear-trap scenario of trapped fingers – and also avoids premature loading by not opening for business until the activation of the cocking lever. This is in addition to the classic BSA thumb safety (which, on the test model, would have benefited from tightening up a tad).

The SMK has an equally simple and effective safety net in the form of very positive,





**Above:** The BSA's barrel shroud gives the option of a screw-on silencer for field work

**Above right:** The SMK's got an effective single-stage trigger (left) while the Beeza's is fully-adjustable

**Below:** Both rifles' underlevers clip securely beneath the barrel – and the Polaris has a fibre-optic foresight

**Bottom right:** The XS38 has a wide open breech (right) so it's easy to feed pellets into the unfussy barrel

self-mechanised safety catch in the trigger guard, plus an anti-beartrap lever behind the trigger which has to be operated by the 'other' hand when closing the breech. This prevents the nightmare scenario of guillotining your naked digits, and should be highly commended.

**XS38** ★★★★★★★★☆☆  
**Polaris** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

### MAKING THE RIGHT NOISES

Both of these beautifully-crafted rifles make a unique and satisfying cocking noise that induces confidence; the XS38 operates with a smooth 'hiss and click', suggesting healthy air compression and spring power, while the Polaris returns a clinical 'whoosh and tick' during cocking. At the other end of the firing cycle, the SMK has a softly-spoken muzzle report that affirms its full-powered, no-frills hunting nature. The Beeza is superb, too. Its impressive muzzle brake comes with a handy 1/2in UNF adapter to accept a quality sound moderator, although this would give the rifle a slightly unwieldy length and is, frankly, unnecessary.

**XS38** ★★★★★★★★☆☆  
**Polaris** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

### POWERFUL PLAYERS

As a shooter more experienced with the .177 school, I found shooting the harder-hitting .22 calibre impressive. The XS38, although not

quite as elaborate to look at as the nicely-crafted Polaris, punched weighted tin cans with noticeably more enthusiasm than the more dignified BSA. Having said that, both produced more than satisfying accuracy and would each be welcome on the toughest of hunting sessions. The SMK also has a recoil plate fitted to keep the scope firmly anchored for maximum accuracy.

**XS38** ★★★★★★★★☆☆  
**Polaris** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

### ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDLY

With the Polaris, you can't help but draw comparisons to their beautiful Martini action rifles that came into the spotlight in the legendary film Zulu. The similarity is based on the cocking lever action preceding the loading of a round into an opening breech – which rotates in the case of the airgun. In divergent polarity (excuse the pun), the XS38 is equally enjoyable to prime and fire, due in no small part to its solid feel and the assertive shooting action that follows.





While I'm drawing parallels, the XS38 could be compared to the accurate, powerful and successful Chinese Mosin Nagant carbine, a standard-issue rifle so accurate it made it as a sniper rifle. In many ways, the Chinese underlever is a wolf in sheep's clothing; it may not have the looks of a glamourpuss, but its secret is that it strikes like a tiger – quickly, powerfully and with clinical accuracy. Sportsmarketing has wisely opted for the sliding breech system that allows the pellet to be placed directly into the barrel. This is always good news for accuracy. BSA's revolving breech option, which is probably quicker, potentially risks accuracy issues if you don't tuck the pellet's skirt all the way into the breech face. (Skirt 'clippings' can impinge on downrange accuracy.)

**XS38** ★★★★★★☆☆  
**Polaris** ★★★★★★☆☆

## HAPPY TRIGGERS

The SMK makes good use of a single-stage trigger unit that's simple, effective and a viable hunting option for those who feel the second stage is unnecessary. Many do – they like to make the decision to fire mentally; thus, with a more decisive process, the shot is smoother. In the field, the trigger is responsive, and the factory weight setting feels right on the mark.

BSA has opted for a two-stage unit that HFT shooters would really appreciate. It's fully-adjustable, precise and sums up well the company's philosophy of 'over-engineering' in order to gain/maintain a broad and loyal client base. The factory setting feels safe and predictable, and the level of adjustment allows you to tailor the trigger to your own requirements in moments.

**XS38** ★★★★★★☆☆  
**Polaris** ★★★★★★☆☆

## PELLET FUSSY?

Being a tough Eastern player, the SMK gets the job done to a high standard without any complaints. Loading is simple, a process mastered rapidly, and pellet loading directly into the solid breech is satisfying. Of key significance, the XS38 simply isn't pellet fussy, and was happy spitting out a range of ammunition at what definitely felt like maximum power. The well-finished rearsight that shadows the sliding breech may look like it gets in the way of the loading process, but it's easy to put the slug where it belongs.

On the other hand, the BSA is slightly more demanding; pellets exceeding the optimum length will result in the rotating breech guillotining the edges of the skirt. When this happens, poor accuracy is inevitable – not good for any hunter.

**XS38** ★★★★★★☆☆  
**Polaris** ★★★★★★☆☆

## FIT FOR PURPOSE?

Although marketed by BSA as a 'medium-power hunter, trainer or superior informal target rifle', the Polaris feels a whole lot more grown-up and capable than a simple leisure sporter. In contrast, one gets the feeling that the XS38 was designed to compete with notable British and German springer firms from day one, which is no dry slap in my books.

At the ubiquitous 30-yard benchmark, the scoped-up Polaris produced groups under the inch, and gave equally encouraging results with its iron sights. Recoil was barely noticeable and the spectre of barrel flip all but eliminated by the clever and multi-tasking muzzle brake.

The Chinese contender was also very well mannered. It produced near identical results, but with slightly more downrange kick, the pellets seriously denting and threatening to penetrate the safety backstop behind the target! In many ways, as the name discretely suggests, if this gun was a fullbore centrefire in a parallel life, it would – without a doubt – be a .308 calibre stalking rifle!

**XS38** ★★★★★★☆☆  
**Polaris** ★★★★★★☆☆



**Above:** For an all-out, hard-working hunter – Stephen's choice is the SMK

**Bottom left:** The BSA's chequering (top) helps to find a solid hold – but don't write off the solid furniture on the XS38

**Below:** Both rifles' cylinders are grooved to accept standard scope mounts, and the SMK has a recoil plate





## BSA POLARIS: SMK XS38



**Above:** The long butt on SMK will suit shooters of a larger frame (top)

**Below:** Two versatile sporters – the Polaris slightly more-suited to HFT events, and the XS38 a hard-nosed hunter

### TUNING POTENTIAL

For both of these springers, I feel that a quick tune-up would be the icing on the cake, as in my own experience one can take a really nice gun and make it even better. Although both shot very well straight out of the box with the quality iron sights, few would disagree with my view that all airguns, especially springers, respond a bit like the wife does after a day's pampering at the health spa – very well indeed!

**XS38** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

**Polaris** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

### WELL STOCKED

Contrary to the somewhat dated opinion among some shooters that Chinese gun

| TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS |   |  |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| RIFLE                    | POLARIS                                   | XS38 CUSTOM DELUXE   |
| Origin                   | Spain                                     | China  |
| Type                     | Underlever sporter                        | Underlever sporter   |
| Action                   | Spring and piston                         | Spring and piston  |
| Calibre                  | .177 (4.5mm) and (tested)<br>.22 (5.5mm)  | .22 (5.5mm)  |
| Overall length           | 1,160mm                                   | 1,150mm  |
| Barrel length            | 470mm                                     | 483mm  |
| Weight                   | 3kg (unscoped)                            | 3.8kg (unscoped)   |
| Sights                   | Fully-adjustable opens, raised scope ramp | Fully-adjustable opens, dovetailed cylinder and arrestor plate |
| Trigger                  | Two-stage, adjustable                     | Single-stage   |
| Safety                   | Manual, rocker type, resettable           | Manual, in-guard type, resettable, with anti-beartrap          |
| Stock                    | Beech, chequered grip and forend, sporter | Hardwood, sporter  |
| Power                    | 11+ft/lb                                  | 11+ft/lb   |

carpentry is second rate, the stock on the XS38 Custom Deluxe is a simple pleasure – with amiable lines, a well-positioned cheekpiece and a smooth finish. Deluxe is very much the correct suffix to this Custom model, therefore.

I would add the caveat that SMK's rifle limits itself to shooters with a well-proportioned frame, due to its lengthy reach from grip to trigger; however on the other side of the coin, it may be unwise to give a gun of this power to less-experienced or younger shooters.

BSA honours its tradition of simple and functional stocks that are visually rewarding, and the grip and forend chequering are effective aids to a solid shooting position.

**XS38** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

**Polaris** ★★★★★★★★☆☆



**XS38** 78/100

**Polaris** 74/100

This BSA continues the Birmingham manufacturer's reputation for solid, reliable and stylish rifles. The safety system is top notch and provides the hunter with double security to match its double-barrelled lines. Its add-on universal sound moderator converter is a nice touch, but the addition of a silencer makes the rifle a little too unwieldy as an all-out hunter. However, the good balance and assured accuracy make it a very good HFT contender for those looking to cut their teeth in the growing sport.

Like the rugged, no frills and widely manufactured Mosin Nagant carbines that were instrumental in helping the Chinese to become a world power, the XS38 would be my choice of hunting partner, though. Built for purpose (and with the power to match), this is a gun I feel would take the knocks, scratches and whacks in its stride – and, unlike the lovely Beesa, I feel a few battle scars would add to its tough, uncompromising character!