Under SCRUTINY



SMK's XS38 underlever is significantly cheaper than much of the European competition. **Nigel Allen** assesses if it's worth investing in a budget-priced fixie...

For many springer fans, fixed-barrel is the way to go – and they're happy to accept the weight penalty that a side- or underlever cocking system comes with. Invariably, they're a little more expensive – and if we look at the recent medal winners in the 2013 *Airgun Shooter* Awards, the Air Arms and Weihrauch underlevers which swapped the top two spots from the previous year's results set the cash registers pinging at around £400 a pop.

At that price point, PCP power is becoming a serious contender – so is it a case of having to accept that the only decent springer in the sub-£400 market is a break-barrel? Well, no – because Sportsmarketing's XS38 Custom Deluxe brings fixed-barrel accuracy for the very affordable sum of just £199.95. What's more, unlike the aforementioned HW and TX models, the latest version even throws a set of open sights into the bargain – fibre-optics, no less.

The question, of course, is whether the XS38 is a great value-for-money fixie... or false economy? While it would be unfair to expect it to compete on the same level as its more expensive counterparts, it's also fair to expect it to give a good return on your investment. Let's face it, £200 is still a lot of money to pay for an airgun for many shooters.

On the racks, the XS38 Custom Deluxe is certainly an eye-catcher – if not for its looks, for its sheer size. This is a man's rifle, of that there is no doubt – and I'd say you need to be over 5'8" to handle it! Unscoped, my test rifle tipped the scales at four kilos – add another half-kilo or so for glassware. That's a fair old lump to control, especially on standing shots. But the silver lining is that all that mass really does its bit to absorb the 'felt' recoil in your shoulder – so build up your muscles, and you'll find this a decent gun to get results with.



The fully-adjustable rearsight...



...and foresight. Both are fibre-optic


Pulling back on the grip releases the holding catch


The breech offers ample room in which to load



I'm always sceptical about triggers on cheaper rifles, but Sportsmarketing has delivered an above-average unit that, though quirky, is a decent squeeze. Though it's non-adjustable, the out-of-the-box pull weight is ideal for the field – and while the first stage isn't followed by an obvious stop-point, the final let-off is consistent enough to gauge. There's some drag as the sears release, but it's all very predictable once you 'get into' the gun, and it's helped by the swept-back design of the blade, which pivots some way back from the fulcrum to give a very finger-friendly mechanical advantage.

As the XS38 follows the common design of drawing back an inner cylinder within an outer receiver, safety is paramount to protect your fingers as you load a pellet directly into the rifling. So I'm pleased to report that despite the rifle's lowly pricetag, Sportsmarketing haven't compromised here.

Draw back the underlever – you need to pull back on the plastic-covered grip to release the holding catch – and not only does an automatic, in-trigger safety catch engage, but also an anti-beartrap system. This means that while the underlever is in the full-cock position, you can put your hand into the amply-sized loading bay area without fear of the trigger being inadvertently operated. That said, I'd still recommend the good practice of keeping one hand on the drawn-back lever while you load with the other.

With the pellet breeched, returning the underlever requires a serrated glider switch at the back end of the cylinder to be pushed forward. This disengages the anti-beartrap – but before you can take the shot, you'll still need to pull the safety catch back, toward the trigger blade. In-guard triggers may not be my favourite, but the XS38's is one of the best I've encountered; besides being resettable, it doesn't 'encroach' on the position of the blade like some many others do. If only all in-guard safeties were made like this…

While the overall finish of the rifle is above the standard I'd expect at this price-point, there were a few elements of the cocking procedure that highlighted the £250 price differential between the XS and the award-winning underlevers I mentioned earlier.

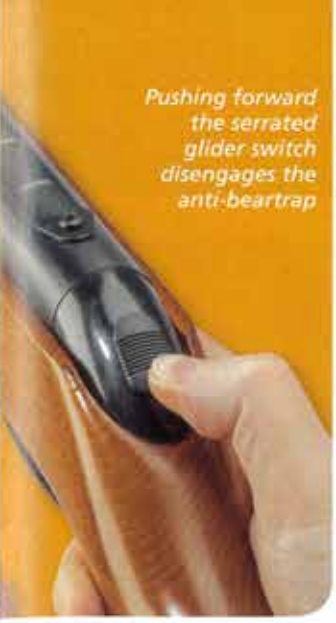
There's certainly a lot of spring noise when cocking (though, oddly, not during the firing sequence) and when returning the underlever, it's just a little too flimsy for my liking. Care must be taken to correctly align the end of the underlever arm with the housing catch when closing as it can bend to one side, putting undue strain on one of the cocking linkages which, on closer inspection, could well fail if this happened too often. The knack I found was to pull back on the lever end to help it relocate into the catch – it doesn't snap back of its own accord.

The spring noise on cocking is largely down to the type of lubrication that the Oriental gunmaker applies on production – it's a little thin and, judging by the smoke that was apparent after each shot during the running-in phase of my test, there's a little too much of it! Once the initial dieseling disappeared, I split wood and metal and packed some grease onto the spring through the cocking slot. This helped quieten (and smooth-out) the cocking tremendously.

It's worth mentioning that I've shot an ARC-tuned XS38 that was beautifully smooth to cock and shoot – so anyone thinking of tuning-up an XS38 will be very pleased with the performance gains that are there to be had relatively easily.

But even on my randomly-picked sample, the actual firing cycle was a lot less 'twangy' than the initial cocking sequence had suggested. Spitting out most mid-weight pellets smack bang on the legal power limit and with





Pushing forward the serrated glider switch disengages the anti-beartrap

remarkable consistency for an off-the-shelf rifle, the XS's kick is short, sharp and very manageable in your shoulder. It's helped immensely by the rifle's overall weight, which absorbs the usual 'liveliness' that's a characteristic of any high-powered springer.

Sitting inside a stylish muzzle surround, the XS38's barrel isn't choked. However, I was still able to push ranges out to 35 yards before I had to accept it was too difficult to land all my pellets inside the 35mm circle that I consider is mandatory for field work – and though I had a lot of fun toppling tin cans out to 45 yards, this rifle is much more a pest controller's tool than a plinker's piece. It's a serious piece of kit.

The new open sights are a nice touch, offering a red fibre-optic bead and fully-adjustable rearsight with green fibre-optic inserts. They're predominantly synthetic, but well moulded and the rear sets up courtesy of very positive click-stop thumbwheels, suitably labelled for ease of reference. The only negative is that the foresight doesn't have a protective hood… so watch that muzzle! (You should be as a matter of course, anyway.)

Initially, I familiarised myself with the rifle using the opens, and was more than happy with their performance not least because they offer up a 425mm sight base. But such is the XS38's potential that I soon had a scope on board – choosing a one-piece mount to marry my 3-9x40 mil-dot to the rifle. There's 135mm of 11mm clamping estate on the receiver, with cross-cuts and an arrestor plate – considerately positioned right at the back of the dovetails – to 'arrest' mounts and stop the scope from creeping back under the influence of recoil.

I must applaud SMK for sorting out a cheekpiece that's as good for a telly as it clearly was for the opens… but though its Monte Carlo styling is gently-profiled in favour of the right-hander, I found the comb was a little short if you like to place your head well forward on the stock. Elsewhere on the woodwork, though, everything feels just right.



A decent squeeze, the XS38 trigger also has an excellent in-guard safety

The stock of a £200 rifle is never going to be exotic, but it was only really chequering I hankered after. A ventilated – though quite hard – rubber butt pad holds the gun securely on aim in your shoulder; the pistol grip is well raked for good trigger attack; the forend is extended far enough forward to give you a hold point for any stance; and the generally squarish woodwork is chunky enough to afford you plenty of control. Finish wise, the beech wood has been well sealed in a tough, glossy lacquer and the gun is worthy of its Custom Deluxe suffix.

After around 500 pellets – the first 50 or so of which were smokin', literally! – my test rifle really started to tick over nicely. I soon had the knack of closing that underlever without problem and the daubing of grease I gave the spring paid dividends in terms of smoothing out the cocking procedure. It is a big rifle, and perhaps not something to consider if you're a lover of short carbines. But, nonetheless, it also comes with a mighty big performance considering its cost, and its fixed barrel will probably give it the edge against many break-barrels in the same price zone.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MODEL: XS38 Custom Deluxe
UK DISTRIBUTOR: Sportsmarketing • 01206 795333 • www.sportsmk.co.uk
ACTION: Underlever, spring and piston
CALIBRE: .22 only
OVERALL LENGTH: 1,146mm
BARREL LENGTH: 470mm
WEIGHT (UNSCOPED): 4.0kg
TRIGGER: Two-stage, non-adjustable
SAFETY: Manual, in-guard, resettable with anti-beartrap cocking system
SIGHTS: Fibre-optic opens, adjustable
STOCK: Beech, sporter (right-hand)
LENGTH OF PULL: 360mm
POWER: 11.6ft/lb (according to pellets used)



The grooved receiver also boasts an arrestor plate