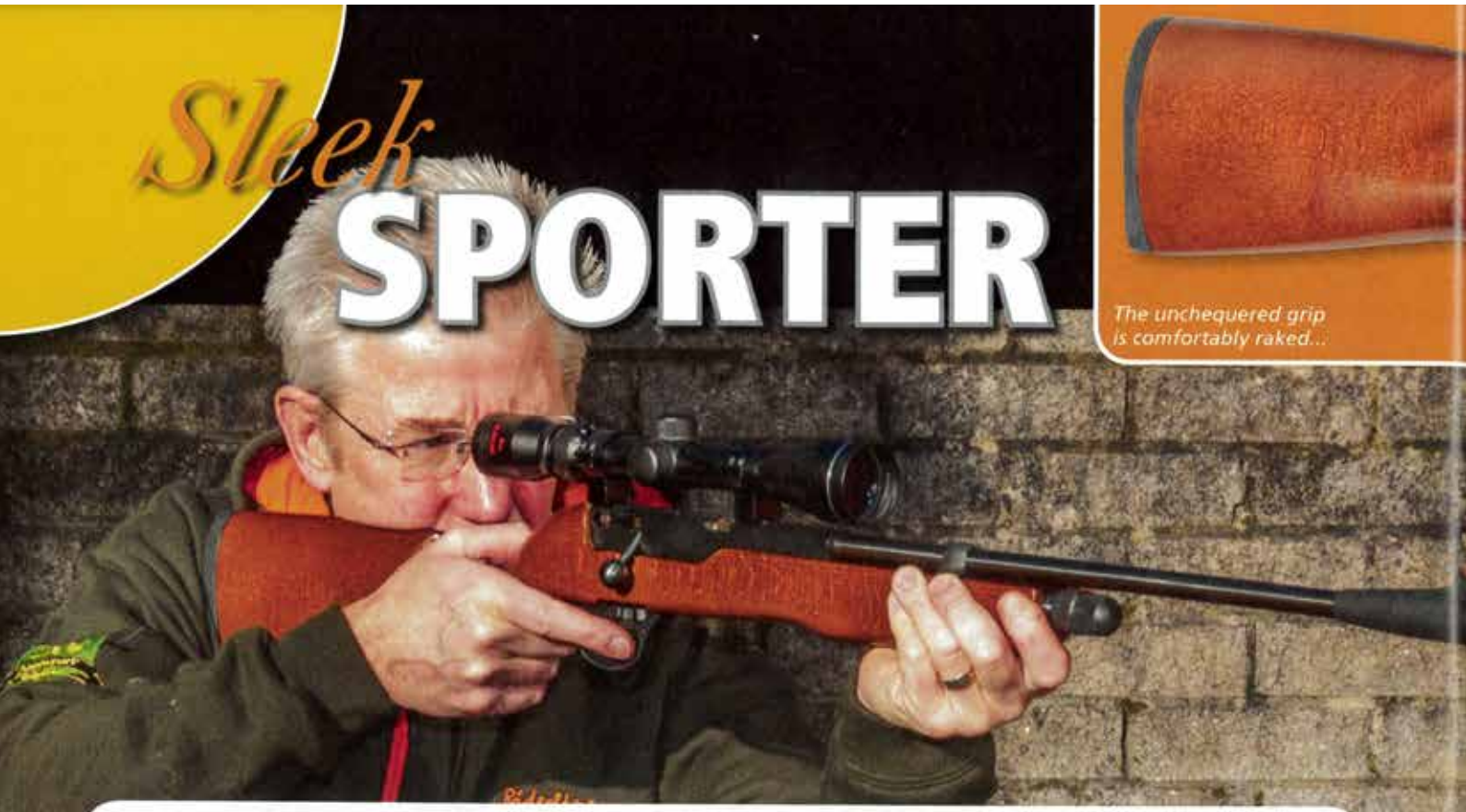
Sleek SPORTER



The unchequered grip is comfortably raked...

Comparative to pistols, the CO2 air rifle market offers slim pickings – so **Nigel Allen** welcomes SMK's new mid-powered XS501 with open arms...

Given the popularity of CO2-powered airguns, and the plethora of pistol models that run on said gas, it never ceases to amaze me how few rifle models there are. So all the more reason why I, like many I'm sure, welcomed the announcement of the new CO2-powered XS501 from SMK.

Just as Crosman dubbed their .22 calibre, wood-stocked Model 2260 the Rabbit Stopper, SMK has dubbed its .22-only, wood-stocked XS501 the Rabbit Destroyer – and there's also the promise of a .177, synthetic-stocked XS502 in the near future. That one, SMK is calling the Rat Destroyer.

The XS501 runs off either two standard-size 12 gram CO2 capsules, or can be connected to a line-feed (*see panel below*) – but as it's the former option that most airgunners will be interested in, and SMK only sent me 12 gram capsules with the test gun, that's the configuration I'm using here.

The user's manual doesn't really explain either method, so it's important to state from the outset that when using two CO2 capsules, you should install them into the under-barrel expansion chamber base-to-base.

In other words, the first capsule goes in neck first and the second one neck last; the pins that pierce the capsules are at each end of the chamber, you see.

Gassing up the XS501 is straightforward enough. From empty, unscrew the knurled collar (anti-clockwise) and with the rifle's barrel confirmed as 'unloaded' and the safety catch manually engaged, cock the hammer in order to take any load off the main firing valve.

Drop in the capsules – remember, necks outward – and screw on the knurled collar, clockwise. The trick is to do this as quickly as possible so that you don't let any gas escape past the main O-ring seal

LINE-FEED

Should you want to run the XS501 from a bulk-fill CO2 cylinder via a line-feed, then the domed section of the end cap needs to be unscrewed. It's a reverse thread, so comes off clockwise – to reveal a screw which can then be removed, allowing the insertion of a bayonet-type line-feed connector. This screw doubles as a bleed valve, allowing you to also vent off any remaining gas from 'spent' 12 gram capsules.

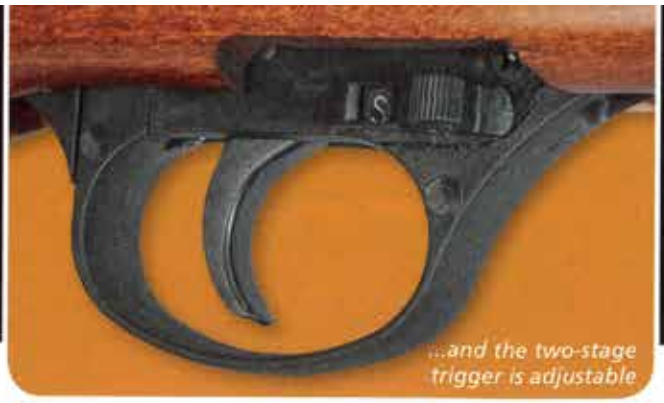


GASSING UP

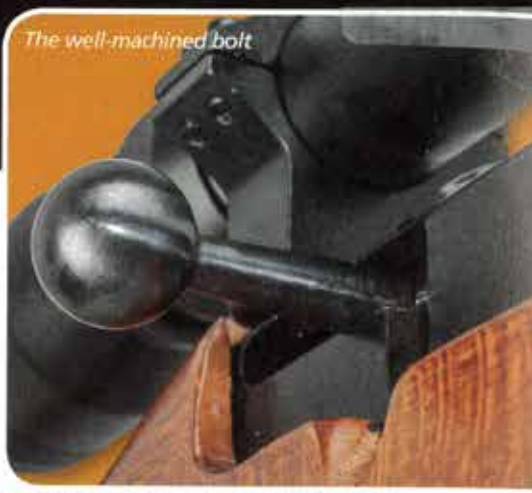
With the gun cocked, undo the end cap [1], drop in two 12g capsules – necks outwards [2 and 3] – then quickly screw the cap back on to ensure a good seal [4].







...and the two-stage trigger is adjustable



The well-machined bolt

VENTING OFF

You'll know when the time comes to replace your gas capsules as the rifle's power will drop and the shots will start to strike low. However, sometimes it can be hard to unscrew the end cap as there's still enough residual pressure left in the expansion chamber to act on the threads of the end cap, making it difficult to undo by hand – and even if you can, the capsules can suddenly jettison out with a loud pop! The best way is to fire off a few blanks until the pressure drops low enough for the hammer spring to overcome the main valve and allow the remaining gas to vent out through the barrel with a loud hiss.

Alternatively, you can turn the small thumbscrew – located under the reverse-threaded, dome-headed cover on the end cap – in, clockwise. Remember to back it right off afterwards, though – otherwise the next new capsules won't seal their released charge properly.

once the capsules have been pierced. It also helps if you keep the O-ring seal well lubricated with silicone oil.

In twin-capsule configuration, my test XS501 returned 35 shots up to a maximum of 9.8ft/lb of power with 15-grain BS55 Black Domed ammo. This was slightly fewer than the expected 50 shot-count indicated in the manual when shooting in an ambient temperature of 20 degrees Celsius, but my chrono tests were undertaken on a very cold day in a very cold workshop – and, of course, the rifle was good for a few dozen more 'plinking' shots (down to around 8.6ft/lb) even after it fell from its maximum power output.

Given these figures, I'd hold up the XS501 as a mid-range hunter – I wouldn't want to extend ranges too far when live quarry was the target. However, accuracy is equally as important as power in the hunting field and with good shot-to-shot consistency, the XS501 certainly takes full advantage of the recoilless firing cycle afforded by the CO2 system. You could confidently use the rifle on small vermin out to around 25 paces.

The gun comes to the shoulder easily thanks to its light weight – even with a scope on board – where it balances in a very shooter-friendly manner. Its 'pointability' is further enhanced thanks to the low manner in which the action is cradled in the beech stock which, incidentally, is ambidextrous.

Ahead of the ambidextrous, 'uncheeked' butt, the grip is comfortably raked and doesn't suffer at all for its chequer-less design. The forend, which has a drop at the very end, is also devoid of any chequering, but its slim, rounded style is still a delight to hold.

This is one of those 'effortless' sporters to take aim with – it just seems to point wherever you're looking. And while the gun's overall dimensions are suited to a wide range of shooters, it's light enough for airgunners of smaller stature to manage, too. It would make a good Dad 'n' lad gun, actually.

Its trigger is two-stage, with some roughness apparent in the first stage – but the second-stage let-off is both consistent and light. It is adjustable via a hex-headed grubscrew at the back of the guard, but I found its out-of-the-box setting fine for me.

The XS501 is a single-shot, and cocking is via a well-machined bolt on the right side of the breech. Lifting it up and pulling it back does two things: it auto-sets the resettable, glider safety on the right side of the trigger guard and cocks the strike-hammer.

As the loading probe moves back with the bolt's operation, it exposes the breech loading tray, into the channel of which a pellet can 'rolled'.

There's ample space when you shoot the gun naked – that is to say using the open sights it comes equipped with – but if you top the action with a scope, you'll need to find the knack for getting the pellet in. Gripping it (lightly!) between thumb and finger, you can then slide your index finger (or thumb) over the top of the pellet as you roll it into the channel.



Below: *To load a scoped XS501, hold a pellet between your thumb and finger, then slide your index finger over the top of the pellet as you roll it into the channel of the breech loading tray*







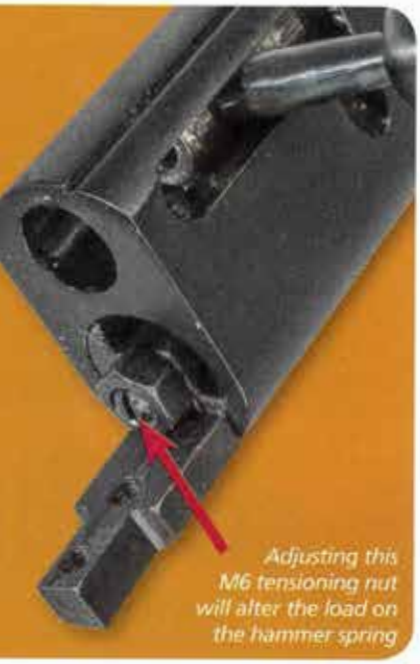


Above: *Its slimline appearance and low sightline lend the XS501 the look of a rimfire sporter*

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION
MODEL: SMK XS501 'Rabbit Destroyer'
UK DISTRIBUTOR: Sportsmarketing
ACTION: Bolt-operated CO2 (2x12g capsules or bulk-fill via line-feed)
CALIBRE: .22 only
SHOTS PER CHARGE: Approx. 50 (dependent on ambient temperature)
COCKING: Bolt-action
OVERALL LENGTH: 1,015mm
BARREL LENGTH: 559mm
WEIGHT: 2.5kg (unscoped)
TRIGGER: Two-stage, adjustable
SAFETY: Automatic slider, resettable
STOCK: Beech sporter, ambidextrous
POWER: 9.8ft/lb with BS55 Black Domed



The red fibre-optic foresight bead is part of the muzzle moulding



Adjusting this M6 tensioning nut will alter the load on the hammer spring

The user manual states that the hammer spring is 'tuneable', though it doesn't instruct how to do this. I assume it's a posh way of saying you can alter the spring tension to make the hammer hit the firing valve harder so that more CO2 flows, thus upping – or lowering – the rifle's power.

Splitting wood and metal – a complicated procedure that I'd advise all but the most competent home smiths to avoid – I could see how to do it: there's an M6 tensioning nut that you can adjust to increase or decrease the load on the hammer spring. However, I chose not to on the grounds that I was happy enough with the XS501's power and would expect the shot-count to reduce if more gas was used. Still, it's nice to know it's an option, and I'm sure the HPA boys will appreciate this design feature – there's a growing band of airgun fettlers who like to convert their CO2 guns to work off high-pressure air.

Sportsmarketing supplied my rifle with a 3-9x40 scope already attached to the 11mm rails, so I didn't test the fibre-optic opens as the rear was removed to accommodate the telly. I can tell you, however, that the synthetic rearsight is fully adjustable for windage and elevation, sporting two green fibre-optic inserts either side of its notch. Very well constructed, it locates onto the receiver via two, cross-head screws.

The red fibre-optic foresight bead is part of the muzzle moulding, which, while having no practical value other than protecting the all-important barrel crown, does add a businesslike air to the XS501. Actually, with its slimline appearance and low sightline, SMK's new rifle certainly looks very similar to a rimfire sporter, an aesthetic which I'm sure will appeal to the many shooters who are fed up with the 'bulky', top-heavy style that's becoming more commonplace on today's airguns.

Shooting the rifle scoped up was nothing but a real pleasure, though because the rabbits on my permissions are too difficult to get within this rifle's range, I couldn't take it hunting on my patch. I will reiterate, however, that the XS501's overall level of handling and accuracy make it more than up to fieldwork standards. From a rest, I regularly put in sub-32mm groups at 25 yards on my garden range – and thanks to a comfortable 'head down' position afforded by the action inletting, I had a thoroughly enjoyable time doing so.

I was able to closely match this performance from a kneeling position, too, which bears testimony to its delightful ergonomics. For me, that says a lot about a rifle's design and there's no doubt that the XS501's is both stylish and practical. Whether you want it as a close- to mid-range hunting tool, simply for some plinking good fun in the garden or at the club's zero range, it'll live up to expectations – plus, of course, in a CO2 air rifle market that offers slim pickings, it's a very welcome addition. ●



The XS501 features 11mm scope rails, though you'll have to remove the rearsight in order to fit a telly



The rearsight is fully adjustable for windage and elevation