

BY TOM BECKSTRAND

# ALEXANDER ARMS .338

This long-range powerhouse blends Russian simplicity with American accuracy.

# ARMS .338



<b>ALEXANDER ARMS .338 LAPUA</b>
<b>type:</b> Piston-operated semiauto
<b>caliber:</b> .338 Lapua Magnum
<b>capacity:</b> 10
<b>barrel:</b> 27 in. (1:9.3 twist)
<b>weight:</b> 19 lbs., 8 oz.
<b>stock:</b> Side-folding modified Magpul PRS
<b>grip:</b> Ergo Tactical Deluxe
<b>length of pull:</b> Adjustable
<b>finish:</b> Anodized aluminum (barrel: IonBond DLC)
<b>trigger:</b> Alexander Arms Tactical Blade Trigger
<b>sights:</b> None
<b>msrp:</b> \$6,800 (ships with five magazines in a hardcase)
<b>maker:</b> Alexander Arms, <a href="http://www.alexanderarms.com">www.alexanderarms.com</a>





The author found the oval-shaped fore-end to be very comfortable. It has a full-length Picatinny rail for mounting optics.

**I**F THE SHOOTING INDUSTRY could present an award for the most exotic and accurate design of the last 25 years, the Alexander Arms .338 Lapua Magnum would win it. The last time we saw a company stray so far off the beaten path with such spectacular results was when Glock unveiled their odd-looking pistol in the mid-1980s. Admittedly, Alexander Arms' semiauto rifle will never sell like a relatively inexpensive polymer pistol, but it is no less extraordinary and fills a niche that few knew existed until now.

Alexander Arms takes its name from Bill Alexander, a Brit who washed up on our shores several years ago. Bill is an engineer who worked for the British military and has a strong background in weapons design and testing, so it makes sense that he started a gun company when he came to the U.S. Bill is known for the creation of the 6.5 Grendel, probably the best hunting/long-range cartridge available in an AR-pattern rifle.

Bill led the design team of Alexander Arms' latest creation, a rifle that has the ergonomics of an AR, an operating system descended from a 1920s Russian machine gun and the accuracy of a bolt-

action rifle. If asked to describe the rifle in one word, I would choose "simple." A closer examination of the rifle reveals why that term fits.

#### DESIGN AND MATERIALS

The heart of any semiautomatic firearm is its operating system. After all, that's what makes the firearm run. The system found on the .338 Lapua comes from an old Russian DP-28 machine gun, except the action is inverted and enlarged. Alexander Arms chose the DP-28 system because it was so incredibly simple and, once scaled up in size and manufactured with modern materials using modern

techniques, it's accurate.

The action consists of a long operating rod that has a solid block of 17-4 stainless steel attached underneath it. The block of stainless steel is the bolt, and into it Alexander Arms machines space for dual ejectors and an HK-style sliding extractor.

The recoil lugs that keep the bolt closed while the rifle is fired are two flat pieces of steel that measure approximately ¼ x ½ x 3 inches. These two pieces absorb all the abuse the .338 Lapua can dish out. Unlike other semiauto actions with which we're familiar, there's no twisting or camming action involved when the action cycles. Twisting to unlock a

semiauto action is incredibly stressful and can fracture steel, especially with high-pressure magnum cartridges.

The action has the two biggest lugs I've ever seen on a rifle. In order for them to fail, those two flat pieces of solid 8620 steel have to compress and/or shear. I just don't see that happening. The lugs are designed to take all the abuse from firing the rifle and be the part that wears the fastest (preventing the receiver or bolt from wearing prematurely). If anyone has enough .338 Lapua ammo to wear out the lugs, the lugs are easily replaced. They slide out of the bolt when the rifle is field-stripped for cleaning and are removed or replaced without the use of any tools.

The receiver itself is machined out of a solid block of 9310, an exceptionally high-grade steel that is also used to make bolts in premium ARs. It's an expensive steel, but the presence of vanadium gives it a very tight and irregular grain structure that prevents it from cracking under repeated impacts, such as those dished out by the .338 Lapua Magnum.

The rifle is piston-operated and has a system that, externally, looks almost identical to what we find on an AK47 variant. The op rod is 16½ inches long and a half-inch in diameter. The rifle cycles by diverting gas through a small port in the barrel and uses that gas to push the op rod rearward. Dual recoil springs — one left-wound and the other right-wound to prevent binding — push the bolt back into battery.

The gas leaves the barrel through a small port and enters an adjustable gas block that houses the piston at the end of the op rod. The adjustable block has five settings numbered zero through four. Zero turns off the gas system so the rifle has to be manually cycled. The first setting is for high-pressure ammo in hot conditions and/or suppressed use. Setting two is for general use with commercial ammo. Setting three is for low-pressure and hunting rounds. Setting four is for arctic conditions where the rifle might be shot at -65 F.

When Bill told me the rifle was designed to pass both the U.S. Army's extreme hot and extreme cold firing schedules, my eyebrows went up. He said, "I wanted to test it against some kind of extreme performance standard, so I used the U.S. Army's." Fair enough.

The rifle's barrel is 27 inches long, has a 1:9.3 twist rate and is made from 4140 steel (the same found on our own M-249 machine gun). The barrel is also button-



The massive receiver is machined out of a solid block of 9310 steel. The magazine well is cut at an angle to allow easy magazine insertion and extraction from the prone position.

#### 100-YARD ACCURACY RESULTS

gun 1		
load	average group (in.)	best group (in.)
LAPUA 300-GR. SCENAR	1.22	.91
gun 2		
LAPUA 300-GR. SCENAR	.96	.78
MILITARY 250-GR. SCENAR	.91	.78

rifled, fluted and sent to IonBond for a DLC coating.

#### GETTING TO KNOW THE RIFLE

The rifle has ergonomics very similar to an AR and uses any standard AR-type trigger, safety and pistol grip. The stock on the rifle I tested was a modified Magpul PRS that was adjustable for both length of pull and comb height. My



The author found the 19.8-pound .338 Lapua to jump around less than a lightweight .308. At 100 yards, it grouped under an inch.

choice of optic was a Steiner 5-25x56 Military Scope (see sidebar).

I had the opportunity to test the gun over three days at New Mexico's Felix River Ranch. There I was able to shoot out to more than 1,400 yards. I fired 150 rounds the first day and immediately noticed how little recoil the rifle generates. I attribute the mild recoil to the rifle's weight and its operating system. The .338 weighs 19½ pounds, which makes it easy on the shoulder. Also, semiautos usually have less recoil than their bolt-operated counterparts because much of the energy caused by firing the round gets used to cycle the action. While the .338 Lapua Magnum can be punishing in a bolt action, the weight of the Alexander Arms gun — and the mass of the bolt — soaks up enough energy that shooting the rifle is about like shooting a .308.

Thanks to the parts commonality with the AR, manipulating the rifle was easy and intuitive. The grip and safety are in the same place, and the stock is a







The heart of the Alexander Arms piston system is its beefy, 16½-inch operating rod attached to a solid block/bolt of stainless steel.



The adjustable gas block has five settings numbered zero through four.

common one for AR-pattern rifles. The magazine well is just forward of the trigger, like an AR, but the magazine release is found on the bottom of the trigger-guard where it meets the mag well. The release is a small, ambidextrous paddle the shooter can depress with his index finger. It's easy to operate and tucked out of the way.

The magazine well is cut at an angle to allow the shooter to insert and remove magazines from the prone position without having to lift the rifle or move out of position. It's a smart design feature. Our best shooting comes when we disturb our position as little as possible, not only when firing, but when reloading. The 10-round magazines are made from polymer and are easy to insert and remove.

The oval-shaped fore-end is approximately 20 inches long and extremely comfortable in the hand. It has a Picatinny rail that runs its length along the top and can accommodate rail sections on the sides and bottom if you desire. I'd probably only need one small section to attach to the bottom for a quick-detach bipod.

I shot the rifle both off the bipod with a small rear bag under the stock's toe when engaging steel and off of a larger front sandbag with the smaller bag under the

toe while shooting paper. All of my shooting was done from the prone position.

One of the rifle's most noticeable characteristics is how easy it is for the shooter to spot his impacts even while firing full-power .338 Lapua Magnum loads, the recoil being more of a gentle shove than a sharp kick. My range session started with steel at 550 yards, and I was able, even at that relatively short distance, to spot my hits. Spotting one's own rounds is a great way to assess how easy it is to manage a



rifle's recoil. Even a light .308 will often jump around too much to permit this, so I was both shocked and impressed when the .338 let me see my own impacts.

Such an advantage makes for some seriously fun shooting when you're on your own and don't have someone to spot for you. And it's invaluable for a sniper because it cuts the sniper/observer dialogue to nothing. Measuring and calling corrections for another shooter can waste a lot of time, time for targets to move and, more important, for wind conditions to change. Being able to see where our first shot lands and immediately reengage without having to so much as cycle the bolt makes for a much higher hit probability.

#### HOW IT SHOOTS

On my second day I took two of the guns and tested them for accuracy at 100 yards. That's a little close for such a big gun, but it's a standard that most can replicate at their local range. One rifle had a muzzlebrake, the other didn't. We'll refer to the rifle with the muzzlebrake as Gun 1. It had approximately 500 rounds

The muzzlebrake is very effective and helps render even Black Hills' 250-grain Sierra MatchKing load (2,950 fps) quite tolerable.



through it before I received it. The rifle without the brake — Gun 2 — had a flash hider and a brand-new, unfired barrel on it. Bill wanted to see what happened as we shot it through its break-in.

I tested Gun 1 with Lapua's 300-grain Scenar bullet. I immediately noticed that — as is the case with many semiautos — the rifle exhibited some sensitivity when firing the first round out of a freshly loaded magazine (hand-cycling the first round into the chamber seats the cartridge differently than how the gun automatically loads them). The result? My first two groups had the first round impacting away from the remaining four. When loading and shooting five rounds, groups hovered around 1½ inches, with four of the five rounds clustered in a group that measured from .75 to .9 inch. So when I loaded six rounds in the magazine and “wasted” the first one into the berm behind the target, I could then put the remaining five into less than an inch.

I tested Gun 2 with some 300-grain Lapua ammo and military-grade rounds



Loaded for long range: The Alexander Arms 10-round magazines are made from polymer and easy to insert and remove.

utilizing the 250-grain Scenar. The Scenar ammo was loaded to at least maximum CIP pressures but was still comfortable to shoot, even without the muzzlebrake. The loads had a muzzle velocity of 3,117 fps and only required 10.4 mils of additional elevation to hit steel at 1,430 yards.

All groups for Gun 2 were fired with the first round going into the berm and the next five onto the target. Gun 2 averaged .91 inch with the 300-grain ammo and .85 with the 250-grain Scenar loads.

The best group of the day was the last one fired — five 250-grain bullets within .78 inch at 100 yards.

#### IMPRESSIONS

I've never seen a simpler or stronger design anywhere in the gun industry. A detailed strip of the rifle is possible with an Allen wrench, a small hammer and a crescent wrench. The Russian roots are obvious from the rifle's simplicity, but the notoriously poor Russian accuracy is conspicuously absent. The design is so strong that I wouldn't

think twice about feeding the rifle a constant diet of ammo loaded to CIP max pressures of 68,000 psi. The action is also an experimental handloader's dream; it can take the beating without beating you.

Alexander Arms has done a great job designing a rifle that is incredibly fun to shoot, easy to maintain, will probably outlast its owner and is very accurate. If I had some land and a hog problem — or just loved shooting things that were far away — there isn't a better tool for the task. **GA**

#### Long-Yardage Glass

Recently, I had the opportunity to use Steiner's 5-25x56mm Military Scope over the course of a few days in New Mexico. Summertime temperatures in Albuquerque and Roswell soared, and a fine, talcum-like dust coated everything left outdoors, including the Steiner.

I like the 5-25X because having 20-something magnification works well for all stationary targets regardless of the distance. If I'm zeroing at 100, I can see the one-inch dots that I like to shoot for groups. Aiming at a small dot at 100 yards is the best way to shoot tight groups because the small target makes it almost impossible to have a wandering point of aim. Your crosshairs are either on the target or they're not.

If you're shooting out past 1,000 yards, the 20-plus magnification helps you see the target. Should there be too much mirage, humidity, or if the barrel is just too hot to allow you to see clearly, you can always dial back the magnification to sharpen the image.

The Steiner 5-25X I tested came with a first-focal-plane reticle that made it possible to mil accurately at any power. This was invaluable in the New Mexico heat when the scope never saw 25X. The MSR reticle that I tested worked very well for evaluating the Alexander Arms rifle while shooting steel at unknown



#### STEINER 5-25x56mm MILITARY SCOPE

objective size:	56mm
magnification:	5-25X
weight:	2.26 lbs.
tube diameter:	34mm
length:	16.8 in.
eye relief:	3.6 in.
msrp:	\$3,096

and the illuminated reticle adjusts with the turret on the left side of the scope. Just the center of the crosshairs illuminates, and the brightness level has 11 settings. The layout for parallax adjustment, illumination, windage and elevation is intuitive and easy to master.

After four days of abuse, the scope proved to be a robust, quality optic that worked well across a broad spectrum of scenarios. The MSR reticle is a great choice for a wide range of shooting styles. It is simple enough to be self-explanatory and precise enough for any application. The elevation and windage turrets return to zero after making multiple adjustments, are easy to read and stayed where I put them. With its simple operation, excellent glass and durability, the Steiner 5-25X scope is a great choice for long-range high shooting.

distances. The crosshair portion of the reticle subtends at each half mil, and there is a measuring aid in the scope that subtends down to a tenth of a mil. Measuring targets accurately was a snap with the MSR reticle.

The turrets adjust in tenth-mil increments,