

The Icon has a fluted barrel and laminated stock and has a minute of angle accuracy guarantee.



THE THOMPSON CENTER ICON PRECISION HUNTER – ACCURACY IS NOT AN ACCIDENT

Thompson Center (TC) has always been an innovator, getting its start in the gunmaking game when inventor Warren Center convinced the K W Thomson Tool Company to manufacture his innovative single shot Contender pistol in 1965.

KW Thomson was a leader in investment casting technology, and this was applied to the manufacture of the Contender, and to many of the firearms that have followed it. While the Contender was the foundation of the business, the company's move into muzzle loading rifles was another outstanding success, with its range of traditional 19th Century styled percussion muzzle loaders made with 20th Century materials and performance.

TC's entry into the centrefire rifle market with its single shot, break action, switch barrel guns did not set the market alight, although they found their niche and remain in production.

TC's first venture into the bolt action centrefire market is its Icon bolt action, again demonstrating the company's willingness to innovate. The Icon was first introduced about 2 years ago, and the latest variation to arrive, released in mid-2009, is the Icon Precision Hunter.

Frontier Arms advised of the first shipment of the new model a couple of weeks

before the GUNS deadline, so we arranged to get a sample and check it out in time for this issue.

The Icon Precision Hunter is designed as a long-range predator rifle and the configuration is well suited to target use here, for any long-range matches to which the rifle is suited (F Class NRA, etc) or Rifle Metallic Silhouette. The sample came in .308, which was at my request. Other chamberings include the .204 Ruger, .223 Remington, .22-250 Remington, .243 Winchester.

A lot of thought has gone into putting this style of rifle together. It has a fairly heavy profile fluted barrel that is free floated in the stock. The wide beavertail forend is vented with a series of holes down its centerline that match up with lateral grooves in the timber.

This setup is designed to facilitate cooling the barrel, allowing air to flow up through the holes and around the barrel channel, when the rifle fires fast enough to heat up the barrel – a common occurrence in target shooting.

The Icon stock is laminated and is definitely target oriented, with a fairly high

comb and reasonably steep pistol grip, combined with the broad, flat forend.

The Icon action utilizes a 3-lug front locking bolt, on a full diameter bolt body. This adds up to a short 60 degree bolt lift and slick bolt operation, although all actions of this type surrender some leverage to the two-lug actions with their 90 degree bolt lift.

The Icon action also features a Picatinny rail (Weaver) type integral scope mounting system on the receiver rings, allowing any Weaver-type mounts to be fitted. The advantage of the Picatinny system is that the multiple notches in the rail allow a fair bit of latitude in setting up the distance between the scope rings. This gets around the problem associated with many fixed position scope mounts on long action rifles that limit the positioning of the scope. Scopes with short tubes cannot be set far enough back to put them in the right position for the shooter's eye, as a result.

The Icon action is 21 cm long and is flat bottomed. It is integrated with another Icon feature – its Interlock Bedding System (IBS).



The Thompson Center Icon Precision Hunter is set up as a long-range varmint or competition rifle.

LEFT: Very simple and effective single shot adapter is supplied with the Icon that converts the magazine from 3 shots to 1 in a couple of seconds.

“The advantage of 5 groove rifling is that the lands are opposite the grooves so bullet deformation is minimised. The TC system also has a 65° angle on the edges of the lands rather than the 90° sharp corner typical of conventional rifling.”

The heart of this system is a precision machined aluminium plate that is embedded in the stock, to which the receiver mates to provide a rigid platform for mounting the barreled action to the woodwork.

The trigger is adjustable for weight via a very small set screw accessible through the rear of the receiver. A tool is supplied to make the adjustments. As received, the trigger had negligible creep and over-travel so only the weight adjustment should be required. I wound the adjuster out to drop the release weight to around 1500g.

The other feature of the Icon is its interchangeable bolt handle. The Precision Hunter comes with what is known as the tactical bolt handle and other standard and custom shop bolt configurations are available. The system used on the Icon is very similar to that used by Brno on its Brno Hornet of 1950's vintage.

The bolt handle is held in the bolt body by the pressure of the firing pin spring, with the forked root of the bolt fitting through a slot in the bolt body. A plastic cap is supplied that is used to de-cock the bolt and compress the spring sufficiently to allow the bolt handle to be pulled out. Once this is done, the firing pin assembly can be removed from the bolt body for lubrication and cleaning.

The Icons come with a 3-shot polymer box magazine that is released with a catch at the front of the magazine. A very good accessory supplied with the Precision Hunter is one of those 'why has than not been thought of before...' items – a single shot adapter that clips into the top of the magazine. This red plastic insert takes a couple of seconds to insert and remove and works very well when single-loading the rifle.



ABOVE: The Icon action has integrated Picatinny/Weaver scope mounting rails that allows plenty of latitude for ring spacing with any Weaver-type mounts. The Icon has a double safety system. The main lever locks the trigger while allowing the bolt to be operated. The smaller lever locks the bolt closed.

RIGHT: Factory test group – 0.65 MoA. All Icons are guaranteed to shoot MoA with appropriate ammunition.

The Icon action has a double safety system, with a safety lever on the right-rear of the action that allows the bolt to be operated with the safety 'On', and a second smaller safety catch just in front of the main one that locks the bolt closed if required.

Icon rifles are MOA certified and each gun is supplied with a test target. The Precision Hunter's target had a 3-shot group measuring 0.65 MOA and the Precision Hunter models are fitted with a match grade fluted barrel and TC's 5R Rifling system.

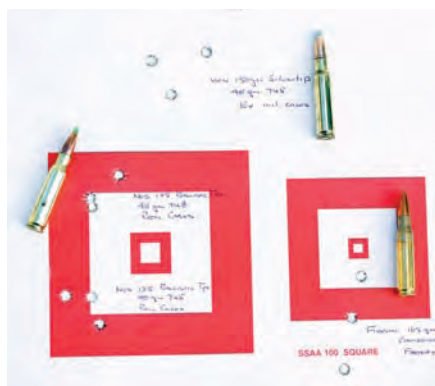
Amazingly enough for a US company, TC credits the development of 5R rifling to the Russians. It is a 5 groove rifling system where most conventional rifling has 6 grooves. Coincidentally, Thompson Center was purchased



Bolt handle removed. This is the 'tactical' handle. Other styles of bolt handles can be fitted as required.



The polymer magazine is detachable. Scope is a Bushnell Elite 6500 2.5-16x50.



ABOVE: Two 3-shot groups shot with non-tuned handloads – both around MOA or better.

ABOVE RIGHT: The Icon trigger is pre-set at the factory for minimum creep and backlash. Trigger pull is adjustable through the rear of the receiver with a tool supplied.



RIGHT: The Icon 3 lug bolt shortens the bolt lift to 60 degrees. The sliding claw extractor and plunger ejector do not limit the bearing area of the locking lugs.



by Smith & Wesson in 2007 and S&W revolvers have always used 5-groove rifling in their larger calibre centrefire revolvers, unlike most other handgun manufacturers.

The advantage of 5 groove rifling is that the lands are opposite the grooves so bullet deformation is minimised. The TC system also has a 65° angle on the edges of the lands rather than the 90° sharp corner typical of conventional rifling. This is claimed to produce less bullet upset and fouling, and facilitates cleaning.

A Bushnell Elite 6500 2.5-16x50 scope was fitted to the Icon to do the shooting tests. The Elite is a top class scope that has been reviewed elsewhere in this issue, and one that was able to do justice to the performance potential of the Icon.

Because of the limited time available, no load development was done. Instead, two factory loads (Fiocchi 150 gn and 180 gn SST) were used along with two of my proven handloads using 125 gn Nosler Ballistic Tips and 150 gn Winchester Silvertips, powered by 48.0

and 46.0 gn Winchester 748 respectively.

While the Fiocchi factory loads are very well made and use top grade Hornady and Sierra projectiles, they have not delivered their potential in a number of .308 rifles in which we have tested them. Ed Ward flagged this up in the last issue of GUNS (Oct-Dec 09) with their main issue being the seating depth of the bullets.

The 150gn Fiocchi loads could not deliver MOA performance, with groups around the 30-40 mm mark at 100 m. The 180 gn Fiocchi's proved unusable, largely because these bullets are very long and the rifling twist in the Icon was too slow to stabilise them and it was hard to keep them in the paper at 100 m, let alone shoot a group.

Both handloads shot MOA or a little better. This was a little surprising with the Winchester 150 gn Silvertip loads, as they are my expendable pig hunting loads, using Bredan primed ex-military .308 brass from various sources, purchased from a scrap merchant.

The 125 gn Nosler loads have proved a

SPECS

THOMPSON CENTER ICON PRECISION HUNTER

Calibre

308 Winchester.
(Also available in .204 Ruger, .223 Remington, .22-250 Remington, .243 Winchester.)

Action

3 lug bolt with 60° bolt lift and interchangeable bolt handles.

Barrel length

55 cm fluted

Magazine

Removable box – 3 rounds.

Weight

4.0 kg

Stock

Laminated timber –
Length of pull 35 cm

Rifling

5 groove TC 5R system.

Distributor

Frontier Arms, Adelaide

Ph: 08 8373 2855

RRP

App. \$2800 but may vary depending on exchange rate.

great .308 combination, and leave the barrel at over 3000 feet per second. This gives the .308 a trajectory not far behind that of a .270 Winchester with similar weight bullets, and in lighter .308 rifles, the recoil appears to be noticeably more comfortable than that experienced with the 150 grain loads. I am sure very good accuracy can be extracted from this rifle with properly sized cases, with precisely seated match projectiles and a tuned powder load.

The Icon Precision Hunter is a comfortable gun to shoot as it is fairly heavy. The bare rifle weighs 4.0 kg, and with the scope and mounts, total weight is around 4.6 kg, which is just over 20lb in the old money. While it is weighty, it is still a compact rifle that handles easily off the shoulder. The barrel is 55cm long, and the stock's length of pull is 35 cm and with the 55 mm forend, the Icon handles like a lighter rifle, although I am sure you would know how much it weighs if you had to lug it around the bush for a few days.

The Icon Precision Hunter proves that accuracy is not an accident. It has an RRP of around \$2800 and should offer a level of performance that will satisfy the needs of any long-range shooters whose targets are either fur, paper or steel. 