

# BUDGET SHOTGUNS

**Need a shotgun but hampered by a small budget? Here are 11 models, performance tips & one often-overlooked alternative.**

by **PHIL BOURJAILY** .....

Several years ago I was invited to hunt at one of the most famous timber holes in Arkansas, a place owned by a wealthy man. His “duck camp” was a colonnaded mansion with nine bedrooms and baths. In the gun rack, Frank’s Holland and Holland double rifle and \$100,000 Fabbri live pigeon gun sat next to the duck gun he took to the flooded woods every morning ... a Remington 870 pump.

All a waterfowl gun has to do is shoot three times reliably, and we are lucky to have several reliable budget guns to choose among. Despite what ads and your Beretta- and Benelli-shooting friends tell you, you don’t have to spend \$1,800 on the latest, greatest waterfowl gun to kill ducks and geese. There are plenty of good new and used duck guns around to fit almost any budget, especially if you keep in mind that you don’t need a camo finish or a 3½-inch chamber, both of which add to the price of a gun without much increase in performance.

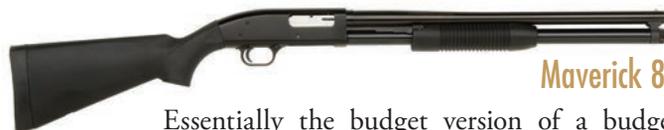
While you don’t have to spend a lot on a gun, you should buy the best gun you can afford, and maybe stretch your budget a little. Of all your duck hunting gear, your gun will last the longest. Your kids won’t inherit your waders, but their children will hunt with your shotgun.

## HERE ARE A FEW PUMPS AND SEMIAUTOS TO CONSIDER:



**Stevens 320**

Pump guns don’t come any cheaper than the Stevens 320. It’s Chinese-made and patterned after the Model 1300 Winchester. The one I shot last fall was slick-stroking and trouble-free through 500 rounds of target loads and half a dozen 3-inch loads on a goose hunt. That’s not a torture test, but it’s something. It does have a very squishy trigger pull, for those who notice such things. Cheap guns are a roll of the dice, but if you come up snake eyes here, you’re only out \$200. In 3-inch 12 and 20, with compact versions available. Starting at \$238.



**Maverick 88**

Essentially the budget version of a budget gun, the 88 is a Mossberg 500 with parts made in Mexico and assembled just across the border in Texas. It has a black synthetic stock and a ring-tailed forend, and it’s identical to the 500 in all but one important way: The left-hand-friendly top safety of the 500 has been replaced by a non-reversible right handed cross bolt. That doesn’t matter to 85 percent of you, but those of us who shoot left-handed will have to move up to a Model 500. \$293.



**Winchester SXP Black Shadow**

Winchester’s Super X Pump is a Turkish-made, redesigned version of the old 1300. I have seen a lot of rounds go through the trap version of this gun with no problems whatsoever. There is not a slicker pump action made than the SXP, which often seems to pump itself. It has a front-of-the-trigger guard safety in the Winchester tradition. It comes with as good a recoil pad as you will find on an inexpensive gun, which is a good thing given its light weight. It comes in 3-inch 12 and 20 plus a compact 20 for just \$379. Masochists can pay \$429 for a 3½-inch version, but all that gets you is more pain when you set it off.



**Mossberg Model 500**

Introduced in 1961 and produced by the millions ever since, the Model 500 is proof that a gun doesn’t have to be expensive to be reliable. The 500’s alloy receiver makes it a light gun, which some find desirable, but it’s not always the best trait in gun that shoots heavy loads. As I mentioned, it has a top safety preferred by left-handers and double gun shooters. Infinite numbers of accessories are available for the Model 500 as well. In 12 and 20 gauges, with compact 20s available. \$419. A “stretch” version, Model 535, takes 3½-inch shells for \$444.



**Remington 870 Express**

The 870 Express is the lower-cost version of Remington’s great 870 Wingmaster, a gun that has set the standard for affordable pump gun performance since 1950. The 870 is trusted as the pump gun that always works. The Express version is the exact same gun, but with a lower level of finish. While Express quality has slipped in recent years,

the company has recently taken steps to improve production, and the new guns should live up to the 870's reputation. In 3-inch 12 and 20, with compact 20s available starting at \$417. 3½-inch Super Magnum Express sells for \$469.



### Benelli Nova and SuperNova

Benelli's space-age styled Nova pump has a unique one-piece polymer stock and receiver and a rotary bolt that makes it one of the slickest of pumps to shoot. A Nova was my main waterfowl gun for a few years and I was very fond of it. At 8 pounds and with the option of a stock-mounted recoil reducer, this is the budget gun I'd choose if I want to shoot lots of 3½-inch shells. A couple of drawbacks: it has a tiny safety button mounted at the front of the trigger guard where it may be hard for shorter fingers to reach. Also the trigger on every Nova I've ever seen has been set at 8 to 9 pounds. That doesn't bother me because I am too insensitive to notice heavy trigger pulls, but it may bother you.

The upgraded version of the Nova is called the SuperNova, and it adds some worthwhile features for an extra \$100: an enlarged safety and trigger guard; shims to adjust drop and cast dimensions and a recoil reducing ComforTech Stock.

Nova: In 3½-inch 12 and 3-inch 20, with compact versions available. \$449. SuperNova: 3-½ inch 12 gauge only, \$549.



### Tristar Viper G2

Tristar's G2 is the least-expensive gas gun I'm aware of. I've only put about 50 rounds through Tristars, so I can't vouch for them first-hand, but the guns are made by the same Turkish company that makes Weatherby's very good SA-08. One thing I do know is that the magazine plug is easy to lose – bad feature in a waterfowl gun – because it is held in place only by the magazine cap. It's a lightweight gun, at a shade under 7 pounds in 12 gauge and around 6 in 20. \$535.



### Weatherby SA-08

The SA-08 is a light and slender gas gun that works very well, and I have never heard a bad word about it from anybody who owns one. It comes with two pistons, one to help it cycle heavy loads, and one for light loads so you have to switch pistons between dove season and duck season,

which takes all of thirty seconds. In 3-inch 12 and 20 with a compact version available. \$649



### Mossberg 930

The 930 is a great deal in a low-priced gas gun and I'd take it over the Viper or the Weatherby. It's heftier, which I like in a waterfowl gun, and it has the top safety that I, as a left-hander, prefer. And it works. The 930 has a good reputation for reliability and soft recoil. I shot its big brother, the 3½-inch 935, a fair amount and never had trouble with it. It also comes with a shim kit allowing you to alter stock dimensions for a better fit. \$560



Remington's 11-87 was a huge deal when it was introduced 30 years ago as the first major semiauto to shoot 2¾- and 3-inch loads without adjustment. That's old news now, but the 11-87 is still a great gun. It's one of the softest-shooting semiautos around, both due to its gas system and its 8-pound weight. It has a definite weight-forward balance that feels awkward right up until you point it at a duck, when you find out it points surely and swings smoothly. You will have to clean your 11-87 more often than your friends have to clean their B-Guns (Browning, Benelli, Beretta), but that's about the end of its shortcomings. \$704 in 12, 20 and 20 gauge compact.



### Beretta A300 Outlander

At \$800, the Outlander is a reach for hunters on a budget, but it's worth it. Based on Beretta's last generation semiauto, the great 391, the A300 compares favorably to guns selling for hundreds more. It's reliable, soft-shooting, and it can go practically forever without cleaning. As a bonus, the stock spacers allow you to shorten the length of pull so it can be shortened for smaller shooters. Like other Berettas, it does have a safety at the front of the trigger guard, so make sure you can reach it before you buy. The only reason I don't own one of these is because I have its predecessor, the 3901.

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Used shotguns can be an excellent option for the budget-conscious shooter. Businesses like J&G Gunsmithing in Granite Bay, outside of Sacramento, carry a wide variety of used guns. PHOTO BY HOLLY A. HEYSER



## BEST PERFORMANCE FROM CHEAP GUNS

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Having said your cheap gun doesn't need a camo finish, I should add that you will need to keep it cleaner to prevent exposed steel parts from rusting and be sure to check the finish as soon as you get home, especially if you use an airtight floating gun case. Likewise, inexpensive semiautos often cost less because they use older designs, so they may need to be kept cleaner on the inside to keep them running smoothly.

Feed your budget gun good ammunition to keep it cycling happily. Often, it seems, cheap guns and cheap shells make a poor combination, and that's especially true of inexpensive dove and target loads you'll be shooting before duck season.

Finally, many inexpensive guns feature older, shorter choke tubes like Winchokes and RemChokes. Often, replacing those shorter tubes with extended aftermarket tubes results in improved pattern performance by 5 to 20 percent. You don't need a whole set of tubes. One \$50 extended tube in light modified covers all but long-range pass shooting.



## USED GUNS

My own accumulation of waterfowl guns consists entirely of pumps and autos that cost me between \$300 and \$600. I bought only one new, because buying used is the best way to stretch your gun dollars. You let someone else take a big depreciation hit on a perfectly good gun before you snap it up.

Some people assume all used guns are shot out, or are lemons. Not true. People get rid of guns for all kinds of reasons: They trade up; they need money; they quit hunting. There are some great bargains to be found. However, you want to protect yourself, and buy smart.

Do your shopping only at a store that stands behind every gun it sells. Don't be afraid to haggle a little. You're in a stronger position if the gun has been sitting unsold for months. The store wants to turn it over. Likewise, if there is something that needs fixing, adjust your offer accordingly. I recently pointed out a dented rib on a gun I wanted to buy and got \$50 off the price and then I straightened the rib myself.

## LOOK OVER THE FOLLOWING:

**Barrels:** Look inside and out for dents and bulges, which are immediate deal breakers. If the barrel is dirty, ask for it to be cleaned out, then look for pitting in the bore and chamber, which is rarely a problem with modern guns, but look anyway. Check the rib for dents.

**Choke tubes:** Make sure they come out. Tubes rusted in place cost a couple hundred dollars to remove.

**Magazine caps, stock screws:** While you're at it, be sure screws and caps aren't rusted on either.

**Pump Action:** A stiff pump stroke can mean bent action bars.

**Safety:** Make sure it works. Also, most guns can be switched to left-handed but some require new parts or even new trigger groups to do so, which will add to the cost.

**Screws:** Mangled screw slots mean an amateur took the gun apart and did who-knows-what to it.

**Semiauto parts:** Make sure a semiauto has all its rings and gas system parts and that they are clean and correctly set. If a gun has been shot a lot with parts in the wrong place, it can be prematurely worn.

**Synthetic stocks:** Synthetic stocks leak. Pull off the pad and make sure the stock bolt and action spring tube of semiautos are clean and rust-free.

**Stocks:** Check the length of pull to be sure the gun hasn't been shortened (or that it has, if that's what you're looking for).

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SHOTGUN PORTING

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