

Double Rifles – A swift, sure second shot!

Until the 1970's the words "double rifle" conjured up images, in the English speaking world, of intrepid hunters in Africa and India facing a charging elephant with a double barreled firearm, sporting a double barreled name such as Holland & Holland or Westley Richards.

Such firearms were chambered for impressive cartridges with impressive names such as 470 Nitro Express, 475 No.2 Nitro Express etc. The cost of these weapons was equally impressive, on a par with the average family home.

This was not the case in Europe where double rifles were, and still are, much more prolific. Indeed they are almost as common as bolt actions in the hunting fields of Germany. Such rifles are chambered for all manner of cartridges from the diminutive 5.6mm (.22 calibre) through to the ubiquitous 9.3 x 74R. The German manufacturers also produce the majority of double rifles chambered for the classic African cartridges made today.

Since the early 1980's an ever increasing number of new, continental made, double rifles have been finding their way to Australia. Initially it was Browning, Beretta, Zoli and Winchester, through their Japanese manufactured model 101, that were most likely to be encountered. Whilst few Brownings are seen today and Winchester's offering was dropped in the 1980's, new names have emerged to join Beretta in the market. Pedersoli, Fabarm, Merkel, Baikal, Zoli and Capuis doubles are all on offer from time to time. More importantly most of these arms are chambered for cartridges such as .308, 30.06, 7x 65R, 8 x 57R, 9.3 x74R and 45-70. These cartridges are suitable for the majority of big game found in Australia.



***A selection of lightweight, reasonably priced double rifles available today. (From top to bottom.)
Beretta Silver Sable, Fabarm Asper, Pedersoli Kodiak IV and Baikal IXH-94.***

Does the double rifle posses advantages over more conventional repeating rifles? Are there drawbacks with this action type?

In the course of my hunting career I have owned a number of double rifles chambered for a variety of cartridges including two chambered for the 470NE, several in 9.3 x 74R and a 375H&H and 30.06. Before I parted with my 470 William Douglass, it traveled almost everywhere with me accounting for sambar in the Victorian Alps to buffalo in the NT and all matter of game from warthog to elephant in Africa. In that time it never let me down and I never had cause to wish I had been carrying a scoped bolt action.



Deluxe grade William Douglass 470NE with accessories: Manufactured through the 1990's WD were the first London Gunmakers to utilize CNC engineering and modern steels. The result was a strong, lightweight (4.4kg) and excellent handling dangerous game rifle – at a bargain price for a London built gun, \$20,000!

However the focus of this article is not double rifles chambered for the mighty African cartridges, we all know they have their place in dangerous game hunting, but rather doubles chambered for the medium cartridges and their application in Australia. With the universal ban on automatic long arms imposed in 1996, the double barreled shotgun and rifle are the only hunting firearms still available to Australian hunters that can provide an instant follow up shot. This factor alone makes them a very attractive choice for hunting large game, particularly sambar, where a fast follow up shot can mean the difference between meat on the table or a wasted weekend in the hills.

In addition most light double rifles, built for medium cartridges, particularly those from Beretta, possess far better balance and pointability than any bolt action rifle. Most are of over and under configuration, well balanced and sweet handling, weighing less than 3.5kg. The result is a quicker attainment of the target, in particular fast moving targets, and a surer, more accurate shot.

My Beretta, in 9.3 x 74R, has accounted for over 20 sambar through the years and I have never lost an animal of any description from rabbits to buffalo when I have been using it. Its sweet handling is the major factor in this success rate.



Sambar stag taken with a Beretta 689 Express chambered in 9.3x74R. This rifle and cartridge combination is the perfect firearm for sambar stalking.

This brings us to the accuracy or alleged lack of accuracy of double rifles. Much has been written about the difficulty in achieving the same point of impact from both barrels of double rifles. There can be no disputing the fact that a poorly built double rifle can be an expensive nightmare to regulate. The barrels on double rifles are generally aligned to place the bullets from each barrel at approximately the same point of impact at 50 meters.

Anything under 10 cm apart or less is acceptable accuracy for hunting big game.

To achieve this feat they need to be test fired and, if necessary, the barrels realigned and tested again until they do so. Most new double rifles come complete with an impressive target showing a combined group from two barrels of well under 5 cm at 50 meters and the ammunition used to achieve this feat. A fair proportion of new double rifles fail to duplicate this result in the hands of their new owners, even with the same ammunition, regardless of their price! One can generally reduce the divergence through trial and error using slower or faster loads and heavier and lighter bullets. Indeed a very well regulated double, after a little tinkering, can often achieve groups sizes under 2 cm at 50 meters from two barrels! However this is the exception rather than the rule.

At the end of the day if, after your best efforts, the bullets from your double are still crossing or diverging much more than 10 cm apart at 50 meters there is not short fix. You will have to live with the situation or the barrels will need to be sweated apart from the rib and adjusted by trail and error, an expensive and time consuming task.

If the rifle is fitted with a scope you will be sighting it in for the first barrel you fire.

It is the accuracy achieved from this barrel that is of more importance than the distance between each barrel's point of impact. This is what you will be taking your first and hopefully, killing, shot with.

Generally I find that individual barrels from double rifles shoot very accurately. Around minute of angle has been the rule rather than the exception from the six doubles I have owned. I put this down to the greater stiffness the two joined barrels provide as well as the greater capacity for heat dissipation compared to single barreled rifles.

Harking back to the aforementioned Beretta, it has never achieved a composite group better than 6cm or worse than 10cm at 50 meters regardless of the loads used. However it will consistently put three shots from each barrel inside 4cm at 100 meters.

In addition it seems unconcerned by the load or ammunition used showing similar levels of accuracy with 258gr, 270gr, 285gr, 286gr, 293gr and 320gr bullets.

My conclusions? Doubles can shoot as accurately as a bolt gun out of the box or they can provide an expensive nightmare to fix. With this in mind it is imperative that secondhand buyers request a test firing prior to parting with their money. With respect to new doubles the failure of the firearm to shoot in a similar manner to the target supplied, if there is one, when using the same ammunition will constitute a valid warranty claim. However be prepared to wait up to a year for the fault to be rectified.

The next consideration in choosing a double rifle is cartridge selection. Doubles share the same break open action as shotguns. This means they do not possess a strong extraction system enjoyed by bolt actions. Cartridges have to be lifted out of their chambers by the act of opening the action and the ejectors, if fitted, come into play once the cartridges have been initially lifted. In this situation rimless cartridges such as 30.06 and 375H&H Belted Magnum pose problems, requiring tiny spring mounted lifters to engage the groove in the case head. There has never been a successful ejector system developed for doubles to handle such cases. The result is fiddly hand extraction of the fired cases giving no chance of a quick third and fourth shot. A double chambered for a rimless cartridge is essentially a two shot semi auto and not suitable for use against dangerous game without back up. However the two instant shots still make it a better choice than a bolt or lever rifle for sambar hunting.

Rimmed cartridges such as the 7 x 65R, 9.3 x 74R, 30-30 and 45-70 are a much better choice. All of these cartridges operate at low pressures and have effective rims to provide reliable extraction/ejection and the opportunity to quickly reload.

The final factor in considering a double rifle is cost! In the past they have invariably been far more expensive than a bolt action. In general they still are with Beretta's Silver Sable in 9.3 or 30.06 retailing for just under \$5000 and Fabarm's equivalent coming in at just under \$4000.

For those who like something a little different, the very well made Pedersoli reproduction Kodiak hammer rifle is available for around \$4900 in 45-70, 9.3 x 74R and 8 x 57R, all excellent cartridge choices. I have used one and they handle well with the exposed hammers providing a positive, visual safety.

There were also a few Remington branded, Italian made doubles in the market around the \$3500 mark in the recent past. However the rifle that has completely turned the debate is the Baikal IZH-94 double rifle.

A number were imported in 2005 and retailed for under \$1000, less than most mass produced bolt guns. I purchased one in 30.06 although they are chambered for the much more useful 9.3 x 74R none have found their way to Australia as yet. Mine cost \$850 and is, as you might expect from the price and its Eastern Block manufacture, agricultural in construction and appearance. However it possesses one unique feature that sets it apart from the pack. By the simple means of turning a knurled nut the owner can increase the tension between the two floating barrels to bring the point of impact together or release it to eliminate crossing of the impact points. Sounds straightforward, however my example possessed a turn screw that was too long to allow me to reduce the barrel tension sufficiently to eliminate crossing and required some work with a hacksaw and file before I had it working properly. As the accompanying photo illustrates it now shoots minute of angle groups, from two different barrels! That's something I have never been able to achieve from my Remington 700 in 30.06, and I have an instant second shot! Whether it will hold these impact points after repeated use only time will tell.



Who said double rifles are inaccurate? The final four groups shot to sight in & regulate my Baikal 30.06 double. MOA accuracy was achieved from TWO barrels; most bolt action rifles will struggle to duplicate this!

Another criticism of doubles is the relative weakness of a break open action and consequent wear after limited use. This was valid in the past when metallurgy was far inferior to today's steels and hand finishing far less precise than CNC engineering.

Over the 16 years I have owned my Beretta I have put over 1000 full power 9.3 x 74R rounds through it plus a similar number of 20gauge shells, using the smoothbore barrels I purchased with it, there is no sign of wear. Beretta's brilliant 680 series boxlock is the strongest action design around but I see no reason why the Fabarm and Pedersoli offerings should not be similarly sound. This applies to any modern over & under action, a design that is inherently far stronger than an SxS configuration.



Author's custom Beretta in 9.3 x 74R topped with a Zeiss Scope on QD claw mounts with interchangeable 20 gauge / 3 inch Mag. Barrels. The ultimate one gun fits all! There is nothing, from the diminutive stubble quail to the mighty African elephant, that this combination cannot handle!

The current availability of a range of reasonably priced, lightweight, high quality double rifles from Italy provides shooters with a functionally superior choice to bolt action, pump and lever action rifles for hunting big game in Australia.

From over 40 years experience hunting on three continents with bolt, lever, single shot and double rifles I have found that a good quality, well regulated, double rifle is superior to all other action types for hunting big game and dangerous game when shots are most often taken well inside a range of 100 meters. From my experience this covers 90% of big game hunting in Australia.

Barry Jones