

THOMPSON/ CENTRE ENCORE PRO- HUNTER .243

Thompson/Center's Encore Pro-Hunter is a new version of the company's rugged design which extends the power of break-open single-shot rifles. There's no hype - it's all top performance.

T/C's Encore Pro-Hunter with 711mm barrel actually has a shorter overall length than Nick's Winchester Modelk 70 .300 WSM with 610mm barrel.

THOMPSON/CENTER HAS DONE well in recent years with its stylish new Icon and Venture bolt actions which complemented its extensive range of single-shot handguns, rifles and muzzle loaders. But what really made the company's reputation was its multi-gun Encore system which offers interchangeable centrefire, slug gun and pistol barrels. The latest addition to the Encore line is the Pro-Hunter which boasts a long 711mm fluted stainless barrel.

My test gun was chambered in .243 Winchester which suggested some interesting possibilities with regard to the muzzle velocities obtainable from such a long barrel. While the single-shot rifle may not be the preferred action type with many sportsmen, it does offer some advantages over other action types and the T/C design enjoys no small degree of popularity with hunters and shooters. The Ruger, Browning and Dakota actions are built on falling block actions, but the T/C's tip-up or break-open action is strong enough to handle high-intensity cartridges.

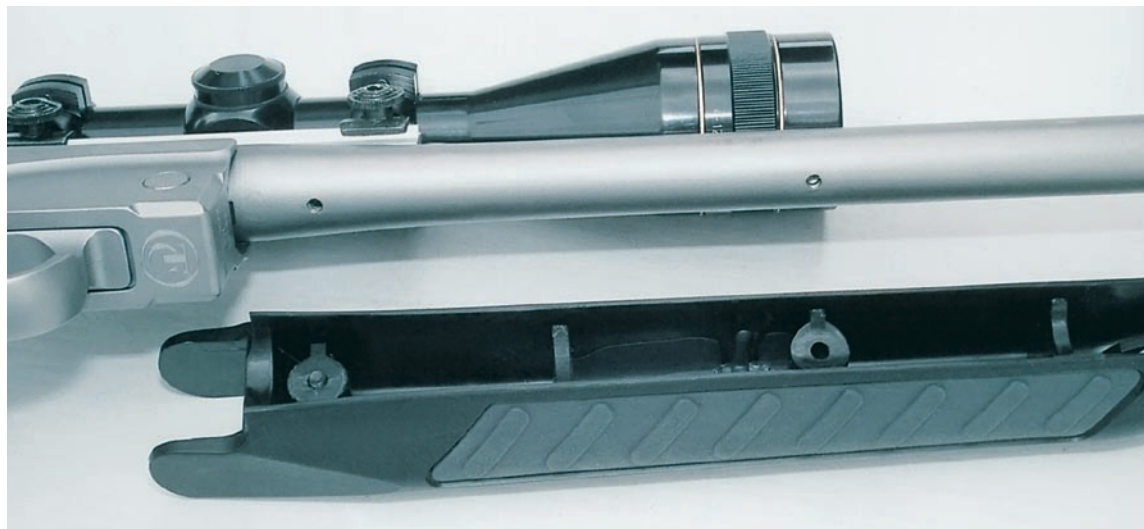
Despite its shortcomings, the T/C Pro-Hunter has a lot going for it as a hunting rifle. For one, it is easy to fit with a scope sight. The barrel is drilled and tapped to take T/C's own Weaver-style one-piece base. Unlike other types of rifles that are restricted in the cartridge lengths they can handle by the length of their receiver or magazine box, the Encore can handle cartridges of extreme length. The Pro-Hunter for example, is available in chamberings as short as the .22 Hornet and as long as the .416 Rigby. It is available chambered for most popular rimless cartridges and belted magnums.



Test Report

RIGHT: The forearm is held on with two screws that thread into the underside of the barrel which is not free-floating.

BELOW: Hammer spur has a side extension which makes it easier for the shooter to cock the gun without fouling the eyepiece of a low-mounted scope.



The Pro-Hunter is also easy to carry due to a narrow width at the balance point where hunting rifles are commonly carried with one hand in the field. In fact, the only rifles that are as well-suited for a one-hand carry as the T/C are leverguns like the various Marlins, the Mossberg 464, Rossi 92 and Rio Grande.

Because of the shortness of its action, the T/C single-shot can be equipped with a very long barrel without its overall length becoming too cumbersome for carrying afield. This gives it an edge over other action types. The test gun in .243 with its 711mm barrel spans 1080mm in length. By comparison, my FN Mauser bolt gun with a 610mm barrel in .240 Weatherby Magnum is exactly 40mm longer. It appears to me that the Pro-Hunter could wear a 762mm barrel without exceeding the overall length of a bolt gun with a 650mm barrel. And since the velocities of most cartridges, especially those with an extremely low expansion ratio, are increased as the barrel length is increased, choosing a single-shot rifle makes a lot of sense for the simonpure trophy hunter for whom downrange performance is of more importance than firepower.

If both action types were chambered for the .243 Winchester cartridge, most loads would likely produce anywhere from 100 to 150 fps higher velocity in the T/C rifle due to its longer barrel. Thus it would deliver as much energy at 150 metres as the bolt gun would at the muzzle!

The T/C break-open action is also one of the more foolproof designs simply because it is either loaded or unloaded with no other condition possible between the two. In other words the chamber either contains a loaded round or it doesn't, and the rifle has no magazine in which additional rounds might be overlooked by the user. It is for this reason that I believe that a G2 Contender Carbine with 584mm barrel would make an ideal first firearm for a youngster. Now T/C has made an extremely versatile gun even more so by offering a Bantam stock with a 12mm shorter length of pull. Of course replacing the short buttstock with another of standard length at a later date would transform the carbine into a handy length for grownups. Another plus is that this single-shot makes a viable choice for hunters who prefer a compact rifle.

The Encore's break-open mechanism was beefed-up to handle high-intensity cartridges by giving it greater mass and strength and several refinements of design in comparison to the original Contender handgun action. The frame is dimensionally larger being about 12.7mm longer and 5mm higher overall, 3.3mm wider across the reinforcing bosses that arc along the frames upper sides, while the hinge pin has a diameter of 11mm against 9.5mm furnishing approx. 25 percent more mass. The Encore's barrel lug is also considerably heavier than the Contender's and is 8.38mm longer, with 3mm greater width and 6.35mm more depth. As well, Encore barrels measure just barely under 25.4mm at the chamber compared to a diameter of only 20mm for the Contender barrels.

In addition to having more massive construction overall, the Encore's trigger guard is smaller because its only function is to unlock the barrel, whereas the Contender's trigger guard also activates an internal safety and resets the sear. There's no switchable centrefire/rimfire firing pin in the Encore's hammer, since the Encore is centrefire only. And it has a lower

Test Report

RIGHT: Buttstock has a high monte-carlo comb and is recessed to allow the hand to slide easily through the thumbhole. Limb Saver recoil pad deadens the kick of heavy calibres.

BELOW: Encore Pro-Hunter was tested with a variety of premium-grade factory ammo to discover its true potential.



profile and offset spur which make it easier to cock under the eyepiece of a scope.

Barrel/frame lock-up of the Encore is effected by a heavy-duty, spring-loaded steel locking block that slides in a slot in the rear of the barrel underlug. When locked the lug protrudes and hooks a shelf in the receiver below the breech, and the block is tapered to ensure the barrel/frame lock-up remains tight as it wears over thousands of open/close cycles. The breech face has a hard steel insert which acts as a recoil plate and firing pin bushing.

To open the Pro-Hunter's action you simply pull the spur on the trigger guard upward to the area which, pushes the locking block forward against the tension of its stiff operating spring, which clears it from its shelf in the receiver, and eliminates all resistance to unlocking the breech. A .250" claw extractor at the bottom of the chamber mouth automatically lifts cartridges free of the chamber as the action opens.

The Encore has no external manual safety and instead features a rear-projecting tab on the sear that securely blocks the hammer from contacting the firing pin when at rest. When the hammer is cocked the tab remains positioned to prevent the hammer from impinging the firing pin until the trigger is pressed fully to the rear and rotates the sear out of the hammer's path. Plus there's a safety interlock that stops the breech from opening when the hammer is cocked and prevents the hammer from cocking when the gun is open. So you can't open the breech to load the gun with the hammer already cocked. You can however, re-cock the Encore hammer by simply pulling it back again, without breaking (opening) the action.

Interchanging barrels on the Encore Pro-Hunter is as easy as falling off a log. Simply remove a pair of screws and lift off the forearm, break the action to take the tension off the hinge pin, tap the pin out gently with a brass punch and lift out the barrel. Install the new one and re-assemble.

Encore shooters are offered a choice of either blued chrome-moly or stainless steel. You can purchase a complete gun and as many spare barrels as you like, making the Encore Pro-Hunter truly a gun for all reasons and all seasons. On the rifle side, there's a Katahdin

PRO HUNTER .243 PERFORMANCE RESULTS

Ammunition	Velocity (fps)	Group Size inches		
		Smallest	Largest	Average
FACTORY AMMO				
Win. Supreme 55gn BST	3912	.760	1.10	.985
Federal 95gn Fusion	2919	.875	1.35	1.20
Superformance 95gn SST	3198	.950	1.15	1.00
Barnes Vortex 80gn TTSX	3496	1.00	1.20	1.10
HANDLOADS				
58gn V-Max 43gn 2208	3730	.750	.990	.870
65gn V-Max 41gn AR2208	3623	.685	1.00	.800

Accuracy taken as the average of four 5-shot groups at 100 metres. The first three shots were always close together, but the fourth and fifth shots enlarged the groups to almost double. If judged by 3-shot groups, the Encore would just about be a 1/2- minute performer.

Test Report



LEFT: The first three shots always formed a tight group, but the last two shots went to a different impact point.

BELOW: Action is opened by pushing forward on the trigger spur. Breech opens widely for loading and removing fired cases.



SPECS

T/C PRO HUNTER

Manufacturer:

Thompson/Center

Model: Pro Hunter

Type: break-action, single-shot

Calibre: a wide range including .243 Win. (tested)

Barrel: length 711mm Fluted; 1:10 R/H twist

Overall length: 1080mm

Stock: black composite with thumbhole or standard grip

Length of pull: 373mm

Weight naked:

Sights: none, optional sight base for Weaver-type rings

Finish: satin stainless, black stock

Likely Price: \$1895.00

Trade enquiries:

Frontier Arms Co. Pty. Ltd, GPO Box 2317, Adelaide, S.A 5001.

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model with 500mm barrel and open sights in .45-70, .460 S&W, .500 S&W and PH 209x50. There's also a Pro-Hunter slug gun and pistol barrels with iron sights.

The Flex Tech thumbhole synthetic stock and forearm come in black or camo equipped with a functional Sims Limb Saver recoil pad. The buttstock has a comfortable grip with palm swell on the right side, a silver T/C logo on the grip cap, and a high Monte-Carlo cheekpiece. The forearm is flattened on the bottom and rubber inserts provide a secure grasp. Its 370mm length of pull suited me just fine in gaining a full field of view from the Leupold 4-12x Vari-X II scope I fitted in Tasco rings.

Scoped the outfit weighed a handy 3.5kgs. All things considered, the outfit was nicely balanced for offhand and held steady from prone for long range targets. The stainless action and barrel offer some advantages, such as resistance to corrosion, but doesn't offer appreciably longer wear. As far as the hunter is concerned, however, the T/C barrel will maintain its initial grouping ability longer due to the ease of getting a good finish on the rifling, which being non-porous is less prone to metal foul. Stainless is also less susceptible to pitting than a conventional steel barrel. If given reasonably good care by its owner, T/C's Pro Hunter should never warp, chip, break, split, rust or suffer from any of the other unfavourable conditions rifles made of wood and carbon steels can be plagued with.

The trigger pull on the T/C Pro Hunter was crisp, letting off at a consistent 2.27kgs, but actually felt a bit lighter. Whether this is significant depends on the shooter's intended use of the Pro Hunter. For varmint sniping I prefer a maximum weight of pull of no more than 1kg, but on a big-game rifle, I prefer a let-off no lighter than 1.36kgs. But since the trigger on the Pro Hunter is free of creep and overtravel, I was happy its 2.7kgs. The Swing Hammer can be positioned to suit right and lefthanders alike and at an outward angle for easy cocking under a scope.

I tested the Pro Hunter for accuracy with a variety of factory loads including Winchester Supreme 55gn Ballistic Silvertip and Federal 95gn Fusion. I also used the rifle to check the muzzle velocities of two brand new accelerated loads - Hornady Superformance 95gn SST and Barnes Vortex with 80gn Tipped TSX BT. Time didn't allow me to methodically work up specific handloads for the Pro Hunter, but I tried a couple of my favourite varmint recipes - the Hornady 58gn V-Max and 43gn of AR2208 and the 65gn V-Max and 41gn of AR2208. You can see the results of my shooting tests in the accompanying chart. In almost every instance the first three shots landed close together, but the last two shots went out to the left and a shade high nearly doubling the size of the groups. Evidently, this particular Encore Hunter was capable of producing a level of accuracy better than my data chart indicates - at least for 3-shot groups. But in any case it proved to be no slouch with different loads I tried. The barrel of the test gun was touching the forearm, but uniform contact was not maintained throughout its length. I have a hunch that if that tension was relieved, accuracy would be considerably improved.

Regardless of whether the barrel was cold or piping hot, the points of impact of all groups remained constant. Last but certainly not least in importance, even when I allowed the bore to become badly fouled prior to rewarding it with a thorough cleaning, accuracy did not deteriorate to any significant degree.

I learned long ago that when hunting in any type of field conditions except blue bird weather, you can't beat rust resistant metal and synthetic stocks. For this reason I can think of very few single-shots introduced during the last few years whose design and performance would suit the trophy hunter as well as T/C's Pro Hunter.

It's long barrel makes it an incredibly accurate long-range performer, giving it that extra bit of punch way out yonder, and it's ideal for hunters who go afield in all types of Weather conditions. ■