



**BENJAMIN**  
TRAIL NITRO PISTON 2



**BSA**  
GRT LIGHTNING  
XL SE



**DIANA**  
340 N-TEC CLASSIC



**WEIHRAUCH**  
HW 90K

# —SUPERTEST— NO HOT AIR, BUT PLENTY OF GAS

**Richard Saunders** tries out four gas-ram rifles, and finds they're a compelling alternative to springers

**L**ike all the best game show hosts, gas-ram rifles seem to have been around forever, and some of them are pretty good. Take, for example, rifles from Theoben, the Cambridgeshire-based company that kicked things off in 1982 when it patented its design for a whole new approach to break-barrel rifles.

Apparently inspired by the front suspension forks of a motorbike, Theoben came up with the idea of replacing the conventional spring with a sealed gas chamber. Cock a gas-ram and you'll compress gas rather than a spring. With the trigger pulled, the gas expands again, forcing a piston forward to push the air and pellet in front of it down the barrel.

Proponents of the technology will tell you that gas-rams are easier to maintain, lighter and, mechanically speaking at least, much quieter thanks to less metalwork flying around inside the action. They are generally regarded as smoother to cock and having a quicker lock-time – the time it takes for a pellet to leave the muzzle after the trigger has been pulled, which, in theory, makes them potentially more accurate.

Theoben married this breakthrough technology with high-quality wood and metalwork that would make you weak at the knees, catapulting its stylish Sirocco model in particular into airgunning folklore.

While stories about the Theoben name being reborn surface every now and then, it's been left to other manufacturers to pick up where the company left off as they realised they simply had to jump on the gas-ram bandwagon.

Today, while it's pretty safe to say they are still something of a niche product, most major manufacturers include at least one gas-ram rifle in their portfolio. In our group test this issue, we have guns from some of the biggest names in the game.

Weihrauch was one of the first manufacturers to realise that Theoben was onto a good thing, and it wasn't long before the two companies were courting each other. The result was the Weihrauch HW 90K, which is still going strong. Costing £460, it's the most expensive of the guns on test here.

From BSA we have the GRT Lightning XL SE, which retails at £319 and is one of three gas-ram offerings in its stable – the GRT Lightning SE and Supersport SE GRT being the others.

Benjamin is one of the biggest names in the game, and the Benjamin Trail Nitro Piston has been around for some time. Thanks to importer ASI Ltd, we have the second iteration of the rifle on test. Rounding out our rifles is the Diana 340 N-TEC Classic Beech, loaned to us by UK distributor Edgar Brothers.





£380

## BENJAMIN TRAIL NITRO PISTON 2

Smooth to shoot and as quiet as a PCP

**B**enjamin is one of the best-known names in airgunning and today is part of the vast Crosman empire. The brand has never shied away from a desire to do something different. Its Blue and Silver Streak pump-up

models belong in the airgun hall of fame, not least because they were at the forefront of the .20 calibre.

At 107cm long and just over four kilos, the Trail Nitro Piston 2 is a hairy chested beast of a gun. That weight is well-balanced

though, and the rifle sits comfortably in the shoulder, especially with the solid rubber pad. The ambidextrous pistol grip stock is nicely proportioned, and it's easy to locate the Center Point scope that's included in the price and mounted on a raised Picatinny rail.

Despite its proportions, the Benjamin is effortless to cock. The fully shrouded barrel needs just the slightest knock to break open, and shuts smoothly and quietly. The safety catch is a blade just ahead of the trigger – not my favourite set-up, but undeniably close to hand, though it's not automatic.

With the Benjamin pointed down the range, I was prepared for the kind of muzzle crack a

gun this size hints at. In fact, the Benjamin is by far the most quiet and undramatic to shoot of all the guns on test. The shrouded barrel, which incorporates a suppressor, reduces noise to almost PCP levels.

The lack of muzzle report tricks you into thinking the recoil is almost non-existent as well, and it's not until you stand back and watch someone else use the gun that you realise the kick is about on par with the other rifles.

The trigger is the Benjamin's Achilles' heel. The trigger guard is thick plastic and even on a gun with the Trail NP's proportions, it looks clunky. The trigger itself is adjustable, but still quite heavy, with a second stage that never quite seems to arrive.

### THE AIRGUN SHOOTER VERDICT

**"The light wood stock will not be to everyone's taste, although a black synthetic version is available. It's a delight to shoot, but you'll need to practise to get the most out of the rifle"**

OVERALL SCORE

87



RRP £319

## BSA GRT LIGHTNING XL SE

Stylish in the shoulder, this Lightning strikes hard

**I**f there's one thing the HW 90K (opposite) lacks as the spiritual successor to the Theoben Sirocco, it's the way it looks. In contrast, BSA's GRT Lightning XL SE is a seriously good-looking gun that reflects BSA's attention to detail. I liked

the fact that BSA uses Allen-headed stock bolts rather than screws, and that they're angled to be hidden from view.

The beech stock, which is stained to look like walnut, is one of the best I have seen on just about any rifle. It's beautifully

proportioned and helps keep the weight down to three kilos unscoped and an overall length of 95cm. In addition to stylish chequering panels on the pistol grip and forend, a subtle scoop that sweeps upwards from above the trigger adds to the looks and feels great in the hand. A raised cheekpiece, scalloped thumb-rest and perforated rubber shoulder pad ensure the GRT Lightning XL SE comes nicely to the shoulder.

The 37cm cold hammer-forged barrel features a fully shrouded silencer. Although it mutes the report well enough, there's still more of a crack compared with the HW 90K, although it is possible to add another silencer.

The two-stage adjustable trigger also falls a little short of

that on the German rifle, but is still an excellent design, although out of the box the second-stage travel was a little too long for me. The simple safety catch is well-positioned to the right of the trigger and clicks positively, but silently. It doesn't engage automatically when the barrel is swept down, but can be switched on and off regardless of whether the gun is cocked or not.

Cocking the Lightning XL SE takes a little effort, but is smooth and positive. The action retains the typical gas-ram 'thuddy' feel, but is a little snappier than that of the HW 90K and the recoil slightly harsher. That said, it was every bit as accurate, placing pellet on pellet on groups out to 30 metres.

### THE AIRGUN SHOOTER VERDICT

**"The GRT Lightning XL SE backs up its looks by being a really solid performer. Compact, well-made and handy, it will stand up against any break-barrel rifle, let alone other gas-rams"**

OVERALL SCORE

90



RRP £359

## DIANA 340 N-TEC CLASSIC

A slender and stylish offering to the goddess of hunting

**T**hese German rifles have lived somewhat under the shadow of Weihrauch in recent years, but the 340 N-TEC range promises to change all that.

This is the entry-level 340 N-TEC Classic Beech model. It's

a fraction shorter than the Benjamin Trail, and a little lighter at 3.9kg unscoped. However, thanks to the slim stock, it seems more delicate and refined.

Other models in the 340 N-TEC range are more aesthetically pleasing; the walnut stock on the



RRP £460

## WEIHRAUCH HW 90K

Refined over time, this stalwart gets ever stronger

**I**t didn't take Weihrauch long to seek out a collaboration with Theoben. A melding of English design with German engineering was an enticing prospect. The HW 90 didn't disappoint then, and has been improved over time.

Like most other Weihrauch guns, the HW 90K is fairly big and heavy, weighing in at four kilos unscoped and 114cm long. However, again like most HWs, the 90K is beautifully balanced and the dimensions are barely noticeable. The ambidextrous

Luxus models, which have sculpted sweeps on the butt and chequered fore-stock, are particularly beautiful and considerably lighter.

The rifle is unique among the test guns in that it comes with fibre-optic open sights, though many will choose to mount a scope on the raised dovetail rail. A ventilated shoulder pad also makes for a comfortable fit.

Despite a full-length 495mm barrel, the 340 N-TEC takes more effort than even the carbine models on test to cock. However, the process is smooth and the barrel closes firmly. Cocking also sets the automatic safety catch that is located perfectly within thumb reach at the back of the cylinder.

The trigger is fully adjustable and in terms of quality, is second only to the HW 90K with a definitive first-stage and a short, but predictable, second-stage let-off.

Unlike the other rifles on test, the Diana 340 N-TEC did not come with a silencer, although other models in the range do. As a consequence, the rifle has quite a bark, but in truth it's no louder than most other unsuppressed springers or gas-rams. That muzzle report also gives a sense of excessive recoil, though again, it's on a par with the other guns.

Groupings were good at 30 metres and even better at 20. The chrono showed it to be consistent, returning velocities in .177 calibre with Air Arms Diabolo pellets that equated to 11.64 ft-lb.

### THE AIRGUN SHOOTER VERDICT

**"The entry level model is an impressive bit of kit. Practise hard and the 340 N-TEC is capable of delivering tight groupings, thanks to a consistent action and an excellent trigger"**

OVERALL SCORE

88

beech stock is somewhat plain, with chequering on the pistol grip and a solid rubber shoulder pad providing the only relief.

Despite the carbine barrel, cocking the HW 90K is easy and automatically sets the safety catch, which is a button on the front of the trigger guard.

Opinion is divided over the merits of leaving a springer cocked for long periods of time, but the issue doesn't arise with a gas-ram and you can leave them cocked as long as you like. In fact, the HW 90K features a blade in front of the trigger guard so you can re-set the safety to take advantage of this fact.

Weihrauch's Rekord unit is the benchmark for most other air rifle triggers. The gold-coloured

Elite trigger is unique to the HW 90K and is every bit as adjustable, crisp and predictable as its illustrious counterpart.

On the range, the HW 90K's weight simply isn't a factor, and neither are its proportions. In fact, although they needed some help with cocking, even the youngsters who tried it found it easy to shoot and were able to hit tight groups at 30 metres. Recoil is barely noticeable. The action would put even the most tuned springers to shame; each shot is marked with a purposeful thud.

With the piston propelled by gas rather than a spring, you'd expect little noise and the HW 90K scores here as well: the Weihrauch tube on the rifle does an excellent job.

### THE AIRGUN SHOOTER VERDICT

**"With its refined action and the engineering and build quality we expect from Weihrauch, there's an argument for the HW 90K being the spiritual successor to the Theoben gas-rams of old"**

OVERALL SCORE

91





## KEY SPECS

NAME	BENJAMIN TRAIL NITRO PISTON 2	BSA GRT LIGHTNING XL SE	DIANA 340 N-TEC CLASSIC BEECH	WEIHRACH HW 90K
CONTACT	ASI Ltd www.a-s-i.co.uk info@a-s-i.co.uk 01728 688555	BSA Guns www.bsaguns.co.uk enquiries@bsaguns.co.uk	Edgar Brothers www.edgarbrothers.com 01625 613177	Hull Cartridge www.hullcartridge.co.uk 01482 342756
CALIBRE OPTIONS	.177, .22	.177, .22	.177, .22	.177, .20, .22, .25
RRP	£380	£319	£359	£460
LENGTH	107cm	95cm	106cm	114cm
POWER	11.3ft-lb	10.1ft-lb	11.64ft-lb	10.7ft-lb
WEIGHT (UN-SCOPED)	4kg	3kg	3.9kg	4kg
FPS VARIANCE (20 SHOTS)	13fps	9fps	11fps	12fps
SAFETY CATCH	Manual, resettable	Manual, resettable	Automatic, resettable	Automatic, resettable
TRIGGER	Adjustable two-stage	Adjustable two-stage	Adjustable two-stage	Adjustable two-stage
KEY FEATURES	Easy to cock; quiet	Cold hammer-forged barrel; light; great looks	Quality finish; easy-to-use safety catch	Refined action; quiet

## HW 90K STANDS EQUAL TO ITS SPRINGER SIBLINGS

More than a credible alternative to a springer, this gas-ram is an excellent rifle in its own right

**F**or most of us, having decided against a PCP either through preference or budget, buying an air rifle means buying a springer. From that point on, we pore over different actions, weighing up various brands and models.

Most springer owners I know pursue the gold standard of a gun that has no twang and lets go with a thud. In fact, many will spend plenty of time, not to mention plenty of cash, pursuing such levels of airgunning nirvana.

And yet, here's the gas-ram. No twang, easy to cock, an action that is unaffected by extreme temperature, potentially very quiet and every bit as accurate, consistent and powerful. Yet it

seems that any consideration of a gas-ram is often cursory. Having spent time with four excellent gas-ram rifles, it truly beats me why this should be so.

None of the four guns here would embarrass themselves in the field or on the range. The Benjamin Trail Nitro Piston 2 is something of an ugly duckling, but there's no denying it's great to shoot and plenty accurate once you've invested enough time to master that trigger.

The Diana 340 N-TEC, especially the models higher in the range, is a real alternative to anything that Weihrauch can offer. And not only does the BSA GRT Lightning XL SE shoot every bit as well as it looks, it's a huge amount of gun for the price.



### THE AIRGUN SHOOTER VERDICT

**"Despite the high quality exhibited by all the gas-ram rifles in this group test, the Weihrauch HW 90K wins out. It's just that little bit more refined, a tad smoother and a smidgen easier to shoot than the competition. Perhaps that's no big surprise as Weihrauch was one of the first manufacturers to collaborate with Theoben to produce gas-rams back in the day. The HW 90K has been tweaked and twiddled with over time – and ultimately that's what gives it the edge today"**