

Range Report: Phoenix Arms HP-22

By Phil Elmore

For years I have seen the Phoenix Arms HP-22 pistol listed in the firearms annuals, minding its own business amongst the buyers' guides with a retail price of as low as 100 USD. Something about the little gun has always been attractive to me. The lines of the pistol seemed almost elegant despite its low price, as far back as I can remember being aware of the gun. It was, then and now, available with an extra-long target barrel, which made it look exotic and no doubt enhanced its function as a target pistol.



Photo by Phil Elmore

My previous experience with Phoenix Arms was limited to the "Raven," a .25 ACP automatic that was the first automatic pistol I ever purchased. The Raven was dirt cheap, which is why I was able to afford it as a college student. While an obvious "Saturday night special" with what is probably a high Zinc alloy content, the little gun never misfired and always functioned reliably for me. I dropped it on the asphalt one day, permanently bending the magazine retaining latch, but was still able to use it. The gun functions flawlessly to this day, more than a decade later.

Phoenix Arms Raven in .25 ACP



Photo by Phil Elmore

One day I became curious. Was Phoenix Arms still in business? Was the target pistol I remember still available with its long barrel? I knew almost nothing else about the gun but thought it was time to change that.

I arranged to test an HP-22 with the help of a local FFL dealer. The gun is still available, in .22 and .25, and can be had in a "Deluxe Range Kit" version that ships with three- and five-inch barrels, cleaning equipment, a Phoenix Arms embroidered patch, and even a pair of earplugs.

I've no idea what the alloy composition of the pistol might be, but the sample HP-22 I evaluated for this article appeared to be a sturdy all-metal weapon with reasonably good fit and finish, especially for a gun in this price range. It feels quite solid, in fact.

My sample is blued, which makes it easy to see the immediate areas of wear produced by the first 100 rounds of Remington "Thunderbolt" .22 Long Rifle ammunition I fed through it. (I fired a little more than twice that for the test). All of the areas of the gun where metal moves on metal show bare steel through the bluing and a few scuff marks (some of which I believe are

minor galling rather than just finish wear).



Photo by Phil Elmore

The weapon is single-action, meaning it must be cocked before the first shot and then recocks itself for each subsequent pull of the trigger. Magazine capacity is ten rounds, though I loaded my test magazines with only nine. The feed lips on the magazines are brutally sharp and it's quite uncomfortable to load the magazines once you're fighting spring pressure.

Empty cases ejected without difficulty, My Raven, the extractor on which was mounted on the top of the slide rather than the side, had a tendency to send shells bouncing off the top of my head. The HP-22 does not suffer from that problem, though it did occasionally send empties straight back at me (one lodged in the crook of my earphones as I was shooting).

The pistol is obviously the result of some... social engineering. Phoenix wears a target on its corporate face because the Ontario, California company is one of the so-called "ring of fire" companies targeted by leftist gun-ban groups like the "Violence Policy Center." The term refers to six

companies in California that supposedly produce the majority of "Saturday Night Specials," inexpensive guns that are abhorred by the anti-gunners as too cheaply obtained and marketed in a way that encourages illegal gun trafficking.



Photo by Phil Elmore

Thanks to this, the HP-22 is over-engineered from the standpoint of safety, resulting in a manual of arms that is more complex than any I've yet encountered in such a small gun.

To say that the little pistol's operation is idiosyncratic is quite an understatement. The HP-22 has two external safeties – a firing pin block mounted on the left side of the slide and a frame-mounted safety. The safety features incorporate a magazine interlock. It is so complicated that it is difficult to explain. I did a lot of research prior to handling the pistol and I still wasn't sure exactly how it did what it did until I operated it myself. Here's the outline:

- ✓ You can load a magazine into the pistol regardless of the position of the safety, but the safety must be ON to remove a magazine.
- ✓ With the frame safety on, the hammer will only go to half-cock -- sufficient

for withdrawing the slide just far enough so you can check the chamber for a live round. The slide cannot be retracted fully unless the frame safety is OFF. When the slide is fully retracted, the frame safety can be pushed ON and will act as a slide stop, holding the action open. You can't take the safety OFF without a magazine in place.

- ✓ The firing pin block cannot be activated unless the hammer is at least half-cocked.
- ✓ Pulling the trigger with the firing pin block ON but the frame safety OFF drops the hammer but did not, in my test, fire the weapon. This means it is, at least in effect, a decocking lever. In use I NEVER trigger-drop the hammer on a chambered round, "decocker" or no – I slowly ease the hammer down with my thumb after pulling the trigger.
- ✓ Without a magazine in place, the frame-mounted safety cannot be switched OFF – unless you cheat and insert a magazine partially into the grip. If you do that, you can activate the interlock without completely inserting the mag, instead removing it and placing the safety OFF without a magazine in place. Why would you want to do this? Well, you would want to do this because...
- ✓ The barrel can be removed if you move the takedown switch with the frame mounted safety ON, but the slide cannot be fully retracted until the frame safety is OFF. It's necessary to pull the slide all the way back during reassembly, so you've either got to disassemble the pistol while the

frame safety is OFF and a magazine is seated, or you've got to cheat the interlock. Confused yet?



Photo by Phil Elmore

Disassembling the pistol is easy. The takedown lever mounted on the forward portion of the frame is pushed forward, which releases the barrel. (The barrel does not move in firing; only the slide moves.) Care must be taken not to let the recoil spring shoot downrange at this point (which it most certainly will do at least once or twice when you first learn to disassemble the pistol).

The takedown latch is actually part of a retaining pin that, when combined with the spring, is all that holds the barrel in place (and thus all that keeps the gun assembled). With the barrel removed, the slide can be moved into position and lifted free of the frame.

Reassembly is, quite honestly, tremendously irritating. You must put the takedown lever/retaining pin in position on the frame and push the slide down and into position. Then, moving the slide forward as far as it will go, you reinsert the recoil spring over the cylinder where it fits on the retaining pin.



Photo by Phil Elmore

The manual shows using the barrel of the gun or a spare magazine to keep the spring from humping up and springing loose as you retract the slide to compress it.

With the spring fully compressed, you are free to reinsert the barrel over a pin near the top of the magazine, then rotate the barrel down until it snaps into place.



Photo by Phil Elmore

If you don't do it exactly right, the retaining pin won't retain anything and the barrel will just snap up again, allowing the spring to shoot out of the gun. I had a devil of a time getting this to work properly when I first tried it. Subsequent reassemblies were a little easier.



Photo by Phil Elmore

I wouldn't call the trigger pull "crisp." It was pretty mushy, with quite a bit of take-up. However, when I started shooting the pistol, I was delighted with the *results*. At standard target ranges I found the little gun very accurate. The sights seemed a little small to me (which is not surprising in such a compact pistol), but I was able to use them to good effect. The five-inch barrel proved exceptional for target plinking, in fact, giving me a nice long sight picture in a gun that is light, comfortable in the hand (especially with the extended pinky-rest magazines, which are longer by a finger's width than the standard flush magazines), and easy to hold on target.



Photo by Phil Elmore

I experienced not a single malfunction during my test session, using the gun out of the box, unfired. (The pistol had, in fact, been fired once to produce a shell casing for the “ballistics fingerprint” database in New York – a database that, to my knowledge, has never been used to solve a crime, though I suppose that could have changed since I last read about it.) I was a little worried the roundnose leads of the Thunderbolt ammo would give it some difficulty, as they’re not smooth like copper jackets, but the HP-22 digested them without complaint.

Obviously, the five-inch barrel is for target shooting only. I can’t imagine carrying around this gun with anything but the more compact three-inch barrel installed. While the gun did not shoot quite as accurately for me with the three-inch barrel, it was still notably accurate. The ease with which I held this on target really pleased me – it is a natural fit for my mitts.



Photo by Phil Elmore

Even with the shorter barrel installed, the question begged is: should you carry this pistol? The frame-mounted safety is easily enough activated and the magazine release is where it should be; these features work fine and I had no

problems with the magazine release popping the magazine in carry (a problem I had with a similarly sized Lorcin .22 automatic years ago).



Photo by Phil Elmore

The problem, however, is the firing pin block. I don’t believe I would trust this pistol with a round in the chamber without that firing pin block activated, but it is very small and difficult to activate even when using the support hand while holding the gun downrange. If you’re going to carry this pistol, therefore, I would recommend carrying it in Condition Three (no round in the chamber) with both safeties off.



Photo by Phil Elmore

This means you’ll need both hands to get the gun into action, which of course can be a problem. What happens if

you've only got one hand free and you need to shoot? This is the sacrifice to readiness that you'll have to make to safely carry the HP-22 as a defensive piece.



Photo by Phil Elmore

One way to adapt the pistol for defensive carry (let's say it was all you had) would be to carry it right-handed but in a left-hand inside-the-waistband (IWB) holster. When the pistol is drawn in a strong firing grip and brought forward, the slide is canted toward the left hand, which can draw it back as the weapon goes forward on-target. This is a little unorthodox and requires practice before it can be used effectively.



Photo by Phil Elmore



Photo by Phil Elmore

The Phoenix Arms HP-22 is an excellent little recreational pistol that could see duty as a concealed carry piece, though it would be less than ideal in that role. Its fit, finish, and accuracy are a cut above its chief competitors in the budget firearms class from which it hails, the vilification and propaganda concerning "Saturday night specials" notwithstanding. I would buy this gun (especially at the low prices it commands) without much hesitation and I would expect to get a decent service life out of it – provided I was not too demanding of it. For moderate use, this is a great buy in a pleasant plinker. ♠