

Double Duty

The Franchi Affinity proves the days of affordable, versatile semi-autos aren't gone.

MY FIRST VIEW of Matagorda Island occurred just after 4 o'clock in the morning. Matagorda is a barrier island that stretches for almost 40 miles along the coast of Texas, providing crucial habitat for wildlife, including migrating waterfowl.

Traveling via fan boat from Bay Flats Lodge in Seadrift, Texas, Benelli's Joe Coogan, outdoor writer Bryce M. Towsley and I set out in search of the migrating ducks that funnel into Matagorda each year. Guide T. J. Christensen pulled the boat onto a bar of broken oyster shells and helped the three of us unload our gear. Then he turned the boat and the roar of the fan lowered as he drove down the island and hid the boat, returning to our blind by starlight.

After T.J. set the decoys, Joe, Brice and I settled into the blind. Out of the darkness, I heard the whistle and splash of a couple dozen ducks landing in the decoy spread.

"Not time yet," T.J. said. Legal shooting light wouldn't begin for some time, but we already had a group in the decoys. They stayed until shooting light, rafted up on the edge of our decoys.

"Go ahead and load up," T.J. said. "It's time."

I picked up my Franchi Affinity, and loaded the Black Cloud 3-inch magnums as another flock of ducks wheeled out over the marsh flats.

"If this group turns, we shoot," T.J. said. On cue, the birds tilted in the morning light and doubled back toward our spread. As they approached, I waited for T.J.'s call with my hand wrapped around the pistol grip of the Franchi.

"Shoot!"

I rose up and shouldered the Affinity, and with the bead just under the incoming bird, I pulled the trigger and watched as the bird rose up, turning, and seemed to hover in the sky. I fired again, and this time the 20-gauge load of steel shot caught the bird squarely.

SEMI-REVOLUTION More than any other type of shotgun, semi-autos have undergone major changes over the past two decades. In years gone by semi-autos were do-all guns, strictly made of wood stocks and blued metal. Almost every semi-auto sold in the mid-20th century served as a multi-purpose gun, taking quail and rabbit as well as ducks, geese, deer, and even bear. Because of their more complex mechanical structure, semis cost more than pumps (if you expect the gun to do all the cycling work you'd better expect to pay extra), but they didn't cost as much as over/unders and side-by-sides.

Today, however, autoloaders look radically different than in the past. Many are treated with realistic camo

pattern dips. Actions have undergone a variety of changes also, and different manufacturers tout their system as the most reliable. In addition, the price point has jumped considerably as well. And even today, the role of the semi-auto continues to change.

For Franchi's Affinity to add something remarkable to this nearly saturated segment of the shotgun world, the company would have to find a way to create a gun that handled well and was reliable, good-looking, and moderately priced.

That's no small order, but the Affinity impresses on a variety of fronts. First, it's a

good-looking gun.

In either black synthetic or camo versions (Realtree's MAX-4 or APG), the Franchi has classic lines. With a stylized recoil pad that dips into the stock, a step-up rib and a rear sling stud that is molded into the stock, the Affinity offers something for the modernist without offending the traditionalist. Stock shims allow for a customized fit,

Specifications

Manufacturer	Franchi
Gauge	12, 20 (tested)
Barrel length	26, 28 (tested)
Chokes	3 (IC, M, F), 2 (IC, M) with compact version
Sights	Red Fiber Optic Bar
Finish	Black, Realtree MAX-4, Realtree APG
Weight	6.4 lbs. (12 gauge), 5.6 lbs. (20 gauge)
Length	47¼ inches, 49¼ inches
Contact:	www.franchiusa.com or (800) 264-4962
MSRP:	\$849-\$949

and a compact version of the Affinity is available with stock extensions that actually look natural on the gun.

When your company's tagline is "Feels Right," as Franchi's is, your guns better not handle like a piece of rough-cut timber. The Affinity's slim fore-end and pistol grip make it easy to swing and point, and the textured grip surfaces make it easy to hold onto when hunting in the moisture and muck of a duck blind. The heel of the recoi

l pad is rounded so as not to catch on shooting vests or jackets, and the red fiber-optic bar front sight comes naturally in line with the eye. The balance point is near perfect, resting between the hands and making the gun easy to swing. Simply put, there are few if any semis past or current that handle as well as the Affinity.

INERTIA-DRIVEN After a century of innovation, shooters expect a system

that performs reliably. And we also prefer semi-autos that will feed light, 2¾-inch loads or hefty 3-inch charges with equal dependability, which isn't an easy task for engineers. The Affinity incorporates the Inertia Driven System that has helped make parent company Benelli famous. Rather than fuss with pistons, O-rings, and gas valves, Inertia Driven guns rely on the rearward force generated by the shot charge to cycle the gun. The design is simple, effective, and lightweight. However, unlike many of its inertia-driven counterparts, the Affinity's recoil spring is located around the magazine tube as opposed to inside the stock.

Cleaning of the system is fast and easy, and with only three parts (bolt body, inertia spring, and rotating bolt head) there are far less moving parts to malfunction or become damaged than on other design types. To add to overall reliability, the Affinity has a finish that is resistant to weather and

gun cleaning solvents. The narrow fore-end, aluminum alloy receiver and simple Inertia Driven system also make the Affinity a very lightweight semi-auto; the 12-gauge version weighs only about 6.4 pounds while the 20-gauge weighs just 5.6 pounds. Despite the light weight, I shot most of a box of Black Cloud 3-inch ammo through the Franchi without excessive discomfort.

After lunch, we headed out to a nearby ranch for a quail and chukar hunt. The Affinity was once again in tow, and it was as popular in the scattered thorn and cactus of the coastal plains as it had been in the duck blind that morning. Hunting over pointing dogs, we managed to put several boxes of Prairie Storm through the Affinity, and it worked well.

I didn't have any luck with quail, but did manage to fold a chukar that drummed up between two lumps of thorn and headed straight out over the flat, dry plain. As the Affinity was tested by all of the outdoor writers in attendance, the verdict remained unanimous: this new Franchi was outstanding for both waterfowling and upland hunting. *

