Range Bag

Nordic Clays Trapmaster

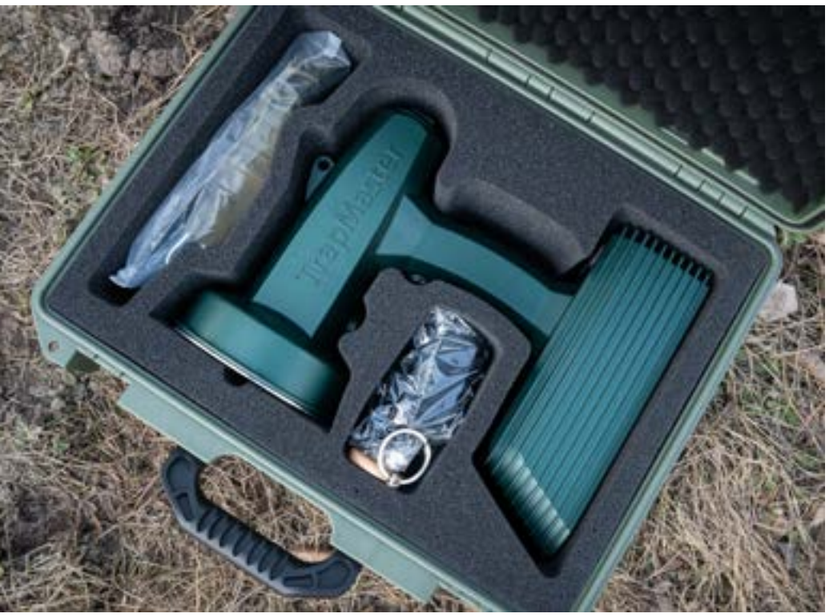
In the early years of trapshooting, which occurred during the mid- to late-19th century, the game was basically one of nobility. Involving the release of a live pigeon from a string-activated trap (hence the name "trap" and the common call for a target being "pull"), the game was prohibitively expensive to participate in, and as a result, tended to be enjoyed by people the same sorts of people who enjoyed falconry, polo, and owning castles. Then came the clay pigeon.

Words by **Jacques Éclair**

Invented around 1875, these clay targets reduced the cost-per-target down significantly for obvious reasons, and can largely be credited with bringing competitive shotgun shooting to the masses. Today, the immediately recognizable inverted saucers are made from an asphalt-like compound, and are basically ubiquitous; being available by the case at most sporting goods stores and dotting the backdrops of numerous gun clubs and too many backwoods clearings.

And there's been similar leaps and bounds made with regard to their launching. In the early days, replacing the live, trapped bird was a cast iron, spring-loaded contraption with a large release lever - definitely the product of an era before health and safety standards. Then came ornate machines designed to throw doubles, and eventually complicated auto-loading trap machines that advertised their speed and ease of use with lines like "the fastest down-the-line team in the world can be kept going by a 15-year-old boy!" Trap actuation was made remote, and eventually, today's complicated electric trap machines took over - the clay target having all but reinvented competitive shotgun shooting so as to make the sport almost entirely unrecognizable from the original game of trap that spawned it.

But at the same time as this wholesale and rapid change was occurring in the competitive market, the affordability of clay targets was having a similar effect on smaller-scale shooters; with simple, hand-throwers like the Midget, and the ICI-Eley Hand Trap bringing the ability to bust targets to anyone with a friend or family member willing to throw them. Today, the most popular of these is the claw-shaped, flexible plastic arm thrower that's almost as ubiquitous as the targets themselves.



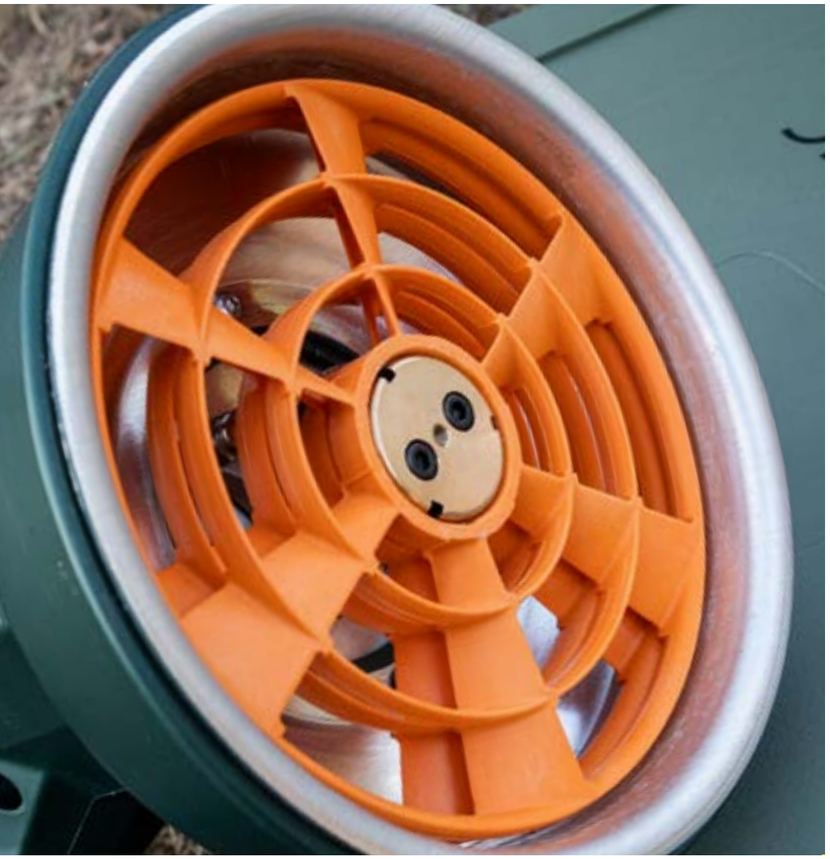
Innovation Never Stops

But while simple, reliable, and certainly affordable, these plastic throwing arms are also something most quickly tire of (both the shooter and the thrower) on account of their repetitiveness. Targets are released from the claw holding them when their velocity combined with their mass overcomes the elasticity of the plastic of the thrower, meaning no matter how hard one tries to work the thrower, they end up releasing from the thrower's grip at largely the same speed.

At the other end of the spectrum, throwers that accelerate the target off a simple paddle offer variable speed by adjusting the machine's spring tension, which dictates the throwing paddle's speed. But these machines generally fall into two camps; large, heavy, powered machines, and small, manually-set portable units. The powered units are too big to be used informally, while the manual nature of the portable ones make adjustment unpleasant, on account of any increase in spring tension also making the machine commensurately harder to load and set. That may not sound like a big deal in isolation, but almost everyone who's ever used one of these portable machines knows exactly what it feels like when the paddle slips and whacks your fingers - so considering the unintended consequences of making that loading process more difficult isn't something that should be taken too lightly. We've all been there.

But the Nordic Clays TrapMaster hopes to strike a balance between these two offerings; promising highly variable target speed from a machine barely larger than a cordless drill. And it does so by entirely rethinking the clay target itself. Instead of relying on an aerodynamic shape like the conventional

The TrapMaster's launching system relies on three small claws that extend outward from the hub, holding until they reach the prescribed RPM. A small button under the motor housing allows the user to retract them for loading (above). The targets themselves are nothing like normal clays in either quality or flight characteristics. They're more durable, biodegradable, and accelerate off the launcher in a manner that's much more akin to how a bird flushes from the ground (below).



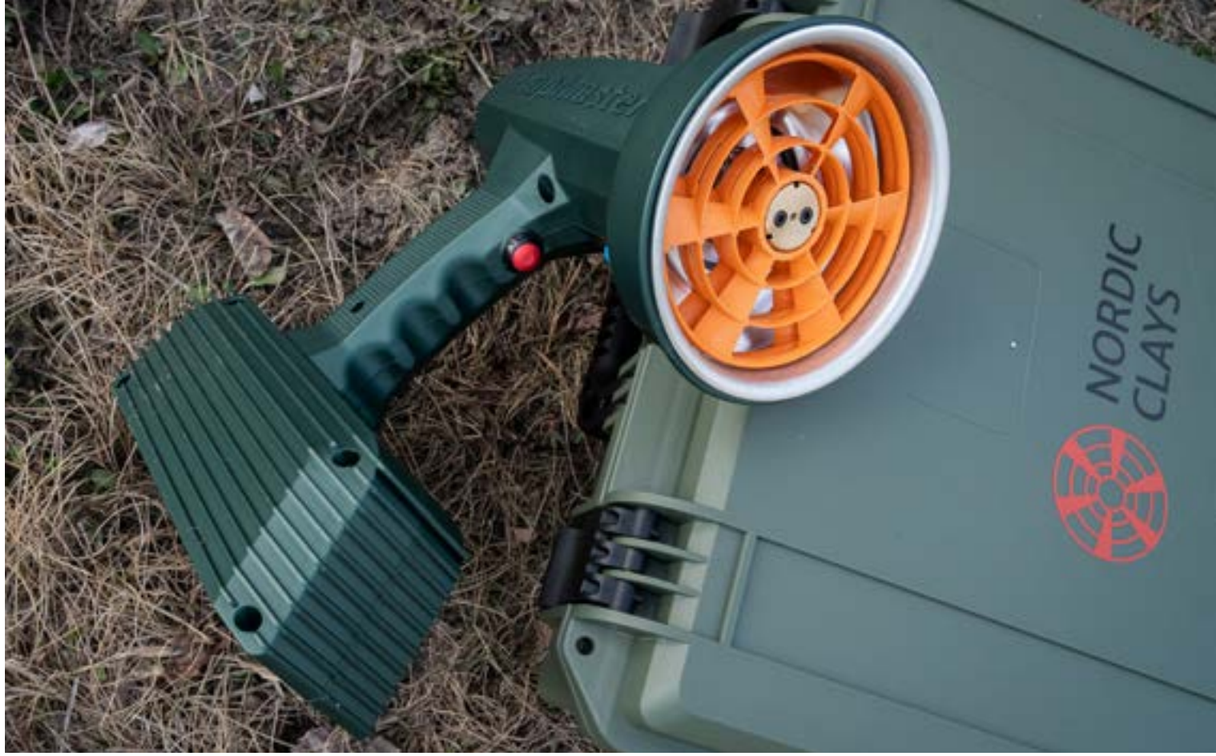
clay target's inverted bowl, which is thrown on edge like a frisbee to generate lift, Nordic Clays' targets fly perpendicular to their rotation - their thrust obviously being generated by their propellor-like shape. This means their speed can be controlled as easily as controlling the speed at which they are spun before launching - higher rotational speeds mean more forward thrust, and more thrust means a faster target flight.

Using the TrapMaster

Coming in a very nice and well-sealed hard case, the Nordic Clays TrapMaster looks more like a very large cordless impact gun than a clay thrower: On one end, a large compartment clearly houses a 5200 mAh battery, and at the other resides an obvious motor assembly. But that's where the similarities stop.

On the battery end, unlike the average cordless tool, the TrapMaster's lithium ion battery is integral; being charged by was of a small AC adapter port fitted with a weather-sealing cap. Above that resides the unit's power switch. Directly below that power LED is the speed selector, which uses small buttons above and below the numerical readout to adjust the spindle speed between 0 (slowest), and 9 (fastest). Finally, there are the trigger and loading controls. The former is self explanatory, while the latter is a small blue button located under the motor assembly that controls the target-retaining claws located in the TrapMaster's spindle assembly. Pressing it causes the claws to retract into the hub, allowing targets to be loaded on at a rate of up to two at a time, and releasing it causes the claws to extend again - gripping the targets and ensuring that they cannot depart the spindle until they've reached the desired speed dialled in on the back of the motor.

And it works; phenomenally. Loading targets is dead easy with pretty much zero risk of breakage, and launching them similarly so - just point the TrapMaster in the direction you want the target to fly and press the trigger. The ramping speed controller brings the target up to the desired RPMs within a couple seconds, holds them there briefly, then off they fly.



The $1,100 Danish-made TrapMaster is, as the price might indicate, more training tool than toy. But for those who take their shotgun shooting seriously, there is nothing that comes close to the unique and realistic target presentations it provides, to say nothing of its portability (above).

And it's then that the TrapMaster really distinguishes itself. Because while the launcher is certainly an improvement over other portable throwers, it's the targets it launches that are the true revelation. Unlike conventional clays that immediately and quite dramatically slow down upon leaving the thrower, the Nordic Clays targets do not. They come off the launcher fast, and accelerate even more in the first few metres of their flight as the airfoils get purchase, only slowing down once they've gained some distance - just like a real bird being flushed from the ground. Add in the variability of the TrapMaster's speed adjustment, and the user's ability to aim it in different directions, and you get a very realistic simulation of how a lot of game birds come off the ground. It's so good, in fact, that it'll likely ruin conventionally thrown clays for you - their lazy arc just seems both wholly unrealistic and entirely too predictable after using this.

Conclusions

But this realism comes at a cost, and it's steep enough to relegate the TrapMaster to those who take their shotgun shooting quite seriously, with retail prices coming in a hair over $1,100. Why so much, you ask? Well, a large portion of the price is probably owing to the fact that the TrapMaster is made in Denmark, rather than China, and isn't being made in massive volumes. The switchgear all feels like it came off a multi-million dollar piece of industrial equipment, the plastic housing itself is cast so well that it feels like aluminium sometimes, and the safety bell designed to catch the pieces of a target should one come apart on launch is thick enough to put some cookware to shame. But the other reason for the TrapMaster's price is likely explained by the complexity of what it does being belied by the simplicity of its idea. Spinning a target on a shaft up to a prescribed speed is one thing; devising a system wherein that target is released from the drive hub at that prescribed speed, without breaking, is quite another. And examining the hub itself, especially as the claws actuate, you get some sense of that. There are a lot of small parts that are very well made involved, and they need to work at very accurately at very high speeds.

And the targets? Well, they come in at $99 for 200 "birds," are available in orange and black, and are, unlike conventional asphalt-based clay pigeons, entirely biodegradable. They're actually made from potato starch, believe it or not, and break down in six years or less. Additionally, they're much lighter than conventional clays, at 25 grams per unit, so they're much easier to pack around and are also much nicer to handle - they don't leave any residue on your hands and have a smooth, plastic-like texture. Lastly, they're quite a bit more resilient than the average clay; individual parts may break off if you wing one, but to smoke one properly requires a good, solid hit.

So is it cheap? No. And if you're thinking this might be just the ticket to replace the orange plastic wibbly-wobbly handtrap that's bounced around the back of your truck cab for years, it obviously isn't. But if you're either an avid bird hunter or competitive clayshooter, the TrapMaster offers something no other product can, and is in many ways as revolutionary as the clay pigeon itself.