

# North American Arms' Super Small .380 Auto

The tiny Guardian pistol in this caliber is only a little bigger than the same firm's .32s.

*by Jerry Ahern*

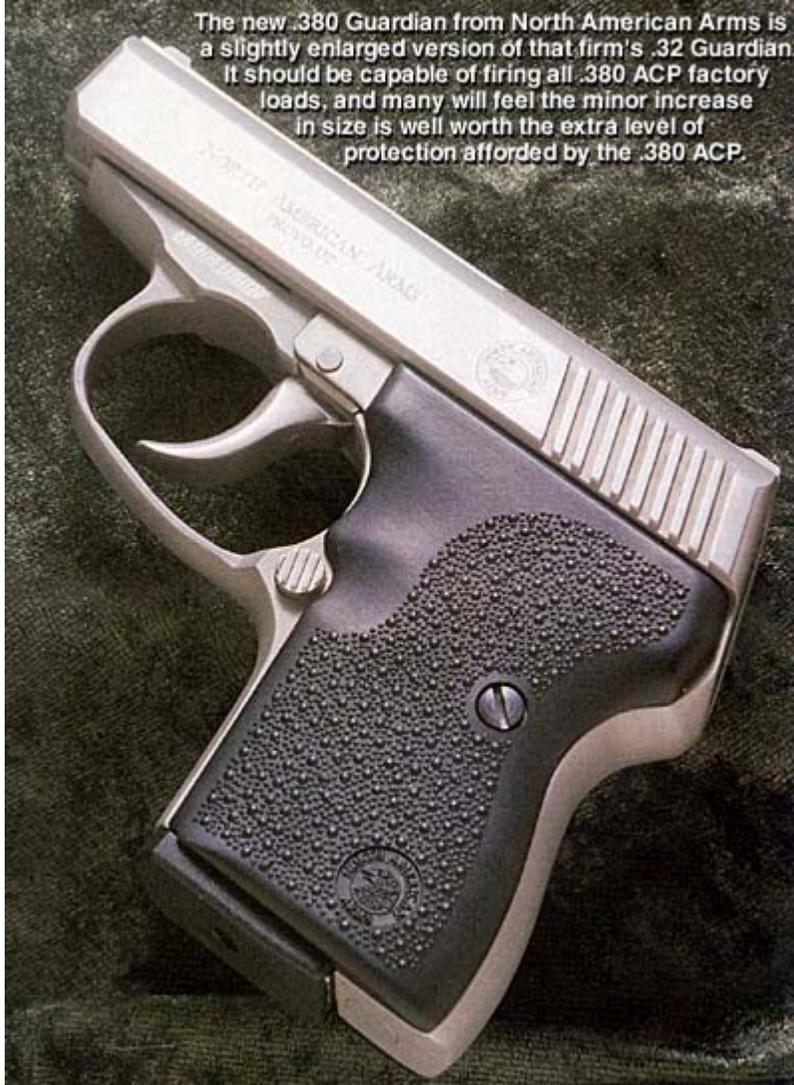
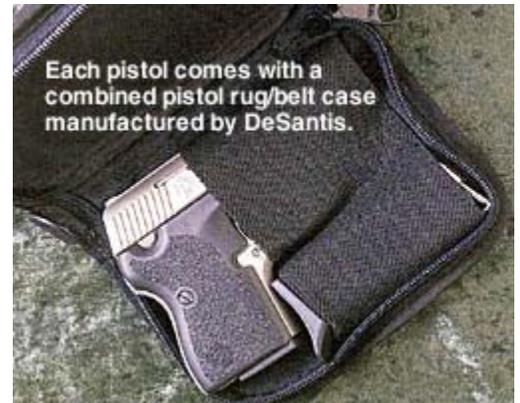
*Photography by Yoichi Ata*

North American Arms has created something unique which will become a benchmark within the firearms industry. It is a .380 pistol, not the smallest in existence (the Seecamp holds that title), but the smallest mass-production .380 of which I am aware. It is smaller than the now defunct Colt Pony and Mustang (about the same length as the Kel-Tec .32, actually).

Although North American Arms offers a full set of custom shop options, unlike a good many of the aforementioned one-time Colt products, the average owner/user is not going to find it necessary to have the Guardian .380 modified for efficient use. Indeed, a cottage industry sprung up around the Colt .380s, Scott, McDougall & Associates taking the basic pistols and turning them into near-perfect little shooting machines.

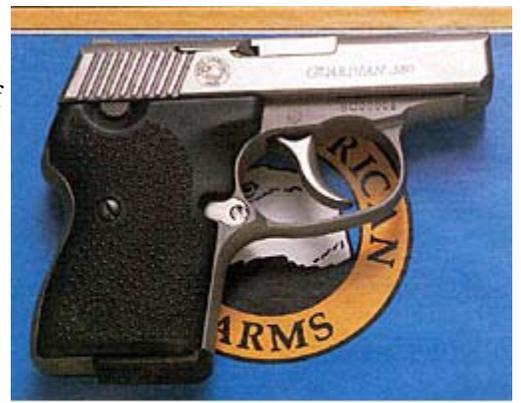
The Guardian .380 is just about perfect for what it is as it is. (Scott, McDougall & Associates also works on the Guardian .32s and will doubtless offer a full spectrum of modifications for the Guardian .380 as well.)

What exactly, is the Guardian .380? It is an ideal crotch, belly or pocket gun, its sights nothing that would snag on clothing, its trigger guard ample for quick finger insertion, its slide not so difficult to retract that an average woman could not operate it, and the cartridge it fires is one of the two best small auto personal defense rounds. However, perceived recoil is not at all unpleasant.



We live in an age when preconceived notions concerning handgun size are falling by the wayside almost more rapidly than could be imagined.

But, the ready availability of quite a tiny pistol in the comparatively powerful .380, one which handles hollowpoints and solids equally well, given that it is an excellent working firearm offered by a firm that is arguably one of the most reliable gun companies in the nation, speaks volumes for the Guardian .380's utility.



This pistol is a sturdy all-stainless steel design. It should prove one of the best choices available for carry in a side or hip pocket or other types of deep concealment.

The original Guardian .32 from North American Arms was the company's premier offering in the field of semi-automatics. Just barely larger than the Seecamp .32, it was the first contemporary mass production .32 auto to approach the Seecamp's .25 ACP-like size. Despite all the nonsensical impediments various anti-gun factions place before handgunners, we live in an age when preconceived notions concerning handgun size are falling by the wayside almost more rapidly than could be imagined. Consider the superb little Kahr Arms MK-9, for example. It is the same size and weight as a Walther PPK, but available in 9mm Parabellum and .40 S&W. In 9mm, it has identical magazine capacity to the Walther in .380. The Guardian .380 has the same capacity as the Walther PPK .380, too, but is a good deal smaller in overall length and- critical to concealment-height.



The NAA Guardian comes with two magazines, a nice touch other makers would do well to emulate.

Suspense is marvelous in a novel, a film, a play or teleplay; when the subject is a new defensive handgun, suspense can be annoying. So, the Guardian .380 experienced not a single firing-related malfunction, was adequately accurate at ranges from 21 feet out to 45 feet, assembles and disassembles easily and is an extremely worthwhile investment for anyone looking for a powerful pocket pistol.

This pistol is easily stripped by pulling slightly to the rear and upward on the slide while depressing the dismounting catch on the right side of the frame above the grip panel. With this and any other pistol, be sure it is unloaded, magazine and chamber, before commencing stripping!

As to particulars, I did experience one malfunction, but not firing related. And, I found it refreshing. There are still some people who believe that firearms companies pick "special" guns for gun writers. NAA doesn't! A little more than 40 rounds into testing the Guardian .380, the trigger return spring broke. The trigger could be pushed forward manually, allowing firing to continue (but, not too conveniently).



The Guardian comes with a set of stocks manufactured by Hogue for NAA. These are pebbled for a secure hold.

North American Arms sent me a replacement spring, which, assisted quite ably by Sharon, I installed. When I called Ken Friel, NAA's general manager, to happily announce the successful gunsmithing job, he told me that their spring manufacturer was already at work on why this breakage had happened and preventing it from happening again; a small batch of the springs were doing this. After a brief discussion, Ken and I agreed that the likely cause was a glitch in the heat treating process. At about the same time, I happened to be talking with Sid Woodcock, my good friend for over a quarter of a century. Sid is the designer of the Detonics .45 and an expert's expert with firearms. I recounted the broken spring tale to Sid, coupled with relating how the trigger pull had noticeably eased after replacing the spring (which compresses as the trigger is pulled). The heat treating theory was Sid's best guess at long distance as well.

The new spring, when I returned to the range, worked flawlessly, both while we were dry snapping the gun and during live fire. And the trigger pull-not only heavy, but heavier, I'd thought, than it should be on those first rounds- was much improved.

Testing with the Guardian .380 was accomplished with Black Hills 95-grain FMIs, 90-grain IHPs and Winchester Silvertip hollow points. Regular readers know that I'm fond of Federal ammo as well, but time constraints were rigorous here.



The barrel of this pistol is integral with the frame; the forward portion of the slide leaves the top of the barrel exposed.

A little background is in order. Holster maker that I am, when not writing books or articles, etc., North American sent me a welded-up dummy of the Guardian .380 to use in wet moulding. I was impressed with size, etc. About a week later, things started happening very quickly. I contacted Ken about borrowing one of the new guns for inclusion in my column. Just then I found out that the gun had not yet passed California's new battery of tests and couldn't be shipped to Jan Libourel as yet. A quick conference with Jan and it was decided: As soon as I got the Guardian .380 from NAA, Jan and I would touch base. If the Guardian .380 had still not completed California's legal hoop-jumping, I would do the feature article instead of just including the Guardian .380 in my column.

There was no time for Federal to get me any ammo; I had a little Silvertip left over from testing the Seecamp .380 a year or so back, and Black Hills was capable (and generous enough) to respond rapidly.



The capacious magazine well of the NAA pistol accommodates a six-round magazine, the same as the classic Walther PPK in the same caliber.

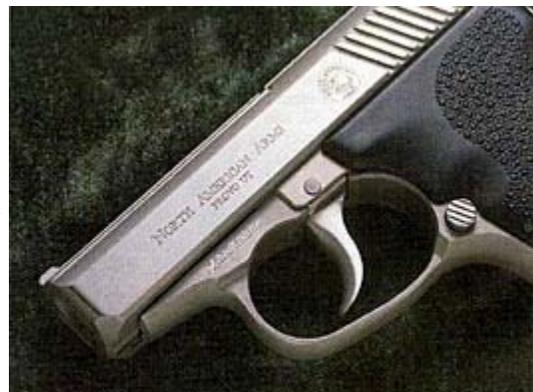
Remember: Firearms writers are journalists, and there isn't a journalist living who doesn't want a scoop. However, the desire to scoop the competition didn't compromise the testing. I spent two serious range sessions with the Guardian .380, burnt up a considerable amount of ammo (all but depleting the Silvertips and taking a large chunk out of the Black Hills rounds), thoroughly familiarized myself with the Guardian .380 mechanically and carried it concealed for several days.

The results were interesting and rewarding. Both range sessions were conducted under miserable shooting conditions. Heat and humidity were excessively high, and swarms of black flies were everywhere. It is hard to concentrate on sight picture and trigger squeeze when tiny insects are crawling across one's shooting glasses. Despite it all, at ranges from 15 to 21 feet, with the Guardian's vestigial sights and initially over-heavy trigger pull, my first shooting session (before the interruption caused by the trigger return spring) demonstrated that the Guardian .380 would easily keep any and all rounds in something the size of the head area of a silhouette target.

The second shooting session was conducted under similar weather conditions. And, my old friends the black flies were back with many additional relatives. This time, I employed the Guardian .380 at two different distances - 21 and 45 feet. Because of the black flies, I'll confess to firing quite rapidly and setting new land speed records for magazine reloading. Still and all, firing two-hand unsupported, standing, at 45 feet, shots would typically produce several clusters running about an inch, measuring from hole centers. At 21 feet, I narrowed the size down to 5/8-inch.

I usually shoot low and to the left, but because of the trigger pull during the first session, which had exacerbated this proclivity, I over compensated and many of my second session groups were high and to the right.

There is no slide hold open after the last round. During my first shooting session, two of the four magazines NAA sent along with the gun stovepiped the last empty. One of my Seecamp .32s does this quite regularly, and I've never found it anything more than a rather odd empty chamber indicator. With the Guardian .380, those same magazines ceased to serve as "empty chamber indicators" after the first shooting session.



The NAA Guardian pistols use a push-button-style magazine release in contrast to the heel clip designs used on many mini-autos.

Firing with hardball did produce more perceived recoil, but nothing dramatically more than experienced with the two different hollowpoints. One can easily fire the Guardian .380 in lengthy sessions without experiencing discomfort of any kind.



Jerry Ahern fired the NAA Guardian as much as his limited supplies of .380 ammo lasted, and he was very impressed with its performance.

The grip of the Guardian .380, like that of its .32 counterpart, is designed to keep the web of the hand mostly in the concave radius and safely below the pistol's slide as it cycles. I have reasonably large hands and was able to hold and comfortably control the pistol with 1 1/2 fingers wrapped around the butt. North American Arms provides a magazine with a finger rest extension off the floorplate, this enabling more hand contact. I have no interest in finger rest extensions simply because of the fact that they do lengthen the dimensions of the pistol butt and, however beneficial in shooting, are therefore detrimental to concealment. There is a pebbled texture to the Hogue grips, which is quite positive without being abrasive. All in all, the Guardian .380 is a perfectly comfortable gun to shoot.

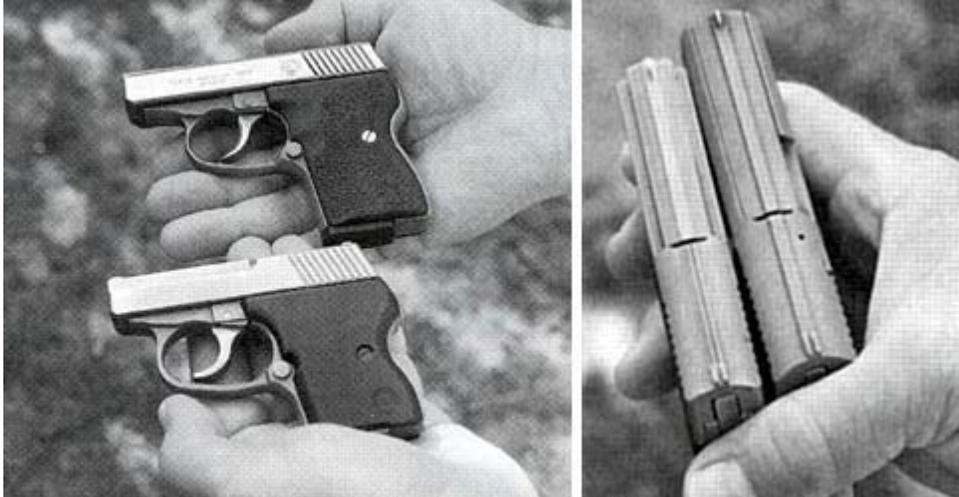
On the office postage scale, the Guardian .380 weighed in at 22 ounces when fully loaded with seven Black Hills 90-grain JHPs. Maximum length of the pistol is 4-3/8 inches, while height from the bottom of the magazine floorplate to the top of the rear sight is 3-5/8 inches.

Metalwork is quite nice, tool marks completely absent from the exterior of the firearm, fitting even and precise. After testing, there was no evidence of any abrasion or galling. The top of the open slide and the exposed portion at the top of the barrel are matte finished; the slide flats and the exposed portion of the spur less hammer are nicely polished. The frame is matte finished. A close look at the forward left side of the frame will reveal that the frames are made for NAA by Kahr Arms, noted for its excellent metalwork

Disassembly of the pistol is quite easily accomplished. First, remove the magazine and carefully check the chamber for loaded condition. Once satisfied that the firearm is empty, actuate the disassembly latch at the right rear of the pistol between the slide and the grip panel. Draw the slide rearward about a half-inch, raising the rear of the slide upward and then moving the slide forward. The double recoil springs and the guide that they surround should drop clear as you move the elevated slide forward. Note the orientation of the recoil springs. Reassembly is the reverse, but squeezing the trigger part way back will be required for the slide to be seated.



The author did his shooting with two Black Hills loads and Winchester Silvertips. Holster maker Ahern, crafted one each of his Pocket Natural (left) and Inside Joker (right) holsters to accommodate this gun.



The NAA Guardian in .380 caliber is slightly longer and thicker than its .32 ACP counterpart, but it is still an excellent choice for deep concealment.

*SHARON AHERN PHOTO*

Operating the pistol is easy. There are no manual safeties to worry about. The slide serrations are clean and positive and easily grasped. When the pistol is chamber loaded, the case head is visible through a narrow notch between the barrel and the slide. The magazine release is American style, located just aft of the root of the trigger guard on the left side. Magazines drop clear smartly and seat positively.

Being all stainless steel, the Guardian .380 is perfectly suited to clandestine carry in a variety of ways. By the time the gun arrived at my cooperating dealer, I'd already made two holsters that I would use with the Guardian .380, detail wet molding them off the dummy gun NAA had originally sent me.

Once the shooting sessions were over and I knew that the gun was reliable, I began to carry it. As regular readers know, I'm a big fan of front pocket carry. In our Pocket Natural, the Guardian .380 is essentially as concealable as my Seecamp carried the same way, albeit a bit heavier. Access from the pocket proved fluid and reliable. The second holster I made for the Guardian .380 is one of our Inside Jokers, equipped with a belt clip. I made the holster with a little higher ride than I normally like, and, when I get the chance, I will make another Inside Joker that will ride a bit lower. When worn inside the waistband, however, the Guardian hugs flat to the body and all but vanishes.



The spurless hammer of this double-action-only design fits flush with the rear of the slide.

Were the Guardian .380 not brand new, I would have solicited other holsters from other makers. By the time you read this, some other makers should have holsters available; as this is written, none to my knowledge are available except the rather neat item NAA supplies with the gun. Made by DeSantis, it clips to the trouser belt and, on the outside, appears to be a zippered pouch for some electronic gadget or another. Unzip the pouch and the Guardian .380 and a spare magazine are secured within elastic holsters, ready to go. The pouch is lockable for those who might wish to do so.

In the final analysis, I now have a valid reason to inventory .380 ammo. I'm keeping this new Guardian .380 from North American Arms. When I feel the need for something more powerful than a .32 ACP from my habitually carried Seecamp, yet the requirements for concealability are essentially the same, the Guardian .380 will make an excellent choice in which I have considerable confidence. I know that it is reliable, easy to shoot and backed by a manufacturer whom I trust implicitly.

As this is written, North American Arms Guardian .380s are being shipped out to dealers across the country. This will be a popular gun, so run out and get in line. You'll be glad you did.

## Where to Find Them

<p><b>Ahern Enterprises, Inc.</b>          Dept. GW          P.O. Box 186          Commerce, GA 30529          (706) 335-5715</p>	<p><b>Black Hills Ammunition</b>          Dept. GW          3050 Eglin Street P.O. Box 3090          Rapid City, SD 57709          (605) 348-5150</p>	<p><b>North American Arms</b>          Dept. GW          2150 South 950 East          Provo, UT 84606-6285          (800) 821-5783</p>
<p><b>Scott, McDougall &amp; Associates</b>          Dept. GW          7950 Redwood Drive Suite 13          Cotati, CA 94931          (707) 795-BANG</p>	<p><b>Winchester Ammunition</b>          Dept. GW          427 North Shamrock Street          East Alton, Il 62024-1174          (618) 258-3692</p>	<p>(It is customary, when requesting catalog materials, to include \$3 in order to help defray the cost of printing, postage and handling.)</p>

**NORTH AMERICAN ARMS' SUPER-SMALL .380 AUTO**

The North American Arms Guardian pistols are fitted with tiny fixed sights. Other sighting options are available from NAA's custom shop.

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