Diminutive firearms in .25 ACP and .22 rimfire have been around a long time, and while widely carried, they have never gotten much respect. They were considered marginal manstoppers back when roundnose .38 loads were the standard for police and civilians alike, and now, in an era of increasingly potent self-defense loads available in compact designs, many consider the mouse guns downright useless. Certainly, these puny rounds would never be chosen if a deadly confrontation were inevitable, but then most people facing a certain shoot-out would wisely opt for something more potent than any readily carried handgun. That is why police officers reach for the long gun when things get hairy.

I'll neither defend nor defame these mouse guns. I've carried them on occasion, and while I had reservations about their stopping power, any firearm can be a comfort. In the majority of cases where a firearm is used in defense, shots are not fired. A look up the barrel of any handgun is often enough to dissuade those who wish you harm. You cannot depend on the cowardice of attackers, though, and if the choice is made to carry any firearm for self defense, some thought should be given to calibers and loads.

In the case of our smallest handguns the choice is usually limited as to calibers and has traditionally come down to the various rimfires vs. the .25 Auto. The choices have been expanding in recent years, and some .32-caliber autos are now available in small platforms but are still larger than diminutive handguns like the Baby Browning and other .25 and .22 platforms. NAA has also recently introduced a new .25-caliber cartridge in the same petite platform as its .32 Auto (see "Mighty Mouse" sidebar).
MIGHTY MOUSE

NORTH AMERICAN ARMS has teamed with Cor-Bon to add some sizzle to the .25 caliber. The new cartridge is called the .25 NM and is basically a .32 Auto necked down to .25 caliber. The velocity is impressive. The only factory load yet available launches a 35-grain Hornady XTP hollowpoint at 1,200 fps from the 2.185-inch barrel of the NAA Guardian. To put it in perspective, what you get, ballistically speaking, is a load almost identical to a .22 Long Rifle hollowpoint fired from a rifle. That is no small accomplishment, and the .25 NM is faster and packs more energy than any other mouse-gun load in existence.

The factory Cor-Bon load penetrates six inches on average in bare ballistic gelatin and expands to .40 caliber. The load travels up to 30 inches in gelatin that has been covered in denim and still expands to .36 caliber. This performance is far superior to any .25 Auto loads and is delivered in a very compact autoloader. The Guardian is not quite as small as most .25 Autos, but there would be few, if any carry situations where the size difference would matter.

The Guardian is a solid, American-made stainless handgun and provides good reliability and service. It is a straight blowback design and, like many such mouse guns, does not have an ejector. The next round rising in the magazine kicks out the empty case. With most guns of this type the last fired case may occasionally hang in the slide. This is not really a problem since the firearm is empty and the case is cleared as a new magazine is inserted and the top round loaded into the chamber. The trigger is double-action-only, the hammer is bobbed, and there are no external safeties to fumble with. None is needed, of course, and this is the safest design anyone has yet come up with for carrying these handguns in deep concealment. The Guardian is also available in .32 Auto.

These slightly beefier and more potent mouse guns have cut into the .22 rimfire/.25 Auto market, but there are still a lot of the smaller guns in use, and they are the main focus here. If you choose to carry one of the smallest of defensive handguns, there are decisions to be made as to caliber and loads.

CHOOSING A LOAD

Much has been written in recent decades on choosing a load for self defense, and not all experts agree on the required criteria. Some view expansion as the ultimate goal while others insist penetration is most important, with expansion a second. It can be confusing, but thankfully, with larger-caliber handguns you have a built-in margin for error. Take the .45 ACP, for example. If you load a premium 230-grain hollow-point into the chamber, you will most likely get good expansion and all the penetration required. If for some reason the bullet doesn't expand, your attacker still gets a .45-caliber hole completely through his vitals. No such margin for error exists with low-powered rounds like the .22 rimfire and .25 Auto.
Consider the .25 Auto. In recent years bullets have been developed that expand reliably in this caliber, but expansion further compromises the round's already iffy penetration. Speer's Gold Dot bullets are second to none in regard to reliable expansion, and the 35-grain Gold Dot .25 ACP load is no exception. It expands reliably but only penetrates six to seven inches in ballistic gelatin. Some experts feel this amount of penetration is adequate, but rest assured it is cutting it mighty close. On the other end of the bullet spectrum are the conventional 50-grain Full Metal Jacket loads. They will penetrate decently, but we all know their poor track record in regard to stopping power of roundnosed FMJ bullets even in larger calibers like the 9mm.

If you compare the ballistics of the .25 Auto and .22 Long Rifle, it is easy to see there is little practical difference between the two. As with the .25 Auto, users of the .22 must decide if emphasis should be placed on penetration or expansion. Again, you can't have both to an appreciable degree. The .22 does offer a wider variety of loads to choose from, and rimfire loads are economical, thus making practice more affordable and likely. This is a major benefit since precise shot placement is critical, and these tiny guns do require considerable practice to attain the skill necessary to place shots accurately under stress.

When you consider firearms like North American Arms' Mini Revolvers and some of the derringers that have been manufactured over the years, your load choices expand to include the more powerful .22 Magnum. You don't get a lot more velocity over the .22 Long Rifle in short barrels, but there is an appreciable amount. You also get a wide selection of bullet weights and designs to choose from. What you sacrifice is the firepower of a semiauto.
THE BABY BROWNING

THE BROWNING .25 Automatic Pistol is the most copied of the .25 Autos and has set the benchmark for the type. Its lineage goes back to 1905 when John Moses Browning designed the first .25 Auto for FN of Belgium and called it the Vest Pocket Pistol. Through an agreement between Browning, Colt and FN, these pistols were not imported to the U.S. Instead, Browning designed a modified version that was marketed here by Colt.

In 1927 Dieudonne Saive, who would later design the famed FN FAL rifle, reconfigured the FN .25 Auto by eliminating the grip safety and slide hold-back, relocating the safety and adding a magazine safety, a popular feature in Europe. The new model was smaller and lighter than Browning's original design and was nicknamed "Baby." This model was imported in large numbers to the U.S. beginning in 1953, but this ended in early 1969 due to size limits placed on imported handguns by the Gun Control Act of 1968.

Those lucky enough to own one of these superbly made little guns possess one of the most reliable .25 Autos ever made, and one of the smallest. The Baby Browning has been widely copied in Europe and to a lesser degree here in the U.S. Few of these copies quite matched the quality and reliability of the original.

THE RELIABILITY FACTOR

If you choose to carry one of the small autos, the choice between .25 Auto or .22 Long Rifle appears to be a no-brainer based on ballistics and cost of ammo, but there is another critical factor to consider: reliability. The rimmed case and long profile of the .22 Long Rifle can cause functioning problems in small autoloaders. The .25 Auto, as the name implies, was designed to be used in autos and functions reliably in quality guns. This is not to say you cannot find .22 autos that function reliably. You can. But .25 Autos across the board are simply more reliable.
North American Arms offers mini revolvers in rimfire calibers ranging from .22 Short to .17 HMR. These solid little stainless firearms have a well-earned reputation for being rugged and reliable. While they don't afford the rapid firepower of .22 autoloading mouse guns, they are more dependable since there are no feeding and ejection worries to contend with. The stout hammer spring and robust external hammer also enhance ignition. I have fired roughly a thousand rounds of various .22 LR and .22 Magnum ammo through a test sample with interchangeable cylinders and have not encountered a single misfire.

The Black Widow models are bulkier than some and certainly larger than a .25 Auto. However, they are still easy to conceal and carry, and the large grip affords a good hold. As with any good single-action revolver, the critical first shot is quick and natural. I've found if I bring the gun up one-handed and fully extend my arm at eye level shots can be placed in the kill zone of silhouettes fairly quickly at close combat ranges. It takes a bit of practice to develop accuracy much beyond spitting distance with the short-barreled models of these tiny revolvers, but it can be done. There is little room for error with the short sight radius, and you must keep the sights lined up perfectly during the trigger release to maintain accuracy.

I recently chronographed a variety of .22 Long Rifle and .22 Magnum loads through a 2-inch-barreled Black Widow to see what velocities could be achieved from the short barrel. I also ran some unscientific tests on water jugs to judge terminal performance. If a bullet will not expand in water, it is very unlikely to expand in flesh. Most of the rimfire loads tested would not expand reliably due to reduced velocities from the short barrel. As discussed elsewhere, lack of expansion with these low-powered loads is not necessarily a bad thing.

There were some surprises during the water-jug tests. CO Stingers, which I've long relied on when maximum explosive effects were desired in .22 rifles, failed to expand at all from the short barrel. The most reliable expansion among the .22 LR loads tested was turned in by plain old Winchester Super X 40-grain hollowpoints and Remington's hyper-velocity 33-grain Yellow Jacket loads. The Winchester load expanded more slowly and provided decent penetration while the Yellow Jackets offered quicker expansion and less penetration.

The best expansion in Magnum loads was provided by the gaping hollow point of CCI's 3-grain TNT .22 WMR load. It expanded beautifully every time I tested it, and the recovered bullet looked like what one would expect from a premium handgun bullet. By comparison, COs 50-grain Gold Dot load failed to expand at all but provide deep penetration. The .22 Magnum cylinder would be the way to go for self defense with this handgun. Magnum loads lose a lot of velocity in the short barrel, but still offer more energy and a wider selection of loads than the .22 Long Rifle chambering. This means the user can pick a load based on his preference for either expansion or penetration.
Another factor is reliable ignition. Centerfire cartridges like the .25 Auto are more likely to go bang when you pull the trigger than are rimfire cartridges. Anyone who fires enough .22 rimfire ammo is likely to encounter some misfires in the best of guns, and the small autos are not known for having heavy hammer falls that enhance ignition reliability.

The reliability of rimfire ammo seems to vary from lot to lot no matter the brand, although I believe the quality has improved all around in recent years. If you do choose to carry a .22, buy it by the brick and test a given lot thoroughly for reliability before betting your life on it. Once you've determined a particular lot of ammo is reliable, stock up on it.

CONCLUSION

If you carry any self-defense handgun smaller than a 9mm, do not kid yourself—you are not well armed. You will be armed, though, and any handgun is a deterrent in most situations. The bottom line: Mouse guns are popular because they are extremely easy to carry, and any firearm you have on you when it's needed is better than the most potent handgun at home in the safe.

I wish I could tell you exactly which of the loads and firearm types is best for you, but I would not presume to do so. Even the experts who have dedicated their lives to such questions disagree. It is your choice, but hopefully, some of the information provided here will help you to make an intelligent choice.