

Coil Roofing Nailers

No matter how little roofing you do, these tools can save you time and money



by Patrick McCombe

No professional roofer would think of installing an asphalt-shingle roof without a coil roofing nailer. The repetitive nature of the job and the sheer number of fasteners required make it a natural for the use of air power. But even if you're doing just a couple of roofs a year, a coil roofing nailer can easily pay for itself in time saved, not to mention the reduction in wear and tear on your body. *JLC* has assembled all the major pneumatic roof nailers and put them through their paces.

Shopping for a Nailer

Although roofing nailers vary from one manufacturer to the next, all share some common features. Here are the features I looked at:

Nail lengths. The roof guns I tested all drove fasteners ranging from $7/8$ to $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches. In all cases, switching from one length of nail to another was a simple matter of adjusting a platform in the magazine of the tool.

Performance and resistance to jamming. I designed three tests to evaluate the performance of these tools. My goal was to create test criteria that would eliminate variables in the evaluation. For the first test, I snapped a chalk line on a $1/2$ -inch piece of fir plywood and drove an entire coil into the plywood as fast as I could to see if the guns would jam.

After each test, I looked carefully at the row of fasteners to check the consistency of the depth control. I then drove about half a coil of fasteners through three stacked shingles to see if the guns would have difficulty driving through multiple layers, as in a roof-over or in nailing cap shingles.

Finally, I stacked my fir plywood on scraps of 2x8 and ran another half coil through each gun. My goal here was to see if the nailers would have enough

power to consistently drive the nails into the occasional truss or roof rafter. All of the guns I looked at performed these tests without difficulty, and none showed any tendency to jam.

Generic fasteners were used throughout, and only one of the guns tested had any problem with them: The Hitachi magazine would not close easily with the Prime Source nails I used.

Durability. Shingle installation takes place in a tough environment. Roof temperatures fluctuate greatly, and the gritty asphalt composition of roof shingles presents an unusual hardship on power tools. A tool that isn't designed and built with those conditions in mind simply won't last.

Ease of loading. To my mind, ease of loading is the most important feature of a roofing gun. Roofing guns go through a lot of nails, and time spent changing coils is time wasted.

Depth adjustment and other features. Because

depth is critical to proper shingle installation, an effective and convenient depth-of-drive feature is essential. A shingle with nails driven too deep is likely to rip off in high winds, while nails left proud of the shingle surface will gradually abrade the shingles above and eventually pop through. Guns that don't have this feature use air pressure adjusted at the compressor to control fastener depth, which can be problematic when cool mornings turn to hot afternoons, softening the singles. Turning a knob on the gun is a lot more convenient than climbing down a ladder to adjust air pressure.

All the guns I looked at have exposure guides designed to keep successive courses uniform. They're simple and practically foolproof: Just push the bar against a shingle on the course below, and the nose of the gun comes to rest at the correct height on the course in progress. The Hitachi uses a fixed guide with a 5-inch exposure, while the others have guides that can be adjusted to vary the exposure.



Hitachi NV 45AC

When I first looked at this tool, I noticed the smaller diameter of the driver housing compared to the others, but my suspicion that the smaller piston would mean less power was quickly disproved. This lightweight tool drove fasteners just as well as its heavier competitors. It's also very well designed. The depth-of-drive has an indexed knob that is easily adjusted, and the exhaust port can be rotated without tools. Loading nails into the Hitachi is a bit tedious, though. To load a coil, you have to open the magazine and place the coil inside, close that door, open the door at the nosepiece and place the nails on the index, then close that door.

Makita AN451

This is a well-thought-out tool. The depth-of-drive is adjusted by an indexed thumb-wheel, so drive depths are easily reproduced. The exposure guide can be adjusted without tools, which is handy for temporarily shrinking or stretching exposures on a few courses. Coil changes are easy, thanks to a one-piece door and easily operated latch, but the exhaust port is part of the housing, making it nonadjustable.





Max CN450R

The first thing you notice about this tool is the cool hose swivel — the only one like it in the test. This is an especially nice feature in a gun designed for use on a roof, where a tangled air hose could spell disaster. The Max has a very good depth-of-drive feature and a large thumbwheel that is easy to adjust. It also has a trigger lock to prevent accidental firing. The exhaust port is nonadjustable, and the exposure guide requires a hex wrench. The Max is the most expensive gun in my test.

Paslode 3175

There are no bells and whistles on this tool; it's a basic heavy-duty roof nailer. The exhaust port is nonadjustable. Setting the exposure guide requires a hex key, and there's no depth control. But Paslode's magazine is the best in the test. It opens easily, and because it has only one door, it's easy to keep out of the way while loading a coil. During loading, the loose end of the coil is held in position by a small lever, which keeps the first nail from slipping off the nail advance mechanism. The latch on the magazine is big enough to open while wearing gloves. Overall, this is definitely a pro-quality tool.



Porter-Cable RN175

Although it's the least expensive tool in the test, the RN175 has some unexpected features. It's well balanced and comfortable to use. Unlike some more expensive guns, it has a depth-of-drive adjustment, which is controlled by a very small thumbwheel. I wished the wheel were larger, but it works reasonably well. Changing coils is relatively smooth. The magazine has only one release lever, but getting coils positioned so that it will close is more tedious than with some other models tested. The exhaust is adjustable without tools. This tool has good value, but it doesn't seem to be as well built as the others. Roofing contractors would probably wear it out quickly, but builders who do a few roofs a year could be well served by it.

Senco SCN40R

Senco's never-lube design is a welcome feature of this tool — no more hunting for the leaky bottle of air-tool oil. The thumbwheel depth-of-drive adjustment is sensitive and easy to use. The exposure guide has handy 1/4-inch detents and is adjustable without tools. Because this tool's double-door magazine is more complicated than the one-door designs found on some other guns, changing coils isn't as convenient as it might be. This nailer features a unique nosepiece designed to keep the nail straight when the gun is not perpendicular to the roof surface, though I didn't find that it was very effective. This was also the only nailer to come with a case.



Stanley-Bostitch RN45B

This gun is built like a tank, but it has no depth control. Adjusting the exhaust requires a hex wrench. The exposure guide is solid and stays in position. I especially like the rubber bumper that goes around the housing at the driver end, which reduces wear and keeps the gun from sliding. Bostitch should consider adding a depth-of-drive adjustment on this otherwise quality tool.

Conclusions

Before testing these tools, I would have thought an adjustable depth-of-drive was a must-have feature. But I came away feeling that a well-designed magazine, like Paslode's, might actually be a more important consideration. Overall, the Makita is my favorite

gun, thanks to its good depth adjustment and a decent magazine. If Hitachi redesigned its magazine to be more user friendly, it would be a contender. If Paslode had an adjustable depth-of-drive, it would win hands down.



Manufacturers of Coil Roofing Nailers

Hitachi Power Tools

Norcross, Ga.
800/830-7593
www.hitachi.com/powertools

Makita Power Tools

La Mirada, Calif.
800/462-5482
www.makita.com

Max USA Corp.

Mineola, N.Y.
800/223-4293
www.maxusacorp.com

Paslode

Vernon Hills, Ill.
800/222-6990
www.paslode.com

Porter-Cable/Delta

Jackson, Tenn.
800/487-8665
www.portercable.com

Senco Products Inc.

Cincinnati, Ohio
800/543-4596
www.senco.com

Stanley-Bostitch

New Britain, Conn.
800/343-9329
www.stanleyworks.com