

Tool
Test

18-Gauge Brad Nailers

Now able to shoot 2-in. nails, these small tools are more versatile than ever

BY KIT CAMP

New carpenters used to be told to purchase a 15-ga. or 16-ga. model as their first finish nailer, but now that most 18-ga. models can shoot a 2-in. nail, the smaller and less-expensive brad nailer has become a great all-around choice for trim. Short of hanging doors or installing heavy trim, many carpenters use brad nailers for nearly every finish-carpentry task. Besides being versatile, 18-ga. nailers leave a much smaller hole than 15-ga. and 16-ga. nailers, which is better for stain-grade work and will have the painters that follow you singing your praises.

Both of the 18-ga. brad nailers I use regularly are older models that have been unavailable for years. One of them shoots nails only up to 1¼ in. long. It's great for delicate work but not a good all-rounder.

For this review, I focused on 14 tools that accept 2-in.-long nails. Using 2-in. nails is standard for a lot of common tasks, such as nailing the outer edges of casing, and fastening baseboard and crown molding. I tested these nailers by using them daily in my work as a finish carpenter. I loaded all the tools into a milk crate and pulled two or three out at the beginning of each day, connecting them to a small trim compressor set at 100 psi.

I used these tools for jobs that are pretty typical for 18-ga. nailers: installing door and window casing, baseboard, and cabinet crown. I also tested them in my shop, firing rack after rack of 2-in. and



Cadex CB18.50

Price \$150

Weight 3.4 lb.

Despite its awkward appearance, this tool was my favorite of the test. It operates smoothly and quietly, is relatively compact, and has a feature I love: a built-in air blower. The blower, which is on the front of the housing, is useful for clearing drywall dust and debris when installing base trim. It's also useful for dusting off tools and cleaning up at the end of the day. This nailer has a solid feel, and its performance was excellent. Its front safety, with a wraparound rubber nose, handled funky angles deftly. The only thing missing is a belt hook.

Features air blower, dry-fire lockout, rear exhaust, quick-release nose, swivel air fitting



Let the air out. The built-in blower on Cadex's brad nailer is handy for clearing drywall dust and sawdust from corners and trim. The flow is controlled by a metal trigger you push with your thumb.



Bostitch BT1855

Price \$80

Weight 2.6 lb.

This tool was a pleasant surprise. Despite the excellent reputation of Bostitch nailers, I have never cared for their feel when I've used them in the past. This tool quickly won me over, though. It left very small holes even in the hardest wood, demonstrated excellent power, and was able to shoot 2 1/8-in. nails. It is also an oilless model, which many carpenters who work primarily with stain-grade materials prefer. Its very small front safety provided excellent visibility, but the tool was harder to get engaged at odd angles.

Features dry-fire lockout, rear exhaust, belt hook with pencil sharpener, swivel air fitting



Better belt hook.

Bostitch's belt hook has a built-in pencil sharpener, and it holds the hex wrench used for clearing jams and making repairs. No tools are required for mounting the hook, which fits on either side of the nailer.



Makita AF505

Price \$84

Weight 3.2 lb.

This nailer feels and shoots like a \$200 tool, but it costs just \$84. Everything about it is refined: It has the smoothest magazine operation of any of the nailers, and it is quiet and comfortably heavy. While it's very capable at odd angles, its chunky nose and lack of a dry-fire lockout kept it from being my favorite model. In addition, the removeable safety can fall to the ground when you open the driver housing; I can see it easily disappearing into a pile of shavings.

Features directable exhaust, belt hook, quick-release nose



Red means stop.

The Makita doesn't have a dry-fire lockout, but it does have red indicators that show when the magazine is empty.

1 $\frac{5}{8}$ -in. nails into salvaged, old-growth fir offcuts from a remodeling job. To test power, I fired 2-in. nails into blocks made from three layers of $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. Baltic-birch plywood. All of the tools performed well. Interestingly, I didn't have a single jam during the entire testing period, which speaks well to the overall quality of this group of tools.

The 14 nailers I tested have a host of features that weren't common eight or 10 years ago. Many now have rear exhaust. Those that don't instead have rotating, top-mounted exhausts, so you can direct the blast of air away from your face and from accumulated drywall dust. Almost all of the nailers have a belt hook so that they can be hung from your tool belt or ladder when you need two hands to position the work.

Many models also have a quick-release nose, which allows you to clear jams quickly without tools. All feature depth-of-drive adjustment to keep hole size to a minimum. I found that all of the depth-of-drive adjustments work pretty well, but some get smoother and easier to adjust with time.

All of these nailers feature side-loading magazines. They're about evenly split between composite-plastic and metal construction. I don't really have a horse in this specific race. Of the nailers I own and use every day, all of which have shot countless numbers of nails, three have metal magazines and three have composite.

Some of these tools have the ability to go from single-shot firing to bounce firing. In single-shot (sequential-trip) mode, the tool fires

one nail when the contact is depressed. To fire another, the contact must be released and depressed again, then the trigger pulled. This can be a pain when you're working in awkward spaces. I know this feature is supposed to enhance safety, but I prefer the multiple-shot (bounce-fire) mode. This is how all finish nailers worked before the introduction of selectable triggers, so I don't see the ability to switch between firing modes as very important.

My favorite feature, found in many of the nicer tools, is a dry-fire lockout, which means that the nailer will not fire when the magazine is empty.

Generally, many carpenters have a preference for the position of the safety contact on their nailers. Some models have a plunger behind where the nail exits; others have it in front. Either way, your view is blocked half the time.

Neither the position of the safety nor the size of the nose affected the performance of these tools much in regular use. Only once, with the giant nose on the Makita, was I not able to place a nail where I wanted in an awkward corner. Removing the plastic no-mar tip solved that problem. Surprisingly, I discovered that the larger, wraparound-style safeties like Makita's work better at odd angles.

With a couple of exceptions, I would be happy to use any of these nailers daily. If backed against a wall, I would choose the Cadex as my favorite. Best value is tougher, as most nailers are priced similarly. Again, if forced, I would choose the Bostitch or the Makita. □

Kit Camp is a finish carpenter in San Diego. Photos by Rodney Diaz, except where noted.



Bosch BNS200-18

Price \$97 **Weight** 2.4 lb.

I was excited to test the Bosch nailer because I've never seen one on a job site. In use, it was just OK, and some of the parts, such as the depth adjustment, felt cheap. It struggled to sink 2-in. nails into my hardest test materials. This tool does have an excellent selector switch for the firing mode, but for the money, there are nicer nailers out there.

Features directable exhaust



DeWalt DWFP12231

Price \$80 **Weight** 2.6 lb.

DeWalt and Porter-Cable (below) are both owned by Stanley Black & Decker, so it should be no surprise that their 18-ga. nailers are nearly identical. The only difference is that the DeWalt model has rubber bumpers on the housing. Both nailers are light and oilless, and they have excellent depth adjustment and ample power.

Features rear exhaust, belt hook, quick-release nose

All of the tools performed well. I didn't have a



Paslode T200 500959

Price \$100 **Weight** 2.0 lb.

Though the Paslode is a solid performer and extremely light, it seems outdated in this pack of modern nailers. I found it loud and lacking in some important features. It also left larger-than-average holes in my hard test materials. With its compact nose, however, it does offer excellent visibility.

Features directable exhaust, see-through magazine, quick-release nose



Porter-Cable BN200C

Price \$80 **Weight** 2.4 lb.

This nailer and the DeWalt model are identical except that there are no rubber bumpers on the Porter-Cable's housing. Both are highly capable, with sensitive depth adjustments and excellent power. They are light and oilless, and they have a full range of modern features.

Features rear exhaust, belt hook, quick-release nose



Grex 1850GB

Price \$198 **Weight** 3.0 lb.
The Green Buddy is heavy-duty and quiet. The only feature it's missing is a quick-release nose for clearing jams. It has a nice swivel air fitting and a cutaway at the back of the magazine that helps it fit into corners. This tool did make larger holes than some of the other nailers in the hardest of my test materials.

Features dry-fire lockout, rear exhaust, belt hook, swivel air fitting



Grip-Rite GRTBN200

Price \$90 **Weight** 3.0 lb.
Nearly identical in appearance to the Uffy model, the Grip-Rite has a smooth feel and is a solid performer. The rear safety with its large wraparound rubber tip worked well when nailing at funky angles. This tool also has a short magazine that allows better maneuverability.

Features directable exhaust, belt hook, quick-release nose, swivel air fitting



Hitachi NT50AE2

Price \$70 **Weight** 2.0 lb.
I owned an earlier model of this nailer, but I got rid of it because it didn't work very well. Unfortunately, I got the same sort of performance with this model. It's louder than any other tool, left the largest nail holes, and felt too light to be stable.

Features directable exhaust, cutaway magazine, quick-release nose



Max NF255F/18

Price \$110 **Weight** 2.4 lb.
I really like this tool. The nail holes it left were among the smallest, and it fired extremely consistently in my tests. It also shoots 2 1/8-in. nails. The tool had a different feel depending on which firing mode was selected. If it had dry-fire lockout and came with an air fitting, this tool would be nearly perfect.

Features rear exhaust, belt hook, quick-release nose

single jam during the entire testing period.



Ridgid R213BNE

Price \$98 **Weight** 2.4 lb.
I've heard good buzz about Ridgid's brad nailer over the years, and it didn't disappoint. It proved itself a top performer, it's quiet, and it shoots nails up to 2 1/8 in. long. Moreover, it has every feature found on a modern brad nailer. It has an oilless design, is lightweight, has plenty of power, and has a transparent magazine that allows you to see the nail supply.

Features dry-fire lockout, rear exhaust, belt hook, quick-release nose, swivel air fitting



Senco FinishPro 25XP

Price \$150 **Weight** 2.6 lb.
Though not one of my favorites, the Senco nailer was a standout in the power category. It easily sank nails into my hardest test materials. Carpenters or woodworkers who routinely fire nails into thick, hard materials should take a close look at this tool. It does not have a belt hook or an air fitting.

Features directable exhaust, oilless operation, 2 1/8-in. capacity, 5-year warranty



Uffy 1825XP

Price \$180 **Weight** 2.4 lb.
A relative newcomer to the retail market, Uffy has supplied industrial users for some time and claims that its nailers are made for industrial use. I found this tool to be a no-frills, capable performer. Externally, its look and features are very similar to those of the Grip-Rite. It performed well at odd angles, while shooting quietly and with little recoil.

Features belt hook, rear exhaust, rear wraparound safety



To see a collection of articles and resources on finish carpentry, go to FineHomebuilding.com/extras.