



PHOTOS BY BILL GOVE

The **BLOCKBUSTER MODEL B-2**

Don't be misled if all you see is corn fields in Iowa. Out beyond there's the Batey family, and they know how to build a good firewood processor.

Reviewed by Bill Gove

When I first heard that one of the most popular firewood processors in the US and Canada is made in Iowa, I thought, "what would mid-western corn or hog farmers want with a firewood splitter?" All I had seen for trees in Iowa during my brief sojourn through was a few cottonwoods along the river bank...so what would they know?

How wrong I was.

It seems there are trees there, and an Iowa logger has produced a firewood processor that ranks among the best in the US. In the rural town of Mt. Pleasant, Robert Batey had been an active logger and sawmiller all of his working life. Then at one point he found himself confronted with a problem common to the

industry—how do you use cull logs that are not suitable for lumber?

As an answer he developed a firewood business, and there he eventually evolved the design and the construction of a firewood processor for his family business. Field-tested modifications soon resulted in a machine that found acceptance for sale in the proces-

sor market. Thus was born, in 1987, Blockbuster Inc., a family-operated business.

Blockbuster now makes three different sizes of firewood processors, plus elevators, resplitters, and log carts. Since their B-2 model—the middle one—is the most popular, I thought it advisable to visit a couple of active machines to see for myself what has come

out of the state of Iowa.

Howard Clark of Ballston Spa, New York, got into the firewood business literally by accident. A tree fell on him during a logging mishap 10 years ago, leaving him permanently paralyzed in the legs and seeking another livelihood. Howard turned to the firewood business, but because of his physical condition, he found it essential to mechanize.

Howard bought a Blockbuster B-2 about four years ago, upon recommendation, and says that very little maintenance has been necessary other than routine care. His usual duty while the machine is operating is running the yard tractor while his hired man operates the processor. However, Howard has operated the processor himself, though not without a helper in the yard. The day I visited he was sitting at the kitchen table bemoaning the loss of his helper for part-time operation.

The Blockbuster processor uses a feature that most other manufacturers have not adopted, an air compressor for powering some



Blockbuster B-2 owner Bill Rowe (above) reports trouble-free operation of his machine since he bought it in 1993. With the aid of a compressed air return on the splitting ram, the chainsaw on the B-2 can be started before the ram is retracted (right), making for a quick cycle time.

of the functions normally performed by the hydraulic system. Both the splitting ram and the chainsaw bar are returned to the set position by air pressure, reducing the demand on the hydraulics. The operator then has the hydraulic pressure to begin the next chainsaw cut even while the ram is still receding. The oil tends to keep a little cooler, too. Although Howard Clark has had to replace a troubled air compressor, other operators report no problems with their Blockbuster units.

The B-2 model comes with a standard 5-foot log deck. Most users agree that the length is not enough. Howard extended his to 10 feet, and then for some reason he had trouble with the log settling in the feed

trough after it dropped off the log deck. So he mounted a 2x8 on the back side of the trough to keep the logs from going over the back edge.

Production on Howard's machine is not up to the expectations set by the manufacturer, but in this case it is understandable. The machine and the yard are not set up in an efficient manner, and the part-time help appears to be sporadic. Production rate with small wood is only about 1 cord per hour; with good sized wood production sometimes exceeds 2 cords per hour.

Although Howard sells green firewood in truckload lots, he has set up another marketing operation in a nearby Quonset hut. A bagging operation stuffs a



The B-2 comes with an operator's seat as standard equipment, something Bill Rowe finds useful. Rowe and other users have said the B-2 could use a longer log deck.

cubic foot of split wood in a labeled and sealed plastic bag. The bag wholesales for \$3, and retails at stores for \$5. Because the wood for the plastic bags must be split fairly small, Howard has purchased a Blockbuster resplitter, a small unit set up next to the bagging operation. The resplitter is equipped with

an air compressor.

For his limited production of 600 cords annually, Howard has found the Blockbuster B-2 to be a reliable machine and has no complaints.

Over on the eastern side of the Hudson River in the gentle rolling country which characterizes the

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Working alone, Bill Rowe can split 2 cords an hour... with a helper he can double that production.

Hudson Valley, power company employee Bill Rowe has set up a firewood operation on a part-time basis. His "retirement" plans include an expansion on his one-man operation.

Bill bought a Blockbuster B-2 model back in 1993 and has put many cords through the machine. Its clean appearance, however, attests to the care he has given the machine. Bill echoes Howard Clark's satisfaction with the B-2, and says it has given him no major problems.

Working alone, as he often does, Bill can easily cut and split 2 cords an hour. With a helper he says he can almost double that production; not counting the time required to load

the deck, move the truck and do other small chores.

Although he has no problem with having only two strands on the log deck, Bill also is quite dissatisfied with a deck length of only 5 feet. It just won't hold enough logs. He doesn't like to shut down the processor and load the deck as often as he does. It should be noted that the new Blockbuster models now come with a standard 3-strand log deck.

Bill has no problem dropping the log from the deck into the feed trough, but he did experience an occasional annoyance with the teeth on the feed chain failing to satisfactorily grip the log to advance it in the trough. To overcome the problem, Bill added some



Bill Rowe installed a tongued grate forward of the splitting head to remove fines from his firewood. A conveyor salvaged from a grain elevator carries the waste that drops through the grate away from the machine.

MANUFACTURER'S COMMENTS

Blockbuster manufactures three models: the B-1, B-2 and the BB-JR. All machines are made specifically for hardwoods. These processors are unique in design simplicity, utilizing "off the shelf" components to arrive at a unit which is easy to operate and maintain. All models utilize maximum splitting power. Your choice of 4, 6, or 8-way floating splitter head provides more freedom in log selection and firewood size. Remember, if you are marketing firewood, Blockbuster is marketing your firewood processor. Positively the most portable, dependable, low maintenance, high volume firewood processor built. From price to performance, we're a cord above the rest!

BLOCKBUSTER B-2 SPEC SHEET

MODEL

Blockbuster B-2

POWER UNIT W/HP

Perkins diesel, 4 cylinder, 50 HP

CYLINDER SIZE

5 inches

SPLITTING FORCE

25 tons

SPLITTER CYCLE TIME

8 seconds

HYDR. TANK CAP.

33 gallons

CHAINSAW BAR

30 inches

CHAIN SIZE

.404 inches

WEDGES (STANDARD)

Adjustable, choice of 4, 6 or 8-way

MACHINE WEIGHT

6,400 pounds

TRANSPORT LENGTH

24 feet 6 inches

TRANSPORT WIDTH

6 feet 6 inches

TRANSPORT HEIGHT

7 feet 6 inches

TIRES

Two, 700-15

HITCH

2 5/16 inches ball, or pintle

TROUGH LENGTH

14 feet

FRAME

2 x 4 x 1/4 steel

AXLES

Single, 6,500-pound

DECK

5 foot live deck, three strand

HOURLY PRODUCTION

2 to 3 cords

MAX LOG DIAMETER

22 inches

MAX LOG LENGTH

20 feet

CLAMP STYLE

Bar

OPERATOR'S SEAT

Yes

SALES PRICE (BEFORE OPTIONS)

\$34,500

OPTIONAL EQUIPMENT

Operator's lights; Elevators, 20 and 30 feet; Resplitter; Electric and Stationary units available; 30-inch chainsaw bar with roller nose

MANUFACTURER

Blockbuster Inc.
2756 Kentucky Ave.
Mt. Pleasant, Iowa 52641
(319) 986-5525

higher teeth on some of the chain links. The newer Blockbuster models have a chain tension adjustment located on the idle sprocket at the back end, a feature which Bill considers a good addition. The sawn blocks dropped neatly into the splitting trough and seldom had to be adjusted by hand.

Bill praised the air compressor feature. Not only does it speed up the cycle time, but he appreciates in particular how much cooler the oil runs. He did offer a word of caution, however, concerning operation of the chainsaw. Unlike models by other manufacturers which use an automatic shut-off, the feed trough chain on the Blockbuster will advance while the saw bar is still

down in the cut position.

Speaking of safety, Blockbuster has installed what appears to be an effective safety guard over the curved path of the chainsaw. Saw chains seldom break, and when they do they seldom fly off the bar. But it has happened. For further protection, Bill has installed a Plexiglas face shield window in front of the operator's console, something which now comes as a standard item on Blockbuster's new models.

Bill wanted to keep his wood deliveries clean of trash (bark, small wood pieces, etc.). To do so he made a grate about 16 inches in length at the end of the processor. The small material falls into a ground level conveyor which con-

veys to a box for dumping. Bill salvaged it from a junked grain elevator.

With about 100 different customers for his firewood, Bill has a variety of sizes to cut. But most customers are satisfied with 16-inch lengths. He uses an 8-way wedge exclusively and finds that few pieces have to be handled again for resplitting. Although he has a small concrete pad used for drying wood in windrow piles, almost all of the wood is sold green at \$95 a cord. The minimum quantity Bill delivers is one cord, delivered in the smaller of his two trucks.

Although the Blockbuster B-2 is easily portable, the only time Bill moves it is when it goes from the field into

the barn, for winter operation. For now he sells about 500 cords a year, but Bill has his eye on the active retirement years not very far away.

From these observations of Blockbuster B-2 models used by two operators who favor differing operating techniques, I would have to say that the machine is designed and built well from "off the shelf" components that don't demand much maintenance. So don't be misled if all you can see is corn fields in Iowa. Out beyond there's the Batey family, and they do know how to build a good firewood processor. ■

Bill Gove is a retired forester who last worked for the Vermont Department of Parks and Forests.

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