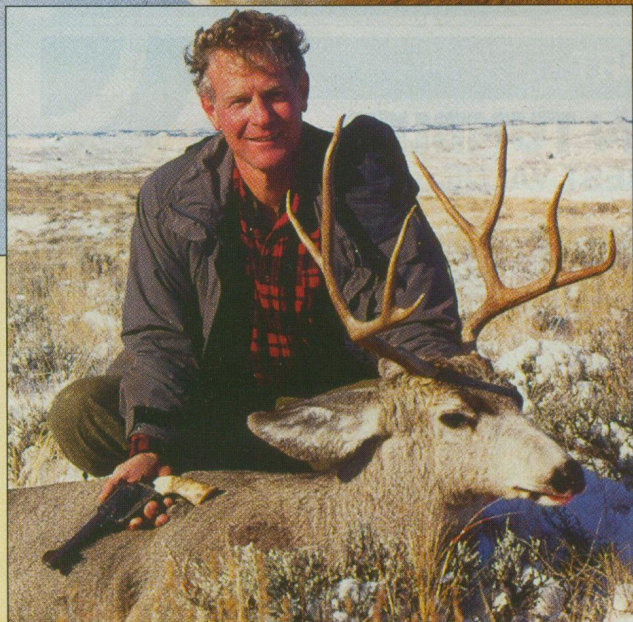
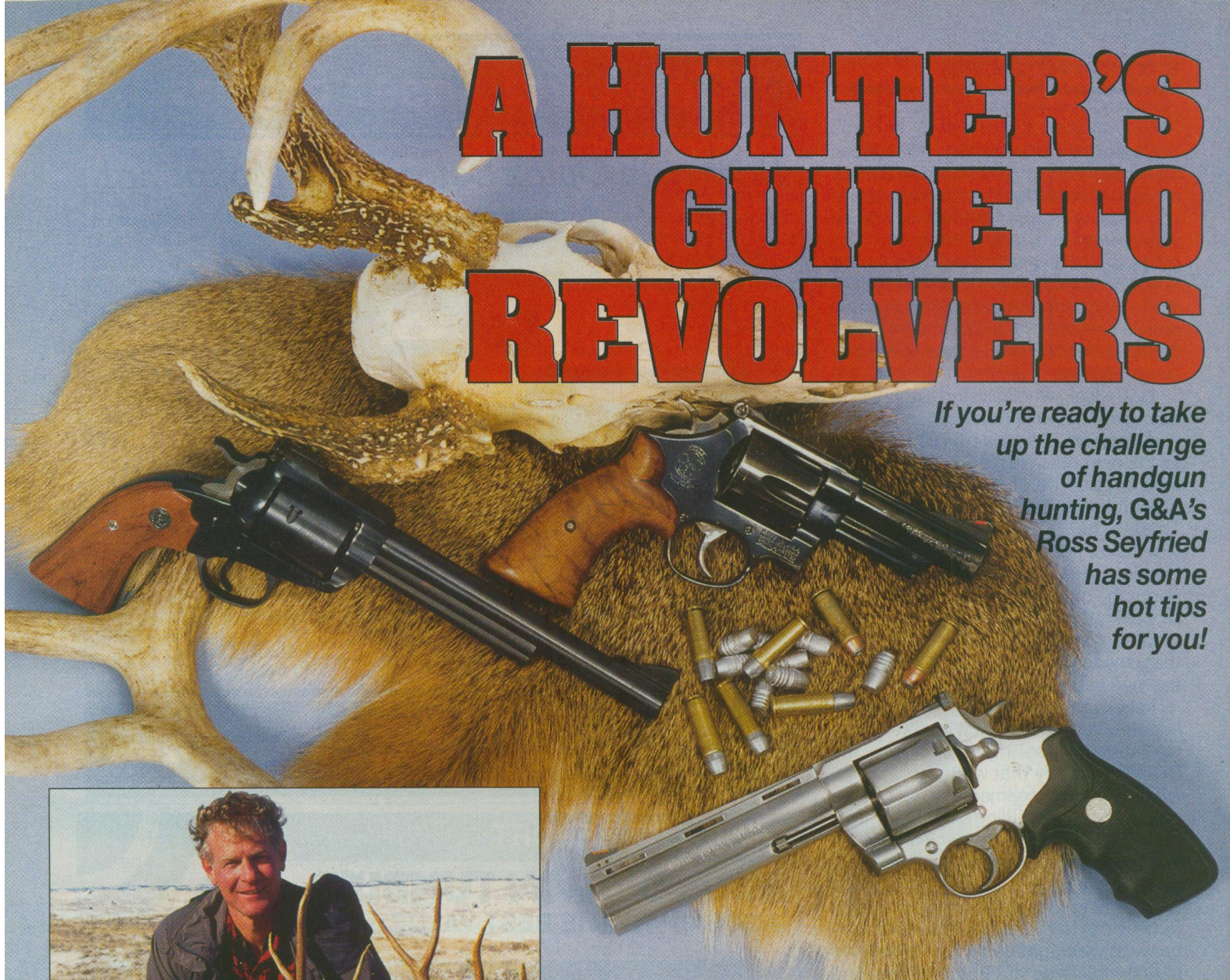


A HUNTER'S GUIDE TO REVOLVERS

If you're ready to take up the challenge of handgun hunting, G&A's Ross Seyfried has some hot tips for you!



Above: Some of the author's favorite hunting revolvers are (clockwise, from left) the 7½-inch Ruger Bisley in .45 Colt, S&W's .44 Magnum Model 29 with a four-inch barrel and a Colt Anaconda with a six-inch tube in .45 Colt chambering. Left: Seyfried took this mule deer with his Hamilton Bowen custom .475 "Maximum" revolver built on a Ruger frame.

Handgun hunters, and especially those of us who enjoy the purest form of the sport, revolver hunting, are living in luxurious times. We not only have some fine hunting revolvers, we have a broad selection. We have guns that are nicely suited to the effective pursuit of everything from rabbits to elephants. I won't pretend to make this an encyclopedia of revolvers. Instead, I will offer an overview of the guns and calibers that I use and my opinions on what works best in the field.

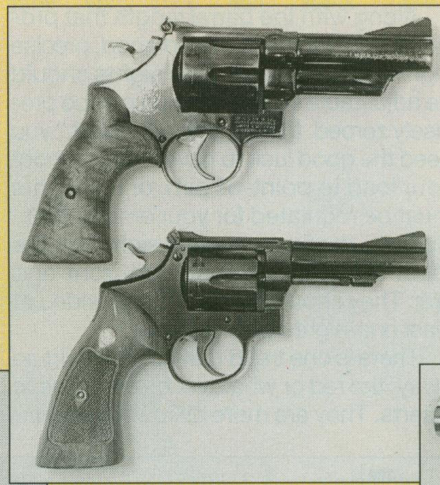
Some of the latest developments have been designed almost totally with the hunter in mind, while others are old standbys. The guns may be suited to many purposes, but we are interested in a gun that you can pick up and specifically go after game with. This is why the "tackle-box," pocket and other survival-type guns won't be mentioned here. In general, they are just too difficult to hit with to be considered primary hunting arms.

The first big choice we have is action

type. Both single and double actions are strongly represented and can be had in everything from .22 to .500 caliber. When we are hunting, the guns will be fired single action, that is, with the hammer fully cocked negating any advantage or disadvantage of the double-action pull. The main difference between the two kinds of revolvers is the way they hold, feel and handle recoil. The double-action guns all have a similar grip frame with a "bump" where they contact the web of your hand. This DA grip shape prevents the gun from shifting in your hand during recoil and, in some ways, may lend itself to a more uniform hold than the single actions. That is, because the grip has more "shape," it tends to force you to hold it in the same place each time. Also, on second or follow-up shots, it is more apt to be in the same place in your hand because it didn't move under recoil. The negative to this is that your hand feels more of the recoil with a DA grip. That bump that keeps the gun from sliding in your hand also applies the recoil force

directly to your upper palm area.

None of this means that the single-action grip is imprecise. Some of the finest shooting I have ever done was with single-action or Ruger Bisley grips. Even though the SA lacks precise "stops," your hand does tend to find a comfortable, repeatable position for each shot. The slip or shift during recoil often requires resettling the gun in your hand between shots, but with a bit of practice this action becomes second nature.



Two veteran hunting revolvers are (top) the author's first .44 Magnum, an S&W M29 and his father's five-screw .22 rimfire S&W M18. These two guns have accounted for hundreds of head of large and small game.



N-frame M29, .44 Magnum

K-frame M19, .357 Magnum

J-frame M34, .22 rimfire

Although the author has carried and used four-inch-barrel handguns like these S&Ws more than any other barrel length, it was because those were what he terms "tools of opportunity." He had them with him and has taken game with them but prefers barrels of 6 to 6½ inches as the ideal compromise between portability and performance.

As you can see, I haven't drawn any hard lines in the sand relative to which action/grip type is best on a hunting revolver. It is almost totally a matter of personal preference. The one definite I can offer is that the felt recoil, with heavy calibers, is far more pleasant with the single-action grip. Where a standard 250-grain .44 Magnum load gets somewhat punishing in an S&W, it is a pussycat in a single-action revolver of the same weight.

Possibly the most important option on a hunting revolver is barrel length. The length of the barrel controls the velocity of the cartridge to some degree and has a major effect on shootability. That is, our

longer is better. Within reason, the velocity of the magnum cartridges will increase with barrel length. The amount of increase depends on the powder type, bullet weight and cartridge itself, but picking up 100 fps or more from four inches to eight inches isn't uncommon.

As the barrels get longer and sight radius increases, the ease of hitting grows exponentially. Where precise shooting is almost (but not completely) impossible with a 2½ inch barrel, a revolver with a 10-



Above: These massive stainless DA revolvers are the Ruger Super Redhawk .44 Magnum (top) and the new .45 Colt Anaconda. Custom gunsmith Hamilton Bowen can convert the Ruger to a five-shot .45, .475 or .500, offering extreme power in a double action.



These excellent single-action stainless steel hunting revolvers are (top) Ruger's Super Blackhawk Hunter in .44 Mag., with integral scope bases in its rib, and the Freedom Arms .45 Colt, which Seyfried feels is as powerful as the .454 Casull and more practical.

inch barrel begins to shoot like a rifle. Nearly 20 years ago, Dick Martel and I, in a fit of "lack of anything better to do" and nearly as a joke, screwed a 10½-inch barrel into a Ruger Super Blackhawk. The thing shot like poison and was incredibly effective even on moving or flying targets. This was a real eye-opener to a young fellow who had associated with Elmer Keith and his notion that nothing quite matched a four-inch barrel for "balance and fine shooting." The fact that



Cartridges for hunting revolvers cover the gamut of size and performance from the factory .22 rimfire to the custom .500 Maximum.

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Elmer was so skilled that his sight radius almost didn't matter didn't occur to me for another 10 years.

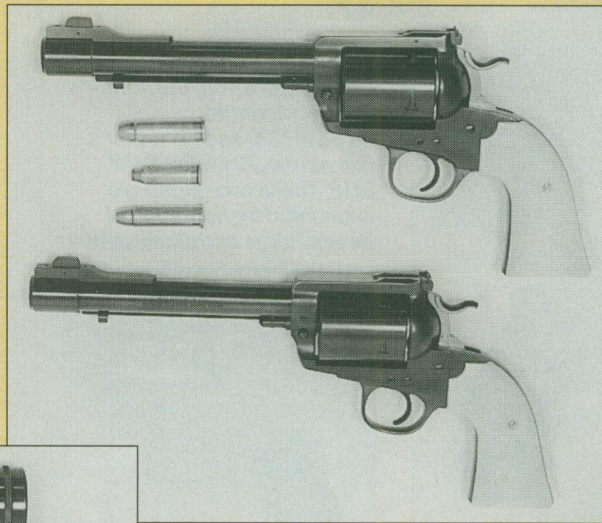
With those thoughts, it seems simple to choose a barrel length. We immediately conclude that 8, 10 or even 12-inch barrels are just the ticket. However, there is a catch, at least when I write the story. This is about hunting revolvers—handguns—not short rifles or other contraptions. With this in mind, we not only have to be able to hit with, but be able to live with, the revolvers. We want to be able to carry them effortlessly in the field, not with a sling, but in a belt holster or a reasonable shoulder holster. Now, we are confronted with just the opposite barrel benefit—the shorter the better. The trick with a fine hunting revolver comes with an intelligent, personal compromise. The truth lies from four inches to 7½ inches or, at absolute maximum, S&W's "8¾" tubes.

Along with the barrel length that provides sight radius, we need good, precise sights. In most cases, the sights should be adjustable so that the gun can be precisely zeroed. If the sights are "fixed," you need the good luck to have the gun shoot your load to point-of-aim, or the sights must be regulated for your ammunition. Actually, the finest hunting sights are the most common—the square front and rear. They should be generously wide...at least one-eight inch.

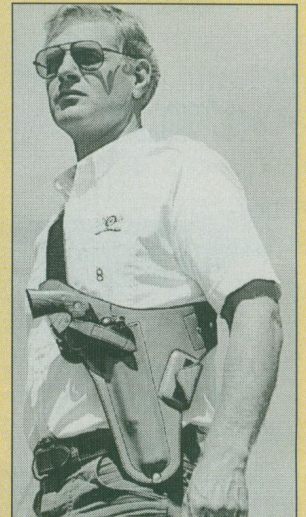
There is one trend that I wish would go away: the red or whatever colored plastic inserts. They are more difficult to see un-

alignment error. To the purist like myself, they relegate the hunting revolver into the "other" category. I hunt with a handgun for exactly one reason—challenge. The challenge to hunt better, get closer and to prize the final success or failure more highly than I would with other means. The one pure excuse for using optical sights is failing eyesight that won't let you see the iron. Here, the optics allow you to continue to enjoy the sport of handgunning. Otherwise, when you screw a scope on your revolver you have to make peace with yourself.

Almost as important as sights is the



This matched pair of Hamilton Bowen custom Maximums represents the extreme in the evolution of the hunting revolver. The bottom gun is chambered for .475, while the top five-shooter is in .500 caliber. The center cartridge is a .44 Magnum shown for size comparison.



This outstanding form-fitting holster made by Von Ringler carries longer-barrel revolvers better than any other method. This rig is made to the author's specifications using a hook-and-loop fastener instead of snaps or buckles.



In the author's opinion, this Freedom Arms .454 Casull with a telescopic sight and sling swivels has gone beyond acceptance as a hunting revolver. Although its performance is outstanding, Seyfried feels that it has become too large and is relegated to "other" status.

Any barrel longer than 6½ inches gets unwieldy in a belt holster and is best carried in a shoulder rig.

I have carried and used four-inch guns more than any other barrel length, but these were usually tools of opportunity. That is, I lived with the gun on my belt and took game with it, "because it was there." As I began to leave camp carrying a revolver with the premeditated idea of securing meat for the table or a trophy, I graduated to six or 6½-inch barrels. I still favor that length as the approach to perfection where both portability and hits are concerned. Recently, however, I have taken to leaving some of the 7½-inch barrels on my Ruger Bisleys uncut. I don't use them all of the time, but when I really want an edge, these are the guns I turn to. With the discovery of Von Ringler's superb form-fitting shoulder holster, I can carry these long guns almost without knowing they are there.

der low light and are easily nicked and worn so that they do not present a flat, precise surface. Plain black sights or Keith gold bar or bars are the answer to hunting sights. Another unwise choice is the "V" notch and bead. This is the classic "express" sight as used on double rifles. The idea behind it is a quick, relatively precise sight picture, and it works just great on a rifle. However, when you shorten the sight radius to handgun dimensions, where the relationship between front and rear becomes critical to the thousandth of an inch, the express sight fails. It just won't hold windage or elevation to the fine degree we require. As far as speed is concerned, the square notch is fast, very fast.

We can't leave hunting sights without mentioning scopes and other optical sights. They are extremely effective, making a hit 50 to 100 percent easier than an iron sight. They simply eliminate sight

trigger pull on your revolver. Out of the box, the double actions certainly have the edge. Smith & Wesson particularly has not succumbed to "lawyer-proof" triggers. A Smith comes out of the box with a light, breaking-glass release. If you turn one over to a fine gunsmith, they can be tuned until they release almost by mental impulse. Some of the other DAs and certainly the Ruger single actions need the help of a good gunsmith. The pulls are usually heavy and very long (with considerable creep). I won't say that you can't hit with this kind of trigger pull, but it makes the job one heck of a lot tougher. I personally like a pull between two and three pounds. If done by a skilled gunsmith, they can be perfectly safe at this weight. While lighter pulls can be had, they become difficult to "feel," especially if your hands are cold.

When we talk about guns themselves, there are so many suited to hunting that they would fill a small book. Possibly the best I can do is to illustrate a few of my favorites or some that are stand-out per-

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formers. This will give you some basis for finding your personal preferences.

At the lower end, the .22 Long Rifle takes some serious beating. It may answer as a small-game revolver better than all of the other choices put together. The first handgun I saw in action was my dad's old S&W four-inch K-frame



Good sights are essential on any hunting revolver. Plain black square-notch sights are ideal. Gimmicks other than Keith gold bars should be avoided.

Masterpiece. This old five-screw gun is silky smooth, extremely accurate and pure poison on jack rabbits. It was this gun that taught me that handguns could hit things rather than make noise! If you like a lighter, "minimum" gun, the J-frame Smiths and similar-size DAs are perfect. The Ruger Single Six and Bearcat fill in the "little" .22 single actions.

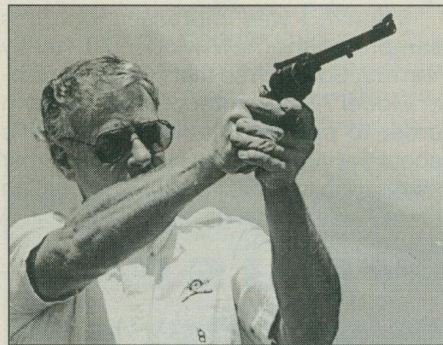
Another favorite small-game caliber, that can now be counted on for medium varmints, is the .32 bore in guise of .32 Magnum and .32-20. Those of you who read much about my guns know that my "baby" Bisley Ruger .32 Magnum ranks as one of my all-time favorite firearms. I'm not sure that I could prove that this gun has a purpose, other than possibly being the perfect revolver for wild turkeys, but I like it. Like the .22 counterparts, the small J-frame S&W is a dandy little gun. However the mid-size revolvers with a bit more weight and wobble-damping capability make hits easier. The .32-20 seems to have been around forever, chambered in full-size Colt Single Actions and Ruger Blackhawks. The old .32-20 Colt is one of the more common black-powder calibers. Again, I'm not sure exactly what they are for, but as an entertainment committee with low recoil and a nice "zap," they may be ahead of any other bore size.

When we move into the .38/.357-caliber revolvers, we hop out of the river into the flood. You name it, and you can have it—any size, shape, action, barrel, maker or price your heart could desire. I prefer

the mid-size frames for this bore but confess my use of a .357, as a hunter, has dwindled to almost zero. My .32s have replaced them as small-game toy guns, and the .357 really isn't enough gun to be considered even as a small whitetail caliber. Yes, it will work, but the margin is so small that I won't use it.

The next caliber is one that I don't use at all and lurks around in the shadows of success, except for those who are disciples. The .41 Magnum is neither fish nor fowl, unless you like it. My friend Wayne Bosowicz, the famous Maine bear guide, lives with a .41 caliber. It is doubtful that many men have flattened more black bear than Wayne, and he says the .41 is a pure black-bear sledgehammer. He has a perfect scientific reason for using the .41 as well. He went to the store to buy a .44, and they didn't have one. He settled for the little brother, and it has worked perfectly ever since.

I expect I've worn out more .44 Magnum revolvers than most folks will be lucky enough to own. It started life in the Model 29 S&W and, in that guise, may well be the most recognizable revolver, if



One of Ross Seyfried's favorite revolvers, and one that makes an ideal hunter, is the Ruger Bisley model. Here he fires a 7½-inch version.

not firearm, in the world. It certainly is the one that taught the world that the handgun was indeed a hunting arm for big game. Our own Robert E. Petersen was one of the true pioneers of the sport of big-game handgunning. Armed with his nicked Smith and the old Norma Triclad, flat-point bullets, he collected many of the significant game animals of the world. My own pets, due purely to Elmer Keith's influence, have been four-inch 29s. With these guns, I've captured lots of critters from Colorado to Africa. Between this double-action version and the other classic, the Ruger Super Blackhawk, I expect you could tally 75 percent of the big-game handgun hunting in the world. Even though there isn't the vast selection of .44s found in the .38s, it may be in second place. Virtually every revolver maker turns out a .44 Magnum, ranging from the big, double-

action brutes like the Colt Anaconda and Dan Wesson to the relatively streamlined copies of the single-action Colt.

The next step up in bore size to .45 puts us in never-never land. The .45s are stuck between feeble black-powder performance and the .454 Casull. Factory ammunition, and to a great degree loading data for the .45 Colt, is still limited by the ancient black-powder Colts. Some of the progressive loading manuals list data for "Ruger revolvers" that gets most of the way from the black-powder world to the .44 Magnum. We have a fine crop of modern, strong revolvers chambered for

"Possibly the most important option on a hunting revolver is barrel length."

the .45 Colt, including the new Colt Anaconda, which has enough steel wrapped around its chambers to handle any reasonable load. The same can be said for the Rugers, Dan Wessons and to a lesser degree the S&Ws. In most cases, if there is an equal amount of steel around the chambers (as compared to the .44 Magnums), the .45 Colt should easily handle the same pressure. However, even by reducing the pressure 25 percent, down to 30,000 CUP from the .44 Mag's 40,000, the .45 Colt will push a 300-grain bullet 1,300 fps. This is about 50 fps more than the .44 Magnum will do with the same bullet weight...with its higher pressure. If the .45 Colt is loaded to the same pressure as the .44, it becomes a one-sided contest; add to this the .45's greater frontal area, and we simply have more gun.

With all of this in mind, the dedicated handloader can arm himself with the finest out-of-the-box hunting revolvers in existence. The Colt Anaconda or the Ruger Bisley chambered for .45 Colt become a match for any game in North America. We can step up to bullets in the 325- to 350-grain range that will allow us to wade right into moose and brown bear without having to send a boy to do a man's job.

The next group of revolvers are truly in a class by themselves. They are the most versatile, effective hunting handguns on Earth. These are the five-shot .45s, either the Bowen and Linebaugh custom guns or the factory production Freedom Arms. We now shed the dowdy feathers that hold the .45 in check and run pressures up to 50,000 CUP in the bank-vault strong revolvers. The production Freedom Arms guns can be had in either .454 Casull or the more practical, special-order .45 Colt chambering. Linebaugh reworks Ruger single

actions, and Bowen offers either Ruger single-action or double-action five-shooters based on the Redhawk. I personally do not like the Redhawk for this purpose because of the aforementioned recoil qualities, but many shooters prefer them. For myself, if I have to pick an all-time favorite, no-holds-barred hunting revolver, it is the latest Bowen .45 Colt based on the Ruger Bisley. These guns feature cylinders individually made and line-bored to each frame and Pac-Nor match barrels. They are quite simply the epitome of power and efficiency. The Bisley grip makes even the most violent recoil manageable, and the lines of the revolver make even a plain-finish gun a thing of beauty. If forced to trim my handgun battery to one, it would be a Bowen/Bisley .45 Colt with a six-inch barrel. The five-shot .45 can function all the way down to the original .45 Colt power level, something on the order of a 200-grain bullet at 850 fps. Alternately, to even my surprise, it will step right up and rub shoulders with the thunderous great .475 by throwing the 412-grain LBT bullets at 1,300 fps. In the middle ground of everyday working loads, the 300- to 350-grain bullets can be driven from 1,400 to 1,700 fps depending on the barrel length and load. With this one caliber, we can cover the spectrum of hunting from small game to being considered adequate, in expert hands, against buffalo and even elephant.

The last stop on the hunting revolver journey is at the super giants, the .475s


and .500s, using 1.4-inch and 1.6-inch case lengths. They can be had in the same guise as the five-shot custom .45s. Where pure top-end horsepower is concerned, they edge out the .45s by driving 430- and 450-grain bullets in the 1,300 to 1,500 fps range. At the top power level, with the "maximum" cartridges in guns based on the Ruger .357 Maximum frames, recoil becomes purely brutal. The guns are no longer fun to shoot; they almost become tools of pure effect against iron-plated game. They respond some-

"Actually the finest hunting sights are the most common—the square front and rear."

what to "reduced" loads, allowing the use of "light" 380-grain bullets at 1,000 fps. With this type of loading, they recoil somewhat like a very heavily loaded .44 Magnum and can be effective against deer-size game.

With so many choices, what is the perfect hunting-revolver battery? This, of course, depends on your objectives and purse. If you want only one gun and one that allows the use of factory ammunition at reasonable performance levels, the choice must be the .44 Magnum. A hand-loader would do well to consider a .45 Colt. I personally pick the Ruger Bisley above all others. If you want to invest \$1,000 or more, get a .45-caliber five-shooter, and you are set for anything.

If we expand to a real battery with a choice of several guns, I go at it this way: I want a four-inch-barrel, small-frame .22 as a minimum gun. Then I would add a .32 Magnum with a four to six-inch barrel for centerfire fun on varmints and turkeys. Next is the .45-caliber five-shooter or .44 Mag with a 7½-inch barrel. This is the gun that gets the call when I really want to get involved in the demanding sport of handgun hunting for big game. Finally, we top it off with a .475, using the 1.4-inch case. This will be a 5½- or six-inch Bisley. I chose this one mostly "because it is there" and perhaps because I might be lucky enough to hunt a lion or to stalk buffalo again someday.

The hunting revolver is a wonderful tool that adds an extreme challenge to the hunt. You should beware of two pitfalls. First, beware of adding gadgets, devices and contraptions that degrade the integrity of your revolver. Then, don't ask it to do too much. Get close and place your first shot. Even more important, be prepared to walk away without ever pulling the trigger. Armed with a pure revolver we are hunting. Killing has become very unimportant. 

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