

## Ross Seyfried

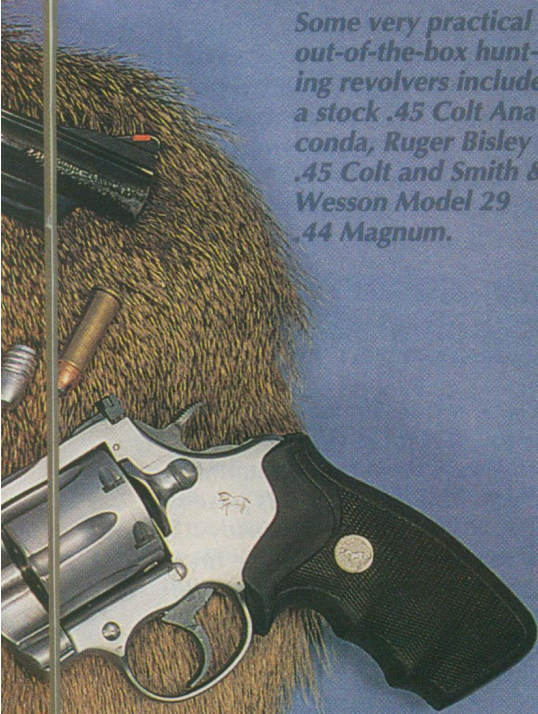
**F**ew pursuits in the hunting world are as challenging or rewarding as *hunting* big game with a handgun. For me it is important to separate the handguns from other types of arms, which in turn helps draw the line between hunting

and technological killing. If you play on my field, by my rules, one hunts with handguns for the same reason you might use a muzzleloader – difficulty. If the end result becomes as easy with a “handgun” as it is with a scope-sighted rifle, we have missed the point. So we begin by defining a handgun and then looking at some pieces I like and use, as well as studying the loads that make them humanely lethal once the hunter has done his part.



# Heavyweights in .44, .475 and .50 caliber.

Some very practical out-of-the-box hunting revolvers include a stock .45 Colt Anaconda, Ruger Bisley .45 Colt and Smith & Wesson Model 29 .44 Magnum.

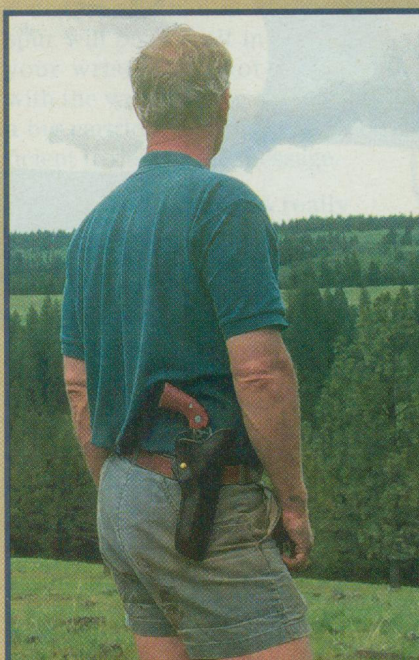


The last few decades have spawned some kinds of arms that are not part of this discussion. These are generally scope-sighted single shots. They come in a variety of sizes, shapes and styles. As often as not, they are also chambered for a cartridge that would appear normal in a bolt-action

rifle. However they are designed or whatever they are called, they are not *handguns* by my definition. I certainly have nothing against them or those who use them. They are fine and usually spectacularly accurate pieces – but they are something else.

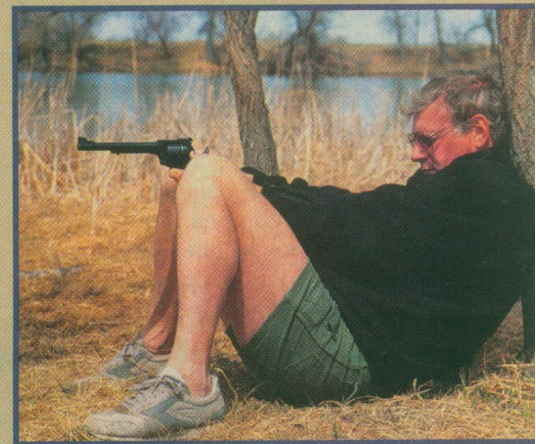
Auto pistols occupy a gray area in my definition. They can be hunting handguns in the purest sense. I have carried my Colt .45 autos in some very special places and taken game with them. There was a time in the Rhodesian war when the Colts were both security blankets and suppliers of meat for our crew, but they really were made for the first cause. Other, exceptionally large frame autos leave my sense of aesthetics and shootability completely cold. Also, a true handgun should be at home on your belt, ruling out the king-sized autos. Thus, when we cut to the chase, my hunting handguns go round and round. Hunting handguns are revolvers.

Within the large family of revolvers personal choice and power requirements will help narrow the choices. The most basic categories are single and double action. Elmer Keith had and still has a profound influence on the world of handgun hunters. Like so many others, my world of handgun hunting is his fault. If you were a student of his work in the 1960s and 1970s, there was little choice when it came to a hunting handgun. We simply gravitated to S&W .44 Magnums. If you were a purist, the barrel was 4 inches long – unless you were fully



addicted, then the barrel would be the rarest of the rare, a 5 inch. From this it would seem hunting handguns must be double-action revolvers. But it is important to keep in mind that at least a large portion of the reason he favored the .44 Smiths was simply power. At its in-

*A single action with a 7.5-inch barrel is wonderfully precise and can be the perfect choice for the dedicated handgun hunter who wants to maximize range and accuracy.*



ception the S&W .44 Magnum was the biggest game in town.

If we look slightly deeper into the great master's handgunning, single-action revolvers are very prominent. Generally they were Colts, often custom Colts, that remain the benchmarks for fine revolvers. His No. 5, a Model P/Bisley hybrid, is one of the finest hunting revolvers ever created, and it was absolutely one of his favorites. But, as we know, Elmer was about horsepower. If No. 5 were a .44 Magnum, he might have never carried a Smith, but its moderate .44 Special chambering relegated it to top-drawer, instead of right-hip, status.

Today the tables have turned. The double action is certainly not the end-all of revolver power. In fact it is just the beginning. Super power today is best housed in a few single actions with the double-action revolvers best suited to the light- and middle-power levels. As we will see later, the best combination of

*A 5.5-inch Bisley in a Milt Sparks holster is an ideal compromise between portability and sight radius.*



strength and recoil control will be found in a single action.

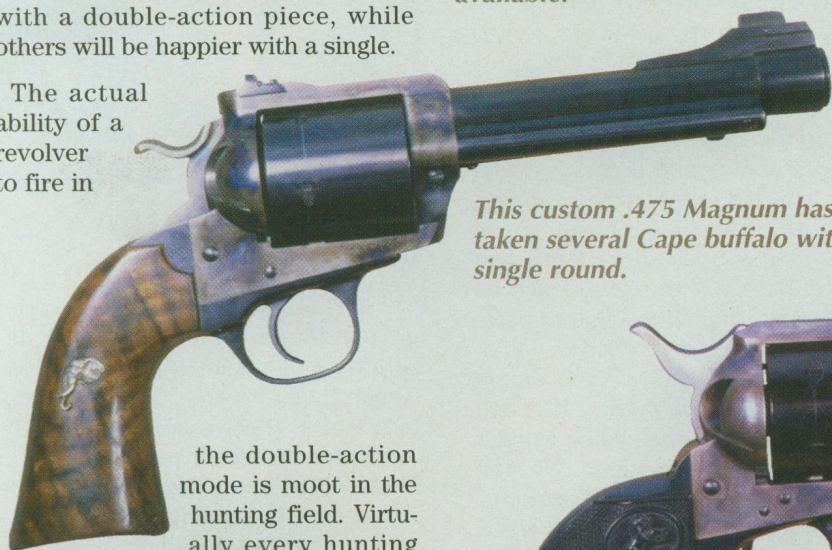
While power is often an important criteria, the ability to apply that power must always be the paramount choice for a handgunner. Handguns, even more than rifles, demand perfect bullet placement. Handgunners must give serious consideration to the kind of revolver that will allow them to do their best shooting. There are several factors that contribute to shootability: trigger pull, sights, sight radius, grip shape and size, recoil management and balance. There are no clear-cut choices. Some hands, minds and eyes will be more at home with a double-action piece, while others will be happier with a single.

The actual ability of a revolver to fire in

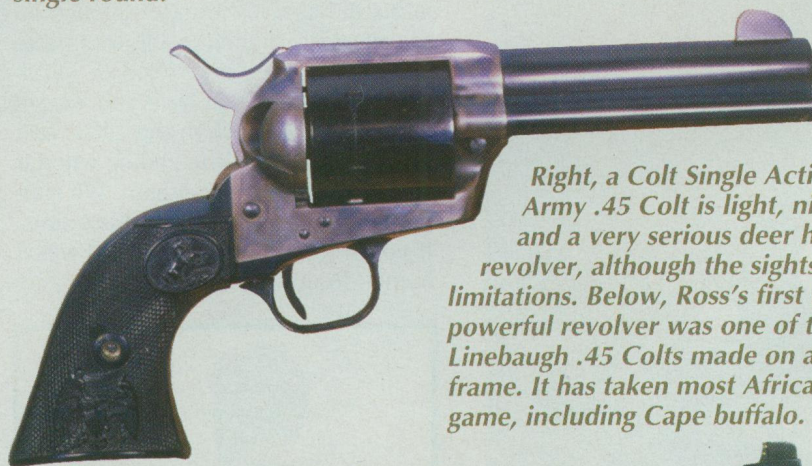
the double-action mode is moot in the hunting field. Virtually every hunting shot should be fired from the full-cock, single action, regardless of the gun's design. Therefore, both single- and double-action guns can be judged on their single-action ability. It is extremely rare to find single-action revolvers with the same trigger-pull quality as the better double-action revolvers. Exceptional single-action pulls have always been standard equipment on S&W revolvers, right out of the box. At the same time most single-action guns come from the store with moderate to poor trigger quality. Fortunately, skilled gunsmiths can put a first-class release on almost any action. Depending on the individual shooter, handgun trigger pulls should be between 2½ and 3½ pounds and either be like the proverbial



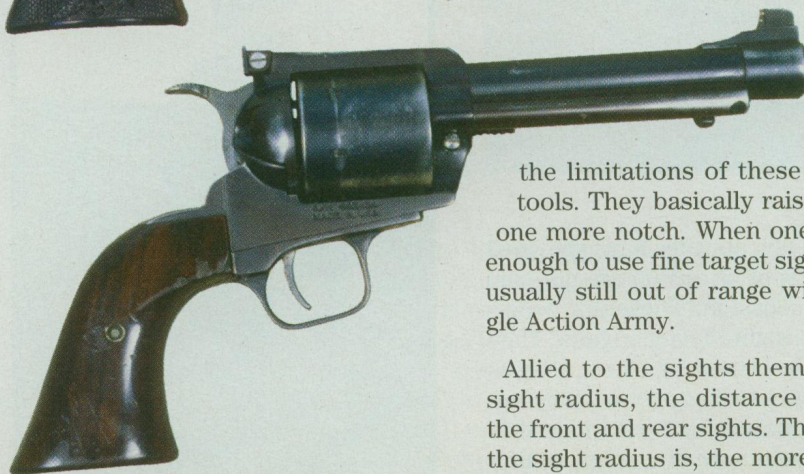
*Ross's long-suffering Model 29 has taken big game in North America and Africa. This "Keith" hunting revolver is still among the best available.*



*This custom .475 Magnum has taken several Cape buffalo with a single round.*



*Right, a Colt Single Action Army .45 Colt is light, nimble and a very serious deer hunting revolver, although the sights pose limitations. Below, Ross's first truly powerful revolver was one of the first Linebaugh .45 Colts made on a Seville frame. It has taken most African big game, including Cape buffalo.*



the limitations of these minimal tools. They basically raise the bar one more notch. When one is close enough to use fine target sights, he is usually still out of range with a Single Action Army.

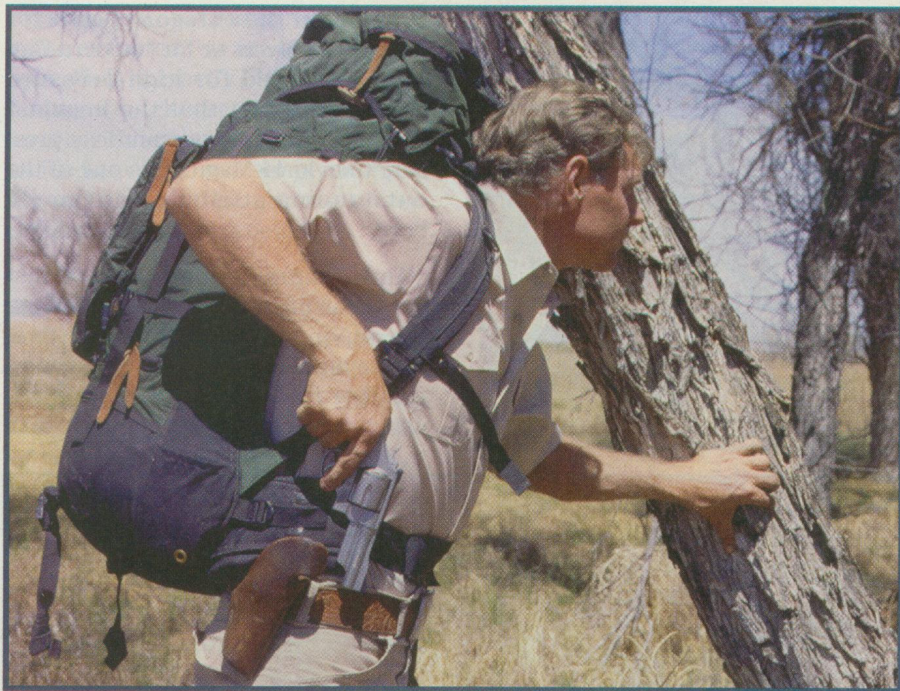
Allied to the sights themselves is sight radius, the distance between the front and rear sights. The shorter the sight radius is, the more difficult

break- ing glass rod, or extremely smooth and consistent with just a little "creep."

While trigger pulls are important to a handgunner, sights rule his world. Nothing, but nothing, controls the hits as much as the sights. Revolvers with adjustable "target" sights should always be a hunter's first choice. Generally, these will have a square rear notch and a flat-topped front blade. Target sights not only promote very precise sight alignment, but they also permit the revolver to be zeroed to perfection.

Some have attempted to promote the classic British V express sight for handguns. While they are moderately practical on a double rifle, they are all but useless on a handgun. Actually, the very best sights for a dangerous game rifle are square-notch handgun sights. If a hunter uses "fixed" sights of any kind, it is important to regulate or zero those sights so the bullets strike the point of aim. Many classic single actions – Colts, Ruger Vaquero and Colt clones – have rounded blade front sights and a trough in the frame to serve as the rear sight. While this is relatively poor sighting equipment, good shooting can be done with them if the shooter practices and is aware of





*The Smith & Wesson Mountain Gun in .44 Magnum or .45 Colt can be a tool of opportunity for hunters with large packs who prefer small six-guns with plenty of punch.*

the shooter's task. Snubbies are really tough to hit with, even though the short barrels are inherently very accurate. The short sight radius magnifies any sighting error. Conversely, extremely long barrels, in the 8- and 10-inch class, make hitting relatively easy. Perhaps the longest barrel that remains fully portable is 7½ inches, with the magic compromise between portability and shootability in the 5- and 6-inch range.

I believe handgunners can make too much of grips. Grossly incorrect grips can be in the way, but no grip is the magic answer to hits. Also, hunters should always shoot with both hands, which negates some of the subtle relationship between one hand and the gun handles. Generally a grip that feels good in your hands will work just fine. Handles that are much too large work against hits. The famous Jordan Trooper grip is a classic example. They were perfect for their designer, our late friend Bill Jordan, but we must not forget Bill was a giant of a man on all counts. His hands took two wraps on a normal coffee cup. A grip that fit him is not suited to most of us. The flip side is the little S&W Magna grips that just barely cover the straps. These are too small for almost every hand, making the grips difficult to "feel"

and hold consistently. These little stocks are also absolutely brutal with any reasonable recoil level.

Grips and frame style are important factors when recoil is significant. Double-action frames with their hump that stops in the web of the hand make recoil seem much more severe to most shooters than the rounded contour of the classic single-action grip. If the recoil is painful, it works against precision. At the extreme power and recoil levels found in the heaviest .45s, .475s and .500 bore revolvers, the once comfortable single-action grip begins to fail dramatically. With super recoil levels the single-action grip actually allows the revolver to rotate in the hand to such a degree the hammer spur will bury itself in your wrist. One shot with the wrong frame and a big cartridge is usually sufficient to deliver the message.

When the going gets really tough, we see what I believe to be the finest handgun grip ever made come into its own. This is the Ruger Bisley, which is not a "Bisley" at all but essentially

*Hunting revolvers must fit into practical holsters. Right is a Colt Single Action Army in a Milt Sparks rig; the Bisley (far right) is shown in Dick Murray leather that is designed for maximum protection.*

the Keith No. 5, or a cross between the Colt Single Action and Bisley grip frames. They offer the smooth configuration of the single action but with a higher profile that stops the recoil-roll. Essentially they give you single-action comfort with maximum recoil control. Best of all, the Bisley grip is equally suited to mild-mannered revolvers.

Balance is difficult to measure. It is one of those intangibles in long-guns and even more mysterious in revolvers. Still, it can have an effect on hits. For me, there is some similarity between handgun and rifle balance. If the handgun or rifle balances "perfectly" with the center of gravity exactly between the hands, in the case of a rifle, or exactly "on the hand" in a revolver, they seem to float. Where great speed is concerned, in fighting pistols or bird guns, this is a good idea. Arms of precision perform better for me if they are just a bit barrel heavy. Elmer's classic 4-inch Model 29 balances perfectly but is less solid in my hands than a piece with a bit more barrel weight. The light barreled S&W Mountain Gun carries the concept even farther in that it feels and floats like a feather in my hands, making it difficult to shoot to perfection.

With the basic revolver more or less defined, we can look at the "part" that no one overlooks, *power*. Today the power and performance choices go beyond Elmer's wildest







*Above, the Ruger Bisley .32 H&R Magnum is in reality a varmint handgun. Right, Number 13 is a Hamilton Bowen masterpiece chambered for the .475 Magnum. It was commissioned to be the finest revolver ever made.*



dreams. Now, the .44 Magnum is where powerful hunting revolvers begin. It is still a good hunting caliber, but it is a pipsqueak when compared to the .45 Colt, .475- and .500-caliber "heavies." Before we get caught up in too much power, let's investigate what might be too little "punch."

In the realm of deer-hunting handguns, there are many choices. The bottom line certainly hovers somewhere around the small "magnums," being the .32 and .357. In my opinion the .32 H&R is inadequate for deer, even when loaded to maximum performance levels. Yes, it will take them, but the same can be said for the .22 Long Rifle. The .357 is on the edge of being a big game revolver. Loaded properly with plenty of bullet (please, no 110-grain hollow-points), it can be used as a deer gun, but I would not push it any farther. The .41 Magnum is, as always, a bit confused. It is neither large nor small. At times it has been praised for its "flat shooting" capability. Unfortunately flat trajectory and handgun are words that do not fit in the same sentence. Handguns all have trajectory like greased bricks – if the range is long. If the range is under 100 yards, trajectory more or less does not matter. Thus, we cannot praise a handgun caliber because it "shoots flat." Like the .357, the .41 works okay, but it will always be on the light side as a hunting caliber. Of course, for its few die-hard fans nothing is better, clearly pointing out

that it is the man behind it, rather than the gun itself.

The .44 Magnum is obviously the base line for hunting calibers. It is fine deer medicine. The correctly fed .44 Special is also perfectly suited to deer-sized critters. The .44 can also be a "bear" gun, just as long as we realize we are sending a boy to do a man's job. If the load is similar to standard, that is, with 240-grain bullets in the 1,200- to 1,400-fps range, the .44 is very minimal if the game weighs more than 200 pounds. With heavier, correctly designed bullets the .44 can rub shoulders with the ideal hunting caliber, the .45.

Nothing, but nothing, can compare to the .45 as a day-to-day, workhorse hunting caliber. Now, I am not referring to the "squib" loads reserved for "weak, blackpowder arms." These are little more than .45 ACP loads in a long case. The heaviest loads listed in most manuals for the "Colt" revolvers are certainly adequate for deer, but they are a long way from putting the .45s best foot forward. Instead, we are talking about loads that begin with 260-grain bullets at 1,000 fps and range upward to 300-grain bullets at 1,300 fps. These loads can be found in the

manuals in the category listed for "Ruger" revolvers or for "modern firearms designed for high-pressure loads." The fact that the heaviest ones have fully 25 percent less pressure than a .44 Magnum is one of the outstanding attributes of the .45 bore.

As we move beyond the heaviest loads for normal six-shot cylinders, the super-heavy loads for the five-shot cylinders await. The five shooters live in a realm all their own, using riflelike pressures to drive 300-

to 360-grain bullets in the 1,400- to 1,600-fps range – if a hunter wants that much power. A delightful part of the "big" .45s is that they perform happily at the normal six-shot throttle setting. The infamous .454 Casull must be included in this discussion. It matches the five-shot .45 Colt but really offers nothing more than the Colt, from a hunter's perspective.

There are two more calibers that have elevated hunting handguns beyond "handgun" status. These are the .475- and .500-caliber arms. They fit in the same niche as true heavy rifles, that is those with bores over .416 inch. Only the rare instance requires them, and only the rare man can apply their power with adequate precision. Here bullets in the 400- to 450-grain range are driven around 1,300 fps. Terminal punch and recoil are about even. While I am a great fan of these sluggers, they are best reserved for truly heavy game: moose perhaps, big bears, bison, buffalo and, for those inclined to live on the raw edge, even an occasional elephant.

If a hunter is contemplating either caliber, it is a good idea to sit in a dark corner and think about it before he parts with his money. In al-



most every instance, very heavy game excepted, we are better served by a .45. It is exactly like the big game hunter who chooses a .45-caliber, or larger, rifle instead of a .375 or .416 as his heavy. He will simply be fighting more recoil than necessary without any game-taking benefit.

When we mention hunting buffalo and elephant with handguns, or even white-tailed deer, it becomes important to understand that, while we are asking a revolver to do a riflelike task, it is not a rifle. The discussion of relative power is its own subject, but we must understand that handguns are not as powerful (at least in the conventional sense) as rifles. They do not use high velocity or violent bullet expansion. Instead, they use deep-penetrating, "plowing" bullets to shut down the vital systems on big game. Therefore, just like rifles, handguns demand very good bullets, but very different bullets than their higher-velocity brothers.

Handguns have one thing most rifles do not have: large bores. A typical big-bore hunting handgun bullet is as large as most rifle bullets – after the rifle bullet has mushroomed. Therefore, expansion is a relatively unimportant trait in hunting handgun bullets, even though many shooters and most jacketed bullet manufacturers try to make handgun bullets work like rifle bullets. Essentially this is a bad idea.

Handguns, with their minimal power, cannot push a bullet very deeply that expands much over bore diameter. When penetration fails, all, including the buck, is lost. Also, because of their low velocity, jacketed handgun bullets are reluctant to expand. At times, good intentions aside, handgun bullets do not expand on game. Because they might not "mushroom," it is vitally important to use handgun bullets that will kill effectively without expansion. This is easy to achieve. The same basic bullet shape, a flat nose, that works perfectly as a hard-cast, non-expanding bullet, also works perfectly as a softnose or hollowpoint jacketed projectile. If they expand it is okay; if they do not it is fine also. The Speer "plated jacket" softpoints are prime examples. These are good, tough flatnoses that are deadly, mushroomed or not. One must avoid round or pointy nosed handgun bullets no matter what their construction.

Of course, no big-bore handgun bullet is better over the long haul and on a wide spectrum of game than a flatnosed, hard-cast bullet. A "ker-splat" bullet can be marginally more dramatic on a little whitetail's ribs than a flatnose, but if you change the angle from broadside, or make the critter bigger, the nonexpanding bullet is reliable every time.

This concept began with the Keith

bullet design and matured with Veral Smith's LBT bullets. Keith believed the shoulder of his bullet did the work, but he was wrong. It is the flatnose that is employed. LBT disregarded the shoulder and made the nose-flat or meplat larger. The result was deep, high-velocity penetration with lots of "splash" or tissue displacement, caused by the large, flat nose. To date, no bullet has been as effective in my hands. Special jacketed bullets like the Swift and Nosler Partition approach the concept by combining moderate expansion with bullets that maintain considerable length to diameter ratios after impact.

Hunting revolver cartridges ask for a very small selection of powder. Generally, there is nothing better than Hodgdon H-110 or Winchester 296 in any hunting caliber. The very heavy cartridges perform well, *at reduced power*, with midspeed powders such as Blue Dot. Virtually every load will want a Large Pistol Magnum primer.

After we have run the course of ideas, we should sum up with a few specific hunting handguns and loads I like. The ultra-classic S&W Model 29 .44 Magnum has served me very well. I completely consumed two of them, and the third is tired. I thought they were the cat's meow until I discovered single-action .45s.

(Continued on page 74)

*Hunting cartridges range from the (left to right) .32 H&R Magnum, .357 Maximum, .41 Magnum, .44 Special, .44 Magnum, .45 Colt, .454 Casull, .458x1.4 Inch, .475 Linebaugh and .500 Maximum. Below, as a rule, hard cast bullets with flat noses will perform over the widest spectrum in the field, but jacketed bullets with similar shapes can be very effective. Below right, there is no better or stronger cartridge for a hunting revolver than a .45 Colt.*





## Hunting Handguns

(Continued from page 41)

The first was one of the earliest Linebaugh .45 Colts. It was made on an old Seville frame and used 325-grain Keith bullets. Suddenly African game that used to sneer at the .44s turned their toes up when the big gun hammered them. I was working in Zambia at the time and became so confident in the revolver that I generally ignored my rifles. Kudu, eland, warthogs and other antelope fell as quickly to the revolver as my .375. Keep in mind that almost all that I shot had been previously wounded

by rifles, a condition that makes all beasts more or less bulletproof. As time went on I even pointed the .45 at Cape buffalo and brought them down as well. The old-styled single action had a hammer fall like an earthquake, and lock time that was a week long, but it hit as well for me as any handgun I have ever fired. I thought it was the answer to all questions, until I discovered Ruger Bisleys.

The five-shot .45 Colt Bisleys are the gold-standard hunting handgun. Those made by Hamilton Bowen (Bowen Classic Arms, PO

Box 67, Louisville TN 37777) are as accurate as rifles and as precise as Swiss watches. Other makers also turn out very functional guns. As a family these are the easiest revolvers to hit with that I have ever held. They seem perfect with 5½- or 6-inch barrels. But, as grand as these revolvers are, there is a better choice for most hunters.

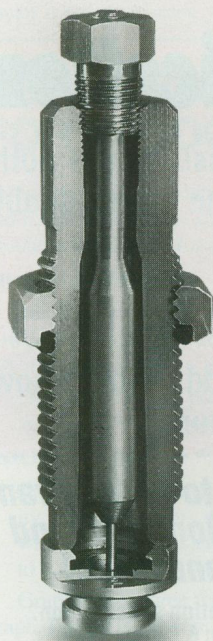
Few need the performance and even less want to spend the money for a five-shot Bisley conversion. For those, there is an almost no-compromise alternative: the out-of-the-box Bisley .45 Colt. These six-shot revolvers are capable of considerable power, more power in fact than .44 magnums. They are normally extremely accurate and need only a trigger job to make them perfectly shootable. The only downside is Ruger has never offered them with any options. You can get them with 7½-inch barrels or seven-and-a-half-inch barrels and with any finish you want as long as it is blue. But this is not all bad, the 7½s are very easy to shoot, and revolvers look best as blue steel. The actual cost for barrel shortening is not prohibitive if you want a shorter version. Ultimately, you have to climb a tree to find a better hunting revolver.

The final degree in my tools are two .475s. They are almost a pair, because the first was a prototype of the second. They began as Bisleys, had their top straps welded to flattop configuration with one standing and a folding leaf sight replacing the originals. The rear sights could be drifted in dovetails for windage. Special front sights are adjustable for elevation. Essentially the sights are robust "fixed" sights that are fully adjustable. The first gun is a plain blue "working" revolver, while the second is a masterpiece, a quest for the finest revolver ever created. This is a Bowen, Best Quality, masterpiece, complete with a Damascus barrel, fossil ivory grips and engraving. The plain one has done fine work against Asian buffalo, putting them down as well as any rifles I have used, the 4-bore and .577 excepted.

In the end, my revolver choice has become extremely narrow. I use Bisley .45 Colts and occasionally take the .475s against big game. Or if I am playing, I carry a .32 Magnum. My .44s are relegated to the closet. ●

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