

SPECIAL  
HANDGUN  
SECTION

# MAGNUMS FOR MOUNTAIN MEN

*Smith & Wesson's .44 Magnum Mountain Revolver heralds the rebirth of light and carryable big-bore wheelguns.*

*By Ross Seyfried*

The S&W Mountain Revolver is almost a reintroduction of an old concept. There was a sizable period in history when handguns rode in holsters until they were called into action. They were relatively light and perfectly balanced. The idea was to not know they were there until you needed them, and the old .44 Specials and .357 Magnums with their slender barrels and tidy grips filled the bill perfectly. Then long bull barrels, scopes and single-shot actions became the rage. The new Smith Mountain Revolver is a return to real handguns, with a combination of features never seen on a production revolver.

The first feature is that the Mountain Revolver is a .44 Magnum, basically a stainless Model 629, with some serious modification. The Mountain Revolver concept came from S&W's Tom Campbell. His years in the S&W model shop, making and shooting Smiths, left him with insight into every conceivable option that might be applied to a revolver. Almost two decades of high-level competition ranging from bullseye to I.P.S.C., exhibition shooting and hunting, let him stand in the tiny crowd of the very best pistol shots who have ever lived. When he put his pencil to the drawing board and actually got what he wanted, the result was a very special gun.

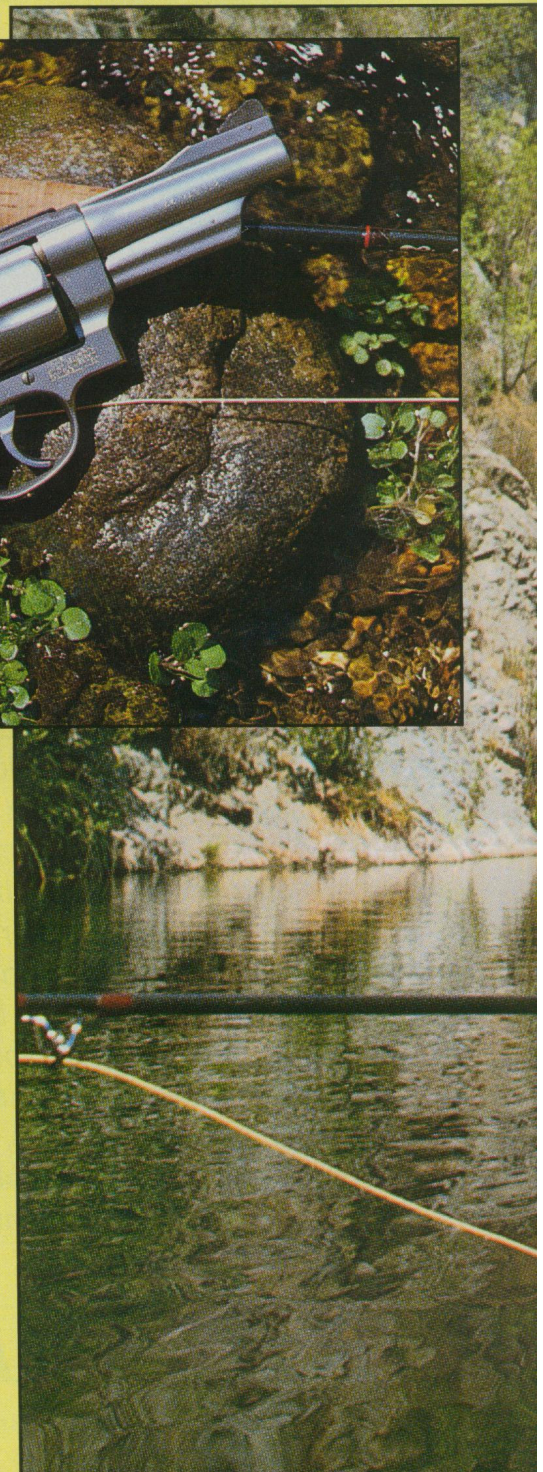
The Mountain Revolver's most noticeable feature is its slender 4-inch barrel. Unlike other .44 Mags that have .800-inch-diameter straight-sided barrels with



*The Mountain Revolver is intended for such settings as pictured here. It carries easily in Bianchi's UM84R nylon cross-chest rig. A fisherman is still capable of managing the fly rod with the big .44 close at hand.*

wide ribs, the Mountain Revolver has a tapered barrel and narrow .300-inch rib. The barrel contour is similar to the old .44 Specials. It starts with a .770-inch diameter where it meets the frame and tapers quickly to .580 inch at the muzzle. This light barrel gives the gun the sleek lines and quick balance of the old Smiths, something never seen on a .44 Magnum.

The Mountain Revolver's most unusual feature is its cylinder. I unwittingly had a hand in this mostly cosmetic and extremely unusual departure from S&W norm. Several years ago, two friends decided to have a gun made as a memento





of my winning the World Championship. Their choice of a base gun was a 629 .44 Mag, but from here most signs of normal Smith & Wessons were left behind. The barrel is 5 inches long. Every surface was painstakingly hand stoned and polished. The Smith & Wesson logo and caliber designation were artistically hand engraved into the barrel, along with my brand in the sideplate. They added black sights and tuned the action to race car perfection, but it still lacked a special something to set it apart from every .44 Smith ever made. The last distinctive touch was taken from the early black powder revolvers: The front edge of the cylinder was gently radiused.

Originally a useful feature that helped keep fouling from binding the cylinder, it now added graceful lines to this special

piece. Beauty aside, the "Seyfried Scallop" had some practical value. The rounded edges on the front of the cylinder didn't gouge a good, tight holster. At Tom's request, I sent my cylinder to S&W so that they could copy the scallop contours and incorporate them into the Mountain Revolver.

At this point, this very packable .44 Mag was well on its way. The addition of a round butt trimmed the gun even more. The big Smith N-frames have always been almost too large for my hands, so this last major face-lift was a welcome addition. Unfortunately, the only choice of production grips was the giant Pachmayr Gripper. They swallow the tidy round butt, making the gun bigger than the originals, but that disease is easily curable. More on this later.

As I said, this Mountain Revolver is a complete package; no stone was left unturned. With the cylinder/frame/barrel combination well in hand, smaller details were given attention. The trigger is the .300-inch-wide smooth version, the kind that in my opinion is most suited to all kinds of shooting—fast double action or precise single action. The hammer is the small, standard size; no room on a mountain gun for the giant and unnecessary target version.

The sights were made without any of the usual gimmicks. The black Baughman front sight is pinned to the rib so that it can be changed if it wears out or if a different height is needed. No stainless steel, red chewing gum or other dreaded gadgetry here. The rear sight is standard, plain black, made for hitting,





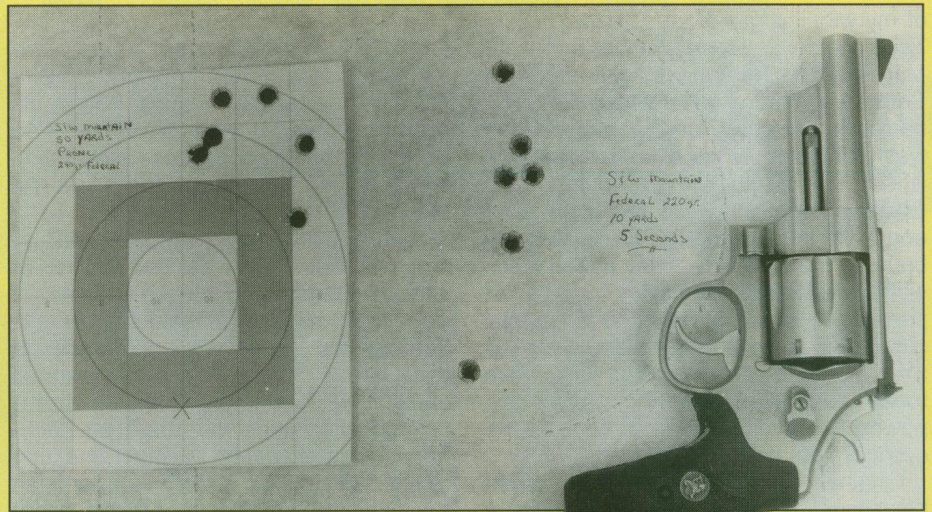
## S&W MOUNTAIN REVOLVER

aligning on target, and not for living-room admiration.

The final finish is pleasing—vapor-blasted stainless steel. Now this isn't the rough finish that looks like it was sand-blasted with road gravel; it's an extremely fine satin finish that isn't quite shiny. In my opinion, the Mountain Revolver was probably the most useful, reasonable double-action revolver I had ever seen. It was ready to disappear in my little Milt Sparks holster and go anywhere I wanted to go. The gun looked and felt perfect, and I wanted to shoot it to see if the drawing board would translate to the field.

The trigger, hammer and sights didn't need to prove themselves. I had used the same combination for 20 years, but the combination of light barrel and reduced grip were new to me. I started shooting with the issue Gripper handles. They actually feel very good, and if you have large hands they might fit you perfectly. I actually began to like them—until I wanted some double-action speed from the handgun.

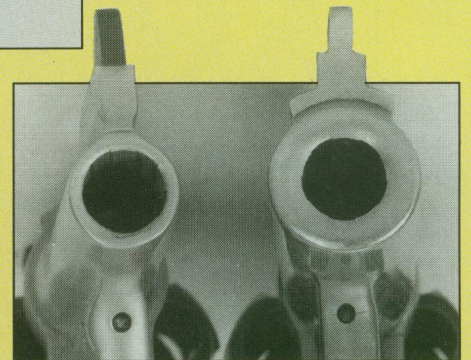
The grips follow a trend set by someone; someone who I doubt ever mastered the handgun. They are very long fore and aft and quite thin left and right. Also, a very generous filler behind the triggerguard elevates the gun in your hand. If you curl your fingers like you are going to hold a handgun and look at the hole in the center, you see more or less a circle. The natural curvature of your



*Seyfried modified the rubber grips as shown (left). The group to the left (above) is a 50-yarder from the prone. Other group was fired at 10 yards with Federal 220-grain ammo—in 5 seconds.*

closed hand does not want to wrap around a 1x4-inch board. If you look at some of the great revolver shots of modern history (Keith, Jordan and McGovern), you will see that they preferred handles that were essentially round in cross section. The large filler behind the trigger puts the axis of the bore higher above your hand, and the result is that the recoil has a greater lever to work against you and the overall grip is longer. It was for grips like these that some kind soul invented belt sanders.

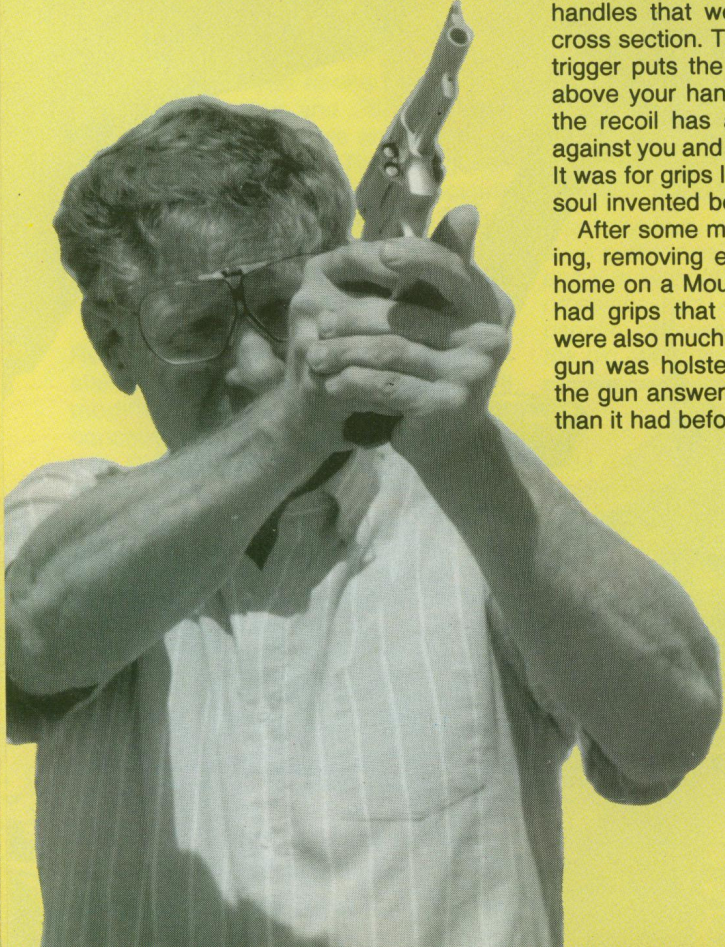
After some minutes of judicious grinding, removing everything that wasn't at home on a Mountain Revolver handle, I had grips that suited my hands. They were also much less in the way when the gun was holstered. Back on the range the gun answered my commands better than it had before. By its very nature the



*What a difference! The Mountain Revolver muzzle (left) contrasts sharply with a standard 629.*

light-barrelled revolver balances perfectly in my hands. It almost feels weightless. At the same time, the lack of barrel weight increases muzzle rise over the heavy-barrelled models. This gun isn't designed for long strings of fast shooting. However, it should answer for a shot or two at high speed if needed. I worked on a pair of Pepper Popper targets at 10 yards with 250-grain Keith bullets at 1,200 fps. The first shot is the same whether a .22 or a .44 Mag; it depends on the pointing qualities of the gun. I found that I could hit a single target (12-inch circle) in 1¼ seconds easily. Shooting two poppers in rapid succession was more challenging. Recovering from the .44's recoil from the light revolver takes some doing. The change in the grips which lowered the bore made the recoil come more straight back. While it felt a little heavier, it was easier to bring the sights back on target. Hitting two targets,

*Author Seyfried is a devotee of big-bore revolvers and is no stranger to recoil. Here he is seen with a stiff load in the lightweight S&W .44. The revolver is in full recoil, with 250-grain bullet over 23 grains of H110. This is one of Ross's pet loads.*





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10 feet apart, took about two seconds total including the draw. The poppers fall when hit, rather quickly when a .44 does the hitting. I was easily hitting the second target before the first one fell. As you try for more hits, the effect of the .44's recoil becomes cumulative, tending to throw your whole body off balance. I shot six-shot strings with the Federal 220-grain loads. At 10 yards I was able to hold six good hits in five seconds. They strung up and down some, but the potential is there if you want to practice.

The reputation of S&W barrels and cylinders is so established that group shooting is almost redundant. The good guns are extremely accurate, ordinary ones shoot okay and occasionally you get a misaligned one that S&W needs to fix. I shot this one from the prone position, the way that ordinary handguns shoot best for me. With Federal 240-grain HP ammunition groups ran from two to five inches at 50 yards. That's all the accuracy this out-of-training pistolero can hold for. Loads with 250-grain Keith cast bullets ran a bit larger and 280-grain LBT loads would stay under five inches. 'Nuff said, the gun would shoot; the rest is up to a man who can hold it. Hitting a 12-inch gong at 100 yards was a regular



occurrence when I managed the sights and trigger properly. Hitting a buck in the shoulders at sporting handgun ranges is easily within the capability of this lightweight. More important than group size, the sights were centered and the adjustments were sufficient to zero my loads using bullets from 200 to 280 grains.

Loading ammunition for the Mountain Revolver can take on a slightly different twist. There are many kinds of .44 Magnums on the market. The single shots and some of the single actions are capable of taking a regular diet of tremendous loads without suffering. The Smith

*These are loads with author's favorite bullets. From the left: 200-gr. Nosler, 250-gr. Keith, 280-gr. LBT.*

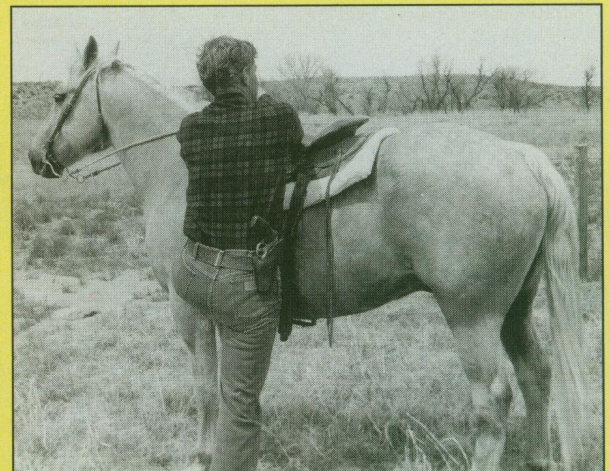
& Wesson Model 29 family trades a little brute strength and durability for pleasing lines, balance and portability. I'm not accusing the Smiths of being weak sisters, I'm just saying that to get the beautiful, tidy package you give up some extra bulky iron. If you set your mind to it, you can beat your S&W .44 to death a little more quickly than some other arms. But with a gun like the Mountain Revolver, or

### SPECIFICATIONS

#### S&W MOUNTAIN .44

Maker:	Smith & Wesson, Inc. Dept. GA 2100 Roosevelt Ave. Springfield, MA 01102
Action Type:	Double-action revolver
Caliber:	.44 Magnum
Capacity:	6
Overall Length:	9.5 inches
Barrel Length:	4 inches
Weight:	38 ounces
Grips:	Rubber, Pachmayr Gripper
Finish:	Vapor-blasted stainless steel
Sights:	Plain black, adjustable rear
Price:	\$458.50

*In a high-riding Milt Sparks holster, the little revolver is out of the way, but ready for instant use. This is what the new S&W is intended for: a carrying gun for outdoor types who need a potent but carryable handgun. It's well named.*



most other models, there really isn't any reason to try to tear your gun apart with overloads.

Elmer Keith started the .44 Magnum idea by using heavily-loaded .44 Specials. He used 18.5 grains of 2400 with his 235-grain hollow point bullet. Velocity was in the 1,200 fps range. When he got his dream gun, the .44 Mag, Elmer turned to 22 grains of 2400 with his 250-grain bullet. Now I'm going to let you in on a little-known secret. One summer,

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*It will take some practice to master the Mountain Revolver. Author tunes up with a pair of Pepper Poppers.*



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far away and long ago, I was in Elmer's attic helping him load ammunition. We had had 10 days of *fun* (my memory says that I had the daylights pounded out of me by every variety of double rifle) when Elmer remembered that his supply of .44 Mag ammo was low. There were tons of bullets under the bench, kegs of 2400 and piles of empty cases. When I got all

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**“...ready to disappear in  
my little Milt Sparks  
holster and go anywhere  
I wanted to go.”**

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geared up to load, I couldn't find the primers...*magnum* large pistol primers, that is. Box after box of primers, but no magnums. “Elmer, you're out of magnum pistol primers.” He replied with his usual degree of opinionism, “Don't use 'em. Magnums are probably too hot. Hell, I've never had a magnum pistol primer in the house.” Elmer's load, the one every book and shooter quotes, wasn't loaded with magnum primers. It was milder than we think. The old master

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didn't have a chronograph, but he knew they were going fast enough. He also wouldn't tolerate cases that stuck in the cylinder or loads that beat the guns apart.

In actual practice, depending on the lot of powder and the individual gun, Elmer's 250-grain bullets were going between 1,200 and 1,300 fps. This was out of a 4-inch S&W. Move up to magnum primers and/or longer barrels and the bullets go faster. Try to get this out of your 4-inch gun and your pressure is go-

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**"At Tom's request, I sent my cylinder to S&W so that they could copy the scallop contours and incorporate them into the Mountain Revolver."**

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ing to be too high. The real lesson here is that in a gun like the Mountain Revolver you don't need "burn, blind and deafen" loads to get the job done. The things Elmer accomplished with these ordinary loads may never be equaled. It is a certainty that if someone ever comes close, it won't be because of a hundred feet more velocity.

I've carried 23 grains of H-110 and 250-grain bullets for years. The velocity is 1,200 fps. I've taken tons of game and made hits at ranges that were embarrassing. I have become a strong advocate of long, heavy bullets in revolvers,

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**"If you set your mind to it, you can beat your S&W .44 to death a little more quickly than some other arms."**

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but not in the Smiths. The heaviest bullet I like in my Mountain Revolver is a 280-grain LBT. This is the Wide Flat Nose variety. It is almost a full wadcutter that delivers a serious punch and cuts a big hole...both in and out. Loaded on 21 grains of H-110 it runs just over 1,000 fps and is guaranteed to get the attention of almost anything it runs into. The various factory loadings are fine. Loads with the lighter bullets, 200 to 220 grains, help keep the recoil to a manageable level in the light revolver. All of these are maximum-type loads. For most shooting their intensity level isn't necessary.

Handloads, using bullets like the 200-grain Nosler, but with lighter powder charges than factory loads, are very

agreeable. A 200-grain bullet with 23 grains of H-110 or 12 grains of Unique runs about 1,200 fps. This kind of load won't pound the shooter or gun, but will take care of 90 percent of the shooting you want to do. The same can be said for the loads in the manuals that drive the 250-grain bullets at 1,000 fps or the 275 to 280-grain thumpers at 900 fps. Use the heavier loads if you think you need them, but don't be afraid to use good, ordinary loads. The moderate loads in a light, carryable revolver make life very enjoyable, and that is what most shooting is all about.

In addition to the Mountain Revolver, another special-edition Smith & Wesson exists today. This is a special, light-barrelled .45 Colt. Again, it is like the old 1950 models. The sample I have was made for the Georgia State Highway Patrol. It has a light 5-inch barrel, square butt and is fitted with the small magna style grips of old. This limited edition isn't terribly significant, but the potential for our Mountain Revolver with .45 Colt chambers *is*.

As good as the .44 Mag is in the Mountain Revolver concept, I think the .45 Colt might be better. Loaded with the modern .45 Colt loads, using bullets from

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250 to 300 grains, the old .45 would be a perfect cartridge in the light revolver. The big bullets loaded from 800 to 1,000 fps are real serious medicine, with very mild manners. Using similar bullet weights at similar velocities the .45 Colt has less chamber pressure than the .44 Magnum. This combination makes it perfectly at home in the Mountain Revolver concept.

I've lived with a 4-inch-barrelled Model 29 for more days and miles than you can imagine. The little guns were constant companions, punctuating long days with an occasional shot at a rabbit or rock. The .44s have fed my African crews and taken several trophies. I even cocked the hammer and looked at a Cape buffalo under the sights. A strong sense of self-preservation told me to let the hammer down quietly, but on one occasion the little gun scraped a ton of bull off of my chest. The little gun in a tidy holster was a lifesaver...because it was there. The Mountain Revolver is possibly the very best of its breed. It's going to give most of my other revolvers some vacation time. 