

# THE CARE & FEEDING OF A WILDCAT!

*Tips and tricks to  
make the pussycats purr.*

*By Ross Seyfried*

**W**hen you talk about wildcat cartridges, shooters seem to fall into three categories: those who have tried them, those who won't and those who want to. Judging from my mail, there are a lot of shooters who would play with nonfactory cartridges if they knew how to go about it.

Before you get involved with wildcat rounds, there are a few things you need to understand. First, with a few exceptions, hand-loaded ammo for factory chamberings will do virtually anything that a wildcat can. If you want to have your name on something, try a monogrammed shirt or personalized license plates. Either of the above will cost less and be a lot safer than a wildcat cartridge.

I continually hear of ludicrous efforts to create a new namesake. One genius suggested necking the .458 Winchester down to 7mm caliber and affixing his six initials to the name.

Great, but someone beat him to the idea—it's called the 7mm Remington Magnum.

Another famous writer type made a short .375 H&H, labeled with a full monogram of his initials, and then put it in a single shot action where cartridge length doesn't matter. The point is that there are a lot of good, useful reasons for wildcats, but a billboard isn't one of them. You probably can't think up a cartridge that hasn't been tried before. Books like

*This Wildcat needs to be fed the right chow. When he is, his performance will please his owner and the cat will purr with delight—just a matter of the right diet!*



*Cartridges of the World, The Handloader's Manual of Cartridge Conversions and P.O. Ackley's Handbook for Shooters & Reloaders* will give you a look at the efforts of wildcatters, proving that virtually nothing is new. At the same time, these books illustrate the almost limitless scope of wildcat cartridges.

I don't intend to discourage wildcatting, if there is a purpose for the effort, but you should be sure of your motives before you start. There are good reasons to have a wildcat: increased ballistic performance and fitting cartridges to particular actions. Increased ballistic performance is the most widely used excuse for a wildcat, spawning all kinds of cartridges including the monumental .585 Nyati and the .475 Linebaugh revolver.

Rounds like the .338/378 Weatherby and the 7mm/300 Weatherby are long-range game and target rounds without ballistic company. If you are into short rifles, wildcat rounds let you make the most of the short barrels and small actions used in these so-called handguns.

The fitting the action category is possibly the most practical reason for wildcatting. Single shot actions often prefer rimmed cartridges. Cartridges using the .357, 5.6x50R, or the .30-40 Krag cases adapt nicely to most small single shots. Necking down the .45-70 to any bore size from .40 to .22 adds useful versatility to the Siamese Mausers, big bolt actions

that require rimmed cartridges. Rounds using the .303 British case let you utilize the host of actions designed for that cartridge. The Kimber Model 84 action is scaled to the .223, and any number of wildcats using that case head make delightful finished rifles using bores from .17 to 7mm or larger. The idea is

to start with an action that fits a given cartridge, then to alter that cartridge case to give you the ballistic performance you want. Often wildcatters quickly grow tired of their creations, selling finished rifles at less than the sum of their parts. There are two lessons here: you don't make wildcat arms as a finan-



Author Seyfried's pet Wildcats. From the left: (1) .17 Mach IV; (2) .17/.357; (3) .22 K-Hornet; (4) 5.6x50R Imp.; (5) .22/250 Imp.; (6) 7x300 Wthby.; (7) .338/378 KT; (8) .45x43 Mauser; (9) .416 Taylor; (10) .585 Nyati. There are advantages over factory loads in each case.



Here are some special Wildcats, tailored for use with custom handguns. The cartridge on the left is the familiar .44 Magnum, shown for contrast. Others are: .500 Magnum, .50 Special Bowen, .475 Linebaugh.



cial investment and you can often buy a wildcat arm at much less than it would cost to make one. If you find a wildcat rifle at a bargain price, you're all set, if you can figure out how to feed it. Beware, there are some real oddballs out there (both wildcatters and their cartridges) and some of their guns would cost too much if they were free.

Let's start at the most basic level. You think you want a wildcat cartridge? Will it work, and how can you get it? Books are the most important and basic source of information. If you are looking for more performance from your '06, check the results that other shooters have achieved with things like the .30-06 Improved over a regular .30-06. In this case, the results approach the .300 H&H without using a magnum action. It might be a very good

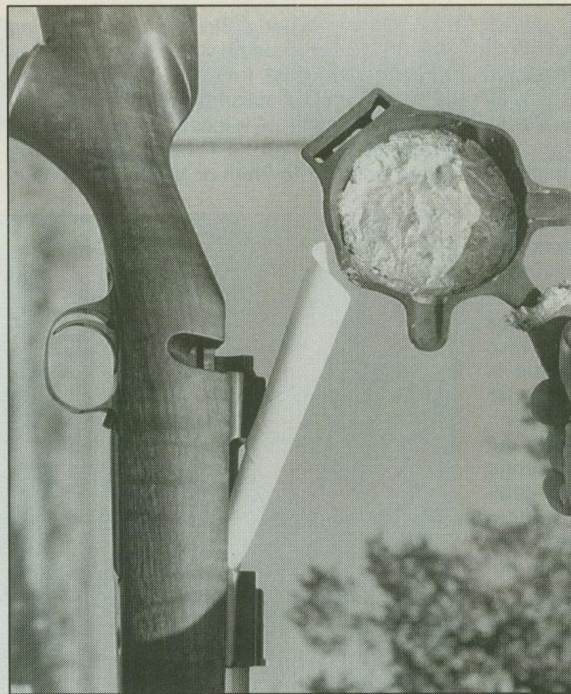
**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Wildcatting your own or someone else's cartridge design can be an interesting and productive activity. However, it is not an effort to be taken lightly or inadvisedly. Anyone engaging in the practice should seek out as much information on the matter as possible. At the very least, he should be familiar with the reference material described in the accompanying article. Under no circumstances should the inexperienced reloader attempt to assemble ammunition for any nonstandard cartridge.

*Extremes—the tiny .17 Mach IV on the left will produce speeds over 4,000 fps; massive .585 Nyati goes 2,400 fps.*

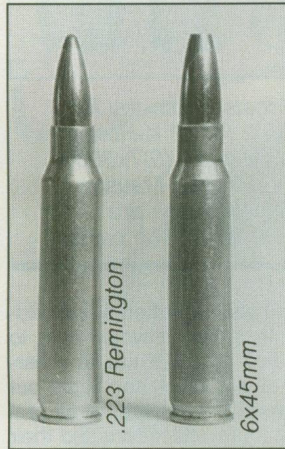
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choice and you can still use factory ammo too. What about the .338/378 Weatherby? Is it any better than a .338 Winchester? There isn't anything written about the round, but rumor has it that it won't go much faster than a good .338 reload and it's one hell of an expensive project.

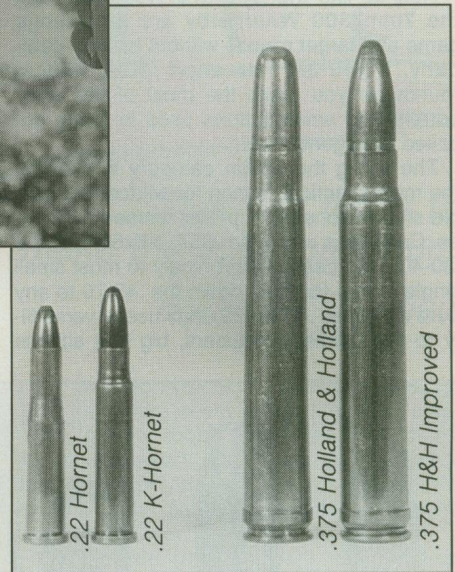
Computers are a big help. The *Ballistic Program* and *Loads from a Disk* will almost let you fire the cartridges. You feed the machine data that includes .338 bore, 250-grain bullet, case capacity of the .378 Weatherby and 26 or 28-inch barrel length. With a touch of the right button, the IBM whirrs and tells you that a relatively mild load gives you almost 3,000 fps. But the computers don't give this cartridge full credit; real loads and rifles outrun



In the photo to the left, author Seyfried is in the process of making a rifle chamber cast. He's using a special material called Cerrosafe. This stuff is available from Brownell's. It's a metal which melts easily and hardens to form a perfect chamber cast.



Necking the .223 to 6mm (left) produces an excellent cartridge for light deer hunting—the 6x45mm. In the above photo, we have a Sinclair expander set, which will expand case necks to a variety of sizes.



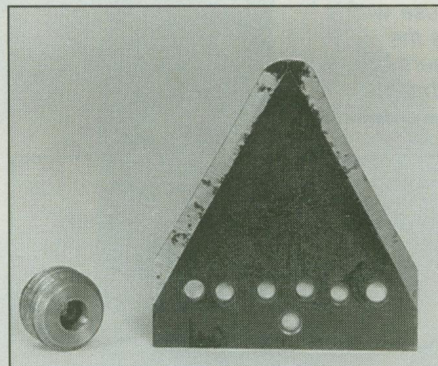
Here are some examples of Improved cases which will also use standard ammunition—Practical Wildcats.

even the .340 Weatherby by 200 fps when both are loaded to all-out maximum. Running the .338, .340 and the .338/378 through the same program will give you a better comparison. At all normal ranges, the .338 will hammer elk as well, maybe even better if the cannon velocity causes the bullets to fail. Better? Yes, but you have to let your conscience and wallet decide if the price of the ticket is worth the ride.

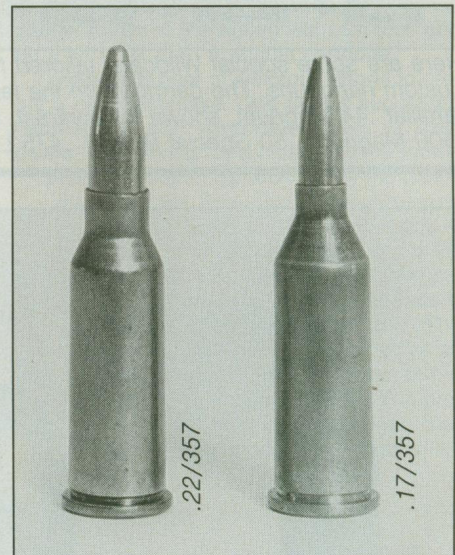
Computer programs are a big help and will predict the performance of almost any cartridge with uncanny accuracy, but you still have to be the judge. The computers allow you to do limitless ballistic experiments without the cost and time of making rifles.

Deliberations are over. You're going to do it—make a rifle for the 9mm Double Convoluted Snipe Sniper Improved (9DCSSI). You are on your own, no one has tried this before and your queries bring only scowls and shrugs. Your favorite gunwriter roundfiles your 16-page list of questions and your gunsmith has never heard of it. You feel like you should give up, but that perfect trajectory is too good to let die. You know that a rifle that shoots perfectly flat for the first 300 yards and then gives the bullets a slight rise is surely worth the trouble.

First, change gunsmiths, then write to



These two photos show special Wildcats made from .357 Magnums for use in single-shots and author's improvised neck sizing "die."



Clymer Manufacturing or JGS. They both make chambering reamers, *any chambering reamer*. Chances are good that they already have blueprints for your 9DCSSI. If not, they will supply data sheets so that you can fill in the dimensions. Then they will grind reamers that your smith will use to chamber and fit your barrel.

When you design a new, improved cartridge, there are some basics that you need to take into account. You know that the bore is 9mm and that the parent case is going to be the RWS 6.5x68mm. Because this is the epitome of an *improved*, you choose a 40-degree shoulder angle and minimum body taper. Now

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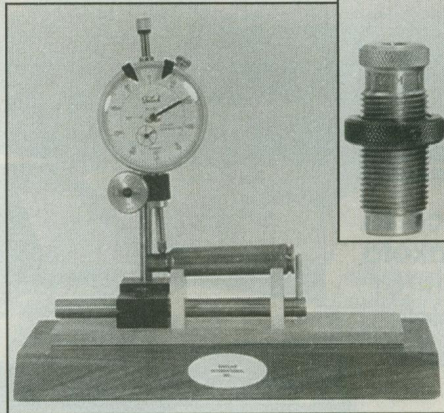
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you will need to carefully define "minimum body taper." If you are going to be able to get the fired cases out of the chamber, the case must be smaller at the shoulder than at the head. I think that .004 inch is the absolute minimum difference, with .006 inch to .010 inch being more practical, without costing you any significant case capacity.

You don't want to have headspace problems, so you wisely choose to leave the position of the shoulder exactly where it is on the parent case. While it doesn't affect your

perceive out there—those who can make any reasonable wildcat a reality. (If you haven't guessed, I'm only joking about the 9DCSSI. This would be a prime example of wildcat folly. In reality this would be a .358 Norma Magnum without a belt—something no one wanted in the first place!)

I mentioned a "chamber cast." This is a very useful tool, especially if you are working with an existing rifle. The correct material for making one is called Cerrosafe and you get it from Brownell's. This is a metal that melts at a temperature close to the boiling point of water, but is quite hard and holds the dimensions of whatever you pour it into with perfection. To cast a chamber on a bolt action you take

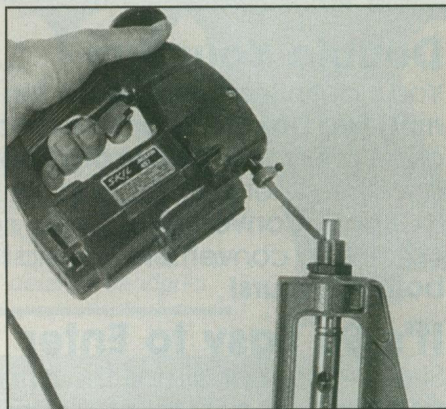


*This Sinclair runout gauge is useful in measuring both case neck runout and bullet runout in loaded ammo.*



*Economy-minded reloaders can use this form die set from Redding, making .221 Fireball from .223—for a penny each.*

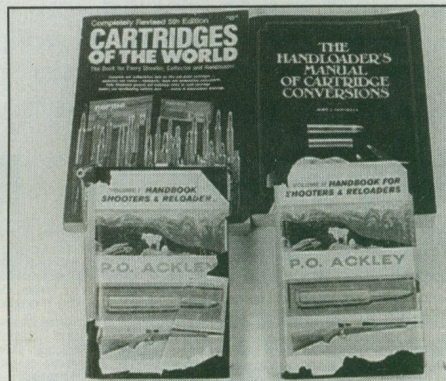
*Using a power saw and a metal cutting blade is the most efficient way of cutting cases to necessary length.*



reamers, you will also need to decide on the right rifling twist in your barrel. Again, the computer programs will work this out, taking bullet weight, design and velocity into account.

Now is also a time for thinking ahead. When your rifle is finished, you will need reloading dies. Redding has dies for quite a few wildcats on hand, especially Ackley improveds. RCBS will make dies for any cartridge, but you will have to supply the blueprints from your reamers, fired cases or a chamber cast of your new brainchild. The die makers already have the dimensions for almost any imaginable cartridge, but if yours isn't on the list, a little more time and money will take care of the problem.

Another reloading die option is to have your gunsmith make them with the chambering reamers. If you have a set (both rough and finish reamers), you have the tools to make perfect dies for your rifle. The roughing reamer is a high-quality reamer that is slightly under-size. If you tell the reamer maker that you want to make reloading dies, this reamer will be ground to cut a perfect full-length sizing die. The finish reamer makes the bullet seating die. The point is that there is help and ex-



*Good reference books like the ones shown above are indispensable sources of information to the wildcatter.*

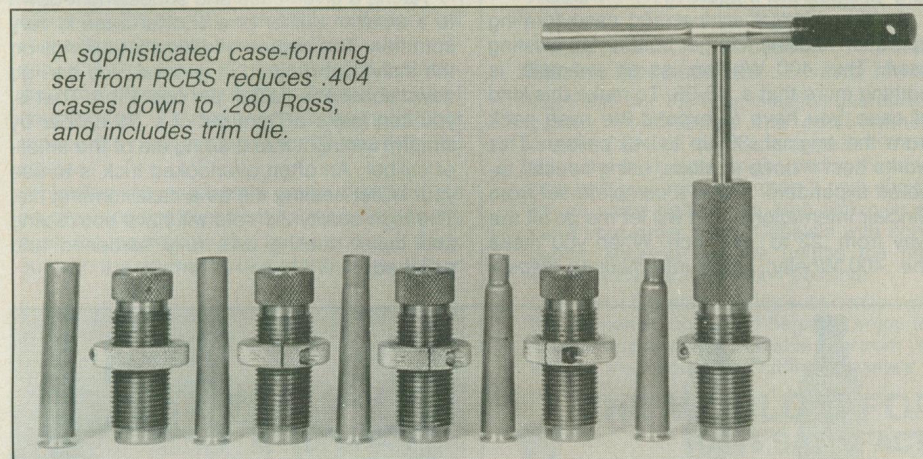
out the bolt, clean and lightly oil the chamber and then push a plug of tissue paper into the bore about one inch in front of the chamber. I use a paper funnel to guide the metal into the chamber, being careful not to let it overflow into the locking lugs, etc. After allowing five minutes for cooling, you can pop the cast

out with a cleaning rod. (After you take out the cast, check to be sure the bore and chamber are free of foreign material.) The chamber cast will let you precisely measure your chamber and bore dimensions. This is an especially useful trick that lets you precisely measure the chamber and bore on any firearm ever made.

Once you are certain what your cartridge is, forming the cases is the next step. The easiest kind of case forming operation is fire-forming. Normally, this is the way that you make the improved cases. Getting the job done is as simple as pulling the trigger on a standard cartridge. The best case forming loads are near full power, but not maximum.



*Case forming gone wrong. Wrinkled necks, collapsed shoulders and split cases are part of the game.*



*A sophisticated case-forming set from RCBS reduces .404 cases down to .280 Ross, and includes trim die.*



*RCBS neck ream die will reduce neck thickness with great precision. Use a good lube like Hornady's One-Shot.*

The idea is to have enough chamber pressure to iron out the case, but not enough to create undue stress.

The .22 K Hornet and .375 H&H improved are prime examples. It is also possible to do fairly complex forming this way. For instance, turning a .375 H&H into .458 Lott cases can be done with the use of a heeled bullet. The bullets are .45 auto, 230-grain ball, with 1/8 inch of their bases lathe turned to .375-inch diameter. The turned portion seats in the .375 case, while the rest of the bullet fits the bore. A light charge of moderately fast powder will pop the .375s up to the almost cylindrical .458 Lotts. This kind of trick is one of the fun and rewarding parts of wildcatting, the possibilities being limited only by the skill and imagination of the reloader.

One point of caution that must be strictly observed is that of headspace. This is the physical tolerance between the bolt face and the portion of the case that holds it fore and aft in the chamber. If you are working with rimmed or belted cartridges, and the rifle is

chambered correctly, the headspace is automatically taken care of. On the other hand, if you are working with rimless rounds (i.e., .30-06, etc.) that depend on the shoulder for headspace, you have to use extreme caution.

As an example, there are several varieties of the .30-06 Improved. The best version does not change the position of the shoulder; both standard and improved versions have exactly the same headspace. The other kind becomes a bit of a technical nightmare, since the improved chamber has a shorter neck and longer headspace than the parent cartridge. Firing an ordinary round in this chamber can be very dangerous, or it will result in misfires when the striker can't reach the primer.

Again, the chamber cast will reveal the chamber's true dimensions. There is also an easy test that will tell you if the headspace is safe. Before you load or fire a round, stick two layers of masking tape on a case head, making sure that the tape doesn't extend beyond the rim. Now, drop the "taped" case in the chamber and slowly close the bolt. If the headspace is correct, the bolt should refuse to close, or at least close with some difficulty, and the tape on the case should show evidence of being smashed. If not, slam on your brakes, *don't fire anything in the chamber* and consult your gunsmith.

If you know that you have one of the improveds with altered headspace, you have to dig into the wildcatter's bag of tricks. Using the short-necked .30-06 mentioned above as an example, where a normal cartridge is unsafe in the chamber, you have to create an artificial shoulder on the case before fire-forming. To do this, you neck the case up to 8mm diameter and then neck it back down to .30 caliber.

As you neck the case back down, you size the neck a little at a time, using a cut-and-try method. Screw your sizing die into the press until it resizes about one-half of the case

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neck. Try a case in the chamber and find that the bolt refuses to close. Now turn the die in a fraction of a turn, resize the case and try it in the chamber again. Repeat this until the bolt will close with considerable force. At that point you have cases that are properly head-spaced in your chamber and you can carry on with normal fire-forming. Keep in mind that this is one example and that this kind of reloading is extremely complex and potentially dangerous. If you aren't fully experienced in the process, get help from your gunsmith before you pull the trigger.

Another kind of wildcat and case forming operation is using a larger bore on an existing case. The .400 Whelan, as an example, is nothing more than a .40-06. To make this kind of case, you have to expand the case neck from the original .30 up to .40 caliber. This works best if done in steps, using special tapered expanders. I have a complete set from Sinclair International that will let me go all the way from .22 to .458 inch. When you make the .400 Whelan, using intermediate steps—

nealing: *never let the case head get hot.* If you soften the case head, you will probably blow your gun up when you fire it.

When I anneal cases, I stand five or six in a pan of water. I play the flame of the torch around the juncture of the neck and shoulder until I get the color change on one case and then move on to the next. When I finish one batch, I take them out of the water and put another lot in. As I said, I anneal any cases that I am going to reload a number of times. A rule of thumb is to anneal cases before you make them bigger. If I am necking cases down to smaller bores, I usually get best results by forming the cases in their hard state and annealing them when I am finished.

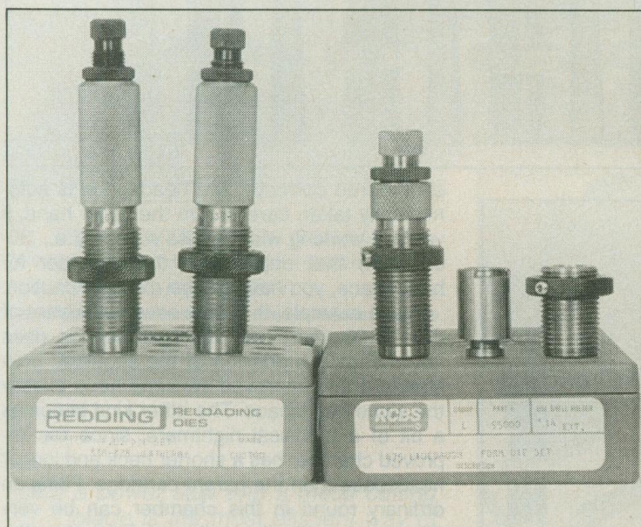
Taking a given case and squeezing it down to a smaller caliber or a shorter case is very common. The degree of difficulty depends on the individual project. In general, you can go down about one caliber per operation. That is, you can make a 7mm out of a .30 caliber by simply running it into a sizing die of the smaller caliber. An often overlooked trick is to use your bullet seating die as a case forming die. The high-quality die sets will have both sizing and bullet seating dies fully hardened and polished.

duce the case, trim to length and inside ream the necks *before* you use the full-length sizer. A die set like this is an expensive proposition, but one that gives you the means to do extraordinary things with brass cases.

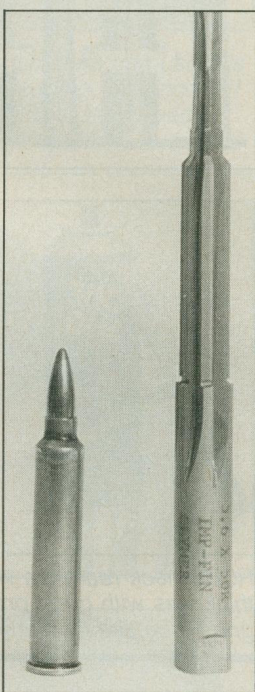
There are times when you can perform extremely complicated case forming without using specialized forming dies. I make .17/357 cases without a forming die set *per se*. I start with a .256 Winchester set, sizing with the bullet seater then full-length die, followed by a .22/357 set used in the same way. When I have .22/357s, I either neck turn or ream the necks to reduce the thickness.

My fancy die set that takes them down to .17 is a mower sickle section with some polished holes that have a beveled funnel on one side. Any eighth-inch-thick tool steel will serve the purpose. I drill the holes with ordinary drill bits, bevel the holes with a countersink and polish them with a Dremel tool and emery paper. To make .17s, I use holes that reduce the neck in stages to .20 and then .18 caliber.

Holding the steel plate under the die hole on my reloading press with a c-clamp lets me push the necks into the holes and pull them out with the normal stroke of the press. When



The precision-crafted dies above, from Redding and RCBS, are the type of relatively inexpensive tools that make wildcat cartridge chambering reamer (right) is made by Clymer Manufacturing, one of several reamer makers.



The chamber cast on the right was the only way to identify an unknown wildcat, for which ammo was made.

.338, .35, .375 and finally .400—should give you perfect cases with minimal case loss. After you have the necks expanded, run them through a normal sizing die and load them as usual. If the necks split when you expand them, they probably need to be annealed.

Annealing (softening the brass in the neck and shoulder area) should usually be used whenever you expand or blow out cases by fire-forming. It is also a useful way to increase the life of any cartridge that you intend to reload often. The purple discoloration on the shoulders of military cartridges is the result of annealing. To anneal the brass, you heat it until you see the case's color change to that of the military rounds, or until the neck and shoulder have a dull red glow.

I use a household propane torch as a heat source and *always, always* heat the cases with at least half of their length *standing in water*. As obvious as this seems, don't heat loaded rounds. Anneal only *empty, unprimed* cases! There is one hard-and-fast rule of an-

If you're in doubt, test your bullet seating die with a file. Stroke the outside of the die with a mill file. If it is hardened, the file won't cut it, but if the file removes metal, your die probably won't work for case forming. The bullet seating die is larger inside than the sizer and can be quite useful in case forming where the full-length sizer is trying to take the case just a little too far. I also use my seaters for first-time sizing of some of the B.E.L.L. basic cases into finished rounds. This is especially useful with the .375, .400, .450, .500 and .577 nitro rounds. When you start to take a case down more than one caliber, you will need more dies.

RCBS and Redding make forming die sets that will let you make almost anything out of anything. The limits are based on your time, patience and wallet. Although it isn't really a wildcat, my die set that turns B.E.L.L. basic (.404 cylinders) into .280 Ross cases is an example of how a full-fledged forming die set works. There are five dies that gradually re-

they are .18 caliber, a trip through the proper .17/357 dies and final trim to length brings them to perfection without the need for several hundred dollars' worth of sophisticated forming dies.

If you have handgun reloading dies, you have a set of neck sizing dies for the big bores. The .45, .44, .41 and .357s can be used to neck size rifle cases of appropriate diameter.

And so it goes. Just as it is easy to make money when you have a lot of it, it becomes easy to make almost any case as your collection of dies increases. The wildcat case forming saga can go on forever, with the PhD levels requiring extensive lathe modification of the brass before you start to form it.

When you are reducing the neck diameter, you have to be aware that your case necks may get too thick. This is the same condition that you get when you repeatedly reload any case to the point that it requires neck turning or reaming. Necking down speeds up the process. The bottom line is that the neck portion of your rifle chamber must be larger than the neck of your loaded cartridge. This extra room allows the neck to open up on firing and let the bullet go. If the necks are too thick, the chamber will grip the neck, which in turn grips the bullet. If the bullet can't move when the powder gases push on it, you may get dangerous pressures, even from a normal load.

You can easily check your case necks in several ways. If you have a chamber cast, you

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measure the neck diameter of the cast and of a loaded round with a good micrometer. If the load is smaller than the cast, you are okay. You can also coat the neck of a dummy (no powder) cartridge with soot from a match or candle. Chamber the round carefully and inspect the neck after you extract it. If the soot is rubbed off of the neck all the way around, the neck is probably too thick. If you have fired one of your cases in your chamber, check to see if a bullet can be slipped into the fired case by hand. If so, the necks are okay.

Possibly the most important question that goes with a wildcat is "What loads should I use?" The books I mentioned earlier will have loading data for many of the rounds, and the computer programs will put you in the ballpark. The Hodgdon, Hornady and Sierra reloading manuals have data for some wildcats. The usual reloader's rule of thumb always applies: start low and work up carefully. If I'm working with an unknown rifle and load, I always start at least 10 percent under the recommended load and work up, getting a feel for the rifle's attitude as I go. If you are using an improved cartridge, you can use the loads for the standard version as a starting place.

Much of the controversy that surrounds wildcat cartridges deals with their real practical application in the field. If there is a reason not to hunt with a wildcat, it is because it may be impossible to secure ammunition should yours become lost or if you simply use up your supply. In light of this last consideration, the improved cartridges become most practical. There are various improved chamberings that will let you use factory ammunition in a pinch. The improved versions of the .30-06 and .375 will fire standard ammunition very effectively. The .458 Lott handles ordinary .458 Winchester rounds as well as any .458, but the wildcat rounds will drive the 500-grain bullets at speeds the old four-five-eight can't even dream of. Simply the best of both worlds.

A great percentage of my hunting, including my professional hunting in Africa, has been done with wildcat rifles that were totally dependent on my ammunition. If the airplane lost my .416 Taylors or my .338/378 K.T.s, I was left with both oars out of the water. Where the regulations allowed it, I always packed some ammunition in the case with my rifles; if I had guns, I had cartridges to go with them. After 20 years of hunting, both near and far and mostly with wildcats, I haven't had a problem. Some rewards seem to justify a little risk.

The argument that a wildcat is less reliable than its factory brothers has some merit. It is very unusual to find a factory round that won't chamber and fire in the correct rifle and very common to see difficulties with wildcats. However, when a wildcat won't work in the field, it is because of pilot error. You, the reloader/shooter, have complete control over your rifle and cartridges. First, every round that you take into the hunting field should be loaded in a case that has been fired *in your rifle*.

After that, follow careful reloading procedures as you would with any cartridge, leaving no stone unturned. Be sure that: your cases are the proper length; the neck thickness is correct; you have resized them properly; and that bullet seating depth is compatible with both the magazine length and chamber throat. When you think you have everything right, go to a safe shooting area and cycle every round of your hunting ammunition

through the magazine and into the chamber. Also, test-fire a few random rounds from the lot before you leave on your hunt.

All of this is advisable with any reload or even with factory ammunition. Just last week I was hunting elk with a fellow who had a factory .375 H&H rifle and factory ammunition. When he tried to load his rifle, he found only one round in a box of 20 that would chamber. The headspace on his rifle was tight and the ammo was at maximum! With all of this tinkering you can actually make ammunition that is more reliable than factory rounds. When I load my own dangerous game ammunition (and all others for that matter), I know several things: there are flash holes in the cases, anvils and priming mix in the primers and powder in the cases. On separate occasions I have encountered factory rounds that have failed on each of those counts. Those are the things that produce the very worst imaginable sound, especially when you are dealing with dangerous critters—*click!*

If you like labors of love, tinkering, aggravation and the rewards of successful effort, you will get along well with wildcats. If you want cartridges that come boxed and ready to go bang, stay with something you can get over the counter. With wildcats you can go faster, farther, bigger and smaller than you can go with factory standards. Just be sure to take a hard look at the ocean before you jump in. Wildcat water is deep, cold and often expensive. But there are those who thrive on it! 🐾

### DIRECTORY

**W. W. Blackwell** (computer program)  
Dept. GA, 9826 Sagedale  
Houston, TX 77089

**John Clark** (computer program)  
Dept. GA, 2417 N. Patterson St.  
Thomasville, GA 31792

**Gunnerman Books** (P.O. Ackley  
Handbooks/2 Volumes @ \$12.50 each)  
Dept. GA, Box 4292  
Auburn Heights, MI 48057

**Stoeger Publishing Co.** (*Handloader's  
Manual of Cartridge Conversions*)  
Dept. GA, 55 Ruta Court  
South Hackensack, NJ 07606

**Digest Books Inc.** (*Cartridges of the World*  
[also available from booksellers])  
Dept. GA, 540 Frontage Road  
Northfield, IL 60093

**Clymer Manufacturing** (chambering  
reamers and gauges)  
(catalog \$2)  
Dept. GA, 1645 W. Hamlin Road  
Rochester Hills, MI 48063

**JGS** (chambering reamers and gauges)  
(catalog \$2)  
Dept. GA, 1141 S. Sumner Rd.  
Coos Bay, OR 97420

**Sinclair International** (neck expanders,  
specialized loading tools) (catalog \$3)  
Dept. GA, 718 Broadway  
New Haven, IN 46774

**RCBS Inc.** (Case forming/reloading dies)  
Dept. GA, 605 Oro Dam Blvd.  
Oroville, CA 95965

**Redding Hunter** (reloading/forming dies)  
Dept. GA, 114 Star Road  
Cortland, NY 13045

**Old Western Scrounger** (RWS metric brass,  
bullets and wildcat supplies)  
Dept. GA, 12924 Hwy. A-12  
Montague, CA 96064

**Brownell's Inc.** (CerroSAFE and most other  
gunsmithing supplies) (catalog \$3.50)  
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