

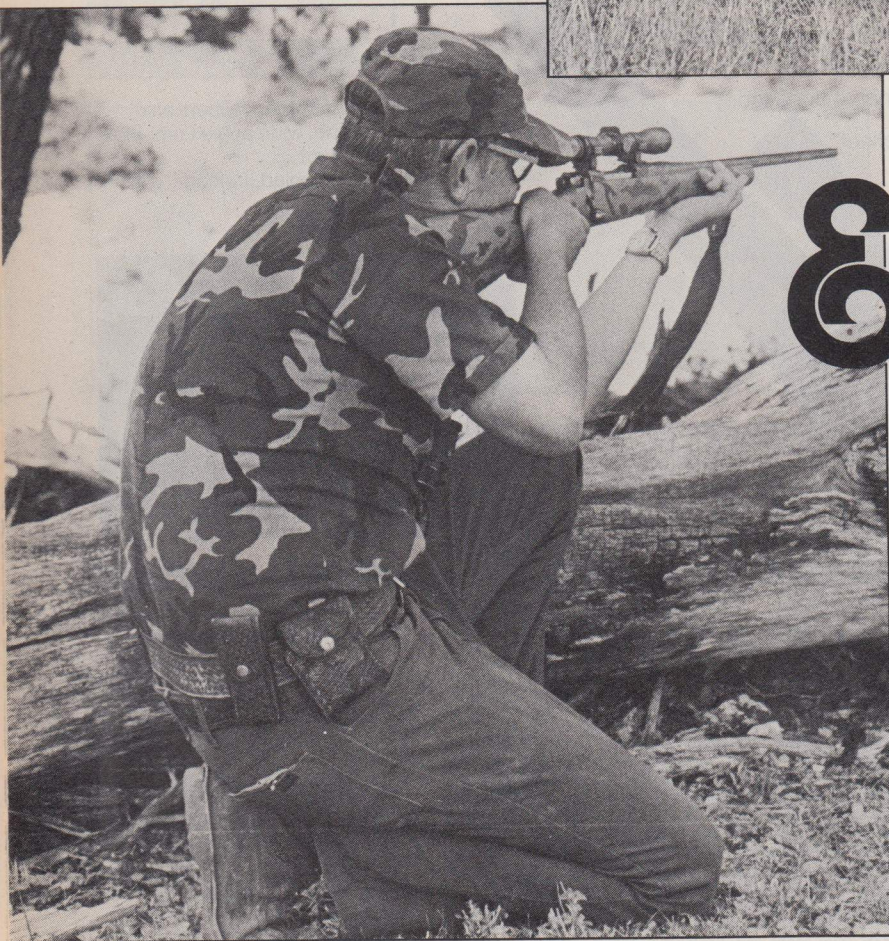
There are many good cartridges and rifles, but it's the person behind the trigger that makes the difference.

By John Wootters

■ Perhaps the single most common question I'm asked, by mail and in person, is "Which is your favorite cartridge for deer?" The answer is that I don't have one.

Sometimes it's phrased differently; for example, a reader may say "What do you use for deer, most of the time?" The answer to that one is most likely to be "Whatever happens to be handy."

That's because, about half the time, I'm



# FACTS & FANCIES ABOUT DEER RIFLES

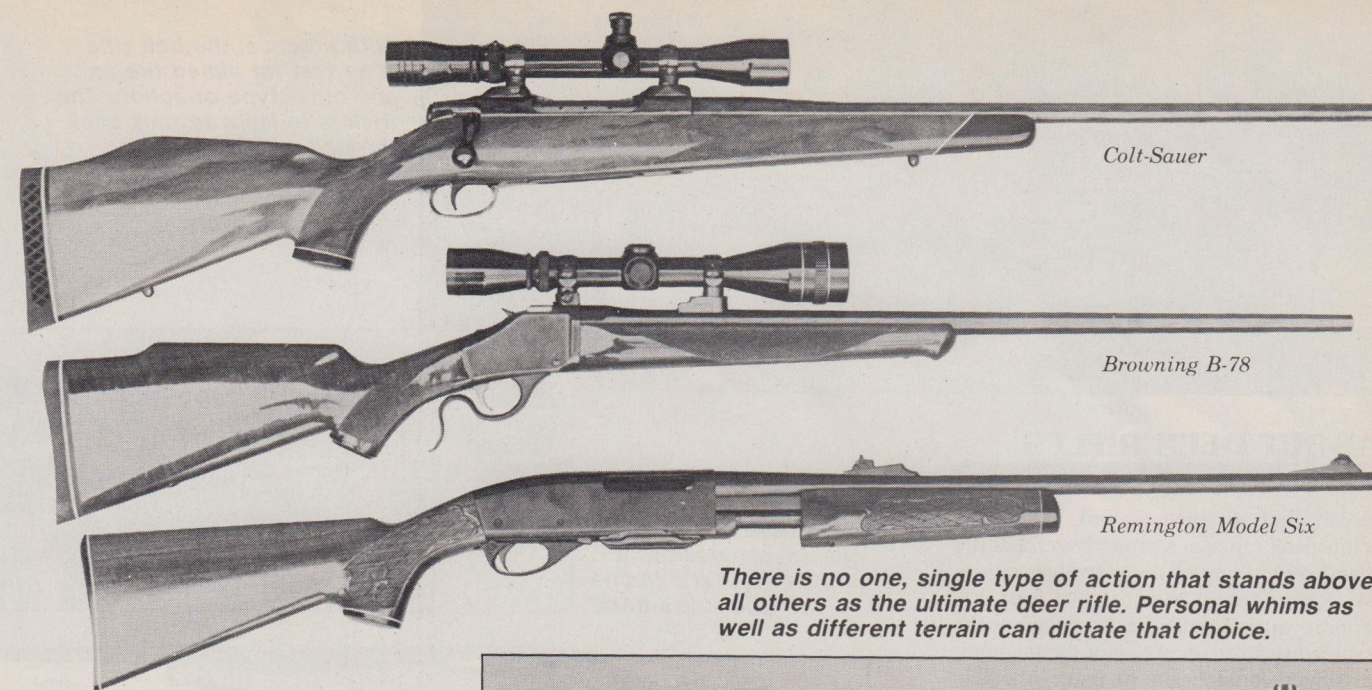
hunting with a rifle furnished me for testing by a firearms manufacturer, either a new model or an old one in a new chambering. This is part of my job. I dutifully tote the new piece out and slay a deer with it, and write the story. As a result of this aspect of my work, I have probably killed deer with more different cartridges than any other living man. I long ago lost track of how many or which ones, but the list includes just about every cartridge known of 6 mm or larger (and a couple smaller) up to the .45-70 Government. In some cases, only one or two deer-sized animals have fallen to a given round in my hands, while

other cartridges have collected as many as 20 or 25 specimens, with a wide variety of bullets and loads.

In these 40 years of deer hunting, I have hit and failed to collect only two bucks. One suffered a broken foreleg from a 7 mm Remington Magnum and I spent three full days looking for that deer without success. Obviously, that sad experience was not the fault of the cartridge. The other was hit with a .308 very high on the withers, actually above the spine, as a result of bullet deflection. Although knocked cold for half a minute or so, that buck was really uninjured, and was observed chasing a doe later

that same day. Again, not the fault of the cartridge.

If there is any one lesson to be learned from observing the effects of all the dozens of cartridges I've used on whitetails, mules, and exotic deer of similar size, it is that all of them will do the job if used competently. A secondary lesson—and perhaps a more surprising one to many hunters—is that most cartridges will do it equally well. There is literally not a dime's worth of difference in the effectiveness of a large group of popular cartridges. These include the .25-06, .270, 7 mm Mauser, 7 mm-08 Remington, .284 WCF, 7 mm Express (AKA



Colt-Sauer

Browning B-78

Remington Model Six

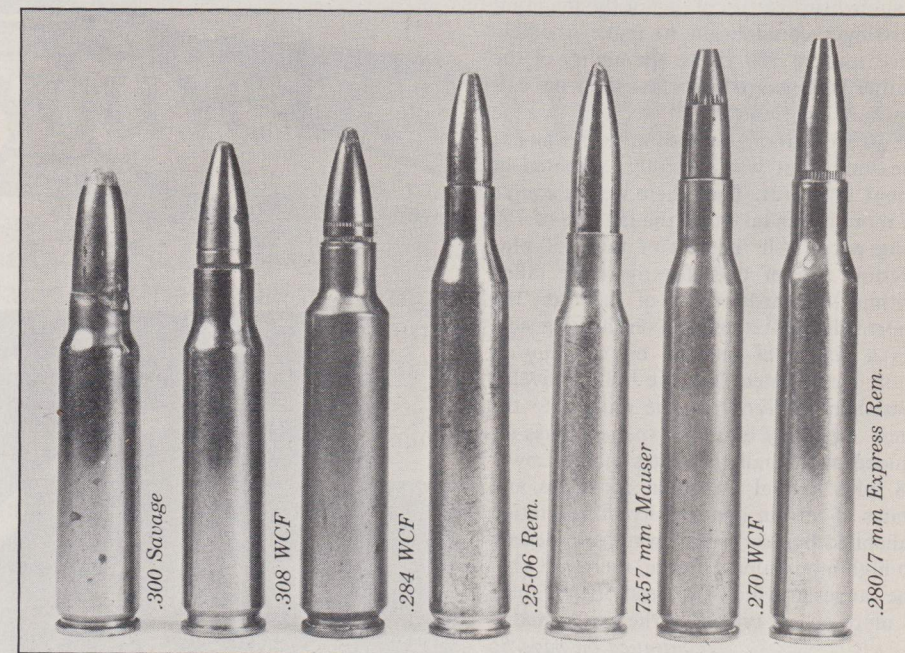
There is no one, single type of action that stands above all others as the ultimate deer rifle. Personal whims as well as different terrain can dictate that choice.

.280), .300 Savage, .308 WCF, .30-06 Springfield, the several 7 mm and .300 magnums, and the 8 mm Mauser, among others. In practical, everyday hunting terms, no difference between these cartridges can be detected by observing the reaction of game animals to comparable hits with them.

To put it another way, I doubt that even an experienced hunter could reliably tell which of these cartridges he was using if he had to judge only from watching animals shot with them. This is especially true when comparing such rounds as the .25-06, .270 WCF, 7 mm Express, .308 WCF, and .30-06 (each being used with the most appropriate bullet weights for deer).

Before a dozen readers write to remind me that I, along with most other gun writers, have devoted pages and pages in this magazine to detailed technical comparisons of exactly these cartridges, pointing out areas of superior performance in this or that one, let me add that I cheerfully plead guilty. Those articles were written for a slightly different audience, *i.e.* the hardcore, handloading "gunny" who is interested in the theoretical ballistic potential of various cartridges for their own sakes. These readers' hearts are warmed by subtle differences in ballistic coefficients, muzzle velocities, trajectories, terminal energies, and similar esoterica—as is my own heart. But those differences are far too subtle to be detected by a whitetail buck clobbered with a slug from any given cartridge.

It's certainly true that some of the rounds on that list above are better *long-range* numbers than others, and that these are, at least theoretically, better tools for the exceptional rifleman with the skill to utilize their long-range capabilities. But how many deer have you shot at long-range? Out of some 150 or more deer (of all species), my own longest shot was a whitetail buck killed at a measured 222



These cartridges, as well as others in the same class, exhibit almost identical effectiveness for deer if the proper bullets are employed.

Even a hot loaded .45-70 round will not knock an animal flat; if it could, the rifleman would also be decked at the same time.

Author checks a whitetail buck's scrape. The rifle is a pet Mannlicher-styled Sako in .308 caliber.





**With practice, the bolt rifle is as fast for aimed fire as any other type of action. The trick is to learn to rack back the bolt with the rifle at the shoulder so that the sights never leave the target during firing cycle.**

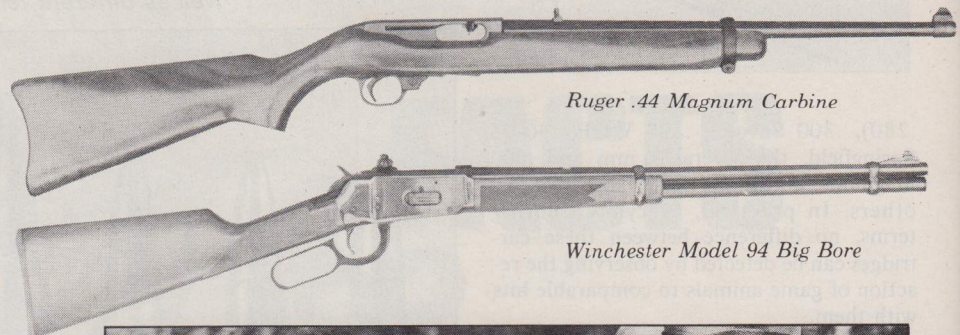
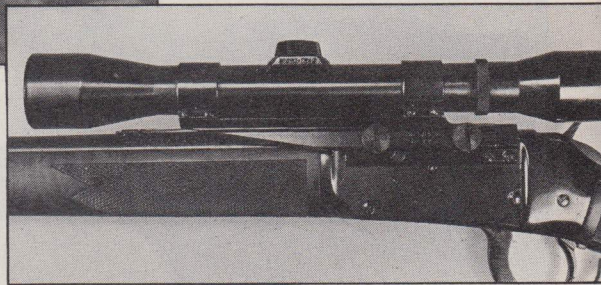
## ABOUT DEER RIFLES

yards. That distance is well within the point-blank range of a properly-zeroed rifle chambered to any of the cartridges on my list. A deer would have to be at least 300 or more yards from the muzzle before the assumed superiority of one of the magnum cartridges could begin to make a difference, and, at 300 yards, the ability of the hunter is far more important than the ballistics of the bullet.

My second-longest shot at deer was not measured, but was carefully estimated at about 190 yards. Then there were a couple of more bucks taken on the far side of 150 long paces. All the rest of that 150-plus lifetime bag of deer for me have fallen within 100 yards, more of them on the short side of 50 steps than on the long side. As a matter of interest, on my *shortest* shot, I calculated that the bullet traveled less than 20 feet from the muzzle to the buck. Since my hunting experience has included about half the states in the Lower 48, plus several Canadian provinces and states of terrain and density of vegetation inhabited by deer, from swamps to deserts to high mountains. I figure, therefore, that the ranges at which I've been offered shots is more or less typical of the experience of

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**The well-chosen scope is the fastest of all woods sights, provided that it is mounted low and in line with the rifle's bore.**



*Ruger .44 Magnum Carbine*

*Winchester Model 94 Big Bore*



**The Savage 99 is available in a wide choice of calibers and is suitable for both western and eastern deer hunting. The Savage spool-type magazine safely handles all bullet shapes including pointed spitzers.**



**Brush bucking reputations notwithstanding, no deer cartridge could reliably take this buck unless a head shot was attempted. A 400-grain .416 bullet nicked this sapling, then missed a 1,900-pound Cape Buffalo!**



PHOTO BY L.L. RUE III

**Long barreled rifles have no place in the brush. Every inch of barrel beyond 20 is a brush grabber.**

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any well-traveled veteran of the "Opening Day Wars."

Nothing I have seen in these four decades of chasing deer has in any way contradicted that first statement: there ain't a dime's worth of difference between most of the popular deer cartridges, in a *practical* sense. If you happen to like the .280/7 mm Express better than the .270 (which I do), and you feel a greater sense of confidence when you're lugging it afield, that's a perfectly valid reason for choosing a .280 . . . but it's a psychological reason, not a ballistic one. On the other hand, if you happen to like the .30-06 but also prefer lever-action rifles, you're out of luck. My advice in that case is to pick the rifle you feel most comfortable with, and settle for the .308, .284, .358 WCF, or some other, similar chambering. Neither you nor your quarry will ever notice the difference.

I'm quite certain, in fact, that such cartridges as the .30-30 WCF and .35 Remington are still viable deer killers and still being chambered today solely because they have been offered in neat, handy carbines that deer hunters like. The hunter who buys a semi-automatic or bolt-action rifle which possesses, to him, all of the dynamic handling qualities of a truck axle, just to get the ballistic properties of, say, the .30-06 cartridge, is going in the wrong direction. He *will* notice the difference . . . and it will be a negative one!

A deer cartridge is sometimes chosen, too, for any of several other reasons which cannot stand close inspection. Two of these are the myths of "knock-down power" and "brush-bucking ability." As to the former, it literally doesn't exist, relative to an animal the size of a deer. The plain fact is that a conventional, expanding game bullet cannot exert a hard enough push against a deer's body to "knock him down." It can, and does, disrupt his nervous system so suddenly that he loses muscular coordination and collapses, but this is not the same thing as actually pushing him over.

This seems to be one of the most difficult concepts to convey to hunters. About ten years ago, I made this same statement in another magazine article and received a letter from a couple of readers who had been so offended by the claim that a sporting rifle bullet has almost no knockdown ability that they went out and spent the afternoon firing their deer rifles into sandbags balanced on sawhorses. The sandbags were carefully constructed to match the weight of a live whitetail buck. Their letter to me stated, in tones of amazement, that I was right; they had not been able to knock the sandbags off their perch, even when rather delicately balanced.

Why, then, can a silhouette competitor knock over a heavy iron ram at 500 meters with a bullet? Simply because the bullet does not penetrate the silhouette target. This permits the conversion of its kinetic

energy into target momentum, enough of it to push the target backward far enough to topple. The same bullet, in penetrating an animal's body, doesn't meet enough resistance to create the same effect, its energy being converted in several other ways into massive tissue destruction. The amount of target momentum generated is about equal to that you would receive if a friend gave you a moderately stout shove in the chest with his open hand. You might have to take a half-step backward to keep your balance, but you would not be in the slightest danger of being "knocked down."

One of my most vivid memories of shooting an African leopard off a limb that was about six inches in diameter is noticing that he fell off the *near* side of the limb. The animal weighed about 165 to 175 pounds, about like the average whitetail, and he was struck broadside by a 400-grain, .45 caliber round-nosed bullet moving at, perhaps, 1,700 feet per second, a projectile that one would think could knock down anything knockable. It killed the old tom instantly, but it didn't impart enough target momentum, even on that narrow perch, to topple him over on the other side of the limb.

An old friend of mine had used a .30-06 for many years with perfect satisfaction. Then one day a gun dealer with one too many magnums in stock sold him the idea that a .300 magnum bullet would have a lot more "knockdown" than the old faithful

ought-six and made him a trade he couldn't refuse. The first deer my friend shot with his new cannon was a forkhorn whitetail at about 40 yards. The hit was a good one, through both lungs, but the little buck hardly even flinched, much less dropped, and made a mad, blind, 120-yard sprint before collapsing. The hunter was appalled. "Why, this damned magnum has less knockdown punch than an old .30-30 carbine I used to hunt with!" he stated indignantly, "I wish I had my .30-06 back!"

He was probably right. The magnum bullet had met so little resistance in the small buck's body that it may not have actually delivered any more energy than a .30-30 slug which stopped under the hide on the far side, but the plain truth is that none of the cartridges mentioned has any real knockdown power. Killing power, yes. Stunning, or shocking, power, maybe. But knockdown power . . . don't you believe it!

And don't buy a certain deer rifle because some clerk announces in awed tones that it "has a ton 'o knockdown."

Similarly, don't let the same clerk snow you about "brush-bucking ability." The idea that a heavy, blunt, large-diameter bullet at a relatively modest velocity will somehow maintain its course though the densest tangle of limbs and twigs and foliage, whereas a light, fast, pointed slug will go off, possibly into orbit, on the same shot, has been thoroughly discredited by ev-

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ery writer about firearms for the last quarter century. But it dies hard in the minds of thick-country hunters. I suppose this is because it *sounds* so logical. When I was a boy learning to hunt deer, back in the Great Depression, members of my Dad's hunting camp tried out two then-current hotshots, the .220 Swift and the .250-3000 Savage cartridges, in the yaupon thickets in which we chased whitetails. These lightly-constructed bullets would literally blow up on short-range hits on sizeable twigs, perhaps spraying the buck with particles and harmless fragments. Everybody nodded gravely and went back to their .35 Remington rifles. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I began to realize that I was having no better luck with heavy .30 and .35 caliber bullets unless I poked a hole in the brush to drive them through. These bullets didn't explode as spectacularly, but they deflected just as surely, and the result was the same; no dead deer. There is no bullet, from any cartridge, which will "cut a cord of wood and stack it" enroute to a whitetail. I have had trouble with deflection even from such elephant-busters as the .458 Winchester Magnum and the wildcat .416 Taylor (the .458 case necked down to drive a 400-grain, .41 caliber, FMJ round nose at 2,400 feet per second).

Perhaps the most important property a bullet can have for deflection resistance is gyroscopic stability. Deflection occurs when the bullet is destabilized by impact with an obstacle. If the projectile is thoroughly "asleep," it requires a larger and more solid obstacle to destroy its stability, imparting a massive yaw which quickly alters the direction of travel from a straight line into a pattern somewhat resembling a funnel-shaped spiral. This spiral rapidly expands in diameter until the bullet is stopped by something, usually the earth. Once destabilized, it will be mere accident if it hits the deer anywhere, and the farther the animal is standing from the obstacle, the lower the chances of any kind of hit. I have had many bullets deflected, but only two of them happened to strike the buck I was shooting at. I once had a .416 Taylor bullet nick a mopane tree in Botswana and actually miss a whole Cape buffalo no more than 12 yards behind the sapling!

In other words, no bullet—of any size, profile, or speed—has much chance to make contact if it hits anything of substance on the way to the target, but possibly the best way to help it do so is to make certain it is thoroughly stabilized. In a given rifling twist and cartridge, this could mean that a *lighter* bullet, moving *faster*, would have a better chance to resisting deflection, because it would have greater gyroscopic stability. That may seem wrong by intuition, but it fits the physical facts.

In any case, a hunter choosing a new deer rifle is well-advised to assume that there is no such thing as a "brush-buster," and to make his decision on the basis of other characteristics of the rifle and cartridge. A high-velocity spitzer is no handicap in heavy brush, or at least, no greater handicap than any other kind of slug.

It may, in fact, even be an advantage now and then, because even in the thickest whitetail regions there are likely to be a few openings—fields, forestry clear-cuts, pipeline or powerline rights-of-way, and such—where a long shot may present itself. It may not happen very often, but once is enough if it's at the buck of a lifetime. Furthermore, the kind of rifle and cartridge which throws the high-speed spitzers will also come in handy for the eastern whitetail hunter who suddenly gets a chance to go west for a whack at mule deer, pronghorns, or other open-country game.

Another deer-rifle myth—which seems to be slowly fading away, fortunately—is that a telescopic sight is too slow for woods use. Such a sight, correctly chosen for low magnification and wide field-of-view, happens to be the fastest of all rifle sights, even for running game, *provided* the man behind it is well-practiced and thoroughly familiar with it. If it's mounted wrong—offset to one side or too high—it will slow a man down, granted, but if the scope is where it should be, the stock fits the hunter, and he has taken the pains to learn to use it, glass-

ware is deadly on deer, anywhere, anytime. And it offers the overwhelming advantage of a clear sight picture under poor-light conditions.

Finally, there is the idea that rapid repeat fire is vital to the hunter of thicket-dwelling deer, and that the faster he can get rid of bullets, the better off he is. Pure baloney! All of us have occasionally killed a deer with a second shot that we missed with the first, but the fact remains that the first shot you have is always the best one. If you can't hit him with that one, your odds drop to near zero with the second and subsequent rounds. Buy a rifle because you like the way it feels and carries, and because you think it will help you score with the *first* bullet, and forget the zone-of-fire ideas you may have learned from your old First Sergeant.

I should add that most of my second-shot kills over the years have been with turnbolt rifles, suggesting that even when a follow-up shot is possible, the bolt action is more than fast enough with a little practice. Without practice and familiarity, nothing is going to help very much, not even a large dose of blind luck!

Choosing a new deer rifle can be perplexing enough, with the variety of models and cartridges on the market today, without complicating and confusing the process with an assortment of old wives' tales, myths, and fantasies which may be holdovers from black powder days. 