

Pick The Perfect Rifle For Your Lady

Preaching, owning a cat, joining a nudist colony, and teaching your wife to shoot are all activities requiring a durable and deep-bottomed ego. I don't know much about the first three, but I am a brass-bound, pluperfect expert at the last-mentioned!

I've been trying to teach my wife to shoot for more than 28 years. Her interest in shooting, for its own sake, verges on non-existence, but she loves to hunt. She knows next to nothing about ballistics; can't even get the designation of the cartridge her rifle uses right on the first try more than half the time, nor is she any great shakes at shooting groups. And she won't practice. You and I know that someone like that will never amount to anything as a marksman (sorry, "marksperson"), don't we?

Of course we do. The trouble is that practically everything Jeannie shoots at falls down dead. On her first safari, in Botswana a few years ago, I had a very bad show with a Cape buffalo one morning. Shot him three times with a .416 Taylor and couldn't even make him lie down, although he was fatally hit. Finally lost him, when he crossed a river into a game preserve where we couldn't follow. Some native meat hunters found him about an hour later, stone dead, but a fat lot of good that did me. I was in a foul mood just before noon when we jumped a pretty good reedbuck, and instructed my spouse to kill him. It wasn't a terribly difficult shot, but it was her first head of African game and that tends to do strange things, even to experienced marksmen-hunters.

Jeannie bounced the buck on his nose with one bullet, and the trackers made crude jokes to the effect that I should have let her shoot the buffalo. That's what I mean about needing a strong ego!

To make matters worse, she continued to do things like that throughout the safari. In fact, she slew five beasts with exactly five rounds of ammo, and brought home the other 45 cartridges I'd loaded for her rifle for the trip. In fact, I don't believe she has used them all up yet... and that was five years ago! One of her trophies was a record tsessebe antelope, weighing about 350

A GUN THAT FITS RIGHT WILL FEEL GOOD AND SHOOT BETTER!

By John Wootters



Lionel Palmer of Safari South, Ltd., Botswana, congratulates Jeannie Wootters on her record Tsessebe antelope, taken with one shot from her .30-06.

pounds on the hoof and the biggest animal at which she had ever fired. He stumbled about 50 feet and dropped dead. Another, a springbok, was the longest shot on game she'd ever attempted, about 225 yards. A springbok is a very small target and always in motion, and many a veteran hunter has burned 20 or 30 rounds of ammo trying to down the one he wanted. With Jeannie it was the same deal: one shot and the buck collapsed in his tracks. By the end of the safari, the trackers were getting out their knives as soon as they

saw an animal they knew Memsahib was scheduled to pop!

On the whitetail deer she so loves to pursue, every buck except one since her first one almost 20 years ago as been a one-shot kill. Long or short, big or little, it doesn't seem to matter.

Obviously, she has to be lucky, right? Well, if it's all a matter of luck, hers holds pretty well with a shotgun, too. Like all of us, she has good days and bad days, but she generally manages to hold her own.

And this, remember, with a gal who

is never entirely certain whether she's shooting a .306 or a .30-08, and who doesn't practice.

As I said in the beginning, however, it takes a tough ego to stand up to that sort of punishment, and I happen to have one. So I'll hereby claim a portion of the credit for my dear wife's success in the hunting field, even though I can't seem to teach her to really shoot. My contribution—out of the depths of my gun-wisdom, patience, and intuitive grasp of feminine psychology—has been to see to it that she was equipped with the right guns and cartridges for her, and that she approached them in the right frame of mind.

There are certain matters which must be accepted as starting points in acquiring a gun for a lady. One is that she is unlikely to possess the basic strength to handle a rifle or shotgun which to an ordinary man would seem eminently handy. Second, her physical dimensions (no, not *those* dimensions, Jack!) are likely to be smaller than a man's, or even than a teen-age boy's. A pistol grip must be very slender to be comfortable to a lady, the buttstock will have to be quite short, the scope will have to be reset for her use because her shoulders are not as thick as a man's and her neck is not as long, nor is her cheek as full.

A third point is that ladies are seldom accustomed by their typical life experience to absorb violent blows upon their shoulders and faces, as are most male children, or to enjoy the proximity of loud noises to their dainty ears. They are much more easily intimidated by recoil and report, at least until they gain some experience... and nobody enjoys things which intimidate him or her, even if they don't really hurt.

Please understand that I did *not* say that ladies can't take recoil. I merely said that such sensations are apt to be unfamiliar to them, and therefore a psychological barrier to their enjoyment of shooting. Frankly, I suspect that the typical American woman can accept as many raw foot-pounds of free recoil as the typical American man, maybe more. Jeannie's favorite hunting rifle is a lightweight .30-06, and I've heard plenty of grown men grumble about the kick from such rifles. And I had a hell of a time weaning her away from her 12-gauge in favor of a pretty little 20-bore over/under. Among the many lady big-game hunters of my acquaintance are some who have demonstrated their ability to handle even a .375 H&H Magnum with pleasure and more-than-respectable deadliness. No, provided the gun fits and she is introduced to it in the proper way, Ms. Hunter can shoot anything you can; never believe that the ability to absorb heavy doses of recoil has anything whatever to do with masculine toughness. It ain't so!

The basic point of all this is that your wife (or daughter, girlfriend, etc.) is simply not going to be able to shoot *your* rifle well enough to learn anything or enjoy using it. Not because it kicks too much, but because it's probably too big for her in all dimensions. This means that, if you wish to encourage her to hunt with you (and sympathize with your desire to spend great sums of time and money in hunting), you're going to have to buy her a gun of her own. Believe me, it will be some of the best money you've ever spent! To begin with, the mere fact that it's *hers*—her own personal property—and not a mere loan or hand-me-down from you, will make a world of difference in her enthusiasm for the piece.

The starting point is selection of a caliber (or gauge), and this is an area she'll probably be happy enough to

leave to you. In big-game rifles, I think the most serious mistake you can make is to arm her with an inadequate cartridge "because it doesn't kick much." She really needs a cartridge with a little extra punch, if anything, for the clean, positive kills (even with slightly imperfect hits) which will give her confidence, and pleasure in the field. For most American game—deer, pronghorn, black bear, etc.—the minimum cartridge should probably be the .257 Roberts or something very like it, ballistically.

Jeannie's first whitetail was taken with this cartridge, fired from a beautiful Mannlicher-Schoenauer rifle of mine. It was too big and heavy for her, but, like most husbands, I was dubious about her sudden yen for deer hunting. Once she had her first kill (one shot, naturally!), I knew the bug had bitten and she was going to have to have her



Jeannie Wootters proudly hoists a trio of fat gadwall drakes she collected with her 12-gauge Winchester model 1400. The gas operation soaks up recoil.



Mrs. Bill Shackelford displays a dandy whitetail she took with her 7x57 mm Ruger M77. She gave up a .243 for the 7x57, and looks happy with her choice!

Pick The Perfect Rifle

own rifle. It was another .257 Roberts, factory-chambered in an early Browning Safari Grade turnbolt with a pencil-slim barrel, as dainty a lady's rifle as can be imagined. I then had the stock shortened and slimmed, and mounted the 2X-7X Redfield scope to Jeannie's specifications, not mine. She still has it, and with proper handloads, it is as lethal a ladylike little rifle as has ever been to the woods. In addition to its virtues as a whitetail killer, the .257's versatility makes it a first-class casual varmint and excellent coyote, bobcat, and turkey rifle. It did seem a little skimpy for African game, however, which is how the .30-06 got into the picture, but upon reflection I have no slightest doubt that my Better Half could have done just as well in Botswana with the .257.

A lot of Texas wives are huntresses, and I've hunted for decades with many ladies. The most popular cartridges among them seem to be the .308 WCF, the 7x57mm Mauser (either standard or the "improved" wildcat version,) and the .270 WCF, together with the .257 Roberts, .25-06 Rem., and a few .30-06s. I can't think of better big-game choices than any of these, for men or women, and you could just as easily toss in the .284 WCF, .280 Rem., and its reincarnation, the new 7 mm Express Remington. Ten or 15 years ago a lot of these ladies were toting .243s and 6 mms, but that fad seems to have run its course among the serious Dianas of my acquaintance, and for good reason.

The reason is simply that, sooner or later, the 6 mms failed them on deer, however excellent their performance on smaller game, and the larger cartridges have not. Many of these gals have as much or more hunting experience than most American deer hunters of whatever sex, and their opinions are really to be respected.

They are mostly—like my wife—confirmed bolt-action fans, although some started out with lever or semiautomatic actions. Women in general tend to be very deliberate shooters, much more concerned with making the first shot count than with sheer firepower, and very few of my acquaintance are willing even to attempt running shots. Therefore, the alleged slowness of the bolt action bothers them not at all. Its mechanical simplicity, ease of operation, and positive feel appeals to a lady who may be a trifle hazy on machinery to begin with, and especially to one who has had some other kind of repeater jam at a critical moment. And you can just about forget about teaching her to operate a bolt at her shoulder between shots: there may be one, somewhere in the world, but I have never seen a female-type rifleperson even attempt it.



This trophy warthog was taken by Mrs. Wootters with one .30-06 shot.



Author's wife looks smug over one shot kill with her .257 Roberts.



The biggest buck ever taken with Jeannie Wootters' Browning .257 Roberts was this wide-racked eight-point whitetail, weighing 150 pounds hog-dressed.

In the case of shotguns, however, the opposite is true in action preferences. About 95 percent of the women I know use a gas-operated semiauto exclusively. A very few will shoot an over-under, but almost none will opt for a side-by-side double, and no amount of talking will persuade them. I suppose it should be added that the situation is not greatly different in the case of most male shooters.

Whatever kind or gauge shotgun you purchase for your wife, it should be a lightweight and, as with the rifle, it should be modified to fit her as perfectly as possible. The pull will have to be shortened almost invariably, a recoil pad installed, and attention paid to correct pitch.

Things about a gun to which you and I would pay no attention whatever will assume surprising importance to a lady,

and you may as well be prepared for it. For example, an autoloading shotgun I got for Jeannie in the early days never made the grade because it had no external button for closing the action. She had to stick her thumb into all that machinery in the bottom of the receiver, and it frightened her when the bolt slammed forward, although it never hurt her. It also tended to damage her nails, and that, my friend, was the kiss of death! Feminine-type persons always remain feminine, even while hunting; it's one of the things I love about 'em!

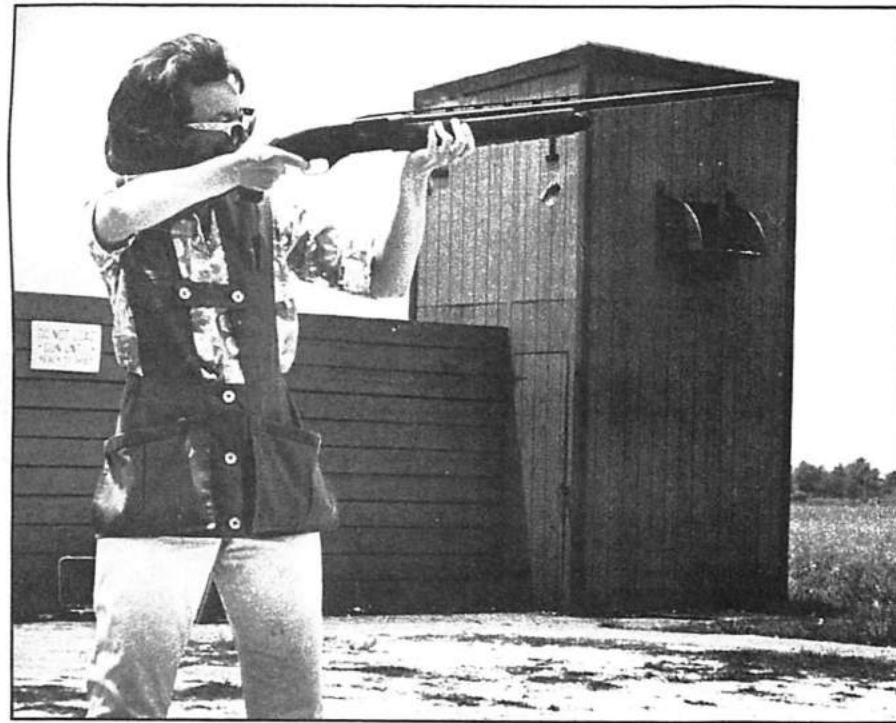
I've noticed, too, that the girls tend to like pretty things, and that includes guns. A nicely-figured piece of walnut in a stock will catch her eye instantly and make her like that gun even without firing it. Unlike a male gun buff, the lady is apt simply to take the performance of the firearm for granted (at least until it fails her or hurts her in some way), and to be impressed with the superficial aspects of its appearance. This may not be true of all women, and is certainly not intended to be chauvinistic, but it's a pretty fair rule of thumb. Frankly, even I like a handsome gun better than an ugly one, and see nothing wrong with that. The difference is that my wife trusts my judgement implicitly in matters of ballistic

and accuracy performance... but she has her own ideas about what makes a gun "nice" or "pretty," and pays absolutely no attention to my opinions along those lines.

She is exactly like a man, however, in that she values a rifle or shotgun with which she has shot well in the past, with which she has had a triumph in the field, or which has become an old,



Even the most experienced of male hunters often come unglued when a rifle fails in the field. Not so Jeannie Wootters! When her scope fogged, she coolly switched rifles with the author and killed this fine 11-pointer (above). Bottom, this excellent southern impala shows perfect bullet placement; another one-shot kill for the .30-06.



Skeet shooting is excellent practice for field shooting! Recoil from her 12-gauge has knocked Mrs. Wootters' glasses awry, but she's ready for more!

trusted, and familiar friend from long association. She becomes every bit as attached to a hunting rifle or shotgun as I do, although exactly how it does what it does remains something of a mystery to her, just as her automobile does.

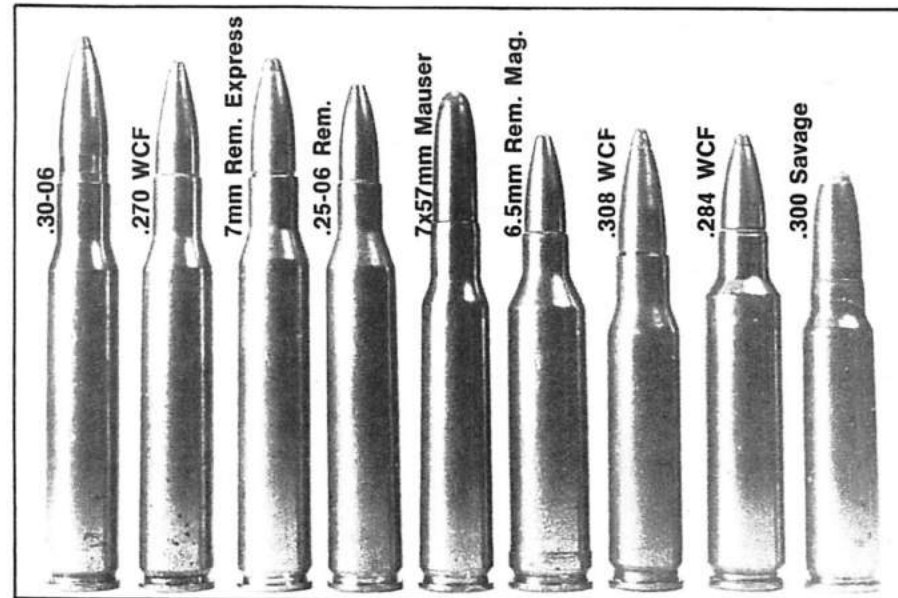
The way to help a lady achieve this sense of confidence and pride of possession in a gun is *not* to hand her the gun and a box of cartridges and turn her loose. You can save her—and yourself—a great deal of trauma in the long run by taking the time at the very beginning of her relationship with a new gun to introduce her to it properly. Choose a time when neither of you has other things on your mind, and sit down with her and the gun and let her handle it. Demonstrate and explain its operating features, such as action, safety latch, trigger, and so forth. Avoid extensive technical detail, and forget all about ballistics. Stress handling safety, of course, but keep the discussion always positive, not negative. Make certain that the stock and scope mounting are comfortable for her. Do not discuss recoil. If she's like Jeannie, first impressions are lasting ones, and she won't even be curious about recoil at this stage of the game.

If the new gun is a centerfire rifle and she has no experience with centerfire rifles, it may be best to allow her to begin by firing a .222 or some similar cartridge, preferably from a comfortable rest. Keep the emphasis on sight picture, trigger control, and, most of all, on the pleasure of hitting a target. At first, a tin can at 100 yards is a much more interesting target than a piece of paper, no matter how small the group

therein. For most women, a sense of personal achievement and early success instills confidence and a fondness for the new gun more quickly than a dozen one-inch groups.

If you're a handloader, by all means assemble some reduced loads for preliminary familiarization shooting... but make sure the rifle is zeroed for the ammunition. Encourage her to shoot as much as she wants to, but don't push her to shoot after she has become tired or bored, and don't be demanding. If she misses, quietly tell her where the shot was and that it was "close."

Your greatest ally is that shooting a



Author Wootters' selection of some excellent big-game cartridges for a lady hunter—or for a man. The emphasis is on enough power to do the job right.

Pick The Perfect Rifle

gun is just plain fun, for almost anyone of any age or sex. Make sure you keep it fun for her, and your investment in a gun of her very own will never be wasted. The quickest way to turn her off, however, is to pressure her, to be scornful when she misses an easy shot, or to show off your own skill. Let it be her show, and be supportive, positive, and encouraging. The rest will take care of itself, nine times out of ten.

If the new gun is a shotgun, the best place to start is with a hand-trap and a case of clay targets. Use the lightest loads available, usually skeet or target loadings, and toss some easy straightaways until she becomes comfortable with the gun and begins to hit targets regularly.

With either rifle or shotgun, never compete with the lady. Chances are, your skill and experience will be too much for her at first (later, she may very well beat the pants off you!) and putting her down is not the way to keep her interest.

Again, none of this is meant to sound patronizing; indeed, I would suggest *exactly* the same procedure for introducing a grown man to a new rifle or shotgun if he had no background whatever in shooting.

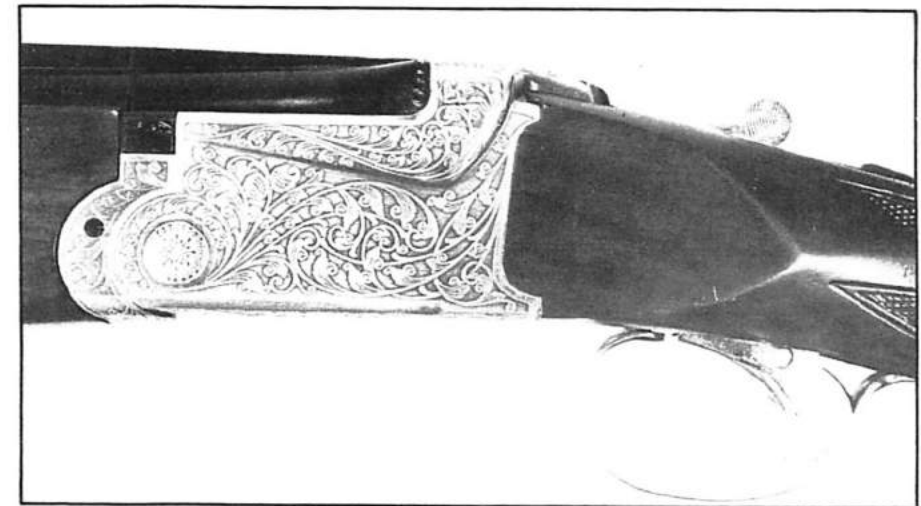
If the lady in question is *not* a beginner, it's still a good idea to use reduced loads for practice and plinking. There's no particular reason, in fact, for burning expensive, full-velocity ammunition for any purpose other than zeroing and actual hunting. My wife never realized that her .30-06 has any recoil at all until last year, when it was necessary for her to check her zero at mid-season.

Some men go hunting at least partly

to get away from their wives, and the last thing on earth they wish to see is an awakening interest in hunting on her part. That's their business, of course, and none of mine... but there are benefits which may not be immediately apparent to having a lady hunter in the family, not the least of which is her greater understanding when the man of the house occasionally needs a new gun of his own or a long and expensive hunting trip.

In my case, best of all, my wife has become my favorite and most constant hunting companion, and sharing this common interest has added new depth and richness to our relationship.

Except now and then... next time, I think I'll let her shoot the damned bullet-proof Cape buffalo, and I'll knock over the reedbuck!



A touch of elegance, such as the etching on this Ithaca SKB Model 680E will make most ladies like a gun more; if one likes a gun, one shoots it better.



Mrs. Rufus Hayes used a Browning in .270 WCF caliber to take this Texas whitetail, her first buck. Above, Mrs. Mark White used the 6 mm Remington to take this javelina. Author feels the 6 mm and similar calibers are fine for javelina and such, but only very experienced hunters should use them for deer-sized game animals.