

Outdoors

Thinking of taking up muzzleloading?

Sooner or later, most shooters get around to trying a muzzle-loading rifle. When that urge came over me, back in the '50s, there was no such thing as a replica hunting rifle.

I dug up an original caplock rifle in a hock shop in Richmond, Texas. To say it had seen better days is a serious understatement, but all the parts were there and the bore still showed signs of having been rifled at one time. Rust and some pitting were evident, but what the hey — the man only wanted \$50 for his “priceless antique” and I figured he’d haggle.

He did and I did, and I took the old gun home for \$35. No identifying marks appeared anywhere on the gun, and I never learned who made it, where, or when. About a quart of Hoppe’s and two packages of steel wool later, I had a working muzzle-loader. Then my education began.

By trial and error I had to devine the correct combination of lead ball diameter and patch thickness, and buy a canister of FFG black powder and some caps.

The lock actually worked; popping caps with surprising vigor, considering those old hand-forged leaf springs were at least 80 years old.

I acquired a mould and cast a few balls, then worked up a load estimated to be about 60 percent of the expected normal powder charge, greased my patch with Crisco, rammed the load home and let ‘er rip. The rifle rewarded me with a nice, sharp crack and a fine cloud of sulfurous smoke. Even better, it didn’t blow up.

That test-firing had been with the rifle bound to a spare tire, triggered with a long cord from behind a tree. Accuracy was not relevant. But I was hooked.

Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

I shot that old smokepole with the greatest of pleasure for several years, fine-tuning powder charges, bullet metal, and loading techniques. I was proud as punch of my resurrected rifle when it shot groups of four or five inches at 50 yards, and of myself when I managed to load and fire two aimed shots within a single minute.

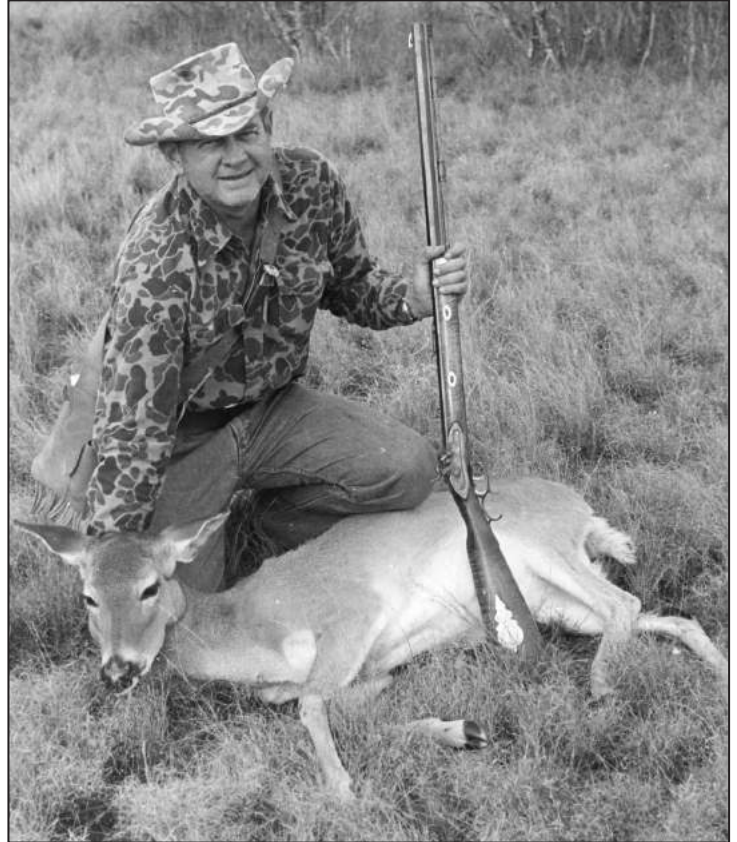
Today, a curious gunny has a mind-boggling array of options for sampling the historical shooting arts. Hundreds of different models of black powder rifles of dozens of types are offered, made of modern steels to precise tolerances.

You can choose from military-style rifles of any era, flintlock or caplock, replica traditional sporting rifles of many types and eras, and even modern muzzleloaders with sure-fire ignition systems, featuring camouflaged fiberglass stocks and designed to mount telescopic sights.

Some of these new rifles are perfectly capable of shooting one-inch groups at 200 yards and can deliver power and bullet performance equal to the demands of any game on earth, including the biggest and most dangerous.

It’s your call. Personally, I find these modern guns “muzzleloaders” in name only and completely foreign to the spirit of the historic weapons. They’re of no interest to me, although I do possess one and have hunted deer with it.

This class of guns exists



Photos by John Wootters

Wootters has used traditionally-styled muzzleloading rifles like this Connecticut Valley Arms “Plains Rifle” to hunt whitetail and axis deer, elk, moose, black bear, pronghorn antelope, wild boar, axis deer and assorted other exotic game. These primitive firearms add a real challenge to the hard work of culling whitetail does for herd management.

only to take advantage of special muzzleloading hunting seasons in various states. It seems to me that it misses the whole point black powder shooting. About the only thing they have in common with “real” muzzleloaders is that they’re single-shots.

There are even “replica” black powders available today, to go with ignition systems that use shotgun primers instead of caps. These new-style guns are more reliable than traditional arms and require less skill and knowledge to use. They are hardly primitive firearms, and vastly reduce the challenges of taking game.

If somebody developed archery tackle that drives an arrow by means of gunpowder with flat trajectories up to 200 yards, every bowhunter I

know would snort at it. The reaction would be “So what? What does it have to do with traditional primitive hunting?”

Still, if it’s legal and you like it, go for it. Not everyone chooses his hunting gear because of the challenge, the satisfaction of doing something the hard way. Pay no attention to a dinosaur like me, and good hunting.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen’s Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.