

# Sports/Outdoors

## Big Iron ... for whitetails

Speaking of ways to add challenge to your deer hunting (which we were, in this space two weeks ago), perhaps you've been considering a handgun, in addition to traditional muzzleloaders or string guns.

If so, you're tracking my own mental processes of a few decades ago. I liked pistols, enjoyed shooting them, and didn't think that hitting something as big as a deer or wild hog would be a major problem (wrong!). I tried the idea out on a coyote I called up in South Texas and whacked him with a Ruger .357 Magnum Blackhawk. He was killed and I was hooked (see adjacent photo).

The next step, naturally, was deer. Using the same Ruger single-action, I collected two whitetail bucks but came away from that experience a little disappointed in the .357 Magnum for deer. The bucks went down, but not as decisively as I wished, even with pretty good bullet placements. I, like my old friend Elmer Keith, prefer to do all my hunting before I shoot.

Nobody knew much about building expanding bullets for handgun velocities in those days, and I know now that I was getting little or no expansion from my .357 bullets. Nevertheless, with or without good reason, I swore



Photo by John Wootters

**This old South Texas buck was nailed with a .44 Magnum, which is one of the few cartridges for which really excellent big-game hunting ammunition can be purchased commercially.**

off the .357 for deer. More recent experiments with the

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cartridge have shown that modern .38-caliber bullets can expand very reliably, but in the meantime I'd found other handgun calibers so much more positive on big game that I've never gone back to the .357.

These include the .41 and .44 Magnums, .45 Colt (sometimes incorrectly

termed the ".45 Long Colt"), and .454 Casull, all usable in single-action revolvers. The .475s and .500s are quite obviously adequate as well, possibly even unnecessarily "adequate." I also worked and hunted extensively with Thompson/Center Contenders and other similar single-shot handguns using rifle-type cartridges, but these are a whole 'nother topic and will be reserved for another column.

In my personal bias system, the open-sighted single-action revolver is the only pure and proper hunting handgun and deserves first mention. It's light and easy to carry, leaves both hands free, and offers a tremendous sense of accomplishment after a successful hunt.

Note that I specified "open-sighted"; most hunting revolvers can be mounted with a telescopic sight, but, unless the shooter's eyesight requires that assistance, a scope on an old-fashioned sixgun seems out-of-place, inappropriate, and, to me, offensive.

There's really nothing wrong with a double-action revolver, of course, but they hold no advantage over single-actions, aren't as sturdy or as comfortable for shooting powerful ammo — and besides, I just don't like 'em.

Disadvantages of all revolvers include range and power restrictions, which are actually the same thing. My

own self-imposed range limit for a shot at an unwounded animal is 50 yards max, and I like 25 yards much better. I can ring a 12-inch steel gong at 100 yards shot after shot with my hunting pistols, but I don't care where I hit that gong, and I care very much where I hit an animal that bleeds and feels pain.

The biggest disadvantage is the inherent difficulty of holding a pistol steady, which is where the challenge comes in. That means practice and lots of it, something most Americans seem to think themselves above. It also means finding some kind of gun rest for every shot at game.

Of those cartridges listed above, my overwhelming favorite is the .45 Colt because of its versatility when correctly handloaded, closely followed by the .41 Magnum. The .44 Mag is perfectly OK with proper ammunition, and I've enjoyed consistent success with it, but I've found nothing it can do that the .41 Magnum can't do just as well, with less fuss and commotion.

If you happen to be one of the very few shooters possessing a rare Ruger Blackhawk in .357 Maximum — and are willing to fire such a collector's item — you'll find it more effective by a wide margin on big game than its older cousin, the .357 Magnum.

I've taken whitetails with just about everything except sharp sticks, and can testify that a clean kill on a mature buck with a single-action hogleg comes close to being the most fun I know how to have in the woods.

**John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson'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 Peterson's "Hunting."**



Photo by John Wootters

**This coyote answered Wootters' predator call in 1965 and became the author's first game (bigger than a rabbit or armadillo) taken with a handgun.**