

'MAGNUMIZING' THE .44

By GEORGE W. RICE

A souped-up version of the .44 Special, flat enough for woodchucks and packing a moose-killing wallop

FOR MANY YEARS the .22, .38, and .44 calibers have been the most accurate among handgun cartridges, and certainly the most popular. The .22 rimfires have been constantly improved both as to accuracy and trajectory until it is a marvel to see what a top shot can produce, even up to two or three hundred yards. The .38-caliber cartridges, more accurately spoken of as .35 caliber, have had their full share of improvement culminating in the .357 Magnum, one of the most powerful and accurate cartridges ever produced for handguns.

That leaves the .44 Russian and the .44 Special as rather lonesome twins. Always superb as to accuracy, the heavy 246-grain bullets, used in both cartridges, start out according to Remington at the same muzzle velocity of 770 feet per second. It seems they are identical twins, so you really have only one choice in that caliber. Take it or leave it. Both have accuracy plus, and with reduced loads and wadcutter bullets they are the sweetest things ever fired at a twenty-yard slow-fire target. The large hole helps tremendously on that small target where nines all count ten and any black shot will go at least a nine. I have always found it much easier to make possibles with the .44 revolver than with a .22 pistol at twenty yards. Along with these good points the .44 has had one bad fault; that of trajectory, which somewhat resembles a baseball going from center field to catch a runner at the plate. You guess the distance just right or you fail utterly to land your bullet where you intend it to go. Now, at last, the .44 has come into its own as a great all-around cartridge. Something has indeed been added—flatter trajectory, speed, and power. In fact, I believe the cartridge I am using has definitely more killing power than any handgun ammunition now manufactured.

Like many others in the shooting fraternity I enjoy filling

in between open seasons by hunting woodchucks. Pleasure does not come merely from killing a lot of chucks but rather, from being out of doors, from the anticipation of a shot and in the knowledge that the chuck has at least a fifty-fifty chance. Also, I do not want to leave even one wounded chuck. In that frame of mind I decided some time ago to buy a .357 Magnum for hunting, but inquiry brought the reply they were not being manufactured and that none would come off the line for many, many months.

Then a second need arose to hasten my decision. I have developed a keen interest in taking moving pictures of my hunting trips and having a trip planned for moose and black bear, which means getting as close as possible for pictures, the problem of some means of personal protection became important, if only for my peace of mind. A bear would not worry me but a bull moose in the fall would, if I succeeded in getting really close. The need in such a situation is for enough power to stop any animal at short range with one well-placed shot. I have had one experience when taking pictures at twenty feet of what looked like a very dead 200-pound bear. In looking through the finder of the camera I was startled to see the bear suddenly come up and turn my way. He dropped again for good with a revolver shot two inches above a point between his eyes. A second experience while unarmed, of spending an anxious five minutes keeping an apple tree between myself and a buck who showed every indication of having an uncontrollable temper, makes me a trifle cautious. My pictures will have less quiver in them and my peace of mind will improve if I carry the margin of safety given by a really powerful load, which I now have.

For many years I had owned a Colt .44 Special Officer's



Taking a sixty-yard shot at a chuck. The shot, a little high, nearly decapitated the animal



Shooting from a rest is the best way for anyone out of practice to set revolver sights for 100 yards without wasting expensive ammunition

Model, with 7½-inch barrel. Starting with that, I wrote a letter to the late J. Bushnell Smith of Middlebury, Vermont, and stated my problem. In due time Smith informed me that he could make up a Magnum load for the .44 that would maintain safe pressures in my gun and yet be what he felt was the most powerful handgun load made. Muzzle velocity would be 1210 feet per second with the fine 235-grain Keith hollow-point bullet. After firing over one hundred of these Magnum loads I have not found a primer that showed excessive pressure.

As I had expected, my first testing presented another problem. The recoil was too heavy for the small, poorly-shaped grips that came with the gun. After thirty shots my hand was through for the day, but what I had accomplished brought my enthusiasm up to new heights. After ten test shots which gave me somewhere near a correct setting of my sights, I took a regulation fifty-yard revolver target and shot 5 shots at twenty-five yards offhand, five shots at 50 yards, also offhand, and five shots at 100 yards from the sitting position. All shots were fired on the same target without adjusting the sights. Twelve of the fifteen shots were in the bull and the other three were no more than one inch outside.

My next move was to get Walter Roper of Longmeadow, Massachusetts, to make a new grip for the gun. He drew an outline of my hand, listened to my problem, and designed a grip to counteract that heavy recoil. When the grip was delivered and tested with the new loads I received another boost in enthusiasm. There was no more of that smash into my hand from the recoil, but rather a sharp upward push which did not bother me at all. I had what I wanted—a handgun with more killing power than a .44-40 rifle and a trajectory that would hit a woodchuck from one to one hundred yards by aiming at different places: low on the chuck at 25 yards, the ground line at 50 yards and his chest at 100 yards. With the new grip attached I fired a ten shot target, three shots each at 25 and 50 yards and four shots at 100 yards from a sitting position. Remembering my punishment from recoil with the old grip I flinched badly on the first shot, one at 100 yards, and recorded a low seven. I then proceeded to shoot a nine-shot group of 4½ inches, every one of which would have killed a woodchuck or hit a deer in the head. I had the gun that I wanted—one with accuracy and power enough to stop even a moose in case an emergency developed.

What I have recorded here any average shooter can do from the same positions and with the same equipment. While years ago I shot on a team that won the U. S. Championship year after year, my sixty-five years, eyes that will not adjust, and a lack of practice have taken the usual toll. If I entered a shoot

now I would do well to stand in the upper half of the novice class, I have only one advantage in hunting: I know what to do and how to do it, but any shooter can learn that shortly by experimenting as I have described.

How far can you kill a woodchuck with a revolver? That is a question easy to answer. Simply put up a target the size of a woodchuck and try shooting at greater and greater distances from a prone or sitting position. Anything up to the point where you stop hitting the target five out of six shots you can feel to be within your range. You will be amazed at how far that will be. Whether you lie down in the grass, hide behind a rock or tree, or shoot from a sitting position, you can rest your body and arm, but under no condition let your gun-hand, gun or wrist touch anything. If you do, your elevation will go haywire. The gun must be free to recoil, just as it is in a machine rest. That rule you cannot break.

When you are in a comfortable position with your body and arm resting you have every advantage that the expert has except the trained use of the trigger finger. If you learn to squeeze that finger slowly and steadily you will shoot a better score from a comfortable rest than an expert can shoot offhand. If you feel it only sporting to shoot from a standing position, think of the rifle hunter with every advantage over you. He does not hesitate to kneel, shoot sitting down, shoot over a leg rest, use a sling strap, telescope or take any other advantage he can get. Take every advantage available in turn. You may not kill as many chucks as with a rifle and scope but you will learn to stalk game better and you will have more fun and much more satisfaction. With very little practice you will be amazed at the accuracy obtained up to 100 yards. But through it all do not forget that you have one of the most powerful handgun loads in the world, if not the most powerful, and use it accordingly. In killing power the .44 Magnum definitely exceeds the old .44-40 rifle that was such a popular hunting arm in its day, and much of this effectiveness is due to the excellent Keith bullet.

The December 1947 issue of the RIFLEMAN carried an interesting and instructive article regarding the hunting qualities and effectiveness of the old flintlocks, written by Les Fitz-



The .44 special magnum cartridges and Colt Officers Model they are used in, showing the custom grips Walter Roper designed to minimize recoil

gerald. Every hunter who reads it should become a better hunter. A comparison of the new .44 Special Magnum load will show up favorably alongside these old rifles. The Magnum equals some of these old rifles in energy and exceeds others. It has one big advantage: there is no smoke to conceal the results of a hit. Also, a second cartridge is immediately available, and you never have to worry about wet powder. While I have not made a test of comparable accuracy I would expect the flintlock to group slightly better at short range and

the Magnum slightly better at longer ranges. The hollow-point 235-grain bullet would definitely have an advantage over the round ball of 80 to 210 grains used in the average flintlocks. However, the sporting attitude and conclusions drawn by Mr. Fitzgerald will apply equally well to either weapon.

Hunting with a bow and arrow has received much space in magazines of late. It has proven effective for the hunter who is willing to stalk his game to close range and make up in skill what is lost in the extra range and power of a modern rifle. Howard Hill, top authority in the United States on hunting with the bow, said in a recent article: "Being an expert shot alone does not make a successful hunter, you must know your animals and their habits." He then went on to describe some of the drawbacks to the use of arrows for hunting. For the first 20 yards of its flight an arrow must have over an 18-inch opening, as the back end whips around before straightening out in flight. This prevents its use in heavy brush, as even a small twig would deflect the arrow 10 feet or more from its course at 50 yards. A medium breeze will drift it a foot at that distance. There is none of that sensitiveness in the 235-grain Magnum bullet with its 1210 feet per second velocity. The arrow leaves the bow at under 400 feet per second and loses half of that speed up to 50 yards, which means a very high trajectory. This will amount to a foot or more for an arrow compared to each inch for the .44 Magnum. Hill describes the accuracy of the arrow by stating that he does not know of a man who can keep his arrows in a six-inch space at 50 yards. In the matter of accuracy, speed of missile, trajectory, use in brush, deflection, usefulness from rest or concealment, and striking energy, the .44 Magnum has tremendous advantages over the bow and arrow.

To complete the story, here is a letter from the late J. Bushnell Smith, in which he gave me the details of the loads he had worked up for me:

"The .44-Special loads were made with 18.5 grains of Hercules 2400 powder, and the 235-grain Keith hollow-point bullet. I do not remember at this time what make of cases were used. If Western, they were primed with Western No. 7 primers; if Remington, with 2½ primers. . . . Any standard pistol primer as furnished in new primed cases by the ammunition makers seem to be satisfactory with this load.

"As an interesting sidelight on this load, Elmer Keith mentioned this bullet and his loads of about 22.0 grains of 2400



This target was the first made after sights were set and represents three shots each at 25, 50, and 100 yards. The low seven was a flinch at 100 yds.

a long time ago. I tried loads from 17.0 to 22.0 grains on the chronograph, and obtained not only the most uniform velocities, but also the *highest* velocities with the 18.5 grain load. This information was given Mr. Keith, and he has used and recommended the 18.5 grain charge since then.

"I am glad to hear that you had a chance to use the loads on a deer. A long time back I got my limit of two of the little 'Pacific Blacktails' with a revolver one season. I think I got a greater kick from this than I would have from killing moose or elk with rifles of the type conventionally used."

At long last something has indeed been added to the .44 Special that makes it a many-purpose arm. Always a superb target arm, flattened trajectory and doubled power have added utility for many purposes. With this new load added to its other attractive features it may be that gun you used to dream about. ♦ ♦ ♦

HANDGUN STOCKS

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whittling, to the consternation and despair of my cronies. They, too, had these modish last words from Lew Sanderson or Walter Roper. Where I whittled too much I put on plastic wood. I took most of the bulge out of the side of the stock, I cut the long sweeping thumb rest down to a very modest thing of similar shape which the thumb touches but does not press upon. As botched up as they were I shot with these stocks for a whole season, now and then cutting a little more wood away or adding a little plastic wood here and there. Then I sent the whittled and patched stocks back to Mr. Roper with a note asking him to duplicate them in his finest walnut and artistry.

I don't recommend that everyone start butchering their nice custom jobs. That is much too expensive. If I had it to do over I would do it another way. I would take the gun just as it came from the factory and on the factory handles I would daub plastic wood, molding it with a pocketknife or a putty knife until I approximated the design desired. Metal portions

touched by the plastic wood should be oiled before application. A small piece of paper should follow the outline of the back strap, at right angles to it, to keep the stocks divided into two parts. When the first application of the plastic wood has dried, the stocks can be cut to shape by anyone.

For thirty-five cents and a couple of hours work, models can be made for the purpose of having them duplicated by a custom stockmaker. From them he can cut a perfectly fitting job. Or the shooter can just keep on shooting them, plastic wood and all, adding friction tape to aid in grasping.

After stocks have been made which are sensible in design and correct in size, minor changes merely for the purpose of experimenting should not be made by those who wish to be shooters instead of experimenters. Remember, one change invites another. And no kind of stock will make you a good shot. You have to become one yourself by—of all things—shooting. ♦ ♦ ♦