

## Brian Pearce



In spite of being nearly a century old, the .44 Smith & Wesson Special is still one of our finest and most versatile revolver cartridges, at least if handloaded. Introduced in 1907/08 along with the first Smith & Wesson N-Frame New Century, commonly nicknamed the “Triple Lock,” the Special was created by lengthening the .44 Russian case from .97 inch to 1.16 inches.

Records sometimes conflict, but it appears that early ammunition was loaded with 26 grains of black powder to drive a 246-grain lead roundnose bullet around 780 fps. A smokeless load appeared at about the same time that drove the above bullet 750 fps. With the obvious potential of smokeless powders to boost velocity above the black-powder loads, it remains a mystery why the factories didn't load it to something around 900 or 950 fps. (An appropriate charge of Unique powder, available during this era, could drive bullets past 900 fps while staying within recommended pressure limits.)

*Below, the .44 Russian (left) was lengthened to create the .44 Special (middle), which ultimately led to the development of the .44 Magnum (right).*



# Handloading

# .44






the

## Loads for an American Classic

# S&W Special



In spite of today's new factory loads, the Special can still be improved through handloading to increase power, accuracy and versatility in smaller and lighter guns than the .44 Magnum. Those who understand and appreciate the virtues of the .44 Special and the great sixguns chambered for it are indeed sixgun connoisseurs.

During the two decades following the .44 Special's introduction, many recognized that it could be handloaded with appropriate smokeless powders to achieve substantially greater power than any commercial cartridge of the era. The cartridge's best-known advocate was Elmer Keith. Keith was in a unique position to try sixgun loads on game ranging from stringy jackrabbits to elk and was a promoter

***Keith found he could drive a 250-grain bullet 1,200 fps from a revolver fitted with a 5½-inch barrel.***

of long-range sixgunning as the ultimate test for accuracy. During the 1920s he developed his own line of sixgun bullets with .44-caliber Lyman mould 429421 (weighing 250 grains) becoming possibly the most popular bullet of all time in the .44 Special.

By the early 1930s, with the advent of Hercules (now Alliant) 2400 powder, Keith found he could drive a 250-grain bullet 1,200 fps from a revolver fitted with a 5½-inch barrel. For nearly 30 years, he wrote about the virtues of heavy .44 Special loads for hunting, accuracy and defense and urged ammunition companies to introduce his load. The Keith load used 17.5 grains of 2400 behind his 250-

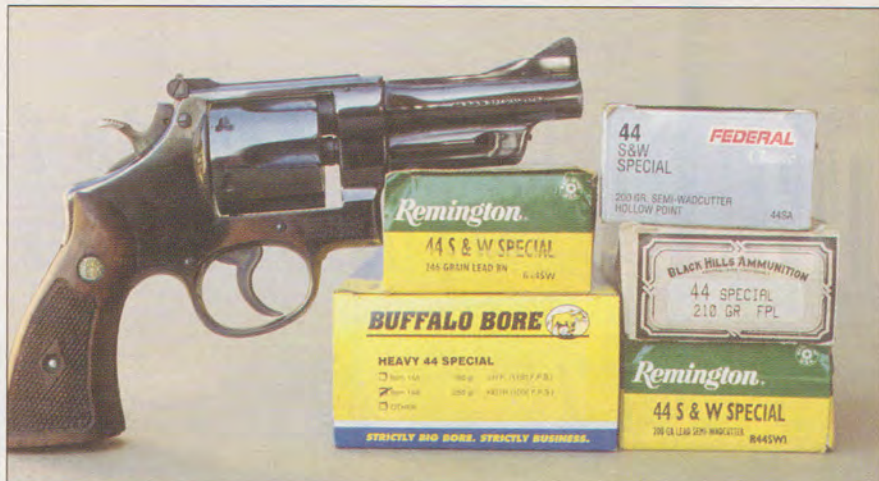


# .44 Special

grain cast bullet, but factories were concerned about revolvers safely handling the 25,000 psi pressures this load generated. In 1953 Keith visited the Remington and Smith & Wesson plants and urged them to bring out a modern magnum .44-caliber sixgun by lengthening the Special case .125 inch. Keith's wishes finally became a reality in 1955/56 with the introduction of the .44 Remington Magnum.

The .44 Magnum was a significant development, particularly for hunters, but the revolvers were larger and heavier than Smith & Wesson and Colt Single Action .44 Specials, which were so trim and handy for belt carry. Today, with the exception of Smith & Wesson's Model 629 Mountain Gun, most .44 Magnums are larger and heavier than ever, leaving a legitimate place for the Special. One prominent gun writer, the late Skeeter Skelton, recognized the virtues of this round and played a major role in its continued popularity. During the 1970s and 1980s, he convinced the head honchos

**Most .44 Magnum dies are suitable for loading the Special.**



*Above, the original 246-grain roundnose factory .44 Special load remains available, but some companies have increased velocity using lighter bullets. Buffalo Bore offers a 255-grain cast SWC at 1,000 fps for post-World War II guns only. Right, the original .44 Special 246-grain factory load (left) is advertised at about 755 fps. The handload contains a 250-grain Keith-style cast bullet loaded to 1,200 fps.*



at Smith & Wesson and Colt to offer revolvers so chambered. For newcomers, Skeeter's standard .44 Special load consisted of 7.5 grains of Alliant Unique combined with the 250-grain Lyman cast bullet 429421 at about 950 fps.

The .44 Special offers sufficient performance for hunting big game with Keith-style cast semi-wadcutter (SWC) bullets driven from 900 to 1,200 fps. A number of years ago, I planted two 250-grain cast bullets (from Lyman

**The .44 special offers sufficient performance for hunting big game.**

mould 429421) through the lungs of a bull elk at over 100 yards. They were driven 1,200 fps from a Colt New Frontier with a 7½-inch barrel. Both bullets exited the offside, and the bull ran 20 or 30 feet before going down.

That same year I trailed a black bear that had been wounded with

a .338 Winchester Magnum. After getting above the bear on the steep hillside, a 250-grain .44 Special bullet was planted squarely between his shoulders, cutting the spine and exiting between the front legs. Several mule deer have fallen to the same bullets that were traveling 900 to 980 fps.

In spite of this modest velocity, bullets completely penetrate on broadside lung shots, and deer usually drop within 20 to 50 yards. I once shot a mountain lion in the chest, as it faced me, using a .44 Special fitted with a 5½-inch barrel loaded with 250-grain Keith-style bullets at 950 fps. The slug traveled straight as an arrow lengthwise, then broke the backbone and exited. Total penetration was around 30 inches.

Having used the Special for a variety of applications, including target and hunting, I appreciate the blend of caliber, bullet weight, velocity and comparatively low pressure.



The .44 Special has always had a reputation for being accurate. It is doubtful it is more accurate than other similar straight-walled revolver cartridges, as long as they are loaded correctly, but it takes a rather unreasonable load to make it misbehave. If care is taken in the selection of components and in assembling ammunition, it often produces extreme spreads of 20 fps or less for 10-shot strings.

Factory loads most shooters are familiar with as offered by Winchester and Remington for the past 97 years include the previously mentioned 246-grain lead

roundnose bullet driven an advertised 755 fps. Regardless of the advertised velocities, in recent decades it is difficult to find a given lot number of ammunition from either company that will go much faster than 700 fps

**The .44 Special has always had a reputation for being accurate.**

from revolvers with 4- to 7½-inch barrels. In fact, a trained eye in good light can usually watch these bullets in flight. I don't know what the pressures are running, but they are low and well

under SAAMI recommendation of 15,500 psi. We can only speculate why this load has never been updated to give just a bit more velocity, but it is likely linked to the steels used in the early S&W New Century revolvers.

In an effort to boost the Special's velocity, Winchester offers a 200-grain Silvertip hollowpoint (HP), Federal a 200-grain lead SWC-HP and Remington a 200-grain lead SWC, each driven 900 fps. One can't help but notice the ballistic similarity of the above loads to the .44 WCF in a revolver, a cartridge that gener-

**Table I** **.44 S&W Special "Category One"**  
(15,500 psi or less)

bullet (grains)	powder	charge (grains)	velocity (fps)	extreme spread (fps)	
200 RCBS 44-200-FN cast	Red Dot	5.5	922	16	low recoil-cowboy action
	Universal Clays	8.0	1,055	29	
240 Hornady lead SWC-HP	Bullseye	5.0	802	18	
	Red Dot	5.0	816	16	
	W-231	5.5	804	21	
245 Lyman 429383 cast roundnose	Bullseye	4.8	761	20	same as 1908 factory load
		5.3	838	19	
	Unique	6.5	902	23	good small game load
		7.0	936	26	
	Red Dot	4.8	776	18	
		5.3	827	15	
250 Lyman 429421 Keith	SR-4756	7.5	856	25	good small game load
		8.0	932	27	
	Power Pistol	7.5	921	18	excellent general purpose
		8.0	978	14	
	AAC-5	8.5	859	26	
		9.3	929	28	
	Universal Clays	6.0	779	23	
		6.7	875	21	
	Unique	6.0	788	26	maximum
		6.9	918	23	
W-231	5.5	760	16		
	6.0	829	20		

**Notes:** A Smith & Wesson New Century (Triple Lock) Target revolver with a 6½-inch barrel was used to fire the above loads. Winchester cases and CCI 300 primers used throughout.

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200 Speer Gold Dot HP	Unique	8.5	1,071	-	
	AAC-5	10.4	1,012	-	
240 Hornady lead SWC-HP	W-231	6.0	844	24	maximum or leading may occur
249 Lyman 429383 cast roundnose	Bullseye	5.0	801	22	accurate, small game load
250 Lyman 429421 Keith	Bullseye	5.0	812	25	
	W-231	6.0	836	23	
	SR-4756	8.0	929	40	
	Power Pistol	8.0	980	13	
255 Lyman 429244 GC	Power Pistol	8.0	983	19	

**Notes:** A Freedom Arms Model 1997 with a 4¼-inch barrel was used in all the above loads. Winchester cases and CCI 300 primers used throughout.

*Be Alert - Publisher cannot accept responsibility for errors in published load data.*



# .44 Special

ally had a good reputation for defense and even hunting game within practical limits.

Buffalo Bore Ammunition offers two loads designed specifically for American manufactured .44 Special revolvers produced after World War II. While they exceed SAAMI pressure recommenda-

Before retiring to the loading bench, it's important to understand safe working pressure limits for a given gun. It seems prudent to divide popular .44 Special revolvers into categories: the first consisting of standard pressure loads that don't exceed 15,500 psi, the second category is for guns that can digest loads that develop up to 22,000 psi, while the third category is held to a maximum of 25,000 psi.



Above, jacketed .44-caliber bullets measuring .429, .4295 and .430 inch are suitable for the .44 Special. Left, a variety of powders was used to develop .44 Special handloads.



tions, they are safe in appropriate revolvers. The first load drives a 185-grain jacketed hollowpoint (JHP) 1,150 fps, while the second pushes a 255-grain cast SWC 1,000 fps. In spite of the factories generally using non-canister powders, their ballistics can nonetheless be duplicated through handloading.

Just because a gun has digested a given load doesn't mean it will stand a steady diet of such. When a gun is fired continuously with loads that are stressing it, metal can become fatigued and eventually becomes dangerous. The point being, loads must have a sufficient margin of safety to allow a reasonable life span for

the gun. Certainly some will disagree how these revolvers have been rated in terms of strength, to which no offense is taken.

The first category (15,500 psi) includes the Smith & Wesson New Century, Second Model Hand Ejector and all imported clones of the Colt Single Action Army revolver. Contrary to what has been printed by many authors, the New Century/Triple Lock revolvers are not particularly strong. The third lock at the crane certainly helped keep the guns tight and chambers in alignment with the bore but did nothing to increase their strength. The steels and heat-treating methods of these early Smith & Wessons were not advanced (and some were not even heat-treated). They can probably take more pressure, but their life span will be shortened substantially,

A variety of cast bullets was used in compiling load data. Left to right: RCBS 44-200-FN, Lyman 429215 220 grains, Lyman 429383 245 grains, Lyman 429421 250 grains, RCBS 44-250-K 255 grains, Lyman 429244 255 grains and Dry Creek SWC 307 grains.





# .44 Special

and the margin of safety that we recommend is narrowed.

In addition these revolvers display remarkable fit and finish and should be used with care to assure their preservation and long life. Colt Single Action Army revolver clones have been imported for decades and have been manufactured by several companies. The quality, types of steels and heat-treating methods have varied considerably. A breakdown and discussion of these guns could fill chapters, so it seems prudent to place them all in this category for safety reasons.

**Elmer Keith's excellent 250-grain SWC was designed in the 1920s.**

The second category (22,000 psi) includes the Colt Single Action Army, New Frontier SAA, Charter Arms Bull Dog and United States Fire-Arms SAA-pattern revolvers that are U.S. manufactured. (Early USFA guns were manufactured overseas.) The Colt SAA and New Frontier models have been used successfully with loads that generate 25,000 psi, but these have proved just a bit warm for some guns and accelerate wear. For everyday tin-can shooting, I would suggest using loads that are between 15,000 and 18,000 psi, but the occasional use of loads that run up to 22,000 psi is safe, assuming the gun is in good mechanical condition. The Charter Arms Bulldog has proven strong enough to handle these loads, but to prevent premature loosening, they should be used somewhat sparingly. Besides, heavy loads in the Bulldog are unpleasant and difficult to control in rapid-fire, double-action shooting.

The third category (25,000 psi)

Table II .44 S&W Special "Category Two" (22,000 psi or less)

bullet (grains)	powder	charge (grains)	velocity (fps)	extreme spread (fps)
200 Hornady XTP-HP	Unique	9.0	1,072	42
	Herco	9.5	1,091	30
200 Speer Gold Dot HP	Universal Clays	9.5	1,142	28
225 Speer SWC-HP	IMR-4227	19.5	1,092	34
	Blue Dot	12.5	1,098	74
	Universal Clays	8.0	1,079	19
220 Lyman 429215 GC	Unique	8.5	1,058	50
240 Nosler jacketed SP	Blue Dot	11.0	933	39
250 Lyman 429421 Keith	SR-4756	8.5	989	38
	Unique	7.5	951	5
		8.5	1,059	34
	Universal Clays	8.0	1,042	20
	VV-3N37	8.5	974	-
		9.0	1,024	-
	2400	15.0	1,076	26
		15.5	1,120	20
255 Leadhead RCBS 44-Keith	HS-6	10.0	971	18
	AAC-7	12.0	1,002	37
	Blue Dot	11.5	1,029	46
	Herco	8.5	1,047	10
	255 Lyman 429244 GC	H-4227	18.0	1,049
	Unique	8.5	1,041	28

\* Maximum, accurate

Notes: A Freedom Arms Model 1997 with 4¼-inch barrel used to test fire the above loads. Winchester cases and CCI 300 used in all loads, **except** Federal 155 Magnum used with IMR-4227 and H-4227 powders.

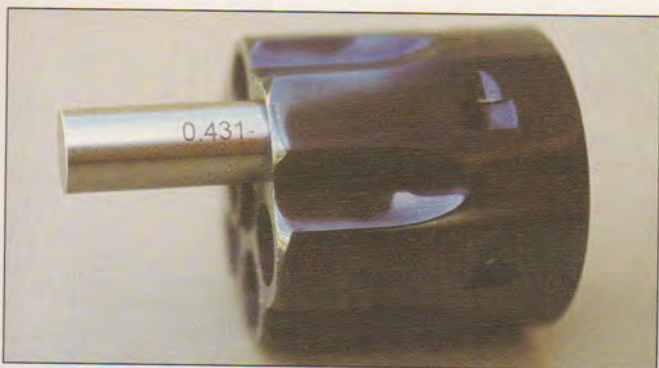
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200 Hornady XTP-HP	Unique	9.0	1,129
	Herco	9.5	1,127
200 Speer Gold Dot HP	Universal Clays	9.5	1,184
225 Speer SWC-HP	IMR-4227	19.5	1,122
	Blue Dot	12.5	1,142
	Universal Clays	8.0	1,130
220 Lyman 429215 GC	Unique	8.5	1,114
240 Nosler jacketed SP	Blue Dot	11.0	984
250 Lyman 429421 Keith	SR-4756	8.5	1,003
	Unique	7.5	989
		8.5	1,088
	Universal Clays	8.0	1,056
	VV-3N37	8.5	998
		9.0	1,047
	2400	15.0	1,101
		15.5	1,146
255 Leadhead RCBS 44-Keith	HS-6	10.0	998
	AAC-7	12.0	1,029
	Blue Dot	11.5	1,066
	Herco	8.5	1,091
	255 Lyman 429244 GC	H-4227	18.0
	Unique	8.5	1,080

Notes: A Colt Single Action Army with 7½-inch barrel used to test the above loads. Winchester cases and CCI 300 primers used throughout, **except** Federal 155 Magnums used with IMR-4227 and H-4227 powders.

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Brian suggests sizing bullets to correspond with throat size. The throats of this Colt Single Action measure .431 inch, while the groove diameter measures .428 inch.



H&I sizing dies are available in .427, .428, .429 and .430 inch, allowing cast bullets to be sized accordingly.

includes Smith & Wesson Third Model Hand Ejector (or Model of 1926), 1950 Target, Model 696 and 396 Titanium, Colt New Service and Shooting Master and Freedom Arms Model 1997. The Ruger .357 Blackhawk converted to .44 Special is also suitable for loads in this category. The S&W Model of 1926 and 1950 Target featured better steels than previous versions and have the same outside cylinder diameter as the Model 29 .44 Magnum. The S&W L-Frames feature five-shot cylinders with bolt notches located between chambers, resulting in strong chambers. The factory conducted some rather strenuous torture tests wherein the Model 696 easily endured pressures well beyond anything we will present here.

With that said, most shooters will find these revolvers most useful (and pleasant) using loads in the 15,500-psi range. At just 19 ounces, the titanium/aluminum 396 Mountain Lite produces rather fast recoil with heavy loads. For those carrying a handgun for defense, bullets weighing 200 to 220 grains driven 1,000 or 1,100 fps or bullets weighing 240 to 250 grains traveling around 800 to 850 fps have considerable punch (and are under 15,500 psi). The ability to fire fast follow-up shots would be preferred to a heavier load that increases recovery time between shots.

With some of today's stronger

.44 Special revolvers, such as the Freedom Arms Model 1997, there could be a fourth category with pressures that run up to 36,000 psi, or the same as current .44 Magnum loads. To me such loads defeat the purpose of the Special, and for this reason have been omitted. Even if we are using one of the stronger guns, most shooters will find loads in the 15,000-

to 22,000-psi range to be most pleasant and useful.

Modern .44 Special cases, manufactured within the past half-century, are of solid head construction and share similar head and wall thickness as the .44 Magnum. In short they are easily strong enough to handle any of the loads listed. Folded or

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*Brian used four revolvers to establish load data including (top to bottom) Smith & Wesson New Century Target with 6½-inch barrel, Colt Single Action Army with 7½-inch barrel (the frame is in the "white" in preparation to receive new case-colors), Smith & Wesson Model 24-3 with 6½-inch barrel and Freedom Arms Model 1997 with 4¼-inch barrel.*

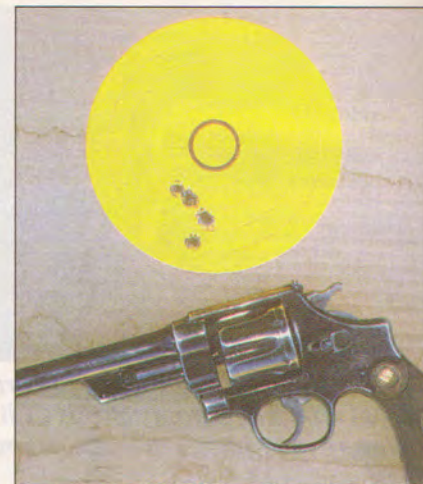
balloonhead cases are now old and probably brittle, so they are best retired to a cartridge collection.

Suitable jacketed bullets are many and include those designed for the .44 Magnum measuring .429, .4295 and .430 inch. The most useful weights generally range from 180 to 250 grains. Speer has introduced a 200-grain Gold Dot HP specifically for the Special. It features a large hollowpoint and an appropriate jacket to help ensure expansion at velocities as low as 850 fps.

Another good bullet is the Winchester 210-grain Silvertip HP, which is available as a component. In spite of being designed for midrange .44 Magnum factory loads, it also offers reliable expansion at velocities of 1,000 fps. The 180-, 200- and 240-grain Hornady XTP-HP bullets generally offer reliable expansion at veloci-

ties of 900 fps or more, making them good choices in appropriate categories. Heavyweight jacketed bullets can be used but most weighing 300 grains cannot be driven fast enough in the Special to offer reliable expansion.

In the cast bullet field, there are



*The Lyman 429383 245-grain roundnose bullet, seated over 4.8 grains of Bullseye, essentially duplicates original .44 Special factory loads.*

many worthy choices, some being classics in the purest sense of the word. Examples include bullets that resemble the 246-grain roundnose factory version and include Lyman mould 429383 or Redding/SAECO 442. In spite

**(Continued on page 96)**

**Table III .44 S&W Special "Category Three" (25,000 psi or less)**

bullet (grains)	powder	charge (grains)	Freedom Arms velocity (fps)	Smith & Wesson velocity (fps)
200 Hornady XTP-HP	2400	19.0	1,254	1,263
200 Speer Gold Dot HP	H-110	22.0	1,289	1,282
210 Winchester Silvertip HP	2400	17.5	1,152	1,148
		18.5	1,220	1,231
	AAC-7	14.5	1,173	1,235
220 Lyman 429215 GC	2400	18.0	1,186	1,204
240 Hornady XTP-HP	H-110	18.5	1,112	1,114
240 Speer JHP	HS-7	13.5	1,153	1,160
250 Sierra Silhouette FPJ	H-110	18.0	1,111	1,119
		19.0	1,188	1,188
250 Lyman 429421 Keith	2400	17.0	1,189	1,202
		HS-7	13.5	1,188
258 RCBS 44-Keith	2400	17.0	1,167	1,190
255 Lyman 429244 GC	Blue Dot	12.5	1,101	1,109
	H-110	19.0	1,177	1,189
	H-4227	19.5	1,145	1,155
	AAC-9	16.0	1,168	1,177
	HS-7	13.5	1,167	1,184
307 Dry Creek cast SWC	H-110	15.5	1,057	1,059

**Notes:** A Freedom Arms Model 1997 with 4¼-inch barrel and a Smith & Wesson Model 24-3 with a 6½-inch barrel used to fire the above loads. Winchester cases and CCI 300 primers used throughout, **except** Federal 155 Magnum primers used with H-110 powder.

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## .44 S&W Special

(Continued from page 42)

of more modern designs largely replacing them for hunting and defense, this bullet offers accuracy and is an excellent choice for taking small table fare, as they damage little meat.

Elmer Keith's excellent 250-grain SWC was designed in the 1920s specifically for high-performance Special loads. It was simple and practical with some important design features. It had a flat nose (meplat) measuring between .270 and .300 inch to deliver shock and create a permanent wound channel. There were three full-caliber driving bands that were each of similar width. The front band is seated forward of the case mouth and rests in the chamber throat to help align the bullet with the center of the bore. Being .100 inch wide, it engages the rifling with little skidding, helps prevent leading and aids in accuracy. The crimp groove is beveled and deep to allow a positive/heavy crimp, and a square bottom grease groove holds a healthy dose of lube. The square bottom groove also offers a fault line, so to speak, that allows the bullet's base to obturate, or slug up, and fill chamber throats.

This last feature was important for revolvers that had throats measuring larger than bullet diameter - at least as long as bullets were not cast too hard. (Some current commercial bullets are too hard and fail to obturate at typical .44 Special pressures, which can cause leading and does nothing for accuracy.) The nose was long at .430 inch, so much of the bullet was seated

out of the case to increase capacity for heavy powder charges. This is probably the most popular .44-caliber cast bullet ever used.

Although they differ slightly in specific dimensions, bullet moulds featuring Keith's specifications are offered from Lyman (429421) and RCBS (44-250-K). Another worthy cast bullet, designed by Ray Thompson, is Lyman mould 429244, a 255-grain SWC with a gas check. While I prefer using plain-base bullets when possible, the Thompson design is accurate and equals the Keith bullet when used on game. If a revolver is prone to leading and the problems can't be cured through experimenting with alloys, lubes or polishing/recutting the forcing cone, using this SWC gas check bullet will likely solve this annoyance.

Bullets of 240 to 255 grains will serve most needs that are tackled with a .44 Special, but for greater penetration on game and ultra long-range shooting, revolvers in the third category can handle 280- to 300-grain cast bullets. They can be driven 1,050 fps and should be considered if tackling large game with the Special.

The groove diameter of .44 Special revolvers has varied considerably with bores that measured from .426 to .431 inch. In the late 1970s, I purchased a new third-generation Colt Single Action Army so chambered. The groove diameter slugged .427 inch, but the throats ran .433 inch. Through a series of trials using Keith bullets and sizing them in H&I sizer dies measuring .426, .427, .428, .429, .430 and .431 inch, the best accuracy came from bullets sized .430 and .431 inch. Since then, it has been observed in many revolvers with throats larger than groove diameter that best accuracy is often achieved with bullets that are closer in size to the throat diameter rather than groove diameter. Regardless of the bullet size chosen, the die ex-



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pander ball should measure at least .004 inch smaller than the bullet diameter.

Suitable powders for handloading the .44 Special seem nearly countless with many giving especially good results. In the first category, examples include fast to medium burn rate propellants such as Alliant Red Dot, Bulls-eye, Power Pistol, Unique, Hodgdon Universal Clays and Accurate No. 5. In the second category, Alliant Unique, 2400, Hodgdon Universal Clays, H-4227, HS-6 and Vihtavuori 3N37 were top performers. Naturally powders in the third category are the same ones often selected for magnum revolver cartridges (such as the .357 and .44) and include Hodgdon H-110, HS-7, H-4227, Accurate No. 9, Alliant 2400 and Blue Dot.

Generally a Large Pistol primer is preferred, even for loads in the third category, as they will give less pressure than a Magnum and still ignite reliably. With loads containing H-4227, H-110 and IMR-4227, a Federal 155 Magnum primer was used to assure reliable ignition.

Data compiled in the accompanying tables was obtained using several revolvers including a Smith & Wesson New Century Target with a 6½-inch barrel, a S&W Model 24-3 with a 6½-inch barrel, a Freedom Arms Model 1997 with 4½-inch tube and a Colt Single Action Army with a 7½-inch barrel. In referencing loads, watch carefully the maximum pressures listed and the revolver and barrel length used in obtaining that data.

In spite of being nearly a century old, the .44 Special remains one of our most versatile and best sixgun cartridges for hunting, defense, target shooting or as a companion when kicking around the hills. It has been 29 years since I began using this round. With any luck I'll enjoy it for a few more decades.

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