

The Ruger Blackhawk .357 Magnum first appeared in August 1955 and was scheduled to be offered in .44 Special and .45 Colt, but due to the .44 Magnum appearing later that year, that never occurred. This revolver was given to Judge Don Martin of Salmon, Idaho, by Bill Ruger.

Ruger New Model Black .44 Spe



Finally . . .
After
54 Years

hawk
cial

Brian Pearce

After a huge success with the introduction of the Ruger .22-caliber Single-Six revolver in 1953, young Bill Ruger designed and began shipping the Ruger Blackhawk .357 in August 1955. As the news and advertisements of the new single-action sixgun broke, it was instantly in a long-term back-order mode. Nonetheless, Mr. Ruger said, “The Blackhawk will be forthcoming in .44 Special and .45 Colt,” which would appeal to in-the-know six-gunners who appreciated the virtues and versatility of these two big-bore cartridges.

Unfortunately, within a couple of months, there was an unseen obstacle that effectively prevented the “old model flattop .357” (as it has been affectionately nicknamed) from being chambered for those two cartridges and came in the form of the .44 Magnum cartridge. In short, in an industry dumping ground, an employee of Bill Ruger found .44 Magnum cases, which had been a well-kept secret project between Smith & Wesson and Remington, and he quickly set to work on building a .44 Magnum revolver.

Three prototype .44 Magnums were built on the Blackhawk .357 frame, but with the steels employed at the time and with the pressures turned up by the .44 Magnum, the medium-frame Blackhawk failed to offer the margin of safety Bill desired, so he designed a larger cylinder frame. Smith & Wesson broke the news and began shipping .44 Magnums on December 29, 1955, with Ruger being in production with his new Blackhawk .44 Magnum in December 1956. As a result the .44 Special and .45 Colt cartridges never found their way into the medium-frame Blackhawk – at least until now!

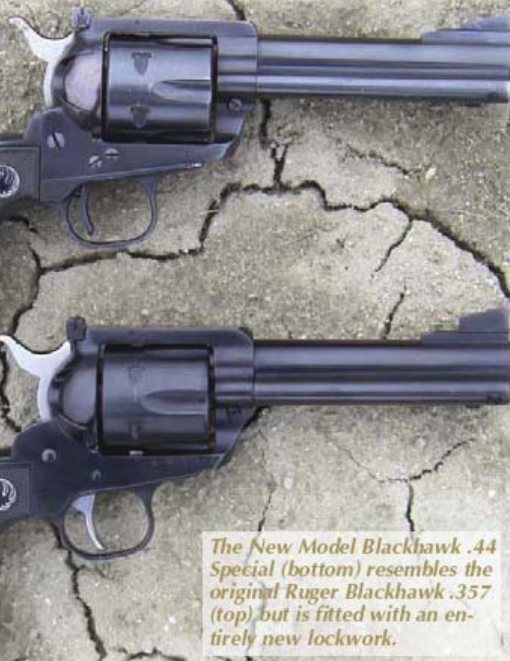
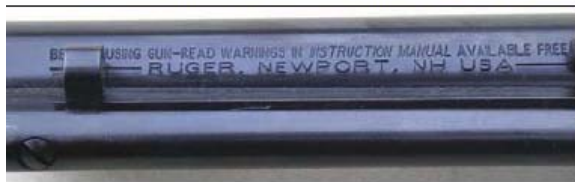
The .44 Magnum is a great cartridge, one of our most versatile revolver rounds; however, the guns are usually larger and heavier than the original Blackhawk .357. Savvy handgunners who appreci-

Ruger New Model Blackhawk

ated the compact handiness of the earlier revolver grew impatient and hired skilled gunsmiths to convert them to .44 Special, which began as early as the late 1950s. By the 1970s noted gun writer Skeeter Skelton began sharing why this was such a practical and enjoyable gun. The popularity of this conversion has continued to grow, and many custom revolver smiths report that overhauling old model Ruger Blackhawk .357 revolvers to .44 Special is their bread-and-butter work. I am especially fond of the combination and have converted three revolvers that have been put to work as general-purpose sixguns, accounting for many pests and a number of big game, including deer, elk and black bear.

In 2005 Ruger introduced its "50th YEAR BLACKHAWK 1955-2005," naturally chambered in .357 Magnum. This was the first time since 1973, when the New Model Blackhawk was introduced, that the medium-frame .357 has been offered, which frankly was long overdue. (Since 1973, all .357 Magnums were built on the larger .44 frame.) It featured a flattop-style frame with a Micro rear sight and was similar in size to the original 1955 revolver. Naturally the lockwork is of "New Model" design that features a transfer bar to allow the safe carry of six cartridges.

Below, long past due, Ruger finally relocated the "warning" on the underside of the barrel, leaving a much cleaner appearance. Right, the Lipsey's limited edition is the first Blackhawk with the .44 Special logo.



The New Model Blackhawk .44 Special (bottom) resembles the original Ruger Blackhawk .357 (top) but is fitted with an entirely new lockwork.

At a SHOT Show news conference in 2005, I cornered Ruger officials and strongly encouraged them to offer their new medium-frame 50th Anniversary Blackhawk in .44 Special and .45 Colt. Naturally they were non-committal but at least said it would be considered, which was no doubt stated just to get me to leave the pressroom and let them out of the corner!

Soon thereafter I was having a conversation with Jason Cloessner at Lipsey's (a firearms distributor) who posed the question: "Brian, do you think that a Ruger Blackhawk flattop .357-frame revolver chambered in .44 Special would sell?"

"Without question!" was my response. Over the next few years, Jason hounded Ruger to build such





The New Model Ruger Blackhawk .44 Special features a flattop frame with fully adjustable Micro rear sight (right) and ramp front.



frame used on early Blackhawks manufactured from 1955 through 1962, and it resembles the perfectly balanced and shaped Colt Single Action Army revolver but is noticeably heavier. One difference is the width of the new steel grip frame is around .062 inch narrower than the XR3. The black composite stock panels are likewise thin, resulting in a fairly narrow grip. These revolvers were fired with original stocks, but since they definitely won't be returned to Ruger, they will receive custom stocks that add a trifle greater width and "dress" them up – perhaps ivory, stag or fancy walnut.

a gun – but without success. Finally in 2008, Ruger executives told the folks at Lipsey's they would build a .44 Special exclusively for them, but the catch was they would have to order a minimum of 2,000 units, figuring that would silence them. However, they instantly responded "Sure, no problem!" and it was a done deal.

As of this writing, the New Model Blackhawk .44 Special is a Lipsey's exclusive (PO Box 83280, Baton Rouge LA 70884; 1-800-666-1333; or www.lipseys.com and click on "Dealer Finder"). It is not a Ruger catalog item. This is mentioned so that your dealer will know where to order one. There will be 1,000 units produced with 4½-inch barrels and 1,000 with 5½-inch barrels. Production will be spread throughout the year, so if they are out of stock, have your dealer keep the order active.

**The
New Model
Blackhawk
.44 Special is
a Lipsey's
exclusive.**

The Ruger .44 Special cylinder is not countersunk and measures 1.6120 inches in length, so overall cartridge length should be held to 1.637 inches. This allows enough room for some bullet "creep" under recoil without tying up the gun, and it allows handloaders to employ a variety of cast and jacketed bullets ranging from 180 to 320 grains.

The only area of suggested improvements is a better trigger pull, as each broke at 4 pounds and was

The first guns began shipping in early 2009, and one of each barrel length was received for evaluation – the first .44 Special revolvers Ruger has ever offered. As previously indicated, they are built on the medium-sized .357 frame with a flattop and Micro adjustable rear sight. The one-piece steel grip frame is shaped similarly to the aluminum XR3

The Ejector Alignment Pawl aids in chamber alignment with the loading trough and was first employed in the 50th Anniversary Blackhawk .357. It also allows easier loading and unloading.





Left, the .44 Russian (left) was developed around 1870 and was a black-powder round. The .44 S&W Special (middle) was essentially a lengthened Russian case and was loaded with both black and smokeless powders in 1907/08. The .44 Remington Magnum (right) was developed in 1955 and was simply a lengthened .44 Special case and loaded to significantly greater pressures. Above, the .44 S&W Special has traditionally been loaded with a 246-grain roundnose bullet at an advertised 755 fps. Through handloading, performance can be improved.

rather “long” in breaking. Nonetheless these are better out-of-the-box trigger pulls than we have seen on Ruger single actions for many years. And last I’d like to see the cylinder bolt stay down a moment longer.

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One new feature that appeared in 2005 is an “Ejector Alignment Pawl” that consists of minor lockwork changes and a plunger located in the breech face. This allows the shooter to rotate the chamber past the loading trough and still rotate it backward for alignment, allowing easier cartridge loading or case ejection. Prior to this change in 2004, if the New Model Blackhawk chamber

was rotated much past the loading trough, it could not be loaded or unloaded but required the cylinder be turned another revolution.

The grip frame is hand fit and numbered to each cylinder frame, and the overall fit and finish is good. The Ruger warning that reads “BEFORE USING GUN - READ WARNINGS IN INSTRUCTION MANUAL AVAILABLE FREE FROM RUGER, NEWPORT, NH USA” has been relocated under the barrel and is not especially noticeable. From the side, the barrel appears clean and uncluttered and is another

welcome change! This combined with all-steel construction, including the ejector rod housing, gives the sixgun a feeling of quality.

As a side note, when this project was first underway, I was asked if the gun should be fitted with an aluminum or steel grip frame. With my fondness for all-steel guns that’s what I suggested, but if fitted with an aluminum grip frame and ejector rod housing, the weight would drop from around 42 to about 34 ounces with the 4½-inch barrel, making it an excellent lightweight field gun. It is possible

Brian tried a variety of factory loaded .44 Special ammunition in the Ruger .44 Specials.



Ruger New Model Blackhawk

Ruger New Model Blackhawk



that after this first production run is sold out, there might be a lightweight version forthcoming.

THE SPECIAL .44 S&W SPECIAL

The .44 S&W Special cartridge was introduced in 1907/1908 in conjunction with the Smith

Brian tried a variety of cast, swaged lead and jacketed bullets in the Ruger .44 Specials.

& Wesson New Century (nicknamed Triple Lock) revolver, the first N-Frame. It was a descendant of the .44 Russian, a respected service and target black-powder cartridge dating back around 1870. The Special featured a 246-grain roundnose lead bullet over 26.0 grains of black powder at an advertised velocity of 750 fps (later 755 fps). At about the same time, a smokeless powder load appeared that duplicated the above velocities and is advertised to this day at 755 fps.

At least a dozen times, I have read statements by various gun writers that the .44 Special case was lengthened to accommodate the new, "bulky" smokeless pow-

ders. I have no idea where that false information originated or why it is continually repeated, as smokeless powders available and employed by ammunition companies at that time, as well as today, were/are considerably less bulky than black powder, and filling the

Table I **Ruger New Model Blackhawk .44 Special**

factory load (grams)	velocity (fps)	group (inches)
200 Federal SWC hollowpoint	922	2.8
200 Remington lead SWC	895	2.7
210 Black Hills FPL	702	3.3
246 Remington lead roundnose	729	2.1
246 Winchester lead roundnose	685	2.4
255 Buffalo Bore SWC gas check	1,087	1.6

Notes: Ammunition was fired at 25 yards from a 5½-inch barreled Ruger New Model Blackhawk. Temperature during tests was 30 degrees Fahrenheit.



Table II **Ruger New Model Blackhawk .44 Special Handloads**

bullet (grams)	powder	charge (grains)	primer	velocity (fps)	comments
WARNING: Some of the following handloads develop up to 25,000 psi and are only suitable for the New Model Ruger Blackhawk .44 Special or revolvers of similar strength.					
200 RCBS 44-200-FN	Red Dot	5.5	CCI 300	930	light recoil
200 Speer Gold Dot HP	H-110	22.0	Federal 155	1,301	1.5-inch group
240 Hornady lead SWC-HP	W-231	5.5	CCI 300	815	expands reliably
240 Hornady XTP-HP	H-110	19.0	Federal 155	1,189	regularly under 1 inch
240 Speer Gold Dot HP	2400	17.0	CCI 300	1,191	
245 Lyman RN 429383	Bullseye	4.8		766	1.1-inch group
250 Keith Lyman 429421	Power Pistol	8.0		998	low pressure, accurate
		8.5		1,035	
		9.0		1,093	1.05-inch group
	W-231	6.0		844	BHN 9, .90-inch group
	Unique	7.5		960	Skeeter's load, accurate
255 cast Lyman 429244 gas check	2400	17.0		1,211	Keith's load
	Unique	8.5		1,049	
	Power Pistol	8.5		1,016	
265 Montana cast SWC-GC	AA-9	16.5		1,205	just under 1-inch group
	Power Pistol	9.0		1,062	

Notes: Loads fired from a 5½-inch barreled Ruger New Model Blackhawk .44 Special. Starline cases used for all loads. Temperature during testing was 30 degrees Fahrenheit.

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

case with such would certainly destroy the gun! Naturally the longer case increases capacity and therefore allows greater charges of smokeless powder, which generally increases performance, but the .44 Special's velocities were not increased over the Russian cartridge.

Leading sixgun experimenters of the era found that the "New Century" cartridge could be handloaded with select smokeless powders to drive 235- to 250-grain bullets 1,000 fps and beyond, but only in heavy-frame revolvers such as the Smith & Wesson N-frame and Colt Single Action Army revolvers. When Hercules (now Alliant) 2400 powder first appeared in 1933, noted gun writer Elmer Keith developed a load with 18.5 grains in the old balloonhead cases behind his 250-grain cast bullet, Lyman mould 429421, for around 1,200 fps. When solid-head cases appeared just after World War II with a reduced capacity, he necessarily cut the load to 17.5 grains and used a standard non-magnum large pistol primer. The resulting pressures developed 25,000 psi in laboratories. This famous load has been used from Alaska to Africa on big game and helped prepare the way for the .44 Magnum.

Unfortunately with the spotlight on the new, powerful .44 Magnum, the .44 Special fell into the shadows almost unnoticed and was soon discontinued from production by Colt and Smith & Wesson in the 1960s. The two companies did revive it somewhat in the 1980s in the SAA revolver and Model 24/624, with the L-Frame Model 696 appearing in the 1990s, but that too was short-lived. Nonetheless, in-the-know handloaders and shooters still recognized its value, and revolvers so chambered quickly became highly sought after – for good reason.

The Special guns were lighter and easier to carry than most .44

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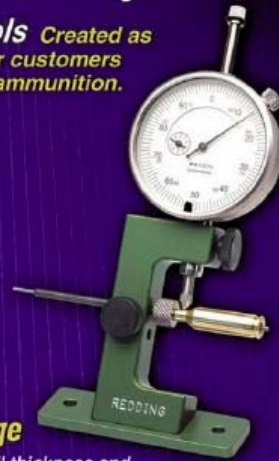
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Magnum revolvers yet still offered big-bore punch, even at leisurely velocities, which made it effective for defense or hunting. The pressures were substantially lower than its offspring, giving noticeably less muzzle blast and concussion, which is appreciated by many experienced handgunners. In the previously mentioned heavy-frame revolvers, it can be stoked to take big game including deer, elk, black bear, etc., the same as the magnum. Furthermore it uses powder more efficiently than the magnum, and the shorter case ejects with ease.

I have used the .44 Special as a “working” outdoor cartridge since the 1970s, primarily in Smith & Wesson, Colt and converted Ruger single-action six-guns. It ranks as one of my three favorite sixgun rounds, which I refuse to list in order. It has proven itself worthy to take vir-

tually all big game in North America, including the great bears of Alaska, but only with correct handloads. With 250- to 320-grain cast bullets it will penetrate the skull of a 2,000-pound

range bull or drive through the chest of a horse with a broken leg. Using a 245-grain roundnose cast bullet at 850 fps, it will kill small game with minimal meat damage. Properly handloaded, the .44 Special will handle 99 percent of any situation that most folks will face with a sixgun.

The .44 Special is an accurate cartridge, but for decades many (those darn gun writers!) have speculated that it is more accurate than almost any other centerfire revolver cartridge. I have not found that to be true. Any modern revolver cartridge – such as, but not limited to, the .32 S&W Long, .32 H&R Magnum, .38 Special, .357 Magnum, .41 Magnum, .44 Magnum, .45 Colt, .454 Casull and others – can demonstrate equal accuracy if fired in a gun featuring proper chamber and bore dimensions, and with correct loads.

For many years it has been popular to convert Blackhawk .357s to .44 Special, due to their ideal frame size, which is more compact and lighter than the .44 Magnum frame. Brian has converted three such revolvers (on the right). Finally, after 54 years, Ruger is offering (through Lipsey's only) a medium-sized New Model Blackhawk .44 Special with either a 4½- or 5½-inch barrel (left).



Ruger New Model Blackhawk

With that said, it is an excellent cartridge to handload and can be used with fast-burning powders such as Alliant Bullseye, Red Dot or Winchester 231 to duplicate, or even exceed, factory load velocities. It thrives on medium burn rate powders such as Alliant Power Pistol, Unique, Hodgdon Universal Clays, Accurate Arms No. 5 and several others that commonly drive 235- to 250-grain bullets between 850 and 1,050 fps. And for those occasions when greater velocity is desired, it can be stoked with Hodgdon H-110, Alliant 2400 and Accurate Arms No. 9 to push 240- to 250-grain bullets to around 1,200 fps, or 310-grain bullets to 1,100 fps – but only in guns of appropriate strength such as the Ruger Blackhawks discussed here.

Please note that in spite of modern revolvers that are capable of handling loads up to and in some cases even beyond 25,000 psi, SAAMI maximum average pressure limits for the .44 Special remain at 15,500 psi. A number of the loads mentioned herein exceed that pressure limit and are intended specifically for the New Model Ruger Blackhawk or guns of similar strength. And for the record, the strength and longevity of modern solid-head .44 Special cases manufactured in the last 60 years are equal to the .44 Magnum.

Shooting the New Ruger .44 Specials

Both New Model Blackhawk .44 Specials were used just as they came from the box. The barrel cylinder gaps measured .004 inch, while throats ran .432 inch and groove diameter of the 4½-inch gun slugged at .430 inch. They are constructed of modern chrome-moly 4140 steel, which usually has a Rockwell hardness of between 36 and 38. In carefully measuring chamber wall thickness and in having some

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knowledge of the breaking point of this frame and cylinder, it will safely digest a steady diet of handloads that generate up to 25,000 psi, or what I termed "Category Three" handloads as presented in previous editions of *Handloader* magazine.

To help season and break in the barrels, 100 rounds of Hornady's 240-grain XTP-HPs were loaded over 19.0 grains of H-110 and Federal 155 Large Pistol Magnum primers. Using the handgun with a 5½-inch barrel, this load clocked 1,189 fps and grouped under one inch at 25 yards, if I would do my part. The shorter barreled gun produced essentially the same accuracy.

After cleaning barrels and removing all copper, both guns were tried using factory fodder from Winchester, Federal, Remington, Black Hills and Buffalo Bore. The velocity and accuracy of those loads can be viewed in Table I.

Next, several handloads were tried with popular cast, swaged lead and jacketed bullets. In firing both revolvers concurrently from a sandbag rest with identical loads, each was essentially producing the same level of accuracy. Due to deadlines being close at hand, not to mention strong winds and rain that slowed the shooting progress, the gun fitted with the 5½-inch barrel was used for the majority of shooting. In addition this six-gun gave a bit more "light" between the front sight blade and rear sight notch, due to its longer sight radius, making it easier to produce tidy groups.

A variety of handloads proved accurate, with those details being listed in Table II. It does seem prudent to mention a few widely published loads and how they performed. For instance, using a 245-grain cast roundnose from Lyman mould 429383 over 4.8 grains of Alliant Bullseye effectively duplicates century-old fac-

tory loads at 766 fps, which grouped into 1.1 inches. A load that noted gun writer Skeeter Skelton employed for kicking around in the hills, taking white-tail deer, javelina and even for law enforcement purposes, was a 250-grain cast bullet from Lyman mould 429421 with 7.5 grains of Hercules (now Alliant) Unique for 960 fps. At 25 yards, one five-shot group measured just under an inch. The Elmer Keith load contains the same Lyman 250-grain cast bullet but is backed with 17.0 grains of 2400 with a CCI 300 primer for 1,211 fps. (Note that the original Keith load was reduced by .5 grain to compensate for today's faster burning Alliant 2400.) Groups often cut a ragged hole with one or two fliers opening it 1 to 1.5 inches.

A couple of excellent general-

purpose .44 Special loads consist of either the 250-grain Lyman/Keith bullet 429421 or a 255-grain Keith bullet as offered by RCBS from mould 44-250-K driven by 8.0 grains of Alliant Power Pistol and capped with a CCI 300 or Federal 150 primer that achieves 1,000 fps from most 4½- to 5½-

100 rounds of Hornady's 240-grain XTP-HPs were loaded over 19.0 grains of H-110.

inch barreled revolvers. The above load is producing less than 15,500 psi, well within SAAMI recommendations. Increasing the powder charge to 8.5 grains produces 1,035 fps, while 9.0 grains reaches almost 1,100 fps. For guns that are prone to leading or those that are more accurate with a gas check, top-notch bul-

lets – Lyman mould 429244 at 265 grains – from Montana Bullet Works (montanabulletworks.com) with 9.0 grains of Power Pistol achieved 1,062 fps from the 5½-inch gun and made an excellent load.

I am pleased with the Ruger New Model Blackhawk .44 Specials and consider their delivery 54 years overdue! Suggested retail is \$579, and considering what original Blackhawk "flattop" .357 Magnums are bringing, plus the cost of conversion by a qualified gunsmith, they are a real bargain. As previously mentioned, there is the possibility of a lightweight version next year. I would encourage Lipsey's to press for a .45 Colt next and perhaps a .41 Magnum. For now, it is available in the six-gun connoisseur's cartridge, and it might not pass this way again. ●

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