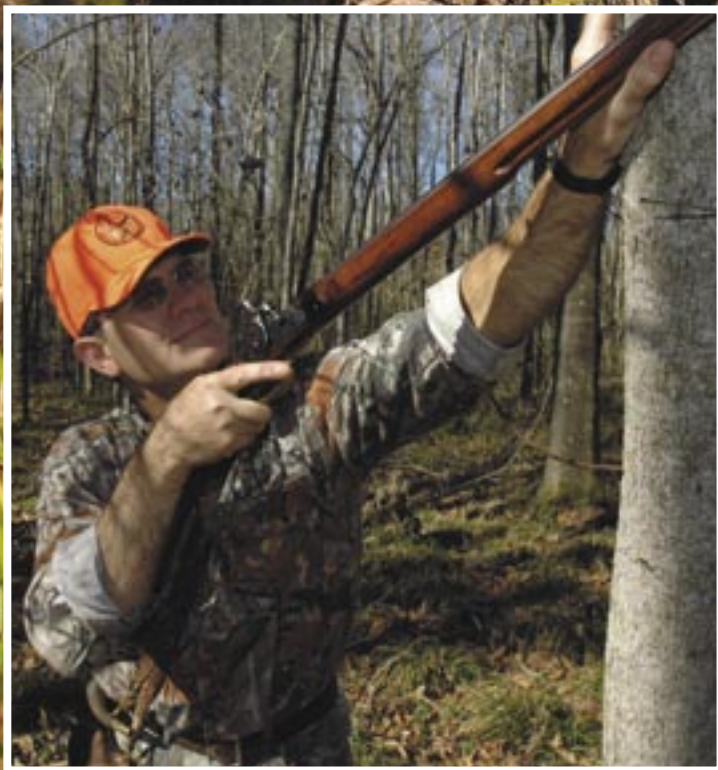


Muzzle

By Allan Andress, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries



BILLY POPE

loading

Keeping the "Hunt" in Hunting



By the 18th century, the patched round ball fired from a rifled barrel was the best system yet devised for small arms accuracy and range.

It was a smaller than bore-sized lead ball held tight against the rifling by a cloth patch. Its use declined in the mid 19th century with the invention of hollow-based conicals followed by the breech loaded metallic cartridge. It came back again in the mid-20th century with the resurgence of interest in muzzleloaders when it was about the only projectile available. Unfortunately, the patched round ball seems to be on the way out again.

With the development of more technologically advanced rifles and projectiles in recent years, the round ball has been largely replaced on the shelves of sporting goods stores by sabot modern projectiles. Why stick with it when much more advanced muzzleloading arms and ammunition are available? Because shooting the old traditional round ball is effective, versatile and fun.

Range and Accuracy

Before I knew better, I thought that a traditional muzzleloader was nothing more than a single shot high-powered rifle that was slower to load and required more cleaning. Loaded with black powder and the round ball, the muzzleloader is about a 100-yard rifle. This can be stretched a little farther under ideal conditions, but closer is better. Initially, this may sound like a bad thing. However, like turkey hunters and bow hunters can tell you, it is that one chance at a closer range that makes the hunt all the more exciting. Instead of avoiding this limitation, you can embrace it.

As for accuracy, both my .50 and .54 caliber barrels shoot the round ball well. Whereas results may vary, my rifles are capable of shooting three-inch groups at 100 yards and will shoot a one-inch ragged hole at 75 yards with open sights. I didn't do any better with my high powered rifle before it had a scope. Speaking of scopes, seeing well is essential for shot placement and good shot placement is essential for a clean harvest. This is more important than tradition or pride. If you can't see well enough to shoot accurately with open sights, using a scope is a good idea.

The bottom line on any hunting arm is its ability to cleanly harvest game. The

round ball's game-getting power comes from its size. Consider that a .530 round ball fired from a .54 caliber rifle makes twice as big a hole upon entry as a .270 and, after impact, the round ball expands to an even larger size. It also tends to hold together, rather than fragment. Most shots with adequate loads in the .50 or .54 will result in a complete pass-through on deer within reasonable ranges. When all is said and done, effectiveness boils down to shot placement, penetration and size of the wound channel. In the categories that really count, the round ball can deliver, harvesting game just as well as its modern brethren within its range.

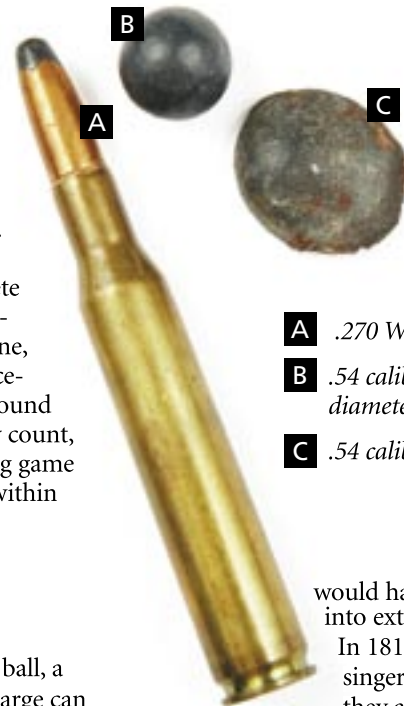
More than a Deer Rifle

With the versatility of the round ball, a big bore rifle with a light powder charge can serve well for small game. However, many of our forefathers preferred the smaller bore .32-.40 caliber "squirrel rifle" for its economy of ammunition and its ability to take small game when larger game was not available. These small bores must have been effective; otherwise, some of our bloodlines



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On cold, sunny days, rabbits often prefer to remain motionless in open woods but near thick cover. This one stopped in the first available cover, giving the author a chance to spot him and take the shot.



A .270 Winchester cartridge

B .54 caliber (.530 actual diameter) before impact.

C .54 caliber after impact.

would have been starved into extinction years ago. In 1814, according to singer Johnny Horton, they also came in very handy for scattering bands of invading redcoats.

With the exception of deer, turkey and migratory birds, all other game, from feral hogs to rabbits, become your legal quarry with a small bore muzzleloading rifle. In my opinion, harvesting a mixed bag

of squirrels, rabbits and hogs make for a much more interesting hunt than pursuing one species alone. When one species is not cooperating, it's nice to be able to take advantage of other game to bring variety to the hunt and the dinner table.


I acquired my "squirrel rifle" initially to hunt feral hogs on Alabama's Wildlife Management Areas during squirrel season, when only .40 calibers or smaller are permitted. I settled on a .36 caliber, rather than the .32 or .40, because it was small enough to be easy on the meat of small game, while still possessing enough power to take hogs. It shoots a 00 buck-sized projectile at a higher velocity and is very effective on feral hogs with a well-placed shot.

Rabbits are also a favorite of mine and are not as hard to take with a single shot rifle as some might think. Swamp rabbits in particular have the very agreeable habit of not running too far or too fast before determining if you are really serious. As often as not, they will run only a short distance and stop, giving you an opportunity to pick a standing shot at short range.

My all-time favorite target for the muzzleloader is the squirrel. Like many whose first hunting experience was with small game and a .22, I've never outgrown the uncomplicated pleasure of squirrel hunting. At first I was doubtful as to the rifle's ability to produce the necessary accuracy to hit a half-dollar-sized target at 25 yards with consistency. I was pleasantly surprised to find that if there was any deficiency in accuracy, it was on my part. Even though the .32 or .36 caliber seem rather small, it can still be destructive of meat. That is why restricting yourself to head shots is important to preserve as much of these tasty critters as possible for the frying pan.

Enjoy the Ride

The muzzleloader obliges you to be both a hunter and a marksman. Get close, get a good rest if possible, place your shot carefully and there's no reason why you can't be as successful as your friends shooting their cartridge guns. But, more than anything, shooting these small bore rifles is inexpensive, painless and just pure enjoyment.

For me, muzzleloading has put the "hunt" back into all kinds of hunting. It's sort of like traveling. Although you want to reach a destination by the shortest route possible, the more you focus on the destination, the less you enjoy the trip. Muzzleloading compels you to slow down and enjoy the ride. 

MUZZLELOADER Memories

By Allan Andress, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries



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The damp gnawed its way to the skin in places. Driven by a north wind, the cold, drizzling rain stung my face, but it felt good in a way. The wind and rain would equalize the game — my eyes against theirs. Slowly, I worked my way into the wind between the briar patches and plum thickets; they had flourished since the pine plantation was thinned.

The snap of breaking cane revealed a doe making haste out of the hollow 50 yards ahead, followed closely by a buck. As the doe disappeared over an open hill, the buck paused momentarily. Range: 100 yards... a standing off-hand shot... have to be quick... better not try. As the buck dropped over the crest of the ridge, I contemplated my options. Were they spooked? I don't think so. I wasn't moving and the wind was good. Tails were down; I think I'm all right.

I made good time across the hollow and up the hill. As I moved slowly and paused, the next hill and hollow came into view. I studied the overgrown brush piles, weed patches and honeysuckle tangles. The deer could be anywhere, or nowhere. Was that...? Yeah, movement, the doe. But, where's the buck? Is that... yeah, an antler! Gradually, the buck's form materialized, like one of those visual puzzles. At first, you don't see anything, but once you focus on it, you see it clearly.

He was standing eight feet or so to the left of the doe. She was milling around, munching on honeysuckle. They didn't appear to be in a hurry now. I had a good shot at the doe, but

I wanted the buck. I had not killed a buck in a couple of years. The problem was his shoulder and neck were partially screened by tall, dry weeds. The range was only about 50 yards, but I needed to be up and over about 10 feet to get a clear shot. The wind was okay, but it was a crosswind now. I hoped it would hold. Again, I considered my options.

Easing down to my knees brought me below the waist-high ragweed, but I had to lose sight of the deer to do it. I just hoped they would still be there when I got into position. Careful to work my way around the dead pine limbs and briars that kept tugging at my sleeves and britches, I made it over to a small crooked pine that would give me a clear field of fire and a solid rifle rest. Several minutes had passed since I had ducked down, and a lot can happen in less time. Taking a kneeling position behind the tree, I was relieved to see that the deer were still there. My rifle rested against the tree. The range was 45-50 yards; the wind good, but a little shifty. The buck was relatively still. I could see him clearly, but a few weeds and stems still screened parts of his body. They could deflect my shot.

I'm not sure how long I can remain undetected at this range, but I've done all I can do; it's a waiting game now. Each moment passes more slowly than the one before. Time drags on. The wind direction varies. I'm on borrowed time. As I concentrate on the buck, where is the doe? She's gone. He starts to move. Get on him. Will he clear the weeds? There's the shot — take it.

The buck launched into that characteristic lunge, head and tail down, indicating a solid hit. Over the hill he went, and that's where he lay. My rifle had done its job well. Body weight? 150 pounds. Rack? 13-inch eight-point. Ordinary buck? Yes — but an extraordinary hunt! This was the beginning of my fascination with the muzzleloader and the patched round ball. I haven't fired a high-powered rifle in more than a decade. 