




Whenever possible, employ a tree or other support to help steady your aim in hunting situations, but use your hand to prevent direct contact against a hard surface with your handgun.

# Why Not HUNT With A HANDGUN?



**T**he first deer I took with a handgun was ambling along a trail 40 paces away. The sagebrush I huddled against camouflaged my outline, and the animal sensed no

danger. I shot the three-point buck from the sitting position, arms solidly braced against my upraised knees. The Ruger Super Blackhawk wore factory iron sights, and its 240-grain bullet arrived smack on target. After taking a couple of frantic bounds, the buck collapsed and lay still.

Handgun hunters and

**Whether With a  
Big-Bore Revolver  
or High-Velocity  
Single-Shot Pistol,  
Handgun Hunting  
Is Its Own Reward.**

**By Clair Rees**

bowhunters have a lot in common. Their choice of hunting tools makes a challenging sport even more challenging. Increasing the level of difficulty lowers the chance of scoring, but boosts hunting enjoyment. Taking game with a

pistol or revolver provides a real sense of accomplishment. When you do something out of the ordinary, you savor each success more.

It takes a fair amount of practice to shoot a handgun well. Before you carry any kind of handgun afield, you should be able to keep all your shots on a 9-inch paper plate at game-getting range. That's a bare minimum requirement. If you can't do this consistently at 50 yards, your

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marksmanship needs more work. I'm talking about shooting from your two hind legs—not from a sandbagged rest. Once you've attained this expertise, do your best to avoid shooting at game offhand. Whenever possible, drop to the kneeling or sitting position, or use a handy tree to steady your handgun against. Don't let the tree come in direct contact with the gun. Use your (gloved) hand as a buffer or the shot will probably go wild.

Hunting deer with a revolver requires woodsmanship and serious stalking skills. The bottom line? It's more satisfying to down a buck at close range with a .44 Magnum than to drop one with a scoped rifle at 200 yards or more.

Not that 200 yards is too far for many of today's hunting handguns. Bolt-action and break-top pistols chambering high-intensity loads offer rifle-like power and accuracy. With an extended-eye-relief scope in place, some handguns deliver surprising long-range performance.

That long-distance potential creates a dilemma for sportsmen. Handgunners like myself appreciate the demands made by big-bore magnum sixguns. The need to stalk close before attempting a shot is a big part of the attraction. In the deer woods, I want a handgun that can be carried in a holster or comfortably toted in one hand. I want a gun that can be accurately aimed and fired quickly without the aid of a bipod.

While I prefer the handiness of unscoped handguns, my aging eyes now require magnifying optics for precise shot placement. I can still hit what I'm shooting at with open sights, provided I take my time and limit the range to 35 or 40 yards. Forty-four magnum handguns have ample punch to drop deer-sized game at more than twice that distance. That's why I've grudgingly mounted scopes on most of my big-bore revolvers. If I'm tempted to shoot at 70 yards, I want the aiming assistance a reticle provides.

Adding a scope adds bulk and weight. It also means a regular holster will no longer do the job. You need a belt holster or shoulder rig designed specifically for scoped revolvers. Such holsters are available from Uncle Mike's, Hunter, Dan Wesson, Freedom Arms and a few other manufacturers.

If you need a scope for 70-yard accuracy, why not go whole hog and carry a flat-shooting pistol with 200-yard reach? I've done this more than once. I have a couple of long-barreled .308 handguns that will group inside 4 inches at that extended range. These bolt-action numbers are essentially sawed-off rifles with a pistol grip in place of a buttstock.

The problem with these Long Tom hybrids? They're awkward to tote and slow to unlimber. In my opinion, rifles are far more convenient to carry and faster to use. Rifles are better balanced, and that buttstock comes to the shoulder in a hurry. Once you've got that rifle up, it can be fired more quickly—and far more accurately—than a handgun from



*In his sharp-eyed youth, the author preferred iron sights on his hunting revolvers, but now his .44 Magnum Ruger Redhawk wears a long eye-relief Bausch & Lomb scope.*

the offhand position.

These awkward-handling pistols weigh too much to shoot unsupported. Try holding one of these big, scoped pistols at arm's length and you'll see what I mean. They're best used with a bipod or some other solid rest. That's fine when you have time to deploy a bipod, but some field situations require speed.

In addition to missing the long-range vision I boasted in my youth, I've become slower and creakier. In spite of this, I can still drop to a steady sitting or kneeling position and fire a rifle quickly. It takes me several seconds more to ready a scoped pistol for long-range shooting. When hunting mule deer, I seldom have extra seconds to spare. I enjoy hunting with handguns, but only when it makes sense. If rifles are clearly superior for the job at hand, that's what I use.

Sometimes, however, handguns can



*Although hunting deer with a big-bore revolver instead of a high-intensity single shot lowers your chances of success, it will help to boost your sense of accomplishment when you do score.*



*The Mark V CFP pistol is a recent addition to Weatherby's hunting gun lineup, and is available in such rifle-class calibers as the popular .308 Winchester.*



Although the author definitely does not shoot a .454 Casull for enjoyment, he respects the capabilities of the cartridge immensely. When hunting with one, he prefers to carry his scoped Ruger Super Redhawk in the company's belt holster.



The Thompson/Center Encore digests stouter loads than the original Contender. An excellent caliber choice for big game would be the flat-shooting 7mm-08.

be a better choice than a rifle. A few seasons ago, I left my .308 in camp in favor of an iron-sighted .44 Magnum sixgun. It was nearly lunchtime, and the hard-hunted deer had taken refuge in a heavy pine forest to while away the afternoon. The odds were long, but I hoped the thick carpet of pine needles would allow quiet stalking. I removed my boots to hunt in stocking feet, then did my best to ease slowly through the woods like a cat. Dense cover limited visibility to 13 or 20 yards.

For this kind of shooting, the big revolver was ideal—quicker and handier than any rifle. The gamble paid off. I filled my doe tag after two hours of some of the most exciting hunting I'd ever done. When the deer spotted me it sprang from its bed. I had an instant to shoot. I'd covered the last few yards with the gun held high in both hands. I only had to

lower the sights and pull the trigger.

When circumstances and terrain are suitable for stalking—or where it's practical to set up a short-range ambush—I'll opt for a Ruger or Smith & Wesson magnum .44. Other fine candidates include Freedom Arms' .454 Casull sixgun, Dan Wesson's .44 or .445 SuperMag revolver or Magnum Research's Little Max revolver in .454 Casull chambering. It takes experience to shoot the .454 Casull cartridge accurately. I'm still not comfortable with its intimidating recoil. Still, in practiced hands it's a highly effective hunting round.

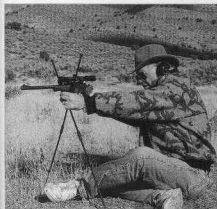
While I prefer closer targets, I have no quarrel with those who use 7mm-08, .308 and even more potent pistols to take deer and other game at extended range. Many dedicated handgunners consider this a piece of cake.

Don't get me wrong. I do a lot of

shooting with long-barreled break-top and bolt-action handguns every year. I don't know how many rounds I've fired through my T/C Contender and Encore single shots. I've also kept the barrels of several Weatherby, Remington and Savage bolt pistols pretty hot.

Instead of firing cartridges designed for deer and larger game, these hybrid handguns are chambered for .223 and .22-250 Remington varmint loads. Flat shooting and highly accurate, they're perfect for picking off ground squirrels and prairie dogs at improbable distances. This kind of hunting requires no stealthy stalking. There's no need to hurry your shot. You steady your gun on a bipod or some other sturdy rest. Once everything is in place, you sit comfortably back and use binoculars to scan for the usually plentiful targets.

I've taken my share of prairie poodles



In open country, a single-shot, "rifle caliber" pistol (left) such as the T/C Encore has a distinct advantage, but the revolver (above) rules the roost when it comes to hunting in close cover where speed and repeat shots may be called for.

# Why Not HUNT With A HANDGUN?

with heavy-barreled varmint rifles, but shooting them with handguns is a lot more fun. I consider scoped, long-barreled pistols firing .22 centerfires ideal for this relaxed kind of hunting.

Some of these long-range rigs can deliver startling accuracy. I've seen top pistolers like Bob Milek, Jr. regularly roll prairie dogs out around the 400-yard mark. I have a hard time scoring on these tiny targets with a rifle at that rarified range. Yes, I've managed to handgun a few prairie dogs four football fields distant—but only when the animal waited patiently until the laws of chance finally kicked in. That's the attraction long-distance varminting holds for handgunners. Never mind all the misses you're bound to make. You're not likely to wound one of these diminutive critters with a misplaced bullet. Keep shooting, and every once in a while you'll connect with a truly spectacular shot.

My introduction to handgun hunting came when I began popping jackrabbits with a French-made pistol. Teenagers are



*The author lines up a shot with his Remington XP-100R pistol with Harris bipod support. This bolt-action handgun is designed for long range punch and accuracy, and is a superb varmintier when combined with the .22-250 cartridge (inset).*

seldom flush with cash, and I was able to buy this gun with time payments to Montgomery Ward. The .22 autoloader was neither reliable nor highly accurate, but it accounted for several squirrels and desert hares. I eventually traded it in on single-action Colt .22—a gun I wish I still owned.

I still like to wander the desert with my Ruger Mark II, which was recently customized by Dino Longueria. This gun has taken a lot of small game over the years and I'd never consider parting with it. It wears open sights. I've also shot an impressive number of ground squirrels with a Browning Buckmark equipped

with a Bushnell HoloSight. The HoloSight offers an unlimited field of view, which is a huge advantage when it comes to locating distant targets in high grass. For .22 handguns, I consider it a big improvement over the long eye-relied pistol scopes I've used.

Hunting with handguns offers a lot more pros than cons. Some call it a stunt. I strongly disagree. Anyone willing to practice and gain the handgunning skills required to kill game cleanly deserves respect. Like bowhunters, those who carry handguns afield know they've limited their chance of success. And yes, that makes them special. ♦



*Scoped, single-shot pistols require specialized holsters for ease of carry in the field.*



*Simple pleasures: When he's not hunting big game, the author still loves to wander the desert gunning jackrabbits with his Ruger Mk II.*