

HOW TO BE A BETTER Handgun Hunter

Here's what you need to know to be successful in the field along with our Handgun Editor's suggestions for the ideal three-gun hunting battery.

My first hunting handgun was an old Colt Bantline Scout with a 9½-inch barrel in .22 Magnum. This long-barreled sixgun shot like a rifle and was plenty deadly on rabbits and squirrels. With it I learned the importance of shot placement and the need to restrict my shots to within my own effective range of accurate fire. Spraying the countryside with lead doesn't win gunfights, and I soon learned that it doesn't put meat in the cook pot either.

Something about hunting with a handgun just caught my fancy, and I have enjoyed the sport ever since. Today, I own hunting handguns by Ruger, Smith & Wesson, Freedom Arms, and Thompson/Center, and I hunt with numerous other brands that are sent to me for testing. They include single-action revolvers, double-action revolvers, and single-shot pistols. Some are scoped, and others aren't. In the caliber department they run the gamut from



Photo by Lance Krueger

.22 LR to .357 Magnum, .44 Magnum, .454 Casull, .475 Linebaugh, 7x30 Waters, and .270 Winchester. It has been my fortune to collect whitetail deer, mule deer, black bear, javalina, turkey, feral hogs, and an assortment of exotic animals with my handguns. And I've been on several elk hunts but never have had one of the great animals in my sixgun sights. (I'll correct that oversight in the near future.) My point is not to try to impress you but to point out the great challenge and enjoyment that handgun hunting has

become for me. Because of handgun hunting I have become a better woodsman so that I can get closer to my game in order to make the most accurate shot possible. I have also developed a far greater appreciation for bullet placement and for matching the cartridge to the game that is to be taken. One of my favorite trophies is an ibex-cross goat that Penn Baggott and I spent several hours stalking before I could get within range of this wily animal. He may not be big enough for the record book, I've never scored him, but he is truly a trophy to me. I worked hard for him, I stalked him for hours, and, in that moment

of truth, the .45 Colt cast bullet went right where it needed to go.

Start Small & Work Your Way Up

In my view there is no better way to get started handgun hunting than the same way that I got into the sport, with an accurate .22 rimfire handgun. It really doesn't matter if the handgun in question is a revolver (SA or DA), an autoloader, or a single shot. What matters is that the gun is accurate and that you shoot it well. It also doesn't matter

if the sights are iron sights or a scope. Whichever you choose, they should be fully adjustable so that the handgun can be sighted-in for a particular load. The beauty of the .22 handgun is that there is virtually no recoil to deal with, and the shooter can concentrate on sight picture, trigger squeeze, and breath control. Ammunition of the .22 rimfire flavor is relatively inexpensive, and that is good because if you do this right you are going to burn up a whole lot of ammunition in your practice sessions.

Just as the average rifle hunter relies on more than one rifle in more than one caliber, so will the handgun hunter find room in his hunting battery for several handguns. For deer-sized game and feral hogs, it is pretty hard to beat a 6.0- to 7.5-inch-barreled .44 Magnum revolver. This is an accurate, powerful combination with a wealth of hand-loading data available as well as a large assortment of factory ammunition. With proper ammunition and proper bullet placement, the .44 Magnum will drop any game animal on the North American continent. In fact, it already has. However, when hunting bear, elk, and moose, the handgun hunter might want to turn to something a bit more authoritative such as the .454 Casull or the .475 Linebaugh. These big rascals will push 300- to 400-grain bullets upwards of 1500 to 1600 fps. And they'll do it accurately too.

Another valu-

The .44 Magnum is capable of downing any North American big game, but Jim says the .454 and .475 are good insurance for elk, moose, and bear.

Every serious handgun hunting battery should include a single-shot pistol chambered for a rifle-type round.



RPM XL .30-30



S&W Performance Center
M&S29 Hunter
.44 Magnum

The author suggests that novice handgun hunters start out with a .22 rimfire revolver or pistol before working up to big-bore centerfire hunting handguns.

able addition to any handgunning battery is a quality single-shot pistol of the likes of the Thompson/Center Contender or the XL pistol from RPM. Single shots come in the broadest array of calibers, but I particularly prefer the 7x30 Waters, .35 Remington, .375 Winchester, and 6.5 J&D.

One of the important factors in selecting a handgun hunting battery is to find guns that are comfortable for you to handle and shoot. Remember, these big .44 Magnums, .454 Casulls, and .475 Linebaughs will generate a lot of

A THREE-GUN BATTERY FOR BEGINNING HANDGUN HUNTERS

If I were just getting into the handgun hunting business, I would consider a three-gun battery that would be the basis for all of my handgun hunting needs. To begin with I'd select a quality auto-loader in .22 LR as my small-game gun. There are several excellent models available, but my personal choice would be the Ruger Mark II Stainless Government Target (KMK-678G). At \$470, this Ruger semiautomatic is a tough, accurate handgun that will give years of really accurate shooting and hunting enjoyment. My choice of center-fire revolvers would also come from Ruger. After years of packing one around, I can tell you that few handguns are as useful as the Ruger Super Blackhawk in .44 Magnum. Putting together this new battery, my Super Blackhawk would be the 7 1/2-inch, stainless-steel version called the KS47N (\$499). This big sixgun would stay loaded with my favorite handload, which consists of a 300-grain cast bullet over a maximum charge of H110 (Magnum primer), or either the 310-grain Hammerhead factory load from Garrett or the 290-grain Partition Gold factory load from Winchester. I can assure you that my Old Model Ruger Super Blackhawk has taken care of a lion's share of my handgun hunting chores, and this new Ruger .44 would be no different. The third gun in my imaginary battery would be a Thompson/Center Encore in 7mm-08 (\$591.42). I'd top this rascal off with a 4X handgun scope from Weaver or Leupold, and I'd rely on it when I really wanted to reach way on out there. Just to gild the lily a bit, I'd also get an extra barrel chambered for .45-70 to take care of the really heavy stuff that I might want to hunt.

There you go, three guns in four calibers that will handle just about any game animals a fellow would care to throw lead at. And, on the other hand, if your preferences happen to run to Freedom Arms single actions, or Smith & Wesson DAs, or the new Taurus Raging Bull in .454 Casull, I can't argue with that sort of reasoning at all. I've hunted with all of those guns and taken game with most of them.



Freedom Arms
.454

Ruger Super
Blackhawk .454

S&W M&S29
.44 Magnum

Freedom Arms
.475

coil. And if those big guns hurt your hands, you can expect to quickly develop flinching problems. This is the reason that some years ago I decided to do my big-bore hunting with single actions. They just didn't batter my shooting hand like a DA sixgun would. That curved grip allows the SA revolver to roll during recoil instead of driving straight back into the shooting hand the way most DA revolvers do. However, all of that changed for me when Taurus brought out its DA Raging Bull revolver in .454 Casull. Taurus completely redesigned the rubber grips on this massive DA revolver to include a recoil-reducing strip that runs down the backstrap. A couple of years ago I joined the folks from Taurus and Winchester Ammunition for a feral hog hunt on California's El Tejon Ranch. The new Taurus grip design helped me successfully manage the .454's recoil, and I was able to settle down and make a clean shot on a really big porker.



Sheriff Jim prefers single actions for hunting, and some of his favorites include these customized Rugers.

gun scope does not extend my effective range much beyond 100 yards. The scope really serves to help me define the target a bit more clearly and to be a bit more precise about bullet placement, but it does not seem to allow me to shoot much farther.

Another important practice tool is the use of actual field positions during your practice sessions. About the only time that a handgun hunter ought to use a benchrest is when he is sighting-in his handgun for a new load or with a new set

but with time and practice you should be able to extend your limits to something like 100 yards. Surprisingly, I have found that the addition of a hand-

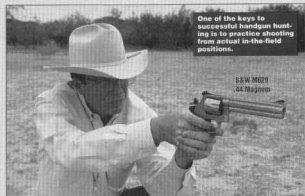
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Keys To Successful Handgun Hunting

The real key to successful handgun hunting is to determine what your outer limits are and to always hunt within those limits. The more you practice, the more you know exactly which shots to take and which to pass up. With this realistic assessment of your own ability, your shot-to-kill ratio remains very high and you establish a reputation for quick, clean, humane kills that ought to be the goal of every hunter regardless of the tools he uses. Here are some quick references for determining those personal, handgun-hunting limits.

For small-game hunting, your limit ought to be the farthest distance that you can consistently keep all of your shots on a standard-sized playing card. You'll notice that I didn't say it's the distance where you can occasionally hit the card, but it is the distance where you can reliably keep them all together. If at first that distance is only be 25 yards, so be it. The dedicated handgun hunter will only take shots out to 25 yards until, through practice, he can extend that limit.

On deer-sized game, exotics, and larger stuff, your personal limit ought to be whatever distance it is that you can keep all of your shots on a nine-inch paper plate. Again, at the beginning, that may only be 25 to 50 yards,



One of the keys to successful handgun hunting is to practice shooting from actual in-the-field positions.

S&W M&Z9
.44 Magnum



of sights or just testing his zero. After you determine that the gun is on, then you need to be doing your practice from the actual positions that you will be using in the field.

The old cowboys have a saying: "Never stand when you can sit and never sit when you can lie down." For them it meant taking advantage of a chance to rest, but for handgun hunters it means a chance for more accurate shots. The more solid your rest is, the more accurate your shooting will be. A handgun hunter will never take a shot at game from the standing, point-shoulder position unless the target is very close and that is the only way you can get the shot. Some years ago I was

Proper shot placement is another key to successful handgun hunting: keeping your shots on a playing card is an excellent way to practice small-game hunting.

"Handgun hunting can be a wonderful challenge. It will teach you to pay a whole lot more attention to the use of cover and the direction of the wind than you ever did as a rifle hunter."

hunting on the Laney Ranch near Hillsboro, New Mexico, when a nice mule deer buck caught me flat-footed. I was standing out in the open when this big buck blew up out of a canyon

boulder, or fence post to use as a back rest and sit flat on the ground with your knees pulled up in front of you. You can sit comfortably like this for hours, and you can get a steady shot by

just have to experiment and find the one that is most comfortable for you and is also the one that you can get into quickly. Just make sure that your elbow is braced on your knee to create the most solid shooting platform possible.

Three Most Important Aspects

Handgun hunting can be a wonderful challenge. It will teach you to pay a whole lot more attention to the use of cover and the direction of the wind than you ever did as a rifle hunter. It will also teach you to study the habits of a particular game animal to figure out ways to get closer or to set up an ambush as he ambles by. You will also soon find that the design of clothing you wear is not nearly as important as the ability to simply sit still. It will also teach you the patience that is needed to watch a real trophy animal get away because you know that he is beyond your effective range and you are not going to just throw lead at him. When you can do that, you have become the kind of hunter that has my complete respect.

To further increase your chances of handgun hunting success, it is a good idea to begin handgun hunting by using guides and outfitters who are experienced in providing hunts for handgun hunters. Be as honest as you can when you are describing your handgun skills to your guide and rely on him to get you into a position that will be within your personal limits. It also helps to take a stand or hunt from a blind, so that you sit still while the game animal moves in close.

Handgun hunting is a great sport that provides challenges to the average hunter and turns his game into true trophies that are honestly earned and respected. And three things comprise the most important aspects of the handgun hunting sport. The first is to use only the most accurate, reliable guns and sights, always being careful to properly match the caliber to the game being taken. The second is to practice on a regular basis so that you have an honest appreciation for your own limitations, whatever those might be. The third is the ability to hunt within those limitations and hone your hunting skills so that clean, humane kills are what you expect to make. When you put it all together and drop a nice buck or bear with one clean, well-placed shot, then you have collected one of the greatest hunting trophies to be found. And you did it with a handgun.



Shooting at nine-inch paper plates is good practice for large game; the author recommends that hunters determine the range at which they can keep all shots on the plate and limit their in-the-field shots at game to that distance.

beader, virtually at my feet. Swinging my .44 Super Blackhawk into action, from an unsupported standing position, I promptly missed him with the first shot. Fortunately, I settled down and hit him with the next two and dropped him on the spot. Had there been a nearby tree limb to rest my arms on, I could well have expected to have hit him on the first shot.

Another position that is to be generally avoided is the prone position. Now a prone position is just about as solid as you can get, but out in the field you just can't see anything. Grass, rocks, and other ground debris generally ruin your view and your sight picture. And in some locations you might get right down into a prone position only to find that you have a real close-up view of the nose of a prairie rattler. This, and other considerations, make sitting and kneeling the best handgun-hunting positions.

Early of a morning or even when roaming high country during the day, it is a great idea to occasionally stop, sit down, and just look for game that is moving. It is best to find a tree trunk,

resting your shooting arms on your knees.

When game is encountered by surprise, it takes only a second to drop into a solid, kneeling position. Several kneeling positions are taught by the marksmanship schools, and you really



The exhilaration of handgun hunting is realized when you put it all together and take a good buck or bear with one well-placed shot from your revolver or pistol.