

Make Mine A

.44

Long cylinders and specialized mega-loads are keeping the .44 Magnum at the top of the heavyweight division.

By Ashley Emerson

Most .44 Magnum shooters may not realize the significance of the extra-long cylinders featured in Ruger Redhawk, Dan Wesson and a few other revolvers. What the longer cylinder on these heavy-duty

revolvers allows is a longer overall loaded-cartridge length. Generally, this means we can have an extra-heavy bullet seated to less depth, thus gaining more room for powder.

And with a cartridge loaded long—and to the top of SAAMI pressure specifications or even a bit on the +P side—to maximize use of an extra-thick and long cylinder, it works out well for safety's sake. These are, of course, cartridges that, if loaded in an S&W Model 29, would stick out of the cylinder and prevent it from rotating.

Pushing The Envelope

Since the late 1990s Randy Garrett has been producing a 330-grain Super Hard Cast Long-Hammerhead at 1,385 fps. Custom gunsmith John Gallagher introduced me to it several years ago. I have found that if you run into John out hunting, he will likely have a cylinderful of Garrett 330s in his custom Ruger Bisley. When Hamilton Bowen went hunting up in Alaska last year, he was camping out in brown bear county. At night he slept with a Redhawk on a lanyard. No, it wasn't a .475 or .500. It was, in fact, one of his 4-inch Kodiak conversions in .44 Mag loaded with Garrett's 330s. I've been so impressed with the additional performance afforded by having a .44 that works with this type of ammo that I now have two custom Blackhawks and a takedown Marlin rifle specifically built to chamber the Garrett 330.

Randy Garrett has for years specialized in high-performance .44 Mag and .45-70 ammo. All of the hard-cast bullet loads he sells are loaded with bullets he's hand-cast himself out of molds he designed with an alloy made to his specifications (he buys 5,000 pounds at a time). In the past he's featured a plain-base bullet, which has shot very well in all of my guns, and he has recently added a gas check to this load. Each gun is a different critter, and while leading was never a problem in most guns, the addition of a gas check does minimize leading that might occur.

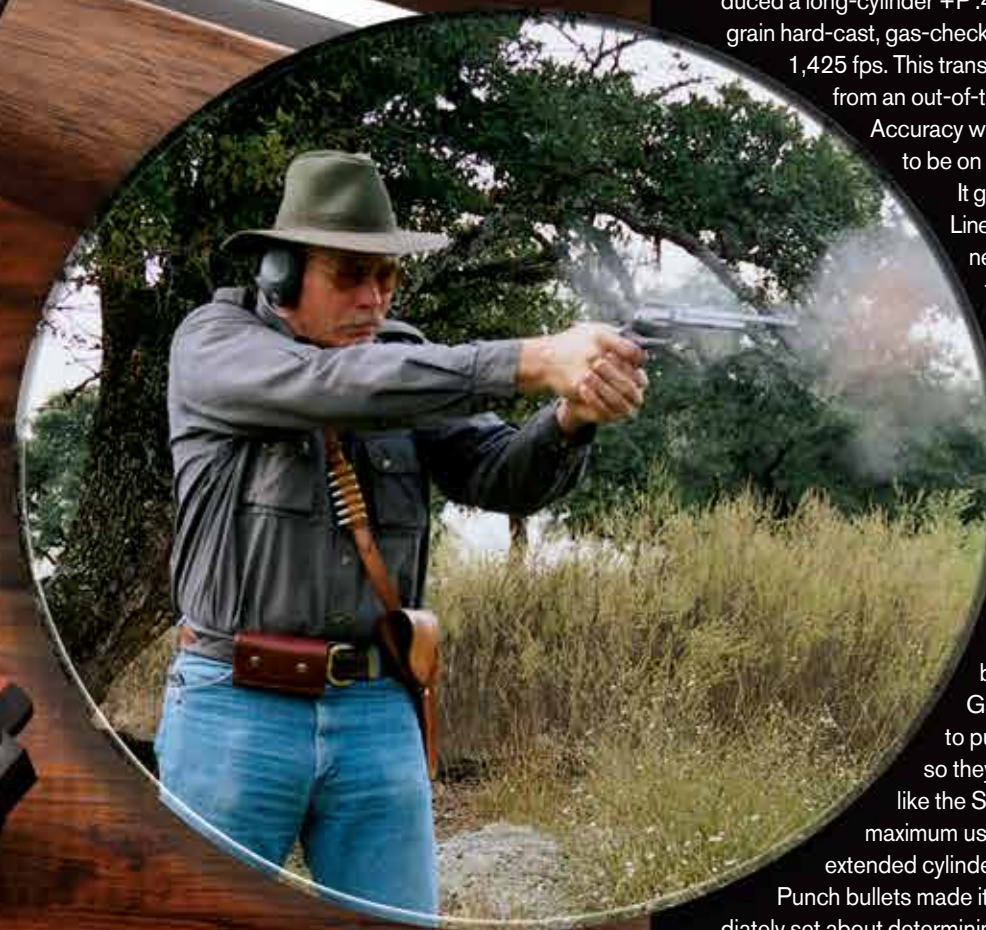
Another company specializing in high-performance .44 Mag ammo is Buffalo Bore Ammunition, which has just introduced a long-cylinder +P .44 Mag loading using a 340-grain hard-cast, gas-check bullet with a muzzle velocity of 1,425 fps. This translates to 1,533 ft-lbs of energy from an out-of-the-box 7½-inch Ruger Redhawk. Accuracy with the Buffalo Bore load seems to be on par with the Garrett.

It gets better. A while back at a John Linebaugh penetration seminar, I witnessed some near unbelievable performance from a .50 Alaskan lever-action rifle. The bullets being used were from Belt Mountain Enterprises, and they were amazing. With a profile much like an LBT-type bullet, these projectiles have thick, lathe-turned brass jackets with lead swaged in from the rear.

When I ran across Belt Mountain's Kelye Schlepp at the Whittington Center I begged him to make his Big Game Punch bullets for .44s and to put two crimping grooves on them so they could be loaded short for guns like the S&W Model 29 and long to get maximum use of the Ruger Redhawk's extended cylinder. The first of the .430-diameter Punch bullets made it to me a while back, and I immediately set about determining how much H110 I felt

Cartridge commonality for the 21st century: This David Clay-customized Marlin 1894 and dead-stock Ruger Redhawk both handle Garrett's stomping 330-grain Super Hard Cast Hammerhead .44 Mag load (inset), which offers a significant upgrade from the traditional 240-grain JSP.

Lynn Pedigo photo



Make Mine A .44



The right tool for almost any job: The author's Bowen-customized Blackhawk .44 Mag sports a 5½-inch S&W 629 DX barrel; a long, heavy, line-bored six-shot cylinder; and interchangeable-blade front and rear sights.



The OAL factor illustrated: A standard 240-grain JSP is flanked by a Garrett 330-grain Hammerhead (left) and a Buffalo Bore 340-grain Hard Cast.

able with behind the new 300-grain bullet when I teamed it with WW cases, CCI 350 primers and 25 grains of H110. With this load I averaged 1,461 fps out of my 7½-inch Bowen custom Black Hawk. I was more interested in penetration testing than in shooting the smallest group possible for a pretty picture. For now I can only tell you they are accurate, and only time will tell if they are as accurate as the Garrett and Buffalo Bore heavyweights.

Puttin' The Wood To It

The day I received the bullets I headed out to a friend's farm to do some semiscientific mesquite testing. Mesquite trees are super tough, and it doesn't take a big one to stop a normal hunting load from a .30-06.

First off, I found the thickest mesquite that the 300-grain Punch bullet would shoot through out of my 5½-inch Bowen Blackhawk. That seven-inch-thick tree stopped both the Garrett 330 and the Buffalo



The outer limits of bigbore fun: The author lights off a Buffalo Bore 340-grain load in his 7½-inch Bowen-customized Ruger Blackhawk. He's packing a Murray Custom Leather shell holder for extra ammo.



Big-time penetration: Belt Mountain's Big-Game Punch 300-grain .44 Mag load proved its mettle on live mesquite. A recovered bullet (inset, far right) showed only rifling marks after 11 inches of penetration.



Bore .340s. When I sectioned the tree, I found that both of those hard-cast numbers stopped after about 4½ inches. Wondering how the Punch bullet would do from my 18-inch David Clay custom take-down Marlin, I looked for a bigger tree and found a suitable 10-inch number. I shot through it, then found an 11-inch-plus tree and barely shot through that. I say "barely" because the bullet was laying on the ground on the other side. The only substantial marks on it were from the rifling. When shooting hard-cast bullets into a tough medium, velocity can work against you if you're looking for maximum penetration.

75 yards, the load that may upset at 10 feet will penetrate better at longer yardage because of its reduced velocity.

If you're looking for maximum penetration, I believe you need to look for the hardest bullet that will not break up on bone that has a sharp-edged, flat nose and is relatively heavy. Currently, the Belt Mountain Punch bullet appears to be the bad boy of .44 penetration, offering performance never—to my knowledge—seen from a .44 Mag. Randy Garrett was so impressed when he

got ahold of these bullets that by the time you read this he will most likely be loading the Belt Mountain in his super-premium Penetrator line.

Even though I am guilty of "wasting" a pretty good pile of Garrett 330s shooting rocks at ridiculously

gunsandammomag.com Log on and look up "The All-American .44 Magnum" in "Handguns" to read more about the .44 Magnum.

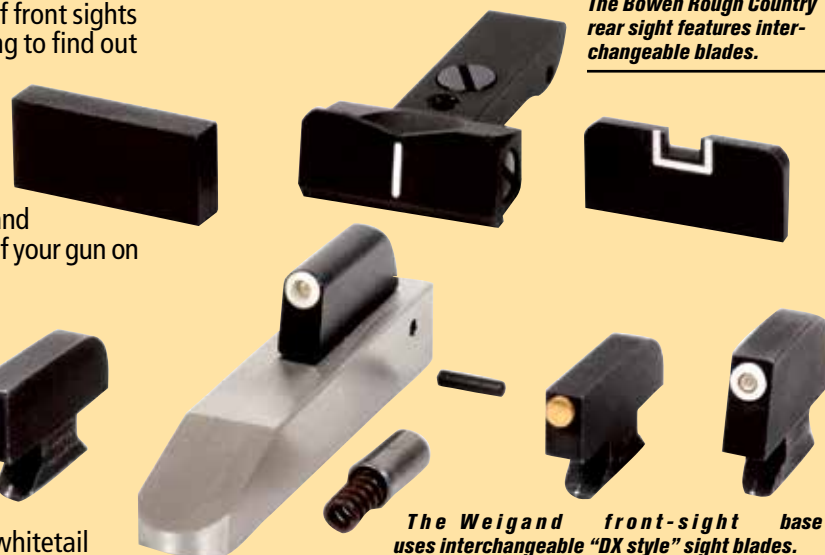
Custom Sights For Serious .44s

The appearance on the market of both Bowen's Rough Country rear sight and the Weigand front-sight-base interchangeable sight system is significant. The Rough Country sight is a heavy-duty machined-steel unit that's fully adjustable and has interchangeable sight blades. Likewise, the new Weigand front-sight base accommodates any front-sight blade made to work with the proven S&W DX front-sight system and allows for a wider spectrum of front sights than ever before available. Trust me, it's irritating to find out that your rear sight won't go low enough or you just can't stand it sticking up high enough to sight-in some load you want to shoot.

The ability to change front sights yourself enables you to have different front sights set up for specific loads. If you can change both front- and rear-sight blades, you can change the character of your gun on a whim without a trip to the gunsmith. For instance, you may be spending a lot of time at the range punching paper with light-recoiling 200-grain SWCs and want a flat-black square notch and post sights for a 6 o'clock target-type sight picture. Or you could be getting ready for a long-awaited whitetail

hunt and want a white-outline rear sight and white-line front to ensure placing that 240-grain JSP where you want it in low light. Then, of course, you could go to a white dot with tritium on the front and a white-line express on the rear to help direct those 300-grain fire-breathers into a hairy whatever with big teeth and claws coming into your tent.

The Bowen Rough Country rear sight features interchangeable blades.



The Weigand front-sight base uses interchangeable "DX style" sight blades.

The problem seems to be—and I'm talking about shooting critters here—that if you increase velocity to where the bullet upsets at all on impact, penetration suffers (see the accompanying wet-newspaper-penetration chart). This is not always a bad thing because, obviously, with a given bullet weight, more velocity means more power and the potential for more destruction. Range often helps penetration when hunting because at, say,

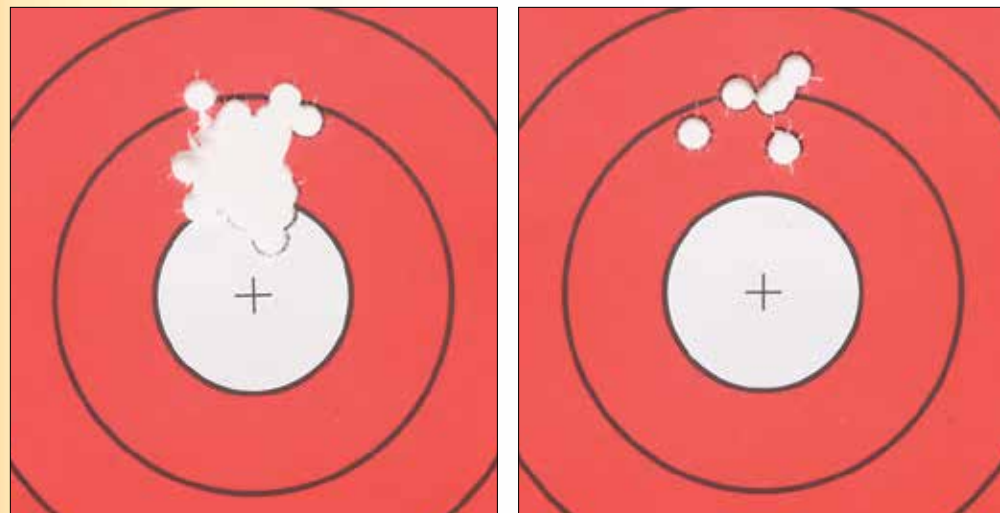
Wet-Newspaper-Penetration Test

Load (grs.)	4-inch revolver bbl.	18-inch rifle bbl.
Garrett 330	32 inches (1,227 fps)	33 inches (1,576 fps)
Buffalo Bore 340	28 inches (1,323 fps)	23 inches (1,628 fps)
Belt Mountain 300	36 inches (1,330 fps)	45 inches (1,715 fps)
JSP 240 (handload)	11 inches (1,290 fps)	12 inches (1,678 fps)
Lead SWC 240 (handload)	12 inches (961 fps)	30 inches (1,234 fps)
Buffalo Bore 270 JSP	12 inches (1,325 fps)	14 inches (1,664 fps)

Make Mine A .44



This recovered Garrett 330-grain Hammerhead (left) and Buffalo Bore 340-grain Hard Cast (right) were shot through 18 inches of soaked news-paper from an 18-inch rifle barrel.



Power and accuracy from both long and short tubes: The 18-shot group at the left was fired at 50 yards from a David Clay-customized Marlin 94 takedown. The six-shot group at right was fired at 50 yards with a custom Bowen Blackhawk. The load? Garrett 330-grain Hammerheads.

long range, don't get the idea that most of what I shoot isn't more normal, affordable stuff. For more than 30 years I have shot .22s like they were free and .44s like most people shoot .22s. The vast majority of my shooting with .44s has been with pretty standard 240-grain JSP and JHP Remington bullets pushed to around 1,400 fps out of 7½-inch barrels using 21 to 22 grains of 2400. When shooting steel plates or teaching beginners, I have always loaded 240-grain lead SWCs at around 1,050 fps. I have used various powders for this light load, but now I prefer HS6.

My teenage daughter has been using the light load in her 5½-inch Redhawk in hopes of taking a deer and/or wild hog this year with a handgun.

Guns For The Heavyweights

Up until a year ago I was content

with my shooting collection of .44 Magnums. With the exception of a 4-inch S&W Model 29 I carried as a deputy in the early 1980s, I'd mostly shot long-barreled Super Blackhawks and Redhawks. (These guns are partly responsible for North Central Texans not being waist deep in jackrabbits today.)

Then in the mid 1980s Ruger brought out the 5½-inch .44 Mag Blackhawk with a fluted cylinder, and I had to have one.

In the early 1990s S&W brought out a 5½-inch Model 29 DX with interchangeable sights. I hated the round butt on a barrel-heavy gun but loved the ribbed barrel with interchangeable sights. It didn't hurt that the DX was unbelievably accurate. It was about this time that I discovered the Garrett 330 load and, using a hard-to-come-by .357 Maximum cylinder given to me by John Linebaugh, I had Bowen build a revolver bored out to shoot the Garrett 330 out of a 7½-inch Blackhawk.

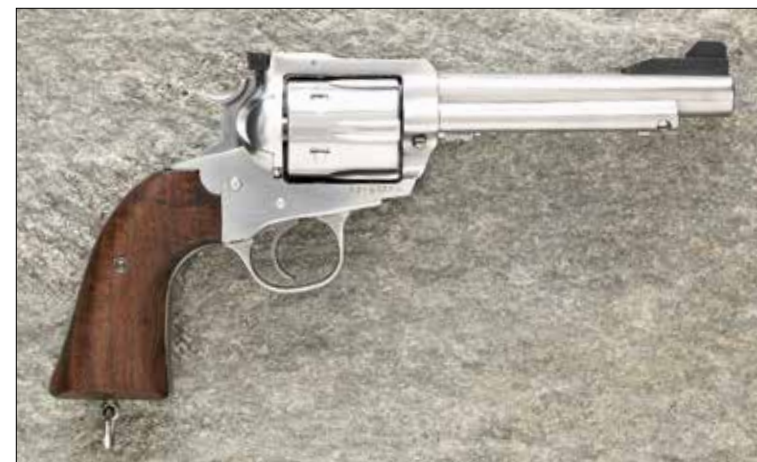
For a companion carbine, Dave Clay of DRC Custom came to the rescue by not only modifying a Marlin 1894 to feed the Garrett 330 but rebarreling it to a 1:16-twist lightweight octagon barrel to accommodate the Garrett 330 load. It didn't hurt my feelings that Dave made it into a takedown, and now it

.44 Mag Directory

- Belt Mountain Enterprises Inc., Dept. GA, P.O. Box 3202, Bozeman, MT 59772; (406) 388-1396
- Hamilton Bowen, Dept. GA, P.O. Box 67, 3512 Old Lowes Ferry Rd., Louisville, TN 37777; (865) 984-3583; bowenclassicarms.com
- Buffalo Bore Ammunition Co., Dept. GA, P.O. Box 40, Carmen, ID 83462; (208) 756-8085; buffalobore.com
- Dave Clay, DRC Custom, Dept. GA, 4201 East Renfro Rd., Alvarado, TX 76009; (817) 783-6099
- John Gallagher, The Sportsman's Center, Dept. GA, 306 Highway 78W, Jasper, AL 35501; (205) 387-7678
- Garrett Cartridges Inc., Dept. GA, P.O. Box 178, Chehalis, WA 98532; garrettcartridges.com
- Weigand Combat Handguns Inc., Dept. GA, 685 South Main Rd., Mountaintop, PA 18707; (570) 868-8358
- XS Express Sight Systems, Dept. GA, 2401 Ludelle St., Fort Worth, TX 76105; (888) 744-4880; aosights.com



Hog hammer: The author downed this spotted Texas boar with his 5½-inch Bowen-customized Blackhawk using a single 330-grain Garrett Hammerhead.



This John Gallagher long-cylinder .44 Mag features a Ruger Bisley grip frame and the maker's own custom stocks.

fits nicely into the factory saddlebags on the Harley out back.

To my way of thinking, I was set with that 18-inch takedown and a 24-inch 1894 Cowboy. Then Marlin brought the 1894 out in stainless, and I had to have one of those as well (by this time, things were getting expensive).

Out of the blue I won a 629 Mountain Gun in a raffle (finally, a home for the round-butt grips that came with the DX). I had no idea how much I would like this gun, and with the addition of Standard Dot tritium sights from XS, this has become one of my favorites.

I was so thrilled with the Mountain Gun that when S&W's X-frame .500 showed up at the SHOT Show, its size and weight turned me off. But at the same time, S&W premiered the new Model 329 Scandium .44 Mag, which struck me as a *real* mountain gun. Now I have a 329 sighted-in for

Garrett's shorter 310-grain Hammerheads. I've literally worn through the finish in places carrying it in the mountains of Idaho while trying to keep up with Buffalo Bore's Tim Sundles.

By now you'd think I had the bases covered as far as .44s go (so did I). But about a year ago I read Hamilton Bowen's *The Custom Revolver* and was inspired further. If you really want to be revolver savvy, the book's a must. There is not room here to explain all the hows and whys of what I had Bowen build, only a list of features. It started out as a stainless 5½-inch Blackhawk in .44 Mag and came back a stainless 5½-inch Blackhawk in .44 Mag (try explaining *that* to your wife). But that new 5½-inch barrel came from my 6½-inch S&W 629 DX, giving me interchangeable front sights and a barrel I knew to be accurate.

In addition, I got a long, heavy, line-



A .44 buff buster: Cold Steel's Lynn Thompson took this Asiatic water buffalo with a Freedom Arms single action stoked with Buffalo Bore 340-grain Hard Cast ammo.

bored, fluted, black-powder-chambered, six-shot cylinder made of 17-4 stainless; Bowen's Rough Country fully adjustable rear sight with interchangeable sight blades; a Bisley hammer and trigger; premium trigger and action work; a recoil lug for the fitted ejector housing; Gallagher grips; an extra-long firing pin; and a lanyard ring (in his book, Bowen points out that "the lanyard ring will ward off evil spirits that infest the modern world"). This gun was built to accommodate the longest, heaviest, meanest loads available at the time, and with the introduction of the Belt Mountain Punch bullet, the performance potential has made a giant leap.

However, the real beauty here is a rifle-accurate, compact sixgun that, with the easy change of the interchangeable front sight to a blade of a predetermined height, can be sighted-in without bothering the rear-sight adjustment to drive nails with mild-mannered lead SWC loads or anything in between. ■