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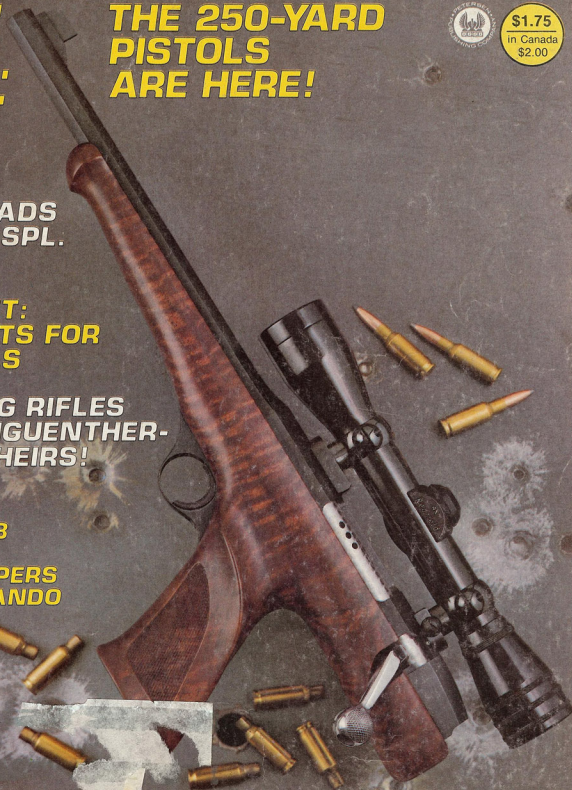
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LONG-RANGE HANDGUNNING FOR VARMINTS



■ With my hearing protectors in place, I raised my binoculars and focused them on the rockchuck that was making his way along the steep, grassy hillside across the creek. Dave Hetzler was scrunched in behind a boulder on my right, following the chuck's progress in the field of view of the Redfield 4X pistol scope set atop his Remington XP-100 pistol chambered in 7 mm Remington Bench Rest. I glanced at Dave and could tell that he was estimating the range. Was it 150 yards or 200?

At a small rock outcropping the chuck scurried up onto a flat slab and stopped to peer down at us. That was a fatal mistake. He'd no sooner stopped than Dave's 7 mm Bench Rest roared in the mountain silence. As if grabbed by an invisible hand, the chuck was plucked off of the rock by the 120-grain Sierra spitzer bullet and hurled backward out of sight.

"That's two in a row at over 150 yards," I complimented. "Are you ready to try for 200 yards?"

Dave nodded affirmatively, so I directed

The rifleman's varmint fields are starting to be infiltrated by pistoleros armed with new, exciting and accurate long-range shooting machines.

By Bob Milek

his attention to a rimrock to our left where a big chuck was flattened out atop a ledge, soaking up the sun's warmth. Dave fed a fresh round into the XP-100, rearranged the sandbags under the fore-end of the pistol and drew a deep breath. Again the pistol cracked, but this time the shot hit low, chipping rock from the ledge an inch or so below the chuck and sending the varmint into his den in a single bound.

"He was farther away than I figured," I quipped. "If your hold was good, he must have been all of 225 yards out, maybe a little more."

"You try him with that .30," Dave muttered, relinquishing his position behind the makeshift benchrest.

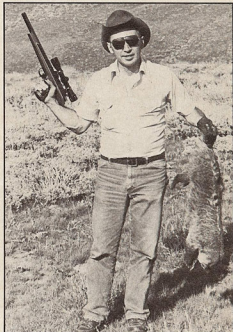
By the time I was settled in and had my bolt-action M-S Safari Arms .300 Herrett nestled into the bags, the chuck Dave had missed was back out, apparently trying to find the source of the dust shower he'd endured minutes earlier. I fed a round into the chamber and settled the crosshair of the 4X Redfield scope just above the varmint's back. When everything looked right, I squeezed the trigger. The impact of the 125-grain spitzer bullet lifted the chuck a foot into the air. He was dead before he came back to earth.

The satisfaction you feel when you connect with a chuck at over 200 yards is something akin to scoring on chucks at 600 yards with a .220 Swift. It takes a careful-planned combination of pistol, sights,



This is the handgun that started the long-range handgun revolution, the Thompson/Center Contender. Available in different calibers, and in two different barrel lengths, it is the first pistol that can be designed by the owner for a multitude of different shooting and hunting chores.

One of the best standard pistols for the western varmint hunter is the Remington XP-100 (color, left) chambered in their "wildcat" 7 mm Bench Rest cartridge. With 120-gr. bullets it bucks wind quite well. Still another good cartridge is the 6 mm/.223 that Milek has built up on this custom-stocked Remington for shooting over great distances.



Milek's scope-sighted, bolt-action M-S Safari Arms in .300 Herrett made short work of this boar badger.

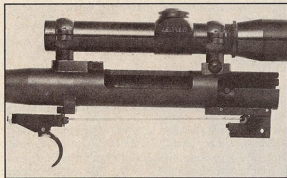
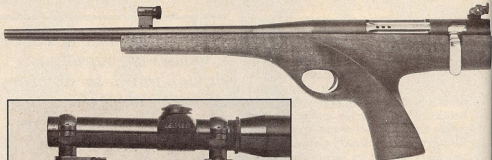


VARMINT PISTOLS

cartridge and load to score at 200 yards with any degree of regularity. A few short years ago, handgunning varmints at anything over 100 yards was next to impossible and hits were strictly a matter of luck. Today, though, thanks to some giant advances in the development of pistols, cartridges and sights, the effective range of handguns stretches well beyond 200 yards.

Long-range varmint shooting with a handgun is a demanding sport and nothing short of specialized equipment will suffice. Try it with a revolver and you'll come away muttering to yourself. Your pistol must be capable of producing 100-yard groups no larger than 1½ inches in size and the closer to minute-of-angle accuracy you can get, the better. As it stands today, only the specialty pistols are capable of such accuracy. Most of these are break-open or bolt-action single-shot guns sporting long barrels and excellent triggers.

Believe it or not, pistol and cartridge development has been more rapid than sighting advances, thus you'll find that your sight is the biggest factor governing your long-range handgunning. Riflemen who seriously shoot varmints equip their rifles



Beautifully made and designed, the Wichita line of pistols is the Cadillac of single shots. Like Remington, Wichita solved the problem of center-located pistol grips by running a sear link under the action.

with scopes of 10X or more so that small, distant targets can be easily seen. This option isn't open to the handgunner. At the present time the Burris 6X is the most powerful long eye relief pistol scope available. Redfield, Burris, Leupold and Thompson/Center all offer 4X models.

The Burris 6X is a good optic that stands up to recoil, but the eye relief is limited to a maximum of 14 inches and this causes problems when your arms are fully

extended for comfort in most shooting positions. I find that I can use it only on bolt-action guns with center-located stocks, and even then I have trouble at times. Because of this, I tend toward the use of 4X scopes on most of my pistols.

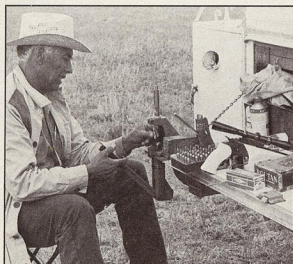
No scope of less than 4X should be used on a handgun intended for long-range varminting. But neither 4X or 6X is enough magnification for precision shooting of small targets at over 200 yards. The reticle often covers your entire target, so sighting error is a factor that seriously limits your long-range accuracy. This past season I made two kills on prairie dogs at over 300 yards. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? But what you must realize is that I didn't score on the first shot, the second or even the third. Bracketing, a method used by riflemen to bring their shots on target at very long range, is nearly impossible with a pistol when the scope reticle completely covers the target. I had little trouble getting my elevation right, but windage was another story.



These two 5-shot, 100-yd. groups are typical of the accuracy needed for long-range hunting. These three .22 centerfire cartridges (R) are available in pistol chamberings and are excellent for long-range shooting.

A spotter is needed (below), and he should be armed with a powerful scope like this armored Bushnell, when hunting for small rodents like this prairie dog (R).

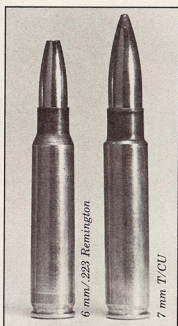




Many shooters outfit their vehicles with hand-loading equipment so they can replenish their ammo supply as Steve Herrett is doing here.



All three of these .30 calibers are fine long-range cartridges that can double for medium-sized big game.



Various long-range pistols are chambered in these two calibers, both based on the .223 Remington case.

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Still, even though the 4X and 6X handgun scopes of today lack the magnification needed for shooting at small targets at ranges beyond 200 or 250 yards, they're a vast improvement over the 1.5X to 2.5X



A solid shooting location is a must. If nothing else the Creedmoor position will work if the surrounding brush isn't high or thick.



Custom-stocked handguns are liked by the long-range hunting set. The Remington XP, because of its functional, but unappealing, fiberglass stock, is often customized.

models, and so much superior to iron sights that there's no comparison.

As important as the increases in magnification and the improved optics found in today's handgun scopes is their superior construction over those of just a few years ago. I have a basket full of pistol scopes that literally fell apart on me when Steve Herrett and I were doing the development work on the .30 and .357 Herrett cartridges. Many scopes failed on the .222 Remington, the .30-30 and even the .22 WMR! You won't encounter this problem today—providing you buy quality, and this means putting out a hundred bucks or more for a scope and mount. I realize this is quite an investment, but when I think back on the many hunts that were ruined for me by scope failure, the investment in a quality pistol scope is a bargain.

Long-range varmint shooting requires

Above is the Remington XP-100 in .221 Fireball, the first of the modern-day bolt guns. At right is the second variation with a 15-in. barrel in 7 mm BR.



special handguns. The break-open Thompson/Center Contender and bolt-action designs like Remington's XP-100, the Wichita, M-S Safari Arms' Ultimate and Weatherby's Silhouette are the types of handguns that should be considered. Granted, they take some getting used to, but once you've shot a good one and thrilled to the accuracy of which such pistols are capable, you'll quickly find that you can't do without one.

The question I'm frequently asked is why worry about a pistol and scope for over 200 yards work when pistol cartridges

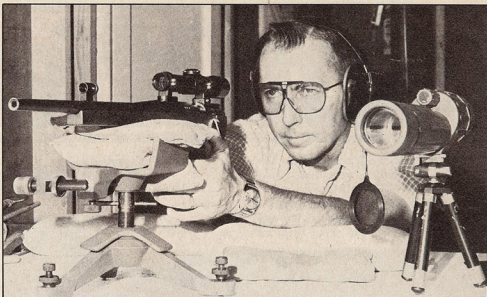
aren't capable of doing the job at such distances? This is a logical question, but it's asked by shooters who haven't kept up with the rapid advances in handgun cartridges that have taken place in the past five or six years. The traditional revolvers and semi-automatics won't do the job, not only because they lack the inherent accuracy required for long-range varminting, but because the cartridges for which they are chambered aren't ballistically capable of the task.

In specialty pistols, though, you can choose from a number of excellent long-

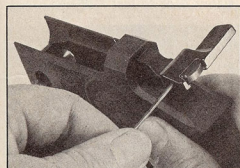
range cartridges. For varmint shooting we have .22s, 6 mms, a couple of 7 mms and some .30s. Naturally, none of these are the traditional straight wall cartridges generally associated with handguns. In fact, a couple of the .22s are bottleneck cartridges originally designed for rifles, then adapted to pistols.

In .22 caliber, the .221 Fireball, .222 Remington and .223 Remington are your best choices for long-range varminting. Pistols are available in .22 Hornet and .218 Bee, and while both of these cartridges display excellent accuracy in the Contender, they lack the velocity needed for a flat trajectory and good bullet performance at long range. It's been my experience that the Hornet poops out at anything over 100 yards and the effective range of the .218 Bee is, at most, 150 yards.

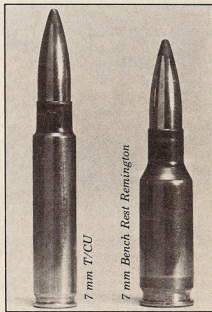
Varmints are small, but tenacious, so at long range you've got to use a cartridge that's not only accurate, but which will push a bullet fast enough that it will expand rapidly when it hits a distant target.



Because many of the popular cartridges used in long-range handguning are wildcats, it's necessary to spend some time at the bench working up accurate loads.



When a scope is mounted on the T/C a hammer extension is a must for safety (above). On long-range pistols Milek suggests the lightest possible trigger pull. Most T/Cs require some stonework to the sear (right).



These two 7 mms are popular with both varmint hunters and silhouette shooters. For hunting Milek likes the Remington BR.



Another single shot making its way into the hunting fields is the Merrill. It is available in popular varmint calibers.

Of the .22 centerfire cartridges, the .223 Remington is my favorite. I have two .223s, a Contender with a 14-inch barrel and a ten-inch barreled Wichita. Both are extremely accurate—capable of ¼-inch five-shot groups or better at 100 yards when I do my part of the job. A charge of 25.5 grains of Hodgdon's H322 powder pushes the 50-grain Sierra medium velocity Blitz bullet out the muzzle of my Super 14 Contender at 2,915 feet per second (fps). At any distance at which I've been able to take prairie dogs and chucks with this rig, sometimes in excess of 250 yards, the Blitz bullet has expanded very well. The same is true of the 50-grain SX bullet from Hornady—a superbly accurate bullet in both the Contender and Wichita.

Wind, though, is the nemesis of all .22s at handgun velocities, so when the wind

whips up here in Wyoming, I opt for other cartridges. One of my favorites is the 6 mm/.223, a cartridge formed simply by opening up the neck of a .223 to accept a .243-inch bullet. Redding provided the excellent dies for my 6 mm/.223 and no special form die is required. My handgun for this one is an XP-100 Remington action with a 15-inch heavy Douglas barrel which was chambered and fit to my action by Trapper Gun Inc. The stock is a piece of Fajen silver maple that was inletted and finished for me by Ralph Hastings of the Diamond R Gun Repair here in Thermopolis. I've topped this pistol with a Burris 6X scope, and Ralph fitted the stock with Pachmayr sling swivels that make the rig

easy to carry. It tips the scale at five pounds, nine ounces and is one of the most accurate long-range pistols in my battery.

For prairie dogs, I often load my 6 mm/.223 with the 60-grain Sierra HP bullet pushed out the muzzle at 3,011 fps by 26.5 grains of H322. However, this bullet is almost too explosive and I've yet to have it penetrate through a prairie dog or chuck. It simply goes to pieces, killing instantly.

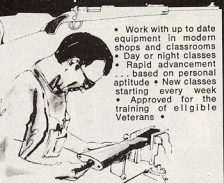
On a windy day the 60-grain pill isn't all that much better than a 50-grain .22, so I get better results with heavier 6 mm offerings. One of my favorites is the Speer 75-grain HP which I push at a muzzle velocity of 2,759 fps with 25.2 grains of H322 powder. This bullet really grinds up the varmints and is extremely accurate.

But when the wind gets to howling, as it often does in Wyoming, the larger caliber cartridges come into their own. Both of the 7 mm cartridges for which pistols are commercially chambered—the 7 mm T/CU

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and the 7 mm Bench Rest Remington—are very good at long range. I prefer the 7 mm B.R. because of its higher velocity which helps in both bucking wind and bullet performance. On a varmint hunt this past spring, Dave Hetzler did some mighty fancy shooting on chucks and prairie dogs using his 7 mm B.R. He capped his five-day hunt here, which was frequently interrupted by snow and rain, by killing a young prairie dog, which isn't much bigger than an adult ground squirrel, at over 250 yards. Dave finds both the 120-grain Sierra and the 120-grain Hornady bullets to be his liking. In my custom-stocked XP-100 7 mm B.R., I've done considerable experimenting with a variety of bullets. If the 7 mm caliber has any shortcoming in handguns for varmint shooting, it's in the toughness of the bullet jackets that are available in this caliber. Only a few will expand at all on small varmints. Most of

spring I took an old boar badger with this pistol at about 140 yards. The 125-grain Sierra spitzer bullet plowed into the layers of hide, fat and muscle on that pugnacious varmint and destroyed its innards, yet it went on through and made a sizeable exit hole. The badger dropped in its tracks—killed instantly by the .300 Herrett.

But even a top-notch pistol, an excellent cartridge and a good scope aren't enough to guarantee you success at long-range varminting. Two other factors are vital. The first is a trigger on the pistol that doesn't take two hands to pull. The lighter the trigger pull—within safe limits, of course—the better are your chances of scoring on distant small targets. Normally I hold the pull weight on hunting guns at 2½ pounds, but my varmint pistols are the exception. On them I'll spend hours adjusting and honing in an effort to achieve a one-pound pull or less. On some pistols, like the Wichita or an XP-100 with a custom stock featuring a rear-located grip, you can fit a Canjar light pull trigger to the pistol. If possible, do it—you'll never be sorry. On Contenders you'll have to hone the striker and engagement surfaces and change the trigger spring. M-S Safari Arms pistols offer the shooter the option of an electronic trigger. No matter what you must do, get that trigger pull down as light as is safely possible! Sure, this means that you'll have to exercise extra care in the handling of your pistol in the field, but this is really no problem for the careful hunter.

Last but not least, you have to learn to take advantage of anything at hand to steady your shooting position. If you think you're going to connect often on distant targets when shooting from an offhand or sitting position, you'd better think again. Success will be your reward only when your shooting position is solid. A rock, the fork of a tree, a thick bush with a hat or jacket laid on it—these are the natural rests to look for. To make them even better, I usually carry a couple of shooting bags filled with wheat in my backpack. They do wonders for a steady hold and are especially useful when I'm going to be doing a lot of shooting from one spot. A backpack laid on the ground in front of you forms a steady rest and if you're in a hurry, the Creedmoor position used by silhouette shooters is good. However, the latter is useful only if there's no high grass or brush to obscure your line of sight. Assuming a solid position in the field isn't easy due to the uneven terrain encountered, so I recommend that, if possible, you practice getting into various positions as frequently as you can.

Once you've put together your long-range varminting rig and have developed accurate loads for it, you're ready to try your hand at what just may be the most challenging of all handgun hunting sports.

But be forewarned—the sport is habit forming and you may find yourself snapping off good long guns to beef up your battery of pistols for long-range varmint shooting.

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them zing through, inflicting a minimal wound. In all fairness, though, I'll have to say that expansion isn't critical to quick kills. Retained velocity and bullet weight are usually enough to anchor the toughest chuck. Of the many varmints Dave and I shot with 7 mms last spring, none escaped.

My favorite of the big bores, though, is a .30 caliber, particularly the newest cartridge to come down the pike—the .300 Herrett. Based on a .308 Winchester case which is shortened to 1.630 inches, this one pushes a 125-grain spitzer bullet out of a 15-inch barrel at 2,500 fps.

My .300 Herrett was made up for me by M-S Safari Arms of Phoenix, Arizona. Based on their Ultimate single-shot bolt action, the pistol sports a massive .30 caliber barrel furnished by Hoppy Hopkins of the H&H Barrel Works Inc., 5635 Furnace Avenue, Elkridge, MD 21227. Set in a fiberglass stock, the pistol weighs six pounds, five ounces. It's capable of better than minute-of-angle accuracy with a variety of loads, and as you'd expect with such weight, recoil is never bothersome. It looks big, but it's my idea of the perfect long-range pistol for the windy West.

When that 125-grain bullet from the .300 Herrett connects with a varmint, even at long range, a quick kill is guaranteed. It bucks the wind well and seems to expand enough to inflict a deadly wound. Last



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