

Better bullets make the .243 suitable for everything from woodchuck to deer

For woodchucks on a windy day, I leave the .22-250 at home and instead pack a .243. With the right rifle, either cartridge can deliver long-range hunting accuracy, and with a laser rangefinder and drop table, trajectory out to 400 yards is very manageable.

Both shoot a 55-grain bullet with about the same ballistics. The larger case and bore of the .243 let it fire its 55-grain bullet at a slightly higher muzzle velocity, making it just a bit flatter at 400 yards. The trade-off is a bit more recoil.

However, there is no laser-like device for “doping” the wind, and the .243 also handles heavier 75- to 85-grain varmint bullets that are significantly better at overcoming wind deflection. Yes, the heavier bullets start out slower and drop a bit more at 400 yards. But again, a laser rangefinder makes that drop practically a non-issue.

The .243 was introduced by Winchester in 1955, made by necking down the .308 case to put that hefty powder charge behind a smaller bullet. The combination proved ideal for coyotes and other varmints at long range, but deer was also in the marketing plans, and deer hunters were not enamored with the .243, mainly because the 100-grain big-game bullet was considered questionably light. Hitting at top .243 speeds, those bullets also developed a reputation for falling apart and failing to penetrate. A well-placed shot still killed most deer almost instantly. But later, while the hunter field dressed said deer, the bullet’s “failure” was discovered.

I shot my first deer with a .243 back in 1968, with a broadside hit to the center of the lungs at about 125 yards. During penetration, the hand-loaded Nosler Partition lost 31 of its original 100 grains yet held together behind the partition as designed. I found it lodged in the off shoulder.

At what point during that Vermont deer’s nearly instantaneous death might one say the bullet failed?

We could debate that forever, I suppose. But nowadays, it is even more of a moot point because newer bonded bullets hold together even better, and the monolithics lose absolutely none of their weight as they mushroom and then plow through.



Left to right: .243, 7mm-08, and .308. A Barnes TTSX bullet will mushroom perfectly from all three yet retain all of its weight for deep penetration.

The idea of a mushrooming bullet may be traced back to when deer hunters moved away from effectively fat .45-70 bullets in favor of smaller but faster .30-30 bullets that would fly flatter and hit harder at long range. Such bullets were deliberately designed to mushroom upon impact, to regain some of that old fat-bullet punch.

Yet as velocities increased to .30-06 speeds and beyond, the same bullets sometimes mushroomed too much, breaking apart before penetrating the vitals.

True, most well-hit deer still died instantly. Even when a high-speed bullet explodes on impact, it usually destroys enough tissue and blood vessels to drop a deer in its tracks. Regardless of whether it loses 30, 60 or even 80 percent of its weight, shock alone drops the deer.

I’ve seen literally dozens of deer hit

with high-speed .243s and also smaller centerfire .22s. Regardless of whether the bullet goes to pieces or not, the deer doesn’t make it 30 yards.

I know at least four .223s and .22-250s that find their way into the deer woods most years, carried by youngsters who get the woodchuck rifle to serve as a low-recoil deer gun. Even with highly frangible varmint bullets, a hit anywhere forward of the diaphragm can be quickly lethal. A friend who also owns a .270 and a .35 Remington mostly hunts deer with his .22-250, saying it puts deer down more quickly than the .35 or the .270.

Yes, a 55-grain bullet from a high-speed .22 centerfire will likely drop a deer even if the bullet blows apart on impact. But I’ve never been totally sold on the idea because of the possibility of a shot being taken at a poor angle. I’ve convinced friends who do hunt deer with such rifles to load only Nosler Partitions or, more recently, Barnes X bullets.

Berger Bullets put a different “spin” on the exploding bullet approach when they brought out a line of hunting ammunition that uses very-low-drag bullets for extra-long-range effectiveness. The company claims the VLD bullets penetrate 2 to 3 inches before starting to expand. Then they shed 40 to 90 percent of their weight in pieces that act like shrapnel, penetrating the surrounding tissue and organs.

The result is devastating shock and a wide wound channel that Berger claims penetrates 13 to 15 inches. Nosler and Hornady also tout their rapid-expansion .243 Ballistic Tip and Super Shock Tip bullets for big game up to caribou size.

How heavy of a conventional mushrooming .243 bullet is needed for a 150-pound whitetail? Considering that most 750-pound elk are killed with 180-grain bullets in .308 and .30-06, a 100-grain .243 should be more than adequate for even a 250-pound deer. Since monolithic

bullets lose none of their weight during penetration, 80 grains may be even more of a sure thing here.

Barnes guarantees its monolithic X bullet will develop a perfect mushroom following impact and then penetrate without losing any weight at all. I've hit a handful of deer with these bullets, and all exited while said deer dropped in their tracks. Being lighter than a standard 100-grain bullet, the 80-grain bullet exits the muzzle at 3,200 feet a second. I just don't care to drive a deer bullet any faster than that.

Opening day last fall, my wife, Sharon, dropped a five-point buck at 60 yards with an 80-grain .243 Barnes TTSX. The deer was quartering towards her when the bullet entered on the point of the shoulder, smashed through bone and both lungs before exiting 3 inches behind the last rib on the far side. The gun was a T/C Contender, the cartridge a 6mm JDJ, by J.D. Jones of SSK Industries. The 6mm JDJ is based on the rimmed .225 Winchester. Muzzle velocity is 2,800 ft/s from the 16-inch barrel.

When it comes to varmints and predators at longer range, there's no question

that a .243 can do a better job bucking wind than can a .223 or .22-250 shooting a lighter pill. Varmint bullets for the .243 run up to 85 grains or so, and the heavier you go, the less wind drift you see.

One might rightly question the practicality of using a .243 during fur season, when prime coyote pelts may bring good money. Bullet holes up to about 3/4-inch usually can be sewn shut, but a high-speed .243 may leave a baseball-size exit hole, which pretty much reduces pelt value to nothing. Handloaders may step down the velocity to save pelts, but then they lose the long-range ballistics advantage.

Black Hills ammunition offers an interesting high-speed load with the Barnes 62-grain Grenade, a lead-free fragmenting bullet that virtually disintegrates upon impact—meaning no exit hole.

Haven't tried this yet myself, but Barnes posted a video online that shows

the bullet disintegrating upon impact with a single grape.

The last three years, I've hunted woodchuck, coyotes (behind the hounds), and deer in New York and neighboring Vermont almost exclusively with a .243 Savage Lightweight Hunter.

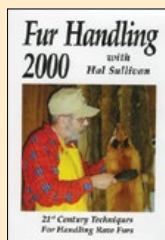
The rifle weighs just 5-1/2 pounds, and with Hodgdon's Superformance powder, I can get more than adequate velocity from the 20-inch barrel.

The rifle shoots under 1/2-MOA with 55-grain Sierra Blitzkings or

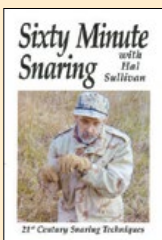
80-grain Barnes TTSX bullets in tailored handloads. During the summer, it wears a Leupold 6.5-20X scope and a Harris bipod. Later in the year, for big game or coyotes, a Leupold VX-6, 2-12X gets the nod. If I had to pick just one rifle for all of my hunting, it would be that Savage .243.

An old adage says to beware of the man who only owns one rifle—because he probably shoots it well. ■

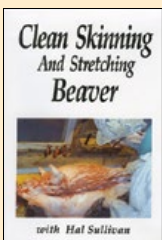
“An old adage says to beware of the man who only owns one rifle—because he probably shoots it well.”



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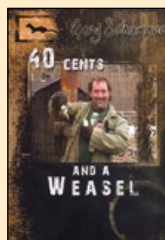


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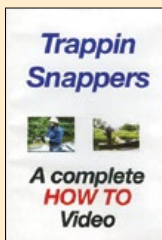


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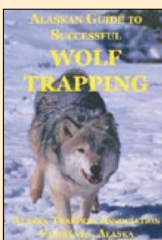
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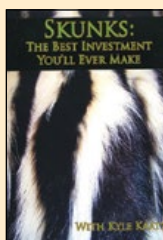
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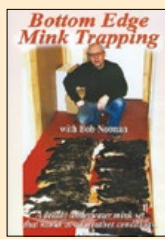


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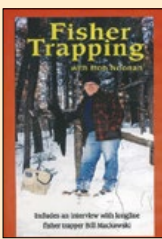
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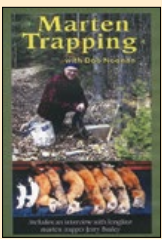
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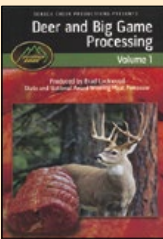
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