

**John Barsness**

**T**he .270 Winchester is one of the oldest cartridges still regularly chambered in bolt-action hunting rifles and the second-oldest commercial hunting round designed for bolt actions – and far more .270s are sold than .375 Holland & Holland Magnums. The latest *Gun Digest* lists at least three dozen current rifles chambered for the .270 Winchester, in every type of action, but it's conspicuously absent from “tactical” bolt-action rifles, which come chambered in cartridges ranging from the .223 Remington to the .50 BMG.

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# **21st- Century .270 Winchester**

*The two new .270 Winchester bolt actions have very nice walnut.*



The reason? Winchester's idea of a long-range hunting cartridge appeared in 1925, *after* the first big rush of military smokeless powder

twentieth century. A prime example was the one-in-14-inch twist for the .250-3000 Savage, just enough to stabilize an 87-grain spitzer,

cartridges. As mentioned in my last *Handloader* article on the 26 Nosler (No. 292, October 2014), every smokeless cartridge of the late 1800s started out with heavy-for-caliber, roundnosed bullets at

but even early .257 Weatherbys had 1:12 twists that wouldn't stabilize spitzers over 100 grains, the reason the original "heavy-bullet" factory load was a 117-grain roundnose.

The .270 Winchester was a light-bullet, high-velocity round, the original factory load a 130-grain spitzer at a claimed 3,160 fps in barrels

not much over 2,000 fps. As a result, rifling twists for early smokeless military cartridges were around one turn in 8 inches (1:8) for 6.5mm, 1:9 for 7mm and 1:10 for .30.

In 1905, however, armies started switching to lighter, sleeker bullets at higher velocities – and so did hunting rifle manufacturers. In 1906 the .280 Ross became the first hunting round to attain 3,000 fps, using a 140-grain bullet. Other light-bullet, high-velocity hunting cartridges quickly appeared, and if they weren't a 6.5mm, 7mm or .30, the rifling twist was usually barely fast enough to stabilize a light spitzer bullet, because the prevailing theory was that a rifling twist just fast enough to stabilize a bullet resulted in the finest accuracy.

This Barely Stabilized (BS) theory affected new hunting cartridges throughout the first half of the

with a 1:10 twist. Whether early .270 ammunition attained that velocity is doubtful, but the trajectory was still considered amazingly flat. Most hunters still used iron sights, and most big-game scopes weren't much better than irons. An actual (not estimated) 500-yard shot was considered very long, and the flat-shooting bullet compensated for range-estimation errors.

The one-in-10-inch twist was eventually found capable of stabilizing lead-cored, 150-grain spitzers, but nothing longer. This is why Nosler's 160-grain Partition is a "semi-spitzer," just short enough to stabilize in a 1:10 twist, and why Barnes recommends a 1:9.5 rifling twist for the 150-grain TSX – and the heaviest Tipped TSX weighs 130 grains.

After laser rangefinders appeared in the 1990s, some hunters started shooting at game far beyond 500 yards, and today we have three distinct categories of big-game hunters. By far the most abundant are tra-

ditionalists, who sight-in for the longest "hold-on" distance and rarely shoot beyond 300 yards, partly because in a lot of hunting country game can't be seen beyond 300 yards. This group includes a surprising number of successful long-range target shooters, apparently because they know too well what can happen to even a well-aimed bullet at longer ranges.

A tiny but growing number are long-range hunters, who don't consider shots less than 600 yards really "long." In fact, some refuse to shoot animals at less than 600 yards and have been known to back up rather than stalk closer, to make a shot more challenging. (I've done some of this on varmints, but not big game.)

The third group regularly practices at longer ranges but only to extend their capabilities. My friend Tim Fallon runs a very fine shooting school at his FTW Ranch in the Texas Hill Country, training hunters on targets from charging elephants at 10 yards to small gongs at 1,000. Tim feels the reason for practicing at long range is to make 500-yard shots seem relatively easy. Hunters in this category don't pass up shorter-range shots, and in fact many enjoy stalking closer more than shooting longer. I freely admit to membership in this category. A few years ago, I went on a pronghorn hunt in Wyoming with a custom 6.5-06 "dialed-in" well beyond 500 yards and killed a buck at a little over 160.

While the .270 Winchester remains one of the most popular big-game cartridges on earth, it rarely appears in rifles built for today's long-range hunting, thanks to the traditional 1:10 twist that won't



Above left, the Winchester Model 70's comb is higher than the Ruger No. 1's (right), making quick shots easier, but the latter will normally be used for more deliberate shooting anyway.

stabilize bullets long and sleek enough to challenge common bullets in 6.5mm and 7mm, the calibers on either side of .270. However, this doesn't mean all 6.5 and 7mm cartridges shoot "flatter" than the .270 Winchester at common hunting ranges. One of the most popular factory rounds among long-range hunters (or at least aspiring long-range hunters) is the 6.5 Creedmoor, but with favored 140-grain bullets such as the Hornady A-MAX and Berger VLD at 2,700 fps, the Creedmoor doesn't shoot nearly as flat as a typical 130-grain, flat-based spitzer from the .270 Winchester at 3,100 fps, even at 700 yards.

However, thanks to laser range-finders, a really flat trajectory is almost irrelevant in long-range hunting. The big factor is the unpredictable wind, and minimal wind drift performs the same function as flat trajectory did back when hunters had to "guesstimate" range. In essence, wind is unknown "range" in the horizontal plane.

A sleek 140-grain boat-tail from a 6.5 Creedmoor drifts only about two-thirds as much as a flat-based

130-grain spitzer from a .270 Winchester. In typical western hunting conditions, at 500 yards a 10-mph crosswind drifts the 130-grain .270 bullet 6 inches more than a high-BC 140 from the 6.5. I know this partly because I've shot a 6.5 Creedmoor a lot – and not just to 500 yards but 1,000.

Of course, several other 6.5mm

rounds do the same things, including the ancient 6.5x55 "Swedish" Mauser, one reason I own a custom 6.5x55 with a one-in-8-inch twist Lilja barrel. But a custom rifle isn't required, and neither is handloading. For a few hundred bucks, you can buy a Ruger American or Savage Whatever in 6.5 Creedmoor and do the same thing. Mount a scope with repeatable clicks, buy a case of Hornady ammunition and start shooting.

Table 1

### .270 Winchester Handloads

bullet (grains)	powder	charge (grains)	overall loaded length (inches)	velocity (fps)	group (inches)
<b>Winchester Model 70, 22-inch barrel:</b>					
95 Barnes TTSX	RL-17	59.0	3.200	3,366	1.23
100 Speer HP		59.0	3.331	3,352	1.19
110 Hornady Spire Point	Hunter	59.0	3.401	3,164	.94
110 Nosler AB	N-204	57.0	3.387	3,167	1.19
130 Hornady Spire Point	H-4831sc	61.0	3.350	3,008	.71
	H-1000	64.0		2,973	1.11
130 Nosler Ballistic Tip	Magnum	65.0	3.522	3,052	.54
130 Nosler E-Tip	VV-N560	59.0	3.476	3,021	1.20
140 Sierra BTHP	Magpro	62.0	3.277	2,902	.97
140 Berger VLD	Hunter	54.0	3.418	2,893	.45
150 Sierra GameKing	RL-22	57.5	3.376	2,921	1.02
150 Nosler Partition	H-4831sc	58.5	3.391	2,848	1.01
	RL-22	56.5		2,854	.89
<b>Ruger No. 1B, 26-inch barrel:</b>					
95 Barnes TTSX	Hunter	59.0	3.200	3,467	.87
100 Speer HP	RL-17	59.0	3.331	3,532	1.12
110 Nosler AB	N-204	57.0	3.387	3,343	1.14
130 Hornady Spire Point	H-1000	64.0	3.350	3,132	.72
130 Nosler Ballistic Tip	Magnum	65.0	3.522	3,157	.71
140 Sierra BTHP	Magpro	62.0	3.277	3,033	.74
140 Berger VLD	Hunter	58.0	3.418	2,988	.77
150 Sierra GameKing	RL-22	57.5	3.376	3,027	.75
150 Nosler ABLR		57.5	3.515	3,035	.63
150 Nosler Partition		56.5	3.391	2,985	1.01

Notes: All loads were fired at 100 yards, used Winchester cases and Winchester Large Rifle primers.

Be Alert – Publisher cannot accept responsibility for errors in published load data.

# 21st Century .270



Above, new .270-caliber hunting bullets have made the old cartridge more versatile, and (right) recent powders provide somewhat more velocity with some bullets.

So why would anyone bother with the .270 Winchester? That's a good question, and the answer lies in its sheer popularity. Ammunition and components are made by all the major manufacturers, and rifles can be purchased just as cheaply as Rugers or Savages in 6.5 Creedmoor, partly because Ruger, Savage and every other bolt-action rifle manufacturer on earth make .270s, and partly because there are

millions of used .270 Winchesters. (Of course, due to rifle loonyism, a few companies make .270 Winchester barrels with quicker rifling twists and heavier, higher-ballistic coefficient .270 bullets. This is essentially shoveling sand against the 6.5mm and 7mm tide, and even I am not loony enough to fall for it. If you are, be my guest.)

Odds are you're one of the vast majority who doesn't shoot big

game beyond 500 yards, and there are ways to make your .270 Winchester basically match the wind resistance of the 6.5 Creedmoor out to 500. And even if you don't plan to shoot beyond 300 yards, there are ways to make your .270 flatter shooting, thanks to hunting bullets made for the smallest .270 factory cartridge, the 6.8 SPC, originally designed for military use in AR-15 and other small semi-automatic rifles.

Let's start, however, with making

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# 21st Century .270

your .270 Winchester all it can be at 500, or even a little farther. First, let me confess that this project started because a couple of years ago I decided to quit traveling as much, instead hunting more in Montana and surrounding states (and Canadian provinces) with my family and friends. Soon afterward I realized the .270 Winchester had performed great as an all-around Montana big-game round since I purchased my first one over 40 years ago, taking game not only for me but also my wife, Eileen, her son Sean and many others.

The Montana game included pronghorn, whitetail and mule deer, black bear, elk and moose, at ranges out to 500 yards. The .270

Table II

## .270 Winchester and 6.5 Creedmoor Ballistics to 500 Yards

<b>.270 Nosler 150-grain AccuBond LR, 3,000 fps (Ruger No. 1B):</b>					
yards:	100	200	300	400	500
trajectory:	+2	+1	-4	-15	-31
wind drift:		2	5	8	13
<b>.270 Berger 140-grain Hunting VLD, 2,900 fps (Winchester Model 70):</b>					
yards:	100	200	300	400	500
trajectory:	+2	+1	-5	-18	-37
wind drift:		2	5	10	15
<b>6.5 Hornady 140-grain A-MAX, 2,700 fps:</b>					
yards:	100	200	300	400	500
trajectory:	+2	0	-7	-21	-42
wind drift:		2	5	9	14

**Notes:** Figures computed at 5,000 feet above sea level, 35 degrees Fahrenheit, 25 percent humidity and a scope centered 1.60 inches above the bore, with trajectory and wind-drift figures to the closest inch. The ballistic coefficients used came from Bryan Litz, as I've found his tested BCs more accurate than those from many manufacturers, especially for specific rifling twists. For more information contact Applied Ballistics, LLC, 25 S. Main St., Cedar Springs MI 49319; [www.appliedballisticsllc.com](http://www.appliedballisticsllc.com).

Winchester did all this with modest recoil, and after handloading for at least a dozen rifles, it also seemed to be one of those "inherently accurate" rounds. Now, any big-game cartridge will shoot extremely accurately from a carefully made custom rifle, but most

of those .270s were factory rifles, and some were as accurate as any custom I've ever shot. This included my first .270, a Remington 700 ADL that would group three Hornady 150-grain Spire Points into right around an inch – at 300 yards.

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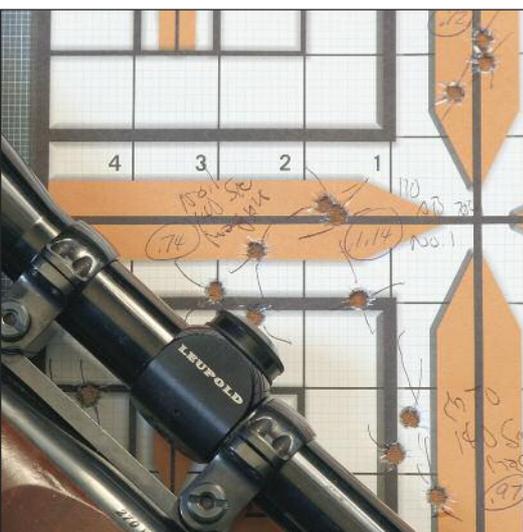
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The Model 70 (above) is a little more accurate than the No. 1 (below), but not much.



At the instant of this epiphany, I didn't own a .270 Winchester but soon found a used CZ 550. It shot extremely well, as 550s normally do, but after a year it seemed like an imperfect compromise. The 60 centimeter (23.62-inch) barrel didn't get as much velocity as possible for open-country hunting and was a little too stout for packing around steep country. So the CZ was replaced with two other .270s. (Two replacing one is typical rifle-loony math.)

The first was a commemorative Jack O'Connor Model 70 Featherweight from the limited run Winchester put together a couple of years ago with really nice walnut stocks. I "won" an auction for the rifle at the annual celebration/fund-raiser at the Jack O'Connor Hunting Heritage and Education

Center in Idaho. (The center isn't just a very interesting museum, since it's also involved in shooting and hunting education: PO Box 394, Lewiston ID 83501, [www.jack-oconnor.org](http://www.jack-oconnor.org).)

The Winchesters weren't put together just for show. With mine, the first three-shot group at 100 yards, using factory ammunition, measured .4 inch. (The scope, by the way, is a 4x33 Leupold FX-II, mounted both because it looked right and because many 500-yard shots were accomplished handily with 4x long before hunters knew it couldn't be done.) With the Leupold in Talley Lightweight mounts, the rifle weighs slightly over 8 pounds.

The other .270 is a "black pad" Ruger No. 1B, also with exceptional wood, purchased used at Capital Sports in Helena, Montana. Many shooters remain suspicious of No. 1 accuracy, but Ruger started hammer-forging its own barrels 20-some years ago, about when the recoil pads were changed from red to black. This rifle shoots almost as well as the Model 70, and the 26-inch barrel provides more velocity. I plan to use the Ruger on the plains of eastern Montana, so a Leupold FX-II 6x36

Table III  
**Highest Ballistic Coefficients of .270 Hunting Bullets from Bryan Litz**

150-grain sampling:	
Nosler ABLR (with 1-10 twist) ..	.543
(with 1-7 twist) ....	.569
Berger Hunting VLD .....	.514
Sierra GameKing .....	.463
140-grain sampling:	
Berger Hunting VLD .....	.487
Hornady Interlock BTSP .....	.445
Nosler Ballistic Tip .....	.444
130-grain sampling:	
Berger Hunting VLD .....	.452
Hornady InterBond .....	.445*
Cutting Edge HPBT .....	.444

\*Hornady lists the same ballistic coefficient for all its plastic-tipped 130s.

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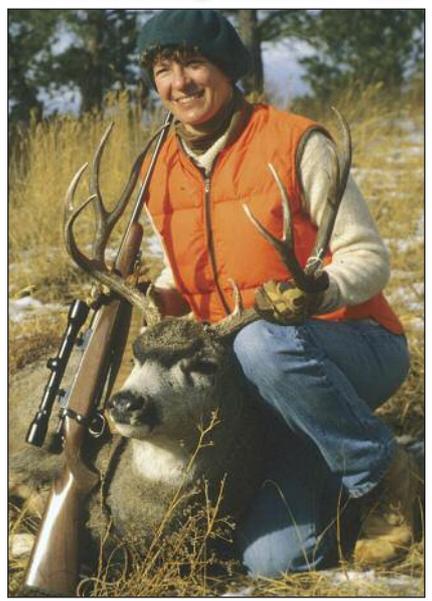


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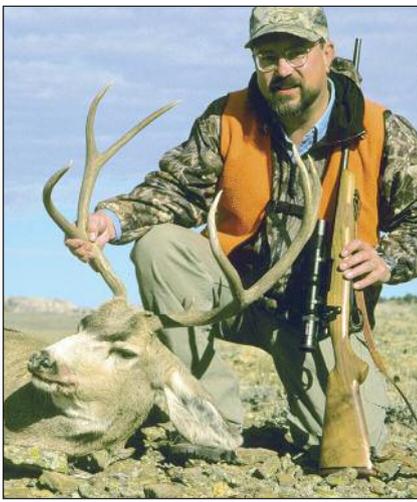


Among the dozen consecutive animals Eileen took with one shot from her Browning A-Bolt .270 Winchester were mule deer and moose.

was mounted, bringing the weight to a pound more than the Model 70 Featherweight.

Both rifles, of course, are hopelessly old-fashioned and hence totally impractical for twenty-first-century hunting. But I'm over 60 now and, as an official old fart, don't care. I also intend to kill a bunch of game with both .270s.

While a bunch of newer powders and bullets were tried in both rifles, the Winchester will mostly be used with a traditional .270 powder, Hodgdon H-4831, and a couple of old-fashioned bullets, the Hornady 130-grain Spire Point and Nosler 150-grain Partition. The powder charge with the 150 is more than most manuals list these days, but the Model 70 produces less velocity and, apparently, less pressure than many .270s. From every indication, the 58.5-grain charge is mild in this rifle but might not be in others. As for 61.0 grains with the 130, Hornady lists 62.0 grains as maximum. I've seen both bullets kill many animals over the years, despite their "marginal" ballistic coefficients. In fact, those are the same handloads Eileen used from a Browning A-Bolt in the 1980s to make a



John's mountain buck was taken with his very first .270, a super-accurate Remington 700 ADL.

dozen one-shot kills in a row on animals from buck pronghorn to bull moose, at ranges out to 450 yards – with a 4x scope.

Many .270s happen to put both 130s and 150s in the same place at 100 yards, and the Model 70 does too. Most practice, sighting-in and hunting will be done with the Hornady, with the Partition reserved for bigger game, but the point of impact of the Berger 140-grain Hunting VLD is the same, so it will be used as well.

The Ruger No. 1 will be used mostly with the Nosler 150-grain AccuBond Long Range at 3,000 fps or so, but one of the lighter 6.8mm bullets will work great on pronghorn. I'd hoped to find some Barnes 85-grain TSXs, because my friends John and Billy Stuver have used this bullet with great success at 3,900 fps with a top load of Alliant Reloder 17. None could be found, however, so I settled for the Barnes 95-grain Tipped TSX and Nosler 110-grain AccuBond. Any of these flatten the 300-yard trajectory so much the bullets never land more than 2 inches from the center of the reticle, though wind drift is a little more than with heavier bullets. The .270's also not a bad large-varmint rifle with traditional hollowpoints like the 100-grain Speer.

Next year the .270 Winchester will turn 90, but it doesn't seem to be slowing down.

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