LOADED FOR FUR

THE FUR-HUNTER'S CHALLENGE IS EXTENDING HIS OR HER REACH WHILE MINIMIZING DESTRUCTIVE IMPACT.

BY RON SPOMER

NAH Editor-in-Chief Gordy Krahn found this Kimber 84M Varmint rifle in .22-250 Rem. combined with the frangible Sierra 55-grain BlitzKing bullet was the perfect mix of reach, power and wind resistance without fur damaging excess.

The old "If you shoot it, you eat it" maxim rarely works for predators, so why do we hunt them?

If you're looking for justification, try:

- Balancing predator/prey numbers.
- Protecting crops and livestock.
- Controlling invasive species.
- Collecting organic, free-range, cruelty-free bio-degradable clothing (fur).

If you're looking for the ideal fur-collecting bullet—well, that takes a bit more study.

Long-range shooting is always easier with aerodynamically efficient bullets, meaning they have a high ballistic coefficient (B.C.) number and travel fast. Very fast. The faster the better. So this part is easy. Buy a rifle/cartridge that shoots high B.C. bullets extremely fast. The .300 Rem. Ultra Mag. will do this. It can be loaded to spit a 210-grain Berger Match VLD Target bullet 2,900 fps. The B.C. of that bullet is an incredible .631. Zero that at 250 yards and it will peak 3 inches high at 150 yards and drop just 3.5 inches at 300 yards. In a 10-mph crosswind it will deflect only 5 inches at 300 yards.

Coyotes won't like that, but you might not, either. The recoil will be stout, the cost of each load will be high, the noise will be painful and, on impact, the coyote pelt could be two or three smaller patches of hide.

This is why shooters invented varmint calibers. Think .223 Rem., .22-250 Rem. and .220 Swift. Better yet, think .204 Ruger, .17 Rem., .17 Fireball and .17 Hornet. Better better yet (if you like rimfires) think .17 Win. Super Mag. and .17 HMR.

If you're even a casual student of rifles, ammo and ballistics, you'll start to question those last two rounds because you know they're weaker (slower) than the former. As bullets slow, they begin to drop downrange, and there goes your reach. Slow even more and there goes your punch. So let's investigate further.

In my estimation, the .22-250 Rem. is about the best all-round coyote load on the shelf. Lots of punch and reach. The Ackley version, with its slightly modified case shape, adds enough powder to put 100 fps more speed into the same bullets while minimizing case stretching during handloading, is better yet. But best of all is the Ackley version with a 1-8 twist barrel. This fast twist means it will stabilize high B.C. bullets of 70-80 grains with B.C.s from .340 to .445 and still push them as fast as 3,200 fps. Zero a .445 B.C. bullet going 3,200 fps at 250 yards and it will peak just 2.5 inches high at 150 yards and land just 3 inches low at 300 yards, where that 10-mph crosswind will deflect it about 6 inches. Talk about "aim and shoot" convenience. This will handle about 90 percent of your shooting opportunities.

With such a "hot" .224 varmint load, you match the drop and deflec-

PHOTO: RON SPOMER

tion of the big .300 at much less cost in dollars and recoil. But you're still liable to damage those hides! When that bullet lands at 300 yards, it'll still be hauling 1,100 foot-pounds of energy (fpe), more than enough to severely disrupt a pelt.

The .223 Rem. will reduce hide destruction slightly because it throws the same bullets as the .22-250 Rem. but at about 500 fps less velocity. Less velocity equals less energy equals less pelt damage. But it also equals more drop and deflection. Shooting that same 80-grain bullet as the .22-250 Ackley, a .223 Rem. should push it 2,700 fps. Stick with that 250-yard zero and you begin to see the problems: Mid-range trajectory peak at 150 yards is now 3.84 inches, drop at 300 yards is 4.5 inches and 10-mph wind deflection at 300 is almost 8 inches. Energy drops to 800 fpe.

Those numbers discourage many coyote hunters from stepping down to pelt-preserving slower .224s such as the .22 Hornet. This oldie but goodie nudges a little, rather low B.C. 50-grain bullet (B.C. .196) just 2,400 fps. You don't want to zero this at 250 yards because it will then land 7 inches high at 150 yards and still drop more than 9 inches at 300 yards. A 10-mph breeze will deflect it into the next county—24 inches at 300 yards. The .22 Hornet minimizes pelt damage, but shoots flat enough only to reach about 220 yards before falling more than 3 inches from point of aim. Wind deflection will still be about 12 inches.

The ultimate fur-safe round in 22-caliber would be the .22 Long Rifle, but at around 1,300 fps its 40-grain hollow-point drops like a stone at 100 yards, and its retained energy even 10 feet from the muzzle is less than 150 fpe. Plenty of coyotes have been terminated with a single .22 LR to the chest, but plenty have escaped, too.

SUB-CALIBER SOLUTIONS

So how do we maintain flat trajectory, a decent degree of wind-drift deflection resistance and still end a coyote's career decisively? With narrower, frangible bullets at explosively high velocities. Enter the sub-calibers.

Because .224 bullets were the smallest caliber offered commercially for hundreds of years, anything narrower is considered a sub-caliber. Mostly these bullets are .204s and .172s. Common commercial cartridges include .204 Ruger, .17 Rem., .17 Fireball, .17

A PELT HUNTER'S CONUNDRUM

BY RON SPOMER

Double a bullet's weight and you double its kinetic energy. Double its speed and you quadruple its energy. On impact that energy must go somewhere. Out through a valuable hide is NOT where you want it to go, thus the need for a careful search for the right varmint bullet at the ideal velocity. The search is half the fun.

Hornet. We haven't space to detail their various bullets, velocities and trajectories, but suffice to say they have what it takes to nearly match the hot .22 centerfires. The .204 Ruger, for instance, is nearly a ballistic match to the .22-250 Rem. with the right bullet. The .17 Rem. is right on its heels. Yes, there will be a bit more wind deflection, but this is offset by virtually no pelt damage.

What the heck, let's burn some space to outline .17 Rem. performance. This is a .223 Rem. case necked down to .17. About 22 grains of smokeless powder will drive a Berger 25-grain Match FB Target bullet (B.C. .190) 4,000 fps. Zero that at 280 yards and it will peak 2.9 inches high at 165 yards, and drop just 1 inch at 300 yards (3 inches at 325 yards) where its energy will have fallen to about 280 fpe. That's not a lot, but I doubt any coyote fairly hit broadside in the chest will shake it off. Note I did not write "through" the chest because this poison pill isn't likely to exit. I wouldn't recommend back-to-front shots at this range. If this sounds like the perfect fur load, better consider wind deflection. At 300 yards it will be about 12 inches.

Slower .17 cartridges perform accordingly until you're down to the .17 HMR rimfire—a great, flat-shooting, no-recoil round that parks its fragile 17-grain bullets in a coyotes chest, where they stay. I parked a 17-grain HMR in a red fox chest; tiny hole in, no hole out. But hit the front shoulder muscle and bone on a coyote and there's no guarantee vital organs will be disrupted. The new .17 Win. Super Mag. rimfire should do better because it shoots a heavier bullet (20- or 25-grain) faster.

We could go on and on with such numbers, but this is a magazine, not a book. So let's (finally) cut to the chase. You will have to decide on your best fur rifle, cartridge and bullet after consulting trajectory tables, considering bullet construction and then experimenting. There is plenty of precedent out there, so you needn't test every cartridge from the .600 Nitro Express on down. Here are key considerations:

» Shootable (light rifles, easy to-control, mild recoil).

» Flat shooting for long range reach and high B.C. for wind resistance.

» Adequate energy (who knows the limits here? 400 fpe on impact might be reasonable).

» Thin-skinned, explosive bullets, i.e. varmint bullets such as Sierra Blitz-King, Hornady V-Max, Nosler Ballistic Tip, Barnes Varminator, etc. You want them to enter the chest cavity and break up. The smaller pieces are less likely to continue out the hide. Light, frangible bullets at highest velocities generally do this.

» An option is a really tough bullet that doesn't expand much and punches through. Think Swift A-Frame, Winchester XP3, Hornady GMX, Nosler E-Tip. FMJs are another option, but in small calibers they often lead to wounding loss. Go large caliber with FMJs and watch for ricochet.