

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

The Varmint Revolver

By Glen E. Fryxell

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Mention varmint hunting, and likely the first tools that come to mind are heavy-barreled, scope-sighted rifles, chambered in some fast-stepping .22 centerfire. These thoughts are probably followed by images of sunburned prairie-dog towns shimmering in dusty mirage, or frost-breathing coyotes crunching through a late-winter snow. Some of you may be thinking of long-barreled shotguns, loaded with heavy charges of #4s, and the explosion of glossy black feathers as an incoming crow meets and ounce and half, airmailed special delivery. Others will think of their pet AR-15s, tracking the long floppy ears of a black-tailed jack rabbit as he shifts into overdrive, cutting a jagged path through the sage. Varmint hunting has many faces, and they are all enjoyable.

One of my favorite kinds of varmint hunting revolves around iron-sighted sixguns. The limitations of the sixgun and iron sights force me to still-hunt quietly and deliberately, in that special state of a hunter's heightened awareness, then to plan my stalk carefully to get within revolver range of yon sharp-eyed rodent. The revolver puts the adrenaline back into varmint hunting for me.

Much of my varmint hunting is done in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, in pursuit of the Columbian ground squirrel (aka "greydigger"). These rotund little sun-worshippers move in behind the clear-cutting logging operations, and take over the stump fields, digging holes virtually everywhere there's soft dirt and green grass. They stand about 10" tall, and are easily identified due to their rusty orange feet and tail. They have a characteristic high-pitched bark (it's really more of a chirp), and after you've hunted them for a while, you get to where you get some feel for their mood just by the volume, pitch and frequency of their bark. They breed like, well, rodents; and within a couple of years even the largest stump fields will literally be covered with mounds, burrows and freshly excavated dirt.

Cartridges suitable for hunting greydiggers include virtually anything that goes "Bang!". While the timeless .22 Long Rifle has certainly claimed its fair share of these rodents, I don't generally use a .22 for the simple reason that at the distances greydiggers are typically taken (50-100 yards) the typical .22 revolver doesn't have a whole lot of "pop" left, and I've had too many wounded rodents have disappear down their holes. If the hunter is willing to stick with hyper-velocity HP's and restrict his shots to inside of 35-40 yards, then the .22 can make a decent showing for itself. The King of the Hill is for varmint hunting is the .357 Magnum -- velocity, accuracy, expansion, the .357 has it all. Other personal favorite include the .30 Carbine, .32 H&R, .38 Special, and of course the .44's and .45's.

Which sixguns work best for varmint hunting? Believe it or not, I've had some of

my most fun varmint hunting with various 3" belly guns (this is a great way to develop real confidence with your carry gun), but not surprisingly longer barrels are a more effective hunting strategy. While the longer barrels do give higher velocity, they're still just revolvers (a long, long way behind the .22-250s and .220 Swifts); the real advantage of longer barreled sixguns is their longer sight radius relative to the shorter guns. Rodents are small targets, and precision sight alignment is critical if your shot is to find the mark (or should I say "find the bark"?). What follows is a short list of a few favorite varmint revolvers.

If there was ever a revolver that was made explicitly for the pursuit and perforation of rodents, it has to be the S&W Model 16. In 1989 S&W re-introduced their K-32, this time chambered for the .32 H&R Magnum cartridge instead of the .32 S&W Long, complete with a full-lug barrel and a Partridge front sight. The 6" and 8 3/8" version had target trigger and target hammer, while the 4" model had the semi-target hammer and the smooth combat trigger. Unfortunately, poor sales led the Model 16 to be dropped from the S&W line in 1992 (people just didn't realize how much fun these guns are!). I found a 6" Model 16 on the used market right after they were dropped from the S&W catalog and I've been absolutely tickled with it. It was very, very easy to name it "Sweet 16". Federal's factory ammo isn't terribly inspiring in terms of either accuracy or velocity, but boy does this gun ever take to handloads, especially cast bullet handloads! Any number of combinations provide very good results in this gun with jacketed, commercial hard-cast and homegrown cast bullets, but my favorite load is easily the Ideal 31133 HP (102 grain HP version of the classic 3118) over 6.5 grains of AA #7 for 1100 fps. This bullet expands nicely at this velocity is surprisingly flat-shooting and hit's a rodent like a baseball bat. Yes, the .32 H&R can be hot-rod'd to more impressive ballistics, but in the end you've still got a pip-squeak rodent round, so why bother?



Ruger Old Model Blackhawk, 30 Carbine.

The Ruger .30 Carbine Blackhawk is another sixgun ideally suited to reach out and touch rodents. Ruger originally came out with this gun back in the late 1960s so the plinkers of the world could burn cheap GI surplus ammo in their dogged pursuit of the wily tin can. But what they really made was a near-perfect varmint revolver. Accurate, and flat-shooting in the extreme, with HP ammo in the 1500-1600 fps range this gun will flip rodents at surprising distances. Once again, my pet load for these guns involves a cast HP, this time the 313316 GC-SWC-HP (109 grains checked and lubed) over 13.0 grains of AA #9 for 1570 fps. This load is challenging the .357 for its title of King of the Hill, and performance-wise it is nothing short of incredible. The limiting factor in terms of range with this gun is the shooter's eyes and how well he can align the sights on a distant rodent; if you can get a good, clean sight picture, that rodent is toast!

The S&W K-38 Masterpiece is one of the classic revolvers of all time. Production of the K-38 started in 1899 with the .38 Long Colt, and the .38 Special round came along in 1902, giving the most reloaded cartridge in the United States over a century

of service. In 1957 S&W re-named this gun the Model 14 (but I like the Masterpiece name better!). Virtually every permutation of this revolver has been built at one time or another, with various sight packages, barrel lengths ranging from 2" to 12", different grip styles, hammers, triggers, etc. I have done an awful lot of varmint and small game hunting with various 6" K-38's (and they remain my favorite all-round field plinking guns), but an 8 3/8" Model 14 followed me home from a gun-show one day, and has been given the specific job of ventilating vermin. Not surprisingly, this K-38 is quite accurate with most every reasonable load it gets fed (typical for the K-38 clan), and I've settled on the Lyman 358477 HP (140 grain HP) over 4.6 grains of Bullseye for a little over 1000 fps. To get good expansion from this bullet at this velocity, it needs to be cast from 20-1 alloy, but it makes a dandy rodent load, and is surprisingly flat-shooting for the "lowly" .38 Special.

The Top Gun in my assorted varmint revolvers is an 8 3/8" S&W 586 that was worked over by some mysterious gunsmith (but I think I know who it was Dave...). This gun is almost spooky in terms of its ability to acquire and hit rodent targets. This 586 gets fed several different pet loads while we're out in the varmint fields (and



Smith & Wesson Model 14.

handles them all quite nicely) but my personal favorite is the Ideal 358439 (Elmer's first hollow point) over 14.0 grains of 2400 for 1350 fps. This load is exceptionally accurate and expansion of Elmer's HP is explosive to say the least! Varmint hunting with the .357 doesn't really require bullet expansion (an expanding bullet just adds spectacle) and the .357 does a dandy job even without it. Any good hardcast 150-160 grain bullet at 1300+ fps will peel a rodent off of his stump with alacrity. In this category, an excellent load is the 150 grain Lyman 358477 SWC over 14.5 grains of 2400, for just over 1500 fps. Remote rodent removal, reduced to a fine art!

Friend John Taffin likes to call the .44 Special a connoisseur's cartridge and I have to agree (even if I do have to look up how to spell it each time I quote him). I have had a fondness for The Special for many years now, and in large part this is due to the countless sunny afternoons that I've spent varmint hunting with one or another .44 Special in my hands. Over the years there have been several, and I've enjoyed shooting them all, but there is one that is particularly special to me; it was made for me by my good friend Dave Ewer; a stainless New Model Blackhawk, fitted with 7 1/2" barrel, .430" throats, oversized front sight and a honey-suckle sweet action job. Dave has built several guns for me, but this was the one that really cemented our friendship. Oh, and by the way, did I mention that this ruggedly handsome .44 Special really shoots? I gave up doing any load development for this gun, because pretty much everything shoots well. For varmint hunting my favorite load is the 429421 HP (cast of 20:1 alloy) over 10.5 grains HS-6 for 1050 fps. When cast this soft (BHN about 8), expansion is positive at this velocity, and there's enough bullet mass to shoot through branches, roots, etc. to get to that wily rodent who thought he was hiding safely behind them. Another .44 Special load that I've been having fun with lately is the Saeco 200 grain truncated cone, loaded over 8.0 grains of Unique, for

about 1000 fps from the long-barreled guns. This is one of my favorite field loads for the little S&W 696 3" .44 Special (about 925 fps). The .357 Magnum may be King of the Hill when it comes to varmint hunting, but the .44 Special owns the Hill.

The Granddaddy of the revolver rounds is, of course, the .45 Colt. The .45 Colt was swatting rodents in 1875 when my great-grandfather took the boat from Sweden to come to the United States, and it has been doing it ever since. In the velocity-crazed world of the modern shooting sports, the paper ballistics of the .45 Colt don't look to be all that impressive at first glance, but the Keith SWC at 1000 fps is perhaps the single most useful handgun round in existence. It combines adequate velocity with adequate bullet weight, and a whole bunch of meplat, and the end result is deadly all out of proportion with the neat little rows of tabulated energy figures. Performance in the varmint fields is exceptional. While the lead round nose bullets, or even the traditional round-nose flat-point bullet aren't the best killers in the world, the .45 caliber Keith SWC is one of the best varmint hunting bullets, period. I came across an 8 3/8" S&W Model 25-3 that I picked up specifically for summer varmint hunting. This gun also gets fed a wide variety of loads out in the field, but the one it shoots most is the H&G #501 (the re-creation of the original Keith SWC) over 8.5 grains of HP-38 for 990 fps and very satisfying accuracy. This is simply as good as varmint hunting gets with a non-expanding bullet.

Varmint hunting with a revolver is a challenging and most enjoyable way to spend a sunny, summer afternoon. Pretty much any caliber of sixgun can be put to work in the varmint fields, but the hunter is generally best served with the center fires and velocities of 1000 fps or better. The "well-dressed" varmint revolver usually has a long-barrel, providing additional velocity, but more importantly it gives the hunter a longer sight radius. In terms of cartridges, the .357 Magnum is a landmark against which all others are judged, but many other cartridges serve well in this capacity, most notably the .30 Carbine and the .32 H&R Magnum. If you get into an active rodent town, varmint hunting can entail LOTS of shooting, so cast bullets are an excellent way to go since they are both cheaper and gentler on barrel steel, and better yet, cast HP's are virtually perfect. The varmint revolver puts the adrenaline back in varmint hunting!

- Glen E. Fryxell

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