

THE POWER OF AIR

MIKE SCHOBY

LOOKING FOR A NEW HUNTING CHALLENGE?
MAYBE IT'S TIME TO DROP THE POWDER.

LOOKING at the recent surge in popularity of medium- to large-bore air rifles, one would think our generation had invented them. But one would be wrong, and as they say, what's old is now new again.

Big-bore air rifles (and hunting with them) are nothing new, a fact the Mandan Indians could attest to after seeing Meriwether Lewis's 22-shot .46 caliber Giradoni air rifle during Lewis and Clark's 1804 Voyage of Discovery. And the Giradoni wasn't a spring chicken even then: It was already nearly 25 years old.

When it comes to hunting, European nobility was using the power of air to kill medium to large game, such as boar and red deer, in the 17th and 18th centuries. The earliest recorded air rifle (preserved in a Stockholm museum today) dates back to 1580.

So like I said, what's old is new again. We are witnessing a modern renaissance in air rifles designed for hunting with more accurate, more powerful, and more user-friendly options arriving every year.



WHILE POWERFUL

keep in mind air rifles force hunters to get archery-close, be extremely accurate, and take only perfectly presented shots. Done correctly, it is a lot of fun, offers plenty of challenges, and extends time afield, making small game a worthy challenge and a whitetail an Everest-like conquest.

MANY STATES ALLOW the use of air rifles for small and medium-sized game, so air rifle hunting may be in your future, if for no other reason than the challenge, satisfaction, and enjoyment that can be derived from it.

THE POWER PLANT

While there are many variations and styles of rifles in use today, broken down to its basics, there are really four main types of power plants that propel projectiles downrange.

MULTI-PUMP PNEUMATIC

The name sounds confusing, but it isn't really. Just think of the pump-up pellet gun you had as a kid. Maybe the Crosman 760, Benjamin Silver Streak, or Daisy 880. All of them are still being manufactured today in their basic configuration. The naming conventions may have changed, but many of them have remained pretty much the same as when introduced. And all are still viable options for hunting small game at moderate ranges at a price that won't break the bank.

However, the multi-pump pneumatics have fallen somewhat in popularity in favor of the higher velocities—with less effort—the spring-piston system provides.



Small-bore air rifles are effectively filled by a hand pump, but large bores are best handled with a scuba tank or small portable tank.

SPRING PISTON

In this system a cylinder of gas is compressed by a spring in one stroke, and this provides the power to propel a pellet of moderate caliber at a surprisingly high velocity. This is probably the most common small-game hunting air rifle in use today. There are many manufacturers and lots of variations, and quality ranges all over the board, from horrible to excellent. Most models are of the break-barrel design, but for the accuracy afflicted, side-lever and under-lever cocking designs rule the roost.

CO₂

While carbon dioxide is not technically "air," it is still a compressed gas and therefore qualifies in the "air rifle" category. Possibly the most commonly used propellant in air rifles and pistols, it is not the first choice of hunters due to its temperature sensitivity as well as its relatively low pressure and the subsequent low velocities it produces. That said, it does work exceptionally well for training with both pistol and rifle and can yield realistic practice sessions as it allows for true semiauto operation. CO₂ is available in containers of various sizes, but the most common is the 12-gram Powerlet cartridge.

PRE-CHARGED PNEUMATICS

Finally, coming full circle back to the type of air rifle Lewis and Clark carried and the most viable power plant for big-bore hunting air rifles today, Pre-Charged Pneumatics (PCP) utilize highly pressurized air (commonly 3,000 psi but can be higher) stored in a reservoir on the gun. PCPs generally use either a specially designed hand pump or a scuba tank to fill the reservoir. On smaller-caliber rifles a hand pump works fine as the reservoir will provide many shots, but on big-bore air rifles, where a reservoir may only yield a handful of shots, a scuba tank is a far better option for recharging. In either case, PCPs are available from .177-caliber target rifles all the way up to .50-caliber big-game hunting options.

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FIVE WORTH YOUR TIME



THERE ARE DOZENS upon dozens of air rifles manufactured around the world that are suitable for hunting medium to large game. If you include all the rifles manufactured for small game and pests, the number skyrockets into the hundreds—far too many to cover in one section. But here are five rifles I have shot, tested, and hunted with and walked away impressed.

BENJAMIN

With its Marauder line of PCP air rifles, Benjamin Airguns can really be attributed to bringing high-performance air guns to the masses. High-quality PCP air rifles have been available in Europe for decades—but at prices most Americans associate with high-quality centerfire hunting rifles. Benjamin brought all of that technology and quality to market in the Marauder line, but it left the sticker shock back in Europe.

Nicely shaped wood stocks, an under-barrel air reservoir, and the fit and feel of a “normal” centerfire rifle contribute to the line’s success. Available in .177 and

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.22 calibers, as well as the better-performing (on game) .25 caliber. All feature rotary multishot magazines and are ideal for hunters looking for a quality PCP to hunt small game and small to medium-sized predators.

The second offering from Benjamin is the newly released Bullpup .357. I field-tested Benjamin's original big bore, the Rogue, at its introduction several years ago. It was interesting—accurate, integrally suppressed, powerful—but ungodly long and heavy. That has all changed with the Bullpup .357.

Shaving its overall length by a foot and bringing its weight down to 7.7 pounds, this rifle is now a viable option for the hunter. Futuristic looking, perhaps a bit ungainly, one needs to pick it up before passing judgment as it feels a lot better than it looks, and it points extremely naturally. Like the original, it is plenty powerful, spitting out a .357-caliber, 145-grain Nosler Ballistic Tip bullet at 800 fps with 200 ft.-lbs. of energy, making it a true medium-game performer.

CROSMAN.COM

GAMO

Earlier this year, I hunted squirrels at the third annual Squirrel Master Classic in Alabama with the Whisper Fusion Mach 1 from Gamo.

Firing a .22 PBA Platinum pellet at a blistering 1,020 fps powered by a Mach 1 gas-piston system, the Whisper Fusion was ideal for what most of us think of as the realm of air gun hunting: small game.

I was after squirrels, but the Fusion would be perfect for rabbits and pests such as crows and sparrows. And for those concerned with bothering the neighbors, thanks to Dual Integrated Sound Suppressor Technology, noise was kept to a minimum. Hence, its name.

GAMOUSA.COM



AIRFORCE

Manufactured in Texas with an eye on precision, AirForce Airguns rifles are serious hunting machines. Offering a wide variety of models—in various barrel lengths and calibers and with or without integral suppression—AirForce makes a rifle to fit about any need. I have been simply blown away by the level of performance all AirForce rifles exhibit.

For the medium- to big-game minded, AirForce offers up its Texan—a .45-caliber super-gun, firing 405-grain lead slugs (I won't even call them pellets as they are the same bullet used in .45-70 rifles) upwards of 800 fps, producing a whopping 500 ft.-lbs. of energy. I wouldn't hesitate to shoot a deer or hog with one out to modest bow ranges, but even large game like bison and large African antelope species are possible, and some adventurous hunters have already done it.

AIRFORCEAIRGUNS.COM

HATSAN

Manufactured in Turkey, HATSAN makes a wide array of Spring Piston and PCP air rifles. Firing a .22-caliber pellet at nearly 1,000 fps, the Hatsan AT44-10 TACT averaged between 30 and 40 shots per cylinder of air, and unique to HATSAN, the under-barrel reservoir is removable, so stowing a couple of extras in the pack made for extended portability afield.

It's deadly accurate, and I was able to make head shot after head shot on squirrels offhand at ranges around 25 yards. For larger game, HATSAN has created the Hercules and Big Bore Carnivore, which give hunters the choice between .30, .35, and .45 calibers with an energy rating of up to 250 ft.-lbs.

HATSANUSA.COM





PELLET OR BULLET?

Traditionally, the answer was simple: If it is meant to be fired from an air rifle, it is a pellet, not a bullet, but times are changing. With projectiles now commonly ranging up to .45 caliber and pushing the 500-grain mark, are they still pellets? I would suggest not. When looking at the smaller calibers that still have a hollow base and thin "skirt," I think the term "pellet" still applies, but when one gets into .30-, .357-, and .45-caliber slugs, "bullet" is more appropriate.

In the last decade we have seen a major push in pellet design from the old simple roundnose lead pellet.

LEFT TO RIGHT
.45 SWC (405 grains), .45 Lead Round Ball (130 grains), .357 Nosler Ballistic Tip eXtreme (145 grains), .357 cast lead RN (150 grains), .25 Eun Jin (43.2 grains), .25 H&N Baracuda Hunter Extreme (28.4 grains), .25 H&N Polymer Tip (25.2 grains), .22 H&N Baracuda Hunter Extreme (19.09 grains).



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Ton Jones, star of Spike TV's hit series *Auction Hunters* with a scimitar-horned oryx taken with an AirForce Texan in .45 caliber.

THE SKY IS THE LIMIT

How big of game can you hunt with an air rifle? Just ask Ton Jones. Better known as the host of the Spike TV series *Auction Hunters*, Jones is a passionate hunter in general, as well as a hard-core air gunner.

"**EVERYONE** associates me with TV and *Auction Hunters*," said Jones. "But my background is much more rural than most realize." Born and raised in the Mojave Desert in California, Jones grew up in a military family. "Anytime I had any time with my father, it was all about hunting. We chased everything from small game and varmints to once a year we would take a big trip for deer. That was our family recreation. In our family we had this rule: If you could carry and load Granddad's M1 Garand (and do it safely) and hit your target, you were ready to go deer hunting. So there were many years that I still wanted to hunt but couldn't handle the M1. Luckily, we had a Benjamin Sheridan that my brother and I would take out small-game hunting. We would kill rabbits and squirrels, and our grandmother would cook them. It was a cool, healthy upbringing."

As Jones got older he got into catching reptiles and problem wildlife abatement. As fate would have it, Jones was out in the desert when a film crew shooting a movie hired him to remove and relocate rattlesnakes from the set. "I found a perfect career. Hanging out on set, getting to eat awesome food, and catching snakes? Count me in." This involvement in Hollywood turned into opportunities to play background "bad guy" roles due to his size and tough looks. One day, a producer was looking for an Auction Hunter to be on a new show. Jones agreed to introduce him to some "idiots" at a local auction. The



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OF
AIR

producer responded, "I think I have already found my idiot," and the rest, as they say, is history, which turned into a six year run on Spike TV for Jones.

"My early life heavily involved air rifles, and I realized as an adult there are a lot of kids who would love to get into the sport, but so many parents consider them too young to handle a firearm. But tell a parent it is an air gun and it takes a lot of the stress and panic out. Also, for a kid it is a lot less scary—it helps me introduce them to the outdoors and hunting without the fear factor of a firearm." Air rifles make for great family time as they can shoot it in their own backyard—dads competing against sons, daughters against mothers. And the best thing is no one has to travel too far as with a safe backstop you can silently practice in your own backyard.

"I hunted with firearms for many years until I met John and Yvette at AirForce, and I discovered a whole new world of PCP guns, which were so much better than break barrels and I thought, 'What a great tool to bridge the gap between young hunters and old.' Air guns teach patience, how to shoot, how to handle a firearm responsibly, and how to hunt."

Everyone thinks small game when they think of air rifles, but big game is not out of the question if you intimately know your rifle, know exactly where it hits, and use a caliber big enough to get the job done. "I recently took a 260-pound hog at 140 yards with a .45-caliber Texan. Yes, it is a long shot, but it is all about shot placement. If you know where it hits you can stretch some ranges. I have also effectively taken red stag, fallow deer, black buck, and axis deer with it. It is an incredible hunting rifle. I think my most memorable hunt was for a scimitar-horned oryx. I waited for him to walk by, and when he got to 86 yards, I was able to put a 350-grain bullet through his shoulder. It penetrated all the way through the vitals and lodged under the skin on the far side. He didn't go more than 10 yards before tipping over. It was an amazing experience."

Hit TV show, amazing life experiences, getting to hunt big game with an air rifle. What's left? "I'm really happy volunteering with Trinity Oaks (trinityoaks.org). They are committed to reconnecting people, whether it is sick children or

returning disabled vets, with the outdoors. It is a great organization."

As for hunting? "I would still like to take a bear and an elk with an air rifle. I think that would be an amazing experience." 🐾

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