



Too much *Power*?



There is an old ailment stalking the sporting rifle community. Andrew Venables describes the problem of ‘magnumitis’ – best defined as using long-range solutions for normal hunting

Have you got ‘magnumitis’? I’ve had to ask myself the same question a number of times in my shooting career. When I started WMS Firearms Training 10 years ago I used short, handy rifles in sensible calibres and was taking more deer and big game in a year than most people do in a lifetime.

I’ve recently taken an inventory of the rifles that I took hunting this year and I reckon I have most of the signs of magnumitis. The symptoms are easily described:

- Is a flat bullet trajectory your most important consideration?
- Are your bullet choices lightweight for the calibre of rifle used?
- Is your rifle barrel long and heavy?
- Do your deer carcasses show excessive damage?
- Do you struggle to shoot your rifle unsupported?
- Do you watch deer wander off through your rangefinder, as you realise they were only 90 yards away?

While I have not gone down the light-bullet-for-calibre road and thus avoid carcass damage, I have developed a tendency to equip for longer-range shooting than I am usually faced with in the field. I have a long-standing love affair with the .300 Winchester Magnum calibre and this means longer barrels and more kit. I guess we are all susceptible to ‘kit envy’, but how much kit and power do you actually need to be an effective hunter in the UK?

Ninety five per cent of my shots and everyone else’s in the UK are sensibly taken within about 200 yards. Shots of this nature are

challenging enough, and finding the quarry afterwards can present difficulties if the animal falls in cover. The speed with which I can assume a decent shooting position and make the shot is the deciding factor. Long barrels, high-powered scopes, recoil, additional gadgets and fretting don’t help, and are also detrimental to me being the efficient hunter I aspire to be.

How did magnumitis creep in to my shooting? Partly it is the nature of my job. People come to us at WMS Firearms Training for a track day with their rifles, to learn what they are capable of and how to use their kit to best effect. The rifle-shooting marketplace has filled with talk of rangefinders, tactical scopes, small groups and tales of long-range shooting over the past 10 years. Has hunting changed? No, it hasn’t.

I used to hunt with standard calibres, not belted magnums, and was noted for the speed with which I acquired targets and dealt with them. How did I do this? I used short, fast-handling rifles with standard 4x32 or 6x42 scopes. They were all zeroed to shoot two inches high at 100 yards, which meant they were all pretty much dead on at 200 yards and between eight and 10 inches low at 300 yards. Coincidentally, this zero means they also shoot dead on between 25-40 yards.

The scopes had either 30-30 reticles, measuring 30in between the posts at three and nine o’clock, or the European equivalent, measuring either 100cm or 200cm. These enabled me to establish instantly whether deer were 100, 200 yards or too far. If they were



anywhere between 50 and 225 yards, I could simply hold central in the chest kill zone and fire. If they were 20-50 yards and I had 'the drop on them' I could consider a dead-on neck or brain shot. If they were at 300 yards and I had a good reason and the wind worked out, I could hold the top of the shoulders, or just over, and be in business. That was it – my hunting sorted with best use of the point-blank zero method.

So what has happened since? Scopes have gained zoom ability, sensibly with perhaps 1.5-6, 3-12 or 4-16 power. Less sensibly, we are now seeing scopes with zoom ranges of 6-24, 5-25 and above appearing on hunting rifles. In woodland and out on the hill, there can be advantages in being able to use the lower powers of 1.5-4 and the higher powers of 8-12, respectively. In truth, any quarry species can be engaged perfectly well at normal ranges of 50-300 yards with either four or six-power. If your scope is set at 12-power and a deer steps out 30 yards away, your are at an immediate disadvantage, looking at a wall of fuzzy fur. If a deer presents itself for a clear shot at 200 yards, being on three-power is no disadvantage. Try it on targets to see for yourself. Our clients often shoot better groups at 100 yards on four-power than they do on 12 power – not that a group ever killed a deer.

Beyond the zoom scopes, the past 10 years have seen rangefinders, anemometers, ballistic apps, tactical stocks, bipods, varmint barrels and a plethora of other must-haves creeping into sporting rifle shooting. The only truly beneficial new kit is the use and availability of moderators. I genuinely believe that these are the best things in hunting since rifling was invented.

So here I am, all the gear and finding increasingly that I am over-gunned, over-scoped and worrying about details and kit, when I should be shouldering the rifle and simply making a killing shot. Over the past month I have been shooting more between 50-200 yards, testing how lethal I am with various rifle, scope and calibre combinations. I am at my most effective when I use short rifles in modest calibres with scopes set between three and six-power. I note with irony that I shoot well with an Anschütz 16in barrelled .22 and a Savage 18in barrelled .17 HMR.

Previously, using 18in barrelled .308 rifles, I have had no problem putting in perfectly good kill zone shots on targets at 250, 300 and out to 600 yards, using either a ballistic drop compensation reticle or dialling for windage and elevation. However, the important fact to focus on, bearing in mind our best use of point blank zero, is that if you are holding off or dialling, you are not really hunting.



Techno fever: Gadgets are proliferating among modern hunters

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My new task is clear now: I need to create a short, handy, portable, well-balanced .308 hunting rifle and use it for everything. The features it needs include an 18in barrel, a truly safe and fast action, a short, light moderator and a do-it-all scope in the 1.5 to 10-power bracket. The rifle should be capable of launching 165-180 grain bullets at velocities of between 2,600 and 2,500fps, respectively. I will shoot it mostly off sticks or using a sling in the standing, kneeling or sitting positions.

I have a Blaser R8 .308 barrel that is nicely run in after 12,000 rounds; it's getting the chop from 23in to 18in. The professional stock is fine, the safety system and trigger perfect. I will decide on the scope and moderator and get back to you with the results. Watch this space. ■

For more information about WMS Firearms Training, contact Andrew Venables on 01974 831869 or visit www.wmsfirearmstraining.com



Tactical rifles: They might be appealing, but are they the right choice for the hunting ground?