

Magnums

We don't need them all the time,
but when we do...

By Craig Boddington

B&C Professional Member

Photographs courtesy of author

Here's a good New Mexico bull taken with the 8mm Remington Magnum. This cartridge has never been particularly popular and probably never will be, but it is still one of my favorites, hard-hitting and flat-shooting.

My first wild sheep, a lovely Stone's ram, was feeding with a lesser ram in belly-deep heather, far up a steep slope. We left the horses in the bottom and clambered up a slippery chute. Today it would be a horrible climb, but that was 30 years ago, and I was hardly winded when we crawled out of the crevice. Erring on the side of caution, we had overshot the rams by a considerable margin; we came out well above and had them dead to rights. I missed clean with my first shot, no reason and no excuse, then dumped the larger ram with a much more difficult running second shot.

The rifle was a lovely FN Mauser in .375 H&H. It was—and is—a most unlikely companion on a sheep mountain. I was a child of the first magnum craze, back in the late Fifties and early Sixties. For many years I bought into the “bigger is better” theory. Some say I still do, but certainly not to the degree that I did back then! In my late teens and early twenties I had a real thing for the .375 H&H. I used it not only for totally unsuitable game like sheep, pronghorn, mule deer, and caribou, but also for larger game such as elk, moose, and bear.

Over time I think I learned two things, for whatever they're worth: First, provided you understand the trajectory, you really can take everything in North America with a relatively slow cartridge like the .375 H&H (270-grain bullet at perhaps 2,650 feet per second). The second lesson took more time to learn: Nobody needs a .375 H&H to hunt in North America! I made it work, and it worked well, but for the general run of North American hunting there is really no need for any cartridge or caliber larger or more powerful than our standard and most popular numbers from .270 to .30.

On the other hand, there are specialized circumstances and certain game animals that really do call for a bigger hammer. There isn't anything on our continent that can't be accomplished with a relatively flat-shooting .30 caliber and a good 180-grain bullet—but there are times and places where bigger is definitely better.



8MM TO .375

There are two ways to increase hitting power: More bullet weight and frontal area; and more velocity. Big-bore cartridges with relatively low velocity, old-timers like the .405 Winchester and .45-70, relative newcomers like the .444 Marlin and .450 Marlin, hit like a ton of bricks

Bugling in a bull elk is one of the greatest experiences in nature—but it also changes the game a bit. During the rut, bull elk tend to be pumped full of adrenalin and can be extremely hard to put down—the medium magnums make a lot of sense in this situation.

Although several proprietaries and wildcats are missing, as are some faster .375s, these are the cartridges I generally think of when discussing “medium magnums.”





Medium Magnums



and definitely have their place (and perhaps will be addressed in a future issue). However, because of their low velocity, effective range is limited. They are very specialized cartridges, ideally suited to close-cover work but lacking in versatility.

There is another class of cartridges that use heavier bullets of larger caliber than, say, our standard deer cartridges, but push them fast enough to render them suitable for longer shooting in open terrain. I call them the “medium magnums.” The operative word here isn’t “magnum,” although most of the cartridges in this class do indeed carry the magnum suffix in their names. Don’t get hung up on that; what we’re talking about is the capability to use a heavier bullet of larger diameter than, say, our standard .30-caliber, and propel it fast enough to take game at normal ranges. In North America I think the sensible choices run from 8mm (.323-inch bullet diameter) on up to .375. There aren’t many cartridges in this group, but if you need them (or if you want the added confidence they give you) they are simply wonderful.

Let’s start with the 8mm, never a popular bullet diameter in America. I’m a great fan of the 8mm Remington Magnum, but aside from a brief flurry of popularity when it was new, it has languished throughout its quarter-century of existence. I think this is unfortunate. I’ve used Remington’s “Big Eight” enough to truly believe that its .323-inch bullet offers noticeably enhanced hitting power over a .30-caliber, but with less recoil than still-larger calibers.

In terms of popularity, the jury is still out on the newest kid on the 8mm block, the .325 Winchester Short Magnum. In my book, however, this cartridge is a real winner. Its little fireplug of a case propels bullets up to 220 grains at very meaningful velocities, making it flat shooting as well as powerful, yet able to be housed in short, light action. In the spring of 2005 I used it to hunt nilgai in Texas, plains game in Africa, and grizzly bear

FROM THE TOP: Here’s a good Arctic grizzly taken with a Kimber M8400 in .325 WSM. There are relatively few occasions in North American hunting when you really need more power than .30 caliber can offer, but among them is hunting our largest bears. ■ The “over-.30” crowd all generate more recoil than most of us are used to, and more than many of us can handle—but the accuracy is there if you can accept the higher level of recoil. This group was fired with a Kimber .325 WSM and 220-grain Swift A-Frame bullets.

in Alaska, and I think it’s a real winner.

Of course, the .325 WSM shares the most-cited drawback of all .323-inch cartridges, which is limited bullet selection. Maybe, but how many bullets do you need? The selection will never be as rich as the more popular diameters, but there are good .323-inch bullets from Barnes, Hornady, Nosler, and Sierra, and Swift with a good range of weights. If the .325 achieves the popularity it deserves, this will only get better.

By far the most popular mediums, at least in North America, are the .33s, bullet diameter .338-inch. This, I think, is based entirely on merit. The .33 is significantly larger in diameter than the 7mms and .30s we use most of the time. Its bullets are significantly heavier, especially the workhorse 250-grain slug. Actually, the 250-grain .338 has a slightly higher sectional density (SD) than the 300-grain .375 bullet, so it’s a simple fact that, with bullets of similar construction, the .338 outpenetrates the .375 all day long.

Bullet selection is rich, and there are a whole bunch of good .33s to choose from. The wildcat .338-06 is surprisingly capable, and I remain surprised that a major ammo manufacturer hasn’t picked it up. I was equally surprised that Winchester decided on the .325 WSM instead of the .338 WSM, which is also a popular wildcat. I used one a couple of years ago and it was wonderful, but while the 7mm and .300 short magnums can come very close to 7mm Remington and .300 Winchester Magnum performance, in .33 caliber the WSM case falls a bit short of .338 Winchester Magnum performance. The shortfall isn’t enough to make a difference to any elk, but it was deemed enough to create a marketing problem. So I don’t think you’ll see that one in factory form, either.

The most popular .33, by far, is the .338 Winchester Magnum, to my thinking one of the most useful “over-.30” cartridges in the world. Pushing a 250-grain bullet at a standard velocity of 2,650 feet per second, it isn’t especially fast—but it’s fast enough, and strikes a good balance between velocity and energy and manageable recoil. You can easily go up the velocity scale. The .340 Weatherby Magnum and .338 Remington Ultra Mag are considerably faster, not only flattening the trajectory but also carrying more energy farther downrange. Then there are the behemoth .33s, the .33-378 Weatherby Magnum, Lazzeroni’s Titan, and the .338 Lapua Magnum. The capabilities are wonderful, with trajectories as flat as any .30-caliber and more energy than most elephant guns. But beware: When you step up the velocity scale from the .338 Winchester Magnum recoil goes up exponentially!



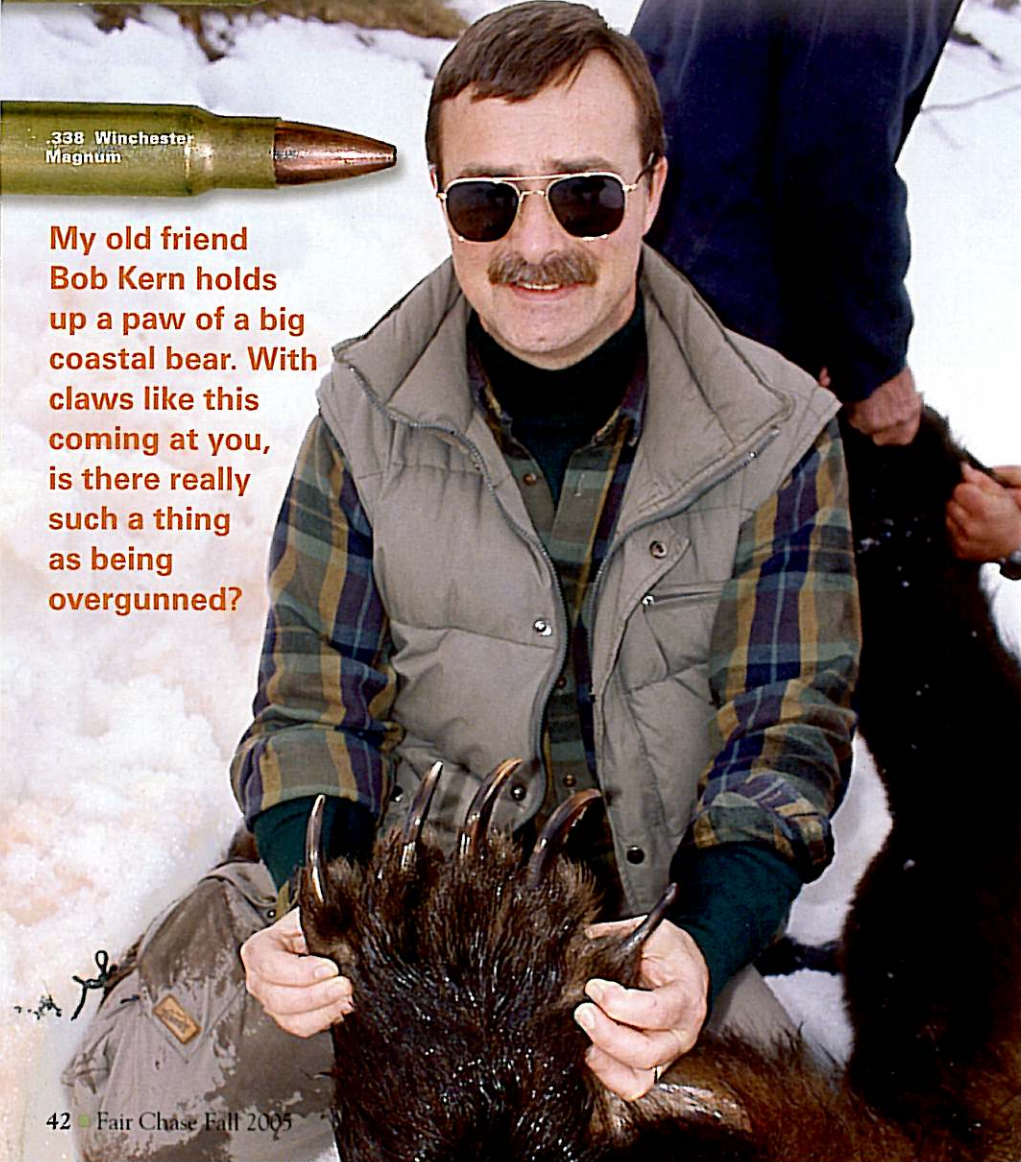
.325 Winchester Short Magnum

8mm Remington Magnum

.338 Winchester Magnum

.338 Winchester Magnum

Medium Magnums



My old friend Bob Kern holds up a paw of a big coastal bear. With claws like this coming at you, is there really such a thing as being overgunned?

Although there are many good wildcats, there are almost no factory .35-calibers in my "medium magnum" group. I love the .35 Whelen, but it's a bit slow for true versatility. Thanks to its well-deserved popularity, the selection of .358-inch bullets is much better than it used to be, but no major manufacturer offers a really fast .35. The possible exception is the .350 Remington Magnum, a true short magnum that was way ahead of its time. I have one and I love it, and I'm glad to see that Remington has returned it to the line. But, realistically, when you put it in a short action (where it belongs) it is impossible to use heavy bullets at meaningful velocities because, in order to fit the magazine box, heavy bullets must be seated too deeply. I shoot 225-grain bullets in mine and it works well, but because of the much lower sectional density, a 225-grain .358 bullet is nowhere near as good on really large game as a 250-grain .338.

Passing mention must be given to the 9.3mm, caliber .366-inch, a European standard that is rarely seen in North America. The old 9.3x62 Mauser, a rimless cartridge, and the rimmed 9.3x74R fall into the "close cover" spectrum, but the fatter-cased 9.3x64 with its 286-grain bullet is, in every way, the equal of the .375 H&H.

The .375s

Which brings us to the .375s. As I said, you don't need a .375 in North America, but it works. I'll go a bit farther and say that a .375 is absolutely the largest caliber that is truly useful in North America. Sure, if you have a .416 you can use it on moose and big bears, and many Alaskan guides use elephant guns for backup. But, truly, we have nothing on this continent that, under any circumstances, absolutely requires anything larger than a .375. The standard is the .375 H&H, since its introduction in 1912 the reigning champion as the foremost all-around cartridge for hunting the entire world. There are faster .375s, such as the .375 Weatherby, .375 Remington Ultra Mag, and .378 Weatherby

FROM THE TOP: Here's a very good Newfoundland moose taken with a .338 Remington Ultra Mag. Although much larger, moose aren't as tenacious as elk, in my opinion. On the other hand you have to get your bullet through a lot of moose to reach the vitals. ■ Many would disagree, but in the North American context I think these are among the most useful medium-bore cartridges. All offer genuinely greater hitting power over our standard deer cartridges, yet all of these have recoil levels that, with proper gun weight, are tolerable for most shooters.

Magnum. As is the case with the fastest .33s, they flatten trajectory and produce much more energy, but recoil goes up very quickly. They have genuine utility in Africa, but in North America there is little reason to take that much pounding. As I said, you really don't need a .375 in North America, but you can use it if you want to—and I don't see a strong argument for using anything bigger.

ELK AND UPWARDS

Over the years I seem to have been branded as a big-bore fanatic, some kind of a “mag-niac.” This may or may not be warranted, but I have said it before and I say it again now: There is absolutely no need, under any circumstances, to hunt deer, sheep, goat, or pronghorn with anything larger than a .30 caliber. Yes, you can use them but, no, you don't need them. The “.30-something” crowd is for larger game.

I believe this starts with elk. Not everyone agrees, nor is agreement necessary. I have taken elk very effectively with .270s, 7mms, and .30-calibers, and will do so again with no qualms. However, and it's a big “however,” I will go to my grave believing that .32s and .33s are better for elk than any smaller calibers. When everything goes right there's no problem, but when shot angles aren't optimum, or bullet placement

is off just a wee bit, the extra bullet weight and frontal diameter makes a difference. No, I'm not even hinting that power makes up for poor shooting. I am suggesting that, no matter who you are, bullet placement isn't always perfect. I am totally convinced that a 220-grain 8mm or a 225- or 250-grain .33-caliber bullet is more effective on elk than a 150-grain .270, 160-grain 7mm, or 180-grain .30-caliber. Just the other day I received in the mail a tag for bull elk in Arizona's Unit 10, one of the great areas. I may not find him, but it's the chance for a bull of a lifetime. If I see him I want to kill him, so I've already made my decision: I will take my Rogue River/Rigby 8mm Remington Magnum.

It should be obvious that a 3,000-pound bison bull requires a fairly stout caliber. If you get the brain shot it doesn't matter, but on body shots you need plenty of gun. Bison are much bigger than Cape buffalo, so the only mitigating factor against hunting them with true big bores is they aren't normally nearly so aggressive. Moose are also incredibly huge animals, with Alaskan bulls weighing as much as 1,500 pounds. That said, I don't think moose are as tough as elk, but there's still an awful lot of moose that a bullet must penetrate to reach the vitals. I much prefer to hunt them with one of these medium magnums, but, like elk,

moose can certainly be taken cleanly with standard deer rifles and good bullets.

Aside from bison, where larger calibers really come into play in North America is on the big bears. This starts with magnum-sized black bears, which are easily as large as the average interior grizzly (and just as unpredictable) and carries on up to grizzly, Alaskan brown bear, and polar bear. Outsized specimens of the latter two can, no kidding, weigh as much as a Cape buffalo, and by their nature are very tough and tenacious.

Hunting Alaskan brown bear in thick alders is one of very few situations in North America where the good old .375 probably is the very best choice, and also the only situation where I wouldn't argue with anyone who chose a larger and more powerful cartridge. The .375 is also a sound choice for grizzly and polar bear—but I'm not sure it's the best choice. I'm convinced you want more power than any .30-caliber (or smaller) can offer, but up in the high basins where grizzlies live and out on the pack ice where polar bears are hunted, you might not get the close shot you want. Instead, you might get a “last day, take it or leave it” shot at something closer to 250 yards. This is a very long poke on a tough, potentially dangerous animal—but it might be viable under the right conditions with the right equipment. So I think the 8mms and

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.33s, faster and flatter shooting than the .375, but still very powerful, with tough, deep-penetrating bullets, may be better choices.

Just this spring, hunting with Dave Leonard of Mountain Monarchs of Alaska, I finally got the kind of grizzly I've sought for 30 years. He was on a moose he had killed, but he was in an open bowl with no cover, and between flat light and blowing snow we had no precise idea of the distance; we just knew we couldn't get any closer. I was shooting a Kimber .325 WSM with 220-grain Barnes Triple Shock bullets. We figured the range at about 225 yards, but we weren't sure, so I was very glad I wasn't carrying a slower .375. I made the shot and got the bear. Years ago, in B.C., I had a cross-canyon shot at a decent grizzly on the very last evening of the hunt. The range was 250 yards, very far for any bear, but I had a good rest and I was shooting a .340 Weatherby Magnum. As much as I love the .375, once again I was better off with a slightly smaller, but faster, cartridge.

THE "R" FACTOR

"R" stands for recoil. We all have our limits, and we must recognize them. Many of us "max out" with the fast .30s, and some of us simply cannot shoot effectively anything more powerful than a .270 or 7mm. My medium magnums are wonderfully capable, but only for those who can handle their increased levels of recoil and shoot them well. You're better off with a good, heavy-for-caliber bullet from a .270, 7mm, or .30-caliber that is placed well than with a poorly placed bullet from any larger caliber.

If you can handle them, the medium magnums are absolutely the right choices for big bears, and definitely better for moose—but only if you can handle them. Recoil, of course, is relative to gun weight and can be mitigated by good recoil pads, mercury recoil reducers (which also add weight), and muzzle brakes. The bottom line, however, is that it's counterproductive, and downright silly, to attempt to use any rifle that hurts you, because you cannot shoot it well.

This is not speculation, but a hard-earned lesson. With a relatively heavy rifle of, say, 9 to 9 1/2 pounds, the .375 H&H is actually fairly pleasant to shoot. Ditto for the .338 Winchester Magnum at perhaps a half-pound lighter. When you increase velocity, both recoil velocity and recoil energy go up very quickly. I revere the .340 Weatherby Magnum and used it quite a bit for several years. It wasn't fun, but in the North American context where I was only going to shoot it once or twice on a hunt, I got away with it. What tore it was an African hunt where I was shooting it every day. I finally had to admit that it was more

gun than I could comfortably shoot. More recently I tried the same experiment with a .338 Remington Ultra Mag, and came to the same conclusion. The capabilities were wonderful, but the recoil was more than I needed. Mind you, there are solutions. I could have fixed either rifle with a muzzle brake—but I don't like the associated blast, and I've already lost more hearing than I can spare. So I know where my recoil threshold lies, and you need to know where yours is.

MEDIUMS FOR ALL-AROUND USE?

My good friend Jack Atcheson Jr., a great Montana elk hunter but also one of North America's most experienced sheep hunters, uses his battered old .338 Winchester Magnum for everything. Yes, you can, as I did with my .375 when I was a kid. Some years ago I wrote that my choice for "one rifle for North America," provided the big bears were included, would be a .338 Winchester Magnum. I stand by that today.

On the other hand, unless there's some reason why you must limit yourself to just one rifle, I do not believe the medium magnums are best for all-around use. Yes, you can load lighter bullets (150 to 200 grains in the 8mms; 180 to 225 grains in the .33s; 235 to 265 grains in the .375, and so forth) and achieve both higher velocity and reduced recoil. But you are using light-for-caliber bullets that won't penetrate as well (not important on lighter game), and, more important, have poor aerodynamics and shed velocity quickly. Honestly, in my 8mm Remington I don't think I've ever used anything other than a 220-grain bullet. In my .33s I occasionally shoot 225-grain bullets, but generally use 250-grain slugs. Even in the .375 my preference for many years now has been 300-grain bullets. This is because I don't think of such calibers as all-around choices, but rather as specialized tools for extra-large game.

Despite their obvious effectiveness on lighter game, you don't need large calibers until you get to large, tough game. Although branded as a heavy-caliber guy, I'm really a guy who believes in the right tool for the job at hand. The medium magnums come into their own on elk, moose, and the big bears. This is where they shine, and no compromises are necessary; they are definitely superior to the rifles and cartridges that are more suited for lighter game. I have used them for deer, and even for sheep, goats, and pronghorns, and will again when circumstances dictate, but they're really for larger game, and then their larger diameter and heavier bullets make a difference. Provided, of course, you can shoot them well. ■