

CRAIG  
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Photos Courtesy of Author

# ACCURATE HUNTER

USE ENOUGH  
GLASS...  
BUT NOT  
TOO MUCH!

Optics have improved dramatically during my career. I'm a child of the scope era, but when I started hunting, we used fixed-power scopes because variable-power scopes weren't yet perfected: shifts in point of impact were normal with changes in magnification. Reliable variables have been with us since the 1970s, but for many years the practical limit was about "three-times-zoom."

The classic example is the popular and versatile 3-9X. Actual image size at "X" power can vary among manufacturers, but if you take popular magnification levels such as 1.75-5X, 2-7X, 3.5-10X, 4.5-14X, 6-18X, and so forth, we're still talking "three-times-zoom." Boy has that changed! Four-times-zoom seemed a breakthrough...then came five-times-zoom, then six...and some manufacturers now have eight-times-zoom. The new Zeiss Victory V8 line includes 1-8x30mm, 1.8-14x50mm, 2.8-20x56mm, and 4.8-35x60mm. Today's extended zoom capability offers incredible versatility, a far cry from the fixed 4X scopes I started with!

Riflescopes are getting more powerful—with good, clear optics and repeatable adjustments—and they're also getting bigger and heavier. At a new product seminar last August, Zeiss's Kyle Brown pointed out a great truth that's worth pondering: "Magnification is overrated!"

This Savage 99 in .300 Savage is mounted with a vintage 4X Redfield scope. This is exactly the kind of scope Jack O'Connor used in his latter years and that Boddington used in his youth. Today Boddington prefers more magnification, but a fixed 4X will get most jobs done!

**BELOW: John Batten with his last Alberta bighorn, mid-1960s. The rifle is his .30-.338, topped with a 2.75X Redfield. Boddington has this rifle, and it still groups very well.**



From the '60s through the '80s this .30-.338 was the late John Batten's favorite hunting rifle. It wore a 2.75X fixed-power Redfield on a Griffin & Howe side mount, but Batten hedged his bets: The rear receiver ring held a base for an aperture sight, the actual sight housed in a trap in the steel buttplate.



When I was a kid, high-magnification scopes existed, but we thought of them as target and varmint scopes. Guys that I respected, like Jack O'Connor, told us that a fixed 4X was really all we needed for big-game hunting. Well, in the 1970s that's pretty much all we had, but we didn't do so badly. John H. Batten (1912-1989) was another hero and long-time leader of our Boone and Crockett Club. Batten hunted widely in North America—and much of the rest of the world. I have the rifle John described as “his favorite hunting rifle.”

It's a .30-.338 on a Mauser action, nicely-shaped stock in laminate wood. The wildcat .30-.338 was most popular between the introductions of the .338 Winchester Magnum in 1958 and the .300 Winchester Magnum in 1963, so the rifle was probably built around 1960. John shot the first of his many sheep in the '30s using aperture sights. On this rifle, he hedged his bets; the rear receiver bridge carries an aperture base, and the sight resides in a trap in the steel buttplate. The rifle has a Griffin & Howe side mount, and in the mount is a fixed 2.75X Redfield scope. John used the rifle through the '80s, including a lot of mountain game.

Variable-power scopes had long been perfected, but Batten apparently found his low-power scope adequate!

In an odd coincidence, at least a half-dozen of today's better-known gunwriters are almost exactly the same age, mid-60s. Every now and then one or another of us will get reactionary, echo O'Connor, and say, “All you need is a fixed 4X.”

I'm as guilty as my colleagues, but I like magnification! I got a 3-9X variable in 1976, and I loved it! The larger image made precise shot placement easier, and I'm not ashamed to say that I often turned it up all the way! So, what is meant by “magnification is overrated?”

First, clarity of image is more important. In the 60s and 70s I had fixed 4X Redfield, Unertl, and Weaver scopes, and a bit later I had a 3X Leupold. Regrettably, I don't have any of those scopes today to compare, but I have Batten's 2.75X Redfield, and a vintage 4X Redfield that came on a Savage 99. These scopes are still “useable,” but nothing like the clarity of image we commonly get today! Today's coatings are much better, and glass is probably better, too.

All things being equal, wouldn't a larger image be better? Sure, if you

absolutely knew you were going to shoot at distance! I love to ring steel way out there—knowing you can is a marvelous confidence-builder—but I am very much not an extreme-range shooter on game. Even back in those innocent pre-range-finder days we took occasional quarter-mile shots with our fixed low-power scopes. Today, with perfect knowledge of range and bigger/better optics, we probably do this more often. However, I've seen few situations where shorter shots can be ruled out—and for sure, I've never backed up to take a shot at game!

In field shooting, the extreme magnification so available today has warts. Image is magnified, but so are tremors and wobbles—and mirage and heat waves. Also, purely as an engineering function, as magnification increases, field of view decreases, so rapid target acquisition becomes more difficult. Last year, on a Coues' deer hunt, I used a new Bushnell Forge 4.5-27x50mm—great scope, and a lot of scope for the money! Coues' deer hunting often requires longer shooting, so theoretically a good place for a big scope.

We were watching a nice buck on the far side of a cut at about 400 yards,

getting ready to shoot when the buck vanished. I don't remember the scope setting (not 27X, probably in the middle). A while later he reappeared just below us, less than 200 yards. Lord, I couldn't find him in the scope! I turned the power down, found the deer, got the shot off—and missed! An hour later I shot the same buck at 120 yards. No matter where you are, the close shot shouldn't be ruled out.

Today's variables with increased zoom capability may have a very high maximum magnification but typically have a low minimum setting that won't get you into trouble. Of course, you don't have to turn your scope up all the way. We need to remember to keep our power settings down until we need magnification—and then remember to turn it back down! Over time, lower settings will probably take more game than the highest magnification.

Not being an extreme-range guy, I'm convinced, at least for big game hunting, there's a maximum "useful" magnification. Again, I like magnification, but I've seen few situations where magnification of 20X or higher was useful. Since my 4X and 3-9X days, my magnification preferences have crept upward. However, I still find the 3-9X (or 3.5-10X) adequate for most hunting. Last year I latched onto a gorgeous left-hand .270 built years ago by Joe Balickie. It came with a vintage 2-7X Leupold so an initial thought was to update the scope. I changed my mind when it printed half-inch groups. I had it in Africa last year, and it worked perfectly out to not quite 400 yards, generally about as far as I need to shoot! Plenty of scope.

However, these days, when I'm setting up for mountains or plains I usually go for more. An early adopter of the 4.5-14X scope, I used a Zeiss

Victory 3-12X on several mountain hunts. When Leupold brought in their V6 line I used a 2-12X a lot, and now have VX-6 3-18X on a couple of rifles. The exact power isn't critical; I've been perfectly happy with 3-15X and, in four-times-zoom, 4-16X. I want the minimum setting low enough that I can't get into trouble on a close shot, including following up a wounded animal. For me, I've seen little utility in a high magnification setting above "teen-X."

Provided the lowest setting is no higher than about a 4X, extreme upper magnification doesn't hurt you. But as riflescopes become more powerful, there's another insidious ill: they're getting bigger and heavier! Unless I'm really trying to shave weight, today I prefer a 30mm tube to one-inch for three reasons: the 30mm tube is brighter, has a greater range of adjustment, and most new scope development has gone 30mm. Larger (and heavier) 36mm tubes are becoming more common. Increased magnification carries a price in dollars as well as scope weight and bulk. My thinking is there's no reason to pay for or carry more scope than is really needed—put the money into a higher-quality scope with less magnification. As scope size increases (and objective lenses get bigger) it becomes necessary to mount them ever higher. Imagine what Jack O'Connor would say about "extra-high" scope rings; I can hear him: "They give me the vapors!" High-mounted scopes change the way we check our rifles, requiring higher combs or strap-on cheekpieces. None of this is bad; it depends on what you like and the kind of shooting and hunting you do. I believe in using enough scope, but I'm convinced there's such a thing as too much! ■



**TOP:** On a Coues' deer hunt in 2018, Boddington used a Mossberg Patriot .30-06 with a new Bushnell Forge 4.5-27x50mm scope. High magnification like this won't hurt you as long as you keep the power turned down. Boddington had it set too high when this buck appeared at close range. **MIDDLE:** Built decades ago by Joe Balickie, this gorgeous .270 came with its original 2-7X Leupold. Boddington was going to update the scope but changed his mind when it produced groups like these. The 2-7X is probably the lowest variable range that has a lot of versatility. **BOTTOM:** Close shots can never be ruled out! Boddington's Dall's ram went down at 122 yards. He used a Jarrett .300 Winchester Magnum with Leupold VX-6 3-18X; he had the scope somewhere on a medium power setting.