

Still America's
Best?

.30-06

Springfield

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Photos courtesy of Author

It's a matter of history that one of the first sporting uses of the .30-06 Springfield cartridge was by Boone and Crockett Club founder, Theodore Roosevelt, on his epic 1909-1910 safari. Except Roosevelt's famous Springfield wasn't actually a .30-06! Some time back I actually held that rifle at the Springfield Armory Museum, and the truth is it was chambered to the original 1903 version and never modified; thus, was actually a .30-03!

In 1892 we adopted the Danish Krag-Jorgensen rifle in .30 U.S. or, if you prefer, .30-40 Krag. This was a rimmed cartridge firing a round-nosed 220-grain bullet, somewhat similar in ballistics to the .303 British. Although the .30-40 cartridge became a standard sporting round (and surplus Krags, with that butter-smooth action were popular with hunters), the Krag had a very short run as America's service rifle. By the late 1890s it was eclipsed by clip-loading designs from Mannlicher and, especially, the much stronger Mauser action. In 1903 we tried again, and the result was the 1903 Springfield, a Mauser clone that would remain in service for 40 years...and, clear into my youth in the 1960s, would remain a favorite sporting rifle action.

The original .30-03 cartridge used a 220-grain round-nosed bullet, but the times were changing yet again, and European powers were proving the superiority of lighter, faster,

The .30-06 is accurate, but is rarely known for match-winning groups, which depends on the rifle and the load. This group was fired from an out-of-the-box Savage with Federal factory loads. You can't ask for any more!

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sharp-pointed (spitzer) bullets. In 1906 we shortened the neck slightly, increasing powder capacity, and went to a 150-grain spitzer bullet at 2,700 feet per second, very fast for the day. Existing Springfields were easily modified, and from 1906 were chambered to this new “.30-caliber cartridge, model of 1906”—what we now know as the .30-06 Springfield. All .30-06 rifles will chamber .30-03 cartridges—the reverse is not true—and for some years, both versions were available.

The .30-06 cartridge was also used for our light (air-cooled) and medium (water-cooled) Browning machine guns. In 1926 the military load shifted to a boat-tailed 174-grain bullet at 2,640 feet per second, the heavier and more aerodynamic bullet proving more effective for “plunging fire” at extreme range. Years later, for more reliable functioning in the semiautomatic Garand, the military shifted back to the 150-grain bullet.

These were only a few steps in the evolution of loads for the .30-06. After World War I it became America’s most popular bolt-action cartridge. After World War II, when the bolt action pulled away from the lever action, it became America’s most popular sporting rifle cartridge. It is not clear that it still retains that title today, but for sure it remains among America’s favorites, and is a world-standard cartridge that will be encountered—and respected—anywhere game is hunted. Although the case hasn’t changed since 1906, propellant powders have changed, and .30-06 loads have benefited from more than a century of intensive load development.

In the days when iron sights were king and expanding bullets somewhat erratic, a 220-grain round-nose at about 2,400 feet per second was a favored hunting load. (Whether you call it a .30-03 or a .30-06, Roosevelt used a 220-grain bullet, and so did Ernest Hemingway.) That heavy-for-caliber, deep-penetrating 220-grain load still has application for close-cover hunting for bear and moose, but today we have better bullets as well as better propellants. Also, with the telescopic sight now in almost universal use, we need more range—and the .30-06 has responded. More or less standard today are: 180-grain loads at 2,700 feet per second; 165-grain loads at 2,800 feet per second; and 150-grain loads at 2,910 feet per second. Handloaders can edge this a bit, and there are “extra fast” factory loads such as Federal’s High Energy and Hornady’s Superformance that take the .30-06 into territory once owned by the .300 H&H.

With the right bullets and in the right hands, the .30-06 is adequate for all North American big game. Grancel Fitz proved this

a generation ago, and my friend J.Y. Jones proved this just a few years ago. Many of our icons, like John Batten, George Parker, and my uncle Art Popham hunted sheep with the .30-06. But while it is more than adequate in power and generally adequate in ranging ability, the .30-06 is not the ideal tool for wild sheep and goats. It is also not optimum for the largest bears and is probably overpowered for smaller big game like pronghorn, blacktail deer, and Coues’ deer.

On the other hand, it will do all these things with few apologies. It is to North American big game what the .375 H&H is to African game: The utility infielder, jack of all trades and master of few, not always a perfect choice, but always an acceptable choice; it does its work without excessive recoil and muzzle blast.

Thanks to the great hunting bullets we have today, the .30-06 is probably better and more versatile than it ever was. With a good 150-grain bullet it shoots flat enough for just about any deer hunting you can think of and is just fine for the largest whitetail and mule deer. With a 180-grain bullet it’s awesome for elk, black bear, and moose. And with the 165-grain bullet, you can compromise and have the best of almost all worlds: relatively flat trajectory and great performance on game.

I was a latecomer to the .30-06, but I have had a love affair with the cartridge since my first African safari in 1977. For years I was strictly a “180-grain bullet guy,” and that will always be the default position. More recently, recognizing that our bullets are so much better, I have softened. Today I still use the 180-grain bullet for heavier game, but for deer I am more likely to use the flatter-shooting 150-grain bullet. For general purpose, I often take the compromise position and choose a 165-grain bullet. Honestly, if you’re shooting a .30-06, you can’t be very wrong! ■



DETAILS:

TOP: The .30-06 is a fine elk cartridge, offering great performance with little recoil—and it’s even better with the great bullets we have today. This bull dropped in its tracks to a single 180-grain Barnes X from a Savage .30-06.

MIDDLE: One of the great advantages to the .30-06 is, because of its popularity, the variety of factory loads is almost infinite.

BOTTOM: A great Colorado mule deer, taken with an accurate Kenny Jarrett rifle in .30-06. The great old .30-06 remains a fine choice for hunting our biggest deer, whether mule deer or white-tailed deer.