

The Enduring .30s



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Photos Courtesy of Author

Europeans like .30s too! A hunter in Scotland aims a Leica-scooped Sauer in .300 Winchester.

On Hardscrabble Mountain the last weekend of the 1967 season, Paul Muehlbauer and his two sons rose early to follow a heavily frosted game trail up to an aspen plateau. They neared it at daybreak. Suddenly Paul spied an enormous mule deer so close he reacted instantly. The shot from his Winchester staggered the animal. His sons fired as it ran, but missed—as did Paul when, after a dash through aspens, he got a second chance. But the first bullet was lethal, and the trio soon found the buck dead. The antlers scored 214 3/8—a state record for typical mule deer! It would remain so for just five years. But during that interval, both the biggest deer and the biggest elk in Colorado records belonged to the .30-40 Krag!

Bolt-rifle design owes much to Europe; but cartridges born stateside dominate game fields worldwide!



Paul A. Muehlbauer's typical mule deer was taken near Gypsum Creek, Colorado, in 1967.



In 1892 our first smokeless .30-bore cartridge, the .30-40 Krag, began military life—and a life afield!





ABOVE: Savage's .303 was a 30-caliber round with a bit more muscle than the .30 WCF. Wayne's shoots well! BELOW: Wayne is sweet on Hornady's .308 Marlin Express. It performs like the .308, but at lower pressure.



When it was adopted by the U.S. Army in 1892, the Krag was an anomaly among the bottleneck cartridges popping up worldwide. France's 8mm Lebel, the first small-bore smokeless infantry round, had appeared in 1886. Germany followed two years later with the 7.9x57 (8mm) Mauser. Great Britain's .303, adopted in 1888 with black powder, went smokeless in '92, as Dutch and Romanian troops were issued rifles in 6.3x53R Mannlicher. Italy had chosen the 6.5x52 Mannlicher-Carcano in 1891. Sweden's 6.5x55 arrived in 1894, the Japanese 6.5x50 Arisaka in '97. Several South American nations picked the 7.65x53 Mauser. Austria and Denmark had the 8x50 and 8x58R.

Conspicuously absent from this list: a 30-caliber cartridge (the Swiss would bump the diameter of 7.5x55 bullets to .308 in 1911). The U.S. pioneered the .30 in its Krag-Jorgensen bolt rifle. Chambered in Winchester's 1885 High Wall single-shot in 1893, the smokeless .30-40 cartridge predated by two years the .30 WCF (.30-30) in the Winchester 1894 lever rifle. Remington had the .30-40 in its Rolling Blocks too. But many hunters favored it in Winchester's 1895, the rifle John Plute is said to have used to kill the elk whose antlers topped B&C records for decades.

I like the .30-40. A Navy Krag was the first centerfire rifle I fired. Despite a sight radius long as a hoe-handle, I missed the soup can stuck atop a furrow on a Michigan farm. The steel butt was merciless.

Years later, hunting with the late Don Allen, I fired a lighter, prettier rifle. By then this talented stock-maker had established Dakota Arms, tweaking the pre-64 Winchester M70 to build his flagship 76. The Model 10 single-shot followed. Once, during a break from pestering

pronghorns, Don handed me his own Model 10, a .30-40. Offhand I managed to scare a distant pebble. The rifle bounced briskly. "Those loads nearly match factory .30-06 ammo," Don said. "The Krag case is strong." It's rimmed too, a perfect pick for the elegant Model 10.

The .30-40 endured for a decade in uniform. It was supplanted in 1903 by the rimless .30-03 with a 220-grain bullet at 2,300 fps (edging the Krag by 100 fps). In 1906 the U.S. took a cue from Germany, loading a lighter 150-grain bullet to 2,700 fps. It also trimmed the .30-03 hull .07 inch. *Voila!* The .30-06.

There's no magic in barrels with .300 bore and .308 groove diameters. But the nimble Winchester 1894 in .30 WCF and early bolt rifles bored for the potent .30-06 herded hunters onto the 30-caliber path.

The first big .30 came from brilliant inventor Charles Newton. Called the .30 Adolph Express for gunmaker Fred Adolph, the rimless round booted 180-grain bullets at 2,880 fps—lightning speed in 1913. But riflemen in that day considered the '06 the arm of Zeus. Besides, while loaded by Western Cartridge, Newton's .30 had no home except Newton rifles. Western dropped it in 1938.

Lesser .30s fared better. Arthur Savage's first successful cartridge, the rimmed .303 Savage, had a little more punch than its contemporary, the .30 WCF. Unlike the .303 British, which fired .311 bullets, Savage loaded .308-diameter bullets in its .303. The cartridge piled up a lot of game. China missionary Harry Caldwell carried it for tigers. William T. Hornaday wrote of a "moose and two bull caribou [shot] stone dead... with one of your incomparable .303 rifles." Savage's 1895 rifle begat the 1899. For this new



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rifle, Charles Newton fashioned a .250. The logical encore to that 1913 rocket: a rimless, more potent .30. So in 1920, the .300 Savage arrived, driving 150-grain bullets at 2,670 fps. It was our first of many .300s.

In 1925, the British firm of Holland & Holland fashioned what it called “Holland’s Super .30” by necking down the .375 H&H. Western Cartridge Company picked it up that fall, albeit no U.S.-built rifles were so chambered for another 12 years. In 1935 Ben Comfort won the 1,000-yard Wimbledon Cup match with a reworked 1917 Enfield bored for this 3.60-inch round. Two years later it debuted as the .300 H&H Magnum in Winchester’s new M70 rifle. A pointed 180-grain bullet from a .300 H&H brings more than 1,700 ft. lbs. to 400 yards. Compared to the same bullet from a .30-06, it flies 15 percent flatter and delivers a 10 percent advantage in wind—with 35 percent more recoil. Early on, you could buy .300 H&H ammo with 150-grain bullets at nearly 3,200 fps, and 220s at 2,620.

During its first 25 years, the Model 70 was shipped in 18 chamberings. More than a third (208,218) were .30-06s! But the .300 H&H earned its keep. The first rifles were stamped simply “.300 Magnum,” as there weren’t any *besides* the H&H! Roy Weatherby’s proprietary .300, didn’t appear until 1945. My first elk rifle, a Henriksen-built Mauser, was chambered in .300 Holland. At dusk in an Oregon meadow long ago, I came eyeball to brow tine with a six-point bull. The shot made me a lucky hunter,

a super .30 fan!

Meanwhile the .300 Savage had been methodically killing game. The Model 99 had supplanted the 1899 rifle but retained its profile and major features—including the spool magazine that permitted use of pointed bullets. Arthur Savage died in 1941, age 84. His 99 added chamberings would pass the million-rifle mark in the 1950s, but none would trump the .300 Savage in lifetime sales. This modest .30 has graced other rifles too, notably Remington 760 pump and 722 bolt guns. Winchester even bored a few Model 70s for it. I’ve used it on deer, caribou, and pronghorns.

Roy Weatherby’s powerful .300, a blown-out .300 H&H, was not his first magnum. By the early 1940s, after moving to California from his native Kansas, he’d started an insurance business and designed sub-.30 magnums on the Holland case, shortened to fit .30-06-length actions. The full-length .300 came in 1945. A year later he pledged “everything I owned” for a \$5,000 loan to float his nascent rifle business.

The trend to bigger .30s also got a boost from wildcatter Rocky Gibbs, who moved to Idaho from California during a March blizzard in 1955 and built a 500-yard range on his 35 acres near Viola. Gibbs developed a stable of wildcats on the .30-06. Unlike Parker Ackley’s .30-06 Improved, the .30 Gibbs had a shorter neck than its parent. Handloaders had to over-expand the neck, then form a false shoulder before fire-forming. Or they could buy Rocky’s hydraulic tool!

My .30 Gibbs, on a Springfield action, has yet to bring me the luck that visited John Garvin when he sat on a rock after climbing out of Colorado brush one day in 1962. Almost immediately he spotted an impressive mule deer ascending a slope 175 yards off. Steadying the Remington on his knee, Garvin sent a 150-grain Sierra. The buck dropped, but then got up. Two more shots from his .30 Gibbs missed, but his last round felled the deer. John knew this buck was exceptional, but he didn’t have the antlers scored for 37 years! They tallied 220-6/8. In 1999 the Boone and Crockett Club added Garvin’s buck to its list of outstanding non-typical mule deer.

As Rocky Gibbs was getting all he could from the ’06 hull, Winchester touted a new smaller .30. The .308 appeared in 1952, two years before the identical U.S. T-65 (to become the 7.62x51 NATO) was chambered in battle rifles. The .308 case holds 20 percent less powder than a .30-06, but 40 percent more than a .30-30. With

a stiff load of 42.5 grains H335, I’ve clocked 180-grain bullets at 2,700 fps—long the accepted speed for 180s from a .30-06. In factory loads, the .308 falls 100 fps shy of matching the .30-06 but beats the .300 Savage by twice that margin. Compared to bigger .30s, the .308 may seem ho-hum. But its standard breech pressure of 62,000 psi exceeds that of the .300 H&H. It has become the most widely chambered hunting cartridge in the world—not only in short-action bolt rifles, but in pumps, self-loaders and front-locking lever-actions. It’s as popular in Africa for plains game as for deer and elk stateside.

Benchresters have tapped the .308 too. In 1967 Dave Hall used it to print a

Ambitiously designed as a short-action .30-06, the .300 Savage holds much less powder and is still a star!



John Garvin’s non-typical mule deer was taken in Mesa County, Colorado, in 1962 with a .30 Gibbs.



Chambered in a host of affordable rifles, the .308 is a versatile, effective round for first-time hunters.

.4612 knot, winning the Sporter class at the National Bench Rest Matches. The next year, Ferris Pindell won the same event with his .308. Group size: .3594. The .308 is good to 1,000 yards with 175- and 178-grain match bullets.

Winchester might have been thinking of a stronger .30 in the '50s, but its first short magnum was the .458! Two years after this 1956 debut, however, Winchester followed with the .338

Magnum, which wildcatters promptly necked to .30. Years later, gunsmith Rick Freudenberg barreled a Model 70 in .30-338 for me. In 1960 Norma introduced its .308 Magnum, the case .06 longer than the 2.50-inch .30-338's. Initial absence of loaded .308 Norma ammo and U.S.-built rifles hardly helped sell it! A year-and-a-half later, ammo appeared; "re" on the headstamp indicated reloadable Boxer-primed brass. Browning



.30 NORMA LOADS
 .300 WSM .308 Norma .300 Win. .300 Weatherby .300 RUM



Despite its short stature, the .308 with 168- to 175-grain match bullets can post fine 600-yard scores.

added the .308 Norma to the roster for its lovely Mauser High Power rifle.

Winchester's .300 Magnum arrived in 1963. Riflemen had expected a .30-338, but got instead a short-necked 2.62-inch hull with the familiar belted Holland head. It had greater capacity than the .308 Norma, but bullets had to be seated deep to clear standard magazines. No matter. My elk hunter surveys in the 1990s showed it trailing only the .30-06 and 7mm Remington Magnum in popularity! As a 180-grain bullet at 3,100 fps is hard to beat for elk hunting, I've used the .300 Winchester often. Seventeen years ago Don Snyder carried it on his quest for a bighorn ram. One evening at 13,000 feet, he and his partner spied a superb animal, but with no approach they could only watch while night drew its curtain. They were climbing before dawn, and at daybreak found the ram—plus eight others. Again the hunters were pinned down. Three hours later they

crawled near enough for a shot. Alas, when Don triggered his .300, it misfired! His second cartridge sent a 150-grain bullet through the ram's vitals. With a B&C score of 195, Snyder's is one of the five-best bighorns ever taken in Colorado.

Arguably we didn't need another potent .30 when in the mid 1980s Don Allen announced his .300 Dakota on trimmed .404 Jeffery brass. Until then, .300 magnums had all descended from the .375 H&H. At 2.54 inches, the rimless Dakota hull is shorter than the .300 Winchester's but holds more powder. In 1996, Weatherby raised the bar with its .30-378, on the belted .378 Magnum whose 1953 debut had put Roy on the hunt for his own magnum rifle action. To everyone's surprise, orders for Mark Vs in .30-378 poured in. (The only cartridge to challenge it ballistically: John Lazzeroni's 7.82 Warbird, on McMillan's action.) The .30-378 with 165-grain Nosler Ballistic Tips at 3,500

fps hurls a ton of smash past 500 yards!

Remington joined the clique in 1998 with its .300 Ultra Mag on the .404 Jeffery. The Ultra Mag's rebated rim fits the .532 bolt face standard for Holland hulls. The cartridge holds about 13-percent more powder than the .300 Weatherby but yields about the same speed (as Norma-loaded Weatherbys): 3,250 fps with 180-grain bullets.

The .300 Winchester Short Magnum arrived in 2000, first of a family of WSMs. Its 2.10-inch hull is short enough to work in actions for the .308 Winchester. But with a base .555 in diameter, the WSM is wider

than a .308. In capacity and ballistically, the WSM matches the belted .300 Winchester Magnum.

Remington followed its .300 RUM in 2002 with a frisky short .30 to compete with the .300 WSM. I think mine was the first elk taken by a .300 Remington Short Action Ultra Mag. Late to the party and slightly smaller than the .300 WSM, it's less popular. There's no appreciable ballistic difference between the two.

The .300 Ruger Compact Magnum, introduced by Hornady in 2008 with a companion .338 RCM, arrived to wring magnum velocities from 20-inch barrels. Inspired by the .375 Ruger, the RCMs share its .532 head and base. Shoulder angles are 30 degrees; case capacities average 68 and 72 grains of water. By comparison, .30-06 hulls hold about 68 grains, .300 WSM cases 79. You can sneak four RCMs into most three-round WSM magazines.

Mitch Mittelstaedt, who headed the RCM project, explained that new proprietary powders tighten pressure curves, so the .300 RCM matches traditional .30 magnums from ordinary barrels but doesn't lose as much

enthusiasm in carbines. "Figure a loss of 170 fps when .300 WSM barrels are lopped from 24 to 20 inches. RCMs gave up only about 100." He added that Hornady uses slightly faster powder behind its lead-free GMX load than behind jacketed bullets "because the GMX intrudes enough to reduce capacity." My chance to take the .300 RCM and Ruger's Compact Magnum rifle afield came in British Columbia's Bella Coola country. The moose were winning until the last day, when I spied the flicker of an antler in open timber. When the bull paused, I sent a 150-grain GMX 105 yards. The shoulder-shot moose fell and did not move.

Hornady engineer Dave Emary gave lever-rifle enthusiasts greater reach with soft polymer tips on pointed bullets in LeverEvolution ammunition. In 2007 he designed a new lever-action cartridge. At 1.92 inches, the .308 Marlin Express hull is slightly shorter than its parent's, the .307 Winchester. Special ball powders hold .308 ME pressure to 47,000 psi, while at 2,600 fps its 160-grain FTX bullets chase the .308 Winchester. They carry 1,200 ft. lbs. to 400 yards. Early in its life I used the .308 ME on elk.

Most recently, a very powerful .30 emerged from Norma's lab in Sweden. Like the .338 Norma Magnum, it's on a shortened .338 Lapua hull. Though at 2.49 inches, .300 (and .338) Norma brass is the same length as a .30-06's, case capacity is much greater. Long Berger hollow-point bullets, which exit at 2,985 fps, give the .300 a loaded length of 3.40 inches, nearly .1 greater than that of the .30-06.

Myriad wildcat rounds have appeared since the .30-40 Krag started shooters down the 30-caliber trail 125 years ago. You could argue that many are redundant—ditto a generous handful of commercial .30s! But hunters worldwide have warmed to a clan of cartridges once uniquely American. Short, efficient cases have joined the tall, raw-boned magnums post-dating the "ought-six" and "thutty-thutty." One type is as useful as the other. If anything, nimble rifles in .300 Savage and .308 Winchester now pull bills from my palm more often than do sub-minute .30s hurling bullets over Mach 3 to flatten moose an arctic valley away. Indeed, there's a .30 for every purpose. The enduring task is choosing just one! ■



Weatherby's .30-378 is the top 30-caliber predator! More than needed for elk? It brought this smile!



Current interest in long-range shooting affects cartridge and bullet design. Big .30s excel at distance.