WAYNE C. VAN ZWOLL
B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
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The Gently Lethal .243

Old enough for Medicare, it's been upstaged by upstarts like the 6.5 Creedmoor. But are they better?

This nimble New Ultralight Arms rifle by Wilson Combat weighs only 5-1/2 pounds but recoils gently.

Wayne's first 6mm was a Remington Model 722 in .244, like this. The 722 later chambered the .243.

"I have two 6.5 Creedmoors, 20- and 22-inch barrels."

Either would be my intro to the latest rendition of the Ultralight Arms rifle developed by Melvin Forbes. After Melvin retired, production continued under new management and the shingle of New Ultralight Arms. Then that enterprise stumbled. Wilson Combat, maker of upscale 1911 pistols and AR rifles, had just given Melvin's fine rifles another chance.

"There's also a .243 with a 22-inch barrel."

"That's even better," I said. My heart goes out to cartridges with patina.

The .243 Winchester dates to 1955, when company engineers necked down the .308. But its roots wind back to post-WW II wildcatting. California's Fred Huntington, Jr., born in Oroville in 1912, didn't take up his father's laundry business after high school. He chose instead to swage .224 bullets and jacket them with spent .22 rimfire hulls. Then he began manufacturing dies. After using a set, Capt. Grosvenor Wotkyns, who had pioneered the .22 Hornet, suggested Fred name his dies Rock Chuck Bullet Swages. In 1943 Fred founded RCBS to make handloading hardware.

Huntington developed what he called the .243 Rock Chucker cartridge on the .257 Roberts case, giving it a steeper 32-degree shoulder. *Field & Stream* shooting editor Warren Page, a benchrest shooter as well as a hunter, had a similar 6mm wildcat. With Remington's Mike Walker, he'd developed the .243 Page Pooper on .308 brass. In 1953 Page wrote that he "wouldn't fall over dead if sometime there were a commercial cartridge using that [.243] bullet diameter...."

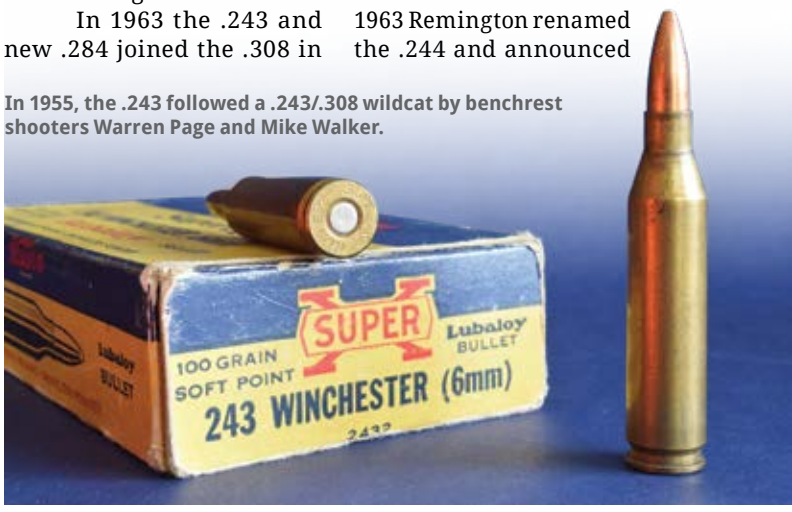
Two years later, his prophesy came true—twice. Remington fielded the .244, essentially the Rock Chucker with a 26-degree shoulder. Winchester's .308-based .243 maintained a 20-degree shoulder. The first .244 factory loads featured 75- and 90-grain bullets; Winchester chose 80- and 100-grain loads for its .243. While the .244's case was longer, with greater powder capacity, heavy bullets seated for short rifle actions whittled its ballistic advantage to just under 100 fps.

My first 6mm rifle, picked up at a gun show, was a second-hand Remington Model 722 in .244. At that time, my net worth had stalled south of four figures. When the .244 joined the 722's chambering roster in 1957, the rifle had retailed for $93.35. Remington listed it in .243 beginning in 1960. Two years later, the 722 was replaced by the flossier Model 700.

Winchester first offered the .243 in its bolt-action Model 70 and lever-action Model 88 rifles. The 70's Featherweight version emerged in 1952, with the debut of the .308 cartridge, which was offered only in Featherweight rifles except on special order. Winchester cataloged the .243 in Standard, Varmint, and Featherweight Model 70s.

In 1963 the .243 and new .284 joined the .308 in Winchester's Model 100 autoloader, introduced in 1960. The Model 100 shared the sleek profile of the Model 88, but unlike the 88 survived the purge of 1963, which mothballed some firearms and changed the way others (notably the Models 70 and 94) were manufactured. The Model 100 trundled on until 1973, some rifles coming from Japan's Miroku factory.

From its inception, the .244 trailed the .243 in sales. It was plagued by reports the 1-in-12 rifling standard in .244 barrels was too slow to stabilize the 100-grain bullets deer hunters wanted to use. Sages blessed the 1-in-10 twist of .243 barrels. In 1963 Remington renamed the .244 and announced



In 1955, the .243 followed a .243/.308 wildcat by benchrest shooters Warren Page and Mike Walker.

a 100-grain factory load. It became the 6mm Remington in Model 700s with barrels rifled 1-in-9. But the .243 proved the champ at market. Savage and Sako built lever-actions in .243. Remington listed it (and the .244/6mm) in Model 760/7600 pumps and 740/742/7400 autoloaders. Ruger chambered its No. 1 in .243 (also 6mm).

Both cartridges have treated me well. Crawling through sage a few years ago, I ran out of cover well shy of a whitetail buck looking my way. All of Wyoming lay open beyond him. He had no reason to drift toward me or even stay put. As we each considered options, I settled the crosswire a hand's-width high behind his shoulder. At the Remington's snap, the deer collapsed.

Many moons earlier, a pronghorn had delivered the same imperative. Sneaking and peeking for most of a morning, I was out of water. Noon's sun was baking the Red Desert. Bellied onto a low ridge, I steadied my rifle. In the 4x Lyman, mirage was chowder-thick, swamping the image of the distant buck. Too far? The bullet had 20 inches to fall when the .244 cracked. The buck ran off through the chowder. A faint tap floated back. But where had the bullet struck? Another softnose up the spout, I squirmed about to keep the animal in sight. Its stride stiffened. It stopped. The wind was steady, kneading the target image. I shaved a bit of elevation, allowed a foot and a half for drift. The crosswire was on the buck's nose when the .244 spat. The pronghorn wilted into the mirage, heart-shot. My first bullet had lanced its withers.

The .243 is a flat-shooting cartridge. Given a 200-yard zero, a 90-grain Hornady SST or ELD-X launched at 3,150 fps falls only a tad over 6 inches at 300 yards. Hornady lists speeds of 3,925 and 3,580 for its 58- and 75-grain V-Max bullets, putting them less than 5 inches low at 300 and only 14 inches low at 400! (My chronograph readings for that 58-grain load aren't as optimistic. Still....)

In another life, when deep snow idled the '63 Peterbilt that helped me shuttle logs from Oregon forests, I handloaded 80- and 90-grain Sierras and hunted coyotes for pelts. A Model 70 in .243, with a 6x Leupold, proved just the ticket. A Ruger No. 1B is now an alternate. Same loads, same scope.

Much of the charm of the .243 lies in its mild recoil—10 to 20 percent less than the nudge of the civil 6.5 Creedmoor. Recently I spent most of a day chronographing loads in a lightweight .243. It imposed none of the battle fatigue that sets in with cartridges as ordinary as the .30-06. Groups stayed tight, not because a .243 shoots better hot and dirty than do more violent rifles, but because a .243 doesn't make me flinch.

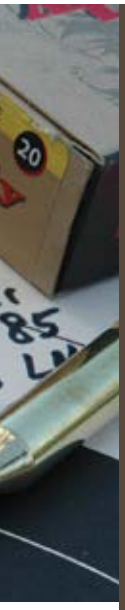
Some years ago, I was tasked with guiding a slightly built youngster to an elk. His father offered up a .30-06 but told me the lad was most familiar with a 6mm Remington. At my urging, he brought the 6mm. Sneaking up on an elk quartering off, the boy got steady at about 100 yards, then waited until the animal turned a bit. I nodded. His 95-grain Nosler Partition rent the elk's heart. It fell before it could run.

Wayne shot this 1-MOA group with a 5-1/2-pound Savage rifle. Such accuracy isn't unusual with .243s.

Not that .243-class cartridges are ideal for elk hunting. Even husky deer can shrug off peripheral hits that, with heavier bullets, might have ended the hunt. Once I bumped a big whitetail from creek-side brush. Declining to fire at the running animal, I dashed after it, hoping it would re-appear at a civilized pace between loops in the creek. Instead, it surprised me up close at a kink in the cover. Out of breath, I couldn't control the rifle offhand. It fired just as the reticle bounded off-target. Frantic, I banged off two more shots and succeeded only in shooting badly faster. The buck struggled for footing as I fumbled for cartridges. Finally, a bullet found vitals. A ragged climax, but hardly an indictment of the .243. Twice in that drainage it had downed mature bucks handily.

A caveat worth keeping in mind with a .243 is to avoid shots that beg


Ideal pronghorn cartridge? The .243! A 200-yard zero puts .243 bullets 6 inches low at 300, 19 at 400.



BALLISTIC COMPARISONS, MID-SIZE 6MMS (DATA FROM HORNADY)

.243 Winchester, 95-grain SST

	muzzle	100 yds	200 yds	300 yds.	400 yds	500 yds
velocity, fps	3185	2908	2649	2404	2172	1953
energy, ft-lb	2140	1784	1480	1219	995	804
arc, inches	+1.5	+1.3	0	-6.3	-18.6	-38.3

6mm Remington, 95-grain SST

	muzzle	100 yds	200 yds	300 yds.	400 yds	500 yds
velocity, fps	3235	2955	2693	2445	2211	1990
energy, ft-lb	2207	1842	1530	1261	1031	835
arc, inches	+1.5	+1.3	0	-6.1	-18.0	-37.0

6mm Creedmoor, 108-grain ELD Match

	muzzle	100 yds	200 yds	300 yds.	400 yds	500 yds
velocity, fps	2960	2784	2615	2453	2296	2144
energy, ft-lb	2101	1859	1640	1443	1264	1103
arc, inches	+1.5	+1.5	0	-6.6	-19.0	-38.0

penetration. Stout jacketed bullets like Nosler's Partition and Swift's Scirocco, and their increasingly popular all-copper counterparts, drive deep; but their frontal area doesn't come near matching that of slightly bigger bullets. Add a 30- or 40-percent weight advantage (say, for 130-grain .270 or 140-grain .280 bullets), and the .243's "stopping effect" lags well behind that of bullets of the same sectional density and starting speed but an edge of just .03 or .04 in diameter.

I once hurried an easy poke at a mule deer about to move out of a shot alley about 200 yards off. A miss! Struggling uphill in deep snow, I caught another glimpse as the buck opened the gap between us. Prone, heart hammering, I waited for the deer to pause, then loosed another bullet. I shouldn't have, as the shot angle was too steep. That .243 bullet and the next both struck, but neither drove deep enough to kill quickly. The follow-up took most of an hour. My first hit with a heavier bullet would likely have downed that deer. Packing up and going home after the miss would have been another intelligent option.

In the 6mm tribe, the .243 is mid-size. Frothier kin date to the 1920s, when Holland and Holland of London unveiled the .240 Belted Nitro Express. It sent 100-grain .245-diameter bullets at 3,000 fps. A flanged load for double guns came in at 2,900. Purdey introduced its .246 Flanged (100-grain .253 bullets at 2,950 fps) two years before the 1923 debut of the .242 Vickers Rimless Nitro Express (100-grain .249 bullets at 2,800 fps). Meanwhile in Germany, Halbe and Gerlich made rimmed and rimless versions of the .244 Halger, claiming 3,700 fps from 87-grain .243 bullets. In 1955 Holland and Holland necked its .300 Belted Rimless Magnum to .244 to burn even more powder.

Weatherby's .240 Magnum, announced in 1968, runs with the fastest 6mms, but its case has the .473 rim of the

Swift's Scirocco drives deep. A fine deer bullet, it's lethal on elk for hunters selective with their shots.

WHY NOT HEAVIER GAME BULLETS?

"Heavy" bullets for 6mms run from 103 to 108 grains in weight. Most, save the 105-grain Speer, are not for hunting but for long-range target shooting. Oddly enough, one of the earliest 6mms in the U.S. fired 112-grain .244 bullets. Also called the .236 Navy, the 6mm Lee Navy shoved these long missiles at 2,560 fps, a modest clip, given the cartridge's powder capacity. Modern propellants would certainly have sent them faster. Military contracts generated 15,000 Model 1895 Lee straight-pull bolt rifles, with steep 1-in-7-1/2 rifling.

Taking on more weight, small-diameter bullets quickly become too long to be practical, begging very fast spin and hiking pressures with increased bore contact, also intruding on powder space in short rifle actions. At weights heavier than 100 grains, 6.5mm bullets become a better choice. Hornady's 103-grain 6mm ELD-X bullet has a sectional density of .249, while a 143-grain 6.5mm ELD-X's is .293. The G1 ballistic coefficient of the 103-grain 6mm bullet is .512, that of the 143-grain 6.5mm .623.

Perhaps that's why, early in the smokeless era, many armies chose 6.5mm cartridges for infantry arms. The 6mm Lee Navy died in 1935. The .220 Swift arrived soon thereafter on its semi-rimmed hull.

.30-06. It cycles in standard actions while hurling 100-grain Nosler Partitions at 3,400 fps to land 1,000 ft-lbs at 500 yards! In 2004 Winchester tested the practical limits of short powder columns with its .243 Super Short Magnum. It starts 95-grain bullets at 3,250 fps; but its squat case feeds poorly.

Target shooters choose efficiency over scorching muzzle velocities. Cases are smaller, for to-the-neck powder charges. The 6x45, circa 1965, is a necked-up .223, and a benchrest champ that prompted some hunters to re-barrel their AR-15s. The 6x47 on the .222 Magnum case dates to 1974, but it got the market's blessing as the 6x47 Swiss Match in 2001. It excels with heavy (107-grain) bullets at 300 meters. During the 1970s, benchresters Lou Palmisano and Ferris Pindell necked the 7.62x39 Soviet to produce the 6mm PPC. Mike Walker's 6mm Remington BR—a shortened .308 case with a small primer—appeared in 1978, nine years before PPCs went commercial. The 6mm International (6mm/.250 Savage) dates to the 1940s. After tweaks by Texas marksman David Tubb, it became the 6XC. Hornady's recent ARC (Advanced Rifle Cartridge) has a short, AR-friendly case. But its 108-grain .243 ELD Match bullets scoot downrange at 2,750 fps and still clock 1,971 fps at 500 yards!

The .243 Winchester's ablest rival may be the 6mm Creedmoor. In 2007 the .30 T/C bucked the trend to bigger cases and powder charges. With Superformance powder, the .30 T/C beats .308 factory loads off the blocks, despite a 3.5-percent capacity edge for the .308. Necked to .264, the .30 T/C became the 6.5 Creedmoor. In 2018 the 6mm Creedmoor was another step down in diameter. Like its parent, the 6mm Creedmoor case is quite short to its 30-degree shoulder. Long, ballistically efficient bullets can be properly seated without exceeding magazine or throat limits in short-action rifles. From the 6mm Creedmoor, 103-grain ELD-X and 108-grain ELD Match bullets at 3,050 and 2,960 fps stay supersonic past 1,300 yards. These bullets beg fast spin: 1-in-7½ to 1-in-8. A Proof Research barrel on an indoor range introduced me to the 6mm Creedmoor. The screen registered just one hole after two shots. A third barely enlarged it. I would have quit right there, but my pal would have none of it. The next bullets egged the hole to .2.

Few hunting rifles can match that level of precision, and I've yet to meet a hunter who can hold it under field conditions. The 6mm Creedmoor is a fetching cartridge, but over the last seven decades, Winchester's .243 has toppled lots of game from affordable rifles in the hands of unremarkable hunters like me. Within the family of sixes, its field record is darned near unapproachable. ■

With 95- to 105-grain softpoints, the .243 is deadly on whitetails!

This buck fell to a Howa rifle in .243.

LEFT TO RIGHT: .243 Win., 6mm Cm, 6mm Rem. They're ballistic cousins; the 6mm Cm excels with long bullets.