

Rifle

The Magazine for Shooters

January-February 1973
Number 25

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The **SECOND AMENDMENT: Prelude and Intent**

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Rifle

The Magazine for Shooters

"Only accurate rifles are interesting"

- Col. Townsend Whelen

Volume 5, Number 1
January-February 1973

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Cover

A perfect outdoor prone smallbore target is "a thing of beauty and a joy forever," particularly if you've shot it with "irons." The sights are a Redfield Mark 8 fitted with a Gehmann Iris Diopter and a Womack dual-range front sight. Photo by Richard L. Aldis, using a Graphic View, 1 second at f. 32.



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Loading for Bear & other critters

by John Wootters

THERE IS A GOOD DEAL to be said for the much-vaunted long range, flat-shooting cartridges of today for modern big game hunting, but sometimes I think entirely too much is said for and about them.

Several years ago, in preparing for a hunt for pronghorn antelope in West Texas, I devoted about a month and powder by the pint to working up good 400-yard loads for two different rifles. I could tell you the bullet's relationship to the line of sight at any range, to the millimeter. It happens, however, that I prefer to stalk pronghorns the hard way, and I was able to crawl within 125 yards of the buck I killed on that trip for a standing, broadside shot at an unaltered animal. After all that load development, it

turned out that I could have made the kill as easily with an iron-sighted .30-30 carbine with factory loads.

Only last month (September 1972), hunting in the Ketchika Range of British Columbia's Cassiar Mountains with Bill Ruger, Jr., and gun scribe Skeeter Skelton, I slew a near-record Stone ram. Again, I was all primed for a cross-canyon shot with a 7mm Remington Magnum with the 150-grain Nosler bullet, loaded hot and zeroed for a point-blank range of more than 300 yards. The ram was located from camp, and I had a five-hour stalk to get at him, the last mile and a quarter consisting of some of the most heart-breaking physical effort I ever put into a hunt. However, when the target presented himself, he was within easy

.45-70 range — only 85 yards away! In conversation with more experienced sheep hunters I've heard that such ranges are really more the rule than the exception.

Again, a couple of seasons back, I marched into the mountains of western Colorado with a long-snouted Seven Mag tuned to the 10th degree . . . and knocked over a handsome mulie buck at 100 long paces and a young bull elk at approximately 90 yards.

All of us know, of course, that about 95 percent of all whitetailed deer are taken at less than the length of a football field, most of them much less. The operative word there may be "taken," on the theory that lots of whitetails shot at beyond 100 yards are missed. Nevertheless, it is rarely necessary to have a long-range whack at the eastern deer.

Some may argue that I may be a somewhat more skilled stalker than average, but, flattering as that is, I'd have to deny it. I may attach more importance to getting as close as reasonably possible to a big game animal than some hunters, but I really doubt that any extra degree of skill is involved. The point is that I've hunted the length and breadth of the continent for most species of big game, in almost every kind of terrain from close to the Arctic Circle to even closer to the Equator, and I have very rarely had a truly long shot demanded of me. Like most varminters, I'm certain that my longest shots have occurred on jackrabbits and coyotes.

Perhaps my experience is atypical. They tell me that as hunting pressure increases on the major species, the animals become wilder and move back into more remote, harder-to-stalk country, and that makes sense. Still, year after year, I find myself taking far more game at hand-grenade ranges than at howitzer ranges.

It goes without saying, of course, that any cartridge and load developed for precision shooting at long range will do the job just as well up close, provided proper bullets are used. Nor will I abandon the practice of working up hunting loads and sight-settings for the longest feasible distances, regardless of terrain or species.

But I receive a fair amount of

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reader mail containing questions like this one from a recent letter: "I've hunted deer and black bear for about ten years, but now I'm planning a trip to Montana for elk and mule deer. I intend to trade in my .308 for a .264, 7mm Magnum, or .300 Mag. Which would you advise?"

In the first place, it always makes me shudder to hear of someone who is about to get rid of an old favorite rifle with which he's been successful in the hunting field. In just about nine cases out of ten, the new rifle — however impressive its ballistics — will not be quite as satisfactory, and the hunter will wish he had his old one back. I know the feeling, and I'm sure most of you do, too. In the second place, I cannot remember a single big-game shot in my 30-years-plus of hunting that I couldn't have made just as well with a .308 WCF as with whatever rifle I happened to be using. Some of them didn't work out too well with whatever I was shooting, and there have been a few on which I'd have tried to change the angle or impact point with a .308,

but I certainly wouldn't have felt handicapped. Indeed, the same could be said for many cartridges less capable than the .308 — the .300 Savage, .35 Remington, even the .30-30 with top handloads in a box-magazined rifle like the Remington 788.

I grant you that if and when I go up against my first Alaskan brown bear, I'll be happier clutching something with a bit more whomp than a .308, regardless of range. That, however, is one of the most specialized hunting situations available in North America, and one of the few imaginable in which the hunter is dealing with a beast which has both the muscle and the will to kill him if things go wrong.

Such cases tend to cloud the issue at hand, and really do not bear upon the man who has a perfectly good .280 Remington, for example, and wants me to tell him to trade it off on a 7mm Magnum, or the Easterner plotting his first pronghorn hunt who doubts the capability of his old .30-06. I sometimes wonder if the ink we gun writers give to the magnum num-

bers doesn't tend to distort the relationships of these hot cartridges to the cooler ones, or whether articles on long-range shooting may not occasionally fail to point out that many of the older, standard rounds produce just about all of the trajectory and energy required for all but a tiny fraction of today's big-game opportunities.

This is not to be construed as downgrading the magnums. Most of them are quite definitely improvements over their older cousins of similar caliber but smaller case capacity. The question is one of degree: is a ten percent ballistic improvement enough to warrant abandoning a familiar, proven hunting rifle in which one has the confidence of many seasons and many kills? Maybe, but not very often — and especially not if the change is made on the basis of published reports of super long-range chances at game in distant places. Those are the shots that are written up *because* they're dramatic and unusual. After all, if they were routine, they wouldn't merit the magazine space. —

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Riflemen Prefer Prairie Dogs

By Dan Flores



ONE OF THE NICEST THINGS about varmint hunting is that regardless of where you live there are always huntable populations of some type of pest nearby, be it woodchuck, coyote, or the common crow. It has always struck me as somewhat unfair, however, that western varmint hunters have such a wide variety and abundance of pests available for off-season shooting — not the least of which is the wary and gregarious prairie dog.

I grew up, and still live, in a transitional area between East and West. So I've had the pleasure of sampling the best summer hunting in both sections. Nowhere have I found tougher targets, or finer long range shooting, than in the prairie dog towns of the West. I live over 200 miles from the nearest dog towns, yet I go after the little sod pooches several times a year.

The prairie dog is a fascinating little critter. Actually a species of ground squirrel, prairie dogs are found in the arid plains and plateaus of the American West. They range from roughly the

A "spooked" prairie dog, resurfacing just enough to see what's going on, presents an extremely difficult target — particularly if he's out around 200 yards.

96th meridian nearly to the Pacific coast, and from Mexico into Canada. Nearly a third of the states in the continental U. S. list the prairie dog as a pest. Montana, Wyoming, and New Mexico probably take top honors as the leading prairie dog states, but the shooting is excellent in scattered locations over most of the trans-Mississippi West.

Prairie dogs are among the toughest of all varmints to bag because of their suspicious nature and their small size. Young dogs are sometimes trusting to the point of foolhardiness, but the adult dogs, particularly those which have had some experience with shooters, are extremely wary. Even a full grown dog is not a large target at long range; an old one may measure 12 inches from head to tail, but rarely will he be over three or four inches wide. The target area, of course, is even less, and does not leave much room for holding error or misreading of wind or mirage at long range.

In the past few years there has been much talk, particularly among Easterners, about the scarcity of prairie dogs. It is quite true that the prairie dog population today is only a shadow of

what it once was, but prairie dogs are far from being endangered. In agricultural and ranching areas they still require controlling because they are extremely destructive to range land and some crops.

Until recently poisoning was the most common method for controlling the prolific prairie dogs, but state legislatures in some western states have passed temporary injunctions against this method of control. Although these bills have met with violent opposition from landowners, the reasoning behind them is sound. Too many dog towns were completely decimated by poison, and innocent forms of wildlife (and some domestic animals) often suffered.

Many landowners are just beginning to realize what varmint hunters have known all along — that shooting is far and away the best method for keeping prairie dogs under control in agricultural areas. Today, getting permission to hunt prairie dogs is even easier than it was formerly. This is important because the bulk of prairie dog towns are located on private acreage. Unless you are a local resident and know ranchers personally, game wardens are



the key to locating good shooting. They know which landowners are having trouble with prairie dogs, and they'll be more than happy to point you in the right direction.

Once you find a good location, the fun begins. Unless you luck upon a town which hasn't been shot in a while, the prairie dogs will be skittish and you probably won't be able to approach them very closely. We try to set up on a hillside across from, and preferably above, a town whenever possible. In flat country a good technique is to set up smack in the middle of a town so you get shooting all around the perimeter. Space your shots and you can work on one dog town an entire afternoon.

Any long-range varmint shooting is challenging, precision work, and prairie dog hunting is no exception. Most of the hunters I shoot with take their varminting seriously, and their equipment reflects this attitude. We use heavy barreled varmint weight rifles with high power scopes for most of our prairie dogging. Sometimes we break this rule to get in summer practice with our deer rifles, but this is the exception.

Until recently I used a Winchester M-70 .22-250 with a 10X Lyman for 90 percent of my shooting at prairie dogs. This rifle, with 33 grains of 3031 behind 53-grain Hornady Match hollow points, is good for half-MOA 5-shot strings at 100 yards. The flat bottomed receiver of the M-70 action makes bedding fairly simple, and the .22 Varminter is an easy cartridge to work up accurate loads with. On quiet days, shooting over sandbags or with a bipod, this heavy barreled M-70 is one of the most effective prairie dog rifles I have used.

This rifle has many 300-yard-plus kills to its credit, and one hit at a yardage figure that I hesitate to cite for fear of being accused of exaggeration, if not outright fabrication. A companion and I had been working an Oklahoma dog town for a couple of hours on this particular morning, and things had begun to get pretty slack.

The slightly rolling plains of western Oklahoma — typical prairie dog country — are almost always windy, and often scorching hot — circumstances which, when combined with the extremely small vital area of a prairie dog, challenge the abilities of even the most accomplished rifleman.



Hunter-wise prairie dogs — as are most of those today due to the poisoning of most "towns" and increasing hunting pressure — are extremely wary. This pair, having seen the hunters, will be down their holes in another second. But even after several shots have been fired in a "town" the dogs will be back up, presenting another target — but it will be very small until the prairie dog is certain that he is not in danger.

Then my partner spotted a prairie dog on a mound so far away that even through the binoculars he wasn't much more than a tiny brown speck. I had the .22-250 along, and more for something to do than any thought that I might actually score a hit, I decided to let fly. I held about three feet over the dog and about a foot into the wind and pressed the trigger. Either that was the unluckiest prairie dog in the state of Oklahoma (and possibly in the whole world), or else the gods chose that moment to smile on me. It seemed like a minute after he had toppled off the

mound that the ripe-pumpkin *plop* floated back to us. My companion, an experienced varmint hunter, was, needless to say, visibly shaken and impressed, but after years of watching me miss far simpler shots he eventually took it for what it was — the result of a modicum of skill and a wheelbarrowful of luck.

Actually, I consider about 350 yards to be my outer limit for any degree of consistency on prairie dogs, and that only under near ideal conditions. When the wind is blowing, which it usually



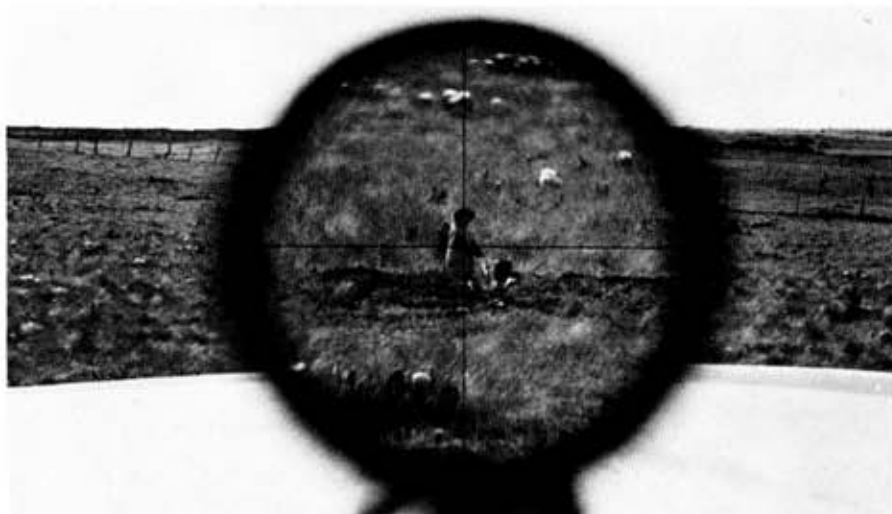
Even with a 9X scope at fairly close range, the prairie dog presents a small target — add another 150 yards and only the finest in precision equipment and marksmanship will do.

is, I leave the .22-250 at home and use a heavier caliber.

The .243 is one of my favorite all around varmint cartridges and medium sized game cartridges as well. At present, however, I don't own a varmint-weight rifle in any 6mm caliber. My Featherweight M-70 in .243 is a fine rifle and is capable of excellent accuracy, but I prefer heavy barreled rifles for prairie dogging. I do a good bit of shooting with a friend's Remington M-700 heavy barrel in .243, and it outperforms both my .22-250 and my sporter weight .243 in the dog towns.

The big advantage the 6mm's and .25's have over the .22's for this type of shooting is their ability to buck wind. If bullets having a ballistic coefficient of over .310 are used, a 6mm or .25-06 will just about double the effective range of the .22 centerfires in normal windy conditions — a distinct advantage.

My present *numero uno* prairie dog rifle is a .25-06 built around an M-70 action and stock. The barrel is a 26-inch target weight stainless steel Shilen



scoped with a 10X Weaver, although my plans include a 12X Unertl for it. After some judicious loading, I came up with a combination of 46 grains of 4064 behind the 100-grain Sierra which will beat half-MOA for five shots if I do my part. Velocity is only about 3,200, but with the heavy bullet and its superb accuracy, this rifle is pure poison on dogs.

Scopes for prairie dog rifles have to be of considerable magnification. A 6X is the absolute minimum, and this is good only for 200 yards or so, even in good light. To me, 10 or 12-power seems just right. Scopes with more magnification are sometimes nearly im-

possible to use on days when mirage is heavy. I once tried to use a 20 power target scope on prairie dogs during the middle of August, and it nearly drove me mad. When I did manage to locate a dog with the limited field, it would appear to be waltzing along about 10 feet off the ground. Variables are a neat solution for getting all the magnification that mirage will permit — providing the impact point is uniform at all powers. The 3-9X all purpose scopes are fair; better are the 4-12X and 6-18X types, primarily because these have provisions for eliminating parallax at all distances.

Other important gear (the market is



Any of these cartridges can be used on prairie dogs — with varying degrees of success, depending upon ranges and conditions. From left are the 5mm RMR, .22WMR and .22 Hornet, each limited to relatively close shots; the .222 Remington, .223 Remington, .222 Remington Magnum, .225 Winchester, .22-250 and .220 Swift, all of which can be effective to beyond 300 yards, with the nod going to

the higher velocity numbers; the .243 Winchester and 6mm/.244 Remington, favorites for long range under windy conditions; and such "biggies" as the .25-06, .264 Winchester Magnum, .270 Winchester and 7mm Remington Magnum which are sometimes used in deserted areas for extremely long shots or for gaining greater familiarity with a deer hunting rifle.



Prairie dog shooting sometimes turns out to be a community project, as here when the landowner and relatives turned out to watch. If the grass is short, as early in the year, most shooting is prone, or from a sandbag rest. In higher grass the sitting position or a raised rest, such as the camera tripod and sandbag arrangement, is frequently used.

loaded with attractions for varminters) are things like binoculars, spotting scopes, etc. Binoculars are a must. I generally use 7x35 glasses, but have found those of eight and ten power better suited for this kind of work. A spotting scope, although not absolutely necessary, is both fun and effective. With one man spotting and another shooting, corrections in hold can be made and hits can be achieved over phenomenal distances.

A couple of years ago a friend and I were shooting a large town near Elk City, Oklahoma. I was spotting for him when he got off a shot that hit under an old dog — just barely under — so that the bullet fragments launched said prairie dog a good five feet into the air. “Hit,” he cried dramatically. “Miss,” said I, and between shots the rest of the afternoon time and oratory were dedicated to debate. I don’t think we ever settled it.

Prairie dog shooting is set-up shooting for the most part. In other words, you’ll take your shots from one location, and aiming can be done in a deliberate manner. The prone position is best and is often feasible, particularly with the use of sandbags or a bipod. Thus a rifle rest of some sort is another piece of equipment you’d be advised to lug along.

Aside from judging range and bullet drop, two of the most serious problems facing the prairie dog hunter are wind drift and mirage. It seems as if the

elements are constantly conspiring against the poor hunter to produce miss after miss. If the wind isn’t blowing at gale force, then heat waves boiling up from the ground nearly obliterate a dog’s image through a high powered scope.

It’s virtually impossible for one shooter to tell another how to judge wind velocity and bullet drift, or how to allow for a left-running mirage. Actually, what is required is an intimate knowledge of the characteristics of the cartridge being used and plenty of experience with the rifle-cartridge combo under adverse conditions. Compe-

tition shooting is perhaps the best teacher of the effects of wind and mirage, since the exact amount of impact shift is painfully visible. Shooters new to varmint hunting or bench rest shooting are often astounded at the effect a slight cross wind produces on a bullet in flight. The time to learn such things is when shooting paper, prairie dogs or chucks.

There’s little doubt that prairie dog hunting is considerably changed today from what it was even a couple of decades ago. I remember reading several years back about a fellow who claimed to have burned up something like 800 rounds of .22-250 ammunition on a weekend prairie dog hunt in Montana. In some places such things may still be possible (although perhaps unethical), but for the most part we are going to have to be content with shooting fewer prairie dogs and deriving more satisfaction from each shot. To me, this means ultra long range, precision shooting. Personally, I’d rather hit one prairie dog at 300 yards than ten at 200 anyway. Mass poisoning of dog towns has taken its toll, and although farmers, ranchers, and game departments still consider prairie dogs first rate pests, shooters are going to have to exercise some discretion. The sport has changed, and prairie dog hunters, of necessity, are going to have to change with it.

Dan Flores



Binoculars are an essential accessory for picking out targets during prairie dog shooting. A spotting scope adds to the game by allowing the hunting partner to observe the effectiveness of the shots.