

Ayoob on Firearms:

A 24/7 BACKWOODS HANDGUN

A handgun can come in awfully...well...*handy* at a backwoods homestead. You're puttering in the garden when a squirrel suitable for the pot makes his presence felt, or the weasel that's been raiding the hen-house pokes its head out of the bushes. There isn't time to go back in the house for a long gun. If only you'd had a sidearm on your hip...

There are more compelling moments. A female jogger is pounced and killed by a cougar. A man who has doubtless read in the books that black bears don't attack humans is attacked and killed by a black bear who apparently does not read. Some of our readers have much bigger bears than that in their neighborhoods. Some share their turf with poisonous snakes. More are probably bothered by feral or outlaw dogs than any other dangerous four-legged beast. And there is always the two-legged predator to worry about. A gun in the house won't help you if you can't get to it. The rural Clutter family was said to own rifles and shotguns. If so, they couldn't get at them when they were massacred by the murderers Truman Capote made infamous in his book "In Cold Blood."

Resolved: It can make sense for responsible adults in locations remote from assistance and possibly infested with lethally dangerous life forms to have a loaded handgun on their person where they can reach it.

Different authorities have taken different approaches. The great hunter and rifleman Jack O'Connor said that if he could own only one handgun, it would be the graceful .22 caliber target revolver known as the Smith &

Wesson K-22. Good for putting the turtle in turtle soup, but a bit light for the more dangerous fauna. Another great shooter and hunter, Elmer Keith, said the handgun he'd keep if he could have only one would be a Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum with four-inch barrel. Now, that's a tune I can march to. If I won the lottery and retired to a remote cabin, my daily wear would include my favorite version of Keith's pet revolver, the S&W Model 629 Mountain Gun.

However, like Keith, I've become habituated over decades to wearing a full size handgun at my hip during virtually all my waking hours. An outdoor person new to the armed lifestyle is likely to find the big .44 too heavy and bulky to wear 24/7. Most cops carry lighter guns than that, and can't wait to get the weight off their hips at the end of an eight to twelve hour shift. Therefore, the "always" gun for the backwoods person should be light and compact enough for constant carry.

There is also the matter of discretion. For people like Keith or me who have carried a gun for a living, the people we associate with us are used to us being armed. Your visitors from the city, the rural postman, and the yuppie who bought the parcel of land next door to yours may freak at the sight of a handgun worn openly on your hip. There's also the matter of going into town on errands and to catch up with neighbors over a cup of coffee. A century or so after the phrase was first uttered, we know that it's still bad taste to "frighten the horses." Therefore, the 24/7 backwoods handgun needs to be concealable in all circumstances where it is legal for the wearer to carry it so.



Massad Ayoob

Which leads me to a recommendation some might find unconventional.

The nominee is...

When you look at the job description above, it's hard to come up with a better "always" gun than the Ruger SP101, caliber .357 Magnum. I would choose the version with the 2¼-inch barrel. This will fit nicely in the pocket of jacket, pants, or overalls. It fits in the glove box of the smallest farm vehicle. It's compact enough for an ankle or boot holster.

No, you won't be dropping deer at a hundred yards with it. But if you've learned to shoot it well and you get a shot at a deer standing broadside to you at a quarter of that distance, you should be able to kill it cleanly with a lung cavity shot. We're not talking handgun hunting, here. We're talking an emergency utility handgun that's always with you. Hence, the short barrel.



Both for snag-free drawing from concealment and for civil liability reasons, author favors spurless hammer “double action only” model as issued by his police department (right) to conventional model (left).

Gun experts have long touted the .357 Magnum as the most versatile of handgun calibers, because a gun chambered for that round can also fire the .38 Special or, for that matter, the .38 Long Colt cartridge that the sport of Cowboy Action Shooting recently resurrected from obsolescence. Just how versatile is that? Let's take a look.

.357 versatility

Start with the .38 Special mid-range wadcutter, a flat-nose bullet weighing 148 grains and trundling out of the short barrel at something like 700 feet per second. Its sharp edges chop a clean hole in the full bullet diameter. There are those at the International Wound Ballistics Association who think that makes it just fine as a self-defense load against criminal assault. Certainly, it's the lightest kicking load you can put in a .38 Special or .357 Magnum revolver.

It's also hell for accurate. When the SP101 came out (in 1988, as a .38 Special) gun expert Wiley Clapp tested one with a Ransom machine rest. He put ten consecutive shots into a group that measured 1.33 inches, center to center. “This is superlative accuracy,” he wrote at the time in

Guns & Ammo. Who would argue?

The ammunition Wiley used that day was Federal Match. While preparing this article I shot some of the same stuff through my snub-nose SP101. Five shots, double action, two-hand standing went into an inch and three-quarters. The best three measured three quarters of an

inch. The group wasn't as good as the machine rest's, obviously, but it was damned impressive for a short barrel revolver that requires a long pull of the trigger for each shot. Some guns have great inherent mechanical accuracy, but don't let the shooter deliver it because the sights or the trigger pull aren't good enough. The little Ruger has a smooth double action trigger stroke, and big sights that are easy to hold on target. It's a user-friendly revolver in more ways than one. Within ten paces, the SP101 loaded with .38 wadcutters lets you nail a bushytail in the head for a painless kill that doesn't waste the key ingredient of squirrel stew.

Jack the power up a notch, to .38 Special defense loads. In a standard pressure round with mild recoil, experience tells me that you can't do better than the 125 grain Federal Nyclad. It's nowhere near as accurate as the wadcutter, but much more dynamic in flesh. It's the defense load of choice for people sensitive to “kick.”

Next up on the scale is +P .38 Special ammo. The 125 grain full- or partially-copper jacketed hot load has gotten rave reviews in some quarters,

but I'm one of many old-timers who prefer the FBI load conceptualized in 1972, a 158 grain all-lead semiwad-cutter hollowpoint at the accelerated velocity delivered by the +P pressures. With no tough copper jacket to peel back, the soft lead bullet almost always mushrooms, even when fired through short barrel guns and after passing through clothing. It kicks more than the lighter bullet +P loads, but I think the superior street-proven performance is worth it.

Then we get all the way up to the .357 Magnum. A 125 grain bullet that would be under a thousand feet per second in a +P .38 Special is running at 1400 to 1450 feet per second in the full Magnum loading when fired from a full size service revolver. Out of a snub, velocity drops to 1220 to 1300 foot-seconds or so. A generation of bad guys shot with this ammo out of the snub-nosed revolvers of detectives and off-duty cops never knew the difference. The 125 grain Magnum semi-jacketed hollowpoint earned a reputation for putting the bad guys down with a single hit better than any other load or caliber, irrespective of the barrel length of the revolver used.

This 125 grain Magnum load is what I would (and do) personally carry in the SP101 most of the time for defensive purposes. It's also devastating on vicious dogs. A friend of mine recently needed six fast shots with his .45 automatic to stop a charging German Shepherd, and another had to empty his high capacity 9mm into a big Chow that was attacking him before the beast gave up the ghost. But the combination of a hollow-nosed bullet about .357 inches in diameter, weighing 125 grains and traveling 1200 to 1400 feet per second has earned a reputation for fast, one-shot stops of the biggest and most vicious canines.

Those bullets go into flesh about ten to twelve inches and stop, with a dramatically wide wound channel

along the way. That's what makes them ideal for anti-personnel work against facing, erect bipeds, or for a shot through the brisket of an oncoming Hound of the Baskervilles, or to put through the breastbone of a mountain lion that's on top of you. If you're in big bear country, though, you'll need something that penetrates deeper.

In 1935, when Smith & Wesson introduced the .357 Magnum cartridge, the only available load was an all-lead semi-wadcutter bullet at a red-line velocity of 1500 feet per second. No responsible manufacturer loads that bullet to that high a velocity now. At the time, though, it went deep enough to kill the biggest grizzly and Kodiak bears, which admittedly was something of a stunt.

Father Hubbard, the legendary "Glacier Priest" of Alaska, killed many a large critter to help feed native families and his own group. He guided S&W's Douglas Wesson on the hunts in which both men shot enough big bears and moose with .357 Magnums to prove that they could cleanly kill such huge game. However, both used guns with barrel lengths ranging from 6 to 8³/₈ inches; remember that in a short barrel "pocket gun," you lose some velocity and therefore lose some power.

It takes a lot to ruin a bruin, and a .357 Magnum revolver is on the light side no matter how you cut it. Today's jacketed soft-nose 158 grain bullets will penetrate much deeper than any hollowpoint, and some specialty loads are available that go deeper yet. On an animal this big, with a skull this hard and thick, penetration is what you want. In my forays to Alaska thus far, I've been doing police training stuff or shooting trial stuff in the cities, and carried one or another .45 auto. When I go for myself and travel the boondocks, the .44 Magnum will be at my side...and my backup gun will be this SP101, loaded with deep-penetrating .357

Magnum GameStopper ammo by Pro-Load.

You'll have to look far and wide to find a more hard-headed creature than the Cape buffalo of Africa. Legendary international big game hunter Elgin Gates was treed by one, and saved his life by shooting it through the brain with armor-piercing bullets from his Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum. I believe it had a four-inch barrel. Today, such ammunition is forbidden to private citizens, but a load like the GameStopper should punch through the skull of the toughest animal that's likely to come after you in the United States.

Now, let's go back down the scales. Down the power scale, down the evolutionary scale, and down from critters that tower over you like bears to the ones that slither up and bite you on the calf. If you're in poisonous snake country, there is a very limited range at which you are likely to employ a firearm against said serpent.

If you see the snake at a distance, avoid it unless it's a matter of keeping your children safe and proactively destroying the creature. If a poisonous snake is close enough to bite you, you're going to have to get your gun out quick and hit a small target very fast. At snakebite range, the logical thing to have in the gun is snakeshot, which sends a cloud of tiny birdshot pellets out in a fan that is highly likely to nail the rattler before the rattlesnake nails you. Speer's .38/.357 snakeshot load is what I would have in the first one or two chambers in line to come up under the firing pin if I was carrying the SP101 in poisonous snake country.

Short barrel revolver advantages

One thread runs repeatedly through tales of survivors mauled by bears and the great cats. Many were holding their rifle or shotgun when the animal took them down, and could



The size of the little Colt Detective Special .38, the Ruger SP101 carries five rounds of powerful .357 Magnum. Note ample steel between chambers in cylinder for maximum safety.

not bring the muzzle to bear on their four-legged tormentor because the long gun was trapped between their body and that of the beast. Even a long barrel handgun could be hard to get out and into action.

The short barrel revolver is faster to clear from holster or pocket. It is faster to get pointed at the vitals of the creature on top of you. In a great many animal attack cases, the defender or protector has to shove the gun muzzle right up against the critter's body. If you do this with most semi-automatic pistols, it will push the barrel slide assembly rearward and "out of battery." That is, the parts are pushed out of the alignment in which they must be for the gun to fire. This won't happen with the revolver, whose barrel is rigidly fixed to the frame and ahead of the firing mechanism.

Something else can happen with a muzzle contact wound. As the muzzle blast roars into the soft tissue of the body, a "blowback" effect occurs in which tissue, fur, and viscous blood can be blown into the open mechanism of the pistol in the instant in which its slide is cycling. This matter can block the slide from returning to battery, and prevent the auto pistol from firing subsequent shots if needed. This does not, of course, occur with the revolver. A friend of mine, a



Good, better, best. From bottom up: Federal Nyclad standard pressure .38 hollowpoint, author's preferred defense load for the recoil-sensitive; +P .38 Special, which hits harder; and the decisively fight-stopping 125 grain Magnum hollowpoint.

CIA agent who has had to do more “wet work” than he would have liked in the service of his country, knows how that term came about. After the first time he had to shove a gun muzzle into an opponent’s body and pull the trigger, the backblast taught him to always use a powerful revolver for this sort of work.

It happens with animals, too. A friend of mine was attacked by a Briard, a rare variation of the huge Bouvier des Flandres. As the dog’s open jaws approached his crotch, he shoved the muzzle of his Colt Commander against its neck and fired. The bullet killed the creature instantly and saved my friend from injury, but fur and blood and tissue blasted back into the muzzle/barrel bushing area of the .45 auto as it cycled, jamming the gun. He was using the Glaser Safety Slug, a lightweight, pre-fragmented projectile at very high muzzle velocity.

It can even happen beyond contact distance. Some years ago, I had occasion to put down a large beef critter. A 190 grain Super Vel .45 hollowpoint to the brain killed it instantly, which was a good thing. The back-

splash of blood and brain matter out of the entry wound not only soaked me but adhered to the exposed barrel of my Colt Government Model autoloader as it cycled from the recoil, and jammed the gun. A quick slap with the heel of my support hand’s palm on the back of the slide compressed the tissue and drove the gun back into bat-

tery, but I had learned a lesson.

Suffice to say that if a living thing is on top of you and trying to kill you and your only chance is to shove your gun muzzle into that thing and pull the trigger several times, a revolver has a distinct advantage over an autoloading pistol.

The SP101 in particular

There are lots of small .357 Magnum revolvers available today. What’s so special about this one in particular?

It’s no secret that I had a hand in convincing the late, great Bill Ruger to make this gun in .357 Magnum instead of just .38 Special. If you’re interested, you can read about it in R.L. Wilson’s superb book *Ruger and His Guns* (Simon & Schuster, 1996, page 193) or in *Complete Book of Handguns 2003*, which should be on the newsstands about the time you read this or shortly thereafter. However, ego investment in the gun isn’t the reason I recommend it. Practicality is.

The SP101 was the first successful “baby” .357 Magnum, small enough

for pocket or ankle carry. It was not the last. Rossi, Smith & Wesson, and Taurus have all since produced short barrel, five shot, small frame .357 Magnums. Most of them are lighter and kick much more viciously, however, and none of them seem to have quite the deliverable accuracy, the mix of user-friendliness and inherent mechanical ability to get those powerful bullets delivered not only fast but straight. The Colt Magnum Carry came closest, but has been out of production for some time.

At slightly over 26 ounces in weight, the Ruger is a solid little gun that absorbs recoil well. It is aided in this by well thought out forward balance and particularly by Ruger’s trademark “live feel” grips, which tend to soak up the kick to a degree that has to be felt to be appreciated. Bill Ruger told Shooting Times staffer Jim Bequette, in one of the last interviews he granted before his death, that the secret to the SP101’s success was that “Those damned cushioned grips make it the easiest small-frame .357 to shoot.”

How good is the SP101? Good enough that in 2002, my police department adopted the spurless hammer double action only version with short barrel and issued it to all sworn personnel for backup and off duty use. Each officer is issued Black Hills 125 grain Magnum ammunition and an Alessi hideout holster. I had often carried one of these little guns for backup anyway. I feel good to know that my brother officers have backup as solid as this.

It would feel good to know that you had it too. Δ

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