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### The King of the Big Game Cartridges

**It packs more than a little wallop, but when the critter is on the really large size, the .577 3-inch Nitro Express is your friend.** The .577 3-inch Nitro Express is one of three cartridges that I have never been able to find an instance where a properly placed bullet failed to stop any charging animal with one shot. The other two are the 8-gauge and the 4-gauge rifles of the Victorian hunters.

These last two weigh considerably more than a .577, and the 8-gauge has twice the recoil of a .577, while the 4-gauge has three times the recoil of a .577. The enormous size and weight of 8-gauge and 4-gauge cartridges make it difficult to carry many rounds on your person and you really need an ammo bearer. Loaded 4-gauge shells weigh about a pound apiece.

At this point someone always says that 100 grains in the brain will kill anything with one shot. Wrong. In 1938 near Mpika, South Africa, the famous elephant hunter Sir Charles Ross put three perfectly placed brain shots with a .450 nitro double in an elephant, but the elephant still managed to reach him and kill him before it died.

This was his 350th elephant killed. The elephant's skull lay on his grave for many years and every passing professional hunter had to examine it for himself and probe the bullet channels. They all agreed the shots were perfectly placed. It's these weird exceptions to the rules and conventional wisdom that dictate that bigger is better. The larger and heavier .577 slug would have done more damage plowing through the brain and saved the hunter. The .577 has even been known to drive brain matter out an elephant's ear holes with a brain shot. If Ross had only used a .577 instead of a .450, he would not have been killed.



**OF COURSE THERE IS** the more common problem of tough animals like the Cape buffalo. I knew one white hunter who was a successful elephant hunter in the old ivory hunting days, yet he never shot a Cape buffalo because he was afraid of them. Does that tell you anything?

The Cape buffalo is overbuilt with extra-heavy bones, overlapping ribs, a physiology that doesn't react to hydrostatic shock, and a brain that can store oxygen under stress, enabling it to keep going for a while after the heart stops pumping. Most charging animals can often be turned by a shot hitting them.

The Cape buffalo is like a kamikaze plane boring in on a ship. Only death will stop him once he attacks. While a careful shot taken at an unsuspecting buffalo will terminate it with predictable efficiency, there is always that rare case where the buffalo got his adrenaline up and proceeded to take 15 or more assorted .458 and .500 shots before stopping.

One .577 will stop it instantly in this situation. You have crossed a threshold in power with the .577 and are in a whole new world of stopping power. A good parallel is the experience of the Japanese navy when they moved up from the 16-inch guns of the Nagato-class battleships to the 18-inch guns of the Yamato-class battleships.

To their shock and horror, they found that the muzzle blast from an 18-inch gun would tear the flesh off a seaman's exposed arm. They had crossed a threshold in power and could not believe the difference. On a shoulder shot on an elephant, the .577 visibly delivers a much more crushing blow than a .470 or .500. Some of the things .577 users witness defy belief and are guaranteed to get you called a liar or crazy by those who have not seen it themselves. Longtime users of the .577 often speak of these things only amongst each other for this reason.



**SUCH POWER BRINGS** visions of terrifying recoil to the uninitiated, but that is not true. While the 100 foot-pounds of recoil of a 15-pound .577 double is capable of injuring you if you brace against it and fight it, this recoil is a heavy shove that requires you to roll with the punch. Just lean into the gun with a good grip on the barrels and pistol grip. Pull the gun firmly against the shoulder but not so tight that the tissue has no more room to compress when recoil starts. Now relax and let the gun push you up straight when it fires.

If your gun has been stocked to fit you, as all double rifles and shotguns should be, you will feel even less recoil. A double that has a fitted stock can also be fired quite accurately like a shotgun without taking time to use the sights. That means you live in those life and death situations where time and light for sighting is absent.

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to get your gun stocked to fit you. A proper gun fitting can be had at the West London Shooting Grounds, The Easley Estates Shooting School outside of Birmingham, and the John Dickson and Son Shooting School outside of Edinburgh, Scotland. In addition, any of the Scottish and British Best Quality Gunmakers can give a gun fitting. This is done with a try gun, which has a stock that can be adjusted to 1/16 inch in all directions.

It is an exact science requiring this precision tool. I am unaware of anyone with the proper training or tools to do this correctly in the U.S. and your life may well depend on its being perfectly correct. It is important to note that gun weight has a lot to do with recoil. Every time you double the weight, you cut the recoil in half.

A 15-pound .577 is not too bad to shoot. At 14 pounds, it is noticeably worse. A 13-pound is very unpleasant and an 11-pound .577 will really show you what recoil pain and gun headache is all about. It should be noted that just as the .577 is more effective on big game than a .600 because of its greater penetration, it also kicks more than the .600. This is because of the lower velocity and heavier gun weight of the .600.

Underweight guns with the resultant vicious kick have kept the .577 from being as popular as it should be. It's not just the momentum of the recoil but also the velocity of the recoil that you must deal with. The higher the muzzle velocity and the lighter the gun, the faster the gun comes back at you. A sharp blow hurts worse and is more damaging than a shove. Recoil velocity over 15 foot-seconds ensures gun headache, which is nothing but injury to the brain. A heavier gun slows this blow down to a more tolerable speed.



**SOME MEN WILL SAY** that a 15-pound rifle is too heavy to carry. Obviously they never lugged a loaded 20-pound Browning Automatic Rifle around like one man in every squad did for decades in the Army. Victorian hunters sometimes lugged 20-pound 4-bore doubles, which gained an extra 2 pounds when their cartridges were loaded in them.

Since the proper weight of a .450-400 is 10 pounds, a .470 is 11 pounds, and a .500 is 12 to 14 pounds, with 14 being ideal, you really aren't carrying that much more weight, but you are gaining so much more effective power for when things go wrong. When hunting in Africa where you may have to run after the game in African heat, a heavy gun can be held steady when the lighter guns cannot because you are hot and tired. That's why even the little .450-400 has been made in 13- and 14-pound guns.

If you like to shoot a lot in practice like I do, then I strongly recommend a 17-pound .577 with a wide buttplate, two mercury recoil reducers in the stock, and a Sorbothane recoil pad with rounded edges. Otherwise you may end up shooting just one or two rounds at a time, which is bad, as you really need to practice with the gun that you are staking your hunt and your life on.

Some will say, what can go wrong on a modern safari where you are protected by your guide? I have seen too many instances of both guide and hunter being killed by big game when their .375 magnums didn't stop a charge in time. If you are depending on your guide to protect you, perhaps you shouldn't be there. After all, he is generally a stranger to you. You don't know how he reacts when he feels that he himself is endangered.

You don't trust the new man in a combat outfit until you have seen him under fire, so why is this different? No modern professional hunter has the time or ammo to practice sufficiently to be a really good shot. The standards of an exhibition shooter are thus beyond their means to attain, yet the customer wants to think that their guide can shoot like the great exhibition shooters Doc Carver and Ad Topperwein.

It ain't gonna happen, son. If you want to be able to stand on your own two legs and take care of yourself like a man in all situations, I strongly recommend that you carry enough gun to do it with.

**SOME PEOPLE REGARD** the .577 as just a stopping rifle for use in heavy cover. They subscribe to the "the more guns the better on safari" tradition, which advocates a 7mm Mauser, a .375 H&H magnum, a .470, and a .577 as the ideal hunter's battery.

I subscribe to the old East India hunter's advice, "Use your big gun for everything, Laddie, and count it practice for the day your life depends on it." There is no better advice you can give a dangerous game hunter.

The more you use it, the deadlier you will become with it. You will find that game shot with a .577 doesn't require difficult tracking, as it doesn't go far. The sportsman's ethic of giving the game a clean, fast, humane kill has never been better served. A good .577 double will easily hit anything at normal hunting ranges and beyond.

While the ammo is expensive, it is nothing compared to the rest of the cost of the safari and if you don't practice with it, how do you ever expect to save your life with it when the chips are down?

It's a gun, custom-fitted to act as a part of your own body, but still a gun that requires practice to use effectively. If it is to be used extensively you also have to get used to the recoil when shooting it multiple times a day.

The old-time white hunters certainly fired enough at a time to intimidate the uninitiated. Jimmy Sutherland cropped almost every big tusker in the Southern Province of Tanganyika, today's Tanzania, with a pair of Westley Richards .577 double rifles.

Decades later, hunters were complaining that there was no big ivory left there. Sutherland also had a .318 Westley Richards but preferred the .577 for the extra margin of safety it offered.

Bad ammunition has been the downfall of many. The post-war Kynoch gilding metal-clad ammo ruined the .600 nitro's reputation. Original Kynoch .577 steeljacketed ammo deformed on elephants, which inhibited their performance. The ammunition loaded by Wolfgang Romey in Petershagen,

Germany used the superb Woodleigh slugs from Australia, which do not deform.

The result is that none of Wolfgang's .577 bullets has ever been recovered from an elephant. There is always an entrance hole and an exit hole, regardless of the angle the elephant is shot at. It doesn't get any better than that for an elephant hunter.

Wolfgang also loads the Woodleigh soft nose bullets, which are unexcelled when you want an expanding bullet. This is the only .577 ammo that I would use or recommend others to use. I can't say that too strongly because this is a life and death matter.

**THE HISTORY OF THE** .577 began in the black powder era with the 24-bore Enfield .577 muzzleloader and continued through the .577 Snyder cartridge conversion to these guns.

The black powder 3-inch version was developed when the famous white hunter and explorer Sir Samuel Baker wanted an express cartridge that could perform on pachyderms. The original black powder load with a 650-grain lead bullet was potent but the full potential of the cartridge wasn't reached until the nitro loading was developed at the turn of the century. The modern nitro load launched a 750-grain bullet propelled by 100 grains of cordite at 2,050 feet per second. It equaled the 8-gauge in stopping power and only the enormous 20-pound-plus 4-gauge offered more stopping power.

For those whose life was on the line with dangerous game in thick cover, this behemoth was a blessing. Due to the burning and pressure curve of cordite being different from modern powders, it can be difficult to recommend a load that will shoot to the point of aim at all ranges in all the guns that were regulated with cordite charges.

Wolfgang Romey is considered one of the world's great authorities on small arms and cannon powders and he has powders that match cordite's burning and acceleration rates so that his ammo shoots to the same point of impact as the cordite shells at all ranges.

For the handloader, I have heard that 145 grains of IMR 4831 with an F215 primer and a 750-grain Woodleigh bullet will give the factory standard velocity of 2,050 fps, but since I have no experience with it I cannot give any endorsement. Since loading for a particular double rifle is more about getting the barrels to shoot to the same point of impact than velocity, the handloader should start with 5 grains less powder and work up till the barrels are shooting to the same point of impact.

Getting a double rifle to shoot to the sights at extreme ranges takes more than just matching muzzle velocity, so I prefer to stick to Wolfgang Romey's ammo. I like my long-range capability with this very accurate cartridge and do not find its trajectory a problem. You just have to know the range and how to compensate for the bullet drop, the same as on any gun ever made.

In the final analysis, when dealing with something that can stomp you into the ground, do you want to be the stomper or the stompee? The .577 stacks the deck in favor of you being the one doing the stomping.

STORY BY JIM DICKSON • PHOTOS BY WESTLEY RICHARDS

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