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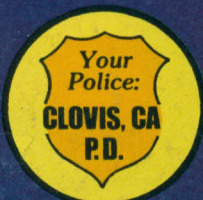


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**MAGNUM UPDATE—
THE NEW .357/44
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THE .357/.44 DREADNAUGHT

This revised version of the .357/.44 Bain & Davis Wildcat outperforms its original battery-mate, the .44/.357 by a wide margin!

By Dan Cotterman

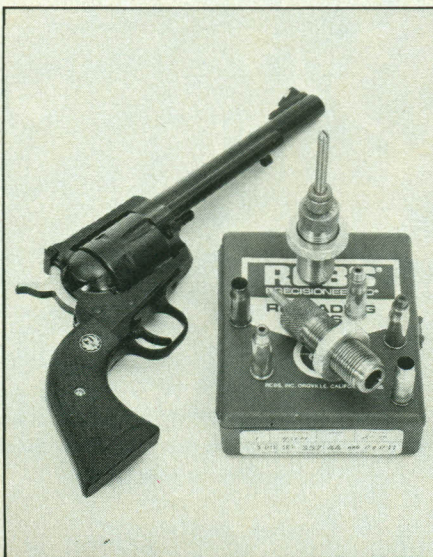


□ A bit over forty years ago Doug Wesson and Phil Sharpe fostered a stretched-out version of the tired old .38 Special that was to start a new age in the quest for greater power from handguns. Their brainstorm amounted to a super-slammer now well known as the .357 Magnum. There was, of course, the .38 Super for auto-loading handguns, but super as it may have been, it still couldn't match the bewildering performance of the new revolver round.

News of the .357 Magnum spread like... well, like wildfire. The thought of a revolver loosing a 158-grain bullet at a factory-announced 1,510 fps and thereby amassing nigh onto 800 foot pounds of muzzle energy virtually dripped with a sort of ghastly fascination.

But bubbles have a way of popping: The Blonde Bombshell turned out to be Ma Kettle's ugly sister as, one by one, chronographs told a different story. No one, to my knowledge was ever able to buy that originally advertised 1,510 fps across the counter. It simply never existed this side of test barrels that were used, sans cylinder-to-barrel gap, in laboratory firings. Ultimately, the ammo makers revised their claims for the .357's velocity potential to figures that

Faced with the challenge of improving a successful idea, the author chose these main ingredients to whip up a batch of ballistical effectiveness utilizing the strength of the Ruger Blackhawk revolver—the precision of RCBS loading dies—and the well-performing Sierra bullets—to create this most effective wildcat.



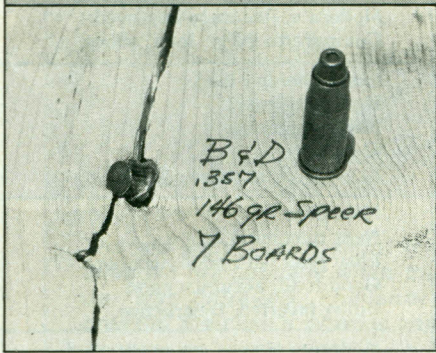
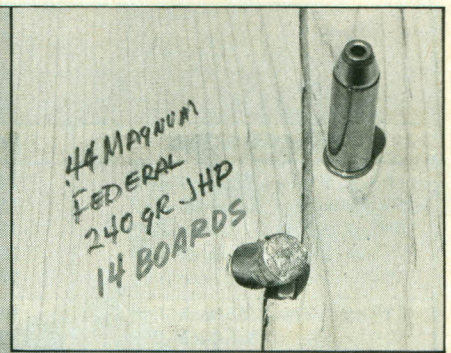
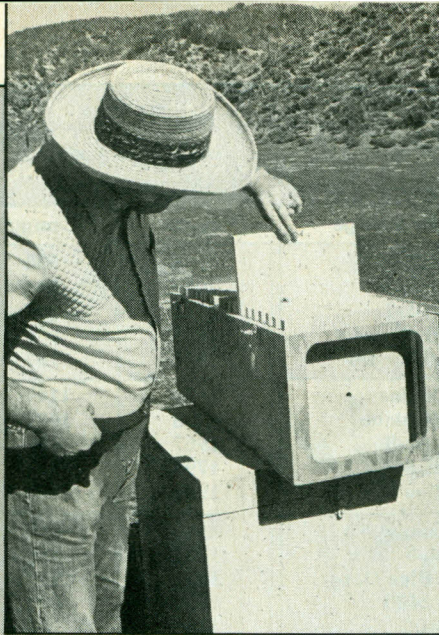
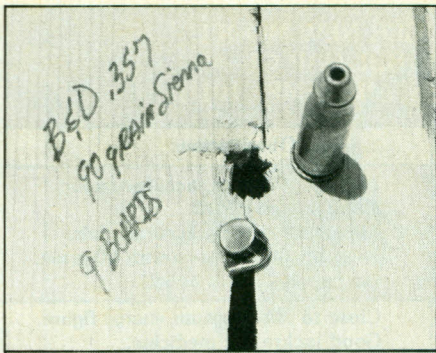
ran from 1,410 to 1,430 fps.

These days—and for several years past—the factory folk have their feet more firmly planted in reality. Remington, for example, now lists velocities for their magnum handgun calibers from their new vented test barrels. The key to Remington's patented system involves the introduction of a gap in the cylinder-to-barrel area which is controlled at .008-inch with a four-inch barrel. Then, to minimize shot-to-shot inconsistencies of velocity readings, the powder charge is orientated horizontally within the case before firing. The claim for the 158-grain bullet is thus listed as a more realistic 1,235 fps. Alongside the vent-barrel velocity figure one can still note a sensational 1,550 fps for a 158-grain from the .357 Magnum fired from an 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch test barrel. Winchester-Western factory ammo not too surprisingly lists the same 1,235 fps for the 158-grainer from a vented barrel.

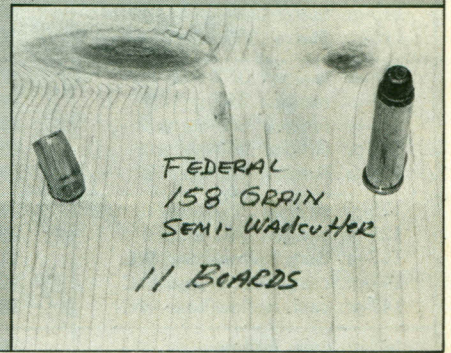
But the .357 Magnum—perhaps more aptly named the .38 Extra Long—still managed to hold forth as an extremely effective handgun round. It's just that it would have been so much greater had it measured up to Infix Pro PDF Editor allyhoo. That is, in a reasonably-sized revolver

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Using a special bullet penetration box which is made up of 1-inch pine boards spaced 1-inch apart, various loads were thoroughly tested as these results clearly show.



one could buy at his local gun shop. That's exactly what gunsmith Keith Davis of Bain & Davis Custom Guns was kicking around one evening back in May of 1963. Davis asked me what I thought of necking down a .44 Magnum hull while giving it a short, fairly sharp shoulder and enough neck length to suitably accept 158-grain bullets. It was just possible, we surmised, to create a true .357 Magnum. The more we kicked the idea around, the more intriguing it became. Our final selection for the conversion was the Smith & Wesson Model 27 in .357 Magnum with an 8³/₈ths-inch barrel. Davis designed the reamers, roughing and finishing, and, within a week we were ready to improvise cases.

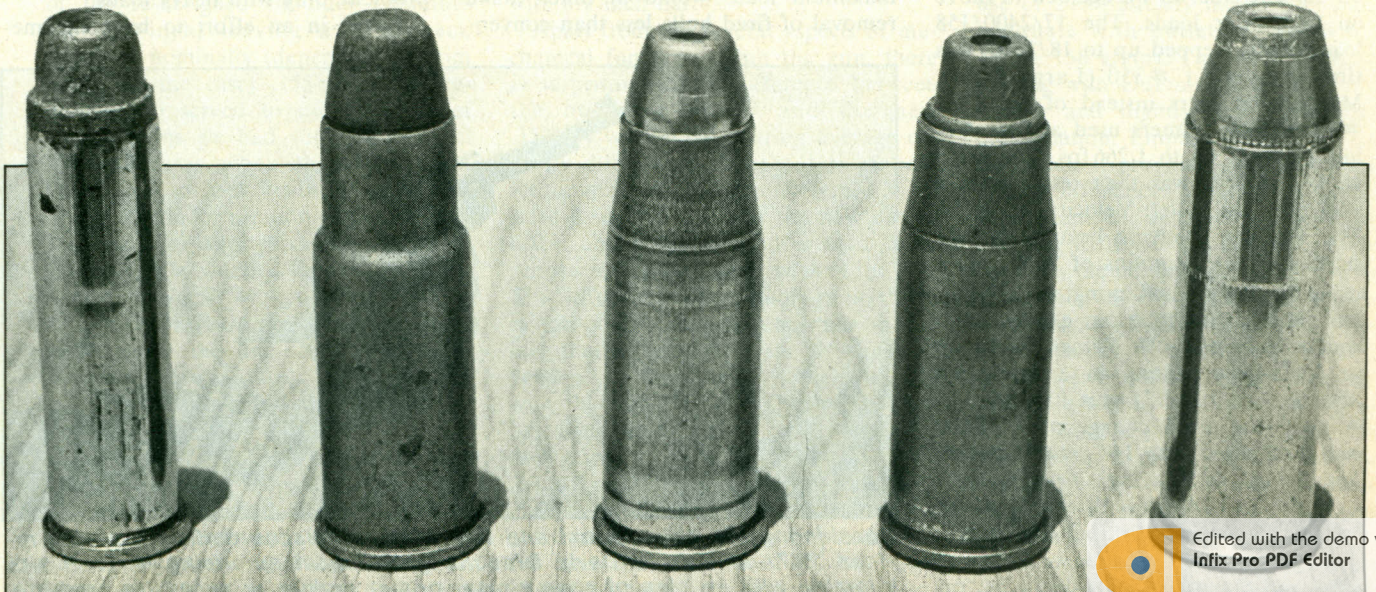
With the proper RCBS die set up the neck shrinking process was easy. We had the ammo loaded, somewhat conservatively, with charges amounting to 17 grains of 2400 behind 158-grain Remington jacketed, soft-point bullets. Notably, a charge of around 16 grains of 2400 is about tops for the .357 Magnum. The .44/.357, as Davis and I named this original (but later to be slightly altered) version of our wildcat,

represented a capacity increase of 7.5 grains, that is, to the base of the seated bullet. I should caution the reader at this point that the measurement was no more than a means of determining capacity increase and is definitely not recommended for reloading purposes.

The evolution of the .357/.44 Bain & Davis Dreadnaught stemmed from the effectiveness of the .357 Magnum and the sheer brute force of the renowned .44 Magnum. This super-successful cartridge deserves recognition as "Wildcat of the Year!"

A Beckman electronic-digital chronograph was set up within the Bain & Davis establishment using a five-foot screen spacing. Using velocity averages taken from series of five-shot strings, our first revelation was that the relatively light 17/2400 load resulted in 1,235 fps for the .44/.357. We had thus bested the 1,225 fps we obtained from a factory round using a regular .357 cylinder in the same revolver with its 8³/₈ths-inch barrel. By way of comparison, a factory

.357 Magnum Federal 158-grain SWC .44/.357 B&D (Old Style) 158-grain Solid Lead .357/.44 B&D (New Style) Speer 90-grain JHP .357/.44 B&D (New Style) Speer 146-grain SWC HP .44 Magnum Federal 240-grain JHP



DREADNAUGHT

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itself ideal. For example, a charge of 14 grains propelled hand-swaged 113-grainers along at an average velocity of 2,170 fps for a muzzle energy of over 1,181 foot-pounds, again topping the .44 Magnum catalog energy figures. I hasten to add, however, that the superior energy figure is insignificant—a sort of abstract comparison—in terms of actual bullet performance. If the well-known chips were down, I'd still go with the .44 Magnum's 240-grainer.

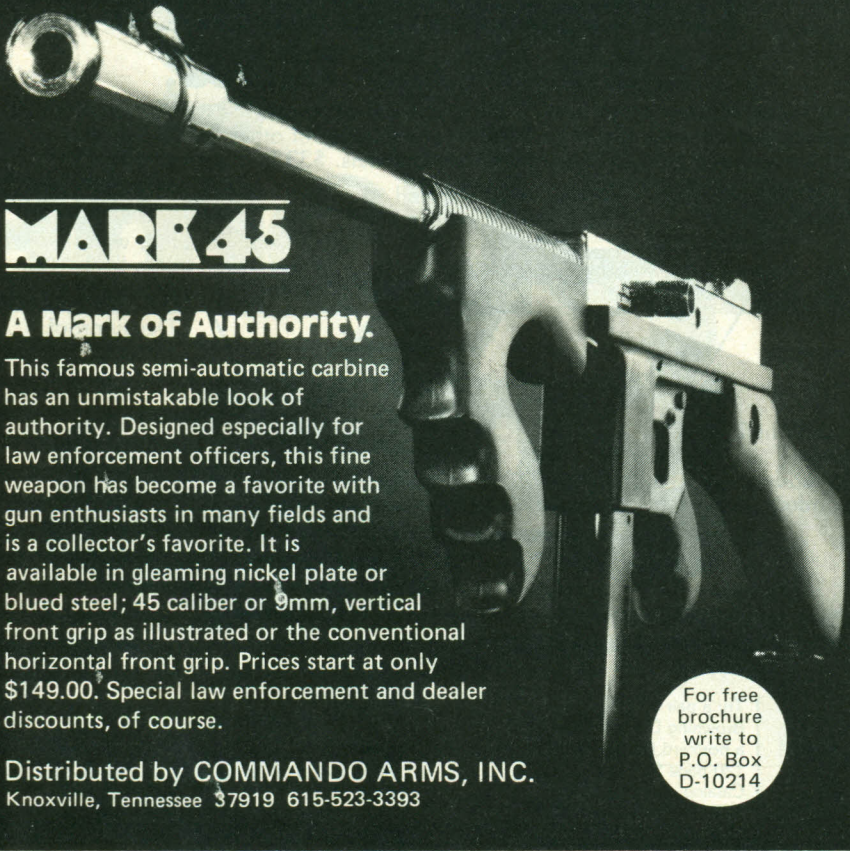
The implied superiority of the .357/.44 versus the .44 Magnum lies not with light, high-speed projectiles, but with bullets of around 150-grains in weight and up. The 158s, in my opinion, offer an optimum balance between attainable velocity, bullet weight and operation within safe pressure limits.

Ruger's New Model Blackhawk, as chambered for these tests by gunsmiths Red Little and Ron Kinstof of Bain & Davis differed from the Smith & Wesson used in the original tests in ways other than weight, chamber wall thickness, price, availability, and so on. In the first place the barrel was not 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ -of an inch in length, but 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, thus implying a minor deficit in terms of attainable velocities. Nonetheless, some of the disadvantage of a shorter barrel was offset by virtue of the fact that the cylinder-to-barrel gap in the original revolver ran from .004-inch to .006-inch, depending upon the rotation of the cylinder. The test Ruger possessed a gap that varied only slightly from a tight .003-inch to an equally tight .004-inch, again depending on the position to which the cylinder was turned. There would, by reasonable inference, be less cylinder-to-barrel pressure loss with the Ruger.

Our first session afield with the *Guns & Ammo* portable electronic chronograph gave rise to a number of fascinating revelations. A string of five factory-loaded .357 Magnum rounds yielded an average 1,245 fps for the semi-jacketed 158-grain hollow-pointed bullets, somewhat superior to factory loads used during the original chronographings those many years back. The improvement may be attributed, in part, to the fact that the air temperature in the parched river bed we had found for the purpose of carrying out the testing was around the century mark, perhaps 30 to 35 degrees greater than the temperature that night inside the Bain & Davis shop.

As if bullet speed were an end in itself, and in the interests of pure experimentation, a number of 90-grain Sierra .355-inch bullets were loaded. These 90s, as well as the 115s I used are intended primarily for use in re-loading the likes of the .380 ACP and so on. The .002-inch

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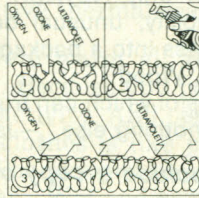
lacking in bullet diameter is insignificant, save in the most exacting target shooting situations. For the sake of pure velocity, a series of the 90s pushed along by charges of 14.5 grains of Hercules Unique averaged out at a rather sensational 2,186 fps. This, by the way, was the highest bullet speed achieved. Unfortunately, as you will note from the accompanying chart, accuracy was not to be a benefit: Ten-shot groups at 50 yards could have easily been covered by a pie plate. Later, with the advantage of a Ransom machine rest, groups at the same range were reduced to cobbler size, though still not equal to the accuracy of which both gun and cartridge are capable.

Best accuracy results, again using the Ransom with target placed at 50 yards was obtained with 147-grain Lyman 35895 hollow-base wadcutters cast hard to minimize leading. This bullet, ahead of either 18 grains of Hercules 2400 or 16.5 grains of Blue Dot will provide machine rest accuracy in the two-inch range using center-to-center measurement at fifty yards. It is not inconceivable that, using a good bullet ranging in weight from 140 to 160 grains, easy-shooting, accurate loads could be developed to suit your individual gun. The solution seems to rest with the use of moderate loadings. It has been my experience that maximum powder charges,

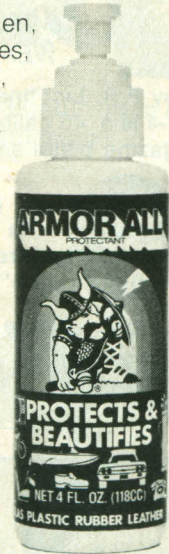
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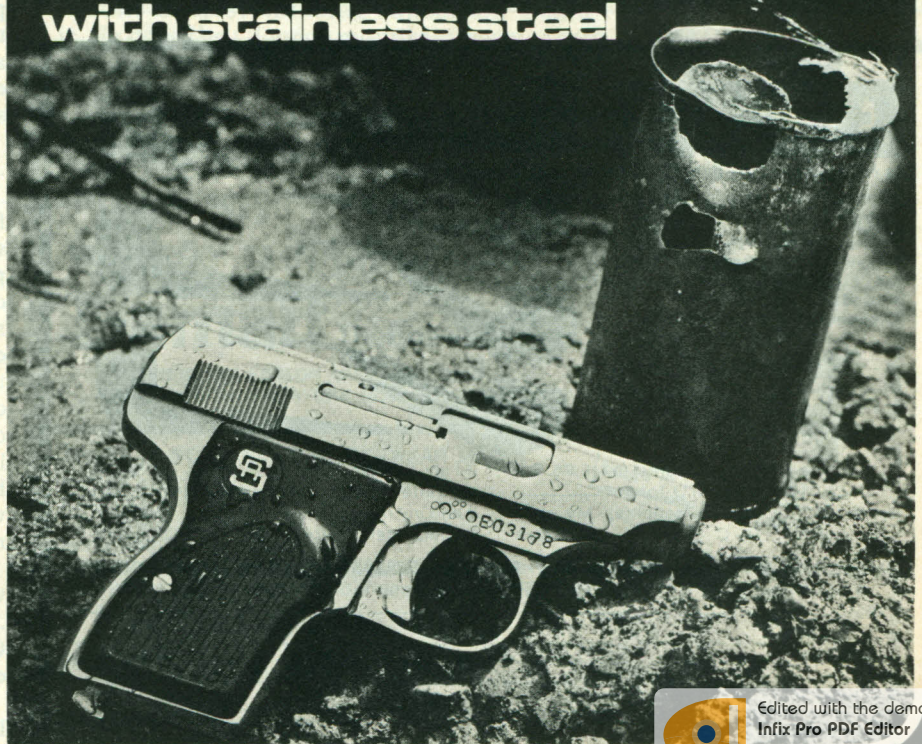
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DREADNAUGHT

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especially in handguns, have a way of running athwart of accuracy. Besides, in working with a cartridge of such great potential as the .357/.44, a so-called, moderate loading will easily outperform the standard .357 Magnum.

The Ruger New Model features a light-gathering insert in the front sight with a rear sight that is adjustable for both lateral and vertical correction of shot placement. The rear sight adjustment is effected through the use of a small, flat-bladed screwdriver and is a micro-click affair. Adjustment appeared to have been established at the Ruger plant so that, once the preliminary accuracy-test shots had been fired, the only adjustments I made were purely in satisfaction of my curiosity.

No shots were fired from the 9mm alternate cylinder prior to re-chambering it for the .357/.44. In the first place, it was necessary to leave the 9mm cylinder at the shop for the re-chambering operation and, in the second place, although the 9mm round has unquestionable merit within the limits of its function as an auto-loading handgun cartridge, I could not muster sufficient enthusiasm for shooting it from a revolver. Bill Ruger—and this is purely wishful thinking—might well consider the advantages, both commercial and practical, of offering their excellent revolver with alternate cylinders for both the .357 Magnum and the .357/.44. In this way the purchaser would be afforded the advantage of being able to shoot anything from the softest .38 Special target loads to the mighty concoctions possible with the .357/.44 . . . and have the standard .357 Magnum round available for anything in between the two extremes. The versatility suggested in such an offering deserves consideration.

The ballistic performance of the .357/.44 approaches that of the standard .357 Magnum when the latter is shot from a rifle with a 20-inch barrel. The superiority of the .357/.44, however, prevails as we compare velocity figures obtained from test firings involving the more capacious round in a rifle. Re-chamberings have taken place in both the Martini single-shot and the Winchester Model 92. You will note, upon observing the included table of rifle loads, that velocities with relatively heavy bullets are impressive, especially when one remembers that this is primarily a handgun cartridge.

There also is, as might be expected, a velocity boost through the use of .357/.44 re-chamberings in Thompson Contender single-shot handguns with either 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch or 10-inch barrels.

A few observations with respect to re-loading the .357/.44. Edited with the demo version of Infix Pro PDF Editor note that the single disadvantage, though not

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insurmountable, exists in the fact that the re-design of the original .44/.357, while serving to minimize or completely eliminate some of the difficulties of case sticking and back-up within the chamber, created a relatively short neck in which to seat bullets. It is still possible to firmly seat a bullet of relatively substantial length and, with appropriate care, introduce just the right amount of crimp. The operation does require more care than with the original version.

The overall length of your loaded round will best be determined by the type of bullet you select and the point at which you elect to place the crimp. The crimp should be fairly substantial. It is an excellent idea in this regard to fit the reloads to your individual gun as you make the initial settings of the dies. I found it necessary, for example, to adjust the resizing die so that its bottom would come into firm contact with the top of the ram. Maximum full-length resizing is necessary in order to allow the cartridge to seat all the way into the chamber. Otherwise, difficult cylinder rotation will be the result. Another comment on the matter of crimping might include a caution against over-crimping with cast bullets. Accuracy will suffer as a result of too much crimping. It is best to use no more than a slight roll crimp with cannellured bullets. Uncannellured types, such as those bullets of half-jacket construction, can often be seated so as to effect a slight roll crimp immediately above the junction of the copper jacket and lead nose. If, in revolver use, you find that bullets are backing out, increase the amount of crimp, but only after checking a few test rounds for easy chambering. In the foregoing regard, it is well to remember that the problem of bullets moving out of their seated position is essentially applicable to heavy loads with proportionately heavy recoil. In moderate loadings with no more than light crimping, it is seldom a factor.

A number of guns, both long and short varieties, are ideal hosts for the .357/.44, each offering a substantial improvement in ballistic performance. Some, especially in the revolver category, are not sufficiently thick in the cylinder to allow for re-chambering within the limits of safe practice. Others, because of shortcomings in frame or action strength are equally unsuitable. It is therefore suggested that you call or write to Bain & Davis Sporting Goods, 559 W. Las Tunas Dr., San Gabriel, CA 91775, for information regarding the advisability of the conversion. The price is right: About \$30 at this writing, plus the cost of the Ruger. Complete .357/.44 die sets are available from RCBS, P.O. Box 1919, Oroville, California 95965, at \$29 a set. It all adds up to a minimum expenditure for an uncommonly great reward in terms of handgun cartridge power and versatility.

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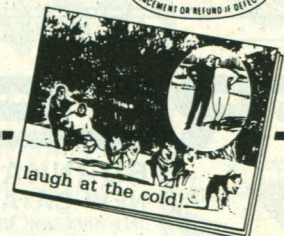
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