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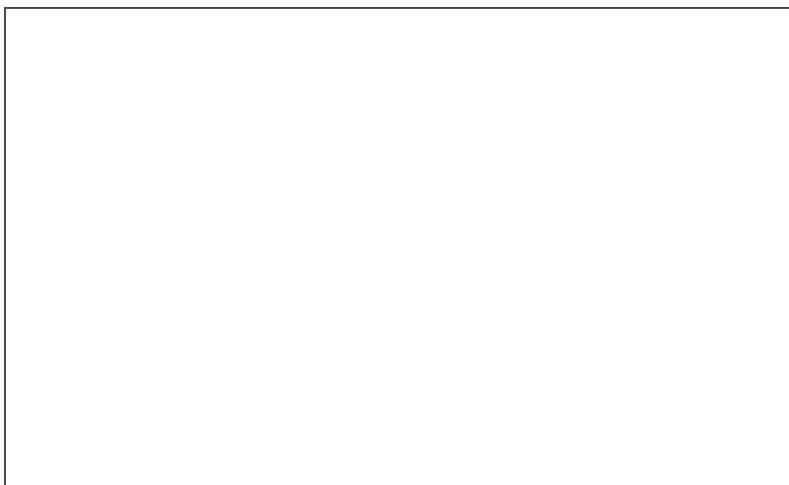
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Magnumatics!

By John Taffin



When Doug Wesson, Phil Sharpe and Winchester put their heads together 60 years ago with the idea of coming up with a new handgun cartridge, little could they have realized what a great effect their creation would have on handgunning. Even Elmer Keith, who by that time was strictly a big bore sixgunner, aided in the experimental phases by putting his heavy .38 Special loads through a Smith & Wesson .38/44 Heavy Duty, a real classic sixgun by the way.

The result in 1935 was the .357 Magnum, with ammunition by Winchester using Sharpe's bullet design and a true jewel of a sixgun from Smith & Wesson simply known as the ".357 Magnum" in those prenumber days. Major Wesson used a long-barreled .357 to take antelope, deer, and moose and was scheduled to go after a big bear. He later said, upon reflection, that he was glad he had not tackled the bear with the .357 Magnum.

Today the .357 Magnum is either the best handgun cartridge for deer or not worth using on ground squirrels depending upon who one listens to or reads. Like most arguments of this type, the truth is probably somewhere in between. The .357 is not any less of a cartridge than it was in 1935 when the hottest thing going was a .45 Colt with a 255 grain bullet at 850 fps or a 246 grain .44 Special at 750. Of course, handloaders vastly improved the performance of the .45 and .44, but there were not all that many handloaders in 1935. No, it is not that the .357 is any less, it is just that it is overshadowed by the .44 Magnum, .41 Magnum, .454 Casull, .475 Linebaugh, .500 Linebaugh.....

Sometimes when the big boomers have taken their toll on hands, wrists, and elbows; when one has the feeling that he never wants to shoot another full house big bore magnum again, or at least until next week. When the level in the powder measure and bullet casting furnace go down faster than the temperature on a February night in Idaho, when one would like to have more power in front of the sixgun and less recoil in the back, then it is time to go back to basics and grab a grand .357 Magnum. Or two. Or three.

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These pistols offer the magazine capacity of the semi-auto, and the power of the .357 Magnum. What are the trade-offs when you go for this compromise?

That is exactly what this confirmed big bore sixgunner has been doing the past few weeks. Not only have I gone back to the .357 Magnum, I have done it not with sixguns but with semi-automatics. Three to be exact, namely the Coonan Model B, the L.A.R. Grizzly, and the Magnum Research Desert Eagle. Most gun testing is pure hard work, in spite of what some of my friends seem to think, and leaves me ready for R and R. Not so with .357 Magnums in general and certainly not with these three semi-automatics that handle the first Magnum sixgun cartridge and do it with great style.

The Coonan dates back to the early '80s. The model B is the latest variation and many parts will interchange with the Colt 1911. Features include a linkless barrel and a barrel hood.

When I first started learning about handguns the 1950s, the sixgun was the undisputed champion, both in double action style from Smith & Wesson and single action mode from Colt and Ruger. The only semi-automatics were Government Models, Browning Hi-Powers, war surplus Walther P-38s and Lugers, and the new 9mm from Smith & Wesson, the Model 39.

Everyone knew it was impossible to manufacture a semi-automatic that would reliably handle sixgun cartridges. A number of enterprising experimenters tried but got nowhere.

Much has changed in four decades. One can look through page after page of gun guides and directories and find literally scores of high quality, extremely reliable semi-automatics. Interspersed in these pages one finds three examples of semi-automatics that chamber Magnum handgun cartridges. Coonan Arms is strictly a .357 Magnum semi-auto with no other chamberings being offered.

The Grizzly from L.A.R. Manufacturing not only handles .357 Magnum but, with its interchangeable barrels, the .44 Magnum as well. Other versions are available in .45 ACP, .45 Win. Mag., 10mm, and the wildcat .357/.45 Win. Mag. From Israel comes the Desert Eagle via Magnum Research. This favorite gun of the movie heavies is also available in .41 Magnum, .44 Magnum, and the new .50 Action Express.

The Coonan Model B used for this test is a brand new one that has been fancied up a bit. The tri-color finish consists of a stainless slide.

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matched up perfectly with the Grizzly I already had on hand with 10mm, .45 Win. Mag., and .357/.45 Win. Mag. units. I might add that switching calibers on the Grizzly is very easy, even for someone as fumble fingered as I am.

Magnum Research's Desert Eagle is a gun that I used for an article a number of years ago and, due to the serial number, decided to send a check instead of returning the gun. This nickel-plated Eagle carries a quintuple deuce serial number, that is, it is number 22222. It has done well for itself the past few years accounting for a black bear and a mule deer in my shooting partner Joe Penner's hands.



The Israeli-made Desert Eagle enjoys a worldwide reputation for accuracy and reliability. Caliber choices range from .357 up to the .50 Magnum. It features a rotating three-lug bolt and has interchangeable barrels available up to 14 inches long.

The Coonan came with checkered walnut grips that look good and have a good feel to them. Black polymer is the order of the day for the grips of the Desert Eagle and they contrast quite well with the nickel plated finish. The Grizzly had to be helped. The rubber grips were quite fashionable and politically correct but mated with the satin black finish of the rest of the gun they screamed dull, dull, dull.

A call to David Wayland (P.O. Box 1142, Dept. G, Mill Valley, CA 94942. Phone 415-381-3543) brought a pair of camouflage laminated stocks plus a promise of a pair of exotic wood grips which arrived just two weeks later. These are a gorgeous deep red with black stripes and really dress up the Grizzly.

A talk with Wayland resulted in quite interesting information about gripping the Grizzly. It seemed that the left grips were prone to crack under recoil, apparently caused by lack of support under the grip. This problem has been solved by the use of Phelps blast guards -- thin pieces of metal with holes properly placed for the grip screws -- that go under the grips.

Both the Coonan and the Grizzly are "Government Model" semi-autos, with the Coonan being basically the same size as a Colt 1911, and the Grizzly looking like the same Colt on steroids. Takedown for both is strictly Government Model style. The gas operated Desert Eagle uses a rifle type locking bolt and takedown is extremely simple being accomplished by a flick of a switch above the trigger guard.

The Coonan is the lightest at two pounds, 12 ounces, with the Grizzly coming in one-half pound heavier, and the Desert Eagle going just two ounces shy of four pounds. All this makes the Coonan the easiest to pack, the Desert Eagle provides the least felt recoil and the Grizzly is somewhere in between. I found the Coonan had the wrist torquing recoil of a Colt Delta Elite 10mm in my hands, while the Desert Eagle and Grizzly could be fired in near total comfort.

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The L.A.R. Grizzly is a beefed-up 1911-type design offered in .357 and several other calibers, including the .357/.45 Grizzly Win. Mag.

Eight shots are provided by the Coonan with a full magazine which is also the capacity of the Grizzly. The Desert Eagle goes each of the others two rounds better. On the subject of magazines, give the Desert Eagle points for being the easiest to load, the Grizzly not too far behind and the Coonan the most difficult with a snap in required and depressing of the main spring to completely fill the magazine.



In the author's shooting tests all three .357 "Magnumatics" performed well. The Desert Eagle delivered the smallest group in the tests. See the [charts](#) below for velocity and group sizes with several different brands of factory ammo.

Once the magazine is loaded and inserted, the Coonan and Grizzly slides both release quite easily with the Coonan having a slightly enlarged slide release that makes it the easiest to operate. The Desert Eagle requires both hands for me to operate, one to pull back on the slide and the other to release the slide lock.

The guns are now loaded and the slide is forward. The Coonan safety is pure Government Model, on the left side and operates very easily without changing or shifting the grip one has on the gun. The Grizzly goes one better and carries an ambidextrous safety that is equally easy to operate. On the Desert Eagle one finds the new style safety that goes down for **safe** and up for **fire**. It is also ambidextrous but with my fat stubby fingers I find I cannot operate it without shifting my grip, or better yet, using the other hand.

The Grizzly and the Coonan both carry an unfair advantage over the Desert Eagle as it is one of the earlier guns before the new triggers were introduced. With the trigger pull coming in at eight and one-half pounds, it was nearly double the Coonan at four and one-half pounds and three and one-half pounds heavier than the Grizzly's five pounds. Trigger pulls did not seem to make any great difference as all three guns shot superbly.

Sights of all three .357 semi-autos were all very easy to use with the Coonan being the boldest and blackest, which is just the way I like them. Millett sights are the order of the day with the Grizzly with the front sight carrying a T-shaped orange bar and the fully adjustable rear is a white outline. This particular Desert Eagle carries excellent bold and black fixed combat style sights, however, adjustable sights are available.

Barrel lengths on the test pistols were five, six, and six and one-half inches for the Coonan, Desert Eagle and Grizzly, respectively. When testing started I tended to doubt the readings on the PACT chronograph as the Grizzly shot so much faster than the other two. However, the results were consistent throughout the tests with the Grizzly recording 250 to 300 fps faster in some cases than the other two. That is amazing to say the least.

**Results were consistent
with the Grizzly recording**

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Grip feel is quite important to most shooters and the Coonan, although the longest grip of the three, is also the narrowest and feels like an old friend as it is so close to the familiar Government Model. Both the Grizzly and Desert Eagle took some real getting used to for this shooter as they are big enough that I early had the feeling of not having complete control of the handgun. That feeling has passed after many rounds have been fired. The Coonan grip allows ease of firing one-handed, while the Desert Eagle and Grizzly almost mandate the use of two hands.

It has been fashionable lately to do so called torture tests and shoot thousands of rounds per day and report on how the semi-automatic holds up. I cannot see that this proves anything as no one buys a car and then drives it full bore for days to see how it holds up. However, if I found myself placed in the position of having to shoot thousands of full bore rounds through a semi-automatic I would pick either the Desert Eagle or Grizzly, but only if someone else loaded the magazines. Ease of shooting is a real selling point of these two .357 semi-automatics.

The Coonan carries more felt recoil for this shooter than the other two and while it is not punishing, I do not feel I could fire the gun all day without experiencing some real pain in wrist and elbow. This is all strictly a result of weight of the guns. The Coonan carries easier; the Desert Eagle and Grizzly shoot easier.

Reliability is a question that is always raised when one talks about semi-automatics and it was not too many years ago when only full metal jacket, or hardball if you prefer, was the only type of ammunition that was totally reliable in semi-automatics. That has all changed. These three semi-automatics all handled .357 Magnum **rimmed**, not the rimless cartridges that are normally deemed necessary for use in semi-automatics.

All operated flawlessly with cartridges carrying bullet weights of 125 grains through 180 grains. Only two failures to feed were experienced and this was in the Coonan with the first two 158 gr. flat pointed hollowpoints out of a magazine.

**All three of these
.357 semi-autos came
through with flying colors
as to accuracy.**

Accuracy? Too close to call. Firing two-handed at 25 yards by resting my hands on the spare tire of my Bronco and with 12 factory loads being pressed into service, the average group size for the Coonan was right at 2 1/8 inches. The other two came in at 1 7/8 inches. I don't know about you but a difference of 1/4 inches at 25 yards is too close for me to call.

My personal standard for a good handgun is five shot groups in the one-inch neighborhood for sixguns and a two-inch requirement to place the same mantle of goodness on a semi-automatic. All three of these .357 semi-autos came through with flying colors as to accuracy under my standards, and they did it not with a solid bench rest but rather informal use of the Taffin Bench Rest, the spare tire on the back of my Bronco. Scope these semi-automatics, place them on sandbags, and watch the groups shrink even more.



Which .357 Magnum semi-auto should one choose? That turns out not to be such a difficult task. Anytime someone asks me what would be the best handgun for them my comeback is always "What do you want it to do for you?" We can examine these three .357 semi-autos in the same light. If my main concern was the use of such a .357 Magnum as a carry gun or home defense gun, I would recommend the Coonan without hesitation. If I intended to scope the pistol and use it for hunting, I would go with the easily scoped Desert Eagle: And if my main concern was adding other calibers later, the choice would be the Grizzly.

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With the first state now passing a law allowing the purchase of only one handgun per month, the purchase of a Grizzly actually counts for one gun but can become six guns with the addition, quite easy addition I might add, of five conversion units in five other chamberings.

First and foremost I am a sixgunner, but I must admit that I thoroughly enjoyed using these "sixgun" semi-automatics. It would not be very hard at all to make a good case for these .357 Magnums as excellent all around handguns. They would certainly handle the vast majority of uses we choose for handguns. And do it with real style.

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