The .308 Winchester

The .308 Winchester has never been the darling of the folks who obsess over just the right cartridge for each type of big game, 500-yard shots, or the latest In-Cartridge. Instead it is the cartridge for practical hunters, who like a relatively lightweight rifle that will cleanly take about any non-dangerous big game on earth at common ranges, without pounding their shoulder into a purple pulp.

The .308 also happens to be among the easiest cartridges to load, especially if you’re looking for accuracy. Some shooters do not believe in “inherent accuracy,” but if that characteristic can be defined as “shoots small groups with a lot of bullets and powders, out to the ranges most hunters can hit game,” then the .308 qualifies. In fact, I have shot more than one out-of-the-box .308 sporter that would average .5 inch or maybe even a little less when shooting 3-shot groups at 100 yards—with factory ammunition.

So what does it take to make accurate ammunition for a .308? Not much, but they seem to shoot their best with 150 to 165-grain bullets. This is just fine, because bullets of this weight class will do anything required of a .308.

Back in the “old days,” before a so-called premium bullet appeared the first of every month, the common advice was to use 150-grain bullets for deer-sized game and 180’s for larger animals like black bear and elk. This was good advice—with so-called cup-and-core bullets. The .308 will get 2600-2700 fps with a 180-grain factory load, depending on the load and barrel. At that velocity “ordinary” bullets expand and penetrate pretty reliably, even on game weighing several hundred pounds.

But today a premium 150 or 165 will penetrate just as well and perhaps deeper. It will also probably shoot more accurately and definitely shoot flatter. Recoil will be somewhat lighter. All of these are good things.

As noted, the .308 is not fussy. Just pick a middle-of-the-road powder like Alliant Reloder 15, IMR-4895, Hodgdon Varget or BL-C(2), Ramshot TAC or Big Game, Vihtavuori N-140, and seat any good bullet. For general hunting, one of my favorite loads is 46.5 grains of Varget and the 150-grain Nosler AccuBond, for around 2900 fps from the 24 inch barrel of my Merkel K1 single-shot. This groups into less than .75 inch, shoots very flat, and has flattened animals from coyotes to caribou to cow elk. For heavier game, a 165-grain Barnes Triple Shock (or any other deep-penetrating premium) at 2800 fps is quite adequate for anything this side of Alaskan moose or African eland—and will even take those with broadside shots. With 165’s Ramshot Big Game produces both fine accuracy and highest velocities.

And when somebody in camp says your “little” .308 isn’t enough, just smile and go hunting. My bet, based upon some experience, is that you’ll do just fine.