If the occasional snake is the only vermin you want to handily dispatch with a handgun, look no further than CCI’s shotshell loads. However, handloading shotshell cartridges for handguns is much easier on the pocket if pack rats continually build haystack nests in the barn, or if you’re like me, you enjoy shooting airborne targets.

CCI’s .38/.357 and .44 Special/Magnum shotshell loads were recently used, and the No. 9 lead shot they fired produced dense patterns 12 feet from the muzzles of my revolvers. The shooting costs $1 per shot for the .38/.357 shells and half again as much per round for the .44 Special/Magnums. Speer Bullets, CCI’s sister company, sells the same shotshell capsules used in CCI loads. At the loading bench, these plastic containers were filled with my own lead shot and loaded much as I would a regular bullet in .38 Special and .44 Magnum cases. These capsules are still a bit pricey, about 15¢ apiece for .38s and twice that for .44s. To lower that cost, I started searching for commonly available wads that would allow me to make handgun shotshells on the cheap.

CCI Shotshells
CCI’s .38/.357 load contains approximately 135 No. 9 pellets, and the .44 Special/Magnum, 170 pellets. The capsules are designed to break on contact with the rifling. Shooting the .38/.357 loads through a Smith & Wesson Model 19 .357 Magnum with a 4-inch barrel resulted in 55 pellet holes in a pattern shot 12 feet from the muzzle. The pattern shot with the .44 load contained 119 hits. Both pattern targets had two holes in them from the shot capsule and base wad. The papers were big enough to catch all the pellets, so perhaps some of the pellets remained inside the container.

Speer Capsules
The Speer Reloading Manual #14 contains instructions and powder and shot weights for loading empty shot capsules. Unique powder was used for all the loads. The only trick to loading the capsules is to put in the correct amount of shot, so that when the base wad is snapped into place, the shot is tight in the container. I cut off a .38 Special case to hold 109 grains of No. 9 shot in the .38/.357 capsule, but after awhile I became pretty precise at filling a capsule just short of full so the shot in the capsule was tight with the base wad snapped into place.

Speer suggests using .38 Special cases originally factory-loaded with wadcutter bullets, because those cases have straighter internal side-walls that better accommodate the long capsules. The loaded capsules can be seated to nearly the correct depth with thumb pressure in those cases. Using a seating die was much easier and precise. Plus, the capsules require a crimp to keep them locked in place during recoil produced by shooting other cartridges.

The first time I loaded .38 cases I set the seating die to apply a roll crimp on the capsules, but the crimp wasn’t tight enough because two of the capsules pulled out of the case when the first shot was fired. Back at the bench, I cringed turning in the seating die a smidgen at a time to in-
I made wads for the .357 case by using a chamfer tool to sharpen the case mouth rim of .357 Magnum and .35 Whelen cases, and then drilled out the primer pockets to insert a drill bit to push out the wads. I hammered the case heads to cut the wads out of cardboard. That worked to make a few dozen wads, but eventually the case mouths bent, and I had to sharpen and drill another case.

If I were going into production of .357 shotshells, it would be much easier to order .360-inch diameter cardboard wads from Track of the Wolf (trackofthewolf.com). They cost only about a penny apiece.

For wads in the .41 Magnum, Ballistic Products .410, .125-inch thick Nitro Cards were used. I split the thickness of the cards in half and seated one piece over the powder with the flat end of a drill bit. Then I added the shot, placed the other piece of the card on top of the shot and finished with a roll crimp on the case mouth.

The .410 cards were a slip-fit in sized .44 Magnum cases. I thought they might not seal the powder gases in the case and bore, but they worked.

Cheap Shooting
The nice thing about Speer capsules is they extend beyond the case mouth to hold more shot compared to what only a case will hold. Using a thin wad to separate the powder and shot and another wad on top of the shot, only 92 grains of No. 9 shot fit in a .357 Magnum case, 110 grains in a .41 Magnum case and 122 grains in a .44 Magnum case.

Copper gas checks intended for cast bullets make good wads, because they are thin, take up little space and tightly seal the bore. I used to load 5.0 grains of Unique in a .44 Magnum case, seated a gas check with its lip up over the powder, added shot to just below the top of the mouth and seated a second gas check, lip down, over the shot. A crimp on the case mouth held everything in place. However, the cost of gas checks has skyrocketed in recent years to the point they add nearly a dime to the cost of each cartridge. Plus, gas checks will punch right through half-inch thick plywood at 20 feet. That rules out pack rat shooting inside a shed or barn. Hard, cardboard wads work just as well, and they’re cheap.

Cheap Shooting

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**Handgun Shotshell Loads**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>load</th>
<th>powder</th>
<th>charge (grains)</th>
<th>shot charge (grains)</th>
<th>pattern diameter (inches)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.38 Special, Speer capsule</td>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>109.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.357 Magnum, cardboard wads</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.41 Magnum, ½ Ballistic Products</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>110.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.410, .125-inch Nitro Cards</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>140.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.44 Magnum, Speer capsule</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>122.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.44 Magnum, ½ Ballistic Products</td>
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<td>.410, .125-inch Nitro Cards</td>
<td></td>
<td>140.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** All loads contained No. 9 shot and were fired at 12 feet.

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CCI .38/.357 factory load
CCI .44 Special/Magnum factory load

Be Alert – Publisher cannot accept responsibility for errors in published load data.
fine. I don’t know what the shot charge’s velocity was because I’m not about to subject the thin skin of my chronograph to such widely scattering loads, but the No. 9 pellets packed enough speed to punch clear through an aluminum can at 12 feet.

**Shooting**

The CCI factory-loaded .38/.357 shotshells had a pattern diameter of 11 inches, and the .44s, 13 inches on a pattern board 12 feet from the muzzle. The handloaded .38 capsule produced an 11.5 inch wide spread of shot. The pellets printed a spiral pattern, no doubt from the capsule turning in the rifling and applying centrifugal force to the pellets. The patterns, though, contained only a few gaps. The handloaded .44 capsules also threw their shot in a spiral with spreads of 12 to 13 inches.

The .357, .41 and .44 shotshells with cardboard wads shot patterns from 9 to 11 inches wide. They seemed to have a more even spread with no gaps compared to the capsule loads. But they are still short range loads; at 17 feet the .41’s shot spread increased to 19 inches.

So far I’ve shot hand-thrown cans on two occasions with the capsule and cardboard wad shotshells. The first time I threw the can with one hand and with a revolver in the other hand, snap-shot at the can. I finally figured out tossing the can up and gripping the gun with both hands, and using the sights to aim at the bottom of the can when it stopped momentarily at the top of its rise worked best. Then I knocked the can out of the air on a regular basis. The Ruger Blackhawk .41 Magnum is my favorite for this, because it points so smoothly.

This shooting is so easy on my pocket, I can stop at the gas station on the way home to buy myself a soda pop and save the can to shoot the next time I’m out with my handgun shotshells.