The 28 GAUGE – Just Perfect

While the 12 gauge gets most of the glory, the 28 is a great gun for sporting clays and wingshooting.

BY JOHN M. TAYLOR

BY RANDY LAWRENCE

▲ The 28-gauge is popular among upland bird hunters, and skeet shooters have kept its popularity up for decades.

It was a chilly, rainy Saturday in May at the Bull Run Shooting Center, but 28-gauge guns were popping around the course. It brought up thoughts of 156 years ago, when a bare 2½ miles northwest of there, the Union and Confederate armies met for the first major land battle of the Civil War.

Fortunately, things reigned peacefully when the National 28-Gauge Invitational (*www.nationalinvitationalclays.com*) was being contested. Why a 28-gauge-only competition? Because it's a gauge that packs a lot into a small package.

Twenty-eight-gauge guns have been made for decades, mainly for hunting. However, it was skeet that kept them alive. A friend in the industry once told me that sales of 28-gauge hunting loads were spotty throughout the U.S., mainly in quail-centric areas, but skeet kept the gauge in their catalog. But that was yesterday! Today, we see shotgun manufacturers putting more and more 28s on the market. Recently, I did a round-up of upland guns, and the 28-gauge offerings ran from high-priced over-and-unders to repeaters from Tristar and Mossberg in the couch-change price range.

Is this some new phenomenon? Hardly. The 28 offers plenty of payload with little or no recoil. For years, beginning shotgunners were started with a .410 bore because of

JUSTIN LANCASTER

its light recoil. The trouble with that is it's also light on payload and knock-down power. Early success is important to keeping beginners interested, and the .410 just doesn't deliver. Change to the 28, and results are much more positive. Check the year-end averages in both sporting clays and skeet, and the difference between shooters' 12-, 20- and 28-gauge averages is very small.

Ballistically, the 28 is the red-haired stepchild. In the late 1800s, W. W. Greener, who is known for his shotguns and firearm-related inventions, wrote a very thick book called *The Gun and Its Development*. In it he discussed the ballistic characteristics of various shotshells. It was his conclusion that the closer the length of the shot column was to the cylinder bore of the shotgun, the better it would pattern. Greener called it the "square load." In theory, the 1-ounce 16-gauge shell is the perfect square load. The 28-gauge ¾-ounce load, with its long shot column, seriously violates Greener's square-load rule, but theory is often violated in practice.

The 28 has just enough: just enough pellets and plenty of velocity. However, there is a limit to this seeming death ray — range. There exists the myth that small-gauge guns shoot smaller-diameter patterns. The truth is that patterns expand just as they do in any gauge from

WINCHESTER: ⅝ OUNCE NO. 6 STEEL 196 PELLETS @ 1,300 FPS					
Outer ring average pellet count	Outer ring percentage	Inner ring average pellet count	Inner ring percentage	30-inch total average pellet count	30-inch total percentage
35	18%	135	68%	170	86%
WINCHESTER: ¾ OUNCE NO. 8 LEAD, 308 PELLETS @1,200 FPS					
Outer ring average pellet count	Outer ring percentage	Inner ring average pellet count	Inner ring percentage	30-inch total average pellet count	30-inch total percentage
77	25%	166	54%	243	79%
WINCHESTER: 1 OUNCE NO. 7½ LEAD, 349 PELLETS @1,200 FPS					
Outer ring average pellet count	Outer ring percentage	Inner ring average pellet count	Inner ring percentage	30-inch total average pellet count	30-inch total percentage
77	22%	146	42%	223	64%

▼ It was a rainy day at Bull Run for the National 28-Gauge Invitational.

10 to 28, but because of the lighter payload, small-gauge patterns are thinner. Hence, the 28's practical range is closer to 30, maybe 35 yards than 40-plus. Yes, the thinning can be compensated for with choke, but that leads to center-dense patterns with little to compensate for errors in lead. The average ¾-ounce 28-gauge load carries 257 No. 7½s and 308 No. 8s. When you compare that to heavier 12- and 20-gauge loads like the 1⅛-ounce 12 of No. 7½ lead at 386 pellets — 129 more pellets — it's easy to understand thinner patterns.

In the recent past, ammunition manufacturers have introduced 1-ounce 28-gauge loads, and in 2015 or '16, Fiocchi brought forth 3-inch 28-gauge shells. They were in consort with Benelli, which simultaneously introduced the 28-gauge Ethos upland gun chambered for Fiocchi's 3-inch 28-gauge shells. According to the Fiocchi catalog, these shells are to be offered in a 1⅛-ounce load of nickel-plated lead shot at 1,200 fps in Nos. 5, 6 and 7½, as well as a 1-ounce lead load at 1,300 fps in 5, 6, 7½ and 8. The jury is still out as to how useful this load will be, and the big question is, will Fiocchi produce them in any marketable volume? One supposes that this long-cased load will perhaps allow more steel pellets; the current steel load for the 28 is ⅝-ounce of No. 6 steel at 1,300 fps in Winchester's Xpert and Hevi Shot's Hevi Steel No. 4 at 1,350 fps. Both are 2¾-inch shells, so it remains to be seen if the 3-inch shell will make much of a market impact. The argument for steel shot is that some ranges require nontoxic shot at some of their stations that feature water.

Although dedicated 28-gauge enthusiasts decry the 1-ounce load in favor of the traditional ¾-ounce package, nothing settles an argument like a session at the patterning board. The patterns were evaluated using a 30-inch disc with a 20-inch inner circle. In universal use, the area of the outer 30-inch ring equals the area of the 20-inch inner circle. This allows for comparison of the inner core with the outer fringes to determine evenness of pellet distribution.

The 28 has just enough — just enough pellets and plenty of velocity.

I put the 28-gauge barrels on my F3 Blaser and set up at 30 yards. The traditional patterning distance is 40 yards, but because of pattern thinning, 30 yards paints a better picture of the results. The barrels on my Blaser mic at .5520, and the Briley choke tube provides a constriction of .011, right on the money for modified choke in the 28. I shot a set of patterns with three different factory loads, all (by chance) from Winchester. I started with an Xpert load of ⅝-ounce of No. 6 steel. Why? Because in close-range hunting conditions — I've shot more than one North Carolina swan with bismuth 28s — the 28 can be an excellent choice. However, be aware that the No. 6 Winchester steel load runs out of downrange lethality just shy of 30 yards. Next down the pipe was the traditional ¾-ounce load of No. 8, and finally 1 ounce of No. 7½ shot. Check the results in the adjoining table.

▲ Year-end stats show that shooters' averages with the 28 are remarkably similar to their averages with 12- and 20-gauge guns.

In a hurry? The ¾-ounce load of No. 8s beat the 1-ounce load by 15 percentage points. So perhaps the "less is more" axiom is true as far as the 28-gauge is concerned.

One could go on and on extolling the virtues of the 28 as far as downrange results and mild recoil go, but the cost of ammunition is another thought. Handloading or reloading of the 28 is not difficult, especially compared with the diminutive .410, but that's for another time.

A better beginner's gun you cannot find, and, well, this gauge breaks targets, right up there with the big guns. Enjoy! CTN