



Survival Guns

Nothing adds security in the backcountry like a firearm.

Apr 1, 2004

By Rich Johnson

When I think about survival guns for outdoorsmen, I think of three scenarios—the first involves using the firearm as an audible signaling device. The second involves providing meat to stay alive. And the third involves self-defense. Taking things in that order (which may or may not be the order of importance in any given survival situation), we've tried to define what makes a good survival gun.

Signaling for Help

When an audible signal is what you need, louder is better. The sharp report of a big-bore rifle or large-caliber handgun will carry farther than the puny *pifft* of a .22-caliber. Shots fired in groups of three are recommended because the three-shot pattern is a universally recognized distress signal. While it might be tempting to fire into the air, safety must be considered, even in the wild. The audible signal will be just as loud if you fire into a tree trunk or a hillside, and you won't have to worry about where those rounds will fall back to earth.

Another concern with signaling is not to "waste" ammo by firing signal shots unless you are pretty certain someone is within hearing distance. It might be prudent to save the ammo for other uses. This is a judgment call you'll have to make using the best information you have at the time.

Gathering Food

You can't always count on a survival situation happening in big-game country. If you find yourself stranded at a time or in a place where there's nothing bigger than squirrels or small birds to subsist on, a big-bore rifle will be less useful for gathering food than a shotgun or a small-bore survival rifle would be.

Conversely, if you're going into bear country, you'll want to carry the largest-caliber handgun, rifle or shotgun you can comfortably handle. That's why it's important to match your "survival gun" to the area and season whenever possible. While no single gun suits every purpose, revolvers do offer the option of loading the first two cylinders with birdshot to handle snakes or birds and the rest with magnum cast-bullet loads for big game. They're also ideal for close-quarters combat should the need arise.

The trade-off, of course, is that at ranges beyond 15 yards, a shoulder-fired long gun (whether shotgun or rifle) will greatly improve accuracy. And in common handgun calibers like the .357 and .44 Magnum, rifles so chambered offer significantly less recoil than their handgun brethren, which, in light-framed versions, can kick like a mule. As you are no doubt beginning to see, choosing a survival gun is a series of trade-offs.

Self-Defense

These days, bad things can happen anywhere—even in the backcountry. It's becoming more common to stumble across illegal activity in the woods—meth labs and other drug farms, for example—which can put you in a tough situation. I'm not going to tell you what to do in that scenario, but it doesn't hurt to figure it out in advance and then be prepared. For self-defense a lightweight revolver is ideal. Here again, you have the option of mixing and matching birdshot loads with hollowpoint defense rounds and cast-bullet loads for hunting larger game. Shotguns also offer you the option of chambering combinations of loads, as do many of the small-bore lever-action and semi-auto survival guns in 9mm, .357 and .44.

Then there's the possibility of an encounter with an aggressive bear or mountain lion. If you're facing the wrath of a large predator and it comes down to shooting the animal to save yourself, you want the biggest and most powerful firearm you can shoot accurately.

Particularly when considering handguns, it's better to use a lesser caliber that you can control and shoot well than to carry a heavy magnum whose recoil makes you cringe every time you touch off a shot. Instead of a .44, perhaps you'll find a .41 or .357 more controllable and comfortable. The best advice I can offer is to find a local gun store with an indoor range and try several styles and calibers before you decide to buy. After that, practice until you are totally confident shooting the arms you carry.

So what do these scenarios prove? In some cases a big-bore rifle is preferable because it lets you take larger game at greater

distances. At other times, however, a shotgun or small-caliber firearm is preferable (the smaller the caliber, the more ammo you can carry). And if you're packing light for a fishing trip, a revolver is a better fit. So what is the ideal survival gun? All of the above.

The trouble is that you can't carry all of the above into a survival situation. In fact, any equipment you're hauling should be as lightweight and compact as possible, because every pound you have to carry drains your energy. At the same time, the equipment must be able to do the job. No firearm is perfect for every instance, but there are some choices that are tailor-made for specific situations hunters and fishermen might face.

Stowable Survival Guns

Stowable guns are ideal to slip behind the seat of your pickup, in the back of your bush plane or in the bottom of your canoe, where size and weight are not too much of a concern. This is where traditional survival guns shine—those models that disassemble and stow in small carrying cases that can be broken out for use should you find yourself stuck in the backcountry. Great choices include:

- * **The Henry U.S. Survival.** This takedown .22 weighs just 2½ pounds. It breaks down and all parts fit in the hollow stock.
- * **Springfield Armory M-6 Scout.** This fold-down model is also very compact and offers both .22 and .410 barrels.
- * **KEL-TEC SU-16 Rifle.** This gas-operated, self-loading rifle in .223 Rem. also features a fold-down stock for easy storage. The stock holds spare magazines and the forend folds down to form a bipod for increased accuracy.
- * **Marlin 70PSS Papoose.** This stainless, seven-shot, semi-auto .22 offers a takedown barrel and synthetic stock. It comes in a padded carrying case.
- * **New England Firearms' Versa-Pack.** This rifle has interchangeable barrels that easily swap over from .22 rimfire to .410 shotgun.
- * **Savage 24F Predator.** This over/under combination gun is available with a .22 Hornet, .223, .17 HMR or .30/30 over a 12-gauge barrel or .22 LR, .22 Hornet, .223 or .17 HMR over a 20-gauge barrel. The takedown action makes storage easy.
- * **Winchester M-9422 and Marlin M-1894PG.** Lightweight lever guns like these offer lots of magazine capacity and the versatility of using either birdshot loads or standard bullets.
- * **Thompson/Center's G2 Contender.** This single-shot is known for accuracy. It comes in a number of different caliber options, is easily scoped and stows effortlessly.

Backpacking and Backup

When you're carrying the whole load on your shoulders, weight and size are definitely factors. Backpacking trips are the time when carrying a revolver (with a traditional hammer spur so you can cock and shoot single-action for better accuracy) is ideal. Load the first two chambers with snakeshot, just in case you come across a grouse (or something or somebody that needs a serious bit of discouragement), and load the rest with hollowpoints for self-defense.

One of the new models with a titanium cylinder and alloy frame to save weight (with adjustable hunting sights) is just about perfect. Shorter barrel lengths will save weight and keep your choice compact, concealable and easy to wield.

- * **Smith & Wesson AirLite SC Revolver.** Smith offers a whole family of AirLite revolvers in a number of calibers and configurations. Models like the M-386 Mountain Lite would also be an excellent choice for survival use.
- * **Taurus M617SS2C.** The mini titanium revolver in .357 Magnum is a standout candidate for survival because it offers a seven-round cylinder instead of the traditional six-shot yet weighs less than 20 ounces.
- * **Glock 17.** These polymer-framed semi-autos can stand up to practically any abuse from Mother Nature and still function. They also offer plenty of magazine capacity in a small, compact package.

Boats and Canoes

In a boat or canoe, weight is not a significant factor, so just about anything goes. Moisture is an issue, however, so lean toward stainless or marine-grade models and synthetic stocks. All of the handgun choices above will work, as will the following:

- * **Benelli Nova Pump H2O.** This gun features nickel-plated parts and is capable of handling just about any shotgun ammo you can feed through it, from 3½-inch magnum shotshells to slugs.
- * **Winchester Model 1300 Coastal Marine.** This stainless-steel pump is a rugged workhorse available in 12-gauge with seven-shot capacity and 3-inch chamber.
- * **Mossberg Model 500 Pump Action.** Available in synthetic stock with a Marinecote finish, Mariner pumps are ideal for use on boats and are the choice of many saltwater skippers.

Fishing and Wading

In bear country one of the short-barreled, big-bore lever guns or one of the marine-grade pump shotguns mentioned previously is a good choice. Loaded with slugs or buckshot, these guns are easy to throw over a shoulder. Other choices include:

- * **Remington Model 870 Marine Magnum.** This version of the 870 is similar to the classic Model 870 Wingmaster,

except the metal parts are plated with electroless nickel. It has a black synthetic forend and stock.

* Marlin Model 1895GS Guide Gun. This stainless lever- action in .45/70 packs a lot of punch in a small package. Bigger still is the new .450 Marlin Model 1895MR.

Shotguns offer great reliability and security if you have to stop a bear while fishing. Browning's BPS pump shotgun and Winchester's Super X2 are solid choices. Despite your best efforts to be prepared, survival situations aren't something you can plan on. Inevitably, circumstances will find you with whatever gun you happen to be carrying; then it's up to you to know how to use it to your best advantage.

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