

# Muzzleloader Hunting

## The Guns We Carry

Story and photos  
by  
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When the special muzzleloader deer season opens in early November, Virginia hunters will carry an assortment of rifles. All will load through the front end of the barrel, but beyond that, similarities are few. Some hunters will carry authentic-looking muzzleloaders, replicas of the old smokepole Great-Great-Grandpappy carried out on the frontier. Others will carry rifles that look like they were just issued out of the back of a SWAT Team van, weapons of stainless steel and black synthetics, the kind that guys in helmets and Kevlar vests use to take out bad guys.

If two hunters carrying such different muzzleloaders were to pass in the November woods, I'm not sure if they would speak. I am pretty sure the hunter carrying Old Betsy would give his high-tech counterpart at least a sidelong glance. It would be look of disapproval, to put it mildly, not envy.

### Muzzleloaders versus Muzzleloaders

Muzzleloaders come in two different styles: traditional sidelocks and modern inlines. Sidelocks are the kind of rifles you've seen in every movie about the American frontier or the Civil War, the rifles with the big pull-back hammers. Picture Daniel Boone cradling his Kentucky long rifle while striding west-



Ricky Horn at Green Top Sporting Goods with a Zouave sidelock replica, circa 1863, and the 2006 inline Savage Model 10ML "smokeless"

ward, Davy Crockett swinging Old Betsy like a club at the Alamo, brave boys in blue and gray charging up the hill with fixed bayonets on heavy muskets. But it is hard to tell many modern inline muzzleloaders from today's standard high-power rifles. Picture Mel Gibson in *Lethal Weapon* lying prone in the desert sand sighting in on a very bad cottontail, a.k.a. Gary Busey. Most likely Gibson was using a Savage Model 10FP Sniper Rifle in .308 caliber, but it could just as easily have been a modern inline.

*Welcome Limitations.* Sidelocks today have the same limitations they had 150 years ago. They shoot straight *if* the powder stays dry, *if* the bullet is well seated on the powder, and *if* the percussion cap fires a hot enough flame to ignite the load. If anything is not right, the rifle will go "phhht" not "BOOM." If all's well, a sidelock will hit a target just fine, but keep your targets within 50 yards if you are shooting with your naked eye through open sights. A hunter with a sidelock muzzleloader faces all the same challenges as his or her forefathers *and wouldn't have it any other way.*

*No "Ifs" About It.* Inlines were introduced in the mid-1980s and have all but eclipsed sidelocks in popularity since then, mainly because they've taken the "ifs" out of shooting a muzzleloader. The breech is fully enclosed so the powder

stays dry, and the hammer is an internal plunger which drives the cap's flame directly into the powder charge. Inlines go "BOOM" every time.

Other innovations have come along to make inlines even more powerful and accurate: powder pellets for precisely measured loads, super hot shotgun primers instead of percussion caps, and plastic cups under copper-jacketed hollow point bullets for greater downrange accuracy, to name a few. When innovations such as these are used in an inline topped with a scope, you have a truly formidable rifle. The epitome is the Savage Model 10 ML. It is the one and only muzzleloader that is built strong enough to handle "smokeless" powder, the fast-burning, high-pressure kind found in high-power rifle cartridges, not the kind in Daniel Boone's powder horn.

With smokeless powder, Model 10 ML fires a bullet at twice the velocity and three times the knock-down power of a traditional sidelock. As one new Model 10 ML owner giddily put it, "There's not a whitetail in the world safe at 250 yards." Not surprisingly sidelock traditionalists are not as enthusiastic: "That's not hunting, that's just shooting."

### State Rules

Advocates of traditional muzzleloader hunting have lobbied their game



Suzie Q is pie-plate perfect at 50 yards.

commissions to limit technological advances and keep the sport as “primitive” as possible. They believe a hunter’s success should depend on his or her ability to scout game trails, read sign and stalk his or her quarry. “I want to take my buck the old-fashioned way—I want to earn it.”

Some states have been sympathetic and imposed rules to preserve the challenge and romance of muzzleloader hunting. Pennsylvania, for example, has a special deer hunting season when you can only use a pre-1800s flintlock and fire only round lead balls. You hunt like Daniel Boone or not at all. Several western states outlaw scopes, jacketed bullets and powder pellets to level the playing field and preserve the frontier spirit.

In Virginia traditionalists have lobbied hard, but technology advocates have lobbied harder—and won. Over the past decade muzzleloader restrictions have all but disappeared. First scopes were allowed, then sabots were OK’d, and then copper-jacketed and plastic-tipped bullets were given the go-ahead. This year Virginia took a major step that will take it

where few states have gone before. The new 2006 rule says, “Smokeless powder is allowed for muzzleloading weapons designed for it.” As of one half hour before sunrise on November 4, to paraphrase that Savage Model 10ML owner, “There’s not a whitetail in the state safe at 250 yards.”

**The Black Knight and the ill-fated big buck hanging at Blanton and Pleasants General Store, Cartersville.**



## Personal Choices

Without rules Virginia’s muzzleloader hunters can pretty much do as they please. Each hunter can choose the kind of weapon to carry and how much challenge to put into the hunt. I made my personal choice a few years back, but it came about as a result of experience rather than quiet deliberation.

When I first went shopping for a muzzleloader there were more sidelocks than inlines on the rack at Greentop Sporting Goods north of Richmond. I eyed a number of sidelock Hawkens, muskets and Kentucky long rifles before I spied a cute little White Mountain Carbine among the big boys. She was short and sweet with a delicately feathered hardwood stock and a peep sight, and she snapped to my shoulder as if we were made for each other. I’m not one for naming guns, but I knew she was “Susie Q” before I finished the paperwork. I soon learned that she would lay a huge Great Plains bullet in a four-inch circle at 50 yards, and I never asked her for more.

We headed up to Bath County for

our first hunt, to the same territory Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton hunted in their day. For three days we saw plenty of deer, but none close enough to shoot. Not long before dark on the third day, a buck stepped into the open far across a high meadow up on Black Oak Ridge. I checked the wind and dropped back into the woods to circle around to a point where he might cross the meadow. After belly-crawling the last 50 yards back to the tree-line, I saw I was right. He was coming—100 yards, 60 yards, 40—and Suzie Q said what she had to say.

I had done my part, and she had done hers, and we had a very nice six-point buck down as a full moon crested Black Oak Ridge. It could have been just the evening breeze, but I swear I heard a voice whisper from deep in the woods, “Well done, very well done.” Could’ve been Dan’l, maybe Simon.

A few years later I picked up a used Knight inline rifle complete with a black synthetic stock, variable scope and nasty-looking bullets with bright red polymer tips. Suzie and I were still together so I really wasn’t looking for another rifle, but I was curious and it was cheap. I knocked off two Bud cans at 100 yards with the first two shots out of the Black Knight and knew he was still dead on.

I didn’t plan to hunt in my home county on opening day that year. I planned to take Suzie west of the Blue Ridge the next week. But before first light on that morning I took a “what the heck” walk out my back door. I stood above the James River floodplain a few hundred yards from my house. At first light a buck rose up out of the ground fog. I looked through the scope and saw he was good. I fired, he fell.

I walked 135 paces to where he lay in the grass. I looked down at a magnificent buck that would place high up in the state’s big-game ranking for that year. I’ve had bad experiences in my hunting life, but nothing like that moment. You can’t call back a bullet. All I could think

was, “This was too easy. I don’t deserve this.... *He didn’t deserve this.*” Later that day I packed the Black Knight away in the back of my gun safe where he has been ever since.

I won’t hunt in November this year. I made a date with Suzie to go up to Highland County for the late season. At the end of the year we’re not likely to see other hunters. We’ll travel light and trek the high country up along the West Virginia border. The weather will be from the north, and with luck there will be snow.

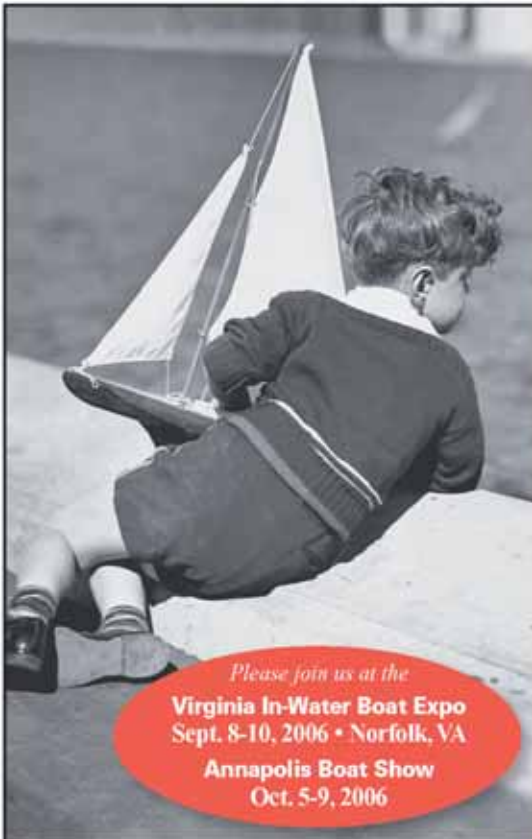
The 2006-2007 Virginia muzzleloader seasons are November 4-17 east of the Blue Ridge and November 11-17 west of the Blue Ridge. The late season west of the Blue Ridge runs December 16-January 6.

Do NOT—repeat, Do NOT—load any amount of smokeless powder in any

muzzleloader other than a Savage Model 10ML. You will blow up your rifle and yourself as well.



If higher authority helps you make choices, Jeremiah’s words may serve: “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” (That’s from Jeremiah 6:16, not Jeramiah Johnson, mountain man.)


The author is an outdoorsman, farmer and international management consultant whose travels often take him to the far edges and borderlands. He welcomes comments at [jshtogren@cs.com](mailto:jshtogren@cs.com).



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