

Muzzleloader Tips

No. 1: Choose the Right Gun

Muzzleloaders are like shoes. The best options are custom fit to you. Things from terrain to shooting skills to budget are factors when selecting the right gun. Get a muzzleloader with the proper length of pull for you, a trigger that you like, and that's of a comfortable weight and barrel length for your style of hunting.

No. 2: Pick a Powder

Once you have the right gun, it's time to purchase propellant to fuel it. True black powder comes in four consistencies (Fg, FFg, FFFg and FFFFg), but FFg is used in most modern muzzleloaders (the finer powders are sometimes used in smallbore guns and pistols, or for priming powder in flintlocks). But few hunters use true black powder these days because it's highly corrosive and prone to fouling, compared to more modern alternatives like Pyrodex, Triple Seven and Blackhorn 209. Many black-powder substitutes are available in loose or pellet form.

Though pellets are popular with hunters, Realtree pro-staffer Tony Smotherman, a muzzleloading expert who also works for CVA, prefers loose powder.

"When you pour loose powder down the barrel, it settles in the bottom next to the breech plug in what we call the powder column," he said. "It fills the rifling completely (and evenly) every time. This makes it super consistent by nature. When you drop pellets down the barrel, you can't see how they stack, making them a bit more inconsistent due to not filling the rifling completely. This can leave you with air pockets around the pellets, causing an inconsistency that you can't control." Smotherman's favorite powder is Blackhorn 209. "It's super clean, and consistent chamber pressures make it an excellent choice," he said.

No. 3: Bet on a Bullet

What bullet should you shoot? Old-school hunters with traditional equipment can consider patched round balls and conicals, but for modern inline muzzleloaders, there are basically two types. "One type is the full-bore bullet with a gas check at the base that contains the pressure once the powder is ignited," Smotherman said. "The other type is an under-bore size that requires a sabot."

Sabots need to be loaded

exactly the same way every time. "Your sabot has petals on it," Smotherman said. "Make sure one of those petals is always in perfect alignment [with the barrel, for consistency's sake]. This ensures that every bullet exits the barrel the same way."

Also consider the weight of the bullet. "Bullet weight is highly debated amongst muzzleloader shooters," Smotherman said. "The two most common weights are 250- and 300-grain projectiles. Both will work just fine. But I prefer heavier bullets. I shoot a bullet that's as close to 300 grains as possible. Heavier bullets are longer than their lighter counterparts, making them stabilize better in flight, which results in better accuracy." Smotherman says the added weight helps with penetration and knockdown power, too.

No. 4: Find a Routine

Test different powder and projectile combos through your gun. Different models prefer different brands and types of bullets and powders. As you're developing a favorite load for your gun, make sure to keep the barrel clean. "Finding the load your gun likes can take many shots, causing quite a bit of fouling to build up in your barrel," Smotherman said. "Barrels can become constricted due to powder residue buildup, making for accuracy changes with every shot. Always swab the bore between shots with a damp patch, and then a dry patch, while sighting in your gun."

Once you find the load your gun likes, it's important to remain consistent. This is true with any form of shooting, but especially when using muzzleloaders. "No matter what bullet, powder and primer combo you're using," Smotherman says, "make sure to follow your routine the exact same way every time."

No. 5: Mark Your Ramrod

Make sure the gun is unloaded, then correctly load it and put a mark on the ramrod even with the crown of the muzzle. This will tell you if the gun is correctly loaded each time. An incorrectly or double-loaded gun can be a dangerous thing. "I'll mark the rod, so I know I've got that load in there tight [and correctly]," said Realtree pro staffer Art Helin. "Push that rod all the way until it hits that line." This is also important so you don't pack the load too tight, which can be a problem with pelleted powder.

No. 6: Go on an Armed Scouting Mission

Many different patterns, behaviors and changes occur during deer season. Don't be afraid to climb down and determine what the current ones are. A quick, yet unobtrusive, scouting session for fresh sign is very important to success. Scout the fringes of the property, stay out of bedding areas, and make sure you keep the wind in your favor while doing so. If muzzleloader season is already in, carry your gun and slowly still hunt. You might just get a shot during the scouting mission.

No. 7: Think Like a Bowhunter

The extended range of a gun can make you complacent. But don't use it as a crutch, or an excuse to be lazy. "Set up a little closer to those bedding areas," Helin said. "Those same areas that I bowhunt are where I go to with my muzzleloader. Because I'm not shooting 200-plus yards. Sure, it's nice to see that animal. But it doesn't do me any good if it's out there at 300 or 400 yards. Don't educate them, but get in tight like you would as a bowhunter."

Funnels and pinch-points are perfect muzzleloader spots. Oftentimes, they condense deer travel down enough that a muzzleloader can cover the entire area, but they're generally big enough that you can still take advantage of a muzzleloader's range.

No. 8: Pack the Possibles

A good hunter is a prepared hunter. Make sure your possibles bag includes powder, bullets, sabots, primers, powder measures, cleaning jags and patches. Prep a few speed-loaders for quick follow-up shots. "I have a sling on my muzzleloader," Helin said. "There are two loops built into the shoulder pad. In those, I already have my preloads in little tubes. I have that all set with a bullet on one end and the powder on the other."

Keep everything — but especially powder, primers and sabots — inside a waterproof container or bag that fits within the possibles bag. While modern muzzleloaders aren't as susceptible to moisture, it's still important to keep that barrel covered in rainy situations, too. "If you're hunting in snowy or wet conditions, take a small piece of plastic and tape it around the end of the muzzle," Helin said.

No. 9: Clear the Smoke

With a muzzleloader, knowing where you hit a deer can be difficult. But you can still see where the deer goes. "There's usually some type of air movement or wind," Helin said. "So, you'll know which way that smoke is going. Try to shift your field of view to the side

of that as soon as you can. And it really doesn't last that long. A lot of times, I'll try to turn my scope down because I don't need it at higher powers. This opens up my field of view."

No. 10: Watch the Wind

Muzzleloaders are smelly. Add your stink to the sulfuric odor of that cannon, and you have a recipe for white flag soup. Deer have been known to detect danger with their nose from up to 450 yards away. That's out of muzzleloader range. Keep the wind in your favor. Implement good scent control. When possible, choose entry routes that flow in the same direction as your scent cone will as it travels away from the treestand. Use a wind checker often. Dried milkweed seeds are likely the best natural wind-checking tool in the woods, but you can bring baking flour from the kitchen, too.

No. 11: Hunt Consecutive Days

If muzzleloader season is the peak of your year and conditions are right, hunt your best spot. If the wind allows, hunt it two or three days in a row. Deer are creatures of habit. If you have a deer coming into an area, chances are you'll see him if you hunt it long enough. Responsibly hunting a good spot two or three days in a row increases your chances of seeing a target deer move through the area. If I've learned anything in my hunting career, this tip is it.

No. 12: Take Care of It

Even though modern powders are miles ahead of the old stuff, it's still important to take care of your gun. Don't leave it loaded. Keep the barrel in tip-top shape for ultimate performance. "Even with today's technology, powder is still highly caustic, and it rusts things quickly," Helin said. "Get rid of that powder and pull the bullet." That's especially important in wet or damp situations.

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Hunter's Style Venison

Ingredients:

- 1-1/2 pounds of venison, cut in chunks (need not be the most tender portions)
- 1/4 cup butter or margarine
- 1 pound sliced mushrooms
- 1 bunch of green onions, chopped
- 1 can beef bouillon
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- Parsley
- Onion powder
- Garlic powder
- Herb croutons

Directions:

Brown the venison in butter or margarine, add mushrooms and green onions and saute for several minutes. Add bouillon, seasonings and wine, cover and simmer for two hours, until meat is very tender, or remove to a baking dish, cover and bake at 325°F for two hours.

When ready to serve, add 2 cups herb croutons, stir and serve.

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