

Muzzleloader hunt begins soon

by Lee Keck

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Nov. 30 marks the start of yet another of Illinois' many special deer seasons. This season, however, is for those dedicated hunters who prefer to harvest their deer using the firearms of our forefathers.

This particular hunt is for those who pursue deer with only a muzzleloading weapon. This means the hunter has only one shot and it must be accurate. You can bet that after all the excitement of the regular firearm season, deer won't hang around waiting for the hunter to reload a muzzleloader.

Many novice smokepolers might be surprised to learn that a clean gun tends to be much more reliable and sometimes shoots a bit straighter. In fact, an unclean weapon may be the greatest single reason that most muzzleloader hunters experience problems while in the field.

Black powder weapons have come a long way while progressing from matchlock to the out-of line long guns. Each step in this innovation process provided the shooter with a weapon that was more accurate and faster to reload for repeated shots.

All black powder weapons operate basically alike, the shooter drops a black powder charge and rams a projectile (some with patch) down the barrel. The shooter then installs one of several ignition systems - a percussion cap, in-line and outer-line.

The percussion cap uses an exposed nipple covered by a percussion cap. Attached to the underside of the cap is an explosive that is pressure sensitive. When struck by the hammer it sends a stream of flame down the nipple and ignites the black powder.

An in-line uses a bolt action just like those found on modern rifles. The shooter slides the bolt open and places a shotgun primer in the concave nipple. Then closes the bolt. When the shooter pulls the trigger it releases the firing pin (housed in the bolt) which hits the shotgun primer sending a stream of flame into the breach igniting the black powder.

An outer-line center mount developed by Markesbery Muzzleloaders is a combination of both systems. Either a standard percussion cap nipple or a special ignition system sits at the rear of the breach and is struck by an exposed hammer. By changing the nipple, a modern primer can be used.

In every case, these weapons perform quite well when properly maintained.

"No matter what type of black powder gun you use the important thing is to keep it clean," said Russell Markesbery, President of Markesbery Muzzleloaders.

"Black powder (and even modern options like Pyrodex) are very corrosive and will easily pit a barrel. It is also very dirty and can foul a barrel after a few shots." Both of these conditions, he says, result in a loss of accuracy. Therefore, it is extremely important to clean the barrel after each shot when sighting-in and thoroughly clean the weapon after each use.

In the past, shooters have used cleaning solvents or hot water and soap to clean the barrel, breech and nipple. This was a time consuming and dirty job. Markesbery says modern day muzzleloader fans will find a variety of cleaning and protecting agents designed for black powder makes the job easier and cleaner.

When sighting-in, he recommends running a patch soaked in a cleaning agent down the barrel several times to loosen the powder residue. Then, run clean patches through the barrel until they exit clean.

When the shooting day is over, it is time to clean the barrel. This can be accomplished by spraying a cleaning agent in the barrel and running a brush through the barrel. Then, let the product sit for five or ten minutes and run clean patches through the barrel until they exit clean.

As a final effort, run a patch coated with a protective lubricant through the barrel and wipe with clean patches.

While in the field, shooters can also eliminate problems with minimal effort. After the second or third shot, run a patch soaked with a cleaning agent through the barrel. This will make loading easier and restore that "first shot" accuracy.

When sighting-in, hunters should remove the nipple and wipe the threads with a cleaning agent. It's also a good idea to visually check the firing hole and clean with a pick if necessary. Also, wipe down the barrel with a light coat of oil and spray a protective coating on all moving parts.

"One thing shooters can do to eliminate a cause of a misfire or hang-fire is to fire a couple of caps/primers through the barrel before a day of hunting or shooting. This will burn off any oil residue remaining in the barrel, breach or nipple," added Markesbery.