

DOVES with MUZZLELOADERS

— LARRY'S SHORT STORIES #231 —

We know the original owner, but not much more about the history of these old shotguns. They were made as a matched pair by Westley Richards, of Birmingham, England, and delivered in 1851. The introduction of shotgun shells (self-contained cartridges) in the 1850's and 60's was a great improvement for bird hunters, but it was the beginning of the end for muzzleloading shotguns. They have since taken up residence over fireplaces and in the vaults of vintage gun collectors; there aren't many that get even casual use today.

But some of us, who enjoy firearms history and keep one foot in the past, like to find a reason to fetch guns like this from the vault and take them to the field. Dove season seemed like the ideal time to "fire up these old guns" so my friend and co-worker Ryan Fischer and I made a plan to do just that.

These are 14 bore/gauge shotguns; not a problem, wads are readily available in this bore/gauge. Also, a steel wad cutting tool was cased with the guns when they were

made. Number 11 caps (primers) haven't changed much through the years, nor has black powder or lead shot. Each gun was originally provided with both shot and powder flasks and they were set for one ounce of shot and 3 drams of black powder.

Sitting side by side in the shade of an oak tree, Ryan and I had our own shot and powder flasks and loaded from a common supply of wads. The original priming tools were lost through time, so we shared a straight-line capper. It took a lot of discipline to ignore the doves flying around and concentrate solely on the process of reloading these double barreled muzzleloaders. A mistake could lead to a



A matched pair of Westley Richards 14 gauge/bore muzzle loaders, with Damascus barrels, made in 1851. The powder and shot flasks allow for quicker loading in the dove field.

double charge of powder down the same barrel, or two charges of shot, or both.

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Our shooting was not at all satisfactory. Cannot tell you how many times we pulled the triggers expecting feathers and dead doves, but got nothing. Patterning the guns, we were quite surprised to find big holes in our patterns. So, we cut the cushion wads in half (a practice recommended by Greener), but our shooting didn't get any better. It was clear that we need to spend a bit of time developing proper loads before taking these fine old shotguns back to the dove field.

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The powder goes in first, followed by an over-powder and a cushion wad. Then comes the shot (pictured here) and an over-shot wad - all pressed in place with the ramrod.



The last step is to press a primer down firmly on each nipple. Of course the doves are flying all this time - but one must ignore them, to ensure that the guns are properly loaded.