

Better chance of pulling a tag?

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

Tired of getting the news that your name didn't get pulled for a deer or elk tag? You might consider Civil War-era muzzleloading, provided you're patient enough to spend 30 seconds or more to load with measured gunpowder and a patch and ball tamped down with a rod.

Consider your chances of drawing a tag. Wallowa County has two muzzleloader-specific hunts. The Eagle Cap elk hunt on the Minam Wildlife Management Unit takes place Oct. 15-23 this year. A white tail deer hunt called the North Wenaha-East Sled Springs takes place Dec. 3-11. Be advised that as the elk hunt takes place in the Eagle Cap Wilderness, the only way to pack the elk out is on your back or the backs of livestock.

The white tail deer tag to applicant ratio is greater than one. In 2015, 279 people applied for 303 tags. The 2015 Eagle Cap elk hunt had 105 people apply for 44 tags. Hunters experienced a mere 5 percent success rate on that hunt.

Before purchasing a firearm, be sure to know the distinction between black powder and muzzleloader firearms. Smokeless gunpowder didn't come into general use until the 1890s, so all firearms up to that point were "blackpowder" arms, including breechloaders. In other words, muzzleloaders are black powder firearms but not all black powder firearms are muzzleloaders.

Muzzleloaders are divided into two groups — flintlock and percussion cap. This has to do with the method used to ignite the primer that in turn ignites the gunpowder. Percussion cap is the more "modern" of the two methods.

As the name implies, muzzleloaders load from the business end of the rifle barrel, while breechloaders load at the opposite end of the barrel. Although some guns are



Steve Tool/Chieftain

Treva Crooks holds the Hawken-style rifle Tom built especially for her. Although now retired from muzzleloading hunting, the couple spent years pursuing the sport.

advertised as muzzleloaders and technically are, it doesn't mean they're legal for Oregon hunting. A quick look at online retailers shows many muzzleloaders sporting a strikingly contemporary look.

For starters, scopes are off limits, as are most optical aids. The ignition must be open so the percussion cap can be seen when the gun is in fire position. Many modern muzzleloaders work in a similar manner to a bolt-action rifle, although some of those have an open ignition as well. Read gun descriptions and hunting regulation descriptions carefully before spending hard-earned cash on a firearm.

If you have a muzzleloader that doesn't fit the bill for the gun-specific hunts, it's still likely legal to use on several doe hunts in this area that prohibit modern, center-fire rifles. These hunts are listed on page 58 of Oregon's 2016 Big Game

Hunting Regulations. If you're particularly ambitious, you can use a muzzleloader in any firearm hunt.

Tom Crooks and his wife Treva of Joseph recently retired from muzzleloading hunting, but share fond memories. Tom Crooks was an avid muzzleloader hunter and is a gunsmith as well as a repairer of clocks. Crooks built his own as well as his wife's percussion cap rifle.

Crooks, who hails from Montana, has a lifelong interest in muzzleloading firearms and hunting.

"I did nothing but for 25 years or so," he said. "I got interested when I was a little kid. I built a pistol when I was in the Navy and went on from there."

His sons eventually showed interest as well and often hunted squirrels with their muzzleloaders.

Treva Crooks started using muzzleloaders after marrying Tom

in 2002. She previously hunted with a 30-06. It took some adjustment.

"I never shot a muzzleloader before I married Tom," she said. "You really have to concentrate when using a muzzleloader. The next shot you have to put in your powder, then your ball — you really have to push it down. Deer generally wait around for that. It's the best way to learn to shoot."

Local hunter Dustin Schaeffer has owned muzzleloading firearms for more than a dozen years but only recently started using them for hunting.

"It's different," Schaeffer said. "I have a .50-caliber percussion cap rifle. It's a Hawken (traditional) style."

And as you might imagine, range is limited with these types of rifles.

"A good range is 100 yards — maybe 150 under great conditions, but I'd never shoot past that," Schaeffer said.

Several types of black powder are available for use. Authentic black powder fouls a barrel much sooner than more modern types of black powder such as Pyrodex, which Schaeffer uses. He cautioned against using smokeless powder as a substitute, which is illegal as well as dangerous because muzzleloaders aren't built to take the pressure of a smokeless powder detonation.

Most experts suggest a rough cleaning with a copper brush about every three shots, with a thorough cleaning of the weapon following each use. And plenty of practice time in a controlled area such as a shooting range is required to gain proficiency.

Muzzleloading guns are available at a number of firearm retailers, as are kits you can put together yourself. For the more adventurous, retailers like Dixie Gun Works actually carry parts you can cherry pick to create your own custom version.