

.41 Magnums & Big Slugs

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A lot has been written about using heavy cast bullets in the .41 Magnum. Much of it has been favorable while others question the need to further “magnumize” the round. I tend to agree with the latter because the .44s and .45 Colts are much better suited for 300 grain slugs and above. Nonetheless, I had a desire to try heavy bullets in the .41. Previously, my experience had been with the cast weights of 210, 220, and 240 and the results were excellent in my Blackhawks and S&W 57s. JD Jones of SSK Industries had long used “.410” bullets ranging from 275 to 295 grains for increased penetration on big game and claimed that accuracy was uncompromised (these bullets are commonly known as being SSK designed).

In August of 1996 I purchased a few hundred .41s in the 295 SSK style. Though many have tried them in the double action Smiths, I only intended to use them in strong .41s, such as the Blackhawks or Dan Wessons. My initial testing of the bullet proved what Jones had claimed for years.....namely, that the .41 Magnum can easily accept heavier bullets and still shoot straight. I was impressed enough to contact NEI and order a mould for a 300 grain “.410”. Upon doing so, they informed me that they had a dual-cavity offering: one was a 275 grain, non-gas check slug while the other punched out 300 grain gas-checked. Casting proved to produce heavier weights than advertised; the 275’s came in at 297 grains while the 300 topped out at 335. I was much more interested in working with the heavier of the two, but wondered if the weight was overly excessive. It was obvious that to attain velocities greater than 1,200 fps, the 335 would have to be seated farther out of the case.

The gun that I elected to use for testing is a custom 5-shot .41 that was built on a stainless steel Blackhawk frame. The standard backstrap was discarded and replaced with a Bisley conversion kit to include the correct hammer and trigger. Next, my father built a new cylinder and installed a 5” barrel that was made off of a cut down piece of .41 Ruger tube. One reason we went to these lengths is that I wanted a long cylinder so that the bullets could be seated farther out (case capacity is quite limited when the 335s have to be seated for a standard sized cylinder). As a result, there is minimal barrel-to-frame protrusion on the gun we built. Whether the 5-shot design is necessary or not,

remains to be seen. The loads that I'll eventually discuss may safely work in the 6-shots, but the added strength comes in handy when pressure curves exceed 50,000. The other reason that I opted to not use one of my existing .41 Blackhawks is that they all were sighted for lighter weight bullets (200 – 240 grain).

When working with a 5-shot .41 Mag cylinder, you'll definitely appreciate the amount of unused steel. They're strong to say the least. Because of this I wasted no time in trying the 335 grain bullet over a fair amount of ball powder. Starting loads used 15 grains of W296 and produced mild recoil and excellent accuracy at 30 yards. From there, subsequent loads were increased by half-grain increments until 19 grains was reached. This load generated a lot of recoil and flattened the hell out of large magnum pistol primers. I was ready to quit at that point, but at the urging of my dad's friend I went to 20 grains. It worked well, the rounds extracted with relative ease, and the bullet shot consistently. Case pressure was another story though. Unquestionable these loads produce well over 50,000 cup which is fine in a 5-shot gun; I wouldn't want to try them in a standard Blackhawk. As a comparison, most loading detail shows the 295 hard cast bullet to max out around 19.5 grains of H110 (which is nearly interchangeable with 296). According to the Hodgen manual, this load generates velocities around 1,270 fps out of a six-inch barrel. Though they don't specify it to be unsafe in an N-frame Smith, I wouldn't attempt the combination. Twenty grains of W296 with the 335 in heavy frames such as a Freedom Arms or 5-shot custom Ruger works well though. Velocities range between 1,230 and 1,250 fps and provide roughly 1,160 foot pounds of muzzle energy. The real benefit though is the increased penetration as afforded by the heavy weight/cross-sectional profile.

One consideration in using the heavy bullet is how the projectile stabilizes with standard .41 barrel twist. Surprisingly, it doesn't seem to be an issue. The 295/335s prove accurate and consistent in how they shoot. Personally, I've not tried them at ranges past 50 yards, but out to that distance they fly great. Secondly, the compressed 335 loads when propelled by 296/110 kick hard but do so with less of a jolting effect. I've found that when massive bullets are used in standard pistol rounds, that faster powders such as 2400 excessively hammer the gun and shooter. Again, W296/H110 seem to work the best in the heavy .41s. I do recommend long cylinders though for .410's that are 300 grains and above. Velocities of 1,250 fps provide for incredible down range performance, but to achieve this you need additional case capacity. Twenty grains of W296 is simply over-compressed when the 335 grain is loaded in a standard length cylinder. Granted, ball powders are happy when in this environment; what is often overlooked though is that if excessively compressed, burn rate and detonation can be altered enough to hamper performance. A tenth of an inch worth of

additional cylinder enables the bullet to be seated out enough to eliminate the problem. Some selected .41 Magnum loads (to include lighter bullets) are listed below.

So is it necessary to big-bullet the .41 Magnum? This has been debated for years and many notable gun writers have taken the position that it is a worthwhile endeavor. Logically speaking, the 300 grain+ road is better served with the .44 Magnum and .45 Colt. For those of us though that are fanatical about .41s, the heavy bullet option provides increased penetration and terminal energy while maintaining excellent accuracy. I should again stress that I've worked with these loads in 5-shot Ruger Blackhawks. Obviously, they should be safe in Freedom Arms single-actions and heavy framed doubles such as the Ruger Redhawk. I have not tried, nor do I recommend, maximum 300 grain loads in weaker doubles-actions (ie, N-Frame Smith & Wessons, Taurus', etc).

NOTE: These loads work in my guns and have not proved unsafe. I am however not responsible for these loadings in any other firearm. As always, maximum loads should be approached with care.

| BULLET WT. | POWDER | CHARGE | VEL | NOTES |
|------------|--------|--------|-------|-------------------|
| 170 | H110 | 25.0 | 1,500 | |
| 200 | 2400 | 20.5 | 1,465 | Near Max |
| 210 | Unique | 9.0 | 1,120 | Very Accurate |
| 240 | H4227 | 20.0 | 1,225 | |
| 255 | H110 | 19.5 | 1,166 | |
| 295 | W296 | 18.5 | 1,260 | |
| 300 | H110 | 19.0 | 1,270 | |
| 335 | W296 | 20.0 | 1,250 | Ruger, FA 5-shots |

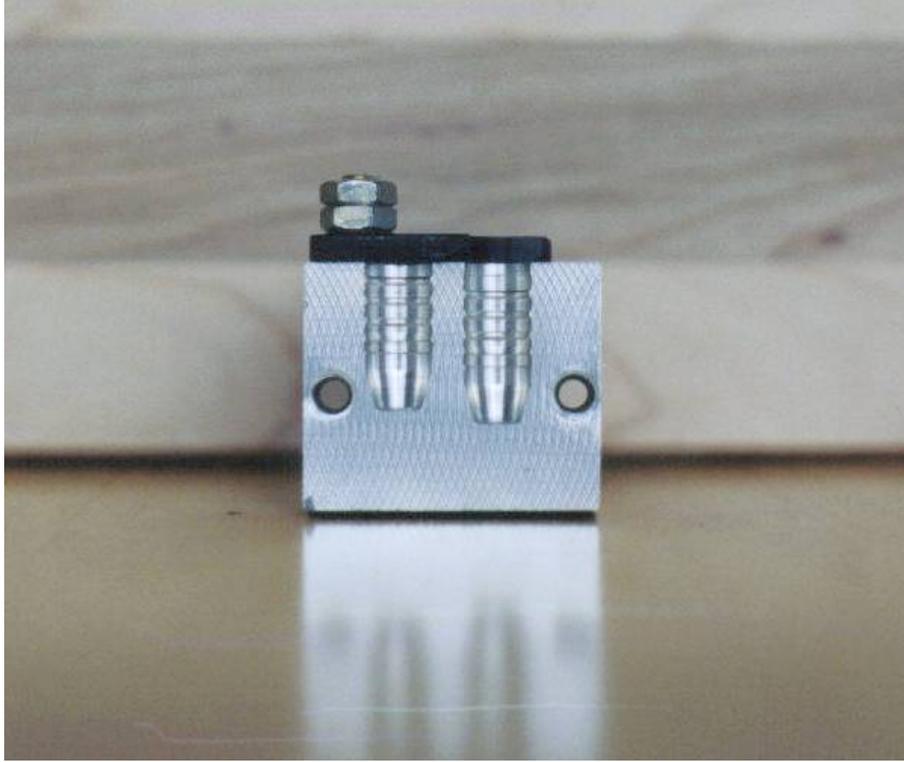
PICTURES – see below



Our first 5 shot .41 Magnum conversion



AccuSport Bisley in .41 Magnum



NEI, 275/300 grain 0.410" mould