



*Wieland in Tanzania with a warthog, downed with one shot from a .257 Weatherby, using a 115-grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claw.*

# Weatherby Magic: Belts, double radii, and flare

Long before the WSM, WSSM, and WSSSSSM cartridges, before the .300 WinMag, 7mm Remington or even the .458 Winchester, there was Weatherby of California.

Roy Weatherby was a native of Kansas, an indefatigable wildcatter, and one hell of a salesman. After 1945, he moved to California and set up in the custom gun business in Los Angeles. Weatherby's product was cartridges but his pitch was speed: He believed in velocity, seemingly at any cost, and never tired of singing its song.

Mention Weatherby to any old African professional hunter, and chances are his lip will curl with a few choice words. The very name

is anathema – a synonym for bullet failure and wounded animals, dating back to Weatherby's first safaris in the early 1950s.

Our purpose here is neither to defend Weatherby nor attack him. Rather, it's to take a fresh look at the Weatherby cartridges – a line that at one time was cutting edge but now seems almost old hat. The fact is, though, Roy Weatherby was a great cartridge designer, and even today some of his cartridges are pre-eminent in their class.

A couple of facts need to be acknowledged immediately. First, to get the advertised velocity out of any of the Weatherby cartridges, you need slow-burning powder and a long barrel – 26 inches at least. This immediately

imposes certain limitations. Second, to take advantage of that high velocity on any serious game animal, you need a premium game bullet that holds together.

Roy Weatherby's early cartridges were based on the belted .375 H&H case, blown out, with a sexy double-radius shoulder. His first creations, the .270 and .257, utilized a shortened case that would function through .30-06-length actions; later ones, including the .300 (his all-time most popular), used the full-length case. An early entry was the .375 Weatherby, which was just a .375 H&H blown out.

Had Weatherby stopped there, stuck to long-range rifles for smaller game and left dangerous game alone, he would have avoided much of the controversy. In 1953, however, he decided to apply his high-velocity philosophy to elephants and Cape buffalo, and the real problems started. He created a whole new cartridge: The .378 Weatherby was essentially the .416 Rigby case with a belt. It advertised 2925 feet per second with a 300-grain bullet. To ensure its success, Weatherby scrapped his smaller (and more useful) .375, and even discontinued the ammunition.

More than any other cartridge, the .378 is the source of the anti-Weatherby feeling in Africa. Standard 300-grain .375 bullets were not made to withstand such velocities and often failed to penetrate on heavy animals. As well, the rifle has a vicious recoil. Word is, Kenya's requirement of a minimum .40-calibre rifle for dangerous game was in direct response to the .378, enacted at the behest of the East African Professional Hunters' Association.



*The controversial big boys: From left, the .375 H&H, .378, .416 and .460 Weatherby. The .378-class cartridges were based on a .416 Rigby case with a belt.*

This regulation created a problem for Weatherby, which was compounded when Winchester brought out its .458 in 1956 and began to garner the dangerous-game business. Weatherby responded by necking his .378 up to .458, calling it the .460 Weatherby, and marketing it as the most powerful rifle in the world. That it was, on paper, but again you needed premium bullets (of which there were none) to ensure good performance.

Two advances have allowed the Weatherby cartridges to reach their potential: a wide range of slow-burning powders, so reloaders can experiment to get best performance, and premium bullets, such as Woodleighs and Swift A-Frames, that will perform at high velocity.

Sometime after their introduction, Weatherby quietly toned down the velocities of the .378 and .460, which helped. In 1989, when they introduced their .416, velocities were kept moderate (by Weatherby standards) and that cartridge has established itself as a solid dangerous-game round.

I am not a big fan of the larger Weatherby cartridges (and I detest the .378), but I love the smaller ones, especially the .257 and .300. The .257 Weatherby with a premium 115-grain bullet, from a long barrel at 3350 fps, combined with gilt-edged accuracy, gives one sufficient power for anything up to zebra and

wildebeest, and the reach to take a pronghorn out to 400 yards. The .300, with a premium 200-grain bullet, can handle anything except the really big stuff. The .340 Weatherby is often touted as the ultimate cartridge for mountain nyala, where ranges are long, the animals big, and the cover intimidating.

For the first half-century of its existence, the Weatherby company presented itself as riflemaker to the stars, but in recent years it has downplayed that image. Weatherby rifles now are available in a range of utilitarian forms, with matte finishes and composite stocks. The Mark V action is immensely strong (if oversized for the smaller cartridges) and can be as accurate as any Remington 700. Anyone seeking a high-performance long-range rifle should give them a look.

Weatherby ammunition and brass is made by Norma. It is accurate, delivers advertised velocities, and the brass is a pure joy to reload. If I had to go hunting with a .257 Weatherby using factory 120-grain Nosler Partitions, I would not hesitate.

While still giving lip service to some of Roy Weatherby's more outlandish claims for the effects of sheer velocity, the company now realistically offers several types of premium game bullets that perform up to expectations in the real world.

Sixty years after Roy Weatherby set up shop in L.A., his cartridges may not be the toast of Africa, but they should not be anathema, either. With modern bullets, they are fine performers. 🌍



*Weatherby's earliest and greatest: From left, the .257, .270, .300 and .340 Weatherby. The two shorter cartridges fit in a .30-06-length action.*