

# Hunting Buffalo — Solids or Soft Points?

By Charlie Haley

*If you really want to stimulate a heated discussion in any hunting camp, simply utter a bald statement of fact along the lines of "Solids are the only bullets to use for buffalo" or "Only a moron would use solids for buffalo — softs are the only way to go"! Few other topics seem to provoke such intense controversy, and it seems that every hunter has his own cherished opinion on the matter.*

Learner hunters are not helped when they obtain five different answers upon consulting five separate experienced operators, and the waters are further muddled when adherents of each camp present good and even (seemingly) overwhelming evidence to support their differing points of view. This leads to that situation dreaded by all courts of law, the "clash of experts". Here are two individuals, both experienced and both acknowledged leaders in their field. One says this is the way to go. The second party states the opposite. Which one is correct? What is the way to go?

The reason for all the furore is that, firstly,

buffalo are dangerous. They can and frequently do kill or seriously injure people, so the subject of bullet performance (and particularly bullet failure) is of more than passing interest and concern. Secondly, the size and strength of the buffalo puts it right on the very edge of acceptable choice concerning the two bullet styles. Everyone pretty much agrees that lion are best dealt with by means of a suitable expanding bullet, and that solids are the appropriate projectile for elephant. Buffalo? Well, opinions can vary.

I find that those holding firm beliefs as to the superiority of one bullet style over another have either used one style exclusively with entirely satisfactory results, and see no need to change, or have had a close call due to bullet failure and are now forever soured against that which let them down. The latter case is the one which leads to the most violent prejudice, and while it is true that one cannot condemn softs or solids out of hand on the basis of one incident, try telling that to someone who was thrown about and generally beaten up due to a bullet's failure to perform! The fact remains that either style can fail, and both can be perfectly adequate too — in the right place! Let us now have a look at the strengths and weaknesses of each in turn, and see where they both fit in.

## Solids

This is the bullet style favoured by most of the old school, and for a number of very good reasons. Firstly, solid bullets will work in virtually any calibre, and those who were compelled to use smallbores such as the .303" in the early days of their careers quickly found that a solid in the right place achieved the desired results, whereas any soft point in such a small calibre was almost certain to fail to penetrate adequately. This gave rise to an

innate belief in the superiority of solids for big game, and to a mistrust for soft points in general. Furthermore, even when using the larger calibres of .375 and above, bullet performance wasn't what it might be. After World War 2, there were some abysmal bullets produced by the ammunition makers when they commenced production of sporting calibres once more, and bullet failures abounded with both solids and soft points. In buffalo, though, a bad solid is far more likely to penetrate to the vitals than a bad soft, and the belief was confirmed that soft points, while maybe ok for smaller game, were spawn of the netherworld for buffalo and an invitation to a lengthy stay in hospital.

Even when using decent bullets of each type, there are times when a solid is to be preferred for buffalo. The most obvious and oft-quoted situation is when a wounded buffalo is departing at speed for the thick stuff, and in such a circumstance a bullet in the north end of a south-bound buff had better be a solid if it is to have any hope at all of reaching the vitals. Even in a quartering — away shot in an undisturbed animal from the left hand side, the bullet will probably encounter the rumen en route to the chest cavity. One look at the vast quantity of moist, dough-like, chewed up vegetable matter contained within this organ will convince even the most ardent of soft point fans as to the desirability of a solid for this particular task. The rumen is a bullet sponge, and solids certainly have the better chance of making it through. Thus, when buffalo hunting, solids can be relied upon to give adequate penetration no matter what the angle or circumstance.

One instance in which the solid is allegedly superior is for making it through thick tangles of bush (the type of vegetation in which buffalo are so often hunted) without being deflected by twigs and

*Wesley Richard round nosed capped. Stewart's soft nosed bonded core section. Sectioned Rhino bullet illustrating bonded core.*



*Various soft points recovered from buffalo*



*Woodley steel jacket Old RWS nicol plated solid that has fishtailed badly after hitting the sholder*



rapidly slowing the bullet down and ensuring all that desirable kinetic energy possessed by said bullet will be utilised within the animal where it will do most good, further damaging tissue and organs around the bullet track. All this leads to a more rapid death than would otherwise be the case, and with an animal which can kill you this is all to the good. There are many instances in which mortally wounded buffalo have killed or grievously wounded one of the hunting party before succumbing to their own injuries, so anything leading to the speeding up of the death process is better for a quick, humane kill and for the safety of all concerned.

The expansion of the bullet has one other effect, and that is to limit penetration. This can be good or bad, depending on the circumstances. It is bad when the bullet does not penetrate adequately into the vitals. This can either be due to an awkward angle of penetration or overly fragile construction. The size and toughness of a buffalo demands that any soft point or expanding bullet employed be of exceptionally robust construction, and we are fortunate now to have an array of excellent premium quality bullets to choose from. No longer limited to just the handloader, many brands of factory ammunition are now loaded with premium quality bullets for the ultimate in terminal performance. Using such bullets should ensure that

branches. This I would like to lay to rest right now. Any bullet – solid or soft – will be deflected by striking even the most insignificant twig towards the edge. Solids have no superiority in this regard, not even the monolithics, so please don't go blasting your bullets through hideous tangles of vegetation in the expectation that they will arrive where they are aimed. They won't.

#### Expanding Bullets

The title 'expanding' bullet is technically more correct throughout, as some modern expanding bullets (the all-copper Barnes 'X' for one) don't

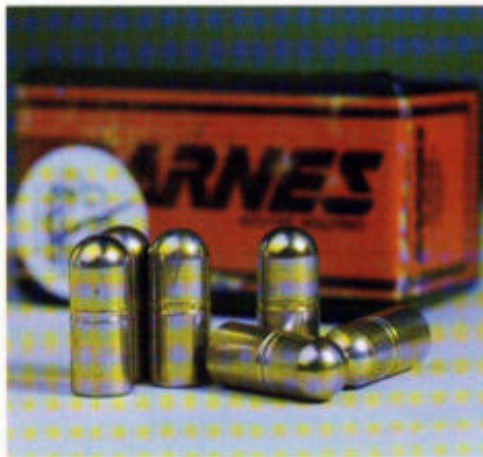
have 'soft' points as such. Whichever description is used, these bullets are designed to expand or 'mushroom' within an animal, and this expansion has a number of effects – almost all of them beneficial. Never forget, when hunting one is essentially trying to kill the animal in question, and an expanding bullet assists in the speed and efficiency of this process. Firstly, by their increase in diameter, expanding bullets cause a larger wound channel. This damages more tissue, causes more bleeding and thus ensures a more rapid death. Furthermore, the increased frontal area of an expanded bullet acts as a brake or parachute,



the bullet failures and blow-ups that used to bedevil hunters some years ago are things of the past. The limited penetration of an expanding bullet is especially beneficial in limiting overpenetration in a herd. Buffalo are herd animals, and it is very likely that there will be a number of them all around the desired animal. A solid will almost certainly exit any buffalo hit from the broadside position, and if there are more buffalo milling around behind one could easily wound or kill others. A good expanding bullet is thus almost mandatory for buffalo in a herd, unless one is really willing to wait and pick one's shot! A word of warning here – some of the modern expanding bullets are so tough that they could well exit a buff in a broadside shot, particularly a lung shot where the shoulder bones are not struck. Having just waxed lyrical about the many virtues of expanding bullets, I must add at this point that most of the negative sentiments expressed in my research have concerned the use of soft points.



*Monometal hollow point*



*Monolithic solid*



*Bonded core soft point.*

#### Conclusions – If any!

Anecdotes abound concerning each style of bullet. During my research concerning this topic, I have encountered opinions ranging from "never use a soft point on any buffalo!" to "The emergence of high technology expanding bullets has rendered the solid obsolete on buffalo". Needless to say, opinions on this topic varied between these two poles to a greater or lesser extent to the point of total confusion! A few guidelines may help to clarify the conflicting opinions one may hear. Firstly, place each incident or opinion in its proper context, and evaluate from the proper perspective. For example, sport hunting the buffalo is very different from the government eradication programmes of yore. When hunting, an overly penetrative shot which wounds or kills another herd member attracts large fines, sundry penalties and the wrath of the local wildlife agencies, not to mention the time on a limited duration hunt spent following up wounded escapees. However, such a mishap on control work would not attract anywhere near the same degree of alarm and despondency. Both hunters of buffalo – both with very different needs and requirements, though, and both having very fixed but contrary opinions as to their projectile requirements.

Remember, too, that one incident does not a conclusion make! Any individual would most certainly hold extremely firm opinions after a mishap with one or the other bullet style, but it takes a number of similar incidents - the more the better - before any statistically valid conclusions can be made. Yes I know, there are lies, then there are damned lies, then there are statistics, but you know what I mean.

Beware also of over-expectation regarding recovered bullets. There is a successful hunt, accompanied by a very dead buffalo. Everyone is happy, because everything worked out the way it was supposed to. One individual is deeply unhappy, though. Nay, he is more than deeply unhappy. He in fact sounds not unlike a

one-man rendition of a particularly melodramatic and sanguine Greek Tragedy. What is the reason for all this doom and gloom? Why, it turns out that the recovered bullet has lost 20% of its weight! Now, while the condition of some spent bullets may give cause for concern – a completely fragmented solid, for one – I am reminded of a phrase coined, I believe, by the late, great Jack O'Connor when confronted by someone bleating about the less-than-picture-book-perfect appearance of a recovered bullet. "At what time during the death of the animal did the bullet fail?" he would say, which I think sums things up pretty neatly! Buffalo are large, tough, thick-skinned and heavy boned, and they can do bad things to good bullets. There is no such thing as a perfect bullet.

Beware, too, of being caught by the velocity trap. Bullet speed is good up to a point for penetration, and beyond this point is good for delivering a lot of horsepower at flat trajectory over long distances. Buffalo hunting is essentially a close range activity, and I have investigated a number of instances where speedy projectiles entirely failed to penetrate buffalo at close range. Solids can bend, rivet or split, and softs can over-expand. Over-expansion of a soft nose is certainly to be avoided in buffalo, for a hugely mushroomed bullet loses rotational speed and stability, and thus will no longer penetrate in a straight line.

As the client of a professional hunter, one will of course abide by the instructions of the PH. He will doubtless have his own ideas gained through much experience, besides which, if there is an unpleasant encounter at hand with a wounded and unhappy buffalo it is entirely his problem. If his advice was incorrect and the problem was due to the use of an inappropriate projectile, he gets to sort it out.

There does seem to be some common ground, however. Most of the hunters I spoke to advocated loading a magazine with a good expanding bullet on top for the first shot, followed by solids in case a fleeing buffalo needed to be brought down. At a recent pre-proficiency course to polish up learner professional hunters, I interviewed them concerning their choice of rifle and ammunition. Almost exclusively (considering they are responsible for backing up a client) they relied mainly on solids, but had a few rounds of soft point in their belts too. When asked when they would use this ammunition, the reply was "for dealing with cats and for buffalo in a herd situation". That's a good reply.

At the end of the day, of course, it is entirely up to you, the one who is going to do the hunting. Just appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of each bullet type, and choose accordingly on the basis of the type of hunting you will be doing in the area you will be going to. Be certain to use premium quality bullets, regardless of your choice, and I would definitely have both softs and solids along, just in case – regardless of the bullet style I chose to rely most upon.