High Speed .38 Special Loads

Caution!!! Loads discussed in this article use loading data that exceeds published data. Use at your own risk. Under no circumstances are these loads to be fired in anything but .357 Magnum handguns. Insure that these loads do not become mixed with loads to be fired in .38 Special handguns.

Several years ago, I was shooting a bunch of .38 Special loads in my .357 Blackhawk. These were your "run of the mill" .38 Special loads put up according to the book. They were nice for plinking up to 50 yards but after that, they leave a lot to be desired in the way of a field load.

For years, my field load was 3.5 grains of Bullseye under a Lyman #357446 bullet in a .38 Special case. It was fairly reliable and since most of my shooting in those days was at 50 yards and under, it served quite well. Later, when I started shooting at longer ranges with the Ruger, that design fell by the wayside

Now, I don't prowl the woods quite as much and most of my shooting is with rifles at 100 yards with cast. Between times when the barrel's cooling, I'll take a handgun along and plink a few at 100 yards to keep my hand in.

The .357 Magnum cartridge is a fine round in my estimation although a .41 Magnum and a couple of .44 Magnums grace my safe as well as the .357s.

My problem is that I had a "tater sack" full of nice .38 Special brass that wasn't gainfully employed.

I was reading Elmer's Sixguns book one night and he mentioned the 38/44 Smith & Wesson Outdoorsman and praised it highly as "the best" .38 Special. I also remembered seeing in one of the old Ideal reloading manuals, a section on .38 Special High Speed loads for the 38/44 Outdoorsman.

My reasoning is that I had a .357 Magnum, and surely, it should be able to take the .38/44 loads in .38 Special cases easily as that was a factory loading once upon a time.

I researched .38/44 data and came up with the reference. All of the loads listed were for the Lyman #358429, 358439, 358431(hollow base) and the 358395(hollow base) wad cutter designs. I had all of these designs in my mould cabinet except the #358431 and I have since added it.

The next problem was that all of the powders prescribed had gone obsolete with the exception of 2400 and Unique. That's where I started.

My goal was to develop loads for the .38 Special cartridge case used in a .357 Magnum pistol to give me at least over 1,000 FPS.

I chose the #358429 as the test bullet to develop loads with as I figured it was the heaviest bullet I would be using and the loads for it would shoot fine with lighter bullets. This has proven to be a valid assumption and has worked well so far and I'm to about 3,000 rounds fired now. Another point in favor of the #358429 is that it's a very accurate design and I have several moulds for it.

The following paragraphs will be a chronological record of my progress in these tests.

After analyzing all available data. I loaded the loads below as "starter loads" and fired them with the indicated results. Cases were once fired WW standard 38 Special cases and Remington Small Pistol Primers were used. All rounds were fired in a 6 ½ inch barrel Blackhawk. 358495 was thrown in as it is an excellent small game bullet and I wished to see if accuracy improved at 100 yards with increased velocity. All bullets for this first test were sized .3575. Firing was done at 100 yards and accuracy was determined by called shots. This test was done to basically "test the waters"

with some of the newer powders available.
Caution!!! Loads exceed published data for the .38 Special cartridge.

Bullet	Weight	Diameter	Primer	Powder	Powder Weight	Average Velocity	Standard Deviation	Comments
358429	171.0	.3575	Rem SP	WW231	4.8	963	18.2	Fair Acc
358429	171.0	.3575	Rem SP	Bullseye	4.6	941	3.8	Not Acc
358429	171.0	.3575	Rem SP	Blue Dot	7.5	933	9.7	Not Acc
358429	171.0	.3575	Rem SP	2400	10.0	981	36.4	Not Acc
358429	171.0	.3575	Rem SP	Unique	6.0	1042	11.5	Not Acc
358495	143.0	.3575	Rem SP	Unique	5.5	1101	21.7	Fair Acc

(Conducted 16 December 2001)

The results from this test were dismal to say the least and accuracy was non-existent except for two loads and in reality, that accuracy was not acceptable for my uses.

The only bright spot is that this test showed that I was on the right track velocity wise and no apparent signs of high pressure were apparent in any of the loads fired despite the fact that they exceeded +P listed data in all cases.

Since my Blackhawk has large throats on the chambers, I began to wonder if the diameters I was using were too small. I have had good accuracy with my bullets sized to .3575 previously but not at these high speeds combined with the jump from a .38 Special case in the .357 Magnum chamber.

As a result of this thinking, the following loads were prepared using a .359 sizer, which gave me bullets measured at .3586. The #73 H & G was included in this testing as I wish it to be a standard "field" load.
Caution!!! Loads exceed published data for the .38 Special cartridge.

Bullet	Weight	Diameter	Primer	Powder	Weight	Average Velocity	Standard Deviation	Comments
358495	143.0	.3586	WSP	Unique	5.5	1111	11.0	Accurate
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	Unique	6.0	1085	19.3	Very Acc
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	2400	10.0	953	20.9	Accurate
73 H &G	144.0	.3586	WSP	Unique	6.0	1141	21.2	Very Acc

(Firing conducted 23 Dec 2001)

As can be seen by the results, the accuracy improved considerably with the bullet size change. Velocities improved in some cases and slowed in others. I experienced one case failure today….a split neck. There were no signs of high pressure with any of the loads.

Since I had changed bullet diameters, I wanted to go back and retest some of the original loads to insure that pressures were not a problem with the increased diameter.
Caution!!! Loads exceed published data for the .38 Special cartridge.

Bullet	Weight	Diameter	Primer	Powder	Weight	Average Velocity	Standard Deviation	Pressure Signs
358495	143.0	.3586	WSP	Bullseye	4.5	1039	10.7	Normal
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	WW231	4.8	936	6.0	Normal
358495	143.0	.3586	WSP	WW231	4.6	1015	7.1	Normal
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	Bullseye	4.6	951	9.7	Normal
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	2400	11.0	1064	24.2	Normal
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	Herco	6.2	1084	14.4	Normal
358395	165.5	.3586	WSP	Unique	6.0	1218	8.6	Normal

(Conducted 13 January 2002)

Further testing continued, after acquisition of an Ideal 358431 hollow base mould.
Caution!!! Loads exceed published data for the .38 Special cartridge.

Bullet	Weight	Diameter	Primer	Powder	Weight	Average Velocity	Standard Deviation	Comments
358431	155.5	.3586	FSP	WW231	4.8	932	15.3	Poor Acc
358431	155.5	.3586	FSP	Herco	6.2	1099	26.3	Poor Acc
358431	155.5	.3586	FSP	Unique	6.0	1089	14.1	Poor Acc
358431	155.5	.3586	FSP	Blue Dot	7.5	955	16.1	Poor Acc

(Conducted 23 March 2003)

Poor accuracy was obtained with all lots with the exception of the two lots giving the lowest velocities. In these instances, accuracy was only fair at 100 yards. These results lead me to believe that a lower velocity may give better accuracy with a hollow base SWC bullet.

As a result, the following lots were tested.
Caution!!! Loads exceed published data for the .38 Special cartridge.

Bullet	Weight	**Diameter**	Primer	Powder	Weight	Average Velocity	Standard Deviation	Comments
358431	155.5	.3586	FSP	AA5	6.5	940	10.7	Fair Acc
358431	155.5	.3586	FSP	Bullseye	4.2	913	12.6	Poor Acc

(Conducted 30 March 2003)

As a point of interest, 357 Magnum cases loaded with the 358431 gave very good accuracy at velocities approaching 1200 FPS.

Subsequent tests of the 358431 bullet design in .38 Special cases have shown that 2400 powder will give good accuracy with this design. At the time, I was low on 2400 and wished these loads to be made up from the faster pistol powders.

The following table reflects all of the loads I tested that met my criteria of 1,000 FPS and good accuracy in .38 Special cases in the .357 Magnum Blackhawk.

Caution!!! Loads exceed published data for the .38 Special cartridge.

Bullet	Weight	Diameter	Primer	Powder	Weight	Average Velocity	Standard Deviation	Comments
73 H&G	144.0	.3586	WSP	Unique	6.0	1141	21.1	Very Acc
358429	171.0	.358	WSP	AA5	7.0	1019	12.9	Very Acc
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	Herco	6.2	1084	14.4	Acc
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	Unique	6.0	1085	19.3	Very Acc
358429	171.0	.3586	WSP	2400	11.0	1064	24.2	Acc
358430	156.3	.3586	FSP	Herco	6.2	1013	23.1	Acc Note 1
358495	143.0	.3586	WSP	Bullseye	4.5	1039	10.7	Acc
358495	143.0	.3586	WSP	Unique	5.5	1111	11.0	Acc
358495	143.0	.3586	WSP	WW231	4.6	1015	7.1	Acc
358480HP	121.0	.3586	WSP	AA5	7.0	1039	11.6	Acc
358431	155.5	.3586	WSP	2400	11.0	1044	67.4	Acc
357446HP	149.2	.3586	WSP	Herco	6.2	1177	19.8	Acc
358156HP	155.8	.3586	FSP	Herco	6.2	1020	36.6	Acc
358212	149.5	.3586	FSP	Herco	6.2	1035	14.8	Acc
358395	165.5	.3586	WSP	Unique	6.0	1218	8.6	Acc

358395	128.8	.3586	RSP	Bullseye	4.6	1103	4.4	Acc Note 2
360271	150.9	.3586	WSP	Herco	6.2	1094	17.9	Very Acc
358477HP	142.8	.3586	WSP	Herco	6.2	1066	28.9	Acc
398 Saeco	164.0	.3575	WSP	Herco	6.2	1140	5.4	Acc Note 3
358093	130.8	.3586	FSP	Herco	6.2	1112	50.9	Acc

Note – This is a lighter version of the 358395 hollow base design.
Note 2 – This is the 150 grain version of the 358430.
Note 3 – This load was fired using military WCC 74 cases.

At no time during the firing tests did pressure signs show on any of the rounds fired. Primers remained rounded, no primers were puncture and case heads did not show obvious signs of excess expansion. One case was lost to a neck split during firing.

I attribute this to one factor …..the free bore created by shooting 38 loads in the longer .357 chamber. The free bore allowed the powder gases to blow by the bullet thus giving less than the anticipated pressures.

From my testing, it is apparent that the .38 Special cases can take the pressures of higher velocity loads without failure. Most of the first couple of thousand rounds was fired with the same lot of Winchester un- plated brass and not +P brass.

The powder of choice for me with these loads is Herco and Unique. Blue Dot is also good but failed to produce the velocities that Herco produced. 2400 is also an excellent powder for this application but I was interested in producing the cheapest combination possible. These loads may not be maximum but I achieved my purposes. These loads were safe in my Ruger and that's all I'll say about that. (Yeah, I know Skeeter bumped 2400 up to 13.5 grains but that was with the old stuff) If you want to "hot rod" any further, you're on your own.

From my testing, it is apparent that field loads in excess of 1,000 FPS in .38 Special cases are easily and safely attained. This velocity makes for a peppy, nice "shooting" load in the .357 Magnum guns.

If you're interested in assembling some of these loads, additional suggested readings is available in some of Brian Pierce's articles in Handloader magazine and also visit Sixgunner.com and read some of Paco Kelly's articles addressing the same subjects. Both sources are full of good information.

The wad cutter loads make great small game and pest loads and loads with either the 358429 or 358439 hollow point bullet make nice field carry loads for all purposes with loads in this category. Safe loading and enjoy making use of that "tater sack".

John Goins/akabeagle

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