

Many sportsmen forced to hunt for ammunition this fall

Brian Whipkey – Erie (PA) Times News - 112321

Hunters this year might have an easier time finding a deer than finding ammunition for their favorite rifle.

Throughout 2021, sports shops across the country have had difficulty keeping their shelves stocked with rifle and shotgun shells.

With more than 7 million new gun owners joining the ranks of sportsmen in the United States last year, the demand for ammo is at an all-time high.

Blaine Smith, president and co-owner of Juniata Trading Co. in Everett, Bedford County(PA), said he's been to many parts of the United States, and everyone is encountering the same shortages of ammo.

"We're struggling," he said about working with distributors to keep the shells available to sportsmen.

He's going on a hunting trip in Montana and found out he needed to ship his own ammo because it's hard to find there, too.

"It comes in, but it's infrequent at best," he said about the arrival of different caliber bullets. They do keep shells on hand that go with the guns that are available for purchase. "If you buy a gun, we have a box or two" that can be sold with the weapon.

He hasn't been limiting the number of shells being sold because he wants the inventory to be out there. He said a few years ago there was a shortage of .22 magnum shells, and the wholesale costs went up. Stores stocked up on them when they could. Soon the demand was met and the wholesale prices went down, but stores were stuck with shells they bought at a higher price during the shortage.

He explained that the prices reflect their wholesale cost. In an effort to be transparent, he has posted copies of letters at cash registers from shell manufacturers that reflect several price increases over the past year.

"Some are a big percentage," he said about them being 8, 10, 12 and 15% mark-ups over previous years. "It's not the store's fault."

The manufacturers promote on their webpages that they have ramped up production of ammo, including working three shifts a day, but that has led to another problem. Smith said reloading supplies for personal use can't be found. The manufacturers are using all of the inventory for their own loads. He said it's difficult to find primers, bullets and other brass casings to make your own loads.

"I don't know where it's all going," he said about the extra manufacturing production. He watches the market in many areas, and everyone is dealing with the low supplies.

Smith expects the demand for shells and guns to decrease over the next year because of the unusual high inflation.

"People are paying \$1.50 more for gas, heating oil. ... The dollar only goes so far," he said about the squeeze on a family's budget.

"I go out a few times during the summer," he said Nov. 12 while checking the scopes of some of his rifles at the public range on State Game Lands 50 in Somerset. The practice gets him ready for squirrel season and rifle deer season.

"It's been real tough," he said about trying to find ammo for some of his calibers like .243. For others, like the .308, he said a lot of manufacturers make that size, and he's had luck finding shells. "The less common ones are awful to find."

Fortunately he has had enough bullets to enjoy his pastime. "I don't know if I was lucky or smart, but I stocked up before Christmas last year," he said.

He enjoys small game hunting and said .410 shotgun shells are "terrible to find."

Erie County

Bob Orr, owner of Bob's Gun Shop & Indoor Shooting Range in McKean, Erie County (PA), for 50 years, said he's been able to get ammunition for his customers, but sometimes they may have to call a few times to get a specific caliber shell.

"Ammo is a little tough to get, but we're staying on top of it," he said, noting the .30-06 and the .30-30 calibers are the most difficult, but he has been able to get most of the other popular shells such as .270, .308 and .243.

Orr said the short supply of ammo started just before the new president took office. Many people were scared about new gun legislation and were stocking up, he said. Orr noted that he has seen similar purchasing patterns during previous Democrat administrations or after school shootings, when some gun owners anticipate possible gun control measures. However, he has seen no buying patterns that rival the current one.

"I guess you can call it hoarding," he said. "It's the worst and longest I've ever seen."

Deliveries of shells have been regular, but people are buying as soon as Orr stocks the shelves.

"Before, the average guy would buy one box of shells. Now they're trying to buy three, four or five. We generally hold them to two boxes," Orr said about wanting to help other hunters have the opportunity to buy bullets.

His suppliers have told him that it might take more than a year before the inventory levels return to a more normal phase.

The short supplies include materials needed for those who reload shells such as gun powder, shell casings and primers.

Lancaster

The Gun Pantry in Lancaster opened about two years ago and has been dealing with a shortage of ammo during the coronavirus pandemic.

Store owner Michael LaSalvia said the rifle shell companies can't keep up with the demand. "When they focus on one (caliber), they neglect others," he said.

LaSalvia said popular rifle calibers, such as .30-06, .308 and .30-30 are difficult to find ammunition for this year. As soon as the inventory arrives, it's soon sold.

The other challenge, he said, is that the wholesalers are charging double of what he wants his retail price to be. In the past, a box of 20 rifle shells that might have sold for \$15 to \$19 is now going for close to \$40.

"Most of us are only making \$2 or \$3 a box," he said. "Right now, you're not making money off gun ammo if you're a gun dealer."

Similar to other store owners, he can't keep reloading supplies in stock either. He said in October he received 40 boxes of 1,000 small rifle primers, and they sold in less than an hour.

He has been able to get some bird shot in for shotguns, but that has been a challenge as well. The manufacturers have big commitments from sporting clay centers, and those places are getting shotgun shells more often than gun dealers.

With the wholesale price being up, sports shops are also wary about buying more ammo than they can sell after deer season. If the price goes down, they don't want to be filled with higher-priced inventory.

"We'll be stuck with it," he said. "We're trying to keep everything reasonable in our store, but at the same time we have to pay our bills."

His store isn't limiting sales on ammo. "If you have the money, you can buy it," he said.

This article originally appeared on Erie Times-News: Many sportsmen forced to hunt for ammo this fall in Pennsylvania