

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

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Photos Courtesy of Author



“Keep your voice down,” Fred muttered as we watched the herd of elk. “They might hear you!”

I chuckled at my friend’s nervous reaction. He had never shot an elk, and I was trying to help him bag one with a bow.

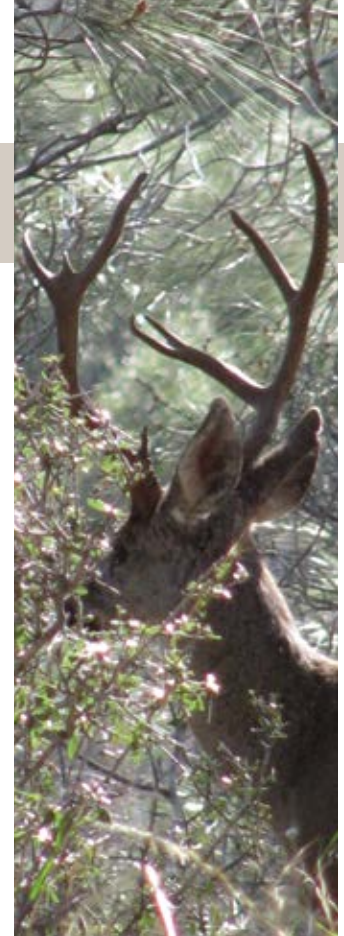
The closest animal was over 300 yards away and the herd was swirling like leaves in a tornado as the dominant bull bugled, sniffed cows, and chased smaller males away. I was talking to Fred in a whisper, and there was no way those elk could have heard us...even at half the distance.

It has been my observation that hunters most often underestimate an animal’s ability to hear. They talk too loudly, drive vehicles too close, wear clothes or footwear that is too noisy, or move too quickly without choosing a silent route. But on the flip side, it is also a mistake to give critters too much credit. You need to know the proper balance between complete silence and too much noise. In other words, you need to know what you can get away with.

The human voice is one good example. In my experience, you can softly whisper within 40 or 50 yards of an alert deer or elk without being heard. But if you use your vocal cords, you might scare animals hundreds of yards away. I have

Chuck stalked his 2014 blacktail deer across near-solid rock—a perfect situation with soft-soled boots.

Wild animals in dense woods are attuned to the slightest foreign sounds made by fabric or boot soles.



listened to hunters talking on distant ridge lines and clearly understood the conversations. And the human ear is not nearly as keen as that of a big game animal.

The sound of a vehicle engine carries fairly well, but the crunching of tires on rocks, gravel, and other road debris is far noisier. "Road hunters" sometimes bag game during the rut or in areas where animals are accustomed to vehicles. But in most cases, you should leave your rig behind and walk if you want to get really close to animals with gun or bow.

Footwear makes a huge difference in close-range stalks. Most mountain hunters opt for hard, durable boot soles like Vibram because these grip well and last a long time. But such soles are a severe handicap when you are sneaking. If you cannot easily indent a sole with your thumb, it will not flex with underfoot debris like twigs, leaves, pebbles, dry grass, and pine needles. A proper sole will cushion your footsteps and let you "feel" your way over noisy terrain.

Soft soles are also best if you are sitting in a tree stand or ground blind. The slight tap of a hard sole against a tree platform can scare a deer as surely as a gunshot.

Suitable boot soles for close-range hunting include soft neoprene, gum rubber, and thin chain tread on pac boots. In cold weather or snowy conditions, classic air-bob soles are also flexible enough to work. Such soles might not grip or resist wear as well as harder hiking soles, but they will definitely help you perform better in close proximity to game.

There is an on-going

debate in the hunting community about whether or not to remove your boots for a final stalk. I am firmly against a sneak in stocking feet. It takes time to remove boots, and creates game-spooking noise and movement in the process. You will probably end up with dirty and rock-bruised feet, and another problem arises if your target animal suddenly moves away. You will need to take more time to put your boots back on while the critter possibly escapes.

With the right soft-soled footwear to begin with, there is never a need to remove your boots.

Clothing can also make or break a stalk. As with boot soles, durability seldom equals silence.

Hard-weave fabrics like cotton canvas and ripstop nylon will last for years, but these whine and shriek upon contact with brush or trees. Many laminated waterproof garments are also noisy, even when you slightly move.

Two years ago, I sat in a tree stand in New Brunswick for black bear while wearing a prototype fleece outfit to test for a major clothing manufacturer. A bear appeared below me, and ran like heck when I raised my camera to take a photo. That bear did not see me, but the inner waterproof membrane in the jacket had crinkled like a newspaper. I never wore that outfit again!

The best fabrics for pants, shirts, and jackets are made of soft synthetic fleece, loose-weave cotton, or wool. You should test every close-range garment before you buy. Simply drag your fingernails across the surface with light pressure. If you can hear a scraping or scratching sound,

the fabric will probably alert close-range animals.

Before you buy any laminated garment, be sure to try it on and move around to determine if you hear noise. What you hear in a retail store will sound ten times as loud in the woods!

It seems obvious that a close-range hunter needs to choose his travel route with care, but I often see this ignored. Very soft and very hard terrains are easiest to navigate without noise. Loose dirt and solid rock are the best. I would rather travel twice as far during a stalk to ensure quiet walking. If you barge across pine cones or needles, clumps of dry leaves, areas littered with sticks, or places choked with close-hugging brush, you probably will not get close enough for a shot.

Just last fall I hunted a big, 5x5 Columbia blacktail deer for several days. I finally found the buck in a place I could stalk, mapped out the approach route in my mind's eye, and started slipping ahead. My well-washed, all-cotton camo and thin neoprene soles were very quiet

as I stepped from lava rock to lava rock. In one place, I had to backtrack and circle a thicket of manzanita brush to avoid noise.

Finally, I peeked beyond a rise, saw the buck's antlers, and took the shot when he stepped into the clear. He never heard a dangerous noise during that entire stalk or he would have been long gone. Being quiet is one huge key to bagging animals up close! ■

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