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ACCURATE HUNTER

GOING PRONE

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When daughter Brittany took her Rocky Mountain goat, I crawled up with her, put the pack into place, and she came in behind me and lay prone with the rifle over the pack. Her hand position is different from what I would use, but it's a matter of what works best for you!



I used a prone position with hasty sling (left) to take this Stone's ram back in 2004. Creating isometric support, the hasty sling is invaluable in many field positions.

Without question the most accurate shooting can be done from a steady benchrest. Prairie dog shooters take portable benchrests to the field, but big-game hunters can't do that. Well, some can: A whole lot of treestands allow bench-like shooting! But if you're a stalking hunter, you don't have the luxury of a set-piece position. You must do the best with what you have to work with, and I believe the basics for almost all extemporaneous field shooting are found in the formal NRA positions: Prone, kneeling, sitting, standing.

All have their uses. And, importantly, there are no range rules in the field, so all of these positions can be augmented with natural rests or stuff you carry with you: backpacks, bipods, sticks, and more. That's fine, but it's also good to start with the basics. So let's concentrate on the prone position—quite simply, lying on the ground. As a rule of thumb, the closer you can get to the immovable ground the steadier you can be.

Beyond the bench, prone is the steadiest shooting position. The biggest problem is that low vegetation and the slightest roll in terrain often prevent view of the target from the prone position. That means you have to get some elevation. In subsequent columns we'll talk about higher positions—sitting, kneeling, and standing—but for now, let's stick with prone; its utility depends on where you are. In brushy, flat country you can almost never go prone;

in prairie and tundra, sometimes; in mountains, one ridge to the next, often. If you can, you should!

In days of yore the prone position had the shooter's body at a 45-degree angle to the rifle-target line—to the left for right-handers, to the right for left-handers. This worked then, and can work now. All field positions are negotiable! The problem with the 45-degree prone position is that it almost inexorably places the rifle butt on the outside of the shoulder, where heart palpitations are more visible and slippage more likely. The modern prone position has the shooter more directly behind the rifle, with the shooting knee (left for lefties, right for righties) drawn up a bit and the rifle butt snugged to the inside of the shoulder. See what works better for you—and practice.

Whatever works, there's more. Being a bit old-fashioned, I like to use a sling



to tighten a prone position. These days few of us even know what a target sling is, but it's detached from the rear swivel and tightened around the supporting arm to create isometric support. The hasty sling is almost as good, created by thrusting your supporting arm between rifle and sling and wrapping your supporting hand—clockwise for right-handers and counterclockwise for left-handers—around the sling. The supporting hand is snugged in behind the sling swivel stud, and the strap tightens across the chest for isometric support. The hasty sling is helpful in many field positions!

These are the basics, but there are a couple of tricks. First, the supporting elbow should be under the rifle, not out to the side. With or without a sling, the more directly the supporting elbow is under the rifle the less wobble there will be. Second, in a perfect world, the

shooting elbow is also solidly grounded. The angle of your elbow doesn't actually matter because that depends on terrain and the angle of the shot, but the shooting elbow should be firmly stabilized. Since we aren't on a level shooting range and there are no coaches or referees, how this is done doesn't matter, but under the shooting elbow is a good place for a hat or daypack.

One thing has paramount importance, what my sadistic Marine Corps Drill Instructors used to call "good body alignment." When you go prone and line up on a target, the rifle-target line and your body must be in sync. Lie down in your steadiest position, aim at the target, and close your eyes. Now open them. If you have to scrunch or shift to get back on target, then you do not have good body alignment. A more graphic demonstration: Get into position, rifle on target, rifle empty, action open,



fingers off trigger. Close your eyes, and have someone go in front of you and forcefully push the rifle rearward. Open your eyes. If the sights have shifted off target you do not have good body alignment.

When I was shooting small-bore competition, prone was the easiest position. It was also the most unforgiving but most precise. And it was my worst because it was boring: It was necessary to hit the pinhead-sized dot inside the ten-ring every time, or game over. What little success I had was secured by less-steady positions where perfection wasn't as critical. But a good prone position remains the foundation for steady position shooting.

In the field, the prone position can be easily and endlessly augmented. Prone is good, but it's even better if the fore end is supported by a solid rest. A bipod added to the prone position is marvelous. In open country I will often add a Harris bipod. I don't use one all the time because it adds gun weight—and in brush is just one more thing to snag. Also, it's nearly impossible to put a rifle with bipod into a saddle scabbard. However, I almost always carry a pack of some kind. This is actually my default setting for field shooting: Resting the rifle over the pack.

If the situation allows, simply setting the pack on the ground, resting the rifle, and going prone behind it is usually a marvelously steady position. Often you need to get higher to gain visibility of the target, so the pack can be placed on a rock or log. If you aren't hunting alone, you can pile up additional packs.

There are two cautions. First, in the heat of the moment it's easy to forget that the scope sits a couple inches above the line of the barrel. This applies generally, but the lower you are the more likely the problem. You know the line of sight is clear because you can see the animal...but you also must make absolutely certain that the bullet's path is equally clear. Sooner or later most of us will make this mistake at least once! Twenty years ago, in Turkmenistan, I had a shot at a fantastic urial sheep down a little draw. I can still see the crosshairs on his shoulder, and I can still see the explosion of dirt when my bullet hit a little berm 10 feet in front of the muzzle!

The other caution is two-fold. First, never rest the rifle barrel directly on anything. Contact with the barrel can affect the barrel's vibration, so only rest the fore end, and make sure the barrel stays

clear. Second, whatever you rest the fore end on, make sure the rifle is level and securely rested. Ground is rarely precisely level, so I prefer bipods with adjustable legs and flexibility to straighten the rifle on uneven ground. When using a pack (or anything else), make sure the fore end is securely rested.

A few years ago I laid the rifle over the pack to shoot at a whitetail in western Oregon. Just as I squeezed the trigger, the rifle slipped off the pack. I felt it go, but I couldn't call the shot back, and the bullet hit about 3 feet right and 3 feet low! To a great degree I did that to myself. Prone over a pack or with a bipod, I usually don't grip the fore end with my supporting hand. Instead, I replicate good benchrest technique, using my supporting hand underneath the toe of the stock both to adjust elevation and snug the butt into my shoulder. This is sound technique and, for me, steadier than gripping the fore end. But in that situation, it got the better of me because I failed to make sure the free-resting fore end was really secure!

If you can lie down to shoot, you should. Nothing gives more stability than good old Mother Earth. Often you can't, because you need more elevation to get a clear view of the target. In order of stability, next comes the sitting position, so that will be our subject for the next issue of *Fair Chase*. ■



TOP TO BOTTOM: FORMAL: A good prone position, aided by the hasty sling. Important that the supporting elbow be as directly under the rifle as possible. **PACK:** Given a choice, this is my default setting. Rifle over the pack, prone position behind the rifle is the position I used to take a tropical whitetail in Peru. **BIPOD:** A low bipod is a tremendous aid to the prone position. Here I am using my supporting hand to snug the butt into my shoulder. This is sound and is my preference, but it's essential to make sure the rifle is securely rested and can't slip.