

LONG SHOTS

FAD OR TREND?

Distances that test rifles exceed those that test marksmanship – and leave killing to chance.

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Photos courtesy of Author

In 1066 the bow and arrow helped the Normans trounce the English. For centuries thereafter the longbow defended that realm and extended its boundaries. Royal edicts required men to become archers. Fines were levied on citizens who failed to hone their skills—at distance! The bow made the spear, pike and sword less relevant. An army bled by arrows beyond pike’s reach lost both its strength and its will. In 1542 an English act dictated that no man 24 years or older might shoot at any mark “less than 11 score distance.” That’s 200 meters! In battle, bodkins rained in steep arcs onto the backs of cavalry horses and the light shoulder armor of footmen. Powered by 100-pound bows, the steel drove through chain-mail and plate. The longbow was truly a long-range weapon!

Early firearms didn’t match the longbow’s reliability or reach, and their rate of fire was glacial. Not until five centuries after the English loosed half a million shafts at Crecy did accurate caplock rifles come to market in North America. Breechloaders by Sharps and Browning (Winchester), with Remington Rolling Blocks, replaced the Hawken on the plains and stretched competition to 1,000 yards. Smokeless powder, jacketed bullets and optical sights later increased precision at distance.

Hunters and soldiers alike have benefited. At this writing, the longest rifle shot made against an enemy is held by an Australian sniper. He made the killing hit in Afghanistan in 2012. A GPS unit gauged the range at 2,815 meters, or 3,079 yards. The shooter is “unknown” because he and a fellow sniper fired at the Taliban commander simultaneously. One bullet struck.

Having fired at targets a mile off, I’m awed by this shot. At 1,760 yards, you can barely afford a minute-of-angle error on a target 18 inches wide. Make that half a minute at 3,000 yards. A puff of breeze so light it won’t shiver an aspen leaf can push your shot wide. The range must be known almost exactly, too, as the arc of a descending bullet is so steep a mile away that an error of a few yards will cause a miss.

While soldiers and target shooters try for center hits,

While “long” is by all logic relative, novice hunters chronically rate shot difficulty with distance.

POSITION OF THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB

LONG-RANGE SHOOTING

Situational Overview

Bullets fired from hunting rifles have had the capability of hitting targets at long distances for many decades. Regardless of these capabilities, sportsmen have historically held themselves to an ethical standard of not taking excessively long or risky shots at the big game animals they pursue. New shooting technologies now being developed and promoted for use in hunting are encouraging hunters to shoot at substantially increased distances. These new technologies, while not illegal, are tempting hunters into taking longer and longer shots, which is raising significant ethical questions, including those of fair chase and intent.

The distance at which a shot is considered “long-range,” ethical, or unethical cannot be defined by specific yardages because this varies with each individual situation. It depends on equipment, shooting conditions, the species being hunted, the hunter’s experience and marksmanship skills, and other variables. It also depends on the commitment of every responsible hunter to avoid inflicting undue suffering, to make quick and humane kills, and to make every effort never to waste animals pursued as legal quarry. It is widely acknowledged that the likelihood of wounding, and the challenges of tracking, and recovering animals increase proportionally as shooting distances increase.


Hunting must involve the risk of detection and failure if there is to be any honor in having overcome the superior senses and survival instincts of the hunted. It is for this reason that sportsmen have embraced limitations so that technology does not fully overwhelm the natural capacities of the prey they pursue. This is a self-imposed trade-off that decreases the likelihood of a successful harvest, but heightens the hunting experience and shows respect for the animals being hunted. Combined, these values represent the intent and cherished traditions of hunting.

Position


The Boone and Crockett Club believes the term “long-range” shooting is more defined by a hunter’s intent, than any specific distance at which a shot is taken. If the intent of the individual is to test equipment and determine how far one can shoot to hit a live target and if there is no motivation to risk engagement with the animal being hunted, this practice is not hunting and should not be accorded the same status as hunting.

The Boone and Crockett Club maintains that hunting, at its most fundamental level, is defined by a tenuous and unpredictable relationship between predator and prey. This is an intrinsic, irrefutable and intimate connection that cannot be compromised if the hunter is to maintain the sanctity of this relationship and any credible claim that hunting is challenging, rewarding, respectful of wild creatures, and in service to wildlife conservation. This connection is built upon many complex components that differentiate hunting from simply shooting or killing.

The Club finds that long-range shooting takes unfair advantage of the game animal, effectively eliminates the natural capacity of an animal to use its senses and instincts to detect danger, and demeans the hunter/prey relationship in a way that diminishes the importance and relevance of the animal and the hunt. The Club urges all hunters to think carefully of the consequences of long-range shooting, whether hunting with a rifle, bow, muzzleloader, crossbow, or handgun, and not confuse the purposes and intent of long-range shooting with fair chase hunting.



In the pits—this man is marking a target for a shooter on the 600-yard line so he can spot the hole.



Glassing can show game from afar. Killing is more certain up close. Conditions affect sure-hit range.

THE TRAP OF THE LONG ZERO

Some shooters equipped with flat-shooting rifles handicap themselves with long zeros. Whatever the cartridge, you're smart to zero so you won't ever have to hold low. Shots too long for a point-blank hold with a 200-yard zero are uncommon. Even in open country, most game is killed well inside 300 steps. I once watched a hunter send a hail of bullets over a magnificent elk 250 yards off. He'd zeroed at 400 and shaded high because the animal "looked far." A bullet's arc is parabolic; its highest point is just beyond mid-range. Zeroing for the odd long shot makes little sense if you must hold low to hit at much more common ranges.

One reason hunters like to zero long: they overestimate yardage. A gent boasted to me his magnum could outshoot any rifle at 900 yards, and that he had clobbered a deer at 700 steps by holding just over its withers. Now, even a politician would have blushed spinning that yarn. To keep a .270 Weatherby bullet (at 3,375 fps) from sagging more than a foot at 700 yards, you'd have to zero at over 600! You'd then hit 2 feet high at 300 and 400. The bullet would trace such a steep arc at 700 that if you misjudged range by just 10 percent, you'd miss a buck's vitals!

Flat-shooting bullets from rounds like the 6.5/284 stretch lethal reach. You must still steady the rifle.



a near miss ordinarily earns partial credit. A shot that sends an enemy into cover or injures him, like a bullet that hits the 9-ring, has some redeeming value. But the sport hunter draws a penalty for a shot that strikes an animal but misses the vitals. He must follow to finish the beast, which may suffer pain and a slow death. Delayed recovery often results in meat spoilage. Crippling hits undermine the biological defense of sport hunting. Lost game begs an apology as collateral damage. Hunting practices that hike the probability or rate of crippling run counter to any view of sportsmanship. All else equal, close shots kill more surely. Odds for poor hits increase with yardage.

A gaggle of gremlins hides far down-range. An animal stricken by your first shot has more escape options at distance, because it can more quickly put itself beyond killing range and because you'll have a harder time sifting it from cover for a fast follow-up shot. You'll burn more time reaching and finding the place where the animal took the hit. And distance affects your bullet, draining its speed and energy. Low impact velocity means less violent, less complete bullet upset. The closer that bullet gets to the commonly accepted floor for reliable expansion (1,600 to 1,800 fps), the less damage it will cause.

Powerful rifles and optics tempt hunters to shoot far. Years ago, guiding an elk hunter, I spied a fine bull out yonder. We hurried in a long arc that put us in aspens 350 yards up-ridge from the herd. As the animals were milling, with the bull in and out of cover, I stopped to let them settle. Odds for a close approach were excellent. Alas, while I set up my spotting scope, the

blast of my client's .300 Weatherby split the silence. He had fired offhand. At that distance, he was as likely to center that bullet in the lungs as I am to throw a 100-mph fastball. Scant blood and a dragging hoof told us the trail would be long. We lost the blood. For three days we searched, and found nothing. That shot may not have been too long for the rifle or the load, but it was too long for the shooter.

When rifles, loads, and optics get labeled "long-range," some hunters expect kills there regardless of conditions or their own level of marksmanship. An F-22 fighter plane has a ceiling and aerial combat capabilities built into its engine, electronics, and profile. But only a fool would fire it up without training. A Stradivarius won't get you into the New York Philharmonic if you've never used a violin. Skills matter.

So do conditions. I once declined a shot at a very fine whitetail buck as it ghosted through a cut in a stand of timber. My .280 Improved could easily have made the 250-yard shot, and I was slung up in a steady sit. But the deer wouldn't stop walking. So the shot was too long.

Another time, after hours tracking a mule deer across alpine basins, I spied the giant buck just 70 yards away. But a gale had come up, driving snow ahead of it. As the deer was looking at me, I couldn't move to sit. Offhand, I swayed like a palm in a typhoon. So the shot was too long.

In Namibia, hard on the trail of eland bulls, two of us came upon the animals in usual fashion, one bright brown eye boring through a screen of thorn at 90 yards. I made out a shoulder. "That bullet will get through,"

With almost no cover, Wayne killed this buck at 75 yards over iron sights. A fine New Mexico hunt!



When someone boasts of killing from afar, I'm tempted to console him: "Cheer up; you'll get closer next time."

urged my pal. But deflection was a real threat. So the shot was too long.

My rule of thumb: If under prevailing conditions I can center the vitals nine times in ten tries, the animal is close enough. Otherwise, it isn't.

While "long" is by all logic relative, novice hunters chronically rate shot difficulty with distance. To this crowd, a 500-yard kill is a signal achievement, while close pokes rate no respect. This is a simple-minded view. Prone, with good gear and still air, I'll whack melon-size steel all day at 600 yards. Hitting with haste offhand after a climb, when the target is a wedge of rib in tight timber—now that's hard!

Predictably, the urge to make long shots easier follows the definition of a long shot as difficult. A shooter who can regularly bring off what's a rare accomplishment for others feeds his ego. So the race for more sophisticated rifles, ammo, and optics is hardly a surprise. Ironically, it can prove a liability afield. In Weatherby's Mark V rifle line, the .30-378 Accumark is a top seller. This fire-breathing round hurls 180-grain ballistic tips at 3,420 fps. They reach 500 yards clocking 2,470. That's faster than 180-grain .300 Savage bullets leave the muzzle! But the .30-378 is thunderous and hits you

with flinch-inducing recoil. Ammo costs more than a ticket to the Super Bowl. Few hunters who carry this leggy magnum afield are truly skilled with it. Sure, the Accumark ranks among the F-22s of rifles. Affix a scope whose elevation dial matches the .30-378's arc, and hits are possible to the edge of the earth. Still, marksmanship matters!

Long-shooting is instructive. It can leave you with a better sense of bullet arc and drift. It can help you sift bullet types and loads. But you learn only when you can see hits—as on paper or steel. Firing at game beyond sure-kill range seems to me more entertainment than education.

Even for the self-absorbed, there's reason for getting close to kill: It's more satisfying. The skills you tap stalking game have more to say about you as a hunter than does a long launch from a bipod. The risk of each step stacks tension as you stalk. Reward builds with risk. Intimacy comes at whisper range: grass hissing against the animal's leg, a twig breaking under its step, the mirror of its eye showing more than reflected light, muscle twitches warding off flies. You share none of that through glass at distance.

When someone boasts of killing from afar, I'm tempted to console him: "Cheer up; you'll get closer next time." It's a valid view.

Shooting long can indeed suggest you lack the initiative or the skills to narrow the gap. Of course, the closer you get, the more often you'll fail. Memorable hunts wouldn't exist if all hunts were easy.

In Wyoming once, I spied a fine pronghorn buck. As he was pestering a doe, I crawled within 150 yards undetected. There my sparse cover ran out. But though I'd made tougher shots with iron sights, I'd set 100 yards as today's limit. Bellying over bare sand took long minutes. I killed the buck at exactly 100 steps. Though a shot at 150 would likely have succeeded, I'd have missed the best part of that adventure!

Fad or trend? Long-range shooting—firing at targets beyond the point-blank range of a practical zero—has profited the firearms industry. It has spawned new products, new competitive games, a growing market. It helps hunters hone marksmanship. It can bring game to bag without ethical transgression. But the long poke reflects your values as a hunter. Killing always with the first shot, you needn't explain away any decision to fire, close or far. Distance is just one element of a shot. If under prevailing conditions you can center the vitals nine times in ten tries, you'll never have to concede that a shot was too long. ■



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