

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

HOW FAR IS TOO

By Chuck Adams
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Photos courtesy of Author

The late, great Saxton Pope routinely shot animals at longer range with his handmade longbows, as witnessed by an 80-yard African lion in one of his hand-captioned 1920's journals.



Shot at 80
yards with
arrows



Chuck took this 33-inch mule deer with one shot from 30 yards. If you can manage it, close is always better.



FAR?

An ongoing debate rages among hunters about how far is too far to shoot. In bowhunting circles, with which I am most familiar, the lines are often clearly and bitterly drawn. High-tech compound bow shooters are typically comfortable with taking deer-sized game at ranges beyond 40 or 50 yards. Traditional recurve and longbow shooters tend to scorn longer shots as risky and downright unethical. Such debate sometimes extends far beyond civility, with flaring tempers and hard feelings.

Similar controversy also swirls within the firearms crowd. Thousand-yard elk and deer shooters strut their stuff, and gunners with more conventional attitudes resent it.

There are valid arguments for every style of big game shooting—short and long—but there is one constant that almost everyone agrees with. You should not shoot at animals you cannot consistently hit.

My dad was a serious deer hunter for more than 60 years. He was not the best target shot in his group of serious hunting friends, and his favorite, Mauser-built .270 Winchester rifle was hard-pressed to shoot 2-inch groups from a bench rest at 100 yards. But year in and year out, Pop always filled his deer tags, while many of his tack-driving pals went home empty-handed.

Pop's secret? He seldom shot beyond 300 yards, and he always waited for the right shot. If a buck was blocked by brush, running down a slope, or facing straight away, Pop waited for the animal to step clear, stop, or turn to a better killing angle. If he did not have a steady rest, he sneaked to a tree, flopped prone, or planted his fanny with elbows locked at the knees. Then—and only then—did he squeeze the trigger.

These same principles apply in bowhunting. In my experience, some of the best national target champions are among the least consistent deer-killing machines. I have shared archery camps with many crack bow shots—guys and gals who could group arrows inside 2 inches all day long at 20 yards. Yet put a buck in front of them, and some could not close the deal. Meanwhile, veteran bowhunters shooting groups two or three times as large dragged in deer with clock-like consistency.

Raw target proficiency is never the only factor to be considered when shooting at animals with gun or bow. But it is important. If you cannot group bullets or arrows reasonably well, you cannot possibly take game on a regular basis.

Good riflemen with well-tuned gear can shoot minute-of-angle groups at 100 yards. A 1-inch group at 100 yards equals a 10-inch group at 1,000 yards when the shooting situation is ideal.

The best bowhunters can achieve “archer's minute-of-angle” accuracy—1-inch groups at 10 yards, 2-inch groups at 20 yards, 6-inch groups at 60 yards, and so on. This level of accuracy seldom occurs unless the day is calm, the ground is level, and the shooter is relaxed and well-rested.



Modern devices like laser rangefinders can extend a hunter's theoretical maximum distance on big game.



Reasonable accuracy on a block target is necessary for a bowhunter to take big game with consistency.

Modern improvements in gear can clearly extend your effective game-shooting distance. Archery innovations like mechanical string releases, IQ Retina Lock sighting systems, and fiber optic-glowing sight pins can make a tremendous aiming difference. Range-adjustable scopes and precise laser rangefinders are among the aids that help gun hunters extend their killing proficiency under perfect shooting conditions.

But “perfect” never happens in real hunting. Wind or heat mirage can ruin your aim. Animals sometimes move unexpectedly or offer poor body angles. A steady rest with a rifle or a solid stance with a bow might not be available. Such factors will often severely reduce the distance you can realistically shoot at game.

With any shooting tool, I strongly believe in the “2/3-rule” for deadly performance on game. If you cannot hit a bull’s-eye 2/3 the size of your target animal’s vital chest cavity, you should not take the shot.

Obviously, ethical shooting distance should always be determined by the species you are after. As I have discussed in this column before, a big buck mule deer has a chest cavity 9 to 11 inches between backbone and brisket. A mature American elk bull’s chest measures 15 to 16 inches, and a Canada moose measures about 22 inches. Theoretically, you can be deadly on a moose at more

than twice the distance you can be on a deer, because the vital target is more than twice as large.

Many hunters—gun and bow users alike—tend to overlook the difference in vital chest cavity size. One especially cantankerous traditional archer took me to task in print awhile back after I wrote about shooting an Alaska-Yukon moose at 38 yards. This same guy routinely shoots deer at 20 or 25 yards and brags about it. Yet a 20-yard shot at a deer’s 10-inch chest is slightly harder than a 40-yard shot at a moose’s 22-inch chest. Go figure.

One thing I do not tolerate well is hypocrisy or fuzzy thinking as hunters debate shooting distance.

For example, one prominent magazine editor told me he routinely shoots his bow at 70-yard deer, yet he religiously and publicly condemns shots beyond 30 yards for everyone else. Another longbow-shooting acquaintance of mine absolutely idolizes stickbow-shooting icons of yesteryear like Fred Bear, Saxton Pope, and Ishi. Yet this fellow roundly condemns archery shots beyond 20 yards as unethical. He knows full well that Fred Bear shot many animals with his recurve bow beyond 50 yards, including Fred’s former archery World Record Stone’s sheep taken at 60 yards with one perfect shot. Saxton Pope shot deer, elk, moose, grizzly

bear, and even African lions at 60 to 80 yards with his handmade longbows, and wrote about these feats in his widely published journals and books. Even Ishi, the “last wild Indian in America,” said he often shot black-tail deer and other California species at ranges out to 50 yards with his decidedly crude 45-pound longbows.

Yet my stickbow-shooting pal nearly has a coronary embolism whenever he hears about a modern archer nailing big game beyond 25 or 30 yards. Such thinking is impossible to explain.

The key to ethical shooting distance is you and you alone. If you practice shooting under field conditions, you will quickly learn what you can and cannot do. If you can hit a 6-inch circle every time at a particular distance, you should be able to drop a deer at that same distance. If you can hit a 10-inch circle every time, you should be able to drop an elk. But you should never forget that field conditions normally shrink effective distance dramatically. If you are cold, excited, tired, or cannot achieve a solid shooting position, you should try to get closer or pass up the opportunity.

Nobody but you can know how far you should shoot. But one thing is certain. We owe it to the animals we hunt to make good hits and quick kills. Anything less is irresponsible. ■