

# Closing

By Wayne Van Zwoll  
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**Killing from a distance requires solid marksmanship — and little else. While records books cannot sift animals shot close from those killed hundreds of yards from the rifle, there's a difference.**

I follow the storm east, through forest pungent with the scent of wet Douglas-fir. The cool wash of evening steals in from the west; sooty clouds curtain an orange horizon.

He brays once; a bellow that seems to shake the boughs. Quickly I nock an arrow and ease ahead. Think not too much, I mumble. Stay until you figure out just what to do, and your chance to do anything will like as not vanish.

The wind swings on its hinges. An antler tip winks through the trees. On hands and knees now, I scurry like a rabbit, seedling to seedling, the bull ever more visible. But I'm still too far — perhaps 50 yards.

There's no more cover, so I belly into the short grass and crawl, moving when the elk faces away, halting when his head turns. Long minutes later I straighten. The limbs arc; my arrow buries to the fletch in the short ribs.

I have shot other elk since that evening, decades ago; but I remember few of them so well. I could smell that animal when I killed it, could see the steam from its wet coat, hear its incisors tear at the grass. Getting that close, near enough to fail is, in my view, what makes hunting sport. The creatures you kill — and those that escape — when you are close have been bested, not just shot. If you shoot from afar, you have in some sense cheated. You have also shorted yourself.

Antlers on a wall tell nothing about the killing shot, except that it was adequate. Big game animals are, well, big. Many die at the hand of incompetent riflemen. Powerful cartridges and flat-shooting bullets forgive transgressions in position, hold, and shot execution. Follow-up shots erase errors. Trophies say most about a hunter when they're taken close enough to test all that hunter's skills but his marksmanship.

## **A Case For Shooting Far**

There's logic in the urge to shoot long. Animals vulnerable at distance can be all but impossible to approach. Wind, cover, terrain, and time can conspire to put them out of reach. The alternative, in a phrase: "With bullets in the air, there's hope."

But just as you won't shoot records-class animals if you shoot immature animals first, you can't get close if you commit to shooting long. A lot of hunters deny themselves the satisfaction of an up-close experience — and an easy shot — by shooting prematurely. The



**This lovely Hagn was built for short shots with iron sights. Who'd trade it for a scoped bolt gun?**

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seeds of this may be in the tales hunters tell. Far-away hits get the applause that used to be reserved for hunters skilled in the sneak.

Oddly enough, many North America guides ask that clients become proficient at shooting long. I've been asked to zero my rifle for distances beyond 200 yards. Several guides have urged me to fire at game beyond 300. Recently one of these masters of the wilderness insisted that I pitch bullets at an elk more than 450 yards away. Perhaps I should be flattered that a guide would have such confidence in my shooting. But truly, I doubt that he did. If he has any experience at all, he knows the odds of a first-round kill at such a distance are remote. He might have thought that a hit anywhere on the animal would anchor or slow it for follow-up shots that would eventually bring it down. A guide's main goal is essentially to get a trophy for his client. Some in the profession are willing to risk a miss or crippling hit to cap that mission.

I've shot animals at distance. But I'm ashamed to admit that none of the few deer and pronghorns I've taken at over 350 yards dropped to the first bullet. Perhaps I'm an

extraordinarily incompetent shooter. But I think not. While the world is full of better marksmen, I believe my experiences to be quite ordinary.

I've seen other hunters blaze away ineffectively at much shorter ranges. It seems to me these fellows do themselves no good. Disregarding the ethical issue, they're at best frightening game they might otherwise stalk. And they're disturbing animals they don't yet see.

The first truly long shot I took was at a Wyoming pronghorn. The prairie sage near Wamsutter at that time afforded scant cover. I crawled to the top of a knoll about 400 yards from the animal, slung up prone, and steadied the .244. The bullet would drop 16 to 20 inches. I had less confidence in my estimate of drift. Wind fish-tailed in from the west at 10 to 20 miles an hour. Holding a foot and a half high and a foot into the blow, I touched off the Remington. Hair flew high and too far back. The buck jetted away, but his gait was strained. Presently he stopped. With the crosswire two feet into the wind, I fired again. Down he went, his heart shattered. I had been lucky.

Some years later I shot at a mule deer about 400 yards off. It died after the fourth round. Another buck, farther still, fell to my first hit — but my third shot. A pronghorn

at 390 steps toppled to my second bullet. It occurred to me that I was shooting too far. So I don't shoot that far anymore. I've passed up two fine bull elk at ranges many hunters would think reasonable. Though I've guided hunters to lots of elk and have killed these animals myself with 27 different rifle cartridges, I have never shot at an elk farther than 300 steps. I've dropped only a handful at over 200. Consequently, my bad shots have been close ones.

## Closer Is Better!

Shooting every shot well is a cheery aspiration. Nobody gets there. If you must blunder, it's best to blunder close. When the animal is only a few yards off, you can miss the spot you want to hit and still hit vitals. And you have a good chance for a second shot, even if your target sprints for cover. A deer or an elk moving into brush a quarter mile off is essentially safe. One that scrambles into a fir thicket at 50 steps may remain vulnerable. Most likely you can hear it move, see it with your naked eye. Perhaps you can run up or to the side for a better view. You might slip a bullet between trees as it departs or catch it crossing an alley.

Once I spent the best part of a day at ridgetop, looking for elk in open places. At dusk, descending into timber, I jumped a bull a garage-length away. Swinging into the shoulder, I triggered the .338. The elk stumbled but kept moving until a second shot brought it down. I ran forward, fired though an opening as it rose. Had that

**In central Wyoming, the temptation is to shoot long. But there's cover in those coulees!**



bull been shot from long range, the thicket would have prevented any follow-ups.

Another time, hunting through an aspen stand with a client, I almost stepped on a fine six-point bull bedded in tall grass. He vaulted to his feet and dashed off. My amigo fired, and the animal dropped. But in characteristic elk fashion it was instantly up and moving. The hunter stood open-mouthed. "Shoot him again!" I screeched. The bull succumbed after three additional bullets. We would not have seen that elk at all, glassing from afar. Had it stood for one shot, we'd never have gotten a second, as the aspens would have obscured the escape.

An elk I surprised at 40 yards dropped to my .30-06 bullet in the shoulder but was up and hobbling when a second hit brought him down behind a screen of lodgepoles. Another, at about the same distance, dropped to a shoulder shot, then rolled downhill into a thicket. Bolting in another round, I fired a finisher as soon as his forward ribs came into an opening. A bull that stood obligingly for me at 50 steps ran off when a lightly-constructed .270 softpoint blew apart on his rib. He stopped behind a tree, only a short section of his back exposed. Because I was close the spine shot came easy. None of these elk would have been spotted from a distance. Had they been, none would have remained visible for a second shot.

Hunting where close shots are the only shots makes some riflemen uncomfortable. Current trends in rifles, cartridges and optics spur long shooting. Why limit



**FROM THE TOP:**

In the Canadian bush, you can come upon moose at very close range. Fast shooting required! ■ Bowhunters must get close. The challenge: to sneak instead of wait in a blind. ■ On open Wyoming prairie the author hunted hard to get within iron-sight range of this pronghorn. ■ Hunting is more than shooting. The test of a predator comes at short yardage. ■ A 40-yard shot after a long stalk dropped this B.C. moose for the author. Rifle: C-Z 550, 9.3x62. ■ Jim Bruno killed this exceptional Illinois whitetail with a muzzleloader at 80 yards.



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**XS sights on this Browning in .450 Marlin suit the rifle to the kind of hunting the author prefers.**



yourself to arrow ranges when you're toting a .300 magnum? One reason: most animals with a hunting season behind them head for cover when they feel pressured. And many live there even without pressure. Looking long shows you lots of country; but you're not out to shoot country, or eat it, or hang it in your garage.

A few Octobers ago, I trudged up a Wyoming mountain looking for an elk. On a thick north face I happened upon two bulls. They charged down the mountain, one to the right, one to the left. I chose quickly and dashed after the one on the left, leaping over blow-downs to find an opening before the elk was too far ahead. By great good luck he paused just as I stopped, and my 6.5x55 bullet found its way through a gap in the trees. Exciting? You bet! Even more so because I found these elk bedded, and in a place no one could ever see from a distance.

## How To Get Really Close

Sometimes you don't have to know much to get close to game. I recall arrowing one elk at dusk. Because trailing the bull could push it farther into timber, I reluctantly left the animal and took up the track at dawn. The elk had died quickly, after running about 300 yards. Alas, a bear had found it during the night and taken some meat. I salvaged the rest, then resolved to check the carcass again; perhaps the bear would return and give me a shot! I carefully swept a clean path through the dry forest litter so I could approach the elk silently. Next morning I

crept into the lodgepoles and spied a fine bear tucking into the ribcage, which I'd left intact. Painstakingly I approached to within 20 steps, loosed an arrow — and watched in dismay as an unseen branch deflected it. The bear left. Walking forward to retrieve the arrow, I heard what sounded like a train in the distance. The sound grew deafening next to the elk. A swarm of yellowjackets had found the animal. With its head in the body cavity, the bear could not have seen or smelled or heard me. I could have strode up to it and whacked it on the rump with my bow!

Common sense can hand you exceptional opportunity. The rule, of course, is that you must mind the wind, move quietly and in cover, and avoid as much as possible being human. That is, you don't rattle change or cartridges in your pocket, cough, sneeze, talk, or gesture. As a hunting guide, I found some clients insufferably human. They seemed oblivious to their own "footprint" — those noises and movements that comprise normal human activity but are red flags and warning sirens for wild creatures. The best advice to an aspiring predator: Make a small footprint. The harder you are to detect, the closer you'll get to game.

I'm afraid most truly big animals that have allowed me an approach have chosen to do so. That is, I can't claim credit for a faultless sneak or still-hunt. The animal usually hears, sees, or scents you before you detect it. So it can choose to stay, run, or slip quietly away. On the other hand, if you hunt well, game is more apt to sneak or stay

put. Animals that aren't sure of where you are or where safety lies are loathe to move. If you're hard to hear or see and have the wind in your favor, your quarry will be careful and quiet during exit, to keep better track of you. Of course, any of us might blunder into animals that are asleep — or have assumed we'd pass by. An explosive exit stuns us and affords the animal a few precious steps before bullets fly.

When you spot an animal that thinks it is hidden, don't disillusion it! Move or sit as if you'd not seen it, slowly bringing your body into position for a shot and your rifle to your shoulder. Any direct eye contact or quick movement is sure to tell the animal you've spotted it; and its natural response is to flee.

In the Wallowa Mountains once, I came upon a bedded bull a pebble's toss away. The trail took me even closer, but the elk surely knew about the trail and expected me to take it. I walked past the bull, eyes ahead. As I passed it, I began slowly to lift my rifle. Several yards further, turning only my torso, I recaptured the bull in my peripheral vision. I had planned to shoot where brush obscured the head but not the ribs. During my last step, I pivoted on my foot. The safety came off just as the bull jetted away. Alas, my bullet did not bag this cagey elk; but until the last second, all was peachy!

The same tactic produced better results on a deer hunt a few seasons earlier. As is my practice, I look behind and to the sides periodically in heavy cover. One glance in a whitebark pine thicket caught the glint of sunlight on an antler tip. I turned my face aside while keeping my slow, leisurely pace away from the buck. Two more steps, and the buck's eye appeared in my 2.5x Alaskan. A .270 bullet shattered the animal's neck.

I got almost as much satisfaction once while deer hunting with a client through lodgepole cover in Utah. Easing up a trail at mid-day, I spied a curious spot of color about 20 steps off the path. Keeping face forward, I continued moving until a tree covered me. My client hadn't seen the elk, a fine six-point, until I pointed it out. It never moved from its bed as we continued on.

When an animal knows it is discovered, it will look discovered. Recognition on an animal's face is as plain as that on a colleague's when you meet in the hall. That's your signal to act. The charade is over; speed matters. Every split-second hesitation on the part of the animal works in your favor; delay on your part is a gift to the game. However urgent the shot, the smoother your movements, the better your odds for a lethal hit. Panic is no help to fast or accurate shooting.

## Results That Count

Instinct honed by many sneaks is an asset when rules fail. You can't know what will happen with your next step. But you can learn to "read" animals as you might wind. Sometimes you must react quickly. I recall once climbing past the last copse of trees on a mountain comprising mainly slide debris. Suddenly, I spied a splendid buck 60 yards uphill, in the open and staring at me. He'd apparently not expected a hunter this high, on this dead-end pile of rock. While he was sifting escape options, I dropped to prone and fired right away, killing him.

Getting "inside the mind" of your target animal is a challenge, but it's part of any graduate course in hunting. Riflemen sniping from afar can get by with a modicum of information about their quarry. Not so someone who makes a practice of sneaking close.

Last fall as I write this, I hunted primarily with iron-sighted rifles. I killed deer, pronghorns, and elk, as well as jackrabbits and prairie dogs out to 100 yards, my self-imposed limit. Handicapped? I didn't think so. In fact, these hunts were richer because I got close. The deer jumped from a prairie wash after I bungled a stalk, then bedded on a sage flat far away. For most of the morning I crawled toward that plateau, snaking up the side of a coulee on my belly to close the final yards. Poking my rifle muzzle through a bush as the antler tips came into view, I lifted my foot. The buck got up. My Core-Lokt took him down.

The pronghorn would have died earlier, had I carried a scoped rifle. I spied it at 300 yards, glassed it until it vanished in the distance, then followed. After some time I spotted it again, sneaked ahead in low sage and ran out of cover in an arroyo. The buck passed by at 140 yards. But the does he tended wandered closer, and on one of his passes, he stopped where I'd mentally marked my 100-yard limit. My .300 Savage bullet destroyed his heart.

While iron sights don't deliver the precision of a scope, they're adequate up close. And the scope's advantage at long yardage is often mitigated by errors in aim and trigger squeeze.

For the decade I guided elk hunters, I kept track of their shooting prowess. Beyond 200 yards, my hunters made a lethal hit with their first bullet only about half the time. And these were sportsmen who'd paid dearly to hunt trophy-class elk — presumably above-average marksmen. I came to insist on short shots.

Professional hunters with whom I've hunted in southern Africa consider 200

steps a long poke; still, many hunters expect to blaze away at plains game much farther. The PH who urges close approach risks alienating clients armed with flat-shooting rifles — and the conviction that real men shoot far! He has my sympathy. But he'll also get my business, because I delight in getting close. That's where a hunt gets exciting; that's where your shots are most likely to be lethal.

Last March I hosted a group of women visiting Africa for the first time. Organized through my High Country Adventures program, its purpose was to introduce the women to the type of hunting they wouldn't find stateside — and would never experience on their own. The five novices shot 12 animals, all but one inside

80 yards. The sole exception was a fine blue wildebeest killed cleanly at 120. There were no losses. While some of the stalks they attempted did not succeed, these women came to appreciate the skills and effort needed to shoot the plains game so often fired upon from a distance.

Of course, when you miss at short range, you're truly humbled. With bow and rifle, I have missed big animals close enough to hit with a slingshot. The only positive spin I can give such bungling is that the sneaks were successful!

As for hunters who boast of the long shot, who talk of game dropping so far off that the sound of the strike is seconds en route, there's another response: "Don't take it so hard; you'll get closer next time." ■

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