

CRAIG
BODDINGTON
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

ON THE
MOVE!

Jack O'Connor often wrote about taking running shots and had no fear of them. An Arizona native, he practiced on running jackrabbits and desert quail, both good teachers.



This is the “two-headed” running moose target used for the shooting test in Sweden. The target runs on a track, so its shot from left to right and right to left. At 100 meters a hold just under the “bell” will hit the vital zone—but a smooth swing is essential.

There is a rumor out there that Jack O'Connor wasn't particularly good at punching holes in paper. I never saw Professor O'Connor shoot so can neither confirm nor deny, but I find this highly unlikely. In the years between the world wars, there wasn't nearly as much big game hunting available as there is today, and—like many serious riflemen of his day—in his younger years, O'Connor was active in high-power competition. To my knowledge, he was not a benchrest guy, so it's possible he didn't care much about shooting teeny, tiny groups.

On the other hand, he loved shooting running jackrabbits in his Arizona desert. Also, and this is important, O'Connor was an accomplished shotgunner. He spent a lot of time hunting desert quail—tough shooting, because you're always walking, half out of breath and on uneven footing when the birds get up.

O'Connor wrote that a game animal “was just as big moving as standing still.” His books include many anecdotes of shooting running game. I suspect he was pretty good at it! There is an alternate viewpoint. I hunted many times with gunwriter John Wootters, both big game and birds. Wootters was a fine rifleman and also quite handy with a scattergun. Wootters once remarked that he wished hunting rifles had “cutoff switches” that would prevent the rifle from firing if the target was moving. He figured that would save a lot of wounded animals. This is not an isolated ethical stance. A few years ago, one of the major outdoor television networks instituted a rule that they would no longer air shots taken at moving animals.

Personally, I lean more toward the O'Connor school of thought. Ethical hunting dictates that any shot at game should only be taken when the hunter is reasonably certain of a hit in the vital zone. A hope and a prayer “Hail-Mary” shot doesn't cut it, regardless of circumstances. However, I think it's unreasonable to limit oneself to stationary shots altogether; it always depends on the circumstances and on the shooter's experience and expertise.

The chest area of a big game animal is a fairly large target, and it stays just as big moving as standing still. At one time the “deer drive” was the most common tactic for hunting whitetails, and the shots would always be at moving animals. Today hunting from stands is the most

common technique, and stand-hunting is more likely to yield a more or less stationary shot. In many parts of Europe the organized drive is the preferred and sometimes only hunting method. Same deal, most shots will be at moving animals, often moving *fast*. Experienced European hunters are often better than Americans at shooting moving game. In part, this is because they've done more of it, but also because most European ranges incorporate moving targets, generally on a track, giving the opportunity to practice. On hunts in both Finland and Sweden, a shooting test is required to be issued a hunting license; you have to demonstrate that you can hit a “running moose” target—in the vital zone.

This is unfamiliar territory for Americans, and it's daunting when you step to the line for the first time. It isn't really that difficult; experienced local hunters will suggest the proper lead to get you started. It's fairly easy to get the hang of it; as with shotgunning, the most important thing is to keep the rifle swinging smoothly. Unfortunately running targets are rare on American ranges, so it's difficult to get practice with a rifle. There are do-it-yourself options, such as rolling tires downhill—very labor intensive! O'Connor's running jackrabbits probably offered the world's best practice. My old friend Chub Eastman also loved shooting running jackrabbits. Chub was one of the best hands with a rifle I ever knew, and he was also superb with a shotgun, a veteran trapshooter.

Honestly, I think shooting clay targets, any discipline—and bird hunting—offers some of the very best practice for shooting moving game with a rifle. It's pretty much the same deal, swinging smoothly and establishing the lead.

When I grew up, my native Kansas didn't yet have a modern deer season, so I did a lot of shotgunning long before I turned to rifles. Perhaps because of this background I've never been afraid of moving shots, and I've usually been successful at them—but nobody bats a thousand! Any shot, moving or stationary, can be missed, but no shot should be taken unless you're sure. And even then, there will be misses. Moving shots are more difficult, and there are limitations. You are not as steady, and as with shotgunning, most shots at moving targets will be unsupported. Moving shots can be taken from some rested or supported position, but there's a risk of getting tied up with the rest, which would prevent a smooth swing.

Then there's the obvious: As with a shotgun pattern, you have to aim where the target will be when the bullet arrives. This is obviously based on combination of target speed, angle, and bullet speed. Computer programs will yield exact lead based on target speed, but that's not particularly useful because, in practice, it becomes art rather than science. It is almost impossible to judge target speed, and on moving game, what may appear broadside usually isn't. Bullet speed usually isn't a major factor; the difference has to be fairly dramatic to notice a difference in lead from one cartridge to another. However, on a "running moose" target in Finland, I did some runs with a 7mm magnum, then experimented with the much

slower 9.3x62. In a clinical situation like that, consistent target speed at 100 meters, I needed visibly more lead with the slower cartridge. Shooting running hogs with a .45-70, I figured out quickly that I needed a whole lot more lead than with a cartridge nearly twice as fast like a .270! The same is true for the many hunters who use shotgun slugs and muzzleloaders, both much slower than most centerfire rifle cartridges.

There is a huge difference in difficulty between hitting an animal that's running and an animal that's walking slowly. In the latter case, honestly, I tend to expect the animal will probably stop, so I usually hesitate. Sometimes, of course, I've been wrong; the animal doesn't stop! A running animal is much less likely to stop, but whether it's a shot opportunity or not depends on the situation—and your confidence level. Without question the risk of a wounding shot is much higher, so for me a running shot better be close! Exactly how close depends on a lot of factors—preferably within a hundred yards, but quartering shots are easier than broadside, requiring much less visible lead.

Considering the animal is already running, the real challenge is having no time to mess around. You have to instantly evaluate both the animal and the shot, take it or leave it. Often the correct decision is to leave it, and seek another opportunity. However, running shots, especially at closer ranges, are not at all impossible. So, I believe there are times when the correct decision is to raise the rifle, work the action or slip the safety while it's coming up, get the rifle moving, get it a little bit ahead, and press the trigger. After the shot, you'll soon learn if you made the right decision! ■



TOP: Chub Eastman recovering a jackrabbit. Eastman was a great marksman with a rifle, and he loved to shoot running jackrabbits. There can be no better practice for shooting at moving game with a rifle. **MIDDLE:** Extremely slow cartridges and shotgun slugs require noticeably more lead. This boar was running hard downhill; I swung the shotgun a bit ahead of his nose. This is a Barbary wild boar, taken in Tunisia where rifles are not allowed. **BOTTOM:** This running boar target was set up on a range in Texas. Though common on ranges in Europe, running game targets are uncommon in America. That's unfortunate, because this is great practice.