

# LONG RANGE AND TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

**As technology advances, the controversy over what constitutes ethical hunting continues. Here's my spin on the subject.**

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There have always been hunters who wished to stretch the envelope. Sometimes this is done to challenge themselves, and this is usually positive. For instance, vast numbers of hunters limit their capabilities by voluntarily putting down their centerfire rifles, instead taking up archery tackle, muzzleloaders, and handguns. Sometimes the stretching is done to increase chances of success. There are many ways to do this. Many of them are clearly unethical and usually illegal, such as extending one's shooting hours with spotlights. Some are not only ethical but also admirable, such as physical conditioning and honing of required skills.


# HIGH-TECH...



# LONG RANGE AND HIGH-TECH... TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

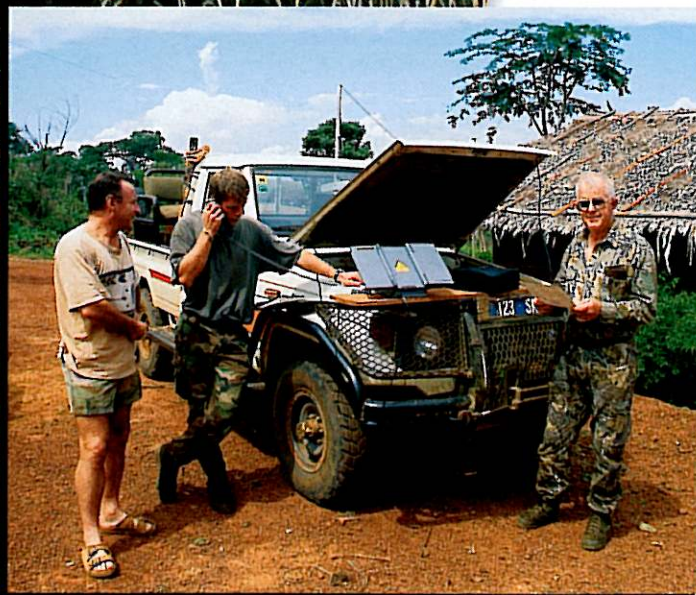


**I carry the Leica Geovids a lot, and with no apologies. Uniquely, the Leica product is both rangefinder and binocular. I play "range estimate" games with myself, checking with the rangefinder. This constant use has made me inestimably better at judging range by eye.**



When the Boone and Crockett Club was established there were very few game laws as we know them today. During the past century the American sportsman has evolved as one of the most self-limiting bodies on this planet. We have not only established seasons and bag limits and required rigid licensing requirements; we also institutionalized in statutory form a de facto code of conduct. Shooting hours are unknown in many parts of the world, but legal shooting hours (a half-hour before sunrise to a half-hour after sunset, though not universal, is most common) are part and parcel to our hunting scene. We legislate minimum calibers, magazine capacities, even apparel (the "blaze orange" requirement). We set aside certain seasons for modern firearms, others for blackpowder, and still others for bowhunters. European hunters are often shocked and bewildered by the scope and complexity of our hunting statutes... and yet they, on their crowded continent, can boast of amazingly good wildlife management.

The purpose to our game laws is varied. Some, like the blaze orange requirement, are for increased safety. Most, however, developed so that hunting opportunity could be maximized while maintaining a sustainable harvest. It would seem that we thought of everything, but there are some serious gray areas out there. For instance, baiting for deer is legal and accepted in a surprising number of



**TOP LEFT: Laser rangefinders from Simmons, Leica and Bushnell. The proliferation of laser rangefinders has a lot of folks nervous, but not me. I find them a useful tool -- but with a modern rifle, knowing the range is actually the easiest part of long-range shooting.**

**LEFT: I suppose cellular and satellite phones would also be considered unethical. Joe Bishop had his along on this safari, and I was most grateful. A small revolution broke out in the country we were hunting, and without communications we would have been in serious trouble.**

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states and Canadian provinces—but where it is not legal it is often considered unethical as well as illegal. In many states it is illegal to shoot from a vehicle or any road under any circumstances . . . but in other areas, under some circumstances, it is quite legal to roll down the window and blaze away.

**This excellent Yukon Dall's sheep was taken at 425 yards, the longest shot I have ever made on a wild sheep – and the closest we were going to get. I could have made the shot without the rangefinder, and would have – but the level of confidence it gave me was wonderful.**

The Boone and Crockett Club is not only one of America's oldest and most prestigious hunter/conservationist organizations; it is also the keeper of our premier records-keeping system, and it has long been one of the foremost forces in promoting the concept of fair chase. This is a weighty responsibility,

and sometimes the answers are not clear. We can agree that any animal taken in contravention of a game law was not harvested in fair chase. But techniques such as baiting and use of dogs have sparked bitter debate and have even been taken to the voters in some states.

As technology has advanced there has been much discussion about potential impact on hunting ethics. So far, at least as far as I know, there are no heat-seeking bullets or arrows, nor radar that will sort deer from surrounding forest. There are, however, extremely compact and effective laser rangefinders, equally compact Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers, and ever more effective two-way radio systems. Undoubtedly there are some other high-tech gadgets out there, but these seem to be receiving the most attention.

You have probably noticed, right here in these pages, that Boone

and Crockett, as one of the founders and keepers of our concept of fair chase, is extremely nervous about these devices and their potential impact on hunting ethics. I would like to throw in my two cents.

My perspective on hunting may be somewhat different from most. Like most of you, I am a hunter, and have been one far longer than I can remember. On the other hand, through a bit of hard work and a whole lot of luck, I have turned our sport into a business. I make my living writing about guns and hunting, pure and simple. I must say that I particularly like writing for this magazine. Unlike all the other writing I do, I do not get paid for the articles herein. Other than making me feel I'm doing something for Boone and Crockett Club, which has accepted me as a professional member for nearly 20 years now, this also gives me the flexibility to say whatever I choose! Let me state that the





following are my ideas, not those of Boone and Crockett or anyone else, and they come from my own perspective on our sport.

My occupation has enabled me to do a lot of what we all like to do, but with an altogether different twist. A hunting trip is always fun, but it is also pure business. I do not actively seek record-class animals, and this for several reasons. One is that I do not have that luxury. An unsuccessful hunt is bad business because I can't write about it, so at some point I must decide that good enough is good enough—even though the hunter in me begs me to keep looking. Another is that, to the writer side of myself, the real trophy of any hunt is a good story. Still another is that I'm not in it for the glory. Hunters come in all sizes and shapes and with all manner of mind-sets. I do not imply that my reasons are better or worse than anyone else's; only my own. I have friends who seek only the biggest and the best . . . and walk away happily when Fortune doesn't smile. I respect and admire them. I know others who simply must succeed, and are willing to do whatever is neces-

sary to make that happen. If "whatever is necessary" means extremes of physical hardship and/or honing skills to an unusual degree, I respect and admire them even more. If "whatever is necessary" means bending the rules, that's another story . . .

As I have mentioned, we have created plenty of statutes that make it reasonably clear what those rules are, at least most of the time. With common sense application, I think they apply to most of our new high-tech gadgetry as well. I find it absolutely ludicrous that any legal use of a GPS could be considered unethical or that "non-use" of a GPS may someday be added to a fair chase affidavit for acceptance of record book entries. A GPS is not like a "fish finding radar." All it will do is locate your position on the ground. If it were used to locate game in air-to-ground communication, such use would already be illegal in most jurisdictions and clearly unethical. On the other hand, if a skilled hunter used a GPS during scouting expeditions, recording as waypoints bedding grounds, feeding grounds, natural funnels, or actual concentrations of sign, I see

absolutely nothing wrong with that. Exactly the same can be done, and has been done for generations, with the same precision with map and compass—and with less precision but equal efficiency with a stubby pencil and notebook. Does the GPS make it easier? Sometimes—if you know how to use it, and if the terrain and vegetation are such that you can get a reading.

I carry a GPS in unfamiliar terrain. Perhaps I'm being unethical. With the exception of some prairie dog towns I recorded as waypoints, I cannot recall a single instance where the GPS has helped me to take game. It has assisted in cross-country navigation, and in places as remote as the Australian Outback and the forests of Central Africa, the GPS has helped me find my way back to camp. I'm hard-pressed to under-

**David Miller of Tucson, Arizona, is one of the most successful long-range hunters I know. His secret has nothing to do with technology, but rather hard hunting and skill born of practice. This fine Chihuahua Coues' buck was taken at something over 550 yards. Miller does not use rangefinders – largely out of fear that they may someday disqualify trophies from records. He uses instead a special reticle with stadia lines.**

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stand how this could be a bad thing. Perhaps I simply lack imagination, but I am hard-pressed to envision how the GPS could be used in an unethical manner.

The world is a good deal grayer with walkie-talkies. Motorola is the leader in hand-held two-way radios, and they have several models they actively market for sportsmen. Hmm. The ethics here seem simple enough. Whether from person to person or vehicle to person (whether ground or airborne), I trust most of us would agree that it is highly unethical (i.e., not in fair chase) to use two-way radios to "talk" a hunter into game. In general we have plenty enough game laws to go around. However, many states and provinces have specific statutes that make illegal such use of radio communication. I think these are good laws because they draw the line, clearly and without ambiguity. Trophies taken with the aid of two-way radios are not eligible for entry in Boone and Crockett Club's Awards Programs.

Does this mean that two-way radios are bad, or that any hunter who carries one is unethical and his trophies should be barred from the record books if he is so fortunate as to take a specimen large enough? Of course not. Hunting is supposed to be fun. Radio communications between separated hunters in the same party are fun . . . and also an excellent safety measure. I've used Motorola units in deer stands in the Southeast, and they're wonderful for sharing the experience with a distant buddy. Sort of like the commercials: "Was that your shot?" "Nope, not me." Or: "I'm wet and cold, heading for the road." "Me too. I'll meet you there." Harmless. I've also used radios to call in some number of Medevacs, both military and civilian. I trust such use would not be considered unethical!

Despite all the rules, our sport is solitary and self-regulating . . . and no rules or laws can make it otherwise. Under most circumstances, only the shooter will ever know if a

shot was taken five minutes too early or too late.

Only the hunter and his buddy on the other end will ever know if a "hint" was given over a two-way radio. We can make that kind of use illegal, but we cannot truly monitor it. I have never owned a two-way radio and have no desire to own one, but I have seen enough situations where they enhanced safety that I think it extremely unwise for their use to be discouraged.

Right now the greatest hue and cry is over the use of laser rangefinders. I'm not sure which has come first, the chicken or the egg. However, there is a tremendous amount of interest in, if not out-and-out long-range shooting, at least extending one's personal range envelope. The laser rangefinder is part of this movement, but there is also a lot of development in faster cartridges and more accurate rifles. The current 1,000-yard record group is now about the size our grandfathers would have been pleased with at 100 yards, and it ain't over yet.

I do believe there is some limit as to the practicality, as well as the ethics, of applying this technology to hunting. Some western states, for instance, have now passed legislation to keep the heavy, wonderfully accurate rifles chambered to .50 BMG (Browning Machinegun) off the elk and mule deer ridges. Good move. Because of my background I often joke about getting game moving by calling in an air strike, but there should be and is a difference between field shooting at game and adjusting artillery fire. That said, I view the laser rangefinder as an extremely useful tool, not as Satan's magic wand.

In the good old days (whenever they were) the only way to judge distance was by eye. With practice you can get very good at it, and even in the blackpowder era shooting at extremely long range was not unheard of. However, effective rangefinders have been around for a long time. Inexpensive and compact split-image rangefinders have been in common use, especially with bowhunters, and most major scope manufacturers have some type of in-scope range estima-

tion/trajectory compensation system. I don't recall a lot of controversy about the ethics of using such equipment.

The laser rangefinder is a better mousetrap—far more precise and simpler to learn to use. From what I gather, its use in hunting makes a lot of people nervous. The Boone and Crockett Club has, in committee meetings, discussed whether the use of a laser rangefinder should disqualify a trophy from listing in our records. This doesn't bother me personally. I carry a laser rangefinder much of the time and I'm not ashamed of it. But, as I said, I don't hunt with record book listings in mind, and indeed have had measured and entered only a couple of my animals that qualify. This does bother some people. It certainly bothers the manufacturers of these devices, but it also worries hunters to whom record book listings are important. One of them is my good buddy David Miller, the legendary rifle maker from Tucson, Arizona.

David is one of those hunters who believes in stretching the envelope . . . in positive ways. His great hunting passion is Coues' whitetail deer. He does his research, he hunts hard and long, and he practices his shooting throughout the year. He has been rewarded with a number of Coues' whitetail entered into our record book. As a matter of fact, only the late George Parker has more Coues' whitetail "in the book" than David Miller, and one of Miller's goals in life is to at least tie his old friend George Parker. Miller believes that his current success, and his future potential in achieving this goal, are based on the work he has done to expand his personal range envelope. Some of Miller's big bucks have been taken at ranges that are astounding to most . . . and would seem unethical to some. The reason I'm talking about David Miller is this: He has achieved this ability through extensive and ongoing practice. His rifle is of his own make, chambered to the half-century old .300 Weatherby Magnum cartridge. He does not use laser rangefinders, at least partly from fear that B&C may someday disqualify them. Instead he uses a custom-made scope reticle of his design

with ranging stadia lines. For David Miller, a 400-yard shot is routine. I do not know what his maximum is (nor does he), but depending on wind conditions, steadiness, and time to set up, he is able to make shots well beyond 500 yards with absolute confidence. Folks, this is *skill*.

The danger of the laser rangefinder and our brave new ultra-fast cartridges is that we humans have a tendency to believe we can replace skill born of long practice (and a bit of talent) with technology. Can't do it! The laser rangefinder is a wonderful tool for giving you the range, but it does not extend anyone's range envelope. It does build confidence and settle arguments, which is why I carry one when I'm guiding. It does allow for the most exact shot placement, which is why I carry one when I'm hunting—but it does not in itself give the ability to shoot farther.

Perfect knowledge of the range is comforting, but it is just one element. With high-velocity, flat-shooting rifles I would argue that it is not even the most important. You must still know the trajectory of your rifle; no matter how fast and flat, the laws of physics are such that at some distance you must still compensate for range. You must be able to judge the wind and compensate accordingly. This is perhaps the most difficult problem associated with long-range shooting, and there is no substitute for experience. Finally, you must still be able to "hold 'em and squeeze 'em," and there are no substitutes for the practice required to do this—especially under field conditions, when you're tired, breathless, and excited.

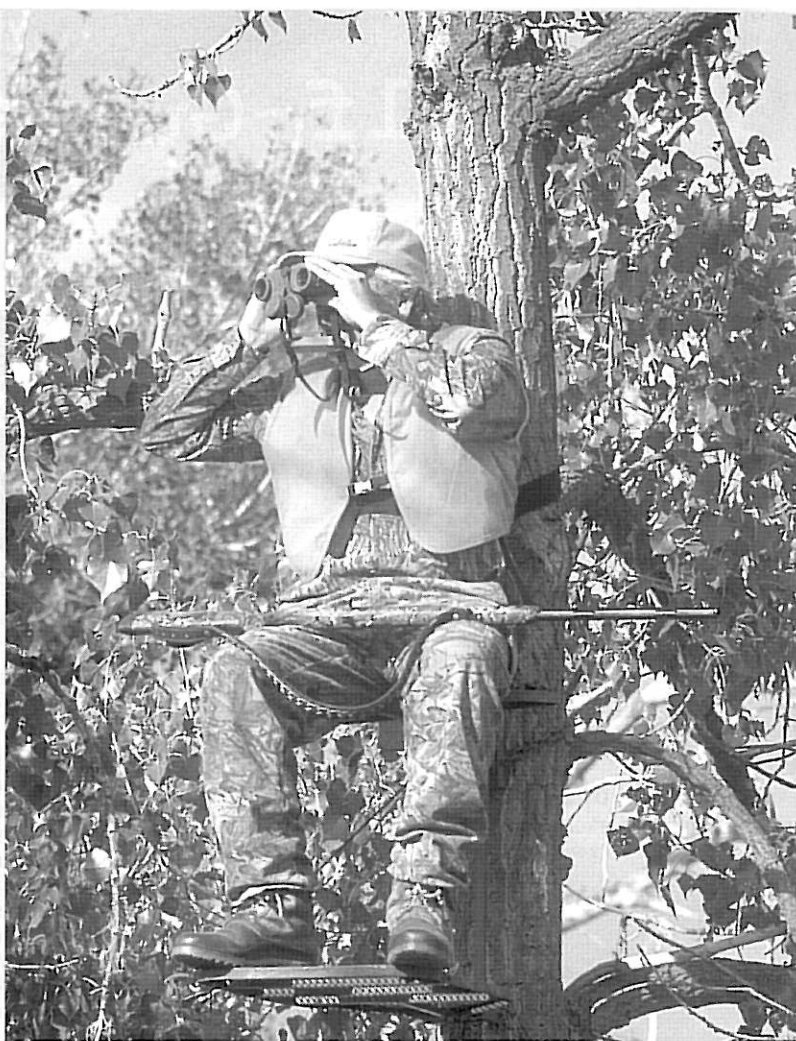
I am writing these lines in a cabin along the Bonnet Plume River in northeastern Yukon Territory. I can look out the door and see three fine Dall's rams that my partners, Mike Satran and Dave Nelson, and I took. Together with our guides, we went separate directions from this camp and came back with our sheep. All three parties carried laser rangefinders (which says something about their proliferation). Among the three of us, we fired a total of three shots to take our three rams. All three shots were "ranged." Dave's shot was at 80 yards; Mike's was at 130 yards.

Was the laser rangefinder needed? Obviously not. Hunting

has changed little, and under most circumstances rangefinders are not needed and never will be. Why are such close shots ranged? To build confidence, to while away the time while waiting for a better shot presentation, and for the best reason of all: Constant use of a rangefinder when there is time to use it makes one a whole lot better at judging range by eye under the many situations when there is not time to use one.

My shot was a bit different. We had a grand ram in view, the best Dall's ram I have seen, let alone taken. He had moved from his bedding ground and, together with his buddies, he was crossing an open valley with a steep, cliffy face beyond. We were stuck, with no more cover ahead . . . and we could not follow into the cliffs where the sheep were headed. My rangefinder is the Leica Geovids, which are also very clear 7x42 binoculars. I take a lot of readings with this device, usually with no intention of shooting. It has made my range estimating 'inestimably' better, so taking readings have become a habit. We had the rams at a bit over 500 yards, and then they moved a bit more. Now it was 585 yards. Rangefinder or no rangefinder, this was not a shot. But just maybe we could creep across a shale slide to one last outcropping.

We did, and the rams stayed put while we did. Now the rangefinder said 424 yards. I took the shot, and the ram went down. Would I have taken the shot without a rangefinder? You bet. Would I have made the shot without a rangefinder? You bet. Before I took the final reading, it was my intention to place the cross hairs of the very fast .30 caliber Lazzeroni about eight inches over the ram's backline. With the reading, I knew I could place the crosshairs right on the backline, and the bullet struck precisely in the heart. Great shot? Sure. But the end result wouldn't have been different had I held a few inches higher. The rangefinder gave confidence, but it was far more important that there was almost no wind, I had a steady position, and I knew the rifle's trajectory. Rangefinders don't change these rules.



There are those who believe that the increasingly small investment in a laser rangefinder will extend their practical range limitations. They are wrong. It is simply a tool, and as a tool it is no more unethical than a properly set wristwatch so that you know the legal shooting hours, rather than judging by eye. Properly used, tools are unlikely to determine ethics. We could legislate away technology—or disqualify it from our record book. But how far do we go? In some of the cantons of Switzerland the minimum legal caliber for hunting is .43 (going back to the Swiss military cartridge of the blackpowder era) and scopes are illegal (unless optical impairment can be proven). Should we go that far? Do we want the rifle hunting community to be as fragmented as the schism between the traditional archery tackle folks and the compound bow boys, or the buckskinners and the modern muzzleloaders? I don't think so. None of us knows how far technology will go, but I think it far wiser to promote its wise use rather than ignoring it in the hopes it will go away. ▲▲▲

**The elevated stand is one of the most dangerous parts of modern hunting. Having a radio available to call for help isn't unethical – it's just plain common sense.**