

ETHICS FAIR CHASE BIG GAME HUNTING

The ethics of hunting requires that the rifle you carry be one in which you have absolute confidence — confidence that's gained through plenty of handling and shooting practice.

SHOOT — Don't Shoot

The definition of “hunting method” is the approach you take to get within shooting distance of an animal. It also assumes a commitment that morally and ethically obliges you to finish the job once your shot is taken.

By Joe Coogan

The most electrifying moment in a hunter's experience is the instant he or she commits to shoot at an animal. It's described by some as “the moment of truth.”

But much has happened before that culmination of the hunt takes place. The factors that determine whether the decision to shoot is the right one will involve the time of day in regards to visibility or sunrise or sunset as determined by regulations (no shooting with artificial light); shot distance; clear shot at a vital organ, which can be affected by cover or the angle at which the animal is standing; whether there's a rest to steady your rifle; your rifle's capability; and your ability to shoot it accurately.

The ethics of hunting demand that you be within a certain distance of an animal to make an effective shot. That distance can vary according to the particular animal, the terrain, your gun, and your ability to shoot it accurately. Ethical hunting requires physical as well as psychological conditioning. Physically, you need to be able to perform the normal activities of the hunt, plus handle and shoot a rifle that can weigh 10 pounds or more when loaded.

Author Joe Coogan takes aim from a rest made up from 3 bamboo sticks tied together to form a very steady tri-pod base.



Just as important, though, are the mental aspects of this unique type of hunting. Success and safety hinge on having the right attitude and resolve, but also exercising good judgment and common sense. Equally as important as knowing when to shoot is knowing when not to shoot—times when the visibility is poor, the animal is running or standing at the wrong angle, uncertainty of what is beyond the animal, or the most common factor, when the distance is too great.

Long before you take your first step on the tracks of a big Alaska brown bear is the time to begin practicing with your rifle. The first step to becoming a better shooter is to acknowledge that you don't shoot as much as you should, and make up your mind to reverse the trend. The ideal opportunity to develop your shooting skills is during the time between hunts. The value of frequent and regular rifle practice cannot be overemphasized, because only with practice will you attain the proficiency and confidence in your rifle, which is so important to a successful and safe hunt.

Whichever caliber you use, proper shot placement is the key to securing a dreamed-of trophy, and proper shot placement eliminates the potentially dangerous follow-up that results from a poorly-placed shot. For quick reference, the point of aim for a side-on heart-shot is one-third of the way up from the bottom of the animal's chest in line with its front leg. This reference is good for any animal—big or small, dangerous or otherwise, and hitting this spot puts a bullet through the top part of the heart every time.

If the brain or spine are hit (both of which are not usually recommended points of aim), the animal will drop in his tracks. But be ready for a quick follow-up shot, because if an animal collapses at the shot, too often the spine or brain are only grazed or concussed, and the animal can get up and run away with surprising swiftness. A dangerous animal that drops at the shot could even get up and charge at you.

Too often, a hunt's success and enjoyment is compromised by the lack of practice and preparation. The outcome of an hunt can be severely affected by flinching when firing your rifle. Another common cause for poor shooting, and one for which there is no excuse, is being unfamiliar with your rifle, especially on a hunt for dangerous game. These faults, and many others, can be eliminated with sufficient shooting practice. Sufficient means devoting enough time to practice, because no matter how hard you try, it's impossible



Dr. Randy Lee (left) and gunmaker D'Arcy Echols practice shooting from natural rests to simulate real field situations.

to squeeze several months worth of shooting into the two days before departing on your hunt.

Be Honest

Many shooters, believing that shooting skills are an inherent talent, don't feel the need to practice shooting. That is until they get into the field and poor performance proves them wrong. An expensive destination hunt is not the time or place to realize you've got shooting issues.

Let's go back to the time before your hunt when the opportunity for practice and conditioning is prime. This is when you have the chance to hone the skills that will enable you to walk, stalk, run, climb, crawl, hike and shoot, and thus bettering your chances of approaching game closer and shooting more effectively.

No one likes the recoil of larger-caliber rifles, which are guns that normally only see limited use during occasional trips out West, or to Alaska. Although there's no substitute for practice with the gun you'll hunt with, don't overlook the value of practicing with a light-recoiling rifle in .22 LR. The ammo is economic, easily available and the noise and recoil is minimal. With a .22 you can shoot as much as you like and never develop a flinch or other bad shooting habits.

Buying a new gun to take hunting is always a pleasing experience, but it's important to become absolutely familiar with

that gun before you step into the field with it. Even before going to a range—always making sure that it's unloaded—handle your rifle frequently to become familiar with its fit, function, and feel

Aiming and dry-firing at safe objects, both close and distant, helps you become familiar with your rifle's trigger pull. This exercise will acquaint you with the weight and pull of the trigger, and allow you to observe whether you're holding on target the instant the firing pin snaps forward. Dry-firing does not harm most centerfire rifles, but when available, it's advisable to use dummy-round, snap-caps designed to protect the firing pin during repeated dry-firing exercises. Working the action, safety lever, and aiming and dry-firing, as well as field-stripping and cleaning procedures can all be done in the comfort of your home.

Squeeze the Trigger

When you're positioned to shoot with the sights on target, take a breath of air and

Too often, a hunt's success and enjoyment is compromised by the lack of practice and preparation.

ETHICS

FAIR CHASE

BIG GAME HUNTING

ETHICS FEEDBACK

We would like to encourage you to send us your thoughts about the topic featured in our "Ethics" series this quarter. These articles are meant to make you think and certainly are not intended to make decisions for you.

Please send your comments to: Boone and Crockett, ATTN: FC Ethics 250 Station Dr., Missoula, MT 59801

or e-mail with subject: FC Ethics to bcclub@boone-crockett.org

then let half of it out—then begin applying slow, steady pressure to the trigger. When performed correctly, the pressure you apply to the trigger should be steadily increased until the gun fires without your anticipating recoil. If the shot doesn't surprise you a little, then you probably flinched to some degree. Flinching is the body's involuntary reaction to anticipated recoil, and it's a constant and continuing battle for most of us to control.

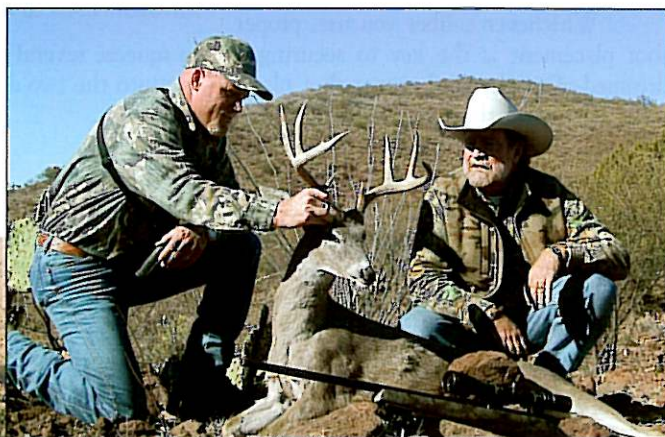
To determine whether you flinch or not, go to a shooting range and have a shooting companion hand your rifle to you—maybe loaded, maybe not. Naturally, you must assume it's loaded and always handle it in a safe manner as if it were loaded. If you have a flinch and pull the trigger on an empty chamber, your body will tense suddenly and noticeably. Few shooters admit or recognize that they flinch, so confronting your flinch in front of friends is like group therapy—but necessary for the healing to begin.

If flinching continues to plague your shooting, then practice with reduced loads or a lighter-caliber rifle and work gradually back up to full-power loads in larger calibers. Recoil buttpads and shoulder pads do make a difference! A quality recoil pad fitted to the gun and wearing a shoulder pad like the P.A.S.T. Recoil Shield helps take considerable sting out of recoil.

Shoot and Shoot More Often

Once at the range shoot from the bench only enough shots to zero your scope or sights. Once your gun is sighted in, come off the bench and shoot it in standing, kneeling, sitting, or prone positions to simulate real field conditions. Shooting off-hand is the most unstable of all shooting positions, and one which shooters practice too little. The ability to hit what you aim at with reasonable consistency from various offhand positions is an excellent way to maintain interest and incentive, and it's a great confidence booster. If you master the

Weatherby's Brad Ruddell (left) and the author Joe Coogan with a fine Coues' deer taken in Mexico.



Coues' deer hunting requires quality scopes for spotting and shooting — and a rifle and caliber that can reach out for 250 yards or more.

skills of competent offhand shooting, then shooting from any type of rest will make you feel rock-solid steady.

For steadier field shooting, always use a rest anytime it's available. With the exception of fancy set-ups for prairie dog shoots and over-the-top whitetail blinds, there are no benches in the field, so learn to look for and utilize other objects for steady rests. It might be your knee, shooting sticks, or a branch or trunk of a nearby tree. Another important stabilizing influence is to anchor your trigger-hand elbow against something solid—even a buddy's back, if nothing else is available.

Also helpful in simulating actual hunting situations is to arrange a variety of reactive targets at varying distances and locations. This is not only challenging, but it's enjoyable shooting in much the same way a sporting clays course is to shotgunning. To keep it interesting, the shooter should stalk or sneak through the course, shooting at each target the moment he spots it. If there's a miss, then he should reload quickly and shoot again until the target is hit. This is very helpful for establishing the excellent habit of reloading immediately after every shot—reload even when the target is hit. Fire the first shot as quickly and accurately as you can, and then reload to be ready to shoot again. Most shooting skills and habits are formed from repetition, so be sure the technique and habits you repeat are the correct ones.

Reactive targets that are safe and fun to shoot, not to mention environmentally friendly, can include fruits and vegetables. They come in a variety of sizes, shapes and colors, and if you've never done it, a most pleasing satisfaction comes with vaporizing a ripe tomato into red mist. Plastic one-gallon milk jugs filled with water also make convenient targets that, when set up at 100 yards, approximate the size of a deer's heart/lung region. Coloring can be added to the water to make the jugs easier to see at varying distances and in different types of cover.

Enjoy the Hunt

Plenty of practice will enable you to handle the gun comfortably, shoot quicker and more accurately. Finally, consider the animal you hope to find—one that's lived long enough to achieve outside-proportions of body or horn, but who has also learned to avoid making many mistakes. Hunters often miss in the rare opportunities to shoot at this class of animal because they are simply too slow to react. Being a capable and confident shooter means shooting well when time is


This buck was rattled up and suddenly appeared at very close range. This is when you need to be ready to take a quick but accurate shot when time is short.



short and conditions are difficult.

When that special animal appears suddenly, dangerous or otherwise, success will be measured by the level of competence with which you handle and shoot your rifle and which will also enable you to make the right decision when it's time to shoot. The

time you devote to practice and preparation increases your chances of making an effective shot, and subsequently to the success and satisfaction you'll enjoy at the end of the hunt. ■



BOONE AND CROCKETT CONSERVATIONISTS

The Boone and Crockett Conservationist Program welcomes those individuals who wish to support the Boone and Crockett Club Foundation's conservation programs and activities through purely philanthropic, tax deductible gifts of \$2,500 or more.

We invite you to become a member of this elite group of individuals whose donations will have a major impact on the future of our hunting and wildlife heritage. Boone and Crockett Conservationists will play a vital role in this future by providing the funds necessary to:

- Influence national and international conservation policy by promoting common sense management backed by science;
- Develop the next generation of conservation leadership through our endowed professorship programs and grants-in-aid programs for young professionals;
- Train tomorrow's conservation leaders through excellence in field programs, applied conservation education, teacher training, and professional enhancement;
- Continue a century-long commitment of strengthening the hunters' role as a conservationist.

Please make a special commitment to protect and conserve the future of our hunting and wildlife heritage by becoming a Boone and Crockett Conservationist today. Visit our web site at www.booneandcrockettclub.com or call 406/542-1888.

BRONZE LEVEL DONORS
Roger B. Donahue, Jr. ■ Hanspeter Giger ■ Roger C. Hooper
Paul F. Ladner ■ Dr. Dan E. McBride ■ Remo Pizzagalli
Rankin M. Smith, Jr. ■ Stuart D. Strahl ■ Larry Tyson

SILVER LEVEL DONOR
Gordon J. Whiting

PLATINUM LEVEL DONOR
Gregory S. Williamson

