

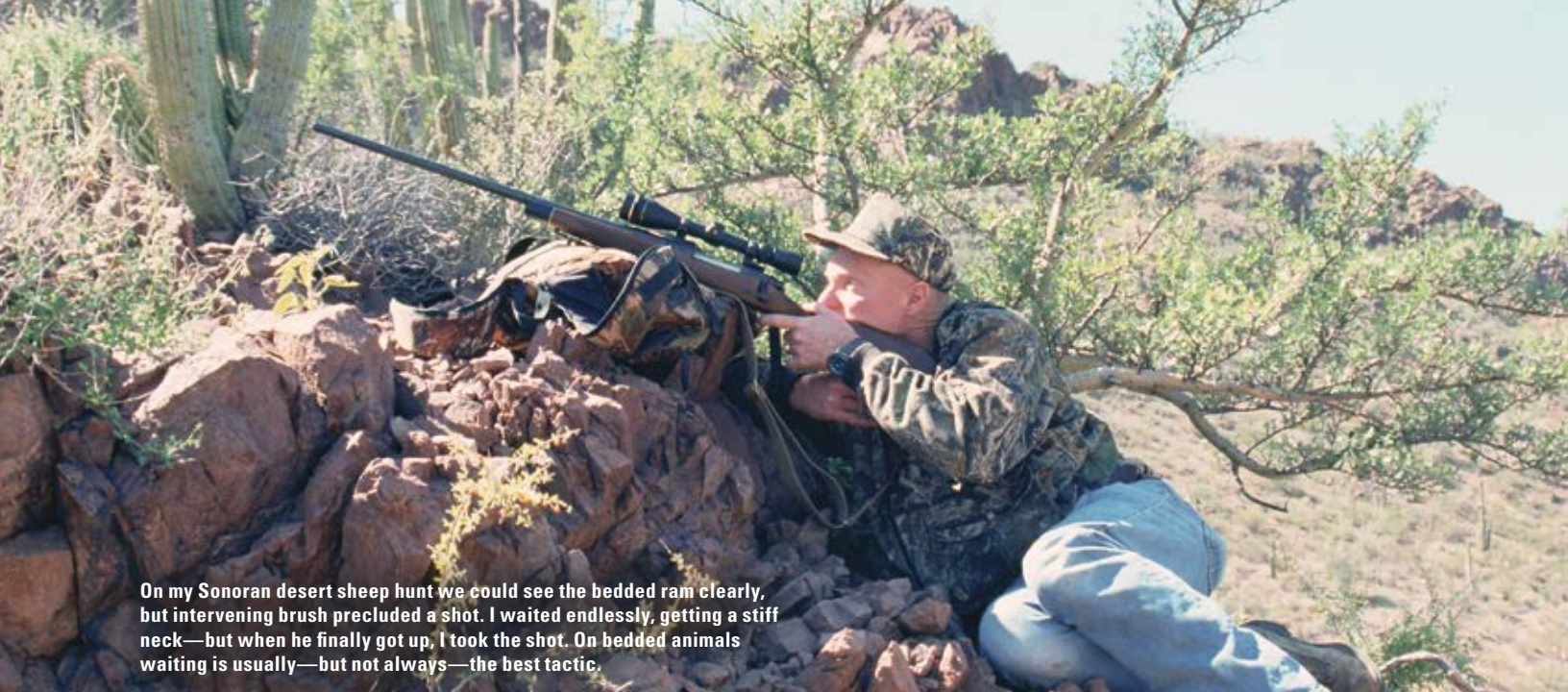
CRAIG
BODDINGTON

PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT!
TO SHOOT
OR NOT TO
SHOOT?

This stand, overlooking a food plot, has been in place for 12 years. Dead-steady rest, known distances. There's no valid excuse to miss or wound game under such conditions. Trust me, these things have happened—and will probably happen again!



On my Sonoran desert sheep hunt we could see the bedded ram clearly, but intervening brush precluded a shot. I waited endlessly, getting a stiff neck—but when he finally got up, I took the shot. On bedded animals waiting is usually—but not always—the best tactic.

When hunting alone, the outcome of any approach, opportunity, or shot is altogether between the hunter and his or her reflection in the mirror. When hunting with a guide or buddy, there might be a couple of witnesses, but ours is mostly a solitary pursuit. At one time, a hunter's desire for success might have been guided by hunger. For many, meat on the table remains a primary and valid motivation to hunt, though today, starvation is rarely a possible consequence. Today's hunters are guided more by conscience, sense of ethics, and the drive to perform well.

Whether anyone is watching or not, obedience to game laws is an integral part of ethical hunting. Sportsmen are one of the world's most self-regulating groups. We created game laws to increase wildlife populations and to perpetuate our ability to hunt. There are no shades of gray here, only black and white: Law-abiding hunters on one side; poachers on the other.

Ethical hunting also dictates that we do our best to harvest our game cleanly. Here's where that natural drive to succeed sometimes gets in the way. Without question, some of us are more driven than others. We all hunt for our own reasons. These can range from interaction with family and friends to pure passion—and deteriorate to thirst for recognition. Whatever the motive, our job is to do it right.

This is not about methodology. I support the principles of fair chase—also created by hunters. However, I have no patience with hunters who argue that one technique or method of take is better than another. So long as within our increasingly complex structure of seasons, bag limits, and regulations, we all have free choice. And we still have the obligation to



harvest our game as well as we can. In almost all circumstances, this comes down to a conscious decision to shoot—or not.

Most veteran hunters, with enough soul-searching, can admit to taking shots we wish we hadn't attempted. Honestly, opposite the pilot's motto of "big sky, little bullet," some marginal shots work out. However, misses and near-misses are far more likely. "Lucky shots" do happen and are long remembered. Misses, regrettably, seem soon forgotten. Better to evaluate them, vow to not repeat that error, and go back to the range! Near-misses, meaning wounded game, are far more serious. Unfortunately, these events are part of hunting.

An article like this is almost certain to draw letters from hunters who insist they have never missed or wounded game. I used to think that these folks either had extremely selective memories or little experience. These options remain likely, but I can accept that many American whitetail hunters spend every season in favorite stands on

familiar ground, thus at known distances with predictable shot angles and shooting positions. Under such circumstances, it might be possible to go many seasons without a mishap! Hunters who spend their lives roving rough country or in unfamiliar areas are presented with a much greater array of opportunities at unpredictable distances. Not all shots can be perfect. If you've truly never made a bad shot, kudos! Stick around; sooner or later it will happen. Don't be surprised or crestfallen; this is part of the game.

However, if you know your equipment as you should and are able to get into an acceptable shooting position for the distance and target size, then most shots should come off pretty much as planned. Even with full confidence, there are still innumerable reasons why seemingly non-slip opportunities can be blown: misread on distance or trajectory; bad call on wind; unseen twig in the way; last-second animal movement. I suppose purists might argue there are no excuses for such errors, but we're

imperfect humans, and they happen. Avoidance lies in thinking the shot through as well as you possibly can and being as sure as you possibly can before taking the final breath followed by the trigger press or arrow release.

Even when everything seems perfect and you are almost ready to commit, there is still a conscious decision: Shoot or don't shoot? Many hunts come down to just one opportunity, so a "don't shoot" decision might haunt you for years—but misses and wounded animals cause far worse nightmares! Unsure about the wind? That's a "don't shoot" decision. Can't get steady enough? That's a "don't shoot" decision. Take a few deep breaths and regroup; if you run out of time, so be it. Hunting is no place for the "Hail-Mary" pass.

Shot presentation has much to do with the decision. Like millions of other whitetail hunters, I'd love to take a "typical 12-point" buck. I had a chance at such a buck just once, going dead-away at 40 yards. I was carrying a .280 Remington, not a small gun,

on a Texas whitetail. I probably could have gotten away with the shot, but outbound and even strongly quartering-away shots are too risky on unwounded game. That South Texas buck has haunted me for 30 years—but not shooting was the best decision.

Moving shots, discussed in a previous column, are controversial. I don't like them, but depending on distance, angle and speed, an animal on the move isn't an automatic "no shoot." It also depends on one's experience and comfort level with moving targets. The lying-down shot at a bedded animal is also controversial. On one hand, it's actually a credit to hunting skill to get the drop on a bedded animal. On the other, when an animal is bedded, the body is often "squashed" at odd angles, and it can be very difficult to envision exactly where the vitals lie. This is a risky shot, but how risky, and whether acceptable, depends primarily on what you can see and how well you think you can visualize the proper aiming point.

The good news on a bedded animal is that, at the

LEFT: Part of hunting is that almost any shot can go wrong, for innumerable reasons. Shooting from a steady rest, I hit this Nebraska whitetail too far back. Fortunately, we were able to recover him! **RIGHT:** My best Dall's sheep was taken in Yukon at a bit over 500 yards. Distance is a factor in the "shoot" decision, but that depends on conditions. That afternoon was dead calm, I was rested over rolled-up sleeping bags, and I knew the distance and rifle.



moment, it's not going anywhere! You have the rare luxury of time to establish a great shooting position, get steady, and figure the shot. Once set up, I usually wait for the animal to stand up before shooting. There are risks here, too. The wind can change or another animal can bound in and spook yours. Also, at least for me, once I'm set up and ready, the longer I must wait to shoot, the more nervous I get. Both my Wyoming big-horn and Sonora desert sheep were bedded when spotted.

Typically, I wait, but that always depends on distance, attitude of the animal, and what I can see. As with moving shots, one of our outdoor TV networks has banned airing shots at bedded animals. The logic of this escapes me; as with all shots, the decision must rest with you and be based on distance, angle, equipment, shooting position—and your confidence that this is a shot you should take and can make. On my Wyoming ram, the sheep was lying facing uphill on the next ridge, broad back like a barn door. But I didn't like it, so I

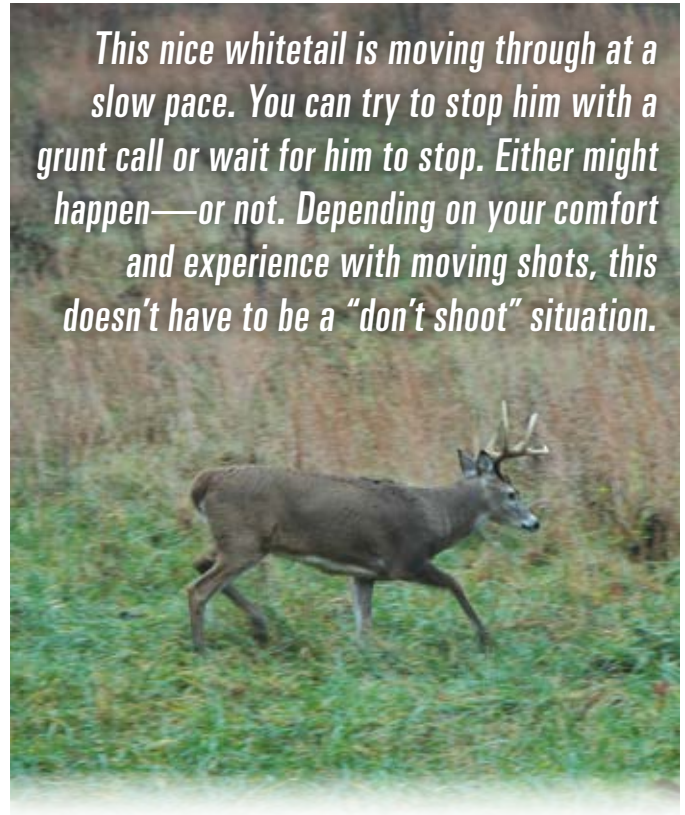
waited a teeth-gnashing half-hour and had a simple shot when it stood. On the bedded desert ram, we could see the horns clearly, but only the outline of its body through ocotillo cacti. There was no shot, so I waited in agony for at least three eternities before the sheep stood and offered a shot.

Just this past fall in Mongolia, I had two shots at bedded rams. One shot was 200 yards; the ram was partly on its side and I was shooting slightly down. I could see the entire ram clearly, not a tricky shot at all. And since he was the largest of 13 rams, the others milling around in brush, it was not a shot to pass. The other shot was closer, just 150 yards, slightly down from one low ridge to another and bedded upright, facing slightly away, most of the body visible. Both times we'd been stalking these rams all day. Daylight was slipping away, and a lot was riding on each shot. These factors add pressure but are not valid reasons to shoot unless you are sure. In each case, I could have waited for the ram to stand, but these were

not difficult shots, and I was very sure. When you've studied the shot properly with whatever time you have, you've gotten steady, and you're confident, things usually work out. And that's how it went. ■



This nice whitetail is moving through at a slow pace. You can try to stop him with a grunt call or wait for him to stop. Either might happen—or not. Depending on your comfort and experience with moving shots, this doesn't have to be a “don't shoot” situation.



LEFT: This is a “selfie” from a tree stand on my farm. Here, no one will know if I shoot too early or too late or flub a shot. But I'll know when I look in the mirror, so I follow the rules and do the best I possibly can. **RIGHT:** Even when all seems perfect, things can go wrong. In 1999, I missed a huge elk from this spot; shot right over him. I think I failed to read the uphill angle, but I'll never know for sure. And that one still haunts me.

