

# When to Pass

By **Wayne van Zwoll**  
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Warm weather kept the animals in black spruce swamps and on fir slopes vast enough to swallow a Slavic republic. We combed the country on foot and on horseback from a cabin four hours above the trailhead. *Nada.*

We packed up and trudged out, then loaded the horse trailer. Darrell and Lynn Collins would have scouted near their British Columbia base camp, three logging-road hours to the east.

“Moose!” I saw them from the road, a trio of dark torsos on stilts. We piled out, my partner eager to shoot. We snuck up a skid trail, got close enough to spot antlers. But the beasts melted into the alders and lodgepoles before Kurt could fire. On a hunch, I pushed farther up the track, peering into the forest. By good luck I spied the profile of a moose nose. At 100 yards, I could see no palms; and brush hid the vitals. But dropping prone, I could make out a shoulder through a small alley.

“Grunt,” I hissed. My companions could not see the moose, but the animal responded to the sound by turning its head slightly. An antler moved. The crosswire quivered. Sling tight, I squeezed the last ounce from the trigger. The Ruger jumped; the bull toppled over backward.

No moose is truly small when you want to move it. But the antlers on this bull were modest by any standard. Was I disappointed? No! Trophy-class bulls are exceedingly rare in this area. We’d hunted hard, and though Kurt had some time to hunt, this was my last day. The mulligan moose was a welcome reward.

**Not big enough? Depends on how far you have to pack it. The author is pleased with this last-day bull.**



HIGH ON A WYOMING PEAK, THE BULL HAD SURVIVED MANY STORMS, ELUDED MANY HUNTERS. AN INTRUDER IN THE SHADOWS, I FELT UNWORTHY—OUTCLASSED IN THIS WILD WEATHER, UNABLE TO LONG ENDURE IT.

MY RIFLE GAVE ME EXTRAORDINARY POWER OVER MY QUARRY. I CHOSE NOT TO USE IT. I FLICKED THE SAFETY ON AND SLIPPED AWAY UNNOTICED.



Now, you could say I downed the moose because after a fruitless week I was ready to taste blood. Wrong. I fired because I wanted to shoot this moose. Had I found it the first day, I'd have tagged it then.

"Kill the animal that would satisfy you the last day as soon as you see it." This advice, from friend and outfitter Ron Dube, makes sense. If you want to ensure a shot, take any reasonable opportunity. As my Montana mentor Jack Atcheson has

## ON ANY HUNT, A TROPHY IS SIMPLY THE END. THE SEARCH AND THE APPROACH MAKE THE MEMORIES.

told me often, "Hunters want to get game. They'll tell you they really don't have to shoot. But they're always happier if they do." Indeed, that seems to be true for most hunters. When meat on the pole matters, shoot soon. You can seldom count on finding that animal or another later.

If you want to hold out for trophy-class antlers, you must hew to a different standard. Once you take a small buck, you can't shoot a big one. Unless you have pockets deep enough to access private land managed for top-end trophies, you'll need discipline to pass up ordinary antlers. Most antlers by definition are ordinary. Book-level bone may never appear in your sight. That's why, when a disciplined hunter with a drawer full of unpunched tags kills a truly fine trophy, he deserves credit. Many top-ranking animals have been shot by people who would have been content with lesser game; good fortune happened to show them exceptional specimens. Lucky hunters may own trophy-class antlers, but they are not trophy hunters.

You might argue that these days money can also separate the blessed from the worthy—and color your standards. If you have the dollars to hunt elk on Utah's Deseret property, where I once guided, you'll ignore bulls that on public land would be shot immediately. Given a week, "The Deseret" should give you a look at 350-class antlers. Ditto for some Indian reservations in the Southwest. Private land with outsize mule deer draws increasing sums from hunters who want a book buck; so do places where white-tails grow huge racks on supplements. In

such venues, you're expected to tag a trophy that justifies the expense. Hunts to remote places can also come at a tall price and an expectation that you'll hold out for high-scoring bone. Unlike ranches packed with mature bucks and bulls, truly wild country can demand lots of commitment for scant reward. Sportsmen seeking a Stone's sheep to beat the Chadwick ram have a tough assignment. Indeed, much lesser goals can challenge your resolve: 6-foot moose antlers or a brown bear that squares an honest 10 feet. For us mortals with real jobs, the object might simply be to find an animal worth taxidermy.

Money's influence in rewriting records lists aside, hunters of modest means can take outstanding animals. The only requisite may be the discipline to decline a shot.

Not long ago I hunted in an area that produced big if not record-class elk. Conditions conspired against me, but I persevered. On the third day I spied a fine bull. Alas, it

was shuffling off to bed three deep canyons distant. By the time I got over there, it had vanished in thick oak-brush. The five-point juveniles I found offered me a chance, which I passed. The next evening I declined a shot at a mediocre six-point, the day after that a 60-yard poke at a similar bull. I left without having fired. On the drive home I reconsidered my decisions. The big bull had raised the bar, perhaps unrealistically. This was my second elk hunt of the year. Both had put elk in my sights. At this rate, it was likely I'd finish the season without having killed.

My ego sneaked in at this point. A discriminating ethic certainly speaks well of a hunter. On the other hand, to the great unwashed, accomplished hunters are those who come back with game. Those who consistently return empty can appear incompetent. And the image of incompetence can be a cruel burden. If you're an avid hunter and proud of it, you want others to think you're also skilled and successful. Earning and maintaining that reputation requires you to kill. Predicating your field decisions on the expectations of others is a slippery slope; but it is a strong temptation common to every hunter who lusts after big antlers.

Choosing to shoot an immature male instead of an older female when both are legal and available reflects a concern for image. No matter that an antlerless target makes the most biologic sense, the majority of hunters will kill the male. "Got my buck," they'll say, as if deer walk around with name tags designating ownership. "Shot a spike bull" —as if the testosterone matters. A yearling bull is much easier to approach

than a seasoned cow elk, but our reluctance to kill females dies hard. Absurdly we attach trophy value to the antlers of animals yet to grow their full set of incisors.

A few seasons back, after a difficult hunt in snow, I'd all but despaired of shooting an elk for the television camera. Then, on the final afternoon, we spied some cows and young bulls on a distant hill. After a circuitous stalk, I bellied through deep powder to an opposite rim and drew the Kimber's sling taut. "I'm going to take the animal on the left. I figure a little over 250 yards."

"Figure a bit more." Travis lay beside me, binocular to his brow. "Not a bull?" He had to check

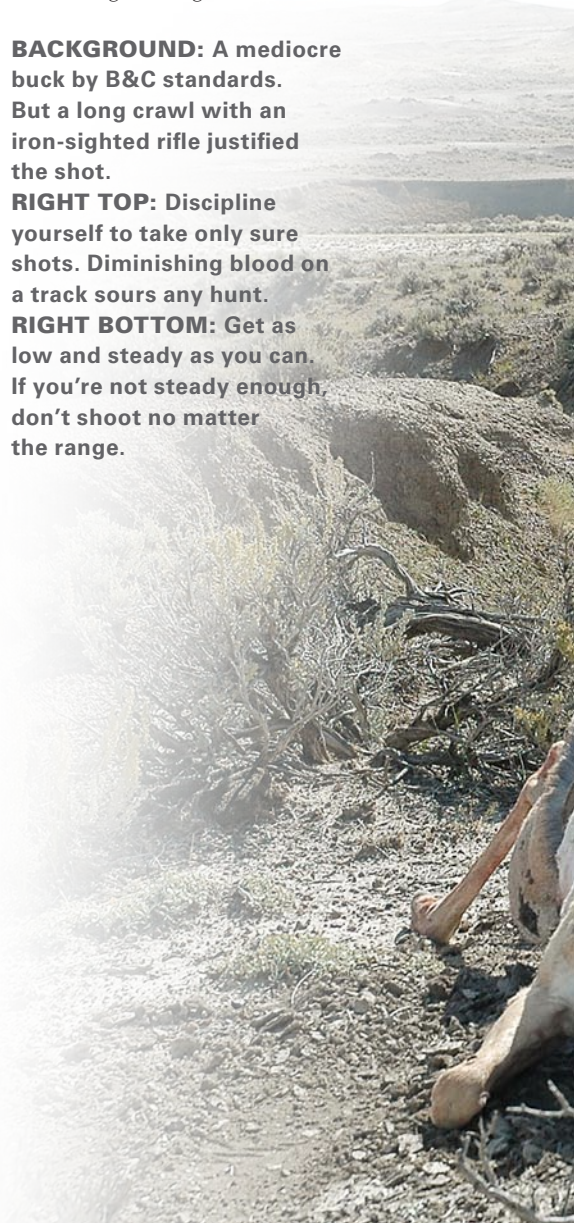
"Nope." I crushed the trigger. The 140-grain bullet from my .260 drilled the animal through both lungs. It dashed downhill, then somersaulted to a stop in a flurry of snow. The camera got the action. I tried to explain, in brief monologue, why I had chosen an antlerless target. I couldn't think of anyone by name who might have made the same decision.

Legal is legal. There's no shame in

**BACKGROUND: A mediocre buck by B&C standards. But a long crawl with an iron-sighted rifle justified the shot.**

**RIGHT TOP: Discipline yourself to take only sure shots. Diminishing blood on a track sours any hunt.**

**RIGHT BOTTOM: Get as low and steady as you can. If you're not steady enough, don't shoot no matter the range.**



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killing young males. But if you value the antlers of old males, you'll let the young live. The main reason you see bigger antlers on musty mounts from the middle of the last century than you see in the woods is that 50 years ago the woods held more mature bucks and bulls. A trophy-class rack needs time to grow. Nutrition and genetics figure in, but time is the main thing denied animals now. At Deseret Land & Livestock, the average age of bull elk tagged by hunters when I worked there was 8 1/2 years. On public land without strict mature-bull quotas, you'll look hard to find bulls older than 3 1/2. Age alone won't guarantee big antlers. You'll see many people of average height and athletic ability for every basketball player you meet. Only a handful of those play at the level of a Michael Jordan. So it is with big game. Only a few Dall's rams come close to matching the one taken by Harry Swank; only a few mule deer look remotely like the Burris buck. Not only does a game population need time to produce mature males; that contingent of males must be large enough to yield exceptional animals, always rare.

So, while you needn't apologize for killing adolescent deer or mulligan moose, passing up game on the come serves your interests as a trophy hunter. If the people who measure hunting success by carcass count don't understand this, more's the pity.

You may want to decline shots for other reasons too. I do. Just before shooting the moose last fall, I'd come off an elk hunt in Montana's fabled Bob Marshall Wilderness, where I failed to kill. The only bull I'd seen had appeared the first day on a meadow fringe. My partner had never shot an elk and was keen for the chance. It seemed only right that he get it. He missed. So had the fellow a year earlier when I'd offered him first crack. Late this fall, on another elk hunt, my partner shot a bull after I insisted he lead off.

Such courtesy befits a gentleman, albeit it can keep your freezer empty. A child of the fifties, I've long been hard-wired to hold doors open, say "Please" instead of "I'll have" to waitresses and pull to road shoulders when a faster driver

wants to zoom by. Not getting the first shot can mean not getting a shot at all—a prospect that shouldn't bother you. If it does, flip a coin, then switch places with your pal every day. A missed chance gives the other hunter next shot. An animal passed up is fair game for the second rifle.



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Another reason to decline a shot: high risk of a *bad* shot. My own rule is to fire only when certain that I can make that shot 90 percent of the time. Incidentally, “making a shot” is not just hitting an animal, but hitting it fatally. Some hunters talk about shooting limits only in terms of yardage. “I won’t take a shot over 400 yards, but close deer are in real trouble.” Well, that sort of hubris ignores other factors that affect accuracy as profoundly as range. Wind, for example. Shooting position. Light. Your pulse. At a rifle range, I can shoot well enough at 600 yards in mild breeze to consistently pepper deer ribs. But that’s prone, over flat ground at well-defined targets with a rifle zeroed to hit them. Hunting, I won’t know the distance unless I have the luxury of a laser range-finder. And then I’ll likely shoot from an improvised rest or an adaptation of a sling-assisted sit. Prone would be a gift. So would the time to slow a racing

## A LONG WAY FROM NOWHERE. DO YOU OWE YOUR SUPPORT GROUP A KILL?

heart and bring breathing back from marathon cadence. But a steady rifle isn’t enough. I’ll need to know wind direction and speed at the target. And I must deny adrenaline control of my trigger. Of course, the first shot will have to hit where I expect, no matter the barrel is clean and cold and that my shooting position puts stresses on the rifle it has never experienced at the range.

Summing deductions, I trim my reach on the mountain to about half my reach on targets. Slung up prone or over a rest or sitting, I can confidently shoot big game to 300 yards. After that I get nervous. And I don’t shoot. Now, 300 is the *limit*. If I’m kneeling, or the animal is moving or the wind is howling, 200 seems more reasonable. Offhand, a 100-yard cap applies, unless conditions are tough. I once declined an offhand shot at

one of the biggest mule deer I’d ever seen. I’d followed this buck across high basins all afternoon. At dusk, with a storm blowing horizontal snow across my scope field, I had the crosswire on his shoulder. Range: 150 yards. But the wind and angle made the shot risky. He vanished in the storm. Forever.

Another time, a friend and I were still-hunting on parallel game trails through Montana foothills. I had the only elk tag. “Come quick!” he hissed. I scurried up the hill, keeping low. “Big bull!” He jabbed a finger. Through the trees from my angle, the elk wasn’t easy to see. But I dared not step into the open to join my partner. At last I got the bull in my binoculars. What an animal! Candlestick ivory tines and cream-and-black cape. A heavy-antlered six-point bigger than any I had shot. But the elk had my amigo pegged; I couldn’t move. The roll of the hill would hide the bull if I went prone or even sat. Offhand, I tried to tame the bounding reticle. No luck. I wanted badly to fire that rifle, a Lazzeroni 8x59 Galaxy that would have eaten up the 300 yards and punched a big hole through the vitals. But I could not steady the sight picture. The animal turned, eventually, and slipped into dark timber.

Some years ago, a very big whitetail buck minced into a logging. I tried to grip the wiggles out of my .280 Improved, but kneeling was as low as I could go, the deer wouldn’t stop, and the distance—250 yards—pulled the reticle off the ribs a little too often. The thick-necked 12-pointer waltzed out of my life.

Incidentally, an opportunity too risky is too risky no matter when you get it and no matter how big the animal. You’ve probably heard: “It was the last day, so I winged one out there.” Or: “That buck was the best I’ve ever seen. I had to try!” A low-percentage shot is low-percentage whether it comes on opening morning or at hunt’s end. It’s a low-percentage shot whether the antlers are thin forks or multi-tined crowns with baseball-bat beams. A big buck lost because of a bungled shot suffers the same fate as a small buck.

Declining a shot because it is too far or you’re too unsteady doesn’t mean you can kiss the animal good-bye. I’ve seen many hunters shoot too soon. Often, waiting for a better opportunity or sneaking closer are very real options. Botch the shot and you’ll never know. Hold your fire and I’ll hazard that over half the time you’ll be rewarded with an easier chance.

A few seasons back in Wyoming, I hunted pronghorns with a 99 Savage. It

wore iron sights, so I imposed a 100-yard range limit on myself. That’s a generous figure in whitetail cover, but where antelope roam it can prove frustrating. Many hours of hunting gave me no close looks at mature bucks. Late in the day, I spotted a small group of pronghorns with a fine buck. I crawled forward, closing the gap as they fed crosswind. At 150 yards, I was tempted; at 120 I almost shot. Inching along a wash on my navel, I stopped when one of the does raised her head. End of the line. For many minutes I lay there eyeing a small stone across the wash. *If they come to feed even with that stone....* And they did. The Core-Lokt from my .300 ruptured the buck’s heart. What for a scoped bolt rifle would have been a quick and uneventful kill had turned into a thrilling stalk! The next day, with that rifle, I bungled an approach on a deer. The buck bounced across the prairie, giving me plenty of time to shoot at modest range. I didn’t, because a moving animal is hard to hit well. I’d all but given up on this muley as it topped a very distant rise. Then, suddenly, it dropped into the sage. More than an hour later, I crawled within 25 yards of the buck’s antler tips. It suspected something, rose from its bed and trotted off a short distance. Then it stopped to look back. The little Savage was ready.

A few sneaks like those, and you may find yourself passing up easy shots just to prolong the hunt.

I did once this past fall, with embarrassing results. Glassing for deer in open scab-land, I followed the line of my guide’s binoculars as he indicated the antlers of a buck bedded behind a distant outcrop. We agreed that I’d go in alone, circling to keep the wind in check. Just 20 minutes later I had wormed my way across basalt and through sage to within 30 steps of the deer. A rock shielded me. The smart thing would have been to sit up, whistle and shoot when the buck rose. But a truly *close* approach was in my grasp, so I continued on. As I belied into a shallow swale, hardly daring to breath, the animal stood. An out-of-focus shoulder filled my scope field; but I knew the muzzle was not clear of the rock. Shooting almost straight up from prone has little to recommend it, but I made a valiant effort, lifting my left elbow to raise that muzzle while arching my back like a contortionist. Pow! Shards of basalt blasted me. The startled deer launched itself into the next county – untouched by a bullet fired from 14 feet away.

You don’t need a reason to pass up an animal. I once crept within 80 steps of a bedded six-point elk in a snow-storm. It

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WHEN YOUR HEART IS POUNDING THROUGH YOUR CHEST.**



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# When to Pass



Resting the .25-06 on a windfall, I began the squeeze. Then I stopped. The hunt was over, the shot a sure thing. The elk, eyes shut as it faced the storm, thick flakes piling like icing on its coat, became, suddenly, all that was magical about this time and place. High on a Wyoming peak, the bull had survived many storms, eluded many hunters. An intruder in the shadows, I felt unworthy—outclassed in this wild weather, unable to long endure it. My rifle gave me extraordinary power over my quarry. I chose not to use it. I flicked the safety on and slipped away unnoticed.

Decisions to simply not fire can always be second-guessed. Did I *really* have

## HIGH COUNTRY DEMANDS MUCH OF ANY HUNTER. IS YOUR REWARD THE HUNTING EXPERIENCE OR A CARCASS?

that one in the bag? Should I have brought a deer home? Am I getting soft? Honestly, I've not regretted letting any animal live.

Peer pressure has pulled the trigger for many hunters, and I've felt it myself. Once, on a hunt for ibex, my guide spotted a very fine ram climbing an opposite slope. Range: about 200 yards. Prone in a taut sling, I had an easy shot. But this event was to be taped, and the cameraman behind me could not find the animal. I gave him every help, finally hissing: "Just follow my rifle barrel!" Alas, it was all for naught. By this time, the ibex had confirmed its suspicions.

It moved furtively and more quickly from cover to cover, climbing, climbing. "Shoot!" bellowed the guide. "That's a trophy ram!" But my task was to get the kill on tape. As the animal passed the 250-yard mark just shy of the crest, I almost fired. "Shoot! Forget about the camera! Kill that ram!" The guide was screaming. He threw his hat on the ground. He hurled expletives. I held the

shot. The ibex topped out. "Oh, I see him now," gasped the cameraman. But too late.

Video cameras on hunts can cost you precious opportunities as someone tries to tape your kills. I have shot animals for the cameras and lost several chances *because* of the cameras. While videos of hunts can bring our passion to others unable to experience it first-hand—as do the excellent programs aired by the Boone and Crockett Club—they can test the discipline of any rifleman.

So can your friends, your guide, the others in your hunting camp. When everyone but you tags out and there's talk about striking camp early, your aspirations for a trophy are on the line. Do you kill the first buck or hunt until the last day for Brutus? When someone has gone out of his way to bring you a chance at game, can you refuse to shoot? I once found myself unsuccessful at the end of a hunt in a foreign country. My companions were packing when a local hunter stopped at our mountain cabin. "You're not going back without a trophy!" he said incredulously. I told him my time was up. "Stay. Hunt one more afternoon.

Use my rifle. I will drive you back to the city tonight myself." It was a five-hour trip. In short order I checked the zero on his 6.5x68 Mannlicher; then we hiked off into the hills. Presently we spotted game, and he urged me to shoot. I figured the range to be 400 yards or so and declined. "But this rifle shoots very straight." He was insistent—and even more so after we had risked exposure on a cliff and closed to just over 300 yards. My hunt was suddenly a problem. I owed this fellow my last chance at success. Did I owe him a shot I wouldn't take with my own rifle? As tactfully as I could, I said I would attempt a steep descent to within 200 yards of the animals. He shook his head. "You'll never make it." I held firm, and with a forced smile, left him atop the spine. By great good luck I reached a ledge just as a big set of horns appeared in an opening below. I fired.

Such fairy-tale endings make for great memories. But when you come up empty-handed, others in your party may think you've let them down. I make a point of telling every hunting companion at the start that I may or may not shoot, that I'm looking forward to a good hunt with or without a kill. I tell them I'm more interested in the process of hunting than in any product I might cart home.

Because I am. ■



**INSET:** This hard-won goat won't make the books, but the climb and descent made the hunt memorable.