

LASER RANGE

When The Smoke Clears

By Julius Fortuna
Senior Field Editor
Trophy Hunter Magazine

PHOTO BY NEAL AND MARY JANE MISHLER



GE FINDERS

Seeing Is Not Always Believing

Realizing as I peered down at my watch for the tenth time, that the end of my trophy quest for monster mule deer, in Arizona's famed Kaibab Plateau, was one hour away. I figured I still had time to work one more long desolate rim. This particular rim dropped off on the west side down to a deep canyon drainage. Just off the rim's north-east side were a couple of small mesas and plateaus. It was in this area that I concentrated my glassing efforts. The only thing going away faster than the daylight, were my spirits. I had put away my spotting scope and tripod, and was about to leave when I had a gut feeling.

You know the ones that tell you, "Keep on looking, you're missing something." There in my first field of view, in a cliff rose choked saddle, stood the "buck of a lifetime."

In a knee jerk fashion I instantly pulled my binoculars away from my face. Had it not been for the fact that I glassed that exact spot twenty five times prior, I might not have ever found him again. He was prehistoric looking, with an outside spread that was close to 40 inches. He had 14 to 15 big points per side, and had a huge 15 inch palmated drop point on the right. His G2 and G3 forks had long in-line extra tines on both sides. His mass however, is what impressed me most. I believe his smallest circumference measurement was his first, and he had close to 50 inches of total mass!

He was standing perfectly broadside, and motionless. His glare was burning a hole right through me. I slowly laid my .300 Weatherby magnum over my back-pack until it was rock solid. It was at that exact moment that fear overtook me. YARDAGE — what's the yardage, I thought. It terrified me to think that the only thing that stood between me, and the buck, was my ability to judge yardage.

Today's hunters have the choice to eliminate one of the biggest causes of inaccuracy in hunting. This tool will give hunters the ethical, and accuracy advantage our prey deserve.

KEN ROSS WITH HIS 1996 NEW MEXICO ANTELOPE, AND THE RF-1 LASER FOR THE ASSURANCE FACTOR.



Using football fields as a primary estimator, and my memory of the 400 yard shooting, I estimated the buck was just over 400 yards. Knowing the trajectory of my rifle and where it would hit at 400 yards I held the cross hairs on the buck's back, in line with the front leg, and I began to squeeze. My sight picture was perfect and my hold was steady. The shot felt perfect. The bullet struck 20 inches under the buck's bris-

ket. The buck jumped sideways, and ran 25 yards to a lone cedar tree. He crouched his hindquarters down and stuck his huge antlers into the branches of the cedar, the only cover for 200 yards. He was slightly quartering away, and I aimed behind the shoulder, attempting to compensate for the drop of the first shot. The second shot was closer, but still 11 to 12 inches low. This time the buck disappeared for good, a lot wiser but unscathed by our encounter.

When I finally got to where the buck had been standing to check for signs of a hit, the reason for my missed shots became apparent. Standing in the buck's tracks, looking back at the ledge I had shot from, it became evident to me that the distance was closer to 500 yards. The drop of my bullet confirmed that the distance was closer to 500 yards than the 400 yards I had estimated. The point of my experience, is that with one of today's modern laser range finders I would have known the distance was 500 yards and I would have passed up a shot at that distance. It is only by good fortune that I did not wound this magnificent animal. At that time, my personal maximum shot at game, which had not been wounded previously, was 400 yards. At that distance, from a solid rest using a bi-pod, I could shoot a 3-shot group no larger than 3 inches. So even though I had done my part in finding this animal and preparing my shot, the sole reason for missing, or possibly wounding this animal, was my inability to accurately estimate the distance to the buck. Had I wounded the buck this incident would have become a personal and ethical nightmare for me.

Today's hunters have the "choice" to eliminate one of the biggest causes of missed or wounded game in hunting. Hunters had a similar choice in the late 50s and early 60s with the boom of improved quality rifle scopes. The similarity between an accurate sight picture facilitated by today's rifle scopes, and the accuracy level it instills in shooting is exactly what laser range finders bring to the modern hunter. The elimination of poor range judgment gives the hunter the ability to determine exactly which shots are too long and the choice to not take shots beyond the capabilities of the hunter and the hunter's equipment. This tool will give hunters the ability to make ethical choices, and the knowledge required to make accurate shots. Our prey deserves both.

Those individuals who object to the use of laser range finders point out that we as hunters have

been guessing yardage without range finders for all this time and a change is not necessary. The simple fact is, we as humans are not well suited anatomically for estimating distance accurately. The best way to prove this to oneself is quite simple. Borrow a quality laser range finder from someone. This should not be difficult to do, since the Swarovski (RF-1), Lieca (Geovid), Bushnell (Lytespeed), hit the market 2-3 years ago, they have been selling 80,000 units per year! Take the range finder to a shooting range with known distances to check it out for accuracy. The RF-1 and the Geovid are much more accurate than the Lytespeed. The first two will be plus or minus 1-2 yards out to 1100 yards, while the Lytespeed is plus or minus 4 yards, out to 400 yards.

Next take the laser range finder out in the field for a day, preferably a weekend, and test your skills at judging distance. Pick out a series of objects which you believe to be at distances of 20-500 yards. Bring a pad and a pen, and write down your yardage estimates for each of the objects you have identified. In order to look at the distance estimation challenges faced by archers, muzzleloader, handgun and modern rifle hunters pick objects in each of the following range categories: archery: 20-80 yards, 2) muzzleloader/handgun: 50-200 yards, and modern rifle: 100-500 yards.

Although any number of objects will work for this exercise, a three-dimensional deer target like the one's used in archery events will make it more realistic. Place it in the field at different distances in an effort to simulate hunting conditions like canyons, hills and shadows. You may also want to do this exercise during the first and last 45 minutes of shooting light when game movement is usually at its peak. Write down your estimation of the yardage to each object you have identified. Next check yourself with the laser range finder. Trained military specialists evaluated their ability to judge unknown distances to within 10%

of the actual distance. They were correct only 30% of the time. Guess where this new laser technology has come from?

I suspect that the majority of the readers of *Fair Chase* already realize how difficult it is to accurately judge distance, especially those who have hunted unfamiliar terrain or those who are archers or muzzleloader hunters. The value of the laser range finder is apparent to anyone who has faced the dilemma of deciding to shoot or not to shoot at an animal when range estimation is critical. My view is that knowing the range by using a laser range finder enhances the hunters ability to consider how far he/she will shoot at game and when the decision is made to shoot helps make the shot clean and the kill swift and humane. My experience on that fateful day in the Kaibab with the "buck of a lifetime" is an excellent example for me. I knew my personal limit on how far I could shoot at the buck, and believed I was within that limit. I failed because I could not accurately judge the distance to the buck. The simple truth is that anyone who has hunted very long has experienced this exact scenario. If you have not missed a game animal due to your inaccurate estimate of range, you will!

Contrary to Mike Cupell, I find that laser range finders are not just expensive gadgets anymore than a high quality rifle, scope, binoculars, or any other piece of hunting gear. Neither are they "unnecessary and redundant." If anything, they are a necessary part of the modern, ethical hunter's gear. Cupell's point that "the action of the hunt is so swift that there isn't time to bring them into play," may be the case at times but when hunting undisturbed game in big open country there is often sufficient time to use a laser range finder. Similarly there can be time to effectively use one while bow hunting, as well as hunting with a muzzleloader. My view regarding whether state wildlife agencies will rule against laser range finders or not is more related to the value of



hunters owning and using range finders than it is to Cupell's charge that these agencies are "bureaucratic and minimalistic." When it comes to "honing hunting skills, and gracefully accepting the limitations that keep some semblance of equalness between ourselves and the animals we attempt to prey upon" we all need to work on this. We must always keep in

mind that we have the responsibility to make accurate shots resulting in quick, humane kills at all ranges. In regard to a hunter killing, or possessing trophy animals, Mike is simply wrong. He has mistaken the extreme passion, drive, and ultimate choice of bettering one's hunting abilities, for some unethical personal satisfaction. Mike is entitled to his opinions so long as he does so in a manner that does not adversely effect other hunters abilities to be ethical. I simply do not agree with him.

The most important point in Mike's article sums up not only his personal philosophy in hunting but that of many of the advocates against the use of lasers. He states, "To do less speaks aloud much more about who that man

is than about what he may or may not be doing." If to "do less" means that hunters should not hone their hunting skills to a razor edge, and use the most accurate, and reliable equipment available in the field, I would just as soon pass. I have a great deal of compassion for my prey, and I strive to be successful in every aspect of my hunting endeavors.

If we are going to make an educated decision about this subject, common sense demands that we "walk a mile in their moccasins." If after this little test you are still of the opinion that laser range finders evoke some unfair advantage, or are questionable in fair chase attempts, your opinion will have been formed by facts rather than emotion!

ABOVE: AUTHOR WITH AN ARIZONA B&C SCORING MULE DEER. THE BUCK WAS HARVESTED AT 450 YARDS. EXACT DISTANCE WAS CRITICAL FOR THIS SHOT.

INSET: DOUG OBERT WITH HIS HUGE 1996 MULIE TAKEN IN UTAH. "THIS WOULD NOT HAVE HAPPENED WITHOUT THE RF-1 LASER RANGE FINDER, HE LOOKED A LOT FARTHER THEN HE REALLY WAS. THANK GOODNESS THE GUIDE HAD ONE!"