

TO SHOOT OR NOT TO SHOOT

UP CLOSE AND
PERSONAL

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Photos Courtesy of Author

“Half a buck is better than none,” my dad used to tell me when I was a kid.

I cut my deer hunting teeth on Columbia blacktail deer in northern California with a Mauser-action .270 Winchester. Any buck with a fork on one antler was legal game, and it required long hours on hard-hunted public land for Pop and me to bag our deer. We used small fox terrier dogs to jump bucks from the heavily overgrown canyons above our town. Any legal deer was a trophy, and most were

taken as they dodged at high speed through the brush in front of our canine helpers. Shots were quick and often none too precise.

It sometimes required a month or more of hard hunting for every buck we tagged, and some of those were dropped as they sprinted straight away or bounded across boulder-strewn hill-sides choked with manzanita, poison oak, and bitterbrush. Waiting for a perfect shot was a joke, and any 130-grain bullet that smacked a buck down was considered a success. Sometimes we brought home a complete deer shot

squarely through the lungs or heart. Other times a ham or shoulder was pulverized by fragmented copper and lead. But in those memorable days of scraping to take thinly populated deer in difficult country, half a buck was truly a prize. It was often half a buck or no buck at all.

Very few places are as difficult to hunt as public land in the Golden State. After I converted to bowhunting in my mid-teens and after my outdoor writing career took me to many parts of North America and abroad, I discovered that taking the right shot on big game is usually possible. Most habitats have fewer hunters and more animals than the country where I grew up.

At best, a hunter with gun or bow should wait for a high-percentage shot. Knowing when and when not to shoot is the mark of a sportsman.

There are four primary ingredients in any perfect shot at game. Before I describe these, let me emphasize one overriding principle. No

matter how or where you hunt, you should always take the first good shot that presents itself. This magic window of opportunity might be narrow, and it can slam shut at any instant. If you dither instead of striking like a rattlesnake, the animal might be gone.

Consider my friend Albert. He saved his money and booked a guided hunt for big whitetails in south Texas. This was not a canned, high-fence adventure. The deer were wild, free-ranging, and hard to find in the flat, heavily overgrown terrain.

After six days of sneaking, glassing, and rattling antlers, Albert and his guide were amazed when a giant 5x5 swaggered into view 60 yards away. The buck was on high alert and locked in on the sound of the antlers he had heard clashing together.

Albert can hit a pop can every time at that range with his .308 Winchester from an offhand position, but for some strange reason he decided to take two steps to the right for a steady rest across an oak



Intervening obstacles like a field fence can ruin your shot. This buck should be dead meat with a rifle, but a bow's arching trajectory might present a problem.

limb. He made it one step before the wise old buck turned tail and ran. That deer should have been Albert's, but he dallied and blew the chance. He did not get another during the ten-day hunt.

DISTANCE

Distance should be your first consideration before you shoot. How far is too far? If Albert's whitetail had been 200 yards away, then taking a rest would have been the right thing to do. At 60 yards, my pal should have lifted his rifle and fired.

As a bowhunter, I have no choice but to shoot offhand. I know my personal sure-kill distance on animals with various sizes of kill zones. If a shot is too far for a definite lethal hit, I try to get closer. It's the ethical thing to do.

Every hunter needs to shoot a lot of targets to determine how far is too far under various field conditions.

Even very close animals can be impossible to kill with gun or bow. Intervening obstacles like bushes, logs, trees, or fence wires can screen a critter's body and ruin your chance of success. One guy I know was elk hunting in Colorado when a nice bull came sneaking by less than 20 yards away. My acquaintance thought his .300 Winchester Magnum would blow through the thick alders in between, but he was wrong. All he got for his trouble was ringing ears, alder splinters on the ground, and a quick view of the elk's south end going north!

BULLETS OR BROADHEADS

Bullets or broadheads—it really doesn't matter. No projectile performs well unless you have a clear target to shoot at.

Skilled hunters always try to nail the quickly lethal heart/lung zone. This requires knowledge of where those vitals are, and patience to wait for a proper body angle.

In hugely difficult shooting situations like I experienced during my youth in California, it might not be possible to wait for a stationary, broadside animal. But many gun-hunting situations do allow this, and all bow-hunting situations demand it.

If an animal quarters slightly away, so much the better because the chest cavity is even more exposed. Aim a bit above the "elbow" of the front leg and let fly.

Bowhunters in particular should wait for a broadside or quartering shot. Sure, butt shots and frontal chest shots with a bow can kill, but the odds of success are reduced. If you do not have the right body angle to shoot at, you should always wait.

ANIMAL ATTITUDE

Animal attitude is an important ingredient in how and when you shoot. My buddy Albert should have nailed that Texas whitetail immediately because the buck was close and wary. Trying to sashay to a nearby tree was a formula for failure. By comparison, if the buck had been feeding, chasing a doe, or just

moseying by, it might have been possible to take a rest.

Suspicious, wound-up animals are especially bad news for bowhunters. A buck or bull on high alert can crouch and duck your arrow with speed that boggles the mind. If the target is tense, with ears cupped stiffly ahead and eyeballs probing your way, it is a mistake to release the bowstring. You will probably miss the shot, or worse yet, hit the animal in a bad place. Ethical archers wait for relaxed, preoccupied big game.

WHEN TO SHOOT

An experienced hunter knows when and when *not* to shoot. You need to quickly assess distance, intervening obstacles, animal body angle, and the mindset of the target. If the situation is right, you should shoot immediately before the opportunity evaporates. If the situation is wrong, you should wait for a better chance. Unless you are forced to hunt thinly populated, brush-jumping track-star deer, a whole and cleanly dropped animal is always best! ■



Chuck played hide-and-seek with this huge American elk for more than an hour before he got a clear, close shot. The bull scored 411-3/8 B&C points, and was the Pope and Young Club's World's Record for several years.