


CRAIG
BODDINGTON
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

THE LONG- RANGE GAME

I'm pretty sure this 1978 Nevada mule deer was about a quarter-mile away, not because that was my guess but because I held a whole bunch of daylight over the back and the bullet hit where I intended. In pre-rangefinder days that was a very long poke.



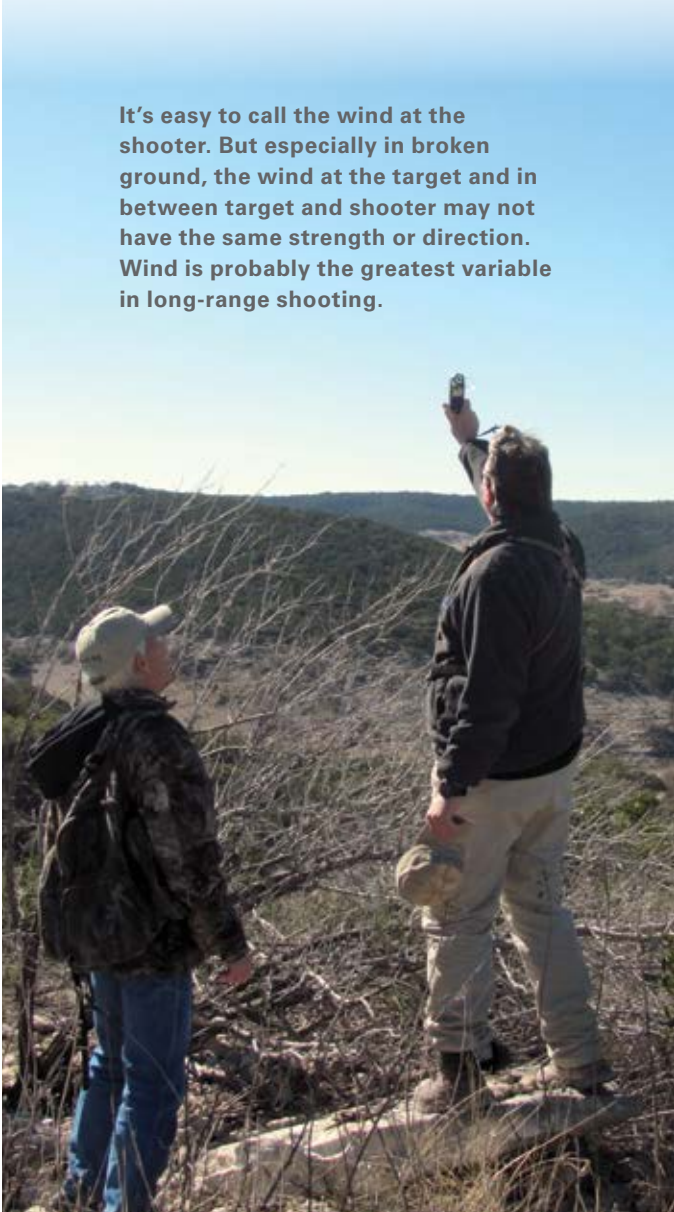
Dialing the range for a longish shot with a Leupold CDS turret on a Jarrett .300 Winchester Magnum. I am convinced that dialing the range is the most precise system for long-range shooting—but dialing in the field requires a huge amount of practice on the range.

These days, long-range shooting is “in.” It is not my place to suggest to anyone how far he or she should or shouldn’t shoot, but honestly, I’m a bit horrified by the shooting distances thrown around these days. From the media, it would be easy to get the idea that shooting at game animals at a half-mile and more has become routine.

Such things are not impossible. Ethical shots at game at any range depends on the conditions, the equipment, knowledge of the equipment, and the skill of the shooter. For sure, our capabilities have expanded since I was a young hunter! Even back then, it wasn’t uncommon to read about 500-yard shots in the sporting magazines. That was long before outdoor TV, internet, and effective rangefinders, so one must wonder how many of those wondrous shots were actually paced off? Realistically, pre-rangefinders, we figured a quarter-mile to be a pretty long poke. Making such a shot depended heavily on a close guesstimate of the actual distance—and then all the rest came into play: time and ability to get steady; knowledge of the trajectory; a good read on the wind.

Today the compact, inexpensive, and shockingly accurate laser rangefinder has generally removed knowledge of distance as a variable. But all the rest comes into play, and I still figure a quarter-mile to be a pretty long poke—trajectories haven’t changed much in my lifetime. Bullet aerodynamics have improved things a bit, but most of Roy Weatherby’s magnums go back to the 1940s—and they’re still among our fastest and flattest-shooting sporting cartridges. Unless you sight-in ridiculously high—and thus, run the risk of over-shooting at closer ranges—at some point on the near or far side of 300 yards, you simply must know the trajectory. Once the trajectory is known, it’s just a number. Know the distance and know the number, and the shot is possible—theoretically.

Exceptionally accurate rifles have been around since before the self-contained metallic cartridge, but it’s absolutely true that *average* accuracy is better today and also true that many of today’s inexpensive factory rifles deliver simply amazing accuracy, especially for the price. Jack O’Connor’s famous “Number 2” .270 was an out-of-the-box sub-MOA



It’s easy to call the wind at the shooter. But especially in broken ground, the wind at the target and in between target and shooter may not have the same strength or direction. Wind is probably the greatest variable in long-range shooting.

rifle, and I have an R.F. Sedgley Springfield from the 1930s that's a sub-MOA rifle—but such rifles were uncommon. Even today not all rifles (of any make) will do it, but in recent years I've shot a lot of inexpensive rifles that would group under an inch—and a few that, with some loads, will cut that in half. For sure factory ammunition is far more consistent than ever before, to the point where it's been years since I was certain I could load a better cartridge than I could buy. These are incremental gains.

Optics today are exponentially better. Consistent, repeatable adjustments, once rare, can be expected in even medium-quality glass. When I was a kid, variable-power scopes were widely distrusted and the fixed 4X was king. Variables have long been perfected, with little to no shift in zero as the power ring is turned. You can shoot better

(and farther) if you can see better. Today's big variables make long-shooting a whole lot easier! Add in precise adjustments on dial-up turrets and it's simply a matter of knowing your equipment, knowing the range, dialing and holding—at least to a point.

Part of the allure of long-range shooting is that our snipers of the recent (and ongoing) Asian campaigns have become cult heroes—and they deserve the acclaim—but we want to emulate their feats. Long-range shooting is fun; it's a great feeling to ring steel “way out there!” My problem is that hunting is not military sniping where any hit counts. Wind is an increasing variable as range increases. It's easy to read wind at the shooter, but reading wind at the target and between target and shooter is an art form, not a science. Broken ground channelizes wind. Using smoke

bombs, I've seen three different wind directions in just 500 yards. Get out there far enough and atmospherics—temperature, altitude, humidity, barometric pressure—all come into play.

Then you have the practical realities of big game hunting, where all hits do not count. Today's hunting bullets are better than ever, but at distance, energy yields are down, and as velocity drops, bullet performance changes and inevitably becomes less consistent. Military snipers work in teams, spotter and shooter. The spotter's role in calling the wind and spotting the strike is actually just as important as the shooter's role. Long-range hunters also often work in teams, which helps. But with reduced velocity and energy and often diminished bullet performance, strikes at long range can be hard to call. Most of the time, ethics demand that you go



look. So, in rough terrain, exactly how long does it take to cover a half-mile, and can you find the spot where the animal was standing when you get there? Again, the team approach helps, but shooting at distance in that critical last hour of daylight is probably a bad idea.

All said, however, our “sensible range” envelope has increased. I still consider 400 yards a longish shot—never a chip shot—but if you can read the range, have time to get steady, and the wind seems constant, quarter-mile shooting is well within reach. With access to real-distance ranges for data verification and practice (lots of practice!), many of

This deer stand overlooks an endless powerline on a friend's place in Georgia. I sit with rangefinder and binoculars ready.



Regardless of equipment and preparation, conditions dictate shooting ranges. On a day like this, rangefinders can't read, and even if they can, 40-miles-per-hour winds greatly reduce effective ranges.





This Jarrett Ridge Walker in .300 Winchester Magnum is a recent addition. Obviously it groups very well; the far-left group is a 200-yard group with Hornady SST.

us can go somewhat farther—and some of us can go a lot farther. Again, it isn't my place to say how far is too far; only that it's mandatory to know what you're doing, understand and evaluate the variables, and understand the risks and consequences.

I never seek a long

shot. Quite the opposite! But in plains and mountains, I usually set up so that I'm ready if a long shot becomes necessary. Two favorite setups are a Blaser R8 and a Jarrett Ridge Walker, both in magnum .30s, both very accurate. There are many great scopes, but the last few years

Early on a Brooks Range sheep hunt in 2017, I passed on a 600-yard shot on this ram. I had the equipment, the data, and the time, but I couldn't read the wind. Four days later, I took the same ram at 120 yards. Whether I eventually got him or not, the long shot simply wasn't smart.

I've usually used Leupold VX6 scopes with their Custom Dial System (CDS) turret calibrated for the load I'm using. Important: I've verified the data at much longer distances than I would actually shoot at game.

I have made long shots with both rifles. Come to think of it, I haven't missed a long shot with either. On the other hand, I haven't tried very often—the conditions have to be right, and I have to be sure. There have been a lot more times when I've waved off from a long poke and tried to get closer!

In August 2017, I did a backpack sheep hunt in Alaska's Brooks Range. That's easy sheep country as such things go but still a stretch (and perhaps a foolish one) at my age. On the third evening we got onto a group of rams feeding around a bowl. Two were legal, the larger of them pretty good and good enough, but at a bit over 600 yards, we ran out of

cover and were completely stuck. I had the Jarrett dialed in with 200-grain Hornady ELD-X and I'd recently shot it out to 900 meters at similar elevation and temperature: I knew the data was correct. We'd had a long day chasing this group and I was at my limit. I really wanted to take the shot, but the wind in that bowl was strong and uncertain.

It hurt to walk away, and it hurt even more to stumble back to our spike camp at midnight. But there was no point in kicking myself; I couldn't read the wind well enough, and that was that. Four days passed, mostly bad weather, no more legal rams spotted—and then we found that same group again. This time a long, circuitous stalk paid off, and we got the shot at 120 yards. Honestly, I'd rather have it that way, but these days I'm prepared for longer shooting if the conditions are right. ■

This 3-inch 600-yard group, fired from a field rest, is probably the best group I've ever shot, one-half MOA. The accuracy was there, but my data was slightly off, and the group is in the wrong place! At extreme range everything must be perfect.

