

# BAD SHOTS



Jim Vincent with a 6x6 public hunting archery elk in 2016. A good shot.

© WWW.ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/TWILDLIFE

During my 50-year archery and rifle hunting career, sometimes I've killed animals with less than perfect shots, and I've lost a couple of animals as well. I've met hunters who've told me about wounding two or three elk in a season before they "harvested" one. This is where I draw the ethical line. To me, fair chase means that if I shoot and wound an animal in a single buck or bull area, this is the only one I will shoot at for the season.

Over the years, I have taken several pronghorns with a bow. But this year, it was either bad luck or bad skills that made for a trying season—maybe a combination of both. In late July, I put my wood 6x8 foot Taj Mahal box blind out in the desert on a water tank. It was ready for the pronghorn bow season. Our local game warden, Tom Burkhart, and I also put up two pop-up blinds at watering holes for two young hunters.

I was fly fishing in Canada a week before the pronghorn season when Tom texted to say that another archer had put his blind right next to mine—unethical among bow hunters. On August 15, opening day, I sat in my blind all day and saw nothing, masochistically suffocating in the stifling 95-degree interior, a purgatory on Earth. This is the self-torture one must endure to hunt pronghorns with a bow. Why? Because the hotter the day, the better the chance a buck will come to a water hole. At dark, I closed the window on the blind, filled my espresso coffee pot for the morning jolt and rolled out my air mattress and sleeping bag. The next day was the same, except I started to come down with a cough. I went home, after leaving a note with my phone number for the other hunter, politely giving him my opinion of his putting a blind on top of me.

After three weeks of being ill and finally recovering, I returned to my blind, still coughing up crud from

time to time. That evening at 8:00, still within a half-hour of legal shooting light, a pronghorn buck showed up, cautious and nervous. He left but came back, and I got my bow down from the hanger on the ceiling. The buck at 25 yards climbed over the huge tire water trough and started to drink. I pulled back, drawing the arrow, but as usual, the sight pin had gone completely black. Idaho hunting regulations keep the intent of primitive weapons: no expandable broadheads, no lighted nocks, and muzzle loaders can only have peep or open sights and load from the muzzle. I agree with all these regulations. The Idaho hunting regulations also state no lighted sights on bows. Yet, I can prove that all sights pins in a blind go black. I believe it is much more ethical to have a pin that is bright so that one can make a clean, ethical shot.

So I fought for the darkened sight picture and released the arrow; maybe too quickly. The buck heard the bow release and reared

straight up into the air. He then walked about 80 yards and stopped. I waited for him to fall over. He laid down for an hour, and just at twilight he stood up and moved off a little further. Damn, I thought, did I make a bad shot through the rumen? I had a sleepless night. The next morning, I left the blind, looking for the arrow. I found it. No blood but some hair and rumen material on it. Yes, it was a gut shot. I had been sick for three weeks and had not practiced shooting. Was I so weak from the illness that it contributed to making a bad shot?

I felt confident that I would still find the buck, as they usually expire within 10 hours of a poor gut shot. I found not a drop of blood in any place he had been, including where he had lain for an hour the night before. I searched for three hours moving further away from the blind. Thinking that maybe he might come back for water, I returned to the blind. I felt terrible wounding this gorgeous animal. During the day,

three other bucks came to the water tank. I did not shoot because I figured I'd already shot and killed one.

I left the next morning for home. A few days later, I got a call from Tom, who informed me that the two pop-up blinds of mine that his son and son's friend were using had been stolen. Thieves. Why some mutants think they deserve someone else's property is beyond comprehension. A friend of mine had his four-wheeler stolen while bear hunting this past spring. And there is more theft all the time. I told the two young hunters to use my wood blind as I was not going to use it again. I had shot and lost an animal. I was done with pronghorn season.

This same dark cloud followed me when I hunted elk on our 80-acre property that we manage for wildlife. One evening, I sat in my tree stand in our woods with the river flowing behind me. I was looking for elk or a big whitetail buck. At 6 P.M., I saw a beautiful 6 x 6 bull heading my way.



Tom guided his son Victor on a mule deer hunt in 2013.



Tom Burkhart on an elk hunt with his son Connor.

I was sitting, but when he went behind some trees, I stood to retrieve my bow. I had an arrow in the rest, and the release hooked on the D-loop attached to the string. I used my range finder twice and measured him at 42 yards. I asked myself a question. I have a fair amount of elk venison in our freezers, but even though it is vacuumed packed, some of it is 3 years old. Did I really want to kill this 6x6 bull? Yes, it was too good an opportunity. I could give away the older elk meat to non-hunting friends. I drew back and centered the 40-yard pin on the vitals of this majestic beast. The arrow flew straight, and I thought it looked really great. It felt like a good shot. The bull whirled around and dug hard to return the way he came. I heard him crash through some timber and then nothing. A few minutes later, I saw the rump of an elk through the trees, maybe 70 yards off, walk slowly away. I waited another 20 minutes, texted Tom and climbed down from the tree stand. I looked for my arrow

but did not find it. Usually an arrow through the vitals will pass through both sides of the animal's body. I found no blood where I shot. I looked for an hour until Tom arrived. Tom, a career game warden and expert tracker, found hoof marks where the bull had dug up the ground trying to leave by his back trail. Thirty yards further I found the arrow. It had broken just behind the heavy insert. Blood was on the end and what looked like spotted blood marks up the shaft for 10 inches. There also was a little bit of hair. The shaft did not smell like I'd hit rumen. There was no blood, not a drop on the ground. Maybe I had hit the scapula. It was getting dark, so we agreed to come back in the morning. Tom was going to bring a young hunter with sharp eyes.

The next morning, we looked for four hours. We found a few hoof prints but that was all. I walked the length of the property four times looking for any sign. We hoped if the bull was dead, that the magpies would start

screaming—as they usually do on a dead animal—but besides the occasional chirp that gave us hope, we heard nothing. I walked the neighbor's fence line and there was no sign of the bull jumping it. He was either dead on our property or he had crossed the river to the other side. Perhaps he had survived, but probably not.

Damn. Two lost animals. Tom told me he had shot two big deer on our property with the same broadhead brand, and both times he did not find one drop of blood. Luckily he was able to track and recover the bucks in the November snow. Then I remembered Tim Moon, another archer friend, telling me he had quit using these same broadheads because he had shot a pronghorn and a white-tail buck a couple of years ago and did not find one drop of blood. He felt he was lucky finding the animals. Tim thought the solid steel two-blade broadhead was great for matching field point accuracy but the hole in an animal shot

by these broadheads closed immediately.

When I returned to the house, I took my practice broadheads and shot my target at 42 yards. Except for the first shot which veered low, all arrows were in a four-inch circle. I changed all my broadheads to ones I used successfully years before that I knew would leave a blood trail and started to sight in the bow for point of impact. Many of the shots were exactly where I thought they would be, but sometimes I would have a flyer. Was I getting tired shooting? Then I noticed some frayed fibers and a bunched up cable string where the string and cable buss meet. The top portion of string was out of the little plastic clip that rides on the cable post. This mechanism allows the fletching to clear the rest. It is critical for accuracy. I had not waxed the string for a month and never noticed this bunched up frayed area.

Over the next few days, I went out in the morning and walked our property and the



Tom and Victor in 2013.

**MAKING THE HUMANE  
ETHICAL SHOT IS  
A COMBINATION OF  
ASSURING THAT YOUR  
EQUIPMENT IS TUNED,  
GETTING LOTS OF  
PRACTICE, KNOWING  
YOUR MAXIMUM RANGE,  
AND BEING MENTALLY  
CALM AND CENTERED TO  
MAKE THE BEST SHOT.**

# BAD SHOTS

neighbor's listening for magpies or coyotes, unsuccessfully. I cow-called and got a response. Since I had shot and most likely killed an elk, I made the decision not to shoot another. One morning I left just before dawn to walk down our lane that enters the woods. I did not want to disturb the roosting turkeys that I had to walk by. I started to walk onto the neighbor's property on the west, calling from time to time. Suddenly I heard in the distance, across the river a couple of bull bugles. One was further upstream across the river from my property. I started cow calling with a diaphragm call. I elicited a response from time to time, but the bugles seemed half-hearted. It was the last day of the bull archery season and maybe their ardor had faded. I kept calling and then started hyper estrus calling where instead of a cow call of EEE-owww, the estrus call goes up and down in volume slightly more like a whine. At times during the peak of the rut, it works. At other times, it will scare bulls to the next county.

Suddenly I saw a bull on the opposite bank. I gave

one more call. He started for the water. I could not believe what I was seeing. He swam 150 yards across the river in about a half minute. I was behind a curtain of brush. If I were to shoot, the mortally wounded bull would turn and go back into the river. That is what they do. They always run back the way they came. It is their security escape. There he would drown in the river or possibly die on the other side. It would be another lost animal. I watched him as he climbed the bank and stood just 10 yards from me, directly from where I had called. I froze, not blinking an eye. His massive body shook the water off. At first I thought he was a 5x5 but then realized he was a small six. The top fork beyond the sword tine was small, five inches on each side. The light wind was perfect going from him to me. He stood there for two or three minutes never seeing me and then not finding an amorous cow, turned around and went back into the river and swam to the other side. I called a couple times, and he would stop and bugle but he had been fooled once and once was enough.

This made my day, and my elk season.

I keep asking myself, why the failures? I practice shooting every other day and feel confident of kill shots to 50 yards though 40 is a practical maximum. Was it because I was sick for so long? Or was the non-blood trail broadhead part of the problem, or the frayed cable buss or was it that I had buck fever and did not relax enough, get centered mentally for an extra two seconds to let the pin settle down to make sure of the shot? Was I too quick releasing the arrow and flustered like the young talented quarterback who throws bullet passes to his wide receivers during team scrimmage and interceptions during a game?

I am depressed when I occasionally watch the horn porn hunting shows on cable TV and see terrible bow and rifle shots. Then the star jumps up, yells and screams, and high-fives the camera person. The drama is played out as if it is on public hunting grounds but commonly takes

place on canned hunts within high fences. I've talked to bow hunters who brag about "harvesting" with a 70- to 100-yard shot, and rifle hunters with the latest electronic solutions who tell me 700 to 1,000 yards are easy. Wind drift with either will wound animals, and one can't call a bullet or arrow back.

Obviously not all bad shots are fatal, but I hate wounding an animal or making that animal suffer. Archers account for 5 percent of harvested animals; rifle hunters take the rest, so wounding happens no matter which weapon is used. Making the humane ethical shot is a combination of assuring that your equipment is tuned, getting lots of practice, knowing your maximum range, and being mentally calm and centered to make the best shot. ■



Tom took this whitetail during archery season.

**TOM, A CAREER GAME WARDEN AND EXPERT TRACKER, FOUND HOOF MARKS WHERE THE BULL HAD DUG UP THE GROUND TRYING TO LEAVE BY HIS BACK TRAIL. THIRTY YARDS FURTHER I FOUND THE ARROW.**