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Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

THE CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Despite the current rage for long-range shooting it's important to remember that close shots can occur almost anywhere. Bowhunters deal with this routinely; despite the challenge, they get close! Primarily a rifle hunter, I'm usually prepared for a longish shot, but I ascribe to the motto, "Get as close as you can, then get ten yards closer!"

In the context of rifle hunting, "close" means on the near side of 100 yards, not half that distance archers strive for. Even so, point-blank encounters do occur. In North America, game usually taken at longer ranges includes wild sheep, pronghorns, and Coues' white-tail. My longest on-average shots have been on Elliott Coues' deer. However, with all three of these animals, I've had shots well within 40 yards, good bow range. Let's not forget, too, that legions of American deer hunters sally forth with open-sighted .30-30s and smooth-bore slug guns. Limitations of equipment dictate close encounters!

Thousands of whitetail hunters go afield with open-sighted .30-30s and smoothbore slug guns. Their shots must be close, but in many situations, this is normal and accuracy is adequate. At close range, it's more about speed than precision.



Red-dot or reflex sights drive the shooter to keep both eyes open. This is valuable for close-range shooting because you keep binocular vision, maintain peripheral vision, and have an unlimited field of view. This is an Aimpoint Hunter Model, non-magnifying but scope-like in appearance.

At any range the shot must be placed well, but close shots are different from more deliberate encounters at longer ranges. Almost universal is *time*, plus the reality that any movement to get into position may scotch the chance. Occasionally we're blessed with a quick glimpse of a mostly-obscured animal; perhaps we see it ambling our way, or maybe terrain allows a very close approach. Then we might have time to plan the shot and take a rest. Bowhunters have to be close but must seek a stealthy opportunity to come to full draw. Often, however, the close encounter is a "take it or leave it" shot. The opportunity is *now* and it's not likely to get better!

Tree stand whitetail hunters deal with this constantly. Most of my elevated deer stands have padded safety rails that double as gun rests—nice if the shot allows their use. But in that game, despite the best planning, the deer dictate the shot and might approach from any angle. Often an unsupported shot is the only opportunity, and sometimes I've leaned and twisted like a contortionist when a buck appears in an unexpected quarter (*safety harness!*). On the ground, a close encounter can happen at almost any time or place. Most areas aren't quite as open as they seem; often there are hidden folds that might hold the game you seek.

So, it's wise to be prepared and to be ready. Preparation means practice; at close range, the clock is ticking. If you haven't been discovered, chances are you will be...soon! My old friend and mentor, the late John Wootters, once said that he wished sporting rifles had a cutoff switch that would prevent them from firing unless steadily rested, stating that there'd be a lot less wounded game. For the latter thought I suppose he's correct, but there are times, always and only at close range, where the options are to raise the rifle and shoot, or pass the shot. I suspect few of us have the discipline to consistently pass, so it's best to practice. Standing unsupported or "offhand" is the least steady and least accurate shooting position. It should be avoided if any other option exists. But since it's the most



This excellent Alaska moose jumped from its bed at 20 yards. The target was huge, but regardless of distance and size of animal, it's essential to place the shot in the vital zone. Fast offhand shooting only comes with serious practice.



ABOVE: Most of our Kansas tree stands have a safety bar that doubles as a gun rest. That's handy if the deer approach as expected, but the deer dictate the shot and can come from anywhere, so unsupported shots from weird positions aren't unusual and need to be thought out.

difficult, it should be practiced regularly—just in case.

The good news is the vital zone of big game animals offers a large target. Shot placement is everything, but pinpoint accuracy is not essential. Paper-plate accuracy is adequate, and paper plates make excellent targets for offhand shooting drills. There was a time when I was very confident shooting offhand to at least 100 yards. I'm not as steady as I once was, but I'm still paper-plate consistent to a good 60 or 70 yards. In my experience, that range covers most do-or-die, stand-up-and-shoot situations, and this is a distance that, with practice, most of us should be able to attain consistent proficiency. Familiarity with your hunting rifle is essential, but most of this practice can be done cheaply and painlessly with a .22!

Sights matter. I used to be proficient with iron sights beyond 100 yards. Today I can't resolve them well enough, so my comfort zone

has shrunk by half! Rifle-scopes with low magnification are faster and more precise than iron sights, but if you know longer shots are unlikely, the red-dot or reflex sights are marvelous options. Like the magnifying scope, they allow the eye to operate in just one focal plane. The red dot is fast, and of equal importance, these sights drive you to shoot with both eyes open, retaining peripheral vision and obtaining an unlimited field of view.

Many of us aren't expecting the close encounter, so we're carrying whatever rifle we consider suitable for the most likely shots. These days, it probably wears a variable-power scope, so train yourself to keep the magnification turned down, and include offhand practice in your shooting regimen. Choosing to take an unsupported standing shot must be a conscious decision, however rapidly it is made. The last thing you should do is throw the rifle up in panic and blaze away! Standing remains the

court of last resort, so even in a fast, close encounter, there must be evaluation: Do you have time to do something else? Can you take a couple of steps to a tree, rock, or fencepost? Would it be better to slowly drop to one knee and use the steadier kneeling position? These evolutions can also be practiced on your range. If that's all there, should you raise the rifle slowly or just throw it up? Usually the former, but it depends; that's part of evaluation, and you won't get it right all the time!

I'm assuming you've just seen the animal and you have frozen. Decisions come fast but still are based on various factors: How far is the animal? Has it seen you and also frozen? If so, then you probably have just seconds, and movement will spook it. If not, then how exposed are you, and what options exist? Realistically, an animal that's spooked and dodging through cover while your rifle is still slung over your shoulder is not

an opportunity, but at close range there might be a quick shot if you're ready.

Being ready is partly mental, accepting that a close encounter can come at any moment, while a more distant sighting will give you more time to prepare. A variable scope should be turned down until more magnification is needed. I shoot a scope with both eyes open, so I usually keep variables at about 4X, even in thick cover. When the rifle is slung I don't keep a round in the chamber, so that means I'm not ready. If an encounter seems likely, then the rifle should be fully loaded, safety on, and under complete control. This means a lot of loading and unloading as you sling and unslung and negotiate obstacles, but that's okay. Ideally, I'm also playing the "what if" game: what if a buck jumps out of that ditch? Is there a rock or tree handy for a hasty rest?

The most critical part is awareness, paying attention and being mentally ready.

Paper-plate drill with a Marlin .45-70 topped with an Aimpoint. For big game, "paper plate accuracy" is really adequate at all ranges, but this size target is excellent for practicing fast shooting from unsupported or hasty positions.

Two shots from a big-bore in a close-range "turn and fire" drill. Essential for hunting dangerous game, close-range drills are universally valuable because a close encounter can happen almost anywhere.



None of us do this perfectly all the time. Last November I hunted whitetails on Anticosti Island, mostly still-hunting along trails through thick forest. On the first day I was dropped off on a marked trail. I slung my pack, loaded the rifle, and started slowly down the trail. I doubt I'd walked 200 yards, and I was adjusting my pack straps when a big buck bounded into the middle of the trail. He wasn't 30 yards from me, but I wasn't ready. I managed to get the rifle up and the safety off as he disappeared around a bend. Mentally I passed it as a Texas heart shot that I didn't want to take—but if I'd been a bit more ready I might have had a fast quartering shot. For sure, I never saw another buck like that!

Regardless of range, the shot must be placed well, but in true point-blank

encounters, there are times when the rifle is pointed more like a shotgun rather than deliberately aimed. Any and all shotgunning is thus good practice for extremely close encounters. As with shotgunning, gun fit matters; the rifle must come up on target. This is easily checked and practiced in your living room (make sure it's empty and, these days, draw your blinds!). At the range, it can be practiced with close-range "turn and fire" shooting drills. Very close shots can occur in North America but are more common in other parts of the world.

There is one other aspect to close encounters: Even if they start with a stationary animal they don't always stay that way! We'll save moving shots for the next column. ■



The stalk on Kevin Howard's big Vancouver Island black bear went a bit haywire, and we ended up right on top of it; a point-blank shot at a matter of feet. Both eyes open, scope turned down, and make sure the stock fits!



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