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Photos Courtesy of Author

Really?

*Some shots are truly unbelievable.
Hunters too.*

Investments of time, money, effort often distill to
one shot in country big enough to deny you another.

John had descended Mount Gunnison in big loops. The day's hunt had produced no elk. Almost within sight of his Studebaker, he released his frustration with a farewell shot at a rock. Turning, he was stunned to see an enormous bull staring from the opposite slope "about 500 yards away." John dropped to a sit and fired. He managed a follow-up before the elk vanished in oak brush. Though he feared both shots had missed, he dutifully crossed the drainage to check. The great bull's antlers scored over 397.

I don't doubt this account. At first blush, a 500-yard kill from a quick sit seems optimistic, and in 1970 few hunters used laser range finders. On the other hand, John had competed as a winter Olympian in the biathlon event. Exceptionally fit and skilled with a rifle, he could also have accurately estimated bullet drop (38 to 55 inches with a 200-yard zero, depending on the load).

I wasn't there.

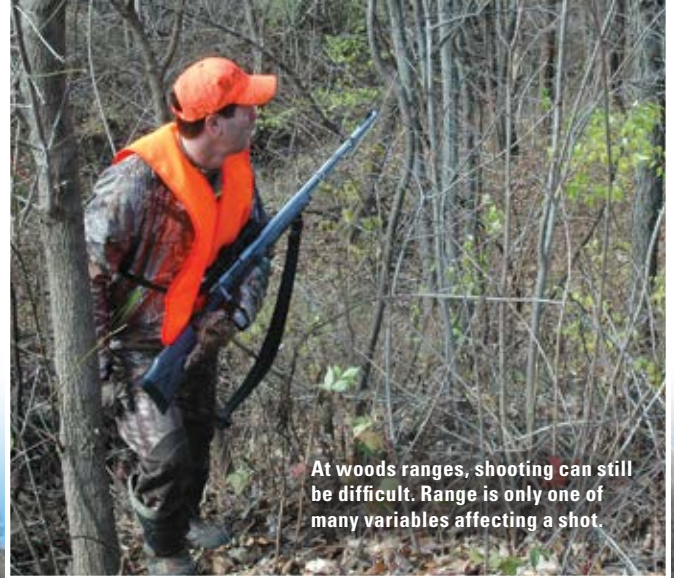
These days, less believable tales abound. Many can be edited down to shot distance, as if hunting success or marksmanship can be gauged by step. But killing game far away isn't always hard. My longest shot to date was twice as far as I usually fire at animals. The air was dead still, however, the light perfect, my position solid, the rifle proven on targets. There was no way to approach. The bullet flew true.

Then again, I once missed a deer at 14 feet. In shooting, distance is not the only variable!

"I've killed running deer at 600 yards with this magnum," boasted a client on the eve of our hunt. Thought I: *This fellow not only fires at unrealistic yardage; he spooks game a third of a mile distant!* The next day he crippled a buck with a 150-yard shot to the paunch. Some time later we recovered the animal.

Often, hunters who earnestly press upon you their shooting prowess have little to demonstrate. On the other hand, even unlikely events can happen once.

Once, admiring photos of a truly outstanding mule deer, I asked the hunter for the details. "He got up ahead of me," he said, "and ran up a ridge. I fired as he went over. A long shot. I thought I'd missed. Got up there and found him dead—but with no bullet hole. Then I found a crease between those 200-inch antlers. The bullet had cracked his skull!"



At woods ranges, shooting can still be difficult. Range is only one of many variables affecting a shot.



From atop a hill in the background, Wayne fired his .25-06 prone to kill this deer as it paused briefly.



Shooting is a small part of hunting, but days of effort can funnel to a couple of seconds on the trigger!



Benchrest accuracy wasn't a requisite when this rifle was designed. Quick, sure handling still counts!

Believing someone who claims the unbelievable is easier if you consider the impossible shots on record. They go way back, no doubt to before the first culverins, when ignition was cause for celebration.

Among the most debated of long shots was fired from the frontier town of Adobe Walls in the Texas panhandle, 26 June, 1874. Buffalo hunter Billy Dixon was one of 28 men asleep in the tiny settlement when at dawn 700 Comanches led by Chief Quanah Parker thundered in. Three whites died before survivors found cover in buildings. Most were hunters, well armed. They repulsed the charge with withering rifle fire.

But the battle wasn't over. Two days later hostiles still lurked, like wolves, on the town's perimeter. As legend has it, about 15 appeared on a bluff nearly a mile off. Dixon, renowned for his marksmanship, was urged to take a shot with the saloon owner's 50-bore 1874 Sharps. Dixon had used this rifle during the attack, so when he took aim, there was more than hope at

play. Still, onlookers were astonished when, seconds after the blast, one of the Indians fell off his horse. The distance was later surveyed at 1,538 yards.

Wind drift aside, that bullet would have been descending so sharply that a range estimation error of just 50 yards would have caused a miss. Whether or not you believe Billy Dixon downed a Comanche at over 1,500 yards with a black-powder Sharps, you'll have plenty of company!

One of the best shots I've seen in the field was not a long one. A week of fog and rain had soaked the hills, muddying trails and flushing away my credentials as a guide. Late the last day, Ken and I clawed our way up a greasy slope toward echoes of elk retreating into timber. Then, antlers! Breathless from the climb, I saw enough to croak, "Shoot!" Behind me, Ken, gasping, on a near-vertical slope, had no chance. The directive simply took me off the hook; I had shown him a bull! But when the elk's shoulder winked through a slot in

the aspens, the .300 thundered. "Thwock!" The great animal stumbled, then pitched on its nose. Under the most adverse conditions, my client had killed a magnificent seven-point bull with an almost unbelievable offhand shot.

Fast shooting, when there's no time for your head to get in the way, can turn in surprisingly good results. Once, in Alaska, I stalked a black bear in coastal grass. A fish-tailing wind alerted the bear, which made for cover. From 90 yards I rose, swung, fired. Forest enveloped the bear. Mark was not impressed. My .30-30 was by his standards marginal; now light was failing after a hasty shot. Under a dense canopy dusk became night. Blood glistening darkly on giant fern led us to the heart-shot bear.

I breathed a prayer of thanks. My frank apology to Mark: "He's dead, but that poke was too fast, too far."

Judging any shot by its dazzling result carries the threat that you'll be asked to repeat it, provided the event didn't happen long ago and far away. I can't recall hearing anyone on an active rifle range brag about shots to be taken or center hits shy of a finish!

Those who invite the public to watch dare not bring their egos. Three years ago on a long rifle range at the FTW ranch in Texas, Jim Spinella courageously uncased a .375 CheyTac built by Hill Country Rifles on a Stiller action. Careful shooting, expert wind doping, and a Nightforce scope conspired to land a bullet on a 36-inch plate at 3,600 yards. Spinella upped the ante in 2015 with a hit at 3,800 yards. Most recently he struck at 4,210—2.4 miles! That bullet spent 10 seconds in flight! Misses? Of course! Spinella conceded: “It’s not about repeatability.” An insightful comment!

Shuffling off the line, trusting others to believe your claims without evidence was no option for recruits wanting to join Colonel Hiram Berdan’s sharpshooters in 1861. “No man would be enlisted who could not put 10 bullets *in succession* within five inches from the center at a distance of six hundred feet from a rest or three hundred off hand.” Black powder and iron sights, of course. Few hunters with scoped rifles these days would meet that offhand requirement!

In those days, shooters learned early on to *hold* rifles. Exhibition shooters near the end of the 19th century wielded them like wands and seldom missed!

Illinois market hunter Adams H. Bogardus set the pace with glass balls, the aerial target of 1877. An ace with a shotgun, he fired 1,000 rounds in 75 minutes to break 973. Two runs later, he hit 990. A.H. Ruth raised the bar, shattering 984 balls with a *rifle*! Dentist W.F. Carver left his practice to join Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, after an exhausting run of 60,000 glass

balls. He missed 660—few enough.

Born Phoebe Ann Moses in August, 1860, Annie Oakley got her stage name after marrying Frank Butler, a visiting marksman she’d beaten in a local Ohio rifle match. Just 16 when she joined his traveling show, she’d already proven her shooting talent by hitting quail on the wing. When Bogardus left the Wild West Show, Annie replaced him, shooting coins from between Frank’s fingers and aiming in a mirror to fire shatter glass balls he threw aloft. Sending 25 shots in as many seconds, she tore one ragged hole in a playing card. With a .22 in 1884 she broke 4,772 glass balls of 5,000 tossed. She shot a cigarette from the lips of Kaiser Wilhelm III—remarking after WWI that she’d had the fate of nations in her sights. Johnny Baker, another pro, tried for 17 years to outshoot Annie. “She just wasn’t beatable!”

Ad Topperwein, born in Texas in 1869 tapped his natural talents to become a cartoonist, and to drill “Indian head” profiles in tin with a .22 at shooting exhibitions. Ad liked aerial targets. In 1894 he hit 976 of 1,000 2¼-inch clay disks. Ad perforated postage stamps stuck on airborne washers, and could nip the bullet of a tossed cartridge. Shooting for Winchester, he fired a 63 autoloader, ejection port up, then spun and hit with a second shot the .22 hull in its arc! In 1907 he fired Model 1903s at 72,000 tossed 2¼-inch

blocks, hitting all but nine! That record lasted until ‘59, when Remington’s Tom Frye used the new Nylon 66 .22 on 100,010 tossed blocks and missed six!

Whoa! Hit a .22 hull spat from an autoloader with the same rifle? Nip a bullet from a tossed pistol cartridge? A hundred thousand blocks? As few shooting routines could be faked, and all were performed in front of spectators, such feats must indeed have been possible!

Herb Parsons was the last of Topperwein’s kind. Winchester hired him in 1929. A wizard with a shotgun, Herb could toss a stack of seven clays and shuck a Model 12 fast enough to shatter all before any hit dirt. Using a mirror and two rifles, he’d break one target in front and one behind him, at the same time. He shot tossed marbles. Talking non-stop as he flung fruits and vegetables, he’d mince one with a .30-30, the next with a Hornet, on to a .348, swapping rifles in a blink. From the hip he’d rattle 10 bullets from a .351 auto and dust as many clay disks standing on edge. “They’re not hard to hit, folks, just easy to miss!”

Herb’s most famous shot wasn’t scripted. During

an event in Maine, he spotted a flock of crows winging toward woods far away. “What’s behind those trees?” he yelled. “Nothing!” roared the crowd. Parsons grabbed a .30-06, swung and fired. A crow, then a speck, shed feathers and fell. Spectators gaped. Herb shrugged: “That bullet had to go somewhere!”

In July 1959, Herb Parsons died at 51 from a blood clot after a surgery.

Tom Knapp’s exploits with Benelli shotguns tugged exhibition shooting into the digital age. Like Parsons, he worked magic with shotguns, chatting conversationally as a stream of empties tumbled from the gun and clays disintegrated aloft. Tom tossed as

Ad and wife “Plinky” Topperwein shot for Winchester. Ad performed incredible feats with .22 rifles.



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Eclipsing even today’s hyperbole, early rifle ads claimed magical properties: Cannot miss? Really?



Shooting up close can be more difficult—and urgent—than deliberate shooting at distant targets.

many as nine targets at once—a step beyond Herb’s seven-target feat with his Model 12. Many assumed Knapp’s autoloaders had open chokes, as there was no time to direct compact charges of shot. “Not so,” Tom told me. “I have to hit one target at a time so can’t afford broad patterns. In fact, I often fire at a section of a target so the shot doesn’t hit one close by.” Knapp said he’d hit a tossed golf ball as many as three times with .22 bullets, keeping it aloft by shading low, that he could nail air-gun BBs a third of the time. “But spectators can’t see ‘em.”

Most hunters old enough to remember 20-cent gasoline can also recall a shot that gave better than they deserved. Mine came when a crow landed in an orchard near the old travel trailer that housed me as a grad student. I snatched up an iron-sighted Browning BL-22 and cycled it. The bead dwarfed the crow

but didn’t obscure it, as I held well over. The bird wilted to the report, at 145 steps.

Hunting big game, I don’t depend on extraordinary shots, because they’re, well, extraordinary. If you can’t make them routinely, how can you expect one when you must have it? But dangerous game can prompt a shot when you’d as soon retreat. Then you must hope for what you’ve no right to expect.

Such was the case with renowned elephant hunter James Sutherlin, in the autumn of 1908 in what is now lower Tanzania. Catching a bull in a glade, he aimed for the heart. The animal charged. Sutherlin waited until it came “within twenty paces” and fired his second barrel. But this bullet, too, missed its mark.

“Seizing me by my kha-ki shirt [the elephant] flung me high... [I fell] between his fore and hind legs.” The hunter lay still. But his antagonist

found him again and hurled him against a tree. He regained his senses minutes later, badly bruised, left thumb dislocated. The bull stood nearby. “I had dropped my .577 [but] managed with some difficulty to place my .318 across [tracker, Simba’s] shoulder and fire....” Alas, the rifle wasn’t steady. The elephant came. “Telling Simba to hold my rifle barrel firmly, I drove another cartridge into the breech and waited....” At 14 steps Sutherlin made the most of his last chance.

One of the most celebrated African explorers, Sir Samuel Baker (1821-1893) stayed clear of such straightforward reporting when penning his exploits for *The Field*, a British sporting journal. It published this account: “Seven stags now broke from a ravine [and dashed] up the hill, thus nothing but rumps were turned toward me.... I put up the back-sight for 250 yards and took a steady



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Really?

shot....” The other stags ran, then paused. “I put up the 300 yards back-sight and fired.... Again I heard the bullet strike.”

A. Tonkin, a writer of my generation from southern Africa, measured the beads of Victorian-era rifles to confirm that the sight on Sir Samuel’s .577 would have covered about 24 inches at 300 yards, or a stag’s entire chest. He noted, too, that in 1883 rifle trials, a black-powder .577 by Holland & Holland beat all comers from the bench, with a 150-yard group taping 4.8 x 7.7 inches. As Baker had just dismounted his horse and was firing offhand at twice that distance, his rosy results are at least suspect.

Gunmakers a century ago did nothing to dissuade shooters from such reports. A 1912 Westley-Richards ad for its Accelerated .318 Express Rifle reads: “Authorities agree that its accuracy is so high that one cannot miss with it....”

Not that humility defined shotgunners of the day. One of the most famous, Earl de Grey, recorded a lifetime bag of 556,813 in a book apparently current when he died in 1923, age 72. That count is mostly if not all birds—nearly 11,000 a year for 51 years!

The book elaborates: “Lord Ripon (the good Earl) had killed 28 pheasants in one minute.... And on another occasion had seven birds dead in the air at one time.” Such claims beg scrutiny. Recent trials with three hammer ejector guns by Purdey & Sons, and expert loaders, concluded the 28-pheasant

minute might have been possible—provided no birds fell onto the Earl, or smoke from the black powder he used didn’t delay shots by obscuring targets. He’d have had to follow any miss with a Scotch double.

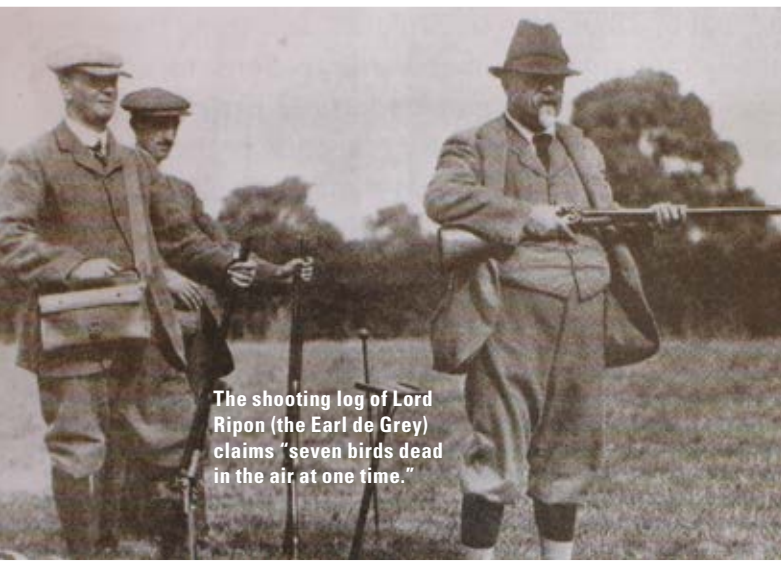
The likelihood of seven birds falling at once more nearly approaches zero. Tonkin points out that a bird shot at 40 yards hits the ground in less than 3 seconds. From 60 yards, fall time is under 3 ½ seconds. So the Earl had at most 4 seconds after he nailed one bird to kill six more, all at long yardage, with gun changes.

Once in awhile, the most unbelievable shot isn’t a shot at all. With Jim, my client on a deer hunt, I entered a copse of aspens. Minutes later a shadow moved. Across a draw, a buck with enormous antlers appeared, walking, a series of winks through the trees as Jim steadied his Sako on a windfall. Then, to my astonishment, an even bigger buck emerged, non-typical antlers the most impressive I’d ever seen afield. Five more bucks slipped, single-file,

from the forest behind. We paralleled the ghostly procession and at last found a slot that opened to a clearing ahead of the deer. “Either of the first two,” I hissed. Both wore records-book bone. The distance had yawned to around 200 yards. “When they stop.” But as they walked steadily into the gap, I knew they wouldn’t stop. “Your call.” I plugged my ears. But Jim’s rifle remained silent. After they left, he withdrew the cartridge and told me he doesn’t risk shots at moving game.

American sportsman Jack Holliday was hunting elephants with PH Roy Home when they cut a track with deep “down-at-the-heel” prints. Arduous trailing at last brought the hunters to the bull, his ears spread and trunk up testing the wind. Long ivory gleamed white against the great, dark body—the finest tusks Roy had seen in years. He waited for the shot that didn’t come. Holliday lowered his rifle and said, “I can’t do it. He’s too fine to kill.”

Unbelievable.
Or not. ■



The shooting log of Lord Ripon (the Earl de Grey) claims “seven birds dead in the air at one time.”

Hunters after grouse fan out on Scotland’s moors. Some century-old shooting records bear scrutiny!

