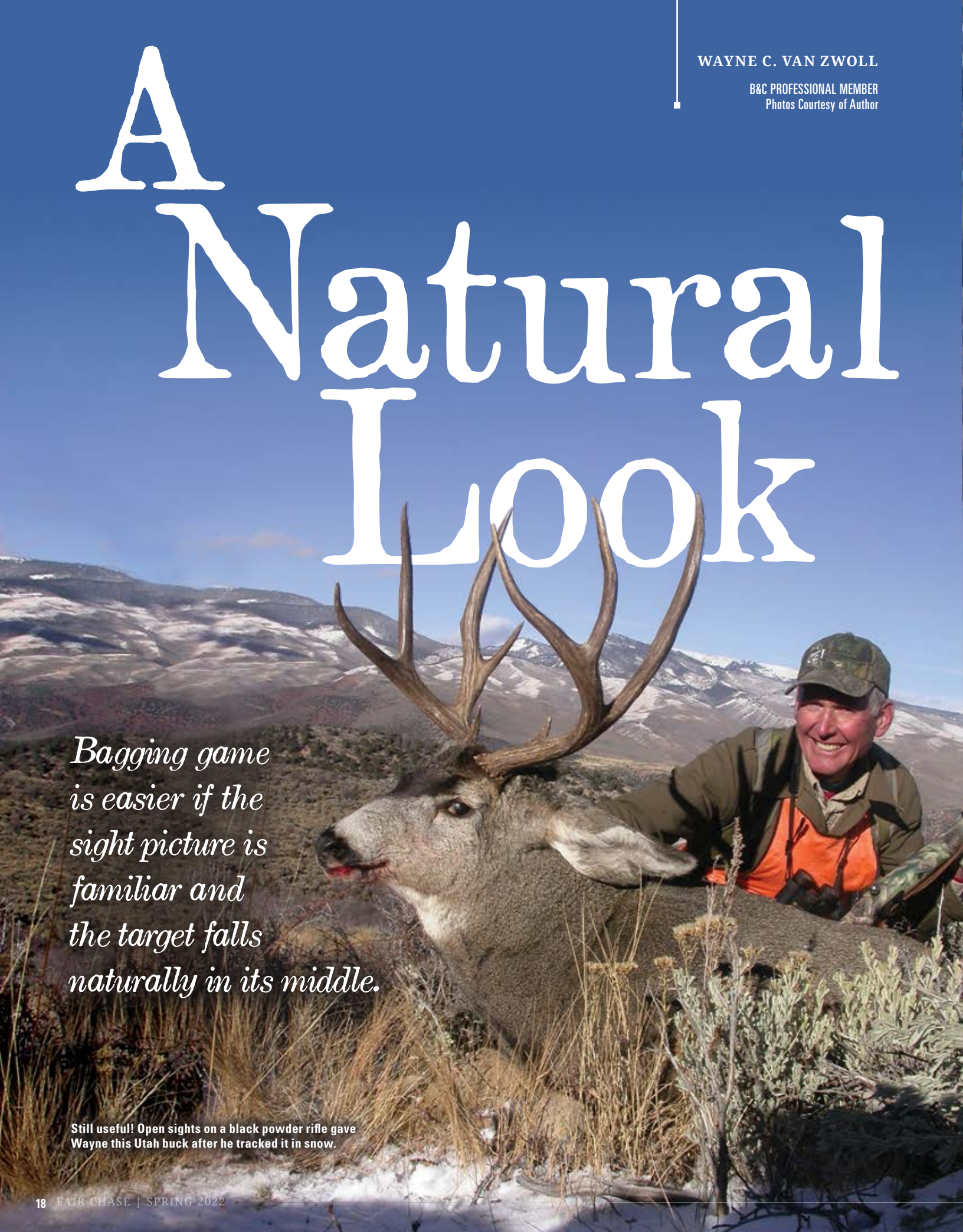
A Natural Look

WAYNE C. VAN ZWOLL
B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

Bagging game is easier if the sight picture is familiar and the target falls naturally in its middle.



Still useful! Open sights on a black powder rifle gave Wayne this Utah buck after he tracked it in snow.

For fast, clear aim, keep head erect, look straight ahead, rifle to cheek. Use both eyes. Naturally!

Thick, sticky snow muffled my steps, but a storm had raked the gap, leaving a jungle of broken boles and shattered tops. The black-and-white tangle of debris reached to my chest. Daunting. But freshly savaged conifers attract elk. I eased forward.

Then: the snap of a branch, sharp in dawn's still, cold air. A wink of tan.... My binocular picked up pieces of four elk. One was a raghorn bull. A handful of steps in as many minutes delivered a tenable shot, quartering off.

Offhand, I let my Weatherby settle. Recoil obscured the elk. The snow-quilt deadened the .340's blast. Hoof-thunder, limb-cracking and white veils sifting from blanketed branches marked the cows' exit.

I stayed still, feet planted where they'd directed the rifle. Just where had that bull stood? In the brief sight picture, I'd ignored the scale and sameness of this splintered snow-scape. It draped the saddle, acres big. Look where the rifle points. Listen. Wait.

I hadn't seen the bull drop. But its image, with the snow and tree wreckage around it, was sharp in memory. Familiar too. The sight itself was the only new element in the frame.

A familiar image is most useful because you needn't spend time organizing its parts and making sense of the whole. Ever look at a painting and wonder what the artist had intended? Or study an unusual house or automobile or rifle to better understand its features—or even figure out what caught your eye? Aiming, you juggle the sight into a logical relationship with the target, which you must first sift from its surroundings. You're on the clock. Every shot has a deadline.

A sight picture closely resembling what you'd see with a casual naked-eye glance—a natural look—helps you aim faster, so you have more time to refine your hold, control breathing and press the trigger. Result: better accuracy.

Given clear definition, the unaided human eye can distinguish about a minute of angle (an inch at 100 yards). You see best, and perceive the widest field, looking straight ahead with both eyes. Naturally. Because depth perception requires both eyes working in tandem, you need both to range a target. A squint against bright sun, pelting sleet or driven dust is a natural defense, but a prolonged squint also strains your eyes. Each pupil controls the diameter of the light-shaft entering the pupil and brings a useful ration of light to the retina. Darkness imposed by closing an eye prompts that pupil to dilate, while the pupil of the open eye wants to constrict to throttle light.

In rifle competition, some colleagues wore a patch over their left eye during iron-sight stages. It absolved them of tiresome squinting but replaced it with a sharp disparity in light intensity. Semi-opaque (frosted) Scotch Tape provided a better solution. Applied to the left lens of the shooting glasses, it blurred the target for the left eye, nixing any "double image" without throttling so much light. With hunting rifles, it's best to learn to aim with both eyes open.

Used together, our eyes are capable of amazing feats. In 1975 Swedish inventor Gunnar Sandberg developed what he called the single-point sight. But this tube wasn't open; you couldn't look through it. The left eye saw the target; the right eye saw a dot inside the tube. As a team they merged dot and target. Sandberg's idea would become a company: Aimpoint.

When smokeless powder was new, open sights limited the practical reach of hunting rifles to 150 yards or so. Tang-mounted apertures stretched that limit. But in cover, a hunter's only chance might come at a few steps and

last a couple of eye-blinks. He had to aim fast. Larry Benoit grew up on the heels of the Depression, in Vermont. He and his family would gain celebrity for tracking and killing big whitetails in forests of the Northeast. From single-shot Stevens and Springfield rifles, Larry graduated to a Model 14 Remington pump, then to its successor, the 760. He settled on a 760 Carbine. But despite the reach of this .30-06, he stayed with iron sights. "Personally, I think a scope [is too] slow to pick up on a running deer. It also raises the weight of your rifle."

Benoit dismissed open sights, installing a Williams receiver sight without the screw-in aperture. Up front he mounted a Williams ivory bead "higher than the [standard] front sight.... You want the bead to float high [and isolated] above the base." After snowfall, he painted the bead with red nail polish. That sight combination and his 760's 18-inch barrel gave him lightning-quick aim—but also precision for the long poke that brought Larry a moose at 400 yards.

Like other savvy hunters, Benoit wasn't above whittling his carbine's stock so it fit him perfectly. Or conceding the merits of scopes. But for hunting in woods, he advised magnification be held to 2-1/2 power.

Speed and accuracy both matter. Arguably, an open sight is fastest. But it tasks your eye with the impossible: focusing at three distances—on rear sight, front sight and target—at once. An aperture close to your eye improves precision by extending sight radius. It also makes aim easier, as your eye naturally puts the front sight in the brightest place you see: aperture's center. But a scope is the optical champ, its reticle in the same apparent plane as the target.

Experienced shooters recognized the single-plane advantage early on. E.C. Crossman was one of the first "gun writers" to earn a living for his efforts. Between WWI and his death at age 50 in 1939, his work drew a wide readership. He wrote that a scope is "far more natural for shooting running game than any blurring metallic [sight]." A shooter "who knows what it's all about" holds magnification to "not over 3x [and] hangs the scope right down on the rifle...." Such set-ups, he added, excel even on aerial targets, because "there is no front and rear sight to fuss with."

A 2-3/4-power Hensoldt (Zeiss) Zeilklein on a Griffin & Howe Springfield in .30-06 would help Grancel Fitz complete his quest to take a worthy specimen of each of North America's big game species. This 8-ounce scope had a 7/8-inch (22mm) steel tube with a 19mm front lens.

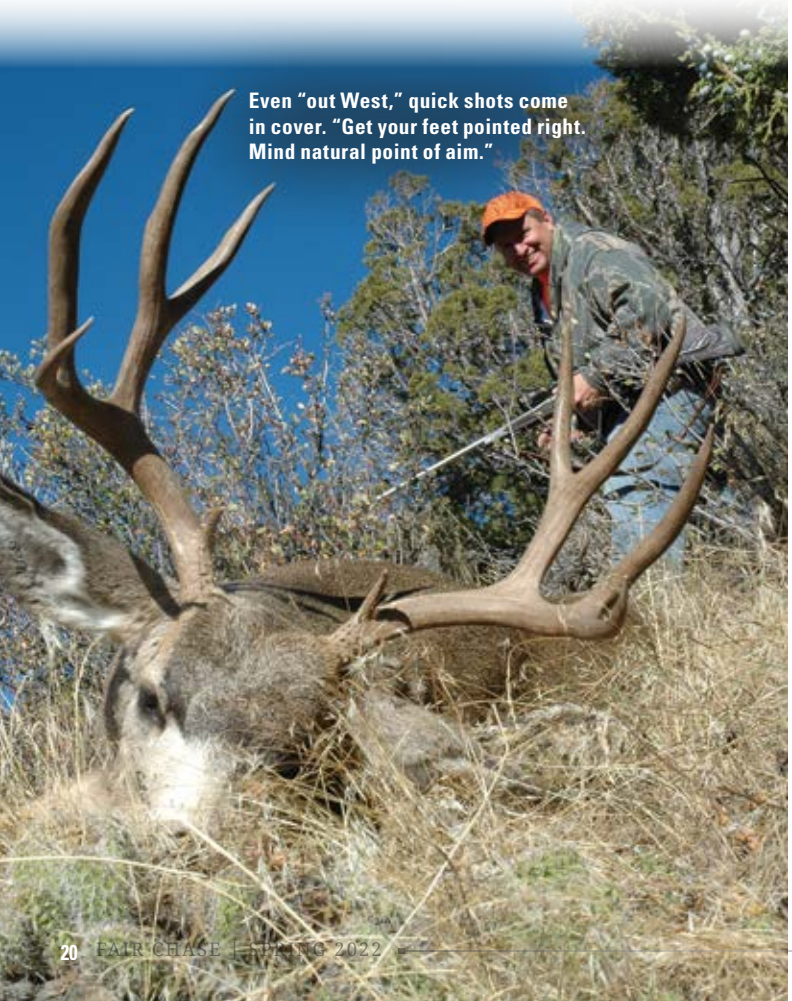
Despite their use by famous riflemen and long service in target matches and even on sniper rifles, scopes got a halting start in hunting camps. Early models were unreliable, with cramped, dim, fog-prone fields. Zeroing sent reticles off-center. Decades of refinements later, these liabilities are no more. Oddly, hunters using scoped rifles are often late on target. Why?

First, the rifle-scope bears myth-baggage. In 1936, the year L.S. Chadwick shot an eye-popping Stone's ram in British Columbia, A.B. Learned wrote of a Dall's sheep hunt on Alaska's Russian River. His rifle: a Winchester 54, .30-06. "I always use open sights," he declared, "preferring their speed to the somewhat slower peep sight.... I have decided definitely that telescope sights are far too slow...."

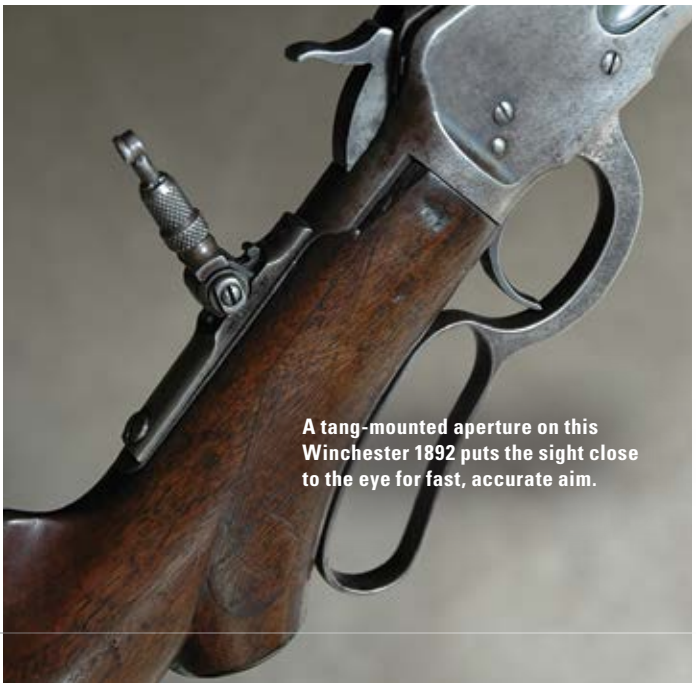
But hunters who routinely had to shoot fast—and also used iron sights—were soon pointing out the advantages of scopes, even in cover.

"The sole object of mounting a scope sight on a rifle is to give greater precision in aiming," wrote John Taylor in his 1948 book, *African Rifles and Cartridges*, adding he'd killed many elephant "that I'm quite sure I would not have succeeded in killing with any other type of sight." Ranges? "Between 30 and 60 yards." He noted the failure of iron sights to deliver clear aim through a lattice of branches, or to help him skid a bullet across the back of an intervening animal. Taylor's favorite scopes included the Lyman Alaskan, Hensoldt Dialytan, Zeiss Zievier and "another small Zeiss that weighed only seven or eight ounces."

Compact low-power scopes impressed other professional hunters, too. In *Use Enough Gun* (1952), Robert Ruark published a photo of a young Harry Selby with a Grant's gazelle and a scoped rifle.



Even "out West," quick shots come in cover. "Get your feet pointed right. Mind natural point of aim."

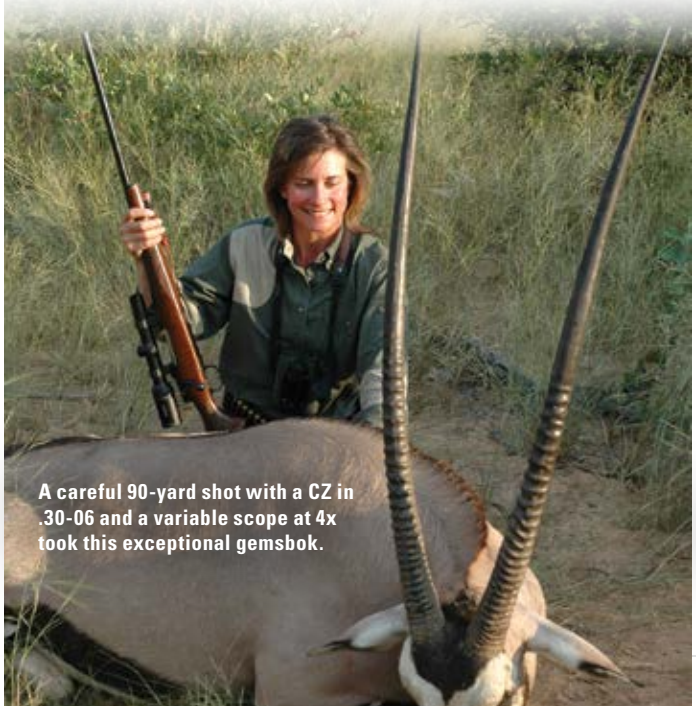


A tang-mounted aperture on this Winchester 1892 puts the sight close to the eye for fast, accurate aim.

To see a full field quickly—or safely from prone—install a scope well forward. Here: Wayne's LAW in .340 Wby., with 2-7x Vortex scope, Boyds stock.

Fast aim with scopes still depends on low magnification. Eye relief (ER) and field of view (FOV) affect how much you see and how quickly you see it. The low magnification that contributes to a big exit pupil (EP, a measure of brightness) extends ER and, importantly, makes it less critical. So you can install the scope well forward, and you needn't have your eye exactly the specified distance from its ocular lens to get a full FOV. Through a 2-1/2-power scope, you see a field about 40 feet wide at 100 yards—wider than a tennis court for a doubles match. A 20-power scope shows you about half what's visible through a soda straw!

Least hailed of all benefits of a low-power scope: the similarity of the field's appearance to what you just saw with your naked eye. You quickly recognize elements of the whole. If the animal is hard to see because it blends into the background or has moved or is partly hidden, your eye adapts in a manner not unlike triangulation, bouncing from the most visible elements to the more obscure. It's a subconscious search. Triple magnification to, say, eight or nine power, and FOV shrinks dramatically. Features suddenly become eight or nine times as big as they appeared before snared by your lens. Your eye must then interpret what at low magnification was intuitive. At dusk it must deal with a darker, dimmer image, from a smaller EP.



A careful 90-yard shot with a CZ in .30-06 and a variable scope at 4x took this exceptional gemsbok.

Shove That Scope Forward!

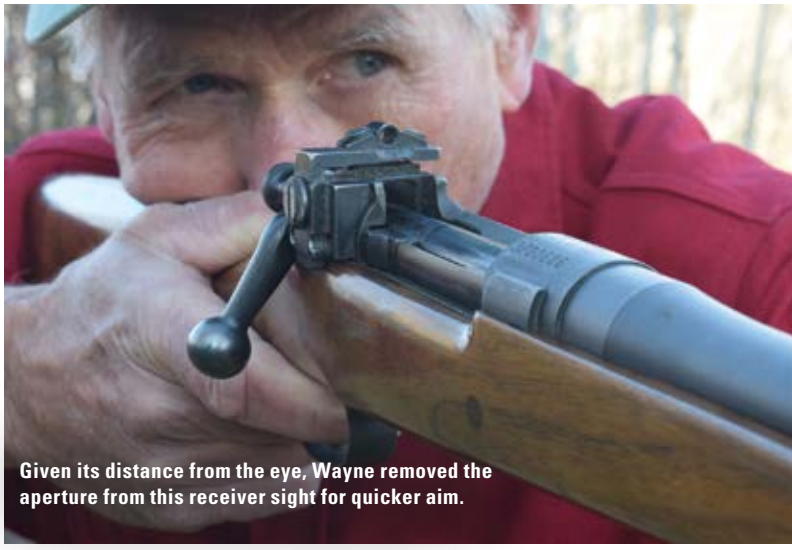
High-power scopes pair nicely with bipod-supported rifles that drill V-rings or bang steel plates far away. Because such rifles are usually fired prone, scopes can be installed and stock combs adjusted to suit that position. Hunting, you may have to fire sitting, kneeling or offhand, in heavy wool or a T-shirt, uphill or down. I install scopes on hunting rifles as low as the bolt handle, barrel contour, rear sight and ejection path permit. Most objective bells 44mm or less in diameter clear the rifle if mounted in standard low rings. Most stock combs are low enough for comfortable aim with low rings.

Rifles scoped by other shooters seldom give me enough eye relief. A long-armed stock-crawler, I smile benignly and make do. Still, it seems to me most hunters install scopes too far to the rear. Relaxed on a stool or in a chair, they cheek the rifle a couple of times and snug the screws. Your natural tendency, to shoot fast in the woods, is to slide your face forward on the comb as you pull the butt to your shoulder. You lean forward, as if your rifle were a shotgun. A scope installed as you watch Monday Night Football, won't suit you afield. You'll see a reduced FOV unless you pull your head back—a delay. In prone and a low sit, your brow tipped toward the ocular ring, recoil may remind you to move that scope ahead.

Some early low-power scopes had enough eye relief they could be mounted with the ocular ring ahead of the bolt handle and thus accommodate a back-up cocking piece sight—elegant, useful and long abandoned by both shooters and sight manufacturers.

In 1946 Jack O'Connor wrote that he'd used scoped rifles exclusively "for the last twelve years." For most hunting, O'Connor was sweet on Lyman's 2-1/2-power Alaskan and the 2-1/4-power Noske. Weaver had recently announced its K2.5. For sheep hunting and "long-range big-game shooting in the Western mountain-and-canyon country [and] the open plains," O'Connor recommended a four power, like the Eagle by R.A. Litschert.

Field & Stream shooting editor Warren Page liked four-power sights too, installing them even on his long-legged 7mm Mashburn Magnum rifles. Bob Hagel, an



Given its distance from the eye, Wayne removed the aperture from this receiver sight for quicker aim.

Idaho hunter who wrote authoritatively about rifles and loads, called the four-power "best suited to all types of western hunting." With an FOV of about 30 feet at 100 yards, and a huge EP even with 28mm objective glass, a four-power delivers broad, bright images. They're similar enough to naked-eye images as to appear instantly familiar. No study and interpretation needed.

Magnification can delay a shot even after the target is glaringly obvious. Aiming with iron sights, you may find the bead bobs like a cork on light chop. From the same position, the reticle in a high-power scope will gyrate like a fly on a hot window about a target caroming with equal vigor. Burning precious time, you try to improve that sight picture. Your muscles tire. You panic. You either lose your chance or yank the trigger in desperation and miss.

A still image is invaluable. It helps you identify a spot of light as reflection from an eye, a wink in falling leaves as the flick of a tail. Magnification that jiggles the FOV denies you the helpful information a deer gets just by standing still. Glass that lets you count gnats ascending a caribou's eyelash is useless in a hunting sight. Very little game spotted far enough off to beg high magnification need be shot there.

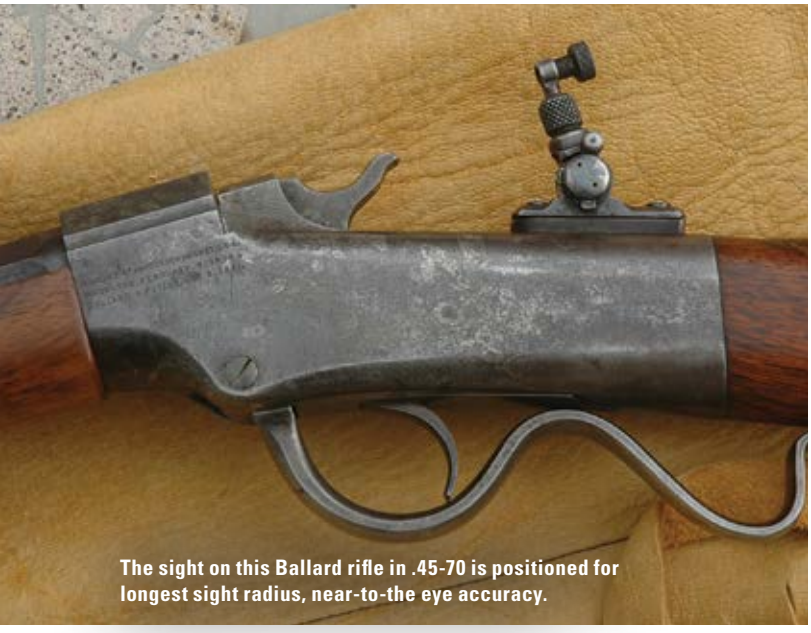
Besides jarringly big objects in jarringly small fields, short, critical eye relief and unruly reticles and targets, high magnification pulls your eye into the scope instead of directing view through it. Among the many shooters I've seen sucked into this rabbit hole was one who lost a chance at an exceptional mule deer. He couldn't find this buck, exposed but nicely camouflaged to match the sage. Rather than mind my frantic pointing, the fellow held his rifle up with one hand while rotating the power dial back and forth, as if at some point the deer would appear inside the scope. It did not.

In my youth, when double black cherry ice cream cones sold for 15 cents, a box of .244 cartridges for $4.10 and surplus Krags for $30, we striplings eager to hunt were taught to "point your feet right." It was surely the most useful advice I recall from that gentle time. Your job, upon spotting game, is to orient yourself so when you relax into the rifle, it points at the target. Fail in this, and you must force the rifle to comply. It won't. After inducing muscle tremor, a rifle denied its natural point of aim will seek it during recoil, before the bullet exits.

While some hunters still prowl the woods with the likes of iron-sighted Remington 760 Carbines, the trend is to more awkward "long-range" rifles that beg artificial support. So armed, few hunters expect to fire quickly, catch-as-catch-can. They don't take the still-hunter's care with foot placement, to ensure the rifle, perhaps after a quick pivot, naturally homes in on the target. But surprising speed and accuracy are possible if you begin each shot this way. It was key to the remarkable feats of U.S. exhibition shooters from the 1880s to the 1950s.

"Look where you want the bullet to strike," advised Earl. "Let your entire body follow your eyes, starting with your feet. Prone, your elbows are your feet." He told us to relax, eyes directly ahead. "Prone and sitting naturally tip your face forward. Kneeling and offhand, keep your head comfortably erect, even if just the toe of the butt meets your shoulder." He clamped his cigar, adding. "You want a natural look."

I didn't know whether he meant my position should appear natural, or I should look at the target in a natural way. Decades later, I've no doubt he meant both. ■



The sight on this Ballard rifle in .45-70 is positioned for longest sight radius, near-to-the eye accuracy.

The ridge you glass from a mile may hide a cedar thicket where bucks hide. Dial scope power down!