

ASSESSING AND DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS AS A FAIR CHASE HUNTER

FROM THE EDITOR



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In the Adirondack region of New York State, it was not uncommon during the mid-to-late 1800s to use hounds to chase deer into one of the area's many lakes. Guides with their "sports" would head out in the water in skiffs or canoes and shoot the swimming deer.

This outrageous practice was exactly the kind of activity that prompted a new approach to hunting in America—one defined by good sportsmanship. At their first meeting in 1887, Boone and Crockett Club members discussed an ethical code of hunter conduct. The name given to the code was "fair chase," and the Club defines it as: "The ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over the game animals."

At its core, fair chase is what separates hunting from simply killing or shooting, whether that involves using dogs to chase deer into a lake or using a bush plane to chase down and exhaust a bear. It reflects an ideal to pursue game in the field in a manner that pays respect to the animal not only in the way the animal was hunted but also, I believe, by a commitment on the part of the hunter that

underscores the importance of a quick, clean kill. The ethical hunter values proper conduct and good judgment in the field and his own hunting and shooting skills.

In recent years, ultra long-range shooting has received quite a bit of press coverage. It's an interesting and challenging aspect of good marksmanship at the target range. I wish more press was given to stalking big game. To me, the stealth and patience it takes to get in close is by far the most exciting and rewarding part of any big game hunt. Stalking has to be one of the oldest skills known to man, and a successful stalk is a worthy accomplishment.

When it comes to taking the shot, how far is too far? Granted, there are many "it depends" in that question, but it fundamentally comes down to what I would describe as your maximum confident range. That range is established by realistic practice—shooting that mimics the terrain and conditions of any expected hunt.

Certainly, you want to sight-in your rifle before the season starts, but shooting from a bench rest doesn't qualify as helpful field practice. Instead, set out some 8- or 10-inch paper picnic plates at 100, 150, 200, and 250 yards. From various shooting positions and using your

favorite shooting aids (bipod, tripod, etc.) determine the most distant pie plate where you are making consistent hits from a given position. Of course, if it's the 250-yard plate, feel free to extend your practice range.

Confidence plays a big role in good marksmanship and knowing you can place your shot in an animal's vital zone at a given distance is a big plus. If, for any reason, you are not sure about taking a shot, heed this good advice: when in doubt, stretch your stalk, not your shot.

While we all strive to make a quick, clean kill, sometimes that doesn't happen. Ethical hunting demands that we make every effort to find wounded game. John Trout's book, *Finding Wounded Deer*, is an excellent reference for hunters to develop their tracking skills. The book includes information and research on recognizing deer trails, identifying various types of wounds, reading signs in snow, mud, and hard ground, and understanding the behavior of wounded deer.

Ethical decisions in hunting ultimately rest with the individual regarding what feels right or wrong and what technologies or methods are acceptable or unacceptable for them to be successful. It's a judgment call. Judging and seeking to improve our

hunting skills is also part of the equation.

PASSING IT ON

I would now like to take this opportunity to mention that this column is my last one as editor-in-chief of *Fair Chase* magazine. It's hard to believe, but 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of my professional involvement in the hunting and conservation arena. As you go through a career, it's important to know when to pick up the reins, but also when to let them go. A half-century in the saddle strikes me as a good endpoint, and time to get off the saddle and let the next generation ride forward.

I'm thrilled Karlie Slayer will be the new editor-in-chief. She's long been the backbone of the magazine, and I know she will continue to do a great job in the years ahead.

Best wishes to all of you and I hope to see you down the trail. ■

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