



LEARNING YOUR LIMITS

Rifle practice is usually confined to a formal range but, as **JEFFREY OLSTEAD** discovered, in Wales you can hone your skills in wild conditions on reactive steel targets.

Long range hunting is a contradiction in terms, according to Andrew Venables. He argues that the whole point of hunting is to get as close to your quarry as possible to ensure a steady, humane shot. But on steel targets you can have a lot of fun at almost any range you like.

So that's why I am lining up my crosshairs on a target 800 yards away - it's fun, and very revealing. Unless you take a shot

at that kind of range it's difficult to realise just how chancy they are, and it dramatically illustrates the limits of your marksmanship.

Can 300 yards be so much more difficult than 200? It can, and that's the great benefit of time spent at WMS with Andrew, John or Neil. Situated in one of the wildest parts of Wales WMS Steel Challenge provides a unique opportunity to evaluate your skill with a rifle. The best

way to realise your limit is to go beyond it, and see where consistent success begins to fade.

Success on a formal range is all very well, you know precisely the range of the target and even if you are unsure it is relatively undemanding to assess range over level ground. But things become more problematic shooting across a valley or up a steep slope. It is on such terrain in these conditions that accurate range judging is essential and the more we can practise in these real-life conditions the more confident and competent we become. And that's where WMS offers a unique facility.

I began my day on the formal range where targets are set at 100, 200, 300 and 400 yards. This provides vital experience at normal distances and beyond. In these conditions it became clear that I had no problems at 100 yards but 200 in good conditions should be my limit. So what is there to prove in taking a shot at 800 yards? For me it proved that flukes occur and you should never assume that one lucky shot is evidence of anything more than that - pure luck..

The 800 yard target is a 20cm circle on a

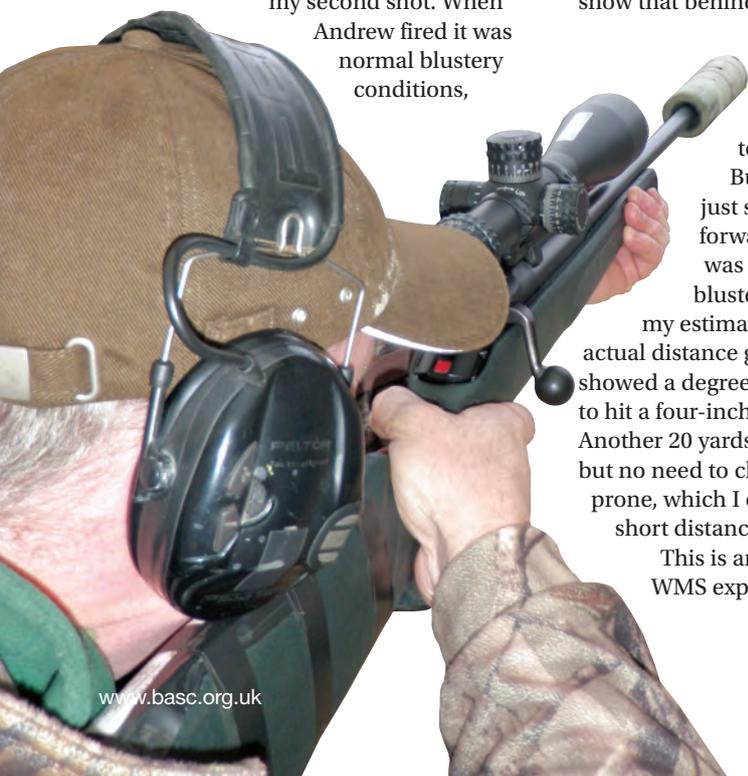


steel plate 90cm wide. With Andrew's input on setting the scope for elevation and windage I squeezed the trigger and after what seemed an eternity there was a spurt of dust from the ground beside the plate. A slight adjustment and I took a second shot – it slammed into the middle of the 20cm circle.

Surprise, elation and relief came in a rush, and a disbelief that it could be so easy. It isn't. Andrew, a premiership shooter to my non-league status, failed to hit the plate with four consecutive shots.

The reason was simple; the wind that seemed steady over our shoulder was fish-tailing at the end of the valley. By pure chance it dropped at the moment I took my second shot. When

Andrew fired it was normal blustery conditions,



unpredictable and at that range pushing the .308 bullets half a target left and right.

For the next lesson we drove out to another valley on the 5,000 acres of wild country that the ranges cover. We stopped by a fence and across the valley on a steep slope, hidden among the stunted oaks and scrub were three steel targets. Here

range judging became more problematic, and what about the wind funnelling down the valley? The opportunity to take a

shot like this, and repeat it several times if necessary, is clearly invaluable.

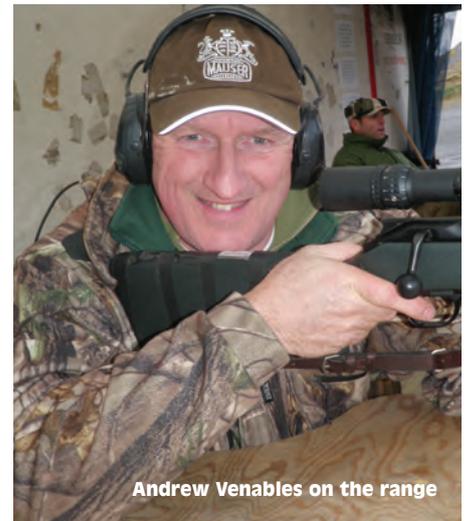
And there was another lesson to learn. Inevitably you moved forward to a gap in the fence to take your shot. Wrong. A good assessment of your surrounding would show that behind you there is a gatepost

providing a solid, stable rest for the rifle.

There's more to shooting than learning to shoot.

But I didn't take a shot – it just seemed too far. I walked forward till I felt that the range was comfortable in those blustery conditions. Checking my estimated range against the actual distance given by a rangefinder showed a degree of optimism in my ability to hit a four-inch circle shooting off sticks. Another 20 yards and all should be well, but no need to close the range if I shot prone, which I could do by moving a short distance to the right.

This is an important part of the WMS experience. You shoot



Andrew Venables on the range

targets in field conditions that provide the opportunity to study how best to take a shot, and try different techniques on the same target. You have the opportunity to analyse your faults and to take the same shot again.

Not surprisingly WMS training is not just for sportsmen, as its website demonstrates, but whatever your level of ability there's always something to learn and in just one morning I've learnt a lot at WMS. The opportunity to practise on targets in open country rather than in the managed environment of a formal range is seldom open to those who shoot with full-bore rifles but it pays big dividends. And as responsible shooters we should all seek to hone our skills and be aware of our limitations – and have fun.

To find out more you can visit www.wms-firearmstraining.org or call 01686 413030 or mobile 07767 365804.



Jeffrey Olstead
Shooting and
Conservation editor and
Head of Publications