

Perfect practice

Foxing: Range work



shoot with this set up in the field," he said. He was right. I rarely use a bipod, so why practise with one?

To start our morning, Andrew suggested we zero our rifles an inch high at 100 metres. He then talked us through the three main shooting positions we would be practising: standing, kneeling and sitting. He explained that with practice it is possible to shoot confidently from standing unsupported out to 80 metres. At 80-120 metres, kneeling would be preferable, and at 120-200 metres sitting gives a more than acceptable level of stability. At 200-300 metres, variations on prone positions are preferable.

Thus far my shooting had all been from sticks, prone or – when it comes to foxing – from a car window or off the bonnet, so I was keen to see how stable I could be without any support. Andrew explained: "This course is not designed to encourage you to start taking shots without support. Wherever possible, use all shooting aids you have available. But learning to shoot from these positions gives you options when things go wrong or you haven't got access to any equipment, which is often the case in the field."

Andrew demonstrated the correct standing position: legs shoulder width apart with a straight back to avoid muscle fatigue. He snaked his arm through the sling and onto the forend, putting it under tension. He then demonstrated raising the stock to the shoulder and taking a shot within five seconds of acquiring the target in the scope. The other members of the course and I all tried this several times, dry firing at targets on the 100-metre range.

Next Andrew showed us the kneeling position. As a right-handed shot, he placed his right knee down and supported his left elbow on his left knee. His left arm was wound through the sling the same way as in the standing position. We all tried this position and dry fired at the 200-metre targets. I was surprised at how stable this felt. I had a little movement left to right (windage), but minimal movement up and down (elevation).

Finally, Andrew showed us the sitting position. As he explained, this will be dependent on your degree of flexibility, but ideally you sit with your legs crossed or outstretched and place both elbows into the inside of your knees. Your feet should be dug in and static, giving your elbows solid use of the inside of your knees. If there is a tree to lean against, all the better. The sling is again used to add tension to the position. When dry firing at the 300-metre targets, I thought this offered equivalent stability to sticks supporting the forend.

Now familiar with these positions, we had the chance to shoot. Andrew went down the line, directing us onto the target he wanted us to fire at, and we had to choose the position we felt most comfortable with. We were directed to squeeze a round off, watch where it landed and – if we missed – rapidly reload in the shoulder and get the second shot off. Andrew stressed how essential preparing for a second shot without breaking the shooting position is when shooting live targets.

We all achieved better results than expected, and I was particularly surprised how well I shot from standing at 100 metres – something I had not practised with a centrefire rifle before. At 300 metres from sitting, I hit about 50 per cent of the targets and my missed shots were within a couple of inches. "At 300 metres you need to start considering seven to 10 inches of bullet drop. Windage may also become an issue," said Andrew.

With a little practice we all started delivering shots on target on the

worked in wildlife management and as a sporting agent. He currently trains police in large mammal destruction duties and zoos in emergency response. These roles have furnished him with a massive amount of practical experience to draw on when coaching rifle shooters.

The course was going to focus on fast, practical, multi-positional shooting on targets between 50 to 300 metres. I prefer to shoot foxes at distances much closer than 300 metres, but there are situations where getting closer is impossible. Learning how to accurately shoot at this range was a skill I wanted to master, knowing how difficult it is for me to practise at these distances under normal circumstances. Also, as a keen deer stalker, knowing how to deal with the follow-up shot into a wounded animal that has run on is vitally important. Andrew emphasised that the skills he would be teaching are to help to you get out of trouble, not into it by taking badly judged long-range shots.

The course, which I attended with four other shooters in July, started bright and early with Andrew delivering a full safety briefing. We then headed to a raised firing point looking down a valley. From our position we could see a series of 100-metre and 200-metre targets on a flat, open area to our front, and a number of targets at further distances running up the hillside beyond. Andrew explained we would be shooting these targets with as few shooting aids as possible. "It is pointless learning to shoot from benchrest-like conditions if you never

Simon Barr attends a 50-300 metre shooting course run by veteran firearms instructor Andrew Venables, and finds that his foxing technique comes on in leaps and bounds



Simon uses the downtime in his foxing calendar to get some well overdue coaching

Before the late summer harvest, fox shooting can be largely unrewarding. Crops stand tall and darkness does not fall across the countryside until gone 10 o'clock. I decided to make use of this quieter period to get some expert coaching and tuition on my rifle shooting techniques, so once the combines had done their business I would be able to do mine even more effectively.

If you are after shotgun coaching, your needs are well catered for. This is in stark contrast to practical rifle shooting. The UK has far fewer rifle clubs, so getting the relevant training is not so straightforward – most of the coaching on offer is for target and match shooting. This makes the WMS Steel Challenge facility in Powys quite remarkable. The privately owned 5,000-acre facility offers real-life shooting scenarios at ranges of up to 1,550 metres. Steel targets are strategically positioned around the site, including scale cut-outs of foxes and deer as well as circular targets designed to simulate the kill-zones of various

mammals. The targets can be engaged from almost any position, elevation or distance within the facility.

I had enrolled on the newly designed 50-300 metre course at WMS hoping to improve my technique and accuracy. As any keen fox shooter will know, a missed fox leads to an educated animal that is far harder to catch up with. I admit to having previously missed uncomplicated shots on foxes with no clue what went wrong, so this course appealed to me greatly.

The WMS facility is run by Andrew Venables, a seasoned and respected rifle shooting coach. Andrew has previously



The kneeling position triangulates the elbow on the knee and uses the sling to give tension



Stable seat: The sitting position triangulates both elbows on the inside of the knees



The standing position relies heavily on sling tension to provide stability

WMS Steel Challenge

The cost of the 50-300m course is £120 plus VAT (using your own rifle and ammunition).

The next 50-300m courses are on:

12-13 August

2-3 September

Contact: Andrew Venables = 07767

365804 = www.wms-firearmstraining.org

Equipment reviewed by: Simon Barr

Product: **BLASER .243 R8 PROFESSIONAL**

Distributor: Open Season = www.openseasonltd.co.uk

Price: **£POA**

Comments: A technological and design masterpiece. A pleasure to use in any scenario

Product: **SWAROVSKI Z6I BTI 2.5-X56 RIFLE SCOPE**

Distributor: Swarovski = www.swarovskioptik.com

Price: **£2,100**

Comments: Top-of-the-range scope with excellent sight picture in low light aided with an illuminated reticle

Product: **SWAROVSKI 8X30 LASER RANGEFINDER**

Distributor: Swarovski = www.swarovskioptik.com

Price: **£810**

Comments: Accurate out to 1,000 metres with 8x30 optics, this could be used to stalk with comfortably

Product: **MEINDL HIMALAYA MFS BOOTS**

Distributor: Bramwell International = www.bramwell-int.co.uk

Price: **£184.99**

Comments: A superbly sturdy boot. Ideal for any shooting activity

By conviction



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first or second shot. Andrew only allowed us two shots at each target – if we missed, we moved onto another target. “Nothing can be learned from continually shooting the same target until you hit it, except that something is not right. You do not get the chance to do this in the field, so there is no point practising this. For every two shots you make, try at least 10 dry fired.”

Andrew continued: “You need to build up muscle memory to assist these positions. To create muscle memory you need to repeat a sequence of movements more than 2,000 times in order to burn the tracks into the synapses in the brain resulting in the movements being automatic. Think of it like driving a car – co-ordinating gears, clutch and steering wheel is quite a daunting prospect on your first lesson, but muscle memory is soon formed, making it possible without considering each individual action. Positional shooting is exactly the same as this.”

Having understood the basic principles, I was keen to see if I could improve my shooting technique from a car as if out foxing. Andrew asked me to drive my truck next to the firing points and broadside the targets. Many of the techniques I had learned in the positional shooting poses were relevant. Sitting in a car, you can create supports for your elbows and triangulate your position to offer maximum stability.

Resting the rifle on the window bag I normally use, I positioned my legs in such a way that my knees offered my elbows more support than they had done previously. Andrew suggested positioning my left hand under the butt of the rifle on my shoulder, adding even more support. This position was rock-solid, and my accuracy on the 300-metre target was excellent.

I often find myself having to shoot off the

bonnet, so I asked Andrew the best method for this. “As if drunk at the bar,” laughed Andrew as he flopped against the front of the truck. “Get as much contact with the car as you can. If you are using a bipod, get it into the windscreen wiper gutter to stabilise yourself. If you are using a bag, get your left elbow down and put the hand under the butt of the rifle, securing it in place.” I had a few more shots at the life-size fox target at 200 metres and hit it every time.

We spent the afternoon working around the site, shooting targets at varying ranges all over the hillside. Some of the targets were well over 300 metres, which helped illustrate the point that beyond this range you need to understand ballistics more than just guessing the holdover if you want to make the first shot count. Windage and elevation make a big difference, so getting to under 200 metres on foxes will increase your chances of success significantly.

I had been given an understanding of how to improve my shooting position whatever the circumstances. Whether shooting from inside my truck, off the top of a Land Rover or sitting in a high seat, I now have a mental toolkit and an idea of how I could make my position more stable, which would undoubtedly have a positive effect on my shooting. I saw my shooting improve steadily over the day. I left with a huge amount of new knowledge, which I am looking forward to putting into practice as soon as the crops come off. If you are serious about shooting live quarry, I could not recommend having some tuition at WMS more highly. ■

Size matters: Andrew points out how small the kill zone is on the life-size steel fox cut-out

