

PERFECT preparation

...prevents poor performance – and before you go stalking live quarry, a day on the range is well worthwhile, as well as being great fun says James Marchington



Squinting through your scope at a red stag at 170 yards is no time to realise that you aren't fully confident in your rifle, your ammo, or your own ability to place the shot in that vital 4-inch circle which will guarantee a clean kill.

Every day's stalking begins with the 'rifle' – the shooter – taking a practice shot at a target. It's a final check that everything is in order. The rifle may have developed a fault, or the scope been knocked out of alignment. Taking a visiting rifle out for the first time, it's also a chance for the stalker to reassure himself that his guest can handle the gun, and shoot well enough to kill a deer cleanly.

But this is no substitute for being truly familiar with your gun and ammo, knowing how it behaves in different conditions, and

being able to confidently take a shot at any reasonable range in all weathers, up or down hill, with a wind gusting across your line of fire.

Paper punching is a good start, and allows you to become proficient at handling the rifle as well as building a solid foundation for accurate shooting. Shooting in the field presents a different set of problems, however. You are unlikely to have a convenient, firm rest to shoot from; you may be shooting at an angle; and the precise range is unknown. You have limited time to make the shot, and the first shot counts.

A recent trip to Andrew Venables' WMS Steel Challenge in Wales showed me just how much you can learn from a day shooting – with expert instruction – in realistic terrain and conditions.

Andrew's facility is set high in the breathtaking scenery of mid-Wales near Llanidloes. The main area covers 5,000 acres, with 20 miles of internal roads and tracks. The terrain is perfect preparation for Scotland, with very similar hills and valleys – and the weather can be equally challenging.

Andrew has set up firing points and steel-plate targets all around the site, providing an infinite variety of set-ups. You can shoot at any range from less than 100 to 1,000 yards and more. Not that anyone would suggest shooting a deer at that range, but shooting targets at longer ranges is a great way to understand

how your bullet behaves over distance, and in different winds. Having 'killed' crow and rabbit sized targets at 300 or 400 yards, the prospect of shooting a deer at 200 seems much less daunting.

I found Andrew an excellent instructor. A thoughtful, knowledgeable fellow, he carefully studied my shooting and then offered advice in digestible, bite-sized pieces. His manner is enthusiastic, helpful and encouraging – and he is good company too! There is no doubt I left his ground considerably more confident and capable than I arrived. That has proved its worth in the field since.

Quite simply, whether you're a novice or an experienced rifle shooter, or anything in-between, you can't fail to gain something from a day at WMS Steel Challenge. The most cost-effective way is to get a small group together and book a day. Prices start from £300 for 1-3 people; I would suggest the ideal group size would be three to four people, but Andrew can readily cope with more. ■

Book it

James was shooting at WMS Steel Challenge, near Llanidloes in Powys. It is around 4 hours drive from London, or 2 hours from Birmingham. Contact by telephone on 01686 413030, or see www.wms-firearmstraining.org for more details.