



Andrew checks his wind meter — the wind was gusting at 15mph to 20mph here

# A day on the range

**Charlotte Lycett Green** puts theory into practice on a long-range rifle shooting day in preparation for a tahr and chamois hunt

**T**here is a place in Mid-Wales where people who enjoy noisy sports can go and play. On 5,000 acres of Welsh mountain, with 20 miles of private roads and tracks, rally car fanatics can fine-tune their high-performance motors amid clouds of dust and the roar of their turbos, and rifle shooters can practise their marksmanship on Andrew Venables' WMS Steel Challenge.

The WMS Steel Challenge, near Llangurig in Powys, offers rifle shooters the chance to practise at painted life-size steel silhouette targets of corvids, rabbits, foxes, roe and boar at all practical ranges, as well as military targets at ranges of up to 1,700 yards — a life-size Marco Polo sheep awaits placement and a bison is on order too. The targets are set up in an entirely natural setting, without manicured firing points or the need for butt markers or the bore of having to walk down to check the targets after firing because you can see where the shot hits on the paint. As you lie prone and take aim at a fox- or a roebuck-shaped target, you can imagine doing it for real. Andrew also offers facilities for police firearms units and military personnel — who rate it as the best pre-deployment training for sniper teams — as well as zoo firearms teams, but Paul Quagliana and I were there to experience one of Andrew's guided practice days for sporting shooters.

Andrew has hunted many different species of game all over the world and most recently returned from a boar shooting trip in Pakistan. He set up the WMS Steel Challenge

for several reasons after noticing a demand from hunters heading abroad on sporting trips who wanted to practise in advance. He also aims to reject much of the controversy attached to "long-range shooters" who brag about shooting foxes at 500 yards and who "only take head or neck shots" at deer by proving, on a steel target, just how many variables there are to consider at such distances in order to achieve a humane kill. It's not as easy as some rifle shots make out. On the other hand, however, he also demonstrates the mid-calibre rifle's range for those unfortunate occasions when an animal is wounded — and every stalker knows that this happens on occasion, whether or not they care to admit it — or you are hunting abroad and longer-range shots are more acceptable because of the terrain.

"So much is written and talked about rifle shooting," he said. "Many people come up here and tell me that they only neck-shoot deer and do so at what I and most other stalkers consider to be ridiculously long and inhumane ranges. My reaction has become 'show me', because, as you will see later when we're firing at 500 and 600 yards, it's just not that simple."

The purpose of the day was to develop my skills to go on a mountain hunt in New Zealand. "On a tahr or chamois hunt you could well find yourself taking shots at extended ranges because of the terrain," explained Andrew. "My aim is to make you the sort of hunter who can make the first shot, sort it out if it goes wrong or just say no if it's too far."

P. QUAGLIANA



The .22 is the platform on which all rifle shots should learn to shoot



The targetry consists of life-size painted steel silhouettes of typical British and European quarry species

## Getting started

Paul and I listened to Andrew's safety brief, which emphasised the need for us to be aware of others using the area. "Rally drivers are going to be out on the tracks and walkers are always a possibility," said Andrew. "It's our job to conduct ourselves safely, just as we do when we're out hunting for real. The purpose of this range is to make it as realistic as possible. I note that under red flags people tend to assume it's safe. We assume nothing. It also suggests danger to the non-shooting public, which I consider to be a negative message to be sending out on behalf of sporting shooting. All rifles are treated as if they are loaded at all times.

"First, we'll talk about some general firearms matters, such as choosing the right rifle for the job. A heavy, long-range foxing rifle is no use on a mountain hunt, for example, as it'll be too heavy to carry," he continued. "I've brought along some examples of different rifles — some are a little unconventional-looking — but the point is that it's not necessary to have a

▼ Andrew instructs Charlotte on how to make adjustments for wind and elevation at 350, 500 and finally 600 yards, at a figure 11 target

military sniper rifle that can shoot well at 1,000 yards when you simply want a decent deer rifle."

"We'll start with the .22 rimfire," said Andrew. "It's the platform on which everyone should learn to shoot." He gave us a refresher on getting the correct sight picture so there are no shadows in the scope and demonstrated a good method of ensuring the stock is into your cheek correctly by placing the "V" of your chin on top of the stock and then sliding your cheek down on to the stock. This can help to achieve the correct eye relief and sight picture, and ensure that when you're firing a heavier calibre rifle the stock is pressed firmly into your cheek so that you don't feel the smack of any recoil.

"When you hold the rifle," Andrew continued, "hold it with a reasonably firm grip. I often see people shooting foxing rifles with a set trigger and a ridiculously light grip so that just the side of their finger is resting on the trigger. It means that when they press the trigger they're actually pushing the rifle slightly to the side, which affects accuracy and the dynamics of the rifle. Imagine squeezing your thumb and forefinger together as you make the shot, and remember to maintain the pressure on the trigger and follow through."



### 350 to 600 yards

The exercise at 350 yards was to fire at a crow target (right), see where the shot landed and then mirror it with the point of aim for the next shot in order for it to hit the target. We then shot at a roe buck, using what we had learned about wind and elevation to adjust on to a killing shot. We tried a similar experiment at 500 yards at a 10in plate and at a military figure 11 at 600 yards.





Learning to judge the wind is a black art, for which an anemometer or this "windy disc" are invaluable aids



The day provided the opportunity to test some unconventional-looking rifles

◀ Paul and I took turns to fire a five-shot group at 50 yards. Andrew immediately identified a couple of problems that we each had — I blinked on the first shot, my brain expecting the recoil of a larger calibre (despite the fact that I knew this to be non-existent in the .22), and Paul had what Andrew called "shotgun trigger", which is throwing your finger off the trigger after taking the shot instead of following through. It's odd what happens when you're being scrutinised.

Our next task was an exercise in understanding bullet drop. We each fired the .22 at a 10in steel plate at 150 yards. First we had to aim directly at the centre of the target and watch where the shot fell (it was low, predictably). We then had to adjust our point of aim to allow for bullet drop, take the next shot and hit the target. Andrew then explained about using the graticules in the scope to help us measure bullet drop — and, later, wind. "Get into the habit of making the shot, watch it hit, reload, re-evaluate, then make the next shot," he said.

*The difference in precision and power with the .223 compared with the .22 was clear*

Our last task with the .22 was to fire it standing, unsupported. I find this hard as I'm short and it's difficult to balance the rifle, but Andrew's instructions certainly helped. "Stand with your weight naturally through your body," he suggested, "rather like you would with a shotgun. And when you are on the target take the shot as soon as you can otherwise you will start straining for the perfect aim, you'll get tired and start to wobble. You need to be able to fire from any position in case you're asked by the stalker to shoot from an unconventional position or if something goes wrong," said Andrew. "Most people can't take an unsupported standing shot with a centrefire and they would do well to practise dry-firing from all positions."

### *Moving up a gear*

Next on the bench was the .223. We shot at 10in plates at 150 yards to demonstrate the difference in velocity and the fact that there was no bullet drop at this range. Even with a standard hunting scope, the difference in precision and power

with the .223 compared with the .22 was clear. At 250 yards, we needed to make a small adjustment for wind. Everything we had learned and refreshed so far would now be put to use at a greater distance from a different firing point.

"Look through the binoculars and pick out the crow target, just to the right of the roebuck," Andrew said. "I want you to aim in the centre of the crow, watch where the shot lands, mirror that with your point of aim and take a second shot before the wind changes. The crow is at 350 yards. Paul, I want you to watch through the binoculars at the same time and tell Charlotte where the shot has landed." This exercise demonstrated two things: first, what the bullet does at 350 yards and how wind affects it at that range; and second, how important it is for the person who is spotting your shot to be clear in their description of where it's landed. Andrew suggested using the crow's size as a measuring tool (i.e. two crows right, one crow down) to help me adjust on to the target.

I made the shot, aiming at the crow's body, which fell two crows to the right and one crow down from the target into the sand — which Paul verified. I then mirrored that by aiming off two crows to the left and one crow up from the target in order for my second shot to hit the bird with a resounding clang.

Next, with three shots in the magazine, we were brought on to a target of a roebuck. "Now you know where you had to aim off for the crow in order to hit it, try to make a killing shot on the roebuck, allowing for the wind and bullet drop," instructed Andrew. "Take the follow-up shot as quickly as possible before the wind changes."

My first shot hit the buck at the back of its shoulder, the second grazed the front of its chest. The third was a killing shot, indicated by the flapping of the yellow 5in bull. We tried this experiment with both the .223 and a .308 Mauser Extrema in a wind that was gusting at between 15mph and 20mph. The task proved how difficult it is to make a humane shot at that range in those conditions. Not only that, but it had shown how difficult it is to aim off the target, allowing for wind and bullet drop, and still find that killing shot. Our next lesson would be on dialling the scope so we could aim where we wanted the shot to fall.

This is where the maths comes in, and to add to the challenge some of Andrew's rifles adjusted in inches, others adjusted in centimetres. However, after dialling the scope for the .308 to raise the elevation, requiring a lot of counting on my fingers, my next shot at a 10in swinging target at 500 yards was made a lot easier by being able to aim at the actual target.

## 450 yards

With three shots we had to shoot first at the swinging plate against the water (in the left circle), then at a static plate to its left and finally at a fox-shaped target set to the right in the quarry (in the right circle). This was to simulate taking consecutive shots at different angles, requiring us to adjust our firing position each time. We also had to factor in what we already knew of the wind and bullet drop in order to make the shots successful. Andrew urged us to take them in quick succession.



Challenging shooting from a high hilltop in swirling winds at targets set at 450 yards

By aiming at about 11 o'clock on the edge of the 10in plate, it hit dead centre. Very satisfying it was too. That's not to say, though, that Andrew is condoning taking a shot at live quarry at that distance by getting us to do this. As he put it, "Just because your car does 120mph doesn't mean that you're going to drive it past every primary school at that speed." It is important, however, that a Shot understands both the accuracy of their rifle and their ability to shoot it, so that shots are taken within their limits.

To finish, Paul and I were set up on top of a steep hill, firing into the bottom of the valley where our shots would be captured on steel targets set at 450 yards against a small pond or a quarried section of the hillside. Our task was to fire with a .223 and a .308 apiece at a 10in swinging steel target hanging on chains. With five shots in each magazine, we had to fire and adjust on to the target. We then had to swap rifles and explain to each other how to aim off correctly using the scope graticules as indicators. This was an exercise set to simulate the instructions you might receive from a stalker if you were using the estate rifle rather than your own.

This was the culmination of all that we had learned in the

day and was challenging shooting, but Paul and I both felt better equipped for the future. We had learned a huge amount. Not only does the WMS Steel Challenge provide the perfect facility to practise on a realistic range, but by starting with the .22 rimfire at 50 yards and ranging up to firing the .308 at a beer-mat-sized target at 500 yards and a figure 11 at 600 yards, Andrew presents an invaluable overview of sporting rifle shooting. The day on the range had given us a unique opportunity to experiment with a number of different calibre rifles at different ranges to see what each was capable of and the considerations required for wind and elevation, but at steel targets — we also had to be aware of our surroundings, just as we would if we were out in the field after live quarry. No matter your level of experience, you will come away from a range day with your brain bursting with information thanks to Andrew's clear and concise method of coaching and with the benefit of having practised everything you've learned. ■

For more information, visit [www.wms-firearmstraining.org](http://www.wms-firearmstraining.org). To book a range day, tel 01686 440782 or 07767 365804.