



# Get ready for the *roe*



With the roebuck season well under way, you've got to be confident in your shooting skills. Helena Douglas spends a day at WMS Firearms Training to find out how to prepare and what factors to consider before pulling the trigger

**R**ifle, check. Scope, check, Ammunition, check. Time to go hunting. Easy, isn't it? No, says Andrew Venables, a hunter and rifle shooting instructor with 35 years' experience under his belt and a client list to match. "Stalking is not easy, and the essence of stalking roebuck, particularly in the rut, is getting close enough to the quarry to feel certain of your shot and being able to make that shot from a suitable position reasonably quickly. After all, rutting roe deer are not known for hanging around waiting for you to set up your bipod."

Andrew explains that confidence and skill are key to a successful shot and far more significant than the rifle, scope, or ammunition used. "I have seen people stalking with rifles that are too heavy and too long, with scopes that have too much magnification, and with target ammo designed to shoot a half-inch group on paper. They think they can buy solutions, but the truth is, with proper preparation and training pretty much any combination of kit will work."

So what builds confidence and skill? "Practising," says Andrew. "But practising in the right way is key. Sitting at a bench shooting tight groups will not be much use in the field. Instead you need to train using the four main shooting positions, standing, kneeling, squatting and sitting (one would seldom use prone in woodland stalking), and concentrate on acquiring a 3-6 inch target area fairly quickly. In the field, the half-inch group you can shoot from a bench will mean nothing when you have buck fever and are in an unfamiliar wood trying to do something you haven't done before."

Confidence also comes from being a safe shot, as Andrew explains. "It isn't just the deer out there. You absolutely have to be safe, so check your left and right arc, work out what is behind the quarry, and make sure there aren't branches or twigs in front of your barrel. Are the deer just reacting to you or are there other people about? And because well-constructed hunting bullets generally exit the quarry, you need to plan for this, and consider whether the shot will be safe."

## Stalking: Shooting positions



**STANDING:** Find a steadying branch or gatepost if you can



**KNEELING:** Keep the elbow and leg in contact for maximum stability

### The four shooting positions

#### Standing

This can be assisted by the use of shooting sticks, slings, suitably placed trees or gateposts. Andrew's personal preference to aid standing shooting is to use two- or three-point rifle slings or trees: "Shooting sticks can be more trouble than they are worth when out stalking, as your hands are likely to be full with your rifle and binoculars, and the fieldcraft of getting close to deer is best with less kit, not more.

"Standing unsupported is best limited to 50 yards or less, standing supported to 100 yards or less. Furthermore, if you can't confidently shoot a beer mat with your rifle free-standing at 30 metres, you seriously need to practice, and should question your competence to be in the woods at all."

Andrew's tip: Standing shots should be taken from a relaxed upright position, with the weight balanced on both feet, the crosshairs coming down to settle on the target and the trigger squeezed gently the moment the sights are aligned.

#### Kneeling

Kneeling is a useful position as it allows the rifle and scope to shoot below the normal browse line, facilitates contact between the elbow

to the leg to ground, and should enable adequate marksmanship from 50-150 yards – depending on how much you practice.

Andrew's tip: Try to sit on your boot to improve your stability, kneeling right down.

#### Sitting

This position allows both elbows to be supported, and if you lean your back into a tree is very stable. Sitting shots are good for distances of up to 200 yards, depending on the skill of the shooter.

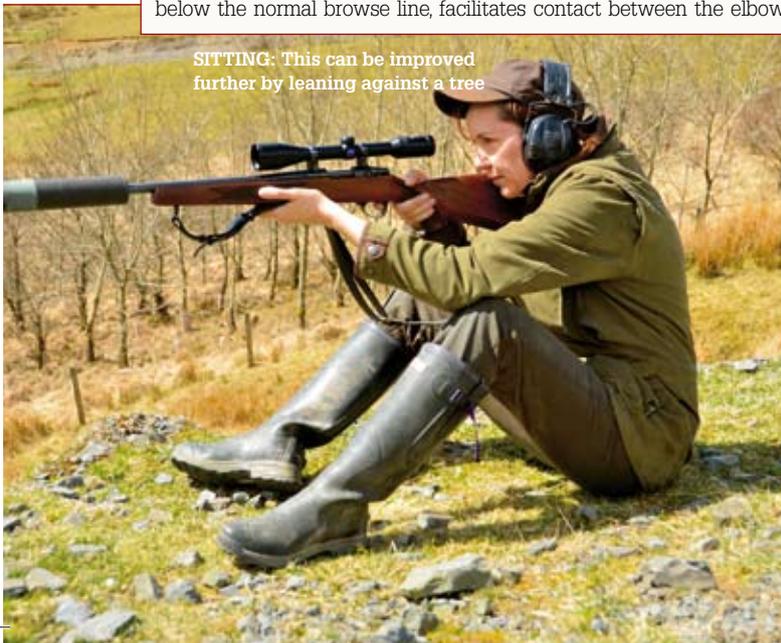
Andrew's tip: Keep your elbows just inside your knees and squeeze together for best effect. "I often wait, sitting under a suitable shady tree in lieu of a high seat."

#### Squatting

Squatting or 'rice paddy prone' is as good as sitting, subject to both familiarity and flexibility. It is quicker and easier to get into than sitting, so better suited to a dynamic stalking situation with movement and firing under the canopy.

Andrew's tip: Older stalkers may find it easier to get into this position than out of it, so practise with a friend initially! Wear baggy trousers.

**SITTING:** This can be improved further by leaning against a tree



**SQUATTING:** A less commonly seen position, but it can still be effective





## Stalking: Shooting positions

Andrew points out that most skilled fullbore shooters spend time practising with smallbore rifles and airguns. “We practise all our hunting and shooting positions at WMS with .22 rimfire rifles first, then move on to dry firing the fullbore rifles, and only then go live. Our objectives are to teach hunters to reliably hit appropriate kill zones on our steel targets, with the shots made quickly, while maintaining the firing position.”

After a safety briefing, Andrew hands me a .22 and we go to work, shooting out to 50 and then 100 metres from all four positions. Standing feels good – perhaps not surprisingly given I have done a fair bit of .22 shooting while standing (at targets for fun) – but as soon as my arms tire I start to wobble. Clearly a supportive tree or post would be helpful. Shooting kneeling also feels good, but sitting and squatting are unfamiliar.

Moving on to the centrefire rifles, we firstly practise the positions by dry firing, which gives the shooter the chance to establish position, become familiar with the trigger and bolt and focus on the four essential marksmanship ingredients – position, hold, sight alignment, and shot release – without worrying about recoil and muzzle movement. If the crosshairs are still in the kill zone when I hear the click of the pin then I have made the shot – easier said than done, especially given my bad habit of lifting my head after firing.

Andrew picks up on this: “Try to maintain your position while you reload, otherwise you will be delaying any second shot you need to take. Don't worry – it's a common mistake and I've had lots of pro hunters who you would rely on to save your life lowering the gun to their waist to reload. I just hope the angry wounded buffalo would pause too!”

After taking the first shot, the reload should be made immediately with the rifle in the shoulder, the head on the stock and the sights still on the target, following it if it is moving. “The only thing that should move is the hand to the bolt for the reload,” Andrew says firmly.

We move on to live firing at a steel reactive roebuck target from 50, 75, 100 and 150 yards. With Andrew going first, he puts shots in the six-inch ‘engine room’ from all four positions, relaxing into each shot and exhaling before squeezing the trigger. My turn next, and although I am nervous I do well free-standing, banging a shot right on target. Sitting is less successful as the unfamiliar position affects my concentration and I miss the target completely with my first shot before planting a round in area of the liver. I can see that sitting is a stable position, but it's obviously one I need to practise. Squatting and prone are more successful but I am quite tense. It's a relief we are shooting at steel targets, not live quarry.

Clearly before I go stalking I need to beef up my shooting skills and become more agile about getting into the right position to enable me to make a good shot. As Andrew notes, this is important for both novice stalkers and old hands. “What is vital for all stalkers to remember is that we are shooting live quarry, so it is our responsibility to make humane, safe shots. To achieve that on a regular basis you have to keep training, keep practising and keep learning.”

The rifle used here, a Sako Vixen .223 calibre, is roe legal in Scotland and Europe, but not in England and Wales, where its use on deer is limited to muntjac and Chinese water deer. It is 30 years old, has fired at least 30,000 rounds and still shoots just fine. ■

Fancy visiting WMS yourself? Contact Andrew on 01686 413030 or [www.wms-firearmstraining.org](http://www.wms-firearmstraining.org).

The half-inch group you can shoot from a bench will mean nothing when you have buck fever and are in an unfamiliar wood trying to do something you haven't done before



In the zone: You need to be getting on target before you go out in the field