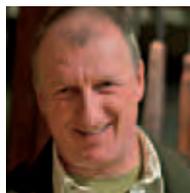


The right *rifle?*



Andrew Venables of WMS Firearms Training looks into what makes a good sporting rifle and the relative importance of length, weight, balance and scope power

Clients of WMS Firearms Training sometimes arrive wanting to improve their lethality as hunters with rifles and scopes that were never made for hunting. It is not surprising that some shooters buy the wrong equipment: there are many products on the market and the media, advertising, product placement, reviews and websites all try to influence us to buy what manufacturers, importers and dealers want us to buy. The result is that we can end up with kit that doesn't suit us or our shooting, which can be an expensive mistake.

For shooters who want to hunt live quarry, a good sporting rifle is indispensable. The very essence of such a firearm is one that can be carried comfortably into the countryside and wild places where the deer, antelope and other game we hunt are found. The most important factors to consider when deciding which sporting rifle to buy are length, weight and balance.

This is especially pertinent when hunting in the mountains or highlands of Scotland, where every kilogram matters, and in woodland stalking where ease of handling and balance are

key. All three factors are also crucial for shooting foxes, taking on wild boar in the forests of Europe and hunting plains game in Africa.

Length

Let's look at what makes a good sporting rifle in more detail. From my perspective, 40 years of experience in the field has made me appreciate well-balanced rifles in modest calibres with barrels of not more than 51cm for hunting. I also like removable magazines that can be topped up from above too, and effective moderators that don't add undue length or weight. On length, I don't want the rifle barrel to stick up way over my head when shoulder-slung, so a rifle of under 110cm including moderator is good.

Weight

Weight-wise, I am looking for under 4kg when fitted with scope, sling and moderator. A great test in the gun shop is to hold the rifle straight out at arm's length, in your left hand if you are right-handed, or vice versa. If you can't hold it at all, the rifle is a bench gun; if you can hold it for 30 seconds, it is a good, general-purpose hunting rifle; if you can hold it for 60 seconds – and it can hit beer mats at 300 metres – then it's a real mountain rifle.

The Scout specification of rifle, as designed and promoted by the late Colonel Jeff Cooper of Gunsite, is a good choice for hunters. The original Scout spec was for an acceptably accurate rifle, at less than 1 metre long and weighing under 3kg (not including scope and moderator), used primarily for hunting. Today's Steyr Scout and Ruger Gunsite Scout are prime examples, with Savage and Mossberg also producing good Scout-style rifles. In addition, most of the major rifle manufacturers produce lightweight rifles for hunting, and also offer a choice of rifles with light to medium-weight barrels from 46-53cm. As long as these barrels are fully free-floated, they rarely shoot badly.

As an aside, don't obsess about shooting tiny groups – any rifle that shoots between 2cm and 5cm three-shot groups at 100 metres with the usual range of factory ammo is good enough. Furthermore, most centre-fire rifles, scopes and ammunition for sale today, once zeroed, can shoot groups like this out to 200 metres from stable positions,

Expertise: Rifle selection



A good rifle shouldn't weigh you down or feel unbalanced...



...should be paired with a scope of the correct magnification...

such as prone and off benches. The standard Winchester, Remington, Steyr, Tikka, CZ/BRNO, Sako and other hunting rifles I own can also shoot good three-shot groups at ranges where no one should be attempting to shoot anything with a pulse. However, they don't do this when the shooter is breathless, tired, under pressure and struggling to manage the weight of the rifle while setting up sticks or finding a suitable position.

Hence, an over-heavy rifle in the field is detrimental to lethality and saves more game than it harvests by slowing the shooter down. In my experience, shooting from standing, kneeling, sitting, leaning against trees and from vehicles is much easier with regular to light hunting rifles and genuinely difficult with long and heavy-barrelled overdressed bench guns.

Interestingly, some the custom rifle makers are now embracing the creation of lighter rifles and we are starting to see some exquisite, light and accurate rifles with barrels as short as 41cm. It is worth noting, however, that while some calibres work well with short barrels, others don't. For example, magnum calibres, or necked-down calibres like .243Win and 25.06 need between 51-66cm to burn all the powder and perform properly. I have a .243Win with a 48cm barrel that loses over 10 per cent velocity with 90-100gn bullets. I also own a .308Win with the same length barrel that loses a maximum of 3 per cent, which is inconsequential. So remember: long, heavy barrels are for shooting ranges and long distances where every last metre per second counts. You will be firing hundreds of rounds and you have to carry the rifle no more than 50 metres.

Balance

A rifle that balances well will place equal weight in each hand when held in regular shooting positions. As with a good shotgun, the rifle barrel will point naturally at the target and not feel like a dead weight in the hands. My Blaser R8, Browning A Bolt, Steyr Scout, BRNO 602 .375 H&H and 30-year-old Sako Vixen all point and swing really well thanks to being balanced. They also shoot accurately both prone and off the shooting bench. Balance is a very personal thing; what may feel balanced to one person may not to another, so pick up rifles and see how they feel – you'll know when one suits you.



...and should suit you in a variety of shooting positions

Scopes

Scopes that work best for me when hunting are high quality and either fixed six-power or zoom scopes in the ranges of 1.5-6, 3-9, or maybe 3-12 or 4-16 for longer ranges. High magnification and small fields of view are more a hindrance than help when shooting live game. There is a trend for very high magnification telescopic sights in the 10-50 power range but using the 20-50 power range will result in an increasingly dim picture, rapidly shrinking field of view and the likely loss of target during recoil. Shooting live quarry demands good light gathering, a wide field of view for safety and the ability to keep the quarry in view if at all possible during recoil and while reloading in the shoulder.

Hunt animals with hunting scopes, and use the big stuff for F-Class and long-range target shooting.

Keep it simple

I own rifles and scopes of many different types. My 'go guns' – the ones I rely on and take hunting – are the handy ones, a pleasure to carry, reliable, easy to mount and work with, and accurate enough to do the job every time as long as I do my bit properly. They are regular calibres – the ones most gun shops carry ammunition for. For hunting, keep it simple and rely on proven products – but do have fun target shooting with bench guns, 'Hubble' telescopes and exotic new calibres too. ■

Book your training session with Andrew Venables: 01974 831869, www.wms-firearmstraining.com