

# Locking-in at long range

Specialist rifle training can be hard to come by but, as **Patrick Laurie** discovers, there is one place in Wales that really hits the mark, whatever your sporting needs.

At 900 yards, the steel plate looked very far away, almost impossibly far away. A stiff westerly whipped up the rushes and threatened to carry off an unsuspecting bullet, and I recalled the concern I had felt at the morning's forecast. Blasted by the tail end of Hurricane Bertha, the Ceredigion hills seemed hostile to long-distance rifle shooting, but under the watchful eye of Andrew Venables, I had been firing a mixture of rounds and calibres over long distances for three or four hours. I had been shown how to accommodate for the wind, and was surprising myself with my shooting, tackling targets well outside my comfort zone. This steel plate was my final objective, and I nestled the black plastic stock of the Tikka .308 into my cheek and let the cross-hairs rise to the tiny white dot.

The wind rattled the thistles and the trigger slid back easily. The rifle boomed and I had an extraordinary opportunity to adjust the stock and peer back through the scope before the bullet reached its target. At 900 yards, there was almost a two-second delay between leaving the muzzle and hitting the target, and it was a bizarre experience to have to wait for the bullet to do its job. Amazingly, Andrew shouted "hit" behind me, and I came to terms with the fact I had accurately dispatched a small piece of lead through half a mile of turbulent wind. Used to shooting foxes at 80 or 90 yards, I was operating

well outside my usual area of expertise, but felt strangely encouraged by this new-found confidence.

## Tailor-made lessons

Andrew Venables is well known in the shooting world, having been active in various forms of rifle training for more than 30 years. He settled in the form of WMS Firearms Training in 2006, and is now based outside Tregaron in Ceredigion, a landscape that might have been designed for firing large rifles over long distances. The wide open spaces create an impression of extraordinary wilderness and isolation, and the fact Andrew can pick and choose from a number of nearby locations allows him to make the best of the weather and the landscape depending upon his clients.

WMS (Wildlife Management Services) operates in all areas of sporting shooting, but I had travelled down to deepest Wales for a one-on-one session with the man himself. Having been brought up around rimfires, I only recently expanded my armoury to include a centrefire rifle in order to shoot foxes on the moor and the occasional roe when it presents itself. Aside from a trip to Africa and a few experiments here and there with heavier calibres, I am a bit of a greenhorn.

As a result, I repeatedly underestimate the powers of my little CZ .222 and seldom shoot anything more than 100 yards away. ➤



Andrew Venables has 30 years of experience in rifle training.

With a variety of different terrains on offer, WMS can offer tailor-made training to suit you.



At 900 yards there is a two-second delay between pulling the trigger and impact.

That is not to say my rifle is under-used, and having rattled around on my back over hundreds of miles of moorland, it has taken on a slightly scruffy appearance. The stock is badly scratched, the magazine clip is broken and there are several marks where the blueing has gone.

Days before I headed down to WMS, I dropped the rifle and found the bolt had fallen to pieces in the deep heather. I managed to patch it together again but the safety was totally inactive. I presented this battered arrangement of metal and wood to Andrew with a feeling of considerable embarrassment. I asked him if it was any good and was strangely heartened to hear his response. "There's no such thing as a 'good' rifle," he said. "It's more a matter of horses for courses. And what you've got here is a little mule." It seemed a fair assessment.

### A track day for rifles

Once he had worked a bit of magic on my rifle, Andrew loaded a miniature



Understanding the impact of the wind on the round in the air is one of the most important lessons.

arsenal of sporting firearms into the back of his pick-up. Not being hugely interested in target shooting, Andrew had gauged I wanted to shoot practical, sporting rifles that have a ready application in fox control and deer stalking. So while I took a moment to coo at the arrangement of tactical weaponry stashed securely in the cabinets, the day was geared towards my own particular interests – a real advantage of the one-on-one structure.

Andrew describes this sort of shooting as a "track day" for rifles; an opportunity to shoot targets at all kinds of ranges with his support and wealth of knowledge at your elbow. I was hugely encouraged by the way Andrew read my abilities and worked on my weaknesses without being patronising or drumming home a level of safety that has been hammered into me countless times before, not least in my cadet marksmanship days. The pitch of his instruction was perfect, and within half an hour of arriving I was shooting steel targets at longer and longer



Andrew's wife Helena is also heavily involved in running the business.

ranges with my own rifle, growing in confidence all the while.

### Falling for the .308

Having mentioned I was dithering over investing in a .308 after red deer recently arrived on my horizons, Andrew brought out two of these rifles to try, including a smart Blaser R8 with interchangeable barrels. We discussed the relative capabilities of the larger round, and I was boosted by the thought I could have one rifle that was suitable for everything from a fox to a stag. Picking his brains, we came to the conclusion that a move to .308 would probably be wise in the long term, and in a world of endless controversy and argument, I felt reassured that I was getting some pretty sound advice.

I fired a couple of boxes of .308 rounds and started to develop a rapport with the calibre. When I finally hit

"I could actually see the bullet being blown back onto the target by the breeze."

the 900-yard plate, I switched places with Andrew and peered through the spotting scope over his head as he fired, amazed by the appearance of so-called bullet swirl. This was the first time I had encountered this phenomenon wherein the bullet's passage is traceable by following a twisting smear of pressurised air. We were firing so far off to the right to account for the wind that I could actually see the bullet being blown

back onto the target by the breeze – a phenomenal spectacle and something I had hardly imagined possible. The shot had only happened after a series of calculations entered into Andrew's wristwatch, and the mathematics of getting that tiny fragment of lead to travel with such precision were mind-boggling.

### First-timers and old hands

I came away from Wales with a major confidence boost. Out stalking a few days later, I spotted, stalked and shot a roe buck at 70 yards. I could have shot him at 150, but I stalked in close because that is part of the fun and also ensured the risk factor was effectively as low as it could be. The day with Andrew has not made me take longer shots but, as he explained, if something ever does go wrong, I will now be able to tackle it. Before my time in Wales, ►



Whatever your quarry, you will be able to practice to your heart's content in this remote part of Wales.

if I had shot a deer at 150 yards out of necessity and wounded it, and it ran on for a further 50, I would have been out of my depth and unable to do anything about it. I now feel that if I do unfortunately wound a deer at 100 yards and it runs on for another 100, I can deal with it easily because I know what the bullet is doing. It's not necessarily about extending the operational range, but learning what the rifle can do in case I ever need to be able to use it in a tight spot.

The traditional perception of rifle ranges and shooting instruction conjures up images of benches, sandbags and day-glow vests, but the huge amount I learnt during one day was directly transferable to my experience of sporting rifles. We shot from the grass, we fired familiar calibres over rough country, and much of our shooting was at laser-cut steel



If you want to ensure you are fully prepared to make the perfect shot every time you pull the trigger, then why not spend a day with an expert?

targets which resemble the deer and foxes I am trying to shoot. Andrew has plans to develop a running boar target and already has a life-size steel silhouette of a Marco Polo sheep on one of his ranges. Given the trophy fees for these phenomenal beasts run into tens of thousands of pounds, I certainly understood the sense of paying WMS a visit before undertaking a trip after one. WMS

Firearms Training can cater for all kinds of rifle users, from first-timers to old hands looking to brush up before a major expedition, and this flexibility has allowed me to get the support, advice and backing I need for the kind of shooting I do. 🦅

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