



Small groups or *field accuracy?*



Andrew Venables questions whether expecting bench rest results in the field is reasonable, or a recipe for disaster

At WMS Firearms Training we start each day by checking that every rifle to be used is shooting to the correct zero from a solid shooting position for the task at hand. The actual zero needed may vary from client to client. One might be dead-on at 100

yards, another an inch or two high at the same distance, because most people choose one or the other for their rifle. Zero established, we move on to field shooting from relevant positions at targets that reflect the size and shape of the animals to be hunted.

People are often surprised that we don't spend additional time on shooting small groups at 100 yards. The hunting forums and Facebook are filled with pictures of tiny targets with tinier groups of bullets – often in the wrong place – and discussions such as “Why won't my Brand X rifle and ammunition shoot a half-inch group?” My inspiration for this issue's column is a 90-comment Facebook thread started by a chap who had run out of ammunition trying to shoot a sub-one inch group before he would go stalking.

In many cases these discussions lead people to conclude that a rifle/ammunition combination that won't shoot groups of less than one inch at 100 yards is not fit for purpose. This can lead to shooters trading in their hunting weight rifles for bull-barrelled target rifles and replacing hunting cartridges for target ammo. They then return to their local range to see if they can compete with the one-hole wonders to be found there.

How much theoretical or bench accuracy do you need to be able to hunt humanely and efficiently when using portable rifles with proper hunting ammunition? Let's consider the facts in relation to hunting. Small animals, like foxes, muntjac and even crows, are killed humanely



Tactical rifles: Excellent on paper, but not ideal for stalking where light, handy rifles excel



Rifles: Accuracy



111-year-old rifles with open sights are well capable of grassing deer

when bullets land within an inch or so of the actual aim-point. At 100 yards this is a two-inch, or two minutes of angle (MOA), group. At 200 yards it is still a two-inch group, or one MOA. A chest shot on a fox or muntjac actually presents a four-inch diameter kill zone when broadside. So at a typical range of 150 yards a humane kill can still be achieved with a rifle that shoots two MOA at 100 yards. While longer shots are possible, I suspect that 95 per cent of all foxes and deer in the UK are shot within 150 yards.

Larger animals, such as roe deer, fallow, sika and boar, present a 6-8 inch chest kill zone. Appropriate placement of a proper hunting bullet in the central zone gives a reliable, humane kill when the round strikes. The “insurance area” around the central zone helps if the animal moves, the wind blows, or the shot is pulled. This actually represents a five-inch group, or five MOA, if the shot is at 100 yards and 2.5 MOA if the shot is at 200 yards.

Over the past 20 years I have seen most well-maintained, scoped hunting rifles shoot three-inch groups or smaller with relevant ammunition. The majority will shoot under two inches at 100 yards with modern ammo and a solid shooting position. I am aware that many of my rifles will shoot sub one MOA with ideal ammunition, but not from field shooting positions with the quarry in front of me. Notably this is because the animals don't have orange dots on them – and generally I only fire one shot.

People can only shoot tiny groups – less than one inch – when the scoped rifle is fully supported at both ends, ideally on the ground or a sturdy shooting bench. The use of bipods, rifle rests and back-bags is required and the person shooting must be relaxed, unhurried and undistracted. It would be unusual for any of these factors to be in place when the same person is hunting, let alone all of them. Don't confuse hunting with target shooting.

Please don't think I am anti-accuracy. What I suggest is a more relevant definition of the word “accuracy” than five shots in a postage stamp-sized area when hunting. Field accuracy – placing one shot in an area the size of a beer mat without a specific aim point – is what gets the job done.

If I am proposing to redefine the word accuracy into “field accuracy”, then I also propose we redefine the phrase “shooting practice”, which many people assume is best achieved sitting at a bench trying to shoot a group smaller than an inch with a hunting rifle.

Next time you head for your range, shooting ground or field with a backstop, leave behind the zero target, the high visibility yellow dots, the sand bags and the match ammunition. Take your bipod, shooting sticks, hunting rifle and hunting ammo. Add some nine-inch white paper plates, a yellow marker pen and a round beer mat. Put the mat in the middle of the plates and draw around it. Now you have your targets.

Check your zero – one and a half inches high at 100 yards for instance – and then start practicing in your relevant field shooting positions at the relevant ranges. Practice by firing one shot, reload in the shoulder and observe the bullet hole.

A hit within the three-inch central circle did the job: well done. A bullet that hits the flat part of the plate also did the job on larger deer, but if you're after foxes or muntjac, keep practising. Bullets that hit the fringes or miss altogether show that more work is needed, so first unload and then practise dry firing until the cross hairs are still centred on the plate when you hear the click. Reload and try a few more live rounds to see if you've improved. By all means practice on a life-size white paper silhouette of your quarry so you can see the impacts and react accordingly, or for even more feedback buy some steel targets.

Any ghillie, hunter or professional stalker will tell you that turning up and declaring you can shoot a half-inch group at 100 yards on the range all day means nothing in the field. Demonstrating that you can put three rounds in a paper plate from a relevant position in perhaps 12 seconds will raise a smile and means everything. Embrace field accuracy and leave the one-inch groups to target shooters. ■

For more information about WMS Firearms Training, contact Andrew Venables on 01974 831869 or visit www.wmsfirearmstraining.com.



Shots fired from 50 to 200 yards standing, off sticks, and prone show “minute of deer”