

# LONG RANGER

A training session at the WMS Firearms range in Wales provides an opportunity to try out a new range of Minox optics and push shooting abilities to the limit, writes Rebecca Green

**I**t's that classic spaghetti western scene: Clint on a mountain top, Stetson on, rifle at the ready, waiting for the outlaws to come charging through on their horses in the dusty valley half a mile below. As the music quickens and the dust billows up around them, shots ring out across the valley and one by one, unaware of the assassin above them, the bandits fall from their horses. In reality of course, as anyone who shoots a rifle will know, the amount of clicks and adjustments required to shoot at long distance – let alone at a moving target – means the baddies would have galloped off into the sunset before

Clint even lined up for the shot.

Although shooting at really long distances is not a regular requirement for most stalkers, there are times when you need to take a shot a bit further out than you would prefer – and the fact is, if you can shoot well at 900 yards, you can be even more confident in your skills at 70. Plus, shooting a target at long range is immensely satisfying, as I and a group of other journalists discovered on a recent trip to WMS Firearms Training in Wales, with Minox optics.

WMS Firearms Training provides a variety of rifle training and firearms instruction to stalkers, target shooters, new shooters and professionals. It is run by Andrew Venables, who has over 30 years' firearms training experience. Set in 8,000 acres of beautiful Welsh uplands, there is plenty of scope for training at long ranges – up to 1,500m and further with the right kit – while the rugged, rural setting is an added benefit for those training to stalk live quarry as it better simulates the real thing.

Today, we are here to test out some new tactical scopes from Minox. The

group is a mixture of very experienced rifle shooters and total newcomers, all of whom are made to feel relaxed and safe under Andrew's expert guidance. We begin at 50 yards, from the bench, using a .22 rimfire with open sights. The steel targets, which are made to the WMS's own 'secret recipe' specification, are set in a quarry on the side of a hill. There are a range to choose from: simple discs, foxes, roe deer – even a full size Marco Polo ram! Hearing the 'plink' as the little .22 bullets hit them is very gratifying. The real test, of course, will be whether we continue to hear it as the distances increase. But with a low mist sitting stubbornly in the valley, whether we'll make it to the really long stuff is uncertain.

On then to the next range, moving 200 yards or so higher up the hill and shooting at a second lot of targets set farther back in the same quarry. This is a chance to shoot the sorts of calibres we are all used to – the .243s and .308s, at 200-yard targets from prone and standing. And, of course, it's our first go with the new Minox scopes, which have some innovative features. (We'll be bringing you full reviews on

The day starts with steel targets set 50 yards below in the quarry



For more information about courses and instruction at WMS Firearms Training, visit [www.wmsfirearmstraining.co.uk](http://www.wmsfirearmstraining.co.uk) or call 01974 831869.



At 900 yards the targets are barely visible to the naked eye



At the longest range, there is a seven-second pause before the 'plink' of success is heard

these in a later issue.) Now the distances have increased, the spotting scopes have also come into play. Minox has brought along its MD62 and MD50 spotting scopes, and they are well received. Several of the team remark on how the eye is instantly in the right place to pick up the picture, unlike some spotting scopes where you can find yourself hunting for the image.

Andrew was on hand to offer guidance to those that needed or wanted it, and most of us benefitted from his pointers on shooting from sticks [see box out]. Shooting with a .243 in fairly breezy conditions, I was happy with my 2" grouping at 200 yards. Andrew's advice on stance really made a difference to the stability of my set-up and it also made me realise how many stalkers I know who would benefit from a session here. Andrew has a very common-sense, unpatronising way of explaining things, which would be advantageous to even the most experienced of shooters. He pointed out that a lot of errors come from not 'taking hold' of the rifle properly. "I see a lot of shooters who've adopted this sort of flimsy, light grip on the rifle," explains Andrew, "But when you take hold of the rifle properly you create a much more stable shooting position. It doesn't mean you have to grip really hard and risk creating a flinch, but you should just hold it firmly – you can still keep your trigger finger action nice and light." I realised I had been guilty of this 'flimsy' grip, and correcting this mistake made me feel much more confident, in control of the rifle and ready for the bigger stuff.

First, there's lunch to be had, which includes some delicious German sausage and rye bread, courtesy of the Minox team, and Helena's homemade lemon drizzle cake – fast on its way to assuming legendary status, if it hasn't already. To our relief the mist has lifted so it's safe to head up to the top of the range where everything is set up to push the limits. There are two rifles – a Steelcore Cyclone .308 and PGW Timberwolf .338LM, equipped with the Minox ZE and ZP tactical scopes.



Relevant adjustments can be made with the help of a spotting scope

Andrew's high-tech windometer (a piece of cloth on a stick) tells us there's a strong cross wind, but, as Andrew points out, there could be a world of difference between the wind speed and direction here and what's happening 900 yards away at the target, which, incidentally, you can barely see with the naked eye.

Trying to get onto the target at this distance isn't easy – there are endless windage and parallax adjustments to be made, but this is exactly what the Minox scopes are designed for and within a few minutes both rifles are finding the mark. This is where the spotting scopes come into their own: the spotter calls out where the bullet is landing, so the shooter can then make the relevant adjustments.

One of the strangest elements of this sort of shooting is the time delay between firing and hearing the 'ting' of the bullet hitting the target – it's about seven seconds, which doesn't sound like much, but when you're lying there waiting for it, it feels like an age. I fully admit that I wasn't expecting to hear that sound when it came to my turn, but with Andrew's help I managed to get on target – twice! I also admit I wasn't expecting to feel so pleased with myself for doing so!

There's no doubt that honing your skills at the WMS training range will stand you in good stead for real shooting scenarios, giving you the confidence to come out of your comfort zone when the situation requires it. And if you want to pretend you're Clint Eastwood as you're lining up your next shot, well, as the great man himself would say: "Go ahead..." ■

## PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE... WITH DOM HOLTAM

One of the great things about a facility like the one at WMS is being able to work on a shooting 'weakness'. I am always pretty cautious when shooting from sticks, so I asked Andrew to assess my technique and give me some pointers on how to improve. "The most important thing is to get a stable, secure base. You often see shooters bending forward from the waist, or bending their knees. What you need to do is have your legs apart and lock the knees: this means you are using your skeleton, rather than your muscles, to provide support. If you need to get lower, widen your stance but keep those knees locked."

With this in mind, I take up a shooting stance and Andrew immediately notices some issues. "Your elbow is sticking out too far. That will create tension and you will tire quickly. Drop it to your side so it is more relaxed. Also, you need the cleft of the sticks as far forward as possible, lengthening your 'fulcrum point'. This will make any wobbling less pronounced. Try and hold both the sticks and the fore-end at the same time – but be careful not to affect the floating barrel on the rifle. Finally, think about your grip and trigger control. Take a good, firm full hand grip so you are pulling the rifle directly back to the shoulder. This also allows the correct placement of the pad of your trigger finger on the trigger blade."

We are shooting at 200 yards from everyday Decoy triple sticks. Starting on a large Marco Polo ram target, I get a couple of nice, solid kill-zone hits while Andrew fine tunes my stance. Next, we move on to a small steel disc and with a smidge of wind correction I am banging shot after shot on target. It is an amazing confidence boost to see and feel just how these little positional and technique adjustments improve my performance. Okay, I won't be taking on 200-yard shots from the sticks at live quarry anytime soon, but if I do encounter a deer a little further than my usual range, I know I have the ability to make the shot.

