

# MY STALKING DAY WITH ANDREW VENABLES

One of the UK's top rifle shooting instructors with over 35 years of experience in shooting training, wildlife management and hunting.

## Tell us a bit about WMS Firearms Training

Between 1985 and 2000, I was heavily involved in pest control at wildlife parks, golf courses and estates, and I also specialised in putting up psychological barriers at wildlife parks and zoos – electric fences – for elephants, apes and bears. So I had a lot of experience in either keeping animals in or out. I was also occasionally asked to destroy large animals for humane reasons, and, as zoos have to keep firearms commensurate with what they do, some of them asked me to train their staff in how to use firearms safely and effectively. So, instead of spending my life travelling around the UK, I decided to set up a business here in Wales to which people could come for training. In a nutshell, I teach people how to safely and effectively use firearms for practical purposes.

The main problem I found was that people with firearms were generally poorly prepared for the hunt. The training is first and foremost about safety, and

then practicality. My method is to watch and listen, then consider what I have seen and heard, and then help them to up their rifle shooting game. We now do formal certification training for staff from zoos, wildlife parks, NGOs, the police and Defra.

We have agreements with land owners here in Wales totalling 9,000 acres and we have our signature steel targets in three specific locations out to 1,600m (1 mile). But in practical terms, we train people to shoot from a range of positions at 50m to 300m with modern stalking and hunting rifles and optics. We also extend the remit to what to do when things go wrong, from 300m to 600m, because, if you are going to shoot deer at 200m, for instance, you really need to also know what to do when things don't go as planned.

## How did you get into rifle shooting?

From a young age, I was desperate to join my father, Desmond Venables, at the Newport and



West Rifle Club where he was the president, and Bisley where he was a lifetime NRA member (he shot for Britain in the Commonwealth Games). So I started shooting airguns at the age of eight, .22 rifles at 12 and shotguns at 11 or 12. I then shot in the CCF for the Cadets at school.

## Can you recall your first ever stalk?

Yes, I can. I was about nine years old and my quarry was a rabbit in a field next to our house. I had a Webley Mk3 air rifle, so the main challenge was getting close enough. By the time I got within range, the rabbits were invariably long gone. But after about a week of failed stalks, I eventually resorted to rolling a log to within 15 yards of their burrows which were in a patch of brambles. I hid behind the log and waited for the rabbits to emerge. I eventually got the shot, hitting the rabbit between the ear and the eye. My mother then showed me how to skin and clean it and we ate it that night. I'll never forget it.

But with hunting, it is the times when things go wrong that you remember most vividly. I remember one such hunt in the Okavango Delta in 2004 when I wounded a blue wildbeest. I simply misread the profile of the animal and shot it too far forward. It then took us three hours to catch up with the herd again and another hour to figure out which was the wounded bull. By the time we spotted him, the herd was on the move again, so I fired four quick shots in succession, hitting him three times. But, to my dismay, he ran on, so I ran after him. Murray Hibbs, the PH, shouted after me not to get too close as he might charge. But I didn't listen and managed to get to within 20m of the bull and, because it was in some quite thick bush, I had to lie on my side so that I could see it beneath the browse line. Thankfully, that final shot dropped him. After four hours, it was finally over. It was hugely rewarding as I had sorted it out myself – a great learning curve. The key is how you recover from a mistake. We like

to bathe in success, but it is from mistakes that we truly learn.

## Where else have you hunted?

The UK, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey, South Africa, Botswana and Mongolia. I have also worked on wildlife projects in Greece, Turkey, Croatia and the Russian Far East, working principally with bears and Amur tigers. I was always the wildlife manager with the gun. We were trapping animals, but I was there for safety.

## Do you have a favourite destination and quarry?

Yes. Muntjac in any British woodland. I love the hunt – they are reasonably cautious and wily, but not impossible, they taste great, and you are also providing a service to British wildlife by controlling their numbers. My second favourite rifle quarry would be the grey squirrel!

## What, in your opinion, are the key ingredients for a good hunt?

This is an interesting one. For me it is all about being in wild places

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at some sort of harmony with nature, pitting my wits against a quarry for which I have a high regard, and situations in which the quarry often wins. So, some of my most memorable hunts have actually been when I have come home empty handed. It is very visceral. Getting it right is what has put us ahead, but getting it wrong is what has taught us what we know.

## What, in your opinion, is the secret to becoming a really proficient rifle shot?

Four things: dedication, humility, the right training and lots of relevant practice.

## What are your top tips for improving your rifle shooting?

1) Practice lots with small calibres or air guns; 2) dry fire in relevant practical positions; 3) find a good coach; 4) focus on one rifle relevant to what you do; 5) focus on making the first shot count. Little groups don't harvest deer. Single, reasonably fast, accurate shots are the ones that harvest game.

## Who is the best rifle shot you know?

Probably John Kynoch who at 80+ still snap shoots a rifle better than I can. ➔

## “SHOOT WHEN YOU ARE CERTAIN OF A KILL, NOT TO SEE IF YOU CAN DO IT.”

### What rifles do you hunt with?

Too many! These days I try to focus on the Blaser R8 setup because it gives me multiple calibre options in one rifle format with identical triggers throughout. And it has the best safety system I have come across. Historically, I have predominantly used the .308 and .300 Win Mag, but I am actually changing now from the .308 to the 6.5x55.

But my foil to the highly technical and clever German engineering of the R8 is a 1906, W.J. Jeffery 6.5x54 Mannlicher Schoenauer bolt-action rifle which shoots 160gr round-nose soft bullets beautifully. Made as a stalking rifle, it has five flip-up express sights for 100m to 500m. When I first bought it and got it home, I started to test the sights and found that it still delivers rounds on-target at all five distances. I have put three shots into a dinner plate-sized target at 500 yards!

### And optics?

Again I am spoiled for choice. I believe the top manufacturers in no particular order are Swarovski, Zeiss, Leica and Schmidt & Bender. I just like European optics. I grew up using fixed power scopes and learnt to hunt that way, but I have now embraced the use of ballistic turrets because dialling for elevation is more accurate than holding over. But if you need to dial in a scope, you do have to ask yourself if you are really hunting. You should always try to get as close as possible so that windage

and bullet drop are irrelevant. Using a car analogy, it is perfectly reasonable to own a Mercedes AMG and to go to a Silverstone track day to see what both you as a driver and the car itself are capable of. But that's not to say that you will drive like Jenson Button when you drop your kids off at school. So, in this respect, we can offer the equivalent of a track-day for rifles, allowing clients to see first-hand what the long-range potential of their rifle is and, indeed, the skills required to shoot at such ranges. This also gives you an idea of what to do when things go wrong and you have to take a longer shot than you would ordinarily.

### And what about ammunition?

I have probably grassed between 5,500 and 6,000 deer over the years, so I have experimented with a lot of different rounds. Nowadays I tend to hunt with my own home loads and have more or less settled on 165gr Hornady Interlocks in the .308, and either 180gr Barnes TSXs or 190gr Hornady Interlocks in my .300 Win Mag. Both perform consistently well on almost all quarry.

### Do you have an all-round favourite deer stalking calibre for the UK?

Historically I would have said the .308 with heavier bullets, but the older I get, the more I seem to be agreeing with 100+ years of wisdom that the 6.5x55 is the most effective, sweetest shooting calibre there is.



### What are your golden rules for the stalking of live quarry?

1) Don't shoot at ranges that you aren't absolutely confident of a one-shot kill. 2) Practice to at least twice the range at which you intend to hunt. 3) Be humble in the face of nature (most blokes miss because of poor preparation and bravado). 4) Kit is not the solution, you are. So focus on your own skills, not the capabilities of your rifle.

### Is there a maximum range that stalkers should shoot live quarry at in the UK?

No, this will depend on the ability of the stalker, the circumstances, and the equipment used (rifle, calibre, optics). Generally speaking, any shots over 200m should be very carefully considered and passed-up on unless the stalker is absolutely confident. Shoot when you are certain of a kill, not to see if you can do it. And practise on targets that are two thirds the size of the relevant kill zone.

### If you could change one aspect of the stalking industry, what would it be?

We need to stop telling ourselves and each other how great and right we are, and start telling the wider media and general public. From my point of view, I would also like to make rifle shooting more commercially available, beyond clubs. I would like to see rifle

shooting schools to encourage the sport. You shouldn't need to join a cliquey club.

### What do you think are the greatest threats to stalking in the UK and country sports in general?

Ignorance and prejudice on both counts. Coupled with greed, infighting and vote-hungry politicians. The general population isn't maligned, it is simply ignorant.

### Do you have any pet hates?

Yes. 1) Sloppy or unsafe gun handling and; 2) disregard for the welfare of the quarry. Animals should not be used as targets and if you must kill, kill cleanly.

### What advice would you give to a complete novice who would like to get into deer stalking?

Seek experienced, old hands for initial advice and guidance, and then talk to organisations like BASC for local advice and opportunities. WMS Firearms Training is an open house for anyone who would like to improve their shooting at any stage, but we especially like to welcome newcomers. But remember, no-one turned into Karamojo Bell overnight. You've got to earn your stripes. It is better to be a time-served practitioner of rifle shooting than an internet expert. And remember, you will never know it all.

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