

# SHOOT BETTER

**THIS MONTH:** Getting within range

## NOT BY A LONG SHOT!

Following on from last month's article on 'wildlife sniping', Andrew focuses on the methods we can employ to help us get within sensible range of our intended quarry, ensuring clean and humane kills

In my article last month I stated that I prefer to do my hunting before the shot, not after it. So just how can we guarantee that we arrive within sensible range of our quarry and in a shooting position that ensures success?

The five Ps of wisdom summarise the primary need: Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance. Confidence in the equipment borne of training and practice is vital, as is prior knowledge

of the quarry species, its habits, and detailed knowledge of the area you plan to hunt and the wildlife within it. I have been fortunate to hunt in the UK and abroad in ecosystems I knew little about. Without local hunters and trackers with intimate knowledge, I could not possibly have succeeded.

My personal experience of hunting has been mostly acquired around the fields, hedgerows and woods of

England and Wales. My occasional forays up to Scotland have been supported and made possible by the amazing stalkers and ghillies who are a sublime distillation of generations of local knowledge and experience. They know their land and their deer as they know their minds and their principles; it's in their blood.

So, what must we do to ensure our hunts actually lead to the possibility of

***BELOW: Pause near something that might assist in shooting, such as a tree or gate***



PICTURE: DOM HOLTAM





« a safe and humane shot should we decide to take it?

The military says that time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted – this is so true in hunting. Walk the ground at different times of the day and watch from vantage points. Many of us can account for our reconnaissance time in all the hunts that did not work. Learning how not to do it precedes finding out how to do it. The first thing you need to take is time. Don't rush anything.

I take care to wear quiet clothing in muted colours. Herbivores are mostly colour-blind, so moving very slowly is far more important than wearing the latest digicam pattern camouflage. Being an average Caucasian, I need to dull down my white face and hands. Deer flash their white rumps to acknowledge danger, so flashing your white hands and face while moving around is to be avoided. I use a triangle of camouflage netting, various stretchy neck warmers or a scarf. Perhaps avoid balaclavas and face paint if you don't want to frighten the public, or be taken for an anti.

When I arrive at my hunting area I quietly sort my kit: rifle, ammo, sticks, binoculars, sheath knife, day pack containing a spare knife, rope, first aid kit, water, gloves, a few plastic bags, a black bin bag, mobile phone, chocolate, etc. I close doors and any gates quietly. I will do a little jump test to find out if any of my gear rattles or chinks, then I stop.



**ABOVE: When you are stalking slowly and quietly enough, you will be able to spot deer and other wildlife before they spot you**

I will wait, motionless at the gate, entrance or start of the hunting area, looking, listening, and reading the prevailing wind pattern. I will have checked the wind direction, strength and weather prior to arrival and planned where I will arrive accordingly... and then I wait. I generally give it a good 10-15 minutes and use the time to plan, and to familiarise myself with the sights, sounds, smell and feel of the hunt.

This waiting allows the area to settle down and for me to immerse myself in it. When I move off in woodland I will slowly and quietly walk from vantage point to good shooting position to the next changed view, and every five to 20 steps I will stop, glass a full 360 degrees if the view allows it, wait a while, then move forwards again.

When I am in the zone in woodland, depending on the tree height, prevailing cover and paths available, I cover about 200-500m per hour. I watch every step, rolling my foot from the heel to toes, feeling for twigs and picking my way along.

When I get this right, I see squirrels and rabbits feeding at close range, I see animals before they scent, see or hear me, and shooting opportunities at calm, browsing deer can occur. If you are not exhausted by the sheer effort of concentrated, slow stalking after an hour or two, then basically you were just taking a walk.

When I get this wrong, I see fleeing squirrels and rabbits at longer ranges, the occasional flash of a deer's rump, and not much else. Once you are committed to a stalk through woodland, the wind will often eddy,

**BELOW: If the wait for a humane shot takes too long, it might be better to let that animal go**







"THE MILITARY SAYS THAT TIME SPENT IN RECONNAISSANCE IS NEVER WASTED"



« swirl and change direction. When I pause and scan for movement and game, I will check the wind again before moving off. This can be done with any form of powder on the planet – flour in a salt cellar, ash from a wood fire, fine sawdust or various hunting market powder puffers. In Africa I always put ash from the fire or dust from the track in my left-hand trouser pocket for this purpose.

I try to pause near a tree, branch, stump or some other feature that might assist in shooting, if I have any open ground and the chance of a longer shot. I carry the sticks and sling the rifle, bearing in mind that in woodland, 80m is a long shot.

In more dense woodland I put the sticks over my shoulder using a strap, and carry the rifle in both hands ready for a close standing shot. If you can't hit a beer mat from free

standing every time with your rifle between 10-40m, you are not practising the right way. Get the air rifle out and start again.

In woodland, I will stalk with the rifle fully loaded and the safety set, unless local rules or needs dictate otherwise. On the hill, I will stalk with the rifle in the slip, magazine full, and an empty chamber with the firing pin dropped. On the final approach the ghillie will make clear whether they want a round chambered and safety set or, more usually, the rifle un-slipped but the chamber empty until the last moments before the shot. Always defer to local safety rules, but apply your own risk assessment as well and act safely in all matters.

So, we are in woodland, the wind is good, our movements are slow and we see what we are after, within range. Don't stare. If you stare at deer with

hunters' eyes they will generally sense it. How often have you been in a pub or a social situation and, suddenly for no reason, have looked over your shoulder to see someone staring at you? Why did you look? What sixth sense alerted you to that stare? I don't know, but I can tell you that your quarry will have 1,000% more of whatever it was.

Keep deer in your peripheral vision while you plan your next move. Glass them by all means, but don't stare at them, it's rude. Move very slowly, don't break your outline. If the animal looks at you, or stops browsing, you must freeze and wait until it settles. Prepare for the shot the best you are able to, using what props you can.

Now we must ensure the presentation and angle are favourable for a humane shot. If the process takes too long and your pulse goes wild, you should pause, breathe deeply and get back in the zone. If the wait for it to turn becomes insufferable and you start to stiffen up, stop. If the deer leaves, better a lesson learned than a pulled shot and a wounded beast.

Last year I pulled and mercifully missed a shot on a roe while stalking with Chris Rogers at Euston Estate. My crime? I spent about 10 minutes up on the sticks waiting for it to turn sideways, and the wait got to me. In the first five minutes all was well; in the last 30 seconds I knew I was over tense, tried to settle and failed. Lesson: I should have waved at that deer, not shot at it. Mercifully, it was a clean miss just under its chest behind its front leg. It happens. I later put four out of four good shots onto a muntjac target at the same range off sticks; lesson learned, reminder logged.

Since then all has gone well. Everything I have shot has been a one-shot drop. Not all hunts will succeed and lead to quarry harvested, but every failed hunt is a lesson learned and an investment in our hunting future.

The main point of this month's contribution is that while I feel I must hunt, as it is in my blood, I must not feel I have to take the shot. I am fortunate enough to have alternative food sources and I can always come back to try again, using the lessons learned from my inevitable occasional failures.

Next month, we will consider the hunt *after* the shot. **RS**

**BELOW: Keep in mind that in woodland, 80m is a long shot**

