

# SHOOT BETTER

THIS MONTH: Open sights

## FLYING IN THE FACE OF TECHNOLOGY

Sometimes it can be immensely satisfying to get back to basics with your rifle set-up and reconnect with hunter-gatherer instincts, says Andrew

**M**y teachers at school were quick to spot my rebellious nature and try to temper it. While I am mostly tamed in terms of civility and acquiescence to authority, there is

still a piece of me which flies in the face of technology.

In my terms of engagement, shooting better is being successful in the closing seconds of a successful hunt. I need to place the right bullet in the right place to bring about the humane death of my quarry, because then it tastes better and I feel at one with nature, even though I am not, really. I am a post-industrial consumer, despite some effort to the contrary.

### NEEDS MUST

Much of my own acquisition of high-technology shooting gear was

driven by my occupation as a wildlife manager who needed to be highly efficient. My forays into night vision sights 20 years ago were commercially led by my pest control activities. Knowledge gained from target shooting in the 70s was pressed into service due to pressure to make efficient large mammal culls. Calibres got bigger, scopes got more expensive and the remnants of the hunter-gatherer were pushed into a dark corner.

I loved the hunter-gatherer in me. He set aside the .300 Winchester Magnum with the big scope and drop

**LEFT AND BELOW:**  
*The place for long-range shooting is on the range, not out stalking*



PICTURES: ANDREW VENABLES (TOP) / REBECCA GREEN





## “IN MY PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY I HAD BECOME AN EFFICIENT, EMOTIONALLY FLAT-LINE KILLER”

chart and picked up an open-sighted Marlin .30-30 underlever which had seen better days.

Marvin (the Marlin) and I would stalk the woods and work hard to get within the required 75 yards or so to make a clean shot possible. I could have lain on the opposite side of the valley using the Harris bipod and saved myself a hell of a long walk and stalk, but where was the thrill and challenge in that?

In my professional capacity I had become an efficient, emotionally flat-line killer. Anything within about 300m had had it. The emotional bond was gone, like the difference between a Queensberry Rules one-to-one boxing match and calling in an air strike. I was a financially efficient killer for my clients, yet in my soul I remained a hunter. If you make it too

easy the passion and the emotional highs fade away. So where do you go from there?

### BACK TO BASICS

Last week I spent quality time in the company of Mike Robinson, game chef, deer manager and friend, who has travelled a similar path, i.e. needing to put meat on the tables of others and having to be coldly efficient in the process. I have found a soulmate who actually gets it. What are we both doing? We are going back to basics: making it harder to hunt, necessary to get closer and putting the odds back in favour of our quarry. No more air strikes in hunter-gatherer time.

If it was legal to bow hunt in the UK I am quite sure we would both be bow hunting, which reduces your chances

**ABOVE: Hearing protection is a must, whether using a moderator or not**

**RIGHT: The golden oldies**

of actually getting to make “the shot” by about 90%. In the absence of the bow hunting option we have both become enamoured with old open-sighted rifles, in sporting and military variants.



PICTURES: DOM HOLTMAN (TOP) / ANDREW VENABLES





**“YOU’LL EXPERIENCE EVEN MORE SATISFACTION BRINGING HOME VENISON SECURED WITH A CLASSIC OPEN-SIGHTED RIFLE”**



PICTURE: MARTIN OSBORNE



« Well, how effective is that? You may well ask...

Last weekend we shot a World War I .303 SMLE alongside a modern Steelcore Cyclone .338 LM tactical rifle and scope... at 1,000m. The .338 LM hit the Figure 11 target with the first shot and the next three – all lethal stuff.

Incredibly, the SMLE put its first shot within 18 inches of the Figure 11, using the original open sights set to 1,100 yards. So old rifles can be very effective in good hands, as proven over the past 120 years.

Observation at WMS Firearms Training over the last few years has proven to us, and many clients, that hitting the requisite thoracic kill zone on deer-sized quarry using open sights is reliably achievable from 10-50m on muntjac, 10-70m on roe and 10-90m on fallow and larger deer.

Longer shots are practicable in good light and open topography but are missing the point; the challenge and duty is to get close enough to be sure. Do your hunting before you squeeze the trigger, not afterwards.

#### IN WITH THE OLD...

What sort of rifles are available to use in this sporting pursuit of our traditionally hunted supper? The wonderful news is that old, good-condition and accurate rifles are readily available at prices that often match just the moderator and scope mounts in a modern set-up.

I am not suggesting you dispose of your hard-earned tack-driving beautifully scoped high-powered rifle. I am suggesting you will experience even more satisfaction bringing home venison secured with a classic open-sighted rifle – an excuse to buy more guns... perfect. You will also further appreciate your tack driver when needs must.

Mike and I both hunt with different 6.5x54 Mannlicher-Schoenauer rifles, which are superbly accurate and deadly with the original open sights and ammunition type. My WJ Jeffreys was made in 1906, remains original and the sights work spot-on out to 500 yards on targets.

We are both experimenting with .303 Enfield rifles, mine a No4 made in 1949 and Mike's SMLE from around 1914-18. The open sights still shoot appropriate ammunition with remarkable accuracy from 100-1,100 yards and easily put expanding 150gr and 180gr

ammunition into the requisite kill zone at 100 yards.

Being inquisitive as well as rebellious, I am now looking into how other nations secured their dinners and with which rifles. I mentioned the Marlin .30-30, which I regret selling years back and have been looking at older calibres, notably .45-70 in lever-action rifles.

A Marlin 1895 .45-70 has now arrived and wears the Lyman peep sight which I kept off the old Marlin. It is joined by a lovely Browning Winchester 1896 model with a long, hexagonal heavy barrel.

Both are joys to shoot, just in different ways. Accuracy out to 100m is excellent hunting-wise and the .45 calibre 405gr expanding bullets hit unbelievably hard, I actually feel sorry for the steel targets we work on.

All the calibres mentioned are deer legal in England and Wales where I do the bulk of my stalking. Beyond fighting old wars, the .45-70 rifles and ammunition were considered perfect for all North American game, notably elk, buffalo and bears.

Travelling at modest velocities, the initial .457 bullet diameter is larger than the fully expanded bullet of many modern hunting rifle calibres such as .243, .270 and .308.

The .45-70 is deadly on game yet gentle on the surrounding meat – ideal for our hunter-gathering purposes.

#### WHAT'S MISSING?

What are we losing in this pursuit of a traditional hunt with an old rifle? The only thing I miss is the moderator. The old calibres seem to 'boom' more than 'crack'. They are really no louder than a 12-bore with a modern cartridge, so it is not a problem. And I always wear hearing protection whatever I shoot. Shooting a .338 LM with a muzzle brake, now that's a problem.

So, flying in the face of technology, I am with Diggory Hadoke, Mark Crudginton, Mike Robinson and all the others who know that a deer grassed with your great grandfather's rifle; a pheasant clean-shot with a muzzle loader; and a trout caught on your grandmother's split cane rod can be especially evocative and rewarding. I swear they taste better as well.

There is a place for all the modern gear, but don't forget that hunting is supposed to be a challenge, and from the greatest challenges come

## FANCY GIVING AN OLD RIFLE A GO?

If you want a crack at shooting old rifles at steel targets, give WMS a call (01974 831869). They are setting up Historic Rifle Days to enable modern rifle shooters to revisit the rifles made famous in the conflicts of the 20th century. Mauser, Mosin Nagant, Enfield and Schmidt Rubin were all well-respected and effective battle rifles which spawned many of the hunting rifle designs of the 21st century.



**RIGHT:** Andrew believes you should do your hunting before you squeeze the trigger, not afterwards

the greatest rewards.

Calibres such as .303, 8x57, 7.62x54 and 7.5x55 sound like fossils, until you shoot them at 1,000 yards and hear the clang of a hit ring out, six seconds after you fired the shot. No matter how many times I hear it, it still makes me smile. **RS**

**BELOW:** The merits of a high-tech can't be denied but shooting the classics is a whole other experience



PICTURES: ANDREW VENABLES