

SPORTS AFIELD

THE PREMIER HUNTING ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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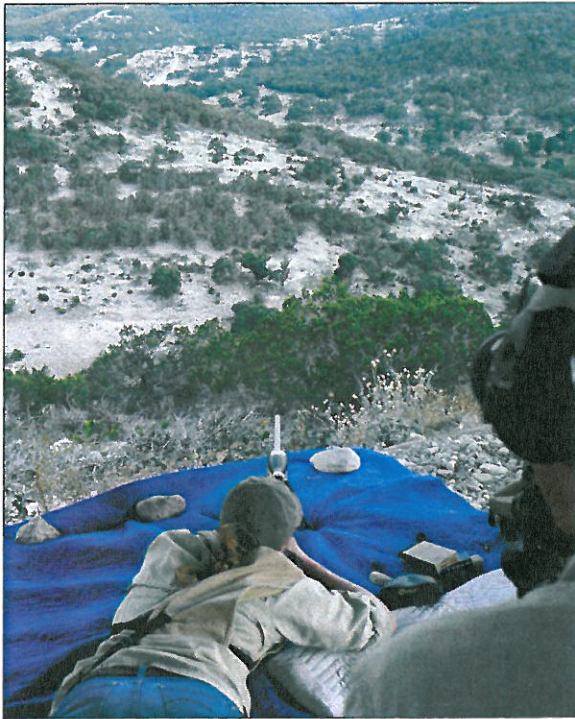


**Learn To Make
Long Shots**

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A SHOT TOO FAR

As technology advances, long-range shooting has become an important ethical issue for hunters.



Preparing to take a shot at a target almost 1,000 yards away. Long-range practice at the range is an excellent way to improve your shooting skills, but how far is too far when it comes to shooting at game?

About DSC

An independent organization since 1982, DSC has become an international leader in conserving wildlife and wilderness lands, educating youth and the general public, and promoting and protecting the rights and interests of hunters worldwide. Get involved at www.biggame.org.

Like a great work of art or intense spiritual experience, hunting is a difficult thing to describe. Far more than the sum of its parts, our immersion in nature is unlike any other activity—it is a return to something more fundamental and unifying. Certainly we can talk of its pleasures and challenges or the requirements for success, but in the end we are always left feeling that somehow it is only in absorbing the entirety that we can have any chance of knowing and conveying the essence of the thing. No one component or series of individual components added upon one another can rightly convey the deep reality, the

beauty and balance that must be achieved if true hunting is to be realized. It is, after all, what made us human.

Yet there are essential elements that must be present, elements so intrinsic and imperative that, if they are absent, we are forced to turn away and accept that whatever the undertaking may be, it is not hunting. It may be some other activity, related and perhaps honest and honorable enough—but it is not hunting. For me, two such elements are the pursuit of the quarry and the motivation to engage the animal as something more than a target, something beyond an object to be acquired. In this context, the kill—the ending of a creature's existence—ought to come at some price to me, a price that can only come from observing, following, and closing in upon a wild beast and attaining some level of intimate engagement with it.

Indeed, is this not the very basis of our fair-chase ethic in hunting? Do we

not strive to engage the animal in such a way as to elicit its extraordinary capacities of detection and escape, or at the very least risk these being aroused and our pursuit thwarted? Is it not in making this possibility an unavoidable part of the experience that we separate hunting from killing? For surely, if the risk of detection and escape are negligible, then we have matched not our hunting skills of detection, stalking, and closing the distance but rather only our ability to make a precise instrument—the rifle—perform as it should. In this culminating act, we may extend our hunting abilities to include our discipline to remain calm, certainly, and with great respect strive for the swiftest death of our quarry. But how can we ever identify this last act as the essence of the thing? Surely, at this point alone, success in the hunting odyssey depends more fundamentally upon the capacities of a technology and human to perform than upon the extraordinarily nuanced human ability to hunt.

However, let me be clear. It is certainly no small thing to be able to shoot well. It requires practice and commitment to consistently do this and considerable knowledge to integrate the many variables involved. In the intensity of the moment, we must somehow remain aware of wind speed, angle and distance of the shot, the performance limits of the ammunition and firearm, as well as our own physical capacities of sight and breath control. We must struggle to wait for the right moment and decline to shoot before this has arrived. Furthermore, if an animal has been wounded, we must demand full concentration to quickly end its suffering, something every empathetic hunter finds difficult to witness. Of all things in hunting, the prevention of unnecessary suffering

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must be considered as paramount. This, more than anything else, defines the respectful relationship between the hunter and his prey. They feel, and so must we.


So there can be no argument that good marksmanship is critical to ethical hunting and that every effort must be made to become as expert as possible. Nor can there be any doubt that all of us will at some point be challenged to consider whether a shot is just too far. Perhaps it will come from suddenly discovering an animal at the far edge of some very difficult terrain with little or no chance to easily approach it. Alternatively, it might be that an animal we have pursued is aware of our approach and has decided to put distance between us and after a long chase stands ready to disappear. Our decision may come down to this: shoot and hope we are successful in killing the animal cleanly, or forego the shot and accept that our chance has passed. Each of us will and must make our own decision.

However, in all such circumstances we are challenged to make this decision in the midst of the hunt. The circumstance that confronts us is simply one of those unpredictable and urgent inevitabilities that arise from the very nature

of the hunting experience itself. We as hunters are simply not in control and that is what we savor—the immersion in an existence where living in the moment is the only option and where one poor decision—to rise too fast, to pursue too quickly, to misread the terrain—will have irretrievable consequences. In hunting, there really is no reset button. We must accept the risks, pursue the chance, and match ourselves to the wild others who know their landscape far better, and whose physical senses and abilities so often leave us in awe. In this fluid context, a long shot decision is but one of a thousand confrontations that inevitably lead inward to the hunter's soul.

But what if the first decision we make, even before the hunt begins, before we even rise to a new day, is to shoot our quarry only at long distances—incredibly long distances that require extraordinary expertise in shooting, but far less in certain other aspects of the hunting experience? Where does this place the hunter and the hunted? If our very intention is to not close with our quarry, to not approach his boundaries of awareness, to position ourselves at every advantage but to never need see his spoor,

acknowledge his track, find his resting place, or work with the wind and terrain to match our stealth with his own, what then does this say of our purpose and intent? If all we strive for is to spot him at a great distance and shoot him where he unknowingly stands, what does this say of our motivations in hunting? What experience will we relate beyond the long arc of the killing bullet?

The issue of long-range shooting has become an important one for all hunters. A relative term, it now confronts us with many profound questions, wherein distance, seemingly the critical issue, is really not so much the point. Far more important are the concerns for how we can reach and locate a wounded animal and how our narrative must change in dealing with new recruits to hunting and in dealing with a distant and already perplexed or antagonistic public. The individuals committed to this activity are law-abiding and certainly good marksmen and they surely have no interest in demeaning hunting. Nevertheless, the question looms as to whether this new activity so alters our relationship with the hunted to demand some nomenclature of its own. Indeed, in this regard, is it not interesting that the term is long-range shooting—not long-range hunting? Perhaps we know of what we speak. 

Purveyor to the African hunter...

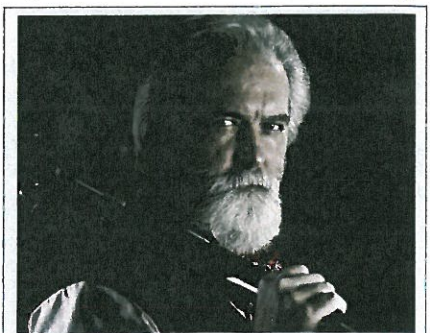


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Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.