

Where to Hunting

The motivation for this article was prompted by the fact that I read most local hunting magazines available as well as a number of international hunting magazines.

It has become of concern to me that I see more and more articles published about at what distance an animal has been hunted and less and less articles about fair chase the challenge of stalking your quarry up close and personal.

My opening comment is not meant to be a criticism of any magazine or any specific hunter or group of hunters, it just provided the motivation for me to put pen to paper for this article.

Perhaps I should start at the beginning and explain why I think that I am in a position to comment on where hunting is going to. I started hunting late in life when I was already an adult and I do not come from a family or cultural background where hunting is as popular as it is in South Africa. The closest my family has come to hunting before I started hunting was the fact that my father use to carry the local squires shotgun on bird shoots in the United Kingdom.

Once I started hunting I rapidly acquired a number of hunting rifles and was fortunate enough to hunt elephant and buffalo before I had shot my first kudu. I have since hunted several more buffalo, lion and a large variety of plains game species, and am now making up for lost time by hunting twice as often because my son now hunts regularly with me. I am still waiting for the big kudu.

I progressed from being a meat hunter through to becoming a trophy hunter and now I am going back to meat hunting again (this is partly because my wife won't let me put any trophies in our new house). I have worked closely with the South African Gun Owners Association, several hunting publications and many hunting associations. I mix and socialize almost exclusively with people who are professional hunters or hunters or who at the very least are enthusiastic firearm owners. I only have two friends who do not hunt, one has never fired a firearm and does not live in Africa and the other simply does not like firearms.

Most importantly is the fact that a number of my friends took me under their wings when I started hunting and taught me what they believe to be ethical and safe hunting. The teachings that I received did not come in the form of lectures, but in the form of actual hunting, positive comments, encouragement and sometimes subtle criticism. When I started bird shooting properly with dogs and guides, my friend, Darryl made a comment "that was a little bit of a low shot chap", which was enough to make me never forget the principle of blue sky shooting.

I have also been fortunate that the same people have taught my son about ethical hunting. You know when you have done a good job when you try to relax your ethical standards a little (maybe that waterhole is actually a little bit closer than you wanted to be) and your son tells you "gun up and walk away" because we are too close to the waterhole or we cannot shoot certain birds, because it is out of season, notwithstanding what the farmer wants us to do.

Most of the hunters that I know well, know a great deal more about nature and their quarry than most animal rightists. There is nothing more educational than in the middle of a bird hunt the line stops, because a particular type of francolin has been shot when it should not be in that particular area or where it has exceptionally long spurs. Knowledge and appreciation of nature makes hunters fundamentally conservationists.

We have often had discussions to stop shooting at a particular point, because we believe that we have ethically taken enough of a particular specie/s off a dam or from a particular area and we will leave it alone to recover and perhaps not even shoot the next year in that area.

This article is not meant to be a treatise on ethics, but like one of my previous articles on safety, it is intended to just perhaps prick a few consciences and bring us back to a point where we should all be able to hunt with the knowledge that what we do is objectively regarded as ethical and sustainable.

I recently hunted a wildebeest bull, which I shot at about 180 meters with my .338 Winchester Magnum and which then promptly disappeared. I had not been paying proper attention and I was not able to locate the point at which I had shot the animal and the tracker and I were unable to agree where the animal had been standing when I shot it. The tracker was right, but I found it difficult, because of the distance and the terrain to pinpoint exactly where the animal had been standing. This made me think of the risks that a hunter takes by taking their super fast Magnum rifle and shooting at ranges of 300 or 400 meters. No one, if they do not have a range finder, can accurately predict the distance or the place at which they shoot an animal. As distance increases, it becomes more difficult to follow up a wounded animal, which may move some extensive distance before you cover the 300 or 400 meters to where it was shot and before you find the spot where it was shot. This makes tracking and following up more difficult because you have to cover more ground to locate and follow blood spoor.

Whilst I accept that there may be some circumstances where shots are taken at such distances, I believe this should be an exception and not the norm. I shoot springbuck in the Karoo on driven shoots. No one in my group would dream of calling this hunting. Even then my son and I generally keep our shots under 250 meters, because the terrain is not typically Karoo terrain and is broken and uneven. There may be those odd circumstances where you have to take a long shot, because the terrain is incredibly flat, but even then I believe that hunting skills play an essential part in stalking and getting closer to take your quarry.

If you are 300 meters away from an animal you have not stalked that animal using wind, concealment, slow movement and shade. That animal cannot hear and in all probability cannot see you. You might have a great deal of skill as a marksman in shooting a soup plate size target area at 300 or 400 meters, but a marksman is not necessarily a hunter.

I have had the privilege to hunt dangerous game in countries such as Zambia and Botswana with qualified and experienced professional hunters. I have stalked buffalo to within 12 meters, not for hunting in that particular instance, but for the experience of getting up close and personal with buffalo. Not only do you use cover, concealment, camouflage, movement, wind and shade, but your mind is focused and your body becomes alive, because you are getting up close and personal with your quarry. This cannot happen hunting an animal that is 300 or 400 meters away, and is an impersonal experience I would never dream of hunting lion, buffalo or elephant with a scoped rifle, because it would be too easy. I do not know any professional hunters who regularly hunt dangerous game who make use of a scope on a rifle.

I did use a scope on my .416 Rigby to hunt buffalo on one occasion and I will never do it again, because I could not shoot a rapid follow up shot, because I was too busy looking through the scope to see what had happened to the buffalo. I recently acquired a 9,3 x 74 R double and because it is not really intended to have a scope I wanted to walk and stalk something with open sights. I thought it would be challenging, particularly as I am no longer what I regard as particularly youthful or supple. It makes bending, crawling and kneeling more difficult. I embarked on a stalk on a farm that I know well in Limpopo, which is incredibly densely vegetated. I could have shot a hartebeest bull, but I was not sure whether it was on the hunting list, because I had not discussed it with the farm owner, so I passed on it. I stalked one within 20 meters and was sorely tempted. I moved within 30 meters of a warthog and shot it through the heart with open sights and it died immediately. All in all more satisfying to me than a shot at an animal 300 meters way.

I find that type of hunt where you have to exercise skill and ability far more gratifying than pulling off a long shot at an animal. If you had to ask me what my two most memorable hunts are, the first is the first impala ram that I stalked and hunted on my own when I was still a novice hunter. I cannot remember the distance out, but it was not far. The second would be my first buffalo that was hunted up close and personal and without compromise. Nowhere in my hunting memories can I recall an exceptionally long shot as being particularly memorable.

This article is not intended to be a memoir of my hunting exploits, but is intended to remind all hunters of what I consider to be proper walk and stalk and ethical safe hunting methods. Whilst there is a place for the shooting of animals at long ranges, in my view real hunting involves skill, walking and stalking and making use of your environment and pitting your skill against the survival instincts of the animal that you are hunting.

Please endeavour to pass these skills and these ethics onto the next generation of hunters.

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