

Outdoors

Five good reasons for sighting-in your rifle now

The odds are that your hunting rifle is not perfectly sighted-in, no matter what you remember from the most recent firing. Rifles can change, for many possible reasons.

REASON #1: The guard screws may be loose. Guard screws (usually one at the front of the floor plate and another behind the trigger guard) hold a bolt-action rifle's barreled action in the stock.

If the stock is wood, it can shrink in the kind of dry, hot weather of the past summer, loosening the screws slightly – and “slightly” is more than enough to shift the rifle's point of impact. Before sighting-in, check both screws and tighten as needed.

REASON #2: The stock may have changed the way it bears on the barrel. This is the most common cause of unexpected changes in the point of impact. A rifle vibrates like a tuning fork when fired, and anything that alters that vibration pattern can change the zero, sometimes drastically. Plastic or laminated stocks are more stable, but wooden ones can squirm like snakes with changes in humidity. If your barrel was “floating,” it may be touching somewhere now. If it was bedded with a pressure point, it may have increased, decreased, or even moved the contact with weather changes. I haven't space here to explain how to deal with this, but shooting the rifle now will reveal any problem that may have developed, in time to get a gunsmith to help you with it before hunting season.

REASON #3: One or more screws in the scope mount may have loosened. Those firing vibrations mentioned above can work a screw loose and allow the scope to move imperceptibly. The screws that hold the base to the receiver have very short bearing surfaces, and even 1/10 of a turn is too loose. Before sighting-in, go over every screw in the mount base and rings with a screwdriver that fits. You shouldn't feel any movement in either direction.

If you can, turn it in snug but not tight enough to “chirp.” Best of all, reset all screws in the mount with Loc-Tite. If there's a gap between the upper and lower halves of your scope rings, it should be the same width on



Photo by John Wootters

Sighting-in does not require fancy equipment but it does take patience and care. Do it from a comfortable, relaxed position on a firm sandbag rest, at a known distance. One hundred yards is customary and most scopes are calibrated for this distance. Make only gross, preliminary adjustments on the strength of single shots; make final adjustments only on three-shot groups. Get it right; never settle for “close enough!”

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both sides and on both rings.

REASON #4: You may have changed ammunition. The zero of a rifle is reliable with only one load, with one bullet weight and style, at one velocity. Even a change in lot numbers can make a difference, even with ammo of the same brand and nominal specs. Experienced handloaders among the readership, of course, know all about the sometimes-eccentric preferences a rifle barrel may reveal

for a specific bullet shape, weight, brand or velocity.

Be sure to sight-in with the identical brand and bullet weight and style you've shot in the rifle in the past. If you aren't certain what you used before, buy enough to re-zero and have some cartridges left over to hunt with; to achieve a perfect zero and then have to buy hunting ammunition that may be even slightly different from your zero load means you have to start all over. Hunting with ammunition other than your zero load is foolish.

REASON #5: If you don't shoot for recreation, you probably need to get reacquainted with your rifle, no matter how many years you've owned it. Firing a rifle shocks both your body (recoil) and your ears (muzzle blast). If you've fired nothing at all for a few

months, you will need to re-acustom yourself to these harmless but inevitable effects. You also need to get the feel of the gun's trigger action again.

Even if the sights are still perfectly adjusted, it'll pay to shoot at least a couple of five-shot groups from the sandbag rest; I'll bet you'll find the second is smaller than the first, showing that you're getting back in touch with the rifle after a few shots.

If not, better to find it out on the range than in November on the biggest buck you ever saw.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.”

Trailblazers walk Saturday

The Kerrville Trailblazers will meet at 8 a.m. Saturday, Sept. 30, for a walk.

The meeting place is the Cailloux Theater parking lot on Main Street.

From there, walkers carpool to Shalako Estates off Goat Creek Road to walk.

Visitors are welcome; Walk at own pace and distance.

For additional information, call 830-257-2613.