

# Outdoors

## The long shot

A race horse going off at 100-to-1 odds is a “long shot.” So is a natural royal flush, as are many other risky enterprises that don’t fulfill their promise.

And so is sending a pointed metal cylinder weighing less than half an ounce through several hundred yards of turbulent, moving air to strike a game animal’s vitals.

In fact, all those other “long shots” owe their names to this original long shot — made with a rifle.

Shooting at big-game animals at long ranges is not a practice in which I take pleasure or pride, or that I recommend.

At abnormal distances, any of a dozen different factors can move the bullet’s impact several inches — or several feet — from your aiming point. A howling crosswind once blew a bullet of mine laterally more than six feet — and completely off the body of a distant caribou bull! Fortunately, my guide happened to notice it strike the ground so I could correct for the wind and drop the bull with another shot.

I dislike and avoid long shots, but, over a lifetime of hunting, situations have developed occasionally in which I felt compelled take a shot beyond my customary comfort range, which is about 300 yards. It has not happened often ... and all but one of those efforts had good outcomes. That one exception was a clean miss ... which is still a better outcome than a bad hit.

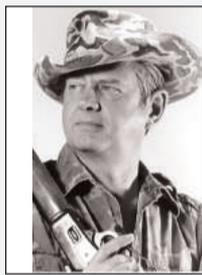
One reason I’ve attempted so few really long shots over the years is that I can usually stalk closer, rendering the barrel-stretching shot unnecessary. With a little time and effort most game animals can be approached within reason-



John Wootters photos

A solid shooting position is essential for long shots; here the author prepares to shoot a distant mountain reedbuck in the Drakensberg Mountains of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The professional hunter, right, with his chief tracker, watch for the results of the shot.

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able rifle range.

A few species do regularly require long shooting, usually because they inhabit open country offering little stalking cover. Notable among these are mule deer, the Coues subspecies of whitetail deer, Barren Ground caribou, red stags on the Scottish moors, and mountain sheep.

Pronghorn antelope have that reputation, but my longest shot at a pronghorn buck was only 220 yards ... after an hour of belly-crawling through the Wyoming sagebrush and dog-cholla cactus.

My longest shot on a whitetail was, unsurprisingly, at a Coues buck in the Sonoran desert of Mexico. My guide studied him across a rugged, rocky canyon and urged me to shoot. As usual in unfamiliar country, I asked him for a range estimate while I prepared to shoot. On his own terrain and an animal he’s hunted all his life, a local guide’s guess at the range is a cinch to be better than mine (laser rangefinders were unknown at that time).

When he said the deer was at about 250 yards, I relaxed. My rifle was a deadly-accurate, flat-shooting 7mm Remington Magnum. I knew the rifle and I knew the load, from shooting game of many kinds and sizes with it all over the world. I also knew it was zeroed to strike point of aim at 260 yards!

That shot was duck soup. The buck never heard the gun go off! Confidence is a big



This is the little mountain reedbuck collected by the author with a single shot at 375 yards.

plus in game shooting.

When the range exceeds 300 yards, however, I call it “long”, and take special pains with the shot — if I can’t get closer.

Many things can go wrong at such distances: a cloud moving across the sun to cast the target animal into shadow — or passing on to drench him in brilliant sunshine — can cause unforeseen misses. The wind on the far side of a canyon can be blowing in exactly the opposite direction from the wind on your cheek. Watch out for the uphill/downhill angle at long ranges; contrary to popular belief, your bullet will go high in both cases.

Firing with or against even a light wind can move the bullet’s strike lower or higher than you’d expect. Simple haste — over-eagerness to get that trophy on the ground — is probably the biggest cause of long-range mistakes; there are just too many factors to consider simultaneously, especially when you’re excited and in a hurry.

You must know your rifle’s real trajectory. That knowledge comes only from firing hundreds of rounds at different distances. Remember, the

best rangefinder in the world is useless if you don’t know your bullet’s trajectory! The only way to know that is by shooting at various ranges so you can see the actual drop with your own eyes, instead of merely a number in a ballistics table.

My reloading records show that for many years I averaged firing about 8,000 rounds of centerfire rifle ammo annually, developing handloads, testing components and equipment, practice shooting, and hunting.

I made my living as a full-time professional gun writer in those days, and shooting was a part of my business, as well as my favorite hobby.

But I tried to limit my long shots to horse races and poker hands instead of big-game hunting.

**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.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.**