SETTING UP FOR THE LONG RANGE HUNTING SHOT

First off lets start off let's start by saying that long range hunting shots are like snowflakes, a few maybe similar but no two are really alike. While each shot is unique the preparation for each shot is mostly the same.

For the sake of this article let us assume that you have a rifle and scope combination that shoots very well and you have a developed and confirmed drop chart for your home practice shooting range. Now we will go afield and run through the steps for making a solid first round hit on your hunt.

First things first, we must locate said animal and I cannot stress the use of quality optics enough. When the target animal is located the very first thing I do is get my rifle setup in a good shooting position toward it. I use a Harris bipod with a PodLoc and a low profile scope level to set up quickly and relatively level. I can use almost anything for a rear bag, fanny pack, a real bag, a rock or just about anything that will allow a solid position, my hand is my last option. In the picture below you will see a MTM ammo box for a rear bag.

Once I have a good shooting position I start to lock in the shot. The very first thing I want to know is the exact distance as this will affect how I work the rest of the shot out. I use a lazer range finder anytime it is possible to do so. Rain, light fog, low batteries or accidentally leaving it in the truck are any number of things I have done in the past so I have a back up plan for ranging. My favorite and for me most accurate way to range without a device is with the reticule in my scope. I have mostly Nightforce scopes, the NPR2 and NPR1 reticules allow very accurate calibration for ranging. With one and two moa graduations they tend to be much more precise than mil-dots. If you intend to range with your reticule it takes practice to be good with them and opening day is not the time to start.

Now that we have a range on our target we also have choices to make depending on what that distance might be and what your long range shooting methods might be. Once again assuming, since this is a long range setup some elevation compensation will be required. It is at this point more info is required for me. I break out the Kestrel weather station to retrieve temperature, humidity, elevation and barometric pressure. I also want to know if the shot is up or downhill. I determine this by using a cosine or angle indicator mounted on the rifle.

I will consult this info to determine bullet drop to the target by means of drops sheets or use of a pocket PC (I use the pocket PC whenever possible). Now I have determined and corrected for elevation drop in my bullets flight. There are several ways to do this using a ballistic cam, ballistic reticule or direct dialing. My preference is direct dialing for numerous reasons I won't cover here.

With my elevation corrected I take a good look at the wind and its effects on my shot. I use the Kestrel again to get the wind speed where I am standing, if possible I will use the spotting scope to check mirage deflection, rain angle, fog drift, smoke angles, leaf and grass effects etc. I will also use these to determine direction or wind value. Once I have estimated wind speed and direction I consult a drop sheet or PC to correct for the wind. While I am looking at the wind I also determine if it can be effecting my elevation. This happens a lot in canyon country where wind will blow over a saddle or ridge and give you a lift or downdraft. If I see this effect I correct for it now.

Now with the correct windage and elevation compensations I settle in behind the rifle for the shot. This is the most important part of the shot in my opinion, settling down and waiting for proper shot angle. I try to put myself in situations where I have time to settle in and be comfortable. I am also looking for several other pluses if they are available. If the wind is blowing from left to right I really prefer the animal to be facing right. I hope for this because I almost never over estimate the wind and an under estimate on this kind of a shot results in a miss and not a wounded animal. If the animal is moving along, feeding, etc. I look for the spot that they will pass that allows the best spotting of

the shot. If an elk is in a brush patch heading toward a small barren opening where I could see bullet strike in the event of a miss better I will wait for that position to fire. If I have dialed in for a certain wind condition and the wind is changing back and forth I will wait for the condition I have doped in for to fire. It is nearly impossible to have all the conditions exactly like you want but these are the things I look for when I am thinking of shot opportunity. All of the issues above will effect how comfortable I feel about a give shot and if I don't feel warm and fuzzy about it I won't take it.

The last thing I do in setting up for the shot is be sure I am ready to spot the shot. Now this maybe saying to your spotter, "are you on him?" or it could be locking into your shooting position as well as possible to spot your own shot. With these things accomplished I am ready to take the shot. This is how I break down every shot of any distance that I shoot in the field.

In setting up for the LRH shot it is important to do everything you can to stack the deck in your favor. Let's look at the two most popular long range hunting methods to see how your hunting style can affect your shot setup procedures. The two most common methods I have seen or used are the static long range ambush and long range hunting on the move.

Let's look at hunting on the move first. Hunting on the move is just that we have our gear and are on the move by any number of methods to locate the game we are after. In this style of hunting often time is not on the side of the hunter having to do all of the above steps before the game disappears from view. Some terrain is better about this than others. The second issue with hunting on the move is the ability to quickly find a suitable platform to shoot from. LRH on the move can involve a lot of things to do in a short amount of time for a single person, this is a great place to have a spotter. LRH on the move does give the advantage of covering a lot of country but I find a lot of people tend to quickly glass an area over and dismiss it as unproductive. After their 3 minutes of "intense" scanning most suffer from the grass is greener syndrome.

Last and my favorite is the static ambush. In the static ambush the hunter or hunters have gone to a predetermined location and probably a predetermined spot to shoot from and will remain here for a couple of hours to a whole day. First let's look at all of the items we need to do to make a long shot. Of all of these things many can be done before the target show up. Distances to likely areas that the target might appear, up/down hill issues, atmospheric conditions, stable shooting platform, and judging wind patterns just to name a few. I try to locate a shooting position and make a range card from it to major land marks, trails, scrapes, wallows etc. range cards are very handy for several things first when a light rain or fog comes in and you range finder reads 22 yards every where you look you still can work the area over with a good range card. When possible I like to get to my spot in the summer and shoot some of these shots ahead of time. If I find a scrape line along a trail that I can see from the other side of the canyon and it passes an odd colored rock that is one of the distances I run and take a practice shot at. Nothing beats having shot from the position prior to season opening. This is a great confidence booster and tremendous practice. Let's look at a list of prep for the long range hunting shot.

1. Assume a solid shooting position, do whatever it takes to achieve this.

2. Get an accurate yardage to the target.
3. Factor in atmospheric condition changes from your zero conditions.
4. Uphill / Downhill corrections
5. Wind velocity and direction estimation
6. Correct for elevation and or windage
7. Lock into your shooting position
8. Wait for the shot you want to have
9. Last second wind check
10. Fire
11. Spot your shot
12. Follow up if necessary

From my view when you shoot if you miss it should be a complete shock, if it is not then in you mind the shot was marginal and that is not what we are here for. If you don't have absolute confidence in the shot prior to shooting then change the factors of the shot that you can until you feel solid about it. This maybe as simple as waiting for a calm in the wind, moving position for better target presentation, or closing the distance on the target etc.

Practice your setup for the shot during the off season and good luck this year.

Shawn