

# The Personal Range Limit

By Chuck Hawks

A publisher's promotional statement for a new hunting/shooting book recently asked:

*"When that big buck appears at the head of the canyon 250 yards away, when your rifle is buffeted by a monster cross-wind and you can't get comfortable, can you make an accurate, killing shot the first time, every time?"*

Nope, I cannot, and I have done quite a bit of shooting at animals from field positions without any kind of rest and also in windy conditions. Nor can any of my hunting buddies make such a shot with 100% reliability. Maybe we could make that shot most of the time, but that is not good enough.

However, it doesn't matter. One does not need to be able to master extreme conditions or long ranges to be a successful and ethical hunter. One can simply *not shoot* and wait for a better opportunity later, or on a future hunt.

This principle applies even if it is your last chance at a trophy on the last day of the last hunt of your life. Would you want the last shot you fired in the field to be remembered for wounding a magnificent game animal? Always shoot within yourself, your known capabilities.

The thing is to shoot at live game within your capabilities and skill level and pass on any shot you don't absolutely KNOW you can make. If you THINK you can make a one shot kill, you may only wound. Superlative skill with a rifle or handgun is not required for enjoyable and rewarding big game hunting, but good judgment is.

Whatever distance you can *always* keep 10 consecutive shots in a 10" circle, when [Shooting from Unsupported Positions](#) (without a rest), is your "personal range limit" from that position for hunting deer size, or larger, game. Economy 9" (22.8 cm) paper plates make cheap, convenient targets and, being slightly smaller than a 10" circle, give you a tiny bit of room for error.

Consider the distance at which you can keep 100% of your shots on a 9" paper plate when shooting from the [Offhand Position](#) (standing) your personal range limit from that position. Remember, no misses or "flyers" are allowed.

Whatever distance you can keep all of your shots on a 9" paper plate when shooting from a sitting position, without a single miss in at least 10 rounds, is your personal range limit from that position. A proper sitting position is usually much more accurate than standing or kneeling and I usually shoot from a sitting position in the field. (See [The Sitting Position](#) for details.)

Standing and sitting are the two most important shooting positions in the field. Interestingly, for most rifle shooters, the kneeling position is not much steadier than standing.

The prone position is the steadiest of the unsupported shooting positions and a bit more accurate than sitting. Unfortunately, it is seldom viable in the field, because the hunter's head is too low to see over tall grass, low brush and other clutter.

Keep your personal range limitations in mind and use an impromptu rest, shooting sticks or a bipod whenever possible, not to extend your maximum range, but to make a one shot kill more certain. Collapsible, lightweight shooting sticks, once shooting from them is mastered (this takes some practice!), are not excessively burdensome for most hunters to carry in the field.

Forget about bullet drop tables, "ballistic" scope reticles and so forth. In fact, in the field, forget about long range shooting entirely. Zero your rifle or handgun for the +/- 3" maximum point blank range (MPBR) of the cartridge/load you are using and NEVER attempt a shot beyond that distance.

Never shoot if you must hold over an animal to allow for bullet drop. If you have to allow for bullet drop, you are too far away to shoot, period. Chances are, if you are hunting with a centerfire rifle, the MPBR of your cartridge/load will be beyond your personal range limit, anyway.

A study by the South Carolina DNR revealed that when shots at deer are taken from beyond about 150 yards, even when wind is not a factor, the percentage of wounded and/or lost animals increased dramatically. This research showed that 150 yards is a long shot for most rifle hunters. Maybe not from a bench rest at a rifle range, but in the field at a living animal, definitely. Note that the hunters in this study were shooting from permanent blinds with a solid rest available, not unsupported field positions.

Handgun hunters are even more likely than rifle hunters to be limited by their personal range limitation, rather than the MPBR of their chosen hunting cartridge and load. The standard magnum hunting cartridges, from .357 Magnum on up, can be zeroed to hit

dead-on at 100 yards with typical big game hunting loads. This allows for a MPBR (+/- 3") of around 115 yards.

Remember, the longest distance you can keep 100% of your shots on a 9" paper plate from whatever field position you choose is your personal range limit. I have observed that most novice handgunners who buy powerful magnum revolvers cannot achieve 100% hits on a paper plate at 25 yards, using both hands, when shooting from a standing position (Weaver stance, or whatever) and often not from a sitting position.

Flinching is the number one cause of this inadequate marksmanship. However, with dedication and sufficient practice, a handgun hunter should be able to keep all of his or her shots on a 9" paper plate at 100 yards from the sitting position.

100% hits at 100 yards will harvest a lot of big game. It is still true, despite all the nonsense you may have read in gun magazines or online, that the great majority of deer are killed at less than 100 yards (or, if you think metric, 100 meters), whether shot by a handgun or a rifle.