

THE PERFECT SHOT

PRACTICAL SHOOTING PREPARATION FOR AFRICA

By Tim Danklef

After five long hours of tedious tracking, the tracker turns to the professional hunter and raises his hand. The expression on his sweat-drenched face indicates you have finally caught up to the trophy that you have traveled half way around the world to collect. The tracker has done his part, now it is up to you and the P-H to finish the job. As the tracker sinks to one knee, you and the P-H slide past him in a half crawl, half crouch position. You suddenly hear a bellow and realize you are within 20 feet of a herd of Cape buffalo. The jesse bush is thick as hell and visibility is limited to 10 feet at best. Dammit, you had always heard that buffalo like the thick stuff but this is ridiculous! You continue to move forward but still see nothing. Suddenly, out of the corner of your left eye, a bush moves and you spot a black mass move ever so slightly. Both you and the P-H freeze in half step. You strain your eyes and suddenly you begin to make out the shape of a buffalo in the thick bush. Your eyes move back to the P-H and he indicates that it is a cow and to be damn quiet! Quiet hell! This thing is only 10 feet away! You continue forward in the footsteps of the P-H. The wind is right as you maneuver at right angles to the herd. At what seems an eternity but in reality is about 10 minutes, you make contact with two more shadows in the bush. You look for a signal from the P-H but he once again slowly shakes his head and mouths the word cows. Another 10 minutes goes by when suddenly and silently, your P-H grabs your arm and moves you in position. He points to a black mass that is in between two bushes no more than 25 feet in front of you and whispers firmly in your ear to take him! Take him now! This is the moment you have been waiting for, the moment that you have practiced in your mind for months. You raise your rifle and attempt to steady your nerves. You don't want to blow this one. You know where to put the bullet. You aim, and aim, and aim. Your P-H sternly whispers in your ear "shoot now"! You continue to hesitate as the cross hairs wobble. Damn but you just cannot get comfortable. How can this happen after all those hours spent on the bench back home at the rifle range? Suddenly and without warning, the 44" bull with the most beautiful boss on any buffalo takes one step and disappears as quickly as he had appeared. Gone forever. Sure you and the P-H stay on the spoor of the herd for another two hours. But now the wind is up and changes direction willy-nilly. Kiss that buffalo good bye!

This is a real life situation that happens on safari to many first time clients to Africa, and not just with buffalo. Unlike North American hunting, most African shooting is in extremely thick cover. Shots outside of 100 yards are uncommon. Less than 50 yards is about average on most plains game species with under 25 yards common on buffalo and elephant. Due to the fact that most species are being preyed upon by lion and leopard since birth, African game animals are extremely wary and tend to stick to heavy cover for survival. To collect real trophy animals, the shooter must be able to shoot quickly. While accuracy is important, the ability to shoot within a second or two of spotting an animal is often times the difference between success and failure. At fifty yards, the shooter that can achieve a hit within a 4 inch bulls eye in a second or two is much more successful than a shooter who shoots "under 1 inch" but takes five or six seconds to make the shot. When the P-H tells you to shoot, you must be able to do so quickly and with confidence.

So the question is, how do you prepare yourself for this type of shooting? Quite simply, get off the bench. Once you are confident that your loads are accurate and the scope is on zero, move away from the bench. This often times will require doing your practice at some place other than the public range with restrictions on off-hand shooting. You should set your targets at 25, 50 and 100 yards. Start initially with your rifle at the down position and begin by attempting to place one bullet into an 8" circle (paper plates work well). With continued practice, gradually you should work to move this group inside of 4". Once you have mastered this, load 3 rounds into the rifle and work on placing all three shots into the 4" bull. Remember, you are working on speed as well as accuracy. Once this is mastered, try walking up to the targets at varying distances and shooting off hand while still trying to stay within the 4" bull. In addition, shoot from varying positions such as prone, one knee, seated, etc. Now you are simulating the real hunting situation.

Next, you should work on practicing with shooting sticks. The best ones available on the market today are from Long Grass Outfitters (www.longgrassoutfitters.com). Or you can make a set by binding 3-6 foot tomato sticks together with a 1" strip of bike tire tube about 4 inches from the top. Either way, they will form a tripod when spread out at the base. Most plains game animals and many buffalo are shot with the aid of shooting sticks. You should practice by setting them up, moving a few steps back and then quickly stepping into them, aim then fire.

One final bit of practice to become a better off hand shot is dry firing. This can be done in the back yard or out the window of your living room and is a tremendous aid in building confidence. Set aside 15 minutes each day for this exercise, and this is guaranteed to improve your shooting.

Being a good shot does not happen by accident, it takes work. Often times the difference between taking good trophies and just marginal ones is not luck. It is the ability to shoot accurately as well as quickly. Good trophies do not stand around waiting to get shot! Please practice before you go.