Wild Game Recovery: Before and After the Shot:

Introduction

Recovering wild game after the shot is the responsibility of all hunters. In many states it is law referred to as the Wanton Waste Law. Under this law, stiff penalties can be applied in cases where hunters do not make reasonable efforts to recover wild game. The goal of law-abiding ethical hunters is to place a shot in the vital organs thereby increasing the potential for quick, clean, humane kills. Modern hunting equipment (firearms/bows and arrows) are designed to provide quick, clean, humane kills at reasonable hunting ranges. Reasonable hunting ranges are distances at which a hunter should become familiar by practicing prior to the season with hunting equipment of choice. Generally speaking, bows and arrows and shotguns do not shoot as far (short range hunting equipment) as compared to rifles (long range hunting equipment). Knowing the limitations of hunting equipment, as well as hunter, lessens the chance of crippling or wounding wild game.

Before the Shot

Through pre-season practice, hunters can minimize crippling and wounding by becoming familiar with shooting at various distances. Knowledge of distances to trees, rocks, depressions, etc. in the hunting location can give hunters an added advantage. For example, as wild game approach these objects during the season, the hunter is better prepared to make an accurate and lethal shot. This is common practice and a goal for bow hunters due to the limited range of archery (bows and arrows) equipment. In addition, hunters can also improve wild game recovery by becoming familiar with trails and escape routes within their hunting area. Wild game species prefer predetermined routes when moving between feeding, watering and bedding areas or when escaping from predators. Knowing these routes, and practicing with hunting equipment prior to the hunting season, will aid hunters in being successful by avoiding crippling or wounding losses.

After the Shot

Following-up after the shot is critical to successful wild game recovery. After the shot, it may be unclear as to whether the shot was accurate, poor, or resulted in a clean miss. Wild game animals will sometimes act or behave a certain way when hit and these visual cues can be valuable prior to tracking.

For example, a well-placed shot on a deer may cause it to drop instantly, or result in an immediate bolting (fleeing) reaction. In some instances, there may be little if any reaction at all. Stumbling or crashing sounds as the deer exits usually indicates a fatal hit. In most cases, a fatally wounded deer will prefer to run
downhill rather than up for two reasons. One, it is the path of least resistance, and
two, the deer will seek water sources in an attempt to quench thirst brought on by
decreasing blood volume.

Some knowledge into understanding how hunting implements dispatch a
deer can offer insight into what to look for after the shot. Firearms like rifles and
shotguns, shooting high speed single projectile ammunition, cause massive tissue
damage, blood loss, and trauma. Often, but not always, a well-placed shot from a
rifle or shotgun immediately immobilize a deer on the spot requiring no tracking or
trailing. Bows and arrows, however, rely much more on promoting massive blood
loss caused by the razor sharp cutting edges of the arrowhead. Deer taken with bow
and arrow must first bleed-out and are rarely immobilized on the spot unless the
spine is severed. Any shot that does not result in immediate immobilization
requires that hunter’s follow-up and track. The ability to make well-placed shots
into the vital organs will go far toward quick recovery and the prevention of
crippling losses. Ethical law-abiding hunters make every attempt to follow-up after
the shot in order to avoid wanton waste of any wild game.

**Tracking**

How long a hunter waits prior to tracking is also important. With a well-
placed shot in the vital organs, a deer may expire within visual distance. If not, a
minimum 15 to 30 minute waiting period is usually recommended. If a hunter is
not sure the shot was well placed, a longer waiting period may be necessary. The
goal is to allow a deer to lie down, stiffen-up, and expire without being pushed or
flushed prematurely. If unsure of the accuracy of a shot, a good idea is to at least
proceed to the location and look for signs of a hit. This way, a hunter can
determine whether a waiting period is required and, if so, how long.

Immediately after the shot, a hunter must rely on two very important cues;
visual and audio. Visual cues provide known locations just prior to and after the
shot. Likewise, audio cues help determine direction of travel when visual cues are
no longer available. After the shot and immediately following the last visual
location of a deer, a hunter needs to listen carefully in an attempt to follow the path
of a deer by sound alone. This is because mortally wounded deer may run wildly
causing crashing sounds that help to indicate direction of travel. This is important
because it provides yet another option in which to locate sign when tracking. Prior
to tracking, a hunter needs to visualize three very important locations to mark
while searching for sign. They include:

- The hunter’s location.
- The location of a deer at the shot.
- The location where a deer was last seen before disappearing into woods
  or brush.
Looking For Sign

Before attempting to search for sign, it is important to mark the location with a biodegradable material like tissue or napkins before proceeding to the other locations mentioned. Using a biodegradable material, rather than clothing or equipment, helps to avoid loss of items, while at the same time won’t contribute to littering. Types of sign encountered at the shot location may include: tracks, blood, tissue, hair, skid marks in dirt or forest debris, marks on trees from the bullet or arrow *(the arrow itself)*, or absolutely nothing.

Many hunters prefer to go immediately to the spot where a deer was last seen before disappearing into the woods or brush. This is because the shot location often contains little or no sign at all. In fact, it may take 5-10 yards or more for a deer to begin expelling blood from the wound and or nose and mouth if mortally wounded. The following is a general list of what a hunter may expect to find when trailing after the shot:

- Bright crimson blood *(arterial blood/high oxygen content)*.
- Bright bubbly or frothy blood: *(lung blood/high oxygen content)*.
- Dark blood: *(venous blood/lower oxygen content/could be associated with liver or muscle hit)*.
- Partially digested vegetative material with minimal dark blood *(stomach/abdominal hit)*.
- Dark brown hair/no blood *(high on body/could be a non-fatal graze)*.
- Medium brown hair/no blood *(mid-body/could be non-fatal graze)*.
- White hair/no blood *(under belly/under neck/could be non-fatal graze)*.
- Nothing *(potential miss)*.

A hunter should bear in mind that there may, or may not, be combinations of sign and therefore will need to determine a required waiting period before tracking based on available sign. Even if no blood or hair is discovered initially, an ethical law-abiding hunter will make every effort to thoroughly check the area before assuming a clean miss or non-fatal wound. When beginning the search, a hunter should avoid stepping onto or into the trail. Doing so could erase or cover up sign making back-tracking if necessary difficult or impossible. Instead, a hunter should walk alongside the trail being careful as not to step into it. The trail should also be marked at regular intervals just in case backtracking is necessary. In this way, a hunter will not need to backtrack all the way to the initial shot location. As mentioned earlier, utilizing biodegradable materials like tissue or napkins for marking the trail will avoid littering and or the need to collect clothing or equipment after tracking is completed.

Although ground level may be the logical place to search for sign when tracking, a hunter should also scan low-lying brush, especially in heavy cover. This
is because a fleeing deer may brush blood against vegetation that could easily be missed if sole focus is at ground level. Whenever possible, it is a good idea to enlist the help of hunting partners when tracking. Several sets of eyes scanning for sign are far better than one set alone.

Remember, it is very common to have little, if any, sign at the initial shot location. This is where visual and audio cues become extremely important. In many cases, bleeding tends to increase and become most obvious where a deer was last seen before disappearing into the woods or brush.

**Allowing Time before Tracking**

As a general rule, if large amounts of bright frothy-blood are found quickly, the pre-tracking waiting period may be short (15 minutes or less) or unnecessary and a hunter can usually expect a short tracking distance (<50-100 yards). If minimal dark blood and stomach contents are apparent, the opposite is likely requiring a longer waiting period (from one to several hours or more) and tracking distance increased. If a hunter begins tracking a poorly hit deer too soon, the chance of recovery diminishes due to a variety of reasons including:

- Deer could be pushed onto property where a hunter does not have permission making recovery difficult if not impossible.
- Deer might be claimed by another hunter in the area.
- Deer may not be recovered due to loss of sign.
- Deer may die without being recovered.
- Deer may recover and survive if shot was non-fatal.

Because it is possible that a deer may flush or jump from a bedding or resting area while being tracked, a hunter should be prepared for a follow-up shot. If a flush occurs, and shot not offered or missed, it would be wise not to push any further. A hunter should approach the vacant bed or resting location, and depending on available sign, decide whether to continue or allow more time before tracking. Again, the goal is to allow a deer to lie down, stiffen-up, and expire. Lying down promotes the movement of blood to concentrate at the wound site thus promoting bleeding in that area. If a hunter continues to push a deer, blood is transferred to the extremities and used for movement lessening the chance for bleed out at the wound site. This process may be prolonged if tracking begins too soon on a poorly hit deer.
Tracking Issues Related to Weather and Time of Day

Another consideration when tracking is weather and time of day. If it is raining or snowing, waiting to track an animal may be counterproductive. Blood, hair, and other sign might be washed away or covered up making tracking difficult if not impossible. The presence of light snow may increase the ability to track sign, but heavy snow or a snow/rain mix might eliminate or cover up sign in a very short period of time. In this case, it may be best to give up tracking altogether until conditions improve or wait until the following morning. This may also contribute to the deer lying down sooner thereby increasing the chances of a shorter tracking distance.

Time of day is also a factor. Early in the day there is little concern because daylight is not a limiting factor. If tracking near or at dusk, the situation worsens. It is much more difficult to track a deer in darkness even with the aid of a flashlight. Unless the sign suggests a good hit and possible short tracking distance, it may be better to wait until first light to resume the tracking effort.

It is also critical to follow-up tracking as soon as possible especially during early season when temperatures are warm. Prolonged tracking in warm weather does not help to promote good table quality of deer meat (venison). The last thing a hunter wants is to end up with a deer not fit for human consumption and wanton waste of wildlife.

Safety should always be number one when tracking, especially at night. Crossing obstacles like fences, logs, or streams can be dangerous during the day let alone in total darkness. The best advice may be to resume the search early the next morning (Note: for safety reasons, firearms should be unloaded and arrows should be placed in quivers when crossing obstacles and always remember to review a current copy of the North Carolina Inland Fishing, Hunting and Trapping Regulations Digest for seasons, manner of taking, regulations concerning firearms, and legal shooting hours).

Approaching Downed Game

Caution must be practiced when approaching downed game animals; especially big game like deer or bear. With deer, it is best to approach from behind and, utilizing a stick or branch, touch the area near an eye in an effort to promote a response. If a deer blinks and or moves, another follow-up shot may be necessary to dispatch it. Most hunters prefer to place a finishing shot in the neck or lower chest area. Doing so minimizes damage to edible meat and results in a quick-clean kill as compared to shots placed elsewhere (Note: a head shot for finishing off big game at close range should be avoided due to the chance of a ricochet off the animals skull plate).
As a general rule, if the eyes are open and breathing appears to have ceased, the animal is likely dead. If the eyes are closed, and or breathing apparent, the animal may still be alive. Approach the animal with caution and follow-up with another shot if necessary. Never attempt to use a knife to finish off a big game animal.