

RIFLE DEBUTANT



ROSIE NICKERSON tries her hand at rifle shooting, under the watchful eye of West London Shooting School instructor Ian Spicer.

Though a keen shot with a shotgun, I have for some reason never fired a rifle, so the idea of having a lesson at the rifle range at West London Shooting School seems extremely appealing. I've always wondered what it would be like and whether I'd be any good!

PHOTOGRAPHY:
PAUL FIEVEZ

The rifle range at WLSS is not new. General Manager of the school, Jonathan Irby says: "Our rifle range was an unintentionally well-kept secret. It has always been used by the London trade for zeroing rifles and patterning shotguns. Over the last 12 months, with advice and guidance from Ian Spicer, our rifle instructor, we now offer a broader service to the sporting rifle shot on both the range and in the shop."

For the total novice, such as myself, or the lowland stalker who needs to learn to shoot from a prone position in readiness for a trip to the Highlands; or the experienced rifle shot who's just bought a moderator (silencer) and needs help adjusting his technique, then Ian Spicer is your man.

When I meet Ian on the morning of my lesson, he is decked out in plus fours and tweed jacket and looks all ready for a 'proper' day's shooting. His attire plus the freezing temperatures and icy drizzle make me think we are about to embark on the real thing. Luckily when we arrive at the range, I realise we aren't going to be exposed to the elements after all, because a smart shelter complete with table and chair are all ready for our convenience. Shooting from a prone position is certainly a new one for me. But it's

where all beginners start. Eventually you can move on to shooting from a bipod, or kneeling or lying down.

"How you handle the rifle at the start of the day will quite often dictate where on the estate your stalker or host takes you that day," Ian explains. It's a concept all too true: you can tell instantly if someone is at home with a sport from the first moment they pick up a fishing rod, racket, or get on a horse. To get the best out of your day's stalking, you must be and be seen to be 100% familiar with the rifle as well as 100% safe.

We start with a detailed description of how a rifle works. A lot of this is completely new for me, including the fact that the bolt can be removed. This makes the rifle totally safe which is tremendously reassuring and we start off handling it without the bolt in place. It begins to dawn on me that the firearm I am about to fire is potentially far more lethal than a shotgun. Travelling at speeds in excess of 2,500 feet per

second, with a range of potentially up to 4.5 kilometres and with many tons of weight behind the tiny surface area of the bullet, I am told it can go straight through even a thick metal frame rather like a hot knife through



ABOVE: FIRST SET OF THREE SHOTS, AN INCH GROUPING...

FAR RIGHT: IAN WATCHES AS ROSIE PREPARES TO SHOOT

RIGHT: LAYING A RIFLE MAGAZINE

At home on

the range

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butter. I get shown the holes in apparently solid steel to prove it. This is serious. A tiny mistake and someone standing in the wrong place a mile away could get seriously injured.

The rifle I am to use is a Sako, in calibre .243. It's an ugly grey firearm, quite a lot heavier than I expect and clearly built for utility and no other purpose than to fire a bullet efficiently. This is no pretty Purdey. Ian says: "This rifle is capable of scalpel-like precision - it's the human operator who mucks it up". I don't think he means me per se, but rather that the rifle itself, once zeroed and aimed and held correctly, I surely can't miss?

The rifle is resting on two sand filled bags on the table while I sit on the chair and attempt to look down the sight at the two paper targets. The biggest shock for me is that my left hand (I shoot right-handed) is completely banned from holding the rifle. Ian shows me a technique whereby I fold it around my right elbow instead. This feels extremely odd and my left arm keeps wanting to stray and hold onto the rifle throughout the lesson. Out stalking, I am told, the front of the rifle would ideally rest on a stable platform of some kind such as a back-pack or a rolled-up slip. Alternatively, you'd be lying 'prone' on the ground with the rifle supported on a bi-pod. You'd support it yourself with your left arm as a last option. To do so builds inconsistency into the aim and shot. The only time you'd see a rifle being held with both hands is on European-style driven shoot or in Spain at a Monteria; the skill and precision needed to fire a rifle at a moving target is awe-inspiring. Luckily I don't have to learn that on my first lesson (Ian can do that later).

Once my position has been perfected, the bolt action is placed in the rifle and we proceed to try some 'dry firing', that is to say, I aim at the target and pull the trigger even though there is no ammo in the rifle. Then finally, a single live round is put in the magazine and it's time to focus on getting a tight grouping, which Ian told is more important than hitting the centre of the target. The anticipation is huge. I have waited almost two hours for this moment. When I do finally squeeze the trigger for the first time, the noise and recoil are far greater than my 20 bore. Luckily, I am wearing earmuffs as



well as ear-plugs. I learn later that these days, a lot of rifle shots use moderators which act as silencers and also reduce the recoil. I don't blame them.

It is impossible to tell where the first shot has gone, which is frustrating and then I have to repeat the process twice more before we head down the range to examine the target. I am delighted to see that I hit it well inside the required four inch diameter, and that all three shots are very close to each other, albeit all slightly to the left of the centre.

I then try another three rounds. Ian explains about 'the anticipatory flinch' of the recoil, which can make the difference between a clean shot. He says: "We try and train anticipation of the shot out of you. We fool the body that it's not going to happen."

One of the ways Ian achieves this is to make you count, out loud, to five with your eyes closed just at the point when you are going to pull the trigger. I feel quite self-conscious doing this. You then open your eyes, and see how far off your intended aim your cross-hairs have drifted. This movement is due to your muscles relaxing as they would during an involuntary flinch - the experienced rifle shooter learns to relax fully prior to squeezing the trigger thus reducing any deviation in aim.

Ian also emphasises the importance of not

looking up or moving in any way, immediately after pulling the trigger. He calls this 'follow through' and it takes great discipline, I discover!

For the last three rounds, we dispense with the sandbag support for the rifle butt so it is far more difficult to hold the rifle steady. Our final walk down to the target-board shows that all three of the groupings are tight and all quite close to the centre! Ian seems very pleased, the photographer is amazed and I feel simultaneously surprised, very chuffed and extremely relieved the shots haven't missed the target entirely.

At the end of the lesson, I realise I have not only learned a lot about rifle shooting in a single morning, but I have also become far more knowledgeable about deer and deer stalking. Ian is a very experienced and keen stalker and his passion for the sport and deer welfare overflows into his teaching methods. Somehow learning to fire a rifle in the context of actually trying to kill a beast cleanly and painlessly, and not merely for paper target practice made the lesson far more real to me. Even though we had only fired nine rounds I feel just as exhausted as if I'd fired 100 cartridges with a shotgun. The focus and concentration is intense, and the satisfaction of hitting the target consistently is immense.

■ *WLSS Rifle Clinics with Ian Spicer last for 1-3 hours at £82 per hour.*



ABOVE: STILL DRY FIRING - BUT LOOK AT THE CONCENTRATION

LEFT: THE 100YARD FIRING RANGE AT WEST LONDON SHOOTING SCHOOL

BELOW: IAN ZEROES THE RIFLE FOR ROSIE

BELOW: IAN AND ROSIE DISCUSS RIFLE, SHOOTING, BALLISTICS AND SHOT PLACEMENT



RIFLE FACT FILE

- The calibre of a rifle is probably best described by the approximate diameter of the bullet used and the length of the bullet case.
- A shot which hits the four inch diameter of the centre of a practice target would reasonably be expected, in the case of a deer, to reliably cause death. So, if you can reliably place your bullet in the 'vital' heart-lung it will result in as humane death as is possible; ideally a well-shot deer will not even hear the sound of the rifle shot that killed it.
- If your shot is 'out' by two inches at 100 yards, then at 200 yards the error would be doubled and magnified to four inches.
- A wide grouping could show a lack of consistency from either the shooter or his/her equipment. A tight grouping but not on the desired aim point on the target could be corrected by zero-ing the rifle. This process should be performed carefully prior to any live-quarry shooting.
- Like any other sport, rifle shooting needs to be constantly practiced and worked on if consistency and accuracy are to be achieved.
- The correct grip on the rifle's pistol is perhaps best described as a controlling but not overly strong grip - rather like a firm handshake.
- You should definitely not snatch at the trigger, just squeeze gently and progressively with the trigger blade in the middle part of your index finger-pad - this will take real practice for it to become second nature.
- The view down the telescopic sight should be a nice and crisp circle with no oscillation.
- ND or 'Negligent (sometimes 'Unauthorised') discharge' when your rifle discharges before you mean to and, because of negligence, poor shooting practice and bad rifle-management the bullet is launched in a potentially dangerous or uncontrolled direction outside of your control.
- Avoiding the above altogether forms a significant part of Ian's teaching... as he points out, alas in shooting there is rarely a second chance to be safe and when the bullet has left your barrel you've just become a spectator!
- WLSS has two rifles for training purposes; both are 'scoped' with Swarovski sights and represent the typical choice offered to either lowland or highland stalkers, namely .243 and a .270. For a majority of their teaching they prefer to use the .243 as it is a deer-legal rifle at the lower end of the recoil scale. Or clients can bring their own rifle. The school also offers advice as to which rifle, mounts and scopes are most appropriate having first listened to a client's requirements. There is also a .22LR with virtually no recoil; this is used to good effect to train basic principles and safety.