

ESTIMATING RANGE

Dear Technoid,

So far your advice has been quite helpful and I'm having a lot of fun (seem to be making some progress also), so here goes with another question.

Much of the load/choke combination information is based on distance to target - obviously. When shooting over a skeet/trap type field such as on five stand or a sporting layout incorporating permanent traps I can get a fair idea of target distance. On some of the woodsy, more natural field type settings of other courses this isn't so easy. Have you got any suggestions of a fairly accurate way or ways to gauge distance in the field?

I have practiced marking a point and then pacing to it, but my accuracy varies considerably based on the terrain. There is considerable discussion and opinion as to distances while we're shooting, but no one has yet impressed me with a solid basis for their conclusions, at least on unknown courses. I'm considering a field-type rangefinder, which I saw suggested in a book, but I haven't actually seen anyone (in my admittedly so far limited experience) using one. I've heard different reports on the laser beam rangefinders and someone seems to want them because all of the catalogs I've checked have them on backorder. Since I'm patterning my loads based on known distances, it seems worth the trouble and expense to get an accurate distance reading for actual targets.

Thanks for your thoughts.

Will

Dear Will:

That is a great question and I am chagrined that I have not addressed it before. Yes, you can use a range finder, but judging distance is something that will come with practice and you will not really need it down the road.

You are very right when you say that distance, along with target angle and size, is one of the keys to choke/load selection. I tried a range finder at first. Cabela's and Gander Mountain sell them for bow hunters and they are good out to 50 yards. Just perfect. They use a dual image parallax based system like the older range finder cameras and are accurate enough for our purposes. I now use mine for my air rifle hunting where exact distance measurement can be critical. The laser range finders are miraculous (and miraculously expensive too), but really meant for those 500 yard rifle shots.

You can learn to judge distance accurately. Keep practicing. The key is to try not to judge the distance of the target itself, but to judge the distance of a stationary object, like a tree or such, that is at your target breaking point. This is much easier and gets around the visual deception of various target sizes and speeds.

When you are out for your daily walk, you can practice judging distances to stationary objects. FIRST, make sure to accurately measure your normal pace. You would be amazed how few people actually pace a yard. Note how many normal walking paces you take in a measured 10 yards. When you walk to the supermarket, train station or such (not necessarily only on the clays course), practice judging distances to trees, bushes and the like. After a bit, you will get very good at it and can become quite accurate. Since you are measuring distances to stationary objects, this ability will help you on the sporting course when you eyeball the distance to a stationary object at the target breaking point.

The only time that you have to know target size at distance is when the target is thrown high against clear sky with no ground reference. Since you ALWAYS look hard to find the trap location the target is coming from (you do, don't you?) you will at least know the distance at origin and the flight path of most of your birds. This gives you a good place to start when there is no physical distance reference at the breaking point. It isn't that hard to figure it out.

Don't forget about the hypotenuse of a right angle triangle, though, and increase your leads and chokes for most teal and other high birds.

I generally break my targets down into three distances- near, normal and far. That is really pretty easy to do. If the bird seems right on the edge of a category, assume that it is further out.

If it is "near", inside 20 yards, I use .005" (skeet) choke and #9s. If it is "normal", 20-35 yards, I use .015" (light mod) choke and #8s. If it is "far", 35+ yards, I use .035" (full) and # 7.5s.

This all assumes standard sized, edge-on birds. If that is not the situation, I open or close accordingly, but always pair the choke with the shot size.

Best regards,
Bruce Buck
Shotgun Report's Technoid