

Is your Rifle Ready?

By
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The engine of the Super Cub sputtered at bit as the pilot leaned the fuel mixture in preparation for a smooth landing on Indian Head lake in Northern Alberta. The leaves had started to blush with color, and a heavy frost was still visible in the shaded meadows surrounding the lake. The beavers had been working overtime, as numerous dams and ponds were present on the southern end of the lake.

Josh Williams, age 50, was hardly a newcomer to fly-in hunts, yet he braced his feet against the floor and tightened his jaw as his guide and pilot Pat Murphy touched the float plane down within 100 yards of the shore line. Revving the prop, Pat turned the plane 90 degrees, and eased the Cub into shallower water alongside the makeshift dock.

This would be Josh's third trip to Alberta in search of a trophy mule deer. The 10-day hunt should allow enough time to locate, stalk and to harvest a trophy animal. Previous trips had been unsuccessful, good deer were spotted, but a shot was out of the question. Josh had hoped to end his streak of bad luck, and score on a nice buck. The two quickly unloaded the plane and prepared to settle in for the night.

If weather reports were accurate, they could look forward to cold temperatures and a possible snow flurry the following week. Pat knew the area quite well because he flew numerous fishermen into the lake during the spring. During these trips he had spotted what appeared to be several nice bucks in the next drainage to the east. He felt confident that he could get Josh within shooting distance, since the terrain offered great stalking opportunities. The rock outcroppings and quakie patches were ideal habitat for mule deer, especially big bucks.

The familiar incessant buzzing of the alarm brought both men out of a deep sleep. Josh shifted in his sleeping bag and started to reflect on the hunt. Doubts of regret crept into his mind. It had been a hard eight days of hiking, glassing and scouring thousands of acres in search of a trophy buck. Had he been foolish passing on a nice 28 inch buck the day before? The buck had a good spread, but the mass was not there. He had not come to Alberta a third time to shoot a second rate buck. Today would be the ninth day of hunting; maybe today his luck would change. He pushed the tent flap aside and was greeted by 4 inches of new snow. For once the weather report had been accurate.

With lunches packed and a thermos of hot coffee between them, the two men headed for a series of rocky outcroppings where they had seen deer earlier in the week. With the change in the weather, Pat had hoped the deer would be out feeding at first light. The extreme cold and powdery snow made for quiet walking. The two hunters removed their daypacks and settled in for a few hours of glassing from the rim.

They must be bedded down tight Pat commented. Must be, Josh replied. Where could they be hiding he asked? Pat suggested they wait for the sun to break over the mountain and warm things up. Maybe that will get the deer moving? If not, we'll hunt that patch of dark timber to our left.

Suddenly a slight reflection caught Josh's attention. He glassed that same patch of timber minutes earlier and did not remember seeing anything. He checked the focus on his binoculars and stared intently into the black timber. The sun's rays were penetrating the deep shadows as he caught movement. The movement soon materialized into a huge buck with deep forks and tremendous mass. Josh was looking at the buck of a lifetime.

Pat, I've got one and he's a dandy, whispered Josh. Look just to the left of the big windfall in that dark patch of timber. He's on the right hand side. Don't waste any time Josh; nail him before he gets away. The 10 and ½ pound rifle felt as light as a feather as Josh adjusted his pack for a rest. He'd been glassing for almost an hour, but his heart was pounding harder now

than it had been after the steep climb to the rim. He was having a hard time keeping the reticle steady on the bedded buck. Snowflakes were landing on the eyepiece lens, Josh raised his head and tried blowing them away, but his hot breath fogged the lens. Damn-it he whispered. Pat turned to see Josh trying to wipe away the fog with his glove. He knew from experience that he needed to calm his client. Be cool, he whispered, take your time, don't blow it now.... By now the buck had honed in on the hunters' location, with ears forward and muscles tensed, a split second was all that was required to make his escape. Josh finally cleared a dime size area in the lens from which to see. Exhaling and steadying for the shot, he focused the cross hairs just behind the buck's shoulder. Squeeze the trigger; squeeze the trigger he said to himself, Josh had learned this lesson the hard way year's ago when he flinched on a big bull in the Selway. He was determined not to make that mistake again.

A Boone and Crocket buck was a mere 200 yards away, in a heart beat it would be over and the trophy buck he longed for would be his. He felt the trigger break, but a slight hesitation and an "audible click" interrupted the customary rifles report.

The adult adjectives flowed freely and a fumbled cycling of the bolt prevented a second round from being chambered before the buck sprang from his bed and vanished in the timber. Sound familiar? You bet it does! Every year hundreds of hunters take to the field unprepared for the task at hand. Having spent hundreds, if not thousands of dollars on a dream hunt, only to have it end in failure. Are you going to be the next member to join this growing fraternity? In over 30 years of hunting around the world, I've been quite fortunate to have never experienced a rifle failure. I've had modest scope failures (fogging) but it didn't result in a missed or wounded animal.

Can a hunter have 30 years of good luck? Or, is there a method, a way of eliminating mechanical failures when we go afield in pursuit of big game?

Let's take a look at what foiled our unlucky hunter. The slight hesitation and "audible click" was a failure to fire, resulting from none other than poor rifle maintenance. No doubt, a sticky or gummed up firing pin and spring being responsible for our trophy buck living another day.

Firing Pin Assemblies

These simple mechanisms can cause a majority of our problems. Firing pin protrusion should be a minimum of .050 to a maximum .065 protrusion from the bolt face. The pin tip should be hemispherical in shape. The firing pin body and spring should be free of grease and oil. Eliminate the WD-40 and 3in1 oil from your cleaning supplies. These two magnets for dust and dirt have been responsible for countless failures in the field. In their stead, try a dry film lubricant. I prefer a dry Molybdenum Disulfide spray. It will never become sticky or gum up under harsh conditions.

Trigger Mechanisms

Many do-it- your-selfers spray oils and magic love potions into their trigger groups in a feeble attempt to reduce those horrendous factory trigger pulls and to offer some resistance to rust. Keep in mind rusty trigger parts (sears and triggers) are few and far between. These parts are usually machined from high carbon or tool steels and heat-treated to a Rockwell of 60 plus on the "C" scale. Due to this hardness, rust is not really a concern warranting oiling the trigger mechanism. Often times the sear and trigger are plated or hard chromed to slicken sear surfaces. This plating also inhibits corrosion.

Under NO circumstances should one attempt to oil or grease the trigger for improved performance. Oils and greases simply attract dirt and dust and over time will ultimately result in a mechanical failure that seems directly proportionate to the size and quality of the horned trophy hunted.

The Remington 700 and Browning "A-Bolt" type triggers are what we call enclosed trigger mechanisms. If not maintained, they account for many mechanical failures in the field. The Model 98 and Winchester Model 70 on the other hand, are what we refer to as an exposed trigger group. The Mauser design has been field tested under the worst possible conditions, wind, rain, sleet, snow and freezing Eastern Front conditions have little effect on this proven design. While these triggers may not be as light and crisp as the 700 series of triggers, they are less prone to problems if you are slack in your maintenance regimen.

Cleaning and Maintenance

With the advent of stainless steel rifles and hypnotic Madison Avenue advertising. We have brainwashed the "Stainless Generation" into believing that a maintenance free rifle has finally arrived, liberating them from the tiresome cleaning chores of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth! Every rifle, regardless of its metallurgical make-up needs to be given a little TLC from time to time. This involves removing the barreled action from the stock, cleaning the barrel, and lubing the cocking cam and locking lugs. The entire above-mentioned details can be accomplished by anyone who can screw a nut on a bolt. Believe it or not, barrel cleaning is quite a detailed procedure and we will save it for a future article. Let's remain focused on the action, bolt and trigger for now.

Virtually every small hamlet or village has an auto parts house or Wal-Mart close by. These outlets can easily provide the specialized products required to keep your "Shootin Iron" in good working condition. An aerosol can of Carburetor Choke Cleaner will remove the gum and sludge that can accumulate in their trigger and firing pin assembly. The combination of Toluene and Acetone quickly dissolves the most stubborn build-up of 3in1 oil; WD-40 and dust, rendering the aforementioned parts squeaky clean. Use this product to clean your trigger group at least once a year. Our next item to purchase is a can of dry Molybdenum Disulfide spray. This dry film lubricant is great for the firing pin assembly and acts as a corrosion preventative as well. It is best applied to a clean surface. I like to warm the parts to be coated using a hair drier until they are warm to the touch. I then spray a uniform coating over the pin assembly and inside the bolt body. A can of M/D spray should last the average hunter/shooter several years.

Cocking Cams and Locking Lugs

These are two of the most overlooked areas for maintenance with most shooters. These are the only two areas that we apply a generous amount of grease and anti-seize compound without fear of causing a mechanical failure. The locking seats in the receiver and the locking lugs should mate well in a good rifle. We've all heard of lapping the lugs for better contact. When we increase the contact area between the lugs and the locking seats in the receiver, we need an anti-seize compound to prevent galling. This galling occurs when the two surfaces are dry and under pressure, either from tight headspace or firing pin spring tension on the bolt. A thin film of anti-seize compound on the backside of the locking lugs prevents this galling from occurring. Grease does not work as well and should not be used as a substitute, unless it's an emergency. Cocking cams require sticky high-pressure grease to keep them in working order. Again galling occurs when these surfaces are dry and excessive spring pressure/tension is present in the cocking stroke on our bolt action rifle. It is a good idea to have the cocking cam and cocking piece polished as well (smoother surfaces work better) These modifications along with a little cam grease will eliminate galling and hard cocking. I've seen galling so severe that the shooter was bending the bolt handle trying to cock the rifle. Holland's Shooter Supply, offers a nice kit containing cam grease and anti-seize compound. These round sealed tins will last the hunter for years and fit nicely in your cleaning box.

Action Screws and Scope Mounts

We often hear complaints of loose action screws and wobbly scope mounts. Really? Being aware of your rifles scope mounts and action screws seem elementary to some, but every year we hear tales of woe as to how a loose scope mount cost the hunter a buck of a lifetime! Get into the habit of checking the rifle prior to going to the range for zero confirmation. This simple check can save a lot of grief as well as ammunition.

Action screws should be torqued uniformly. On pillar bedded rifles 50-55 inch pounds are best. On aluminum bedding blocks as seen in Remington, Winchester and Weatherby rifles, 60-65 inch pounds is best. Always tighten the front and rear screws the same. On 3 screw guns like the Winchester Model 70 and Ruger 77's, tighten the front and rear screws the same and just snug the middle screw. Over tightening the middle screw can affect the bedding and accuracy of the rifle. Make sure the action screws when properly tightened do not interfere with the closing of the bolt. If you feel a slight hesitation, or if the bolt fails to close, it is an indicator that the front guard screw is protruding into the locking recess, which will prevent the bolt from closing completely. This can be disastrous to accuracy. Filing or grinding the screw shorter will remedy the problem.

Getting a Perfect Zero

Confirming our rifles zero should go without saying, yet countless hunters go afield with the confidence that their rifle is dead on with out actually confirming their zero. How many of you have heard the following: Hells Bells, why I sighted the rifle in last season and never fired a shot. Its gotta be zeroed. Besides, these new shells are expensive and I've only a half box left! Sounds like a caption to a Far Side Cartoon. I can't wait to hear the stories at the end of the season.

Without exception, you should confirm your zero prior to hunting. Should you stumble or fall, check your zero. What are the odds of the maid fessing up to the rifle clattering to the floor when she is cleaning the closet? It doesn't take much of a bump to move our point of impact several inches at 100 yds. On a recent trip to Africa, I confirmed zero twice in as many days and was damn glad on the second time, since the rifle's point of impact had indeed changed. Failure to do so would have resulted in a 6-inch error at 200 yds. Knowing that you have confirmed a perfect zero gives you confidence in your rifle. Failure to do so can result in a long march back to camp.

Each and every time we remove the barreled action from the stock we should check the rifles zero. Anytime we tamper with scope mounts or screws, confirm zero. Slip, stumble or fall with the rifle, confirm zero.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with a final thought. Know your limitations! If you are not comfortable with shots over 400 yards, stalk and get closer. It is better to pass on a difficult or iffy shot, wounding or losing an animal is a poor way to end the season.

Until next time...

Respectfully,
Darrell Holland