

Sometimes, It's Harder Than You Think

Member Alan Larson



"Bob, this is frustrating. I don't know if it's worth all the trouble to haul this equipment out here for nothing." My partner and I looked at each other with somber expressions. It was something we were both thinking but afraid to verbalize for fear that saying it out loud might give the notion of giving up some momentum. Giving up was contrary to our nature but this little objective was proving to be more than we had anticipated.

This was the second year we had hauled all our long-range gear – rifles, ammo, benches, chairs, rests, rangefinders, spotting scopes – out to South Dakota, from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, only to have it get in the way of our short-range equipment in the limited space in our pickup truck. We had been coming out west for 10 years; many of those years we brought both long- and short-range equipment. This year we were attempting to get into the 1500 Yard Club. Our plan was to try long range in the mornings and evenings when the wind and mirage were low while spending the remainder of the days shooting prairie dogs at short range.

Most prairie doggers know what I mean by short range. It's longer than either of us had ever shot a larger target whitetail deer back in Michigan. Once in a while, when the wind was low, we could reach out beyond 300 yards but with the wind normally found in this treeless country, 200 yards was a practi-

cal limit yielding a high percentage of hits. Nobody likes wasting ammunition.

However, this year, just as last year, we found the conditions in South Dakota wet, wetter than normal for sure. The wet ground was preventing feedback at our 1500+ yard distances, i.e., we were not seeing dust kick up where our bullets were hitting. Without feedback, it's impossible to adjust your aim depending on where the last bullet hit. So for the fourth day in a row, we reluctantly packed the gear back into the truck and went short-range shooting. Don't get me wrong – short-range prairie dog shooting is the highlight of my calendar year. I will do it as long as I'm able and we keep finding places to hunt. But to put so much energy into the attempt for the 1500 Yard Club and be shut down completely was just demoralizing. We had put a lot of energy into preparation because we knew how hard it would be based on previous years' experiences.

In 2000, the first year Bob and I teamed up to go prairie doggin', we were shooting on the Rosebud reservation when, during a slow afternoon, we decided to try to get into the 500 Yard Club. We used our rangefinders to pick a distant hill with prairie dog activity and started shooting. With a partner, it turned out to be fairly easy. Bob had done it the year before without a partner to witness so he never documented the event. Shooting side by side, not only did we each have a witness, we also had each

other to spot for the other and help make adjustments for the wind and distance. Within a few shots we each had scored several hits and set about documenting the particulars. We moved the truck to where the dead dogs were and used our rangefinders, bouncing the signal off our truck for improved reflectivity. We wrote down a few pertinent facts about the date and location and sent the request in to The Varmint Hunter Magazine. It was an exhilarating afternoon to be sure and it cemented in our minds the desire to go for the next increment in the future.

In 2001, Bob came out prepared to try for 1000 yards. I did not have a rifle capable of that distance so he worked on it alone. Again, he found it impossible to accomplish without a partner sitting at his side. This time, it was not so much documenting the event as having a spotter. And at 1000+ yards it also was necessary to do a little more pre-work on establishing the exact distance. He managed to take down a prairie dog at a long range only to find out that it was only 872 yards when measured out. So he was in the "half mile" club, not that there is such a thing. We had learned that one needs a partner and the distance needs to be mapped out beforehand to make sure your efforts are not wasted.

In 2002, we came out both equipped with rifles capable of holding 0.5 moa and able to resist wind drift better than the 22 calibers we had used for the 500

Yard Club. Bob was using a 7mm STW that he built on a Savage action and he had built a 6.5-284 for me on a Remington SA700. Both rifles had Hart barrels.

We set up our range on the first day. We found our rangefinders would not work well so we resorted to using a gps unit to establish target and shooting points at least 1000 yards apart. We set out flags at the target area and at our shooting points so we would know that we were aiming at targets far enough away to qualify. The next day turned out clear but windy so we waited until evening. The wind died down toward evening and we got set up. It didn't take very long before each of us had prairie dog kills documented at 1000+ yards. This year we were hunting on the northern edge of South Dakota, and as it turned out, we had shot from South Dakota and killed dogs in North Dakota. As we enjoyed the moment and thought about all the effort this had taken, we realized this was much more than twice as hard as 500 yards and much more rewarding to accomplish.

In 2004 we brought all our long-range gear to make an attempt at getting into the 1500 Yard Club. We had done a lot of off-season preparations, including shimming of the scope mount in order to reach 1500 yards and establishing the "come ups" necessary to hit at that distance. We even brought along a laptop computer so that we could run a ballistics program to help us with the wind and el-

evation adjustments necessary. But it was not to be. Try as we did, we could not see the dust kick up where our bullets were hitting because the ground was wet. After several days of wasting ammunition, we gave up for the year. We did decide to bring along another heavy piece of equipment next year – a steel gong to shoot at in order to get feedback should we find wet conditions the following year.

Well, we did find wet conditions in 2005 – again. And, as related in the beginning of this story, we saw no dust for feedback. We did manage to shoot groups onto the gong, which told us our rifles were capable. However, as soon as we moved off the gong, we had no idea by how much we were missing those squirrel-sized targets. So we packed away the long-range gear under all the short-range gear so it would not constantly be in the way.

2006. By now we were seriously wondering if it made sense to haul all this long-range equipment out here and put up with it taking up precious room. Was it really worth all the effort? Yes, we had to. We just couldn't give up. This year we had two others going with us and we planned our trip to include a few days in South Dakota with the second half of the trip spent in Montana. Conditions were either stormy or too windy the entire time in South Dakota to even make an attempt. Once we arrived in Montana, things were looking up as the soil conditions were dry and the opportunities to find

shooting points 1500 yards away from the targets were all over the place. We set up one relatively quiet morning on top of a hill and started shooting at prairie dogs below us at just over 1,600 yards away. We missed, and missed again. It seemed like we were just barely missing below the dogs. We would make an adjustment and shoot again. This time we were over the top. @#%!, this is hard. Fifteen hundred yards is geometrically harder than 1,000 yards. Then it got worse, as the wind started picking up and we started to learn how little wind it took to blow you way off your target at 1,600 yards. We were just about to quit for the day when the other two in our party came up on their 4-wheelers to see how it was going. We told them the sad truth – it was not going well at all. It pays to have friends because they offered to help by going downrange, but at a 30-degree angle. They would be away from us about the same distance but 400 yards off to the side, peeking over a rise to watch where our bullets were striking. This was the magic answer to our problem. Using two-way radios, they would tell us that what looked like a near miss, just in front of the target, was, in fact, 50 yards short. Ahhh, our depth perception was fooling us. With suggestions from our downrange friends, we zeroed in on our targets and within an hour we both had knocked over prairie dogs and qualified for the 1500 Yard Club. Lesson: windage errors are easy to see at any distance if you get the dust feedback but elevation errors can be deceiving at long distance.

Wahoo and whadayano. We finally did it! We took pictures, slapped ourselves on the back and basked in the relief that it was finally over. And you know what? We were not left with a real desire to go for the 2000 Yard Club. Yet.

But as I write this in 2013, the urge to go for the next increment has taken seed and is beginning to sprout. I might need to change calibers as a 6.5-284 will not remain supersonic much beyond 1800 yards. But I could go with Bob's chambering. His is capable of staying supersonic beyond 2000 yards because of the increased speed and the superior ballistics of the 180-grain Berger bullets he shoots. Now, what else do we need to prepare? Hmm, how about our heads for the possibility that this might be harder than we think.



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