



# Blood Trails

Making and Following Them

By John Barsness

**E**ven magnum cartridges don't always drop big game animals instantly, like bad guys being bowled over in a Hollywood action flick. We can place our bullets perfectly, and a deer or elk can still run 50 yards before falling – and sometimes even farther. The reason is simple. Most big game hunters think a perfect shot lands just behind an animal's shoulder, where an expanding bullet puts a major hole through both lungs, but it takes a few seconds for blood pressure to drop. An awful lot of big game lives in and around brush and timber, where a 50-yard run can take it out of sight, and even sagebrush or tall grass can hide a fallen animal so completely a hunter can't see it unless standing a few feet away.

Also, occasionally we don't make a perfect shot. Some hunters claim they've never wounded an animal, but if so, they haven't hunted much. Hunt long enough and something will eventually go wrong. A deer will take a step just as the trigger is pulled, or an unseen twig will deflect the bullet.

Many hunters also don't bother to check the area where an animal stood when they shot. Since the animal

didn't react to the shot, they assume the bullet missed, which might be termed the Hollywood Syndrome. Twenty years ago, I was hiking back to my pickup along a forest service road after hunting elk when another pickup, headed the other way, stopped beside me. Inside were a father and his teenage son. The father did the talking, saying they'd "gotten some shooting" that morning at 600 yards, but none of the elk fell. Since he and his son both carried .300 Winchester Magnums that "always knock 'em down," they didn't bother going over and checking.

Sometimes animals don't react to being hit with a .300 Winchester Magnum, or even more powerful cartridges, so unless we absolutely know our bullet missed, we're obligated to check for signs of a hit. The surest sign is blood, though sometimes it's a hair cut from the animal's body – and once we find hair, we should keep looking for blood.

Unfortunately, animals don't always start bleeding immediately, even after a fatal shot. Not all bullets exit, and entry holes are usually small, since the bullet hasn't expanded yet. If a bullet exits in the top half of the animal, it takes some time for internal bleeding to fill the chest, like an overflowing sink. Bullet holes can also get plugged by fat or flesh. This happens often with pigs and bears but can happen with deer or elk too.

So we have to *really* search for blood. This doesn't mean a quick glance where the animal stood. Instead, it means *closely* examining the ground, and not just where the animal stood but in the direction it ran.

# Blood Trails

I once shot at a big mule deer buck standing broad-side just about 100 yards away. At the shot, the buck turned and disappeared. I ran over there and found myself on the edge of 10-foot sandstone cliff, and below the rimrock lay 250 yards of open grass ending in ponderosa pine timber, with no buck in sight. Instead of assuming a miss, I got down on my hands and knees and crawled around where the buck had stood, looking at the ground from a few inches, and found one drop of bright blood the size of a match head.

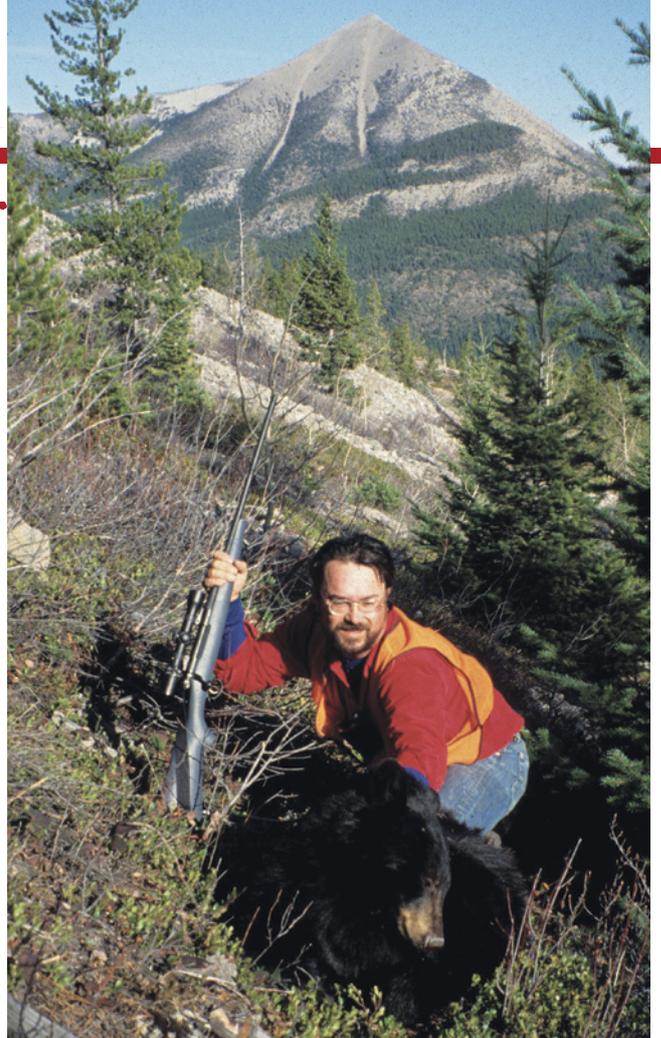
The color of blood can tell us a lot. Bright red usually means lung blood, and a lung shot is almost always fatal. The crosshairs of my scope had been right behind the buck's shoulder when the .257 Roberts went off, so the odds were the deer was already dead. But tall grass between me and the buck had covered the bottom of his chest, forcing me to aim a little higher than normal. This meant the buck might not bleed much at first – as the single drop of blood indicated.

I found a place to crawl down the rimrock but couldn't find any more blood along the base of the rocks. The frozen ground couldn't be dented with anything short of a backhoe and was covered by bunch grass that, in places, grew shin-high. I started walking, back and forth, bent over, looking for any more blood while heading downhill toward the timber, the buck's logical escape route. Every couple of minutes I had to straighten up to ease my back, and eventually started to doubt the deer would be found. But I kept at it, and 45 minutes after leaving the rimrock I stopped to stretch one more time and saw an odd stick rising out of the grass 30 feet away. As I walked toward the stick, it turned into a mule deer antler and then my buck lying in the grass.

The bullet hadn't expanded much. The hole through the lungs was only about the diameter of a quarter, and the momentum of his downhill run carried the deer



One reason .35-caliber rifles are popular among some more traditional hunters is the bullets tend to leave good-sized exit holes.



Bears often don't bleed much thanks to fat plugging bullet holes. This fall black bear did leave a good blood trail, due to a 160-grain 7mm bullet that left a big exit hole in the ribs.

almost 200 yards from the rimrock. The first sign of blood after the tiny drop was right where he fell.

I've taken dozens of animals, from pronghorn to pigs, with the .257 Roberts, including more big mule deer, and never had one travel more than 40 yards after being hit. No doubt the "hard" bullet was part of the problem that day, as the manufacturer modified it a couple of years later to open more widely and violently, but the new bullet might not have exited.

One of the odd contradictions of expanding bullets is the higher the percentage of disintegration, the quicker the bullet kills, on average, but the lower the odds of an exit hole and blood trail. I've been keeping notes on the big game animals my companions and I have taken for over 45 years, and in the past dozen years, my notes included how far the animal traveled after a solid heart-lung shot. The quickest-killing bullet turned out to be the Berger Hunting VLD, with an average of 18 yards, because Hunting VLD's mostly turn into shrapnel after they penetrate a couple of inches. Other shrapnel-creating bullets, such as the Hornady SST and Nosler Ballistic Tip, kill almost as quickly.

The slowest-killing bullets were the various monolithic or near-monolithic bullets, such as the Barnes

Triple-Shock, North Fork, Nosler E-Tip and others, designed to retain nearly all their weight and penetrate very deeply. Lung-shot animals traveled an average of a little over 50 yards before falling, contradicting the common notion that higher weight retention results in extra “killing power.” While such bullets penetrate deeply, their wound channel is smaller, with no collateral damage from shrapnel.

Between those extremes are lead-cored bullets that lose a smaller percentage of their weight. Some expand into a wider mushroom, making a bigger hole, but a wider mushroom also tends to result in fewer exit holes.

While deep-penetrating bullets tend to exit more often, especially monometals, they don't always leave a good blood trail. In calibers under .30, the exit may not be big enough to result in much bleeding. As with my mule deer, blood can help even in relatively open country, but in woods or brush, we need all the help we can get.

Of course, we can try to shoot animals so they'll drop on the spot. Some hunters think a shot through both shoulders will always drop an animal, but I've seen big deer and elk go 25 yards or more with both shoulders broken – and not every shot through a shoulder breaks bone. The only sure way to put animals down quickly is to disrupt the central nervous system with a bullet in the brain or spinal cord. The trouble with either of these shots is a higher risk of missing.

The brain of a typical herbivore isn't very large compared to its skull, and the spinal cord is relatively thin. I've now lost count of the number of big game animals I've seen dropped with brain and spine shots that got up and ran off, sometimes never to be found, one reason I rarely use head or neck shots except under ideal conditions. Obviously, close range and a steady rest help, but even then a neck shot becomes more certain when taken



Bullets under .30 caliber don't leave blood trails as reliably as bullets from .30 up, but there are exceptions. Eileen Clarke shot this cow bison behind the shoulder with a .270 Winchester and a 130-grain Barnes TSX, and the exit hole left a good blood trail. The bison went less than 50 yards through thick brush along a dry streambed. The trail came in handy.

from only directly in front of or behind the animal, with the spine obviously centered in the neck – and a pig's spine, just in front of the shoulders, is also centered in the neck.

The biggest target for a drop-'em-there shot is about three-quarters of the way up the body, right through the center of the shoulder, with the animal standing more-or-less broadside. This placement usually also breaks the spine and is often favored by hunters using monometal



A blood trail is particularly handy when hunting herd animals, whether elk or wildebeest, because it helps sort one animal from several.

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bullets, both because it prevents the animal from running off and because monometal bullets don't destroy as much meat as lead-cored bullets.

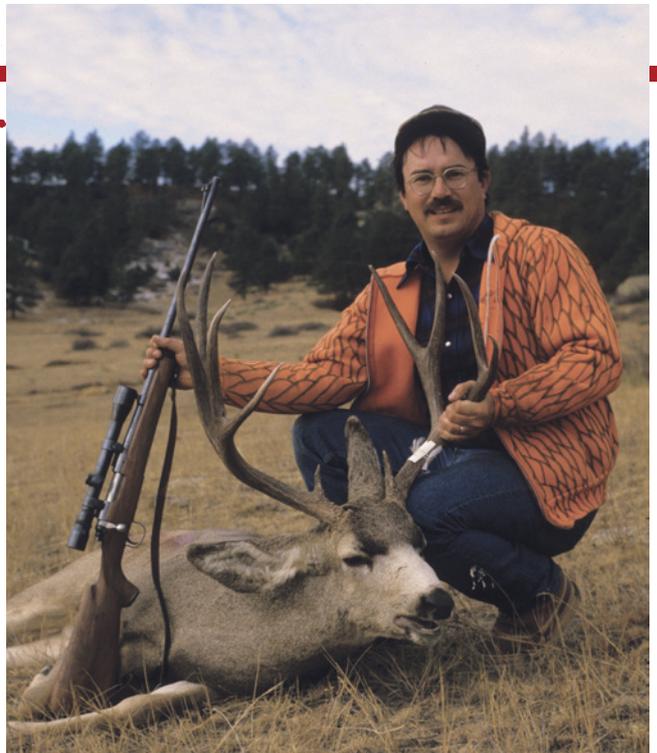
Unfortunately, if the shoulder-spine shot misses a little high, the animal may drop but will probably get up and run off, usually leaving very little blood. A couple of years ago in Tanzania, I killed a Cape buffalo with two healed bullet scars on the top of its shoulders, and between the scars one of the little "ribs" sticking up from each vertebrae was missing. Somebody obviously had tried the shoulder/spine shot and missed high. I wonder what happened then!

The typical behind-the-shoulder shot offers a much larger vital area and leaves more meat for the table. There are two basic ways to ensure a decent blood trail when shooting for the lungs. First, use enough bullet in diameter, weight and construction to punch a good-sized exit hole – and enough diameter can even provide a blood trail from the entrance hole. Second, try to place the bullet no more than halfway up from the bottom of the chest, allowing blood to drip from any hole as quickly as possible.

Unless the blood trail is really obvious, which usually means it won't be a long trail, the best way to blood-trail is with at least two people. One person should be looking ahead of the trail, rifle ready, just in case they actually see the animal. The other person should do the actual trailing, since with eyes on the ground they're not likely to see the animal in time for a shot. In thicker cover, look at brush and trees where the animal might have brushed blood off its body. Blood from the top half of the body often shows up on tall grass or branches.

Bright red blood means a lung or

Years ago, John shot this mule deer right behind the shoulder, yet it traveled close to 200 yards before falling. He followed it up after finding a single drop of blood, then spotted an antler tine poking up through bunch grass.



artery shot, since the blood is oxygenated and on its way to the organs, and is normally hopeful, though I've seen animals go a long way even when chunks of lung ended up on the ground. Muscle or vein blood is darker, and if sparse may mean a flesh wound, especially if the blood occurs around one particular leg. If intestinal contents (usually green or brown in herbivorous animals) are mixed with the blood, you may want to back off and wait an hour or even more. Gut-shot animals can be extremely difficult to approach when freshly wounded. Waiting allows their adrenalin to wear off and, possibly, a lucky nick in an artery or vein to do its work.

If the blood trail ends, leave something visible at the last sign of blood before ranging very far to pick up the trail again. Toilet paper has more than one use for hunters, and is biodegradable.

Don't assume the animal will keep going in the same direction; quite often the end of a blood trail means the animal felt weak and veered off to one side. Last year in Texas, a friend shot a small pig and it dashed into some brush. We im-

mediately found bright lung blood but lost the trail after 25 yards. Arbitrarily, I turned to the left and found more blood within 30 feet – and the dead pig after 40 feet, pointing back toward where we'd first seen it.

In dim light a blue filter on a flashlight makes red show up quite distinctly, and several sprays on the market react with blood to produce a blue glow. Originally developed for law enforcement, the sprays work in the deer woods too. A popular home-made solution is hydrogen peroxide in a spray bottle, which foams when it hits blood. (Any hunter should have some peroxide at home anyway, as it's the cheapest way to remove blood from hunting clothes.) Sprays work, but your supply can run out before the end of the trail, and require carrying something else in your pack. Most of us carry a flashlight anyway.

Yes, we can make a perfect shot with a bullet that kills quickly, but even then we'll sometimes have to follow up. That simple fact will always be part of hunting, the reason blood trailing will always be one of big game hunting's essential skills. 🦌