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Shooting Sticks

How come we don't use them?

By Craig Boddington

Three-legged shooting sticks are in such universal use in Africa that we often call them "African shooting sticks." Over here we mess around almost endlessly with bipods and monopods and a wild assortment of Rube Goldberg gadgets, so I'm darned if I can figure out why more American hunters don't use the one shooting aid that absolutely, positively works the best under the worst conditions: three-legged shooting sticks.



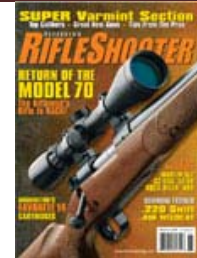
It takes a lot of practice to use the supporting hand correctly with shooting sticks. Ideally, the fore-end should rest on the hand, not on the sticks, so the fingers must grip the sticks as well as the rifle.

It's true that Africa is a bit different. You are almost never alone, and the lead tracker or PH usually carries the shooting sticks. We don't often have such luxuries in the U.S., so if you're hunting on your own, you have to carry them yourself. They don't make bad walking sticks, but there are tradeoffs to be made. The stronger the sticks, the more rigid they will be, but also heavier.

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Shooting sticks are not the universal answer. Nothing is as steady as a solid rest. Failing a stout rock or log that, when padded properly, becomes like a field bench rest, the next-best thing is probably a bipod that you can sit down with or, better, lie prone.

The rules don't change: Mother Earth is the source of stability, and the closer you can get to her, the steadier you will be. However, in much hunting in Africa (and a lot of hunting elsewhere) the brush or grass is too high to allow you to lie down or sit and still be able to see the target. Also, in Africa most trees have far too many thorns to offer suitable standing rests. So a makeshift tripod standing rest is in almost universal use there. If you're considering an African hunt, I strongly suggest you either make one or obtain a commercial version, and even if you aren't Africa-bound, I still recommend you get hold of some sticks and try them. On the range they offer excellent practice, and in the field they are fast and, with practice, surprisingly steady.

There are essentially two ways to make the sticks: three sticks of equal length, about as tall as the shooter, or two sticks "shooter-high" and a third stick about three inches shorter. Either way, the sticks are joined by a flexible wrapping (a strip cut from an old innertube works perfectly) about three inches down from the top. If the sticks are of equal length you have a tripod both top and bottom and must fit your rifle into the web where the three sticks join. If you use one stick shorter than the other, you have a tripod below and an obvious fore-end rest created by the tips of the two longer sticks.

I don't personally have a preference because this is one of the tricky parts: You must not rest your fore-end (and certainly not your barrel) directly on the sticks. Instead, you place your supporting hand on the intersection, grasping both the sticks and the rifle. Getting the height right is absolutely critical and also takes practice; with the tripod legs spread you want the intersection a bit below shoulder height so you can spread your own legs slightly, leaning into the rifle with your body and pulling back on the sticks with your supporting hand, sort of like isometric pressure.

Shooting sticks are fast and wonderful for normal shooting distances--say, 100 to 250 yards--when it's just too far to shoot unsupported, when there isn't time to find a solid rest or when there just plain isn't a solid rest because of terrain or vegetation. I just returned from a wonderful hunt in Namibia, where my buddy, professional hunter Dirk de Bod, is a dedicated shooting-sticks guy. He carries them himself, always.

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