

You can't shoot what you can't see

By Tom Armstrong



T. Armstrong Photo

As we walked down the long narrow cut at first light, we saw something appear on the ridge ahead, about 500 yards away. As we saw it cross into the open, we all stopped and stared, shocked at the size of the whitetail buck we were staring at. We watched it quickly make its way across the narrow cut and disappear into the distance.

Several hours later, after sitting in the fog and rain all morning, the three of us met up and were standing talking in the middle of the cut, when suddenly I saw a deer appear in the gully below us. It had to be the same deer we had seen first thing that morning. This buck had apparently been consumed by the foolishness of the rut. An old mature buck wandering out in the open. I couldn't believe our good fortune as we saw him step out, and as I tried to calm my nerves and get the gun up, I was met with a disheartening sight; a totally fogged up scope.

I frantically tried to clear it and get a line on the deer, reality kicked in for him, and he decided it was time to vacate. As I thought I had a good bead on him through the rain, fog, and my nearly useless scope, I took a shot, and watched it kick up dirt in the hillside just below him, before he turned tail and ran, never to be seen again.

After this happened a number of years ago, I quickly realized the need for quality optics when hunting. Having a quality scope mounted on your rifle, and some quality binoculars around your neck is an essential part of your hunting gear. These tools can be priceless, helping you locate and identify game, and make accurate shots.

When looking at a riflescope or binoculars, there are a number of factors to consider. Budget is one; you can undoubtedly go cheap, but this is something where you definitely get what you pay for, and although you may not need to completely break the bank, this is one piece of equipment I wouldn't cheap out on. After all that's invested in your hunt, good quality optics can make it all come together.

Scope Magnification: When looking at what magnification or power scope to buy, consider what you are most likely to be using it for. You can purchase a scope with a fixed magnification (commonly 4x magnification), or with a variable magnification. The most common you will likely see is a scope with a magnification of 3x-9x, giving you a wide range to work with. Using an adjustable scope on low magnification is a good idea when long shooting isn't likely, and especially when you may need to acquire a target quickly or acquire a moving target. The more you increase the magnification, the more your field of view shrinks, limiting what you can see less through the scope, making it slightly more difficult to acquire targets as quickly, especially with moving targets.

If you are hunting in tight bush, where fast target acquisition is necessary, turning the magnification down is a must. The advantage of the variable power scopes is having the ability to turn it right down in these types of situations to increase your field of view, and increase it when more magnification is required for some longer shooting. You can get scopes with more magnification, but for most people 3-9x is likely all you will ever need. If you are only ever hunting in close quarters something like a 2x-7x could be a suitable option as well.

Eye Relief: another important factor to consider is the eye relief with the scope you are using; which is essentially the distance your eye can be from the scope allowing you to clearly see through the entire scope, without a part of it being blacked out by a ring around the outer edge. Scopes with a longer eye relief may allow you more flexibility when mounting the scope, allowing you to do so more comfortably, and also may reduce the risk that your eyebrow may someday meet your scope when shooting, leaving you a tell-tale, somewhat embarrassing mark.

Waterproof/Fogproofing: getting a pair of binoculars or a riflescope that is water and fog proof has proven to me to be an essential element when purchasing new optics, thus avoiding encounters like the one I found myself in mentioned earlier. After several years of owning a pair of Vortex Diamondback binos, I mounted a matching Vortex scope on my rifle, eliminating any further problems.

Light gathering ability is another important factor when looking at scopes and binoculars, as much of your shooting opportunities occur during the low light periods at dawn and dusk, making a quality scope for the shot or binoculars for glassing priceless. Generally the better quality optics you buy, the better light gathering capabilities it will have. For example, when using them in low light, my Diamondback binoculars, for a modestly priced pair of binoculars, offer an incredible quality image, with great light gathering ability; even on cloudy dark nights when totally unable to see with the naked eye, they draw light in and illuminate fields or the woods remarkably well. Often during that time of peak activity, during the last half hour of legal light, is the hardest time to see, with deer or moose blending into the shadows, and without quality binos to see them and a quality scope to allow you to take the shot, you would be out of luck.

When looking at the objective lens on scopes, one of the most common would be a 40mm objective lens, but you can get bigger or smaller, depending on your preference. A 40mm lens is a good balance between height and size, as well as offering good light gathering abilities.

With summer finally upon us, now is a great time to start looking for optics for the upcoming fall hunt. Do your research and take the time to properly mount and sight in your scope. Make sure to shoot your rifle throughout the summer to get comfortable with it and ensure you're ready for fall.