

Shooting Sports in the White Mountains

By Dan Groebner

Having nice weather almost every day here in the White Mountains, we have great opportunities to sharpen our marksmanship skills just for the fun of it or for a more competitive angle if you are one of those kinds of people. Summer visitors and year-round residents now have more opportunities than ever to enjoy the safe activities of organized shooting sports. What are shooting sports? Do you have to be former law enforcement, military or a current cowboy or Annie Oakley to participate? Absolutely not!

Shooting sports include everything from traditional trap and skeet where you try your best to bust up a small fragile Frisbee, called a clay pigeon, with a shotgun shooting many bbs, to target shooting large caliber single projectile rifles at extremely long ranges. In between are activities like sporting clays, where the targets move in directions simulating wild game, such as rabbits along the ground and waterfowl screaming past high in the air. The most popular shooting sport is sometimes called “plinking” where low cost ammo and targets can provide hours of entertainment. This can include small caliber and mild recoiling rifles to pistols designed for target shooting.

Shooting sports don't always have to include firearms though. Archery target ranges and activities are becoming very popular with many fun and relaxed events along with highly competitive and challenging contests. Archers can use the economical and easy-to-use recurve bows as well as the modern compound bows with all the bells and whistles. One nice thing about archery is that your ammo is mostly reusable (unless you regularly miss the target and keep losing arrows, like some of us).

Shooting sports are fun for almost everybody since there is no real advantage to being built like a football player or being young and self-confident with cat-like reflexes. To get started, smaller bodies can use smaller rifles and shotguns. The kick of a .410 shotgun is very mild but they throw out a nice pattern of bbs to bust up any clay pigeon. The popular .22 caliber is a great target rifle for any age and is the most economical choice as far as ammo and accessories are concerned.

Archers can also choose from different sized bows depending on body size or physical strength. The power of a bow is described by how many pounds of pulling force on the string it takes to pull it back to a full draw. This is where compound bows offer an advantage over recurve bows, as the cams, wheels, and pulleys that are part of the compound bow make it easier to pull the bow to full draw after you pull the string about half-way. Once you have the bow at full draw, you can hold that position longer while you line up your sights or concentrate on your target.

So where can we hone our skills if we already know how to shoot? And where can a person go who is just getting into shooting sports and wants to get some informal instruction? Fortunately, there are plenty of opportunities in the White Mountains depending on which sport you choose. There are even programs for students with the Game and Fish Department's Scholastic Clay Target Program and the Archery in Schools activities.

Folks wanting to try out rifle and pistol target sports have a brand-new facility available 4.4 miles east of Highway 77 on Highway 60, just west of the Bourdan Ranch Road. Watch for the Second Knoll Target Range sign on the right. The target range includes 50 and 100-yard ranges and four separate 25-yard

pistol bays. The facility is open 9-5 on Saturday, Sundays and Mondays. A non-profit organization, the White Mountain Shooters Association, runs the facility under contract with the Arizona Game and Fish Department with a special use permit provided by the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests for about 80 acres of National Forest land. For more information, log onto msainc.org. Once you get comfortable with the basics, it could be time to get involved with the more competitive side of the sport, like the Practical Shooters Association's pistol, rifle and 3-Gun matches.

According to the Arizona Game and Fish Department, "The Second Knoll Target Range was built with the vision of providing a safe, public shooting facility with the added benefit of reducing dispersed shooting on public lands. In addition to recreational shooting, the range is also used for Hunter Education field day instruction, firearms instruction and shooting competitions."

The White Mountain Clay Target Club offers trap, skeet and sporting clays shooting at their site east of White Mountain Lakes. One of Game and Fish's Scholastic Clay Target Programs, the White Mountain Clay Busters, is based out of this range. The Clay Target Program gets students from 9 years old to college graduates involved in organized team competitions "to instill life skills such as discipline, safety, teamwork, ethics, self-confidence and other life values." Activities occur during the school year and include fun shoots and competitions about every other weekend. This past year, according to Mike Thrasher, head coach for the team, the Clay Busters had one state champion and two young women going to the Nationals.

The St. Johns Area Scholastic Clay Target Team, Leading Edge Shooters, utilizes the St Johns Shooting Range and is coached by Bowen Udall. Bowen is also president of the Northeastern Arizona Sportsman's Association which sponsors many other activities including administration of the shooting range. If you are a summer visitor, contact the Shooting Sports Coordinator of the Arizona Game and Fish Department at (623) 236-7402 to find a chapter in your area.

We haven't forgotten about you archers out there, as this shooting sport gained popularity recently thanks to a series of big Hollywood movies. Archery is actually being integrated into the physical education curriculum of many schools in Arizona through the Arizona Archery in the Schools Program.

Flinging arrows is not just for school kids though, as plenty of opportunities exist for us old guys in the White Mountains. The White Mountain Archery Range is managed by the White Mountain Bowhunters Organization, under an agreement with Game and Fish, where they host traditional FITA target and 3-D shoots using life-sized foam animal targets. FITA is a French acronym for the World Archery Federation and describes a competition format where participants shoot 36 arrows at four different targets set at ranges from 30 to 90 meters. The club is also planning a money shoot as well as a Zombie Night and a 3-D fun shoot in Alpine. For a schedule and more information, contact the White Mountains Bowhunters below. The club also recently sponsored the Norm Pint Memorial 3-D Shoot in Show Low (see photo), adjacent to Show Low High School.

One of the largest 3-D shoots in the southwest happens at Sunrise Ski area around every Fourth of July (June 29-July 4, 2017). Make sure you bring a range-finder to determine the exact distance to the targets if you want to score well (or even bring a few arrows back home with you!). The Sunrise event includes numerous courses from beginners to advanced, with prize money available for the most competitive archers out there. Google "Sunrise Ski Park AZ 3-D Shootout" for more information.

Getting involved in shooting sports is another great excuse to get outside here in the White Mountains, especially with some new facilities and active organizations. Becoming part of these organizations gets you access to some first-rate ranges so you don't have to take your chances at an old cinder pit where safety rules are non-existent with that group next to you letting fly with an AR semi-automatic rifle. Using the well-organized and safe ranges makes hiking our cinder cones even safer and avoids giving our sport a bad name with the ground littered by spent shells, garbage and exotic targets such as old TVs and refrigerators (which is littering, of course – even if you hit where you were aiming).

Shooting sports can involve almost anybody, even if you have a disability or aren't in the best shape. Just start slow and get help using some of the latest equipment. Getting your child involved with school archery or clay target programs can teach them responsibility, safety and help them learn that “guns are a tool, not a weapon” as Bowen Udall coaches his shooters.

White Mountain Scholastic Clay Target Teams:

White Mountain Clay Busters Mike Thrasher (928) 242-2396 shotguncoach5@gmail.com

Leading Edge Shooters Bowen Udall (928)245-3666 bowen.udall@nasashootingsports.com

Shooting Sports Clubs and Organizations:

White Mountain Shooters Assn. (928) 205-3609 www.wmsainc.org

White Mountain Rod and Gun (928) 333-5692 dmcdowell.dm@gmail.com

White Mountain Practical Shooters (928) 367-4519 www.wmpracticalshooters.org

White Mountain Bowhunters (928) 242-4218 archery15@cablone.net

Shooting Ranges:

Second Knoll Target Range Show Low (928) 205-3609

Silver Creek Archery Range Show Low (928) 242-1285

Timber Mesa Outdoors Show Low (602) 537-9808

White Mountain Clay Target Club White Mountain Lakes (928) 242-2396