



BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO

SHOTGUN SHOOTING

Everything you need to start shooting with confidence

- | | |
|----|-------------------------------|
| 01 | Gauge Selection & Ammunition |
| 02 | Safety & Range Etiquette |
| 03 | Stance & Mount Basics |
| 04 | Aiming & Shooting Technique |
| 05 | Practice Drills & Progression |

01 Gauge Selection & Ammunition

Choosing the right gauge is the most important decision for a new shotgun shooter. The three most common gauges — .410, 20 gauge, and 12 gauge — each have distinct characteristics that affect recoil, range, and intended use. Visit a reputable gun shop and, where possible, try all three before purchasing.

Gauge Comparison at a Glance

Gauge	Bore Dia.	Shell Length	Recoil	Best For
.410	.410" (10.4mm)	2½ or 3"	Very Light	Youth, small game, close-range clay targets
20 Gauge	.615" (15.6mm)	2¾ or 3"	Moderate	Youth/adults, upland birds, sport shooting, home defence
12 Gauge	.729" (18.5mm)	2¾, 3 or 3½"	Mod.–Heavy	General purpose, waterfowl, deer, competition

Understanding Shot Loads

Shotgun shells are loaded with a powder charge, wad, and either shot pellets or a single slug. Shot size is denoted by number — smaller numbers mean larger pellets. Match your load to the target or quarry.

Shot Type	Common Sizes	Typical Use
Birdshot (fine)	#7½, #8, #9	Clay targets (skeet/trap), dove, small birds
Birdshot (coarse)	#4, #5, #6	Pheasant, rabbit, squirrel
Buckshot	#4, #1, 00 Buck	Deer, home defence, larger game
Slugs	Foster / Sabot	Deer at range, jurisdictions restricting rifles
.410 Loads	#7½, #9 (light only)	Target practice & small game — limited range

■ PRO SHOP ADVICE

Always match your shell's chamber length to your shotgun. Firing a 3" shell in a 2¾" chamber can cause dangerous pressure spikes. Check the barrel stamp or owner's manual before purchase. Ask shop staff to recommend the right gauge, choke, and load for your intended use.

Choke Tubes — Controlling Your Pattern

A choke is a constriction at the muzzle that controls how tightly pellets group downrange. Most modern shotguns use interchangeable screw-in chokes. Matching choke to target distance is key.

Choke	Constriction	Effective Range	Best Use
Cylinder (CYL)	None	0–20 yds	Home defence, slugs, very close targets
Improved Cylinder	Light	20–30 yds	Skeet, flushing birds, rabbit
Modified	Medium	30–40 yds	General purpose, trap, pheasant
Full	Tight	40–50 yds	Trap, long-range ducks, turkey

02 Safety & Range Etiquette

Shotgun shooting is an extremely safe sport when fundamental rules are followed without exception. Treat every firearm as if it is loaded — every time, without compromise.

The Four Universal Firearm Safety Rules

- Treat every firearm as if it is always loaded.
- Never point the muzzle at anything you are not willing to destroy.
- Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target and you have decided to shoot.
- Know your target and what is beyond it — shot travels far and can ricochet.

Shotgun-Specific Safety Rules

- Always open the action (break the barrel / rack the slide) when not actively shooting.
- Keep the muzzle pointed downrange or at the ground — never skyward or behind the line.
- Do not load the chamber until you are on the shooting station and it is your turn.
- Carry a break-action shotgun broken open; carry a semi-auto or pump with the action open.
- Inspect every shell before loading — check for dents, cracks, or incorrect gauge markings.
- Never force a shell that does not chamber smoothly — have it inspected first.
- Ear and eye protection are mandatory for every shooter and bystander on the range.

■ DRY-FIRE & SNAP CAPS

Most modern shotguns can be dry-fired occasionally, but repeated dry-firing can damage the firing pin. Use snap caps (dummy rounds) when practising trigger pull, mount, or swing at home. Always double-check the chamber and magazine are clear before any dry-fire practice.

Range Commands You Must Know

Command	Meaning
"Shooters to the line"	Move to your station and prepare — do not load yet
"Load and make ready"	You may now load and close the action
"Pull" / "Mark"	Shooter's call to release the clay target
"Cease fire"	Stop immediately — open action, remove shells, step back
"All clear / guns down"	Shooting is finished; ensure guns are open and safe
"Walk"	Proceed downrange to retrieve targets or check boards

General Range Etiquette

- Arrive early and introduce yourself to the range safety officer (RSO).
- Never handle another shooter's firearm without explicit permission.
- Keep noise and movement to a minimum while someone is on the shooting station.
- Always congratulate fellow shooters — positive atmosphere makes everyone improve faster.
- Clean up your spent shells — many ranges require you to collect hulls or place them in bins.

03 Stance & Mount Basics

Unlike a rifle or pistol, a shotgun is a moving gun — you swing through a flying target. Good stance provides a stable platform for that movement, while a consistent gun mount ensures the same sight picture shot after shot.

The Stance

- Face the anticipated break point of the target, not the launch point — this is the athletic stance.
- Feet shoulder-width apart; lead foot (opposite shooting hand) angled 30–45° toward the break point.
- Weight slightly forward on the lead foot — roughly 60/40 distribution. Never lean back.
- Knees soft with a slight micro-bend; locked knees cause you to stop the swing.
- Hips and shoulders relaxed — tension in the torso restricts your follow-through swing.

The Gun Mount

A consistent mount is the foundation of accuracy with a shotgun. The gun must come to the same position on your cheek and shoulder every time. Practise the mount at home — with an unloaded, verified-clear firearm — before going to the range.

- Grip: shooting hand wraps the pistol grip firmly but not tightly; trigger finger outside the guard until ready.
- Lead hand: positioned under the fore-end, supporting and guiding the swing — not gripping tightly.
- Cheek weld: bring the gun up to your cheek, not your cheek down to the gun. This is critical.
- Stock should sit in the pocket of your shoulder — not on the top of the shoulder or chest.
- Your eye should naturally align along the rib (top of barrel) to the bead sight.
- Both eyes open for shotgunning — you need full peripheral vision to track a moving target.

■ THE BONE-ON-BONE PRINCIPLE

Good shotgun stance uses skeletal support, not muscle tension. If you are fighting the gun, something is wrong with your mount or fit. A shotgun that fits poorly will always feel uncomfortable and will not point where your eyes are looking. Have a gun fitter or experienced coach check that the length of pull, drop at comb, and cast suit your physique.

Gun Fit — Why It Matters

Measurement	What It Affects	Quick Check
Length of Pull	Distance from trigger to butt pad; controls comfort and mount speed	With gun mounted, trigger finger should reach trigger with a slight bend
Drop at Comb	Height of stock; controls where your eye aligns with the rib	On mount, your eye should sit naturally just above the rib
Cast Off/On	Lateral bend of stock to align barrel with dominant eye	On mount, bead should be centred — not drifting left or right

04 Aiming & Shooting Technique

Shotgunning is fundamentally different from rifle shooting — you do not aim at where the target is, you shoot at where it will be. Lead, swing, and follow-through replace the static sight picture of rifle shooting.

The Three Methods of Lead

Method	How It Works	Best For
Swing-Through	Start behind the target, swing through and past it, fire as the barrel overtakes it — keep swinging. The most natural method for beginners.	Beginners, crossing targets, skeet
Maintained Lead	Establish the correct lead gap in front of the target before the mount is complete, maintain that gap throughout and fire.	Sporting clays, driven birds, experienced shooters
Pull-Away	Mount on the target, then accelerate the barrel away to establish lead, then fire.	Trap, quartering-away birds

Shot Execution — Step by Step

1. Call for the target ("Pull") or wait for the throw — eyes soft-focused on the launch window.
2. Pick up the target visually as early as possible — read its line and speed.
3. Begin your swing toward the break zone; mount the gun smoothly as you move.
4. Cheek welds to the stock — your eye lines up with the rib naturally.
5. Focus hard on the leading edge of the target — not the bead, not the barrel.
6. Apply your chosen lead method, pull the trigger decisively, and keep swinging.
7. Follow-through: continue the swing for a full count after the shot. Do not stop the gun.

■ THE SURPRISE RELEASE — SHOTGUNNING VERSION

Do not stab at the trigger or snatch at it. Squeeze the trigger while continuing to focus on the target and swing the gun. Stopping the swing at the shot — called 'checking' — is the single most common reason for missed targets. The gun must be moving when it fires.

Eye Dominance — A Critical Factor

Your dominant eye controls where the gun points. If your dominant eye and shooting hand are on opposite sides (cross-dominant), the gun will point significantly off target even when the mount feels correct. Test your eye dominance before your first range session.

- Simple test: extend both hands and form a triangle with thumbs and index fingers. Centre a distant object in the triangle. Close each eye alternately — the eye that keeps the object centred is dominant.
- Same-side dominant: shoot normally (right-handed + right eye = standard setup).
- Cross-dominant options: close the non-dominant eye (easiest for beginners), use a cheek patch to occlude vision, or switch to shooting from the dominant-eye side.
- Cross dominance is very common — it is a solvable problem; ask an experienced coach.

05 Practice Drills & Progression

Consistent, focused practice produces far better results than large volumes of undisciplined shooting. Start close, slow down, and build one skill at a time before increasing distance or difficulty.

8-Week Beginner Progression

Week	Activity	Goal	Shells / Session
1–2	Stationary mount practice (unloaded, at home)	Identical mount every repetition	0 (dry-fire)
3	Range — singles from station 7 (skeet) or close trap	Break 5 of 10; focus on mount	25–50
4–5	Range — straightaway and slight-angle targets	Break 7 of 10; work on swing-through timing	50
6	Range — crossers at moderate distance	Introduce lead concept; break 5 of 10 crossers	50–75
7–8	Mixed presentations — vary angles and distances	Break 15+ of 25; start reading target lines	75–100

Key Practice Drills

- **The Mount Drill (Home)** — Stand before a mirror in your shooting clothes. Practice mounting the unloaded gun 50 times per session, watching cheek weld and shoulder pocket. The mount must feel identical every time before you go to the range.
- **Station 7 Skeet** — This station presents close going-away targets — the easiest presentation in the sport. Use it to build confidence, reinforce the mount-swing-shoot sequence, and learn what a breaking target looks and feels like.
- **One-Eye Drill** — Shoot five targets with both eyes open, then five with your non-dominant eye closed. If your score improves dramatically when one eye is closed, you may be cross-dominant.
- **Slow-Motion Mount (Coach Observation)** — Have a coach watch you mount in slow motion to identify inconsistency in cheek weld, shoulder placement, or head movement. Record video if shooting alone.

Common Beginner Mistakes & Fixes

Mistake	Likely Cause	Fix
Consistent misses behind target	Stopping the swing at the shot	Follow-through drill; keep the barrel moving after firing
Shooting over the target	Head lifting off the stock (peeking)	Cheek weld drill; mount gun to cheek, not cheek to gun
Misses below the target	Dropping the gun on mount; stock riding too low	Check length of pull; practise mounting to same cheek position every time
Flinching / inconsistent patterns	Anticipating recoil; often from starting too heavy	Begin with .410 or 20 gauge to build confidence; add a recoil pad
Bruised shoulder	Stock not in the shoulder pocket; perched on chest	Ensure butt is fully in the shoulder pocket, not balanced on top

■ NEXT STEPS

Once you can break 15+ of 25 targets consistently, consider joining a local trap or skeet club, entering a beginner league, or booking a lesson with a certified shooting coach. The Millet Fish & Game Association welcomes new members — ask at the range office about beginner nights, mentor programs, and junior shooting programs in the area.