



SHOTGUN SAFETY IN GREAT BRITAIN

A CODE OF PRACTICE

1. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that there are more than 1.5 million shotguns legally held in Great Britain, the vast majority of which are used in a safe and responsible manner. This leaflet provides a code of practice for those who acquire and use them and if followed will ensure a safe and responsible future for the sport.

High standards underpin public and political support for shooting, now and in the future.

The code provides advice at two levels:

Advice that **must** be followed in order to deliver sustainable shooting – unless otherwise stated the term ‘must’ only applies to meeting the standards set by this Code of Practice and does not refer to a legal obligation.

Advice that **should** be followed in order to achieve Best Practice, any deviation from which would need justification.

THE FOLLOWING GOLDEN RULES APPLY:

1. The most important rule of gun handling – you should **NEVER** point a gun, loaded or unloaded, in an unsafe direction.
2. The safe conduct of shotgun shooting must meet the standards described in this code, show respect for the countryside, due regard to health and safety and consideration for others.
3. When passing a gun to someone it must always be proved empty; that is open, empty and passed stock first so that the empty chambers are visible.
4. **REMEMBER** – ignorance of the law is no excuse. If in doubt, always ask.

2. SAFETY

Above all, safety is the most important consideration. Always be aware of the direction in which the muzzle of your shotgun is pointing and never point it in an unsafe direction. Whenever you shoot, you should know where the shot will fall before you pull the trigger.

Follow these simple directions to be safe:

Carrying a shotgun in a slip

To prevent a shotgun falling out, if your slip fastening should fail, keep it with the barrels down and stock up when slung over your shoulder. A shotgun should be opened before removing it from the slip to check that it is unloaded. Do not touch the trigger even at this stage. Your next action should always be to check that the barrels are clear while pointing the gun in a safe direction. Don't point the muzzle end of the slip at anyone.



Remember, a shotgun should always be considered loaded until proven empty and even then, still handled as if it were loaded.

On replacing the shotgun in to a slip, you should check that the gun is unloaded, insert the barrels first before closing the gun and then fastening the slip.

Where to find the gun's information

If in doubt about which types of cartridges are safe to use in your gun, check the flats of the barrels. You are looking for the proof marks, gauge or bore and chamber length of your gun. If you are not sure what it all means, then ask someone who does know. Your local club, gun shop, or police licensing department will always be pleased to help.



Carrying a shotgun out of a slip

When you are not shooting but have the gun out of its slip, it should be carried empty, open and over the crook of the arm, not over the shoulder or in any other way. The muzzles should not be rested on your feet.

Passing a shotgun to someone

When passing a gun to someone it should always be proved empty; that is, open, empty and passed stock first so that the empty chambers are visible.

Crossing an obstacle on your own

Open the gun and remove the cartridges, then close the gun and, ensuring that the muzzles do not point at you, lean the gun with stock down and barrels up against or partially through the obstacle so that it cannot slip or fall. Otherwise place the gun carefully on the ground and out of harm's way so that you can easily reach it from the other side. Climb over the obstacle and retrieve the gun, again, using appropriate muzzle awareness, open the gun, check the barrel for obstructions and continue. Carrying the gun over the obstacle is not a good idea.

Crossing an obstacle in company

Guns should be open and unloaded and held by one person while the other person climbs over the obstacle. The guns are then passed over (open, empty and stock first) one by one; the other person then climbs over and retrieves his shotgun on the other side.



Shooting safely

Shooting safely is paramount and you should always abide by the following statements:

Never point a gun, loaded or unloaded, in an unsafe direction.

- Never shoot unless you are sure it is safe to do so.
- Always have the safety catch on 'safe' until the moment before you fire.
- Always bear in mind the possibility of a ricochet particularly across water or off branches and vegetation.
- Never fire blindly into dense vegetation.
- Never take chance low shots without a clear fall out zone for your shot.
- Never travel with a loaded shotgun.
- Never put down a loaded shotgun or leave it unattended.
- Keep your fingers away from the trigger until you want to fire.
- Always be steady on your feet before you shoot. Never keep a dog attached to you while shooting; it may pull you off balance.
- Never shoot unless you are certain of your target and can see it clearly.
- Never shoot at, or near, overhead obstructions e.g. power lines or other installations.
- Be extra careful shooting near buildings or concrete structures; ricochets are a real danger.
- At all times guard against shot carrying beyond the boundary of your permitted shooting area.

3. BEHAVIOUR IN THE FIELD

BASC promote and insist on safe and sensible behaviour by shooters in all disciplines. You should act on these points to reassure shooters and non-shooters alike that you can be trusted with a shotgun:

- Advise the land owner and/or tenant in good time when you intend to go shooting and check that it is convenient.
- Confirm with the land owner and/or tenant what quarry you may shoot.
- Always respect the owner's property, crops, livestock and fences and follow the Countryside Code or, in Scotland, the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Open gates rather than climb them and close them after you. If you have to climb a closed gate, do it at the hinged end.
- Never break fences, walls, rails or hedges.
- Try to avoid walking through standing crops or allow your dog to do so.
- Keep your dog under control.
- Avoid disturbance to livestock.
- Never leave litter and wherever possible collect that left by others.
- Always treat a shotgun as though it were loaded and keep its barrel pointing in a safe direction.
- On picking up or being handed a shotgun, check immediately that there are no cartridges in it and that the barrels are clear.
- Before firing your shotgun, you should consider where the shot will go, allowing for possible ricochets.
- Do not fire at quarry unless you are sure it is within range and be sure you know what is behind it. If you are not sure, don't shoot!



- Know your own limitations and those of your gun and shoot responsibly. If you are not reasonably sure of a humane kill, don't shoot! Shooting at quarry is not a competition.
- Be extra careful in cold and wet conditions which can lead to loss of feeling in the fingers and difficulty in operating the safety catch and the trigger.
- Remember that all shooters will be judged by your actions and ensure that your conduct is always above reproach. Always try, whenever possible, to encourage the same attitude in your shooting companions and in any other shooter with whom you come into contact.
- Above all – be safe and sensible.

4. THE SHOTGUN

Always ensure that your shotgun is in a safe and serviceable condition.

Hammer guns require particular care, such as carrying them uncocked, except when a shot is imminent.

Pump-action and self-loading shotguns, such as semi-automatics also require care, as it is more difficult to check their status (i.e. whether they are loaded or not) than the standard single or double-barrelled shotgun. For added safety it is always good practice to store such a gun with a breech flag in the chamber to indicate that it is empty and safe.

Always clean and dry your shotgun after use. Never put a damp gun into a steel cabinet.

If a fault develops, have it rectified before using the gun again.

Never use a gun with badly dented or pitted barrels. Have your gun serviced regularly by a competent gunsmith.



5. THE CARTRIDGE

Ensure that the cartridge type and shot size are suitable for both your purpose and your gun. If you use non-lead shot make sure gun and cartridge are compatible, otherwise damage could occur. Information is available from BASC.

Never imagine that a heavy load and a tight choke justify shots at extreme range.

Do not allow cartridges of different bores to become mixed. A smaller size (say a 20-bore) can be inadvertently loaded into a 12-bore gun and lodge in the barrel. If a 12-bore cartridge is then loaded and fired, it can burst the barrel and cause fatal injuries.

In the case of a misfire, keep the barrels pointed in a safe direction and open the gun cautiously, after waiting 30 seconds.

Loading 20-bore and 12-bore cartridges is dangerous



6. THE LAW

It is an offence (except in certain circumstances) to possess a shotgun without a current shotgun certificate or temporary police permit.

It is an offence to give or sell a shotgun to someone who is not authorised to possess it – usually by virtue of a shotgun certificate.

When acquiring a shotgun, you must inform the police force which issued your certificate. If you give or sell a shotgun to anyone (or lend a gun for more than 72 hours) you must enter it on the other person's certificate and also notify the police force which issued your own certificate within seven days by recorded delivery or by email to the specified address given by the police.

It is an offence to sell or offer for sale a shotgun which is out of proof.

One certificate holder may borrow a shotgun from another for 72 hours or less without notifying the police, or entering the details onto the borrower's certificate.

It is an offence to sell cartridges to someone without seeing their shotgun certificate except where the recipient is a crown servant or where a person produces a certificate authorising another person to possess such a gun, together with that person's written authority to purchase the ammunition on his behalf.

You are responsible for the security of any shotgun(s) in your possession at all times.

When not in use, shotguns must be stored securely, in order to prevent – so far as is reasonably practicable – access by unauthorised persons. When in use, reasonable precautions must be taken for their safe custody.

It is an offence to sell or hire a shotgun to someone under 18 years of age.

It is an offence for a person under the age of 15 to have with him or her, an assembled shotgun except while under the supervision of a person of 21 years old or more, or while the shotgun is so covered with a securely fastened gun cover that it cannot be fired.

It is an offence to be in possession of a loaded shotgun in a public place without lawful authority or reasonable excuse.



It is an offence to shoot game on Sundays and Christmas Day in England and Wales. In Scotland there are no statutory restrictions on the killing of game on Sunday or Christmas Day but it is not customary to do so.

In Scotland and certain counties in England and Wales it is an offence to shoot wildfowl on Sundays. Always check if you are unsure – never guess at what the law requires.

All birds and many animals are protected. There is an ‘open’ season for quarry species and it is an offence to kill or attempt to kill them at other times of the year or possibly at night.

If you are complying with firearms law you can shoot certain pest bird species. These are covered by general licences which, in simple terms, mean you can shoot the birds listed, provided you have the landowner’s permission and provided you are doing it for one of the reasons allowed by the licence.

These reasons may include:

- to prevent serious damage (e.g. to crops and livestock) or to prevent disease.
- to protect and conserve flora and fauna.
- to preserve public health or safety.

The general licences vary by Country and are annually reviewed, so BASC recommends that anyone wishing to take these species should regularly read BASC’s advice on general licences, which is available online at <http://basc.org.uk/shooting/general-licences/>

It is an offence to shoot wildfowl or game with a self-loading shotgun having a magazine capacity of more than two cartridges.



A non-certificate holder may only borrow a shotgun under the statutory exemptions. This is typically under s11A of the Firearms Act 1968. This allows an authorised person to lend a shotgun to a non-certificate holder to use on private premises in the presence of the authorised person: or; at a clay pigeon shoot where the chief constable has approved the time and place for the shooting of artificial targets under s11(6) of the Firearms Act 1968. For further information on borrowing shotguns please consult our guidance document from the fact sheet section of the BASC website
<https://basc.org.uk/firearms/guidance-and-fact-sheets/>

REMEMBER – Ignorance of the law is no excuse. If in doubt, always ask.

7. SECURITY

Keep your shotgun secured – for preference in a purpose-built gun cabinet – when not in use. Ensure that no-one else has access to the keys – remember it is your responsibility to ensure that an unauthorised person (which includes anyone who hasn't got a shotgun certificate) does not have access to your guns. Store your shotgun ammunition separately from your guns. The law does not require you to keep shotgun cartridges secure; however, it is good practice to do so. They are best stored in a cool, dry place where inquisitive children cannot get hold of them.



When travelling in a vehicle, keep your guns and ammunition out of sight, preferably in the locked luggage compartment. It is preferable to keep the guns in their slips or cases. If you have to park your vehicle for any reason, park it where you can see it – if at all possible. The vehicle must be locked and any anti-theft devices set. It is a good idea to park in a manner that prevents easy access to the part of the vehicle containing your guns, such as backing the car very close to a wall to make it difficult for a thief to get at the boot.

Where possible, remove the fore-end of the shotgun and take it with you. There are also various security devices that can be used if necessary.



8. HOW DO I KNOW I AM SHOOTING SAFELY?

BASC has a simple assessment carried out by accredited assessors called the Safe Shot Award. It is not a test of competence. The assessment takes just 20 minutes and can be done at a game fair or organised by you anywhere in the UK. To find out more about the Safe Shot Award please contact the BASC Sporting Services department on 01244 573018.

If you require a shotgun coaching lesson or want to learn more about shooting sports contact your local BASC accredited Shotgun Coach. Details of your nearest coach can be found on the BASC website.

9. INSURANCE

It is advisable to have adequate legal liability (third party) insurance when shooting. Membership of BASC currently provides insurance.

*BASC MEMBERSHIP HOTLINE
CALL 01244 573 030*

10. FURTHER INFORMATION

The BASC Ideal is that all who shoot conduct themselves according to the law and to the highest standards of safety, sportsmanship and courtesy, with full respect for their quarry and a practical interest in wildlife conservation and the countryside.

Never guess at what the law allows. If in doubt, contact BASC (firearms@basc.org.uk) or your local police firearms licensing department. Training courses are available from BASC on the safe and proficient use of shotguns; contact BASC Sporting Services on 01244 573018.

Always follow the appropriate code of practice for the type of shooting you are undertaking. These can be obtained from the BASC website at www.basc.org.uk

BASC is the largest representative body for sporting shooting.

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