



# An introduction to better gamebird hunting

Shotgunning  
Education  
Program



## Important information for new hunters

This guide is for the beginner game bird hunter. It provides you with important information and helpful tips to become a successful and responsible game bird hunter and better shotgunner.

# Getting started

## Gun fit

The first step to becoming a successful game bird hunter is making sure your shotgun fits you. You may find a 12 gauge shotgun heavy and difficult to shoot. A smaller gauge shotgun (such as a 20 gauge) is generally lighter and easier to put to your shoulder and swing. Your local gun dealer can assist in finding a shotgun suitable for you.



---

**TIP: Your gun can be fitted to you by a trained gunsmith or gunstock maker.**

---



## What are chokes?

A choke is the constriction (narrowing) at the muzzle end of the barrels that tightens the spread of pellets. The choke can be built in to the barrels (fixed choke) or your shotgun may come with removable chokes (a tube that screws into the end of your shotgun). Chokes recommended for duck hunting are marked Improved Cylinder (IC) and Modified (M). These chokes are best used when hunting duck at close to moderate distances (20 – 30 metres).

---

**NOTE: Different choke sizes vary the spread of pellets leaving the barrel. This is called the 'pattern'. To test the pattern your chokes make, you need to pattern test (see 'Pattern test your gun').**

---

# Know your limit

All hunters should know their maximum effective shooting skills distance. Shooting beyond this distance will more often than not result in a wounded bird. Generally, most hunters have a maximum effective shooting skills distance of no more than 30 metres. Shots taken within this range will put more birds in your bag.



---

**DEFINITION: Maximum effective shooting skills distance = the maximum distance at which you can consistently hit a target with the first shot.**

---

To work out your maximum effective shooting skills distance, set yourself 20 metres from a crossing clay target. If you can hit 6 or more out of 8 targets with a single shot, go back to 30 metres and shoot at another 8 targets. If you hit less than 6 out of 8 at this distance, 30 metres is your maximum shooting skills distance. If you hit 6 or more, move back to 40 metres and test yourself again.

In the field, don't be tempted to take shots outside your effective shooting skills distance. Let the birds come within range and use decoys and a caller to assist. To ensure that you shoot within your effective shooting skills distance, you need to be good at estimating distances. Practice your distance estimation skills by guessing how far away you are from a stationary object (such as a tree or fence post). Check your estimation with a range finder. Over time, you will become more accurate with your estimations and be better at judging the distance you are from a flying bird.

# Pattern test your gun

Pattern testing is a simple way of testing your ammunition (shell / load) and choke performance. It is an essential part of becoming a successful and responsible game bird hunter.

Pattern testing involves shooting at a piece of paper, within your maximum effective shooting skills distance, and looking at the pattern the pellets make on the paper. Draw a 76 centimetre circle around the most dense part of your pattern and count the number of pellet strikes. Do this three times with each set up and take the average (total divided by 3) to determine the final figure. It should be done with a range of loads, through different chokes and at varying distances.

---

**TIP: Get an experienced game bird hunter or shotgun trainer to show you how to correctly pattern test your shotgun.**

---





An effective / lethal pattern will contain a minimum pellet count needed to achieve a humane kill in the field.

You are aiming to achieve a broad pattern (with no large gaps) and a rich pellet count. Generally, 32 gram #5 or #4 shot will produce such a pattern and is recommended for duck hunting at close range (over decoys). If you intend to hunt larger ducks (such as Mountain Duck), try pattern testing 32 gram #3.

Visit [www.gma.vic.gov.au](http://www.gma.vic.gov.au) and download 'Be a better game bird hunter – Shotgunning Education Program Handbook 2nd edition' And refer to Tom Roster's 2012 Non-Toxic Shot Lethality Table Adapted to Australian Game Birds (page 14) for the minimum pellet counts required for different gamebirds at different ranges.

---

**TIP: It is recommended that you do not pattern test beyond your maximum effective shooting skills distance, as you will not be shooting beyond this distance in the field.**

---



## Practice makes perfect!

Before going hunting, you should practice shooting clay targets. When beginning, practice on clay targets at close range. Skeet shooting is a good starting point as all the targets are close range. This form of clay target shooting also gets you used to swinging the gun and leading (being in front of) the target.

Get an experienced hunter or shooting trainer to give you expert advice on your stance and gun mount.

Regularly practise on a variety of clay targets, both incoming and crossing (left to right and right to left). Simulated field (or sporting) clay target shooting is great for practising a variety of targets that are similar to flying game birds. Regular practice is the key to being a successful hunter.

---

**TIP: Use the same chokes for clay target shooting as you intend to use for hunting. Also, when clay target shooting, use target ammunition with the same velocity (speed) as your field ammunition. The velocity is written as 'feet per second' (fps) on the ammunition box.**

---

# Time to go hunting

Now that you have pattern tested your ammunition, selected the correct load and choke combination for the birds you are hunting at your effective shooting skills distance and you are skilled at consistently hitting clay targets within your effective shooting skills distance, it's time to go hunting. Here are some tips from the experts to put more birds in your bag:

- Bring the birds to you! Use decoys and duck callers to bring ducks within your effective shooting skills distance. Get an experienced duck hunter or research on the web on how to use a duck caller well and how to best set up decoys. There are many useful online resources such as instructional YouTube clips.
- When setting decoys in the field, step out your maximum shooting skills distance from the hide and place a decoy (decoy marker). Place the remainder of the decoys between your hide and the decoy marker. Do not shoot beyond the decoy marker. This means you only hunt within your shooting skills distance.
- Use a well-trained gun dog to retrieve birds you have shot.



- Plan where you are going to hunt. Don't set-up decoys in an area with heavy reed cover because you risk losing the birds you shoot.
- Have a retrieval strategy in place.
- Do not shoot at ducks flying away from you.
- Focus on single birds, or birds on their own, at the back or side of a flock, instead of shooting into the flock.
- Keep practising on clay targets to improve your shotgunning skills.
- Practice your distance estimation skills in the field and check your estimation with a range finder.

# Further information

For more information on shotgunning and game bird hunting, visit [www.gma.vic.gov.au](http://www.gma.vic.gov.au) and download 'Be a better game bird hunter – Shotgunning Education Program Handbook 2nd Edition.'

The handbook has detailed information about getting to know your hunting equipment, selecting and testing choke and ammunition combinations, how to improve your shooting skill level and hunting methods.



Both Sporting Shooters Association of Australia and Field and Game Australia run practical Shotgunning Education Program workshops. The workshop is recommended for beginners and seasoned hunters alike. For more details, contact them directly or visit their websites.

**Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia (Vic)**  
Unit 3/26 Ellingworth Parade  
Box Hill Vic 3120  
Phone (03) 8892 2777  
[www.ssaavic.com.au](http://www.ssaavic.com.au)

**Field & Game Australia Inc.**  
PO Box 464 65 Anzac Avenue  
Seymour Vic 3660  
Phone (03) 5799 0960  
[www.fieldandgame.com.au](http://www.fieldandgame.com.au)

Proudly supported by

