April 2010 BE CAREFULTHIS DUCK SHOOTING SEASON

Mike Spray, Programme Manager, Firearms and Hunter Training, New Zealand Mountain Safety Council

Safety with shotguns should be a priority for all duck shooters this season.

Last year there were reported six non intentional incidents resulting in shotgun injuries say's Mr Spray. These ranged from minor to more serious injuries and tragically the death of a duck shooter who died from his injuries. Five of these incidents happened during duck shooting season and in all six cases the incident was caused by a moment of carelessness.

Mr Spray says always point firearms in a safe direction. That means, loaded or unloaded, never point a shotgun at anyone else including yourself and never put your finger on the trigger unless you intend to fire the gun. Take particular care with muzzle direction when closing the shotgun on live ammunition, releasing the safety catch or crossing an obstacle. Guns can go off unintentionally. Also watch out for clumsy gun dogs.

Before firing, a shooter must establish their firing zone and confirm that no other person or property is within it. Each year during duck shooting season there are reports of shooters within the firing zone of another shooter being peppered with shot says Mr Spray. The danger area for a shot gun is at least 120 metres. The risk of being hit with pellets increases when additional parties of shooters are in close proximity, especially in scrubby areas and as hunters retrieve game or move about neighbouring firing zones. Beware that when you follow flying game birds your firing zone can change rapidly. Also be mindful of obstacles blocking visibility in your firing zone and consider potential ricochets off water and twigs says Mr Spray.

Load your firearm only when ready to fire. Four of the shotgun incidents last year were caused by shooters not following this rule says Mr Spray. Load the magazine only when you reach your shooting area and unload prior to leaving. Load the chamber only when you are ready to fire. With semi automatic shotguns there may be a need to use the safety catch once the chamber has been loaded. Test the safety catch on a totally empty gun, including an empty magazine, by cocking the gun, applying the safety and pulling the trigger. If the firing pin is released do not use the gun. Take it to a gunsmith for repair. And never rely on your safety catch says Mr Spray.

Be mindful of tiredness when shooting says Mr Spray. The duck shooting season is a social event. Late nights and early mornings can compromise safety when tired shooters are less likely to be alert and may be more likely to drop their guard. It goes without saying that alcohol and firearms do not mix. It is extremely unsafe to be shooting while intoxicated or being around someone else who is shooting when intoxicated. It is an offence against the Arms Act 1983 to be in charge of a firearm when under the influence of drink or drugs. Have a drink when the guns are safely locked away says Mr Spray.

Mr Spray stated that in one of the incidents last year an older type shotgun exploded causing serious injury to the hand. This incident is a reminder to all shotgun shooters not to use modern ammunition particularly steel shot in old or badly worn shotguns. The barrels are just not strong enough to absorb the high pressure of modern ammunition.

Mr Spray says regardless of age, any person who does not have a firearms licence can only shoot under the immediate supervision of a license holder. The supervisor with the licence must be close enough to control muzzle direction if necessary. This also means that the supervisor cannot be using a gun at the same time. It is a good idea for all shooters, new and experienced, to have a practice on a clay target range before the season begins. Refamiliarise yourself with your gun and safe behaviour around guns.

Mr Spray says before leaving your shooting area check and double check that your shotgun is completely unloaded including ammunition from the magazine. Be aware that ammunition can become jammed in tubular magazines so double check these. Before cleaning or securing the gun in your safe at home do another check and confirm that the gun it is completely unloaded. This practice should also apply in duck shooting camps.

Mr Spray wishes all duck shooters an enjoyable and safety season and reminds everyone to never let their safety standards slip.

The Seven Basic Rules of Safe Firearms Handling

1. **TREAT EVERY FIREARM AS LOADED**
   - Check every firearm yourself.
   - Pass or accept only an open or unloaded firearm.
2. **ALWAYS POINT FIREARMS IN A SAFE DIRECTION**
   - Loaded or unloaded, always point the muzzle in a safe direction.
3. **LOAD A FIREARM ONLY WHEN READY TO FIRE**
   - Load only the magazine after you reach your shooting area.
   - Load the chamber only when ready to shoot.
   - Completely unload before leaving the shooting area.
4. **IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET BEYOND ALL DOUBT**
   - Movement, colour, sound and shape can all deceive you.
   - Assume colour, shape, sound, and shape to be human until proven otherwise
5. **CHECK YOUR FIRING ZONE**
   - THINK! What may happen if you miss your target? What might you hit between you and the target or beyond?
   - Do not fire when you know others are in your firing zone
6. **STORE FIREARMS AND AMMUNITION SAFELY**
   - When not in use, lock away the bolt, firearm and ammunition separately.
   - Never leave firearms in a vehicle that is unattended
7. **AVOID ALCOHOL AND DRUGS WHEN HANDLING FIREARMS**
   - Good judgement is the key to safe use of firearms.

More information on firearms and outdoor safety can be found on the Mountain Safety Council's website www.mountainsafety.org.nz.

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