



Five Things Patterning Will Tell You About Your Gun

Story by **PHIL BOURJAILY**, IOWA CITY;
photos by **HOLLY A. HEYSER**, EDITOR



When I teach beginners how a shotgun works, I tell them shotgun pellets fly downrange like a swarm of angry bees. That's all they need to let go of the idea that they are aiming a single projectile at the clay.

While the bee analogy works for new shooters, hunters need more information: How many bees are in your swarm? How close together do they fly? How wide is the swarm? Are there enough bees in the swarm to assure some will hit the bird?

Enough with the birds and the bees: It's important to know how your choke and load perform because we're not shooting a clay bird, but a real one we want to kill cleanly, and the only way to know for sure what is going on downrange is to pattern your shotgun.



Hellen Lee of Sacramento examines the pattern of a shot she just took at 15 yards using an open (cylinder) choke on her 20 gauge Beretta 391.

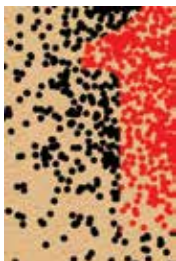
“I highly recommend that all shooters who haven’t patterned their shotguns to try it. Make no mistake: It’s time-consuming, but it’s worth every minute. And, if you get to go with friends, it’s a lot of fun!” — HELLEN LEE

I won’t sugarcoat this: Patterning a gun is like working out. It’s no fun while you’re doing it, but you feel better when it’s over because you know more about how your gun shoots and how well it suits you.

Traditional patterning involves shooting paper at 40 yards and counting percentages of pellet strikes in a 30-inch circle. Doing it right means you first cut open four or five shells from the box and count the pellets, because there’s a lot of variation in pellet counts. Then you shoot 10 patterns with each choke and load you are testing, changing the paper every time.

It’s a chore. Here’s the good news: You don’t have to do all of that, just a little of it. All we’re concerned about is putting enough pellets on a duck or goose to kill it at whatever range we’re shooting it. We don’t need no stinking percentages. I call it “practical patterning.”

Here are five things you can learn by patterning your gun and how to go about testing them:



DOES YOUR GUN SHOOT STRAIGHT?

We’ll start with an easy one. All you need is a dirt bank and a few golf tees. Put a tight choke in the gun. Stick the tee in the bank and back up about 20 to 25 yards. Using a light target load, aim carefully (do this from a rest if you want) and shoot the tee. Try it two or three times. If you’re centering the tee every time, then your gun shoots where it points. If not, see a gunsmith.

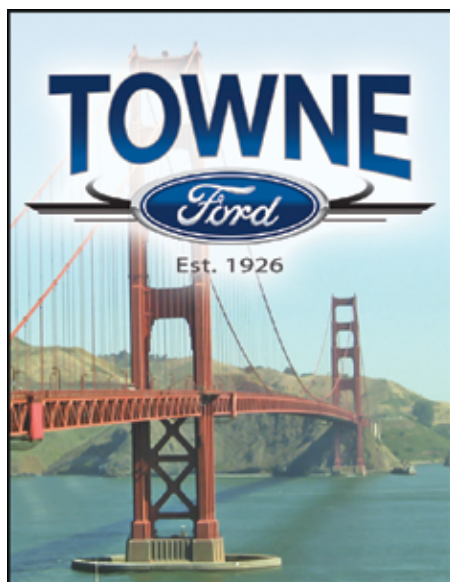
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DOES YOUR GUN FIT?

Traditionally, you use a pattern plate to check gun fit. It's a steel plate, usually 3 feet by 3 feet with an aiming mark cut

out of the center. If you have access to a plate, they are very convenient, although definitely for lead shot only unless you want a face full of steel ricochets.

You paint it with whitewash or grease, back up to 16 yards and mount and shoot the gun at the aiming mark without actually aiming, as if you were shooting at a flying target. Do it three or four times. Don't correct your hold if the pattern isn't hitting the center. The idea is to see if the gun shoots where you look, and if not, how far off it is. If the patterns are centered on the aiming mark or are a shade high, your gun fits. Every inch off center left, right, up or down translates into a 1/16 of an inch you need to raise, lower or cast the stock. If your gun has shims, you can make the corrections yourself. Otherwise it's time for a trip to a stock specialist.

If you don't have a pattern plate, take an old bedsheet, make an aiming mark on it with spray paint or a Sharpie, hang it at 16 yards and blast away until a hole appears in the sheet. The sheet works well because you can't see exactly where your shots are hitting and subconsciously correct your aim.

Failing a sheet, the quick and literally dirty way to check fit is with your golf tee in the bank again, but this time instead of aiming carefully, you mount smoothly and shoot. If it's too hard for you to shoot and see where the shot is hitting, have a friend act as your spotter.



CHECKING CHOKES AND LOADS

Testing chokes and loads requires a big roll of paper. I use 36-inch rolls of "contractor paper" from my local home store and I wish they were 40 inches wide. You need a staple gun and a 4-by-4-foot sheet of plywood, too.

Forget about cutting open shells and counting pellets, and forget percentages and shooting at 40 yards, unless you shoot your birds at 40 yards. Set your backstop at the range you shoot your birds. Put in whatever choke you use, aim and fire at the center of the paper. Do this a minimum of three times, changing paper between shots, for each choke/load combination you test.

At home, draw a 30 inch circle with the densest part of the pattern at its center and count holes and take an average. While the traditional 40 yard distance is arbitrary, the 30 inch circle is not. That's about the maximum width of an effective shot pattern.

If the pattern has more than 60 holes in it, that's enough for a goose; more than 90 is good for big ducks; 130 or more is about right for medium ducks and teal. If all the shot is clustered around the center and there aren't many holes in the fringes, you need a more open choke.

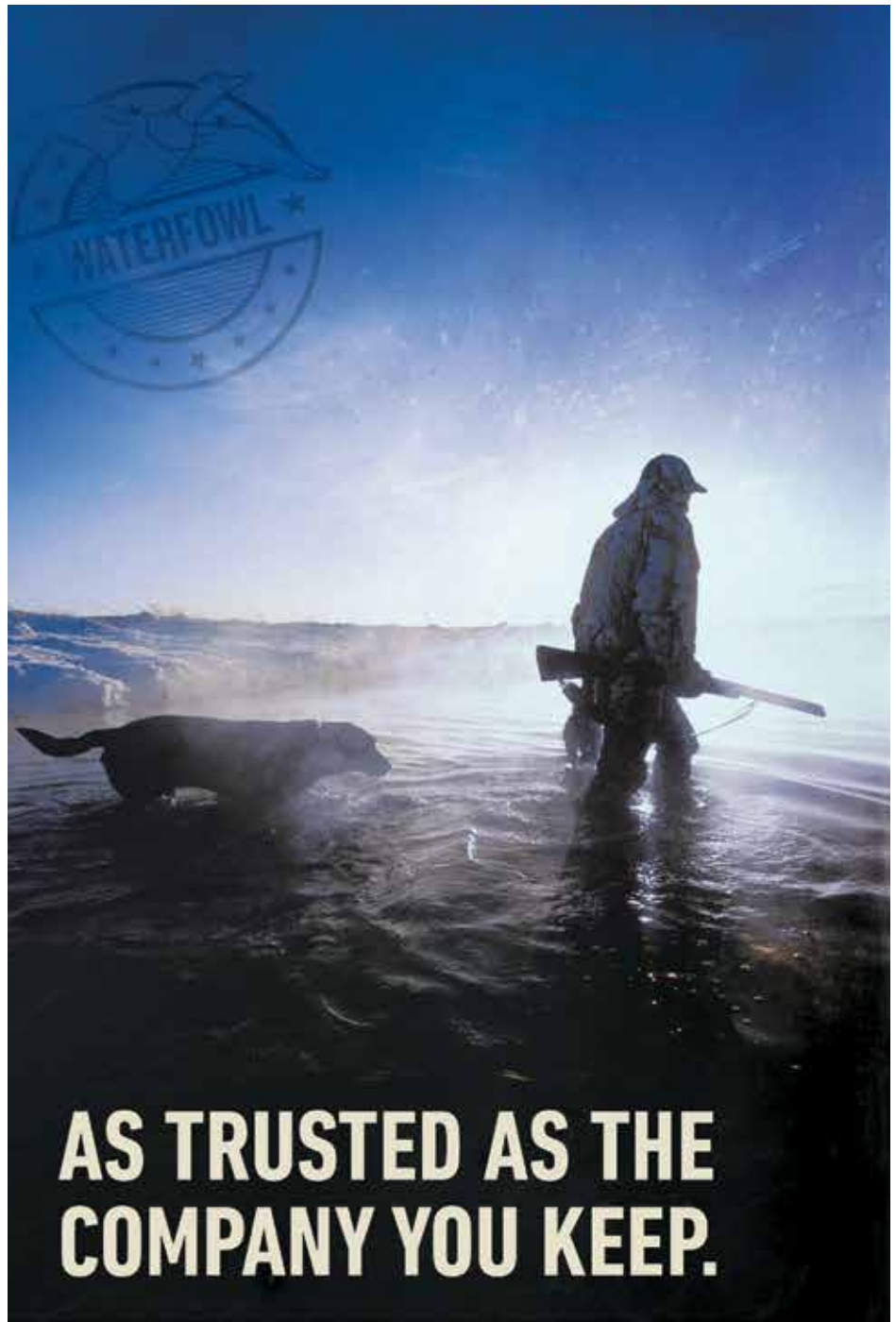


TESTING MAXIMUM RANGE

Testing your maximum range means moving your pattern board back in 5-yard increments until you reach the point where it no longer puts enough pellets of the right size into your 30 circle. It's tempting to look at a pattern that puts a lot of hits on target at 35 yards and assume it will still have enough at 45. The truth is, patterns can decay quickly and the only way to find your maximum range is to test it.



Hellen Lee of Sacramento draws a circle with a 15-inch radius around the center of the shot pattern, Kent Fasteel 1-1/8th oz. 3-inch No. 2 shot through a Mojo Fatal Shot Long Range choke in a 12 gauge Beretta A400 Xtreme at 35 yards. With 109 pellets, this is a good pattern for big ducks, though a bit light for teal and other small ducks.



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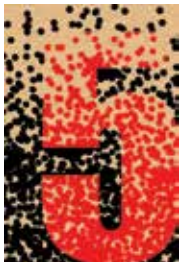
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>> Monique Noel of Petaluma takes a shot at the patterning board at CWA's Grizzly Ranch in the Suisun Marsh.



TESTING MINIMUM RANGE

Shoot some patterns at 15 and 20 yards to find out if your choke and load handicap you at in-your-face distances. At close range, you'll find lots of combinations put almost all their pellets into a 15- or 16-inch circle, which cuts down on your margin for error when you point the gun. A pattern like that is tight enough to mangle a duck, to help you miss it, or to just put one or two fringe pellets into a bird you would otherwise bag. You may not want to change to a more open choke after you look at these patterns because you don't want to reduce your range, but you might want to set your decoys farther out, or change the way you call your shots.

"Doing this exercise answered a lot of questions I had about where the shot is really going and how lethal it really is for that small duck with my improved cylinder choke in. It's definitely changed how I'll choose my shots this season and what chokes I'll take into the duck blind."

— MONIQUE NOEL



Patterning is a chore, but it's good for you, just like going to the gym. Difference is, you have to pump iron two or three times a week, but you only have to punch paper once. Then it's time to go hunting. 🦋

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