



BACK-TO-SCHOOL SPECIAL

Expert tips for adult hunters rusty on the basics of hunting safety and survival.

BY ANDREA JONES



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KENTON ROWE AND LUKE DURAN



Each year more than 7,000 young, eager hunters-to-be pack into Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks hunter education classrooms across

Montana. The kids—mostly 11- and 12-year-olds—are taking part in a traditional Montana rite of passage in place since the late 1950s. The main goal of this education effort? Teach young hunters how to hunt safely.

But what about the tens of thousands of older hunters roaming Montana each fall? Most of them took a hunter education course sometime in their lives. But in many cases, that was three, four, or even five decades ago. Do they still remember what they learned?

In almost all cases, yes. Hunting-related deaths are rare in Montana, with fewer than two fatalities per year on average. (By comparison, more than 200 people die each year in vehicle accidents.)

Still, say Montana’s hunter education instructors, it’s always a good idea for everyone who hunts, no matter what their age, to review safety and survival basics. When it comes to firearms and outdoor adventures, even a small slip in awareness can lead to disaster.

What follows are reminders for all of us who hunt from instructors across Montana.

Firearms

When he starts teaching kids how to handle firearms, 20-year instructor Al Noack of Ennis asks his students if they’re worried about the test at the end of the class. Most of them are. “Then I tell them, ‘Even if you fail this class, you can always take another one until you pass. But every time you handle a firearm, you are taking a test. And if you fail that test, something bad could happen: You or someone else could be hurt or killed.’”

Because the stakes are so high, safety with the firearm itself is of chief importance for Noack and Montana’s other roughly 1,500 hunter safety instructors. “In every single case in which someone was accidentally shot, at least one—if not two or more—of the four cardinal firearm safety rules was

broken,” says Wayde Cooperider, supervisor of FWP’s Outdoors Skills and Safety Program. The four essential rules:

1. Always point the muzzle of your gun in a safe direction.

Instructors repeatedly tell their students that if a muzzle is never pointed at a person, it’s almost impossible to shoot someone if the gun goes off accidentally. They also note that hunters are most prone to forget muzzle safety in some situations more than others. Instructor Irv Wilke of Laurel points out that “most accidents happen near a vehicle, so safe direction is critical there.” Instructor Vince Salvia of Bozeman agrees. “In the morning when you’re getting ready, you’re excited, and when you’re going home, you’re dead tired,” he says. “Those are times you forget about the muzzle. Or you might be around the truck getting ready to put your stuff away, and you cycle the action of your rifle while you’re distracted. If it’s pointed the wrong way, that’s an accident waiting to happen.”

Kelly Esquibel of Butte says muzzle safety is overlooked most often when hunters rush.

“When you are out hunting, take your time,” he advises. “Stop for a moment beforehand to think about how you are going to cross a creek, or a fence, or any obstacle so that you don’t point the muzzle at yourself or another hunter.” Don McKee of Helmsville, who has been teaching “hunter ed” for 55 years, warns hunters never to look at anyone through a scope that’s mounted on a rifle. “No matter how many safeties you have on, and even if you are positive the gun is unloaded, if it’s pointed at someone and accidentally goes off, you could kill that person.”

2. Always treat every gun as if it were loaded.

“When you read articles about hunting accidents, most people say they thought the firearm was unloaded,” says Tim Muessig of Billings. “You can’t just *think* that a firearm is unloaded. You have to *know*.”

3. Always be sure of your target and beyond.

“And especially beyond,” says McKee. He notes that a bullet that misses a target can continue on for hundreds of yards or farther.

SAFETY AND SURVIVAL CHECKLIST

Review and follow these top 10 guidelines before and during each hunt:

- ▶ Always point the muzzle of your gun in a safe direction.
- ▶ Always treat every gun as if it were loaded.
- ▶ Always be sure of your target and beyond.
- ▶ Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to fire.
- ▶ Prepare for weather and accident emergencies.
- ▶ Create and carry a survival pack (fire-starting gear is essential).
- ▶ Make sure you know how to use all your hunting, safety, and survival equipment and that it’s in good working order.
- ▶ Know your hunting partners’ medical problems and physical limitations, and tell them yours.
- ▶ Make a hunting plan that identifies possible problems.
- ▶ Tell someone where you are going and when you’ll return.

Andrea Jones manages FWP’s regional Communication and Education Program in Bozeman.

“You can kill somebody that way, or damage livestock or buildings. You never know where that bullet is going if you’re shooting over the horizon.”

4. Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to fire.

To drive this point home, Salvia tells his students, “Once you do pull the trigger, there’s no power on earth that will allow you to take it back.”

Survival

Though firearm safety should be foremost in any hunter’s mind, there are plenty of other life-threatening scenarios to consider when heading afield. Montana’s outdoors can be dangerous. Hunters can get lost, suffer frostbite, break a leg, or even die of dehydration or hypothermia. “You’re in Montana, so be ready for anything,” says McKee. “Prepare to get lost, to get in a snowstorm, and to stay overnight—that is unless the only hunting you’re doing is for gophers in your backyard.”

Wilke recommends that every hunter create and carry a well-supplied survival pack. “Whether you’re going out for a short hunt or a long one, always have it with you at all times,” he says. “And it’s essential that you know what’s inside the pack and how to use it. You can have it with you all day long, but if you don’t know how to use the survival gear inside, it’s not going to help you.”

Billings instructor J.D. Shanahan says knowing how to build a fire and carrying gear to get a blaze going are essential. “If you have at least three ways to start a fire in your survival pack, you will get a fire started,” he says. “And if you can build a fire and stay warm, you will stay alive. A fire also helps emergency response teams find you.”

In addition to carrying a field survival pack, instructor Kathy Irwin of Lewistown keeps survival gear in her vehicle year-round. She also has learned how to change a tire, check the radiator, and take care of other vehicle basics, which she stresses when teaching women about hunting. A disabled vehicle high in the mountains or deep in the prairie can put any hunter in a miserable or even life-threatening position.

Wilke suggests that every hunter take a first-aid class. “You also should know your hunting partners’ physical limitations and



SEARCH LIGHT Another benefit of a fire: If you’re lost or stranded, the blaze and smoke help rescuers find you easier.

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medical conditions, like if they have diabetes or a heart condition, and what to do if something happens,” he says. “The same is true if you have a medical condition. These are things you need to discuss with each other before heading out on the hunt.”

Equipment

“Anything that’s manmade can and will fail,” says Muessig, who recommends checking all your equipment before leaving on a hunting trip. “That includes firearms and hunting gear and also your vehicle, four-wheeler, camper, and everything else. Many hunters might check their hunting gear but then not look to see if their rigs are in working order.”

“Break in those new boots beforehand,” adds McKee. “And keep in mind that a compass or GPS doesn’t do any good if you don’t know how to use it.”

Montana is notorious for its fast-changing weather, especially during fall and winter. That’s why Shanahan stresses the importance of bringing a wide range of clothing. “You don’t want to be stuck in a blizzard or freezing rain and not have the right gear,” he says.

Hunt plan

And finally, say all instructors, plan ahead. Take time to anticipate problems you might encounter and the gear or knowledge you’ll need in case something bad happens. McKee recommends hunters scout out unfamiliar terrain during summer, when conditions are safer. “And always make sure you have maps,” he adds. As part of any hunting plan, says Irwin, hunters should make sure someone knows where they’re going and when they plan to return.

Is this everything a hunter needs to know to stay safe and prevent accidents when afield? Not by a long shot. But these are the basics, things all hunters—young and old—should review as the season approaches. No plan is foolproof, and every trip into Montana’s outdoors comes with some risk. But by following the suggestions offered here, you’ll greatly decrease the odds of something going wrong. 🐾

Adult hunters interested in taking a hunter ed refresher course on-line (or in becoming certified in hunter ed), can visit fwp.mt.gov and follow the links to Hunter Education.