

## Handling Firearms Safely

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In 2013, there were a total of 33 hunting incidents in Texas. 30 were non-fatal and 3 were fatal. These 33 incidents resulted from the discharge of a firearm while hunting. Almost all were preventable. According to the Texas Hunting Incidents Analysis report for 2013, over 50% of these incidents were self-inflicted and caused by careless handling of firearms. Anyone who handles firearms must take the responsibility to follow these top three basic safe gun handling rules.

**Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction.** One can prevent virtually every shooting incident by following this primary rule of gun safety. A shooter must continually be aware of the direction the muzzle, or front end of the barrel, is pointed at all times. A safe direction means that if the gun were to go off, it would not cause injury or damage. When at a shooting range, the safe direction is downrange. When in the field, be mindful that a safe direction may change often. Always be aware of other hunters who may be in the area, and where other animals or birds may be. Never point a firearm at anything you do not wish to shoot. Never rest the muzzle of the firearm on the toe or foot. Carrying your firearm with two hands provides the most muzzle control. According to the 2013 Hunting Incidents report, the distance of the muzzle to the wound was within just 10 yards. The prevention: Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction.

**Treat every firearm with the same respect you would show a loaded gun.** Each and every time you pick up a firearm, control the muzzle and check to make sure the firearm is

unloaded. Always keep the ammunition separate from the firearm until you are ready to shoot. Always carry your firearm with the action open, showing it is a safe and unloaded gun. Never accept a firearm from someone unless they show you the firearm is unloaded and the action is open. If you are unsure how to determine if a firearm is unloaded, leave the gun alone and seek help from someone who does. Always keep your finger off the trigger and resting outside of the trigger guard, even when the firearm is unloaded. This is a good habit to get into. The only time your finger should be near the trigger is when you are ready to fire. According to the 2013 Hunting Incidents report, the majority of accidents occurred from handling firearms carelessly. The prevention: Treat every firearm with the same respect you would show a loaded gun.

**Be sure of your target and what is in front of and beyond your target.** Before you pull the trigger, clearly identify your target. Whether paper targets, game animals, game birds, or clay targets, make sure the target is fully visible and in good light. Always use binoculars to identify your target, never scan the horizon through your rifle scope! Identify any obstacles in front of your target, such as branches or wires that could deflect the bullet and send it in a different direction. Determine you have a safe backstop or background beyond your target. Never take a shot at an animal on top of a hill or ridge, since you may not know what is on the other side. Never shoot at flat, hard surfaces such as rocks or over water because the bullet can ricochet. If ever in doubt, do not pull the trigger. According to the 2013 Hunting Incidents report, many incidents occurred towards dusk; hunters were not wearing any type of hunter orange clothing and were mistaken for game; and most accidents occurred from lack of hunter

judgment and skill. The prevention: Be sure of your target and what is in front of and beyond your target.

Of these 33 hunting incidents in 2013, only 11 shooters completed hunter education. The main goal of hunter education is to produce SAFE, RESPONSIBLE, KNOWLEDGEABLE and INVOLVED hunters and shooters. Courses give beginning hunters a place to start, removing the temptation to learn by “trial-and-error.” Hunter education refreshes veteran hunters and provides them with a tool to pass on proper information and values of hunting. Whenever a firearm is involved with any activity, there is a potential for an accident to occur when the firearm is not handled responsibly. How to be a safe hunter is not something you learn once. Hunting safety and responsible firearm handling should be an ongoing development of skills and attitude over the lifetime of the hunter.