

4 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT STEEL SHOT

By Heidi Lyn Rao



Individuals who enjoy shotgun shooting or those individuals who are just getting into the sport, are immediately faced with the dilemma of which ammo to shoot: lead shot or steel shot. These two types of ammunition are not the same regarding their properties or legal requirements. As a shooter you need to educate yourself on the ammunition you are shooting because using the wrong ammunition can lead to having a very bad day!

There are four things that every shotgun shooter must know regarding steel shot. These are steel shot is required whenever hunting waterfowl, steel shot patterns differently than lead shot, steel shot does not compress like lead shot, and steel shot is lighter than lead shot. Ignorance can lead to damaged firearms, potential legal issues, and serious bodily injury or death.

Steel Shot is Required to Hunt Waterfowl

Steel shot has been required to use for waterfowl hunting since 1991. Anyone hunting ducks, coots, mergansers, geese, and swans are required to use steel shot. In the mid-1990s, this was expanded to include snipe and rails when hunting. These laws were passed to protect birds that ingest pebbles and rocks while feeding, to grind up their food. Because of this practice, waterfowl were also ingesting lead while feeding. This was leading to birds dying from lead poisoning.



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), under the U.S. Department of the Interior, is now restricting the use of lead ammunition on many federal lands. The only ammunition allowed on these lands is steel shot or monolithic bullets that contain no lead. Many states, such as California, are starting to follow the FWS banning lead and lead projectiles.

It is the responsibility of the shooter to know and understand the laws regarding the ammunition that they are shooting. Violating ammunition restrictions can lead to state and/or federal violations. Remember, ignorance of the law is no excuse.

Steel Shot Patterns Differently than Lead

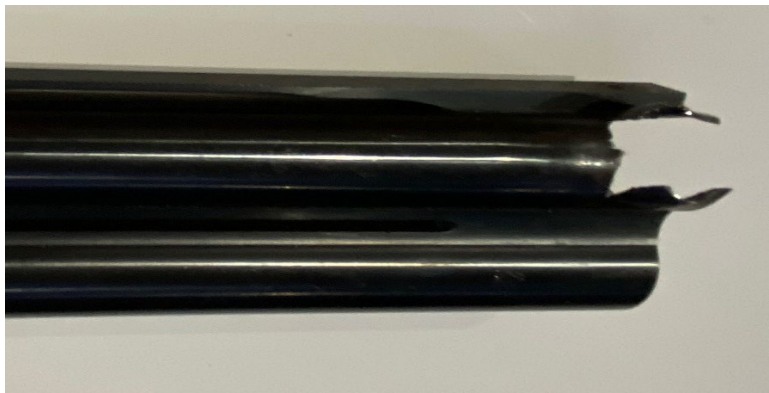
Steel Shot patterns differently from lead shot. There are four commonly used chokes in shotguns. These are cylinder chokes, improved cylinder chokes, modified chokes, and full chokes. All of these chokes affect a shotgun's shot pattern, which is based on patterns when using lead shot.

Steel shot, because of the hardness of the pellets, do not pattern the same as lead shot. Steel shot patterns one choke tighter. For example, steel shot sent through a cylinder choke patterns as an improved cylinder choke. Steel shot sent through an improved cylinder choke patterns as a modify choke, and steel shot sent through a modify choke patterns as a full choke.

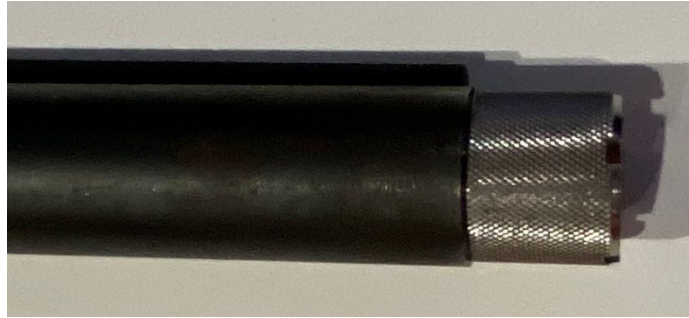
This fact is very important for every shotgun shooter to understand. One reason is that shooting steel shot out of any choke designated as full choke or larger, like "extra-full," can cause a dangerous situation. It is also important for hunters to realize that steel patterns one choke higher and tighter for a quick, clean, and ethical kill. Too much choke can lead to a wounded bird because the shot did not spread out enough upon impact. It can also cause too much damage to the edible portions of the game being hunted.

Steel Shot Does Not Compress

Steel shot does not compress like lead shot. As a result, a careless shooter can ruin their expensive shotgun barrel. Since steel shot does not compress like lead shot, it is possible to bulge the end of the barrel and ruin it. In some cases, the high pressure from the powder combined with the strength of the steel shot, the end of the barrel can split or even blow out the choke causing a potentially dangerous situation.



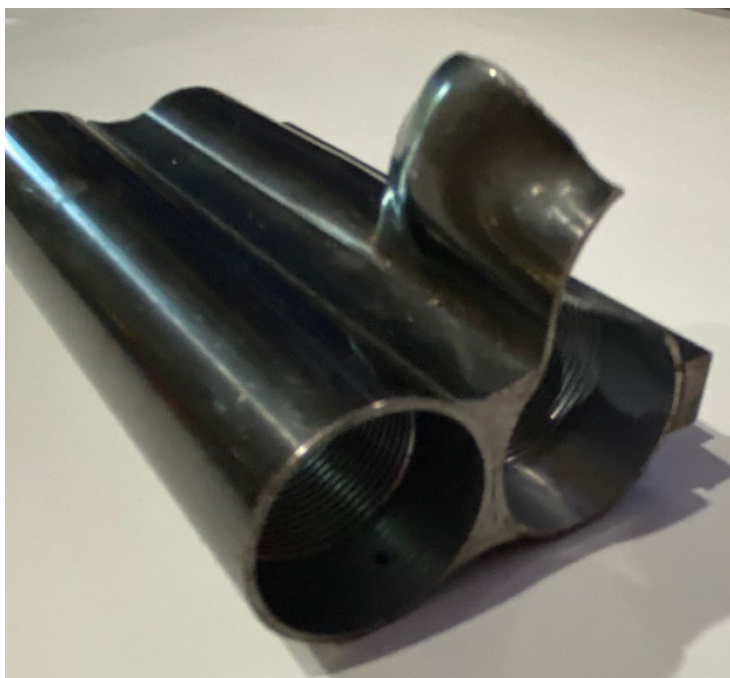
As a rule, never, ever, shoot steel shot out of a standard full choke or an extra-full choke, like used in turkey hunting. All full chokes and larger should be reserved for lead shot only. Also be aware of marketed chokes that can weaken the barrel of your shotgun resulting in a ruined barrel.



I have seen full chokes marketed for steel shot. These chokes should be avoided for several reasons. First, even though the choke can handle the lack of compression qualities of steel shot, you still have the barrel that cannot handle the lack of compression where it meets the choke. This means that you still run the risk of ruining your barrel.



Another reason to avoid a full choke designed to handle steel shot, is that it patterns differently than lead, as mentioned above. This means that a choke designed to handle steel shot is actually patterning as an extra-full choke used in turkey hunting. Remember that steel shot patterns one choke higher compared to lead shot. Turkey hunters usually use an extra-full turkey choke with lead shot. Also, an extra-full choke would be too much choke for waterfowl hunters who are required to use steel shot.



Steel Shot is Lighter in Weight

Steel shot is lighter in weight than lead shot. This means that it can travel further than lead shot. As a result, not understanding the distance steel shot can travel can cause safety issues as well as legal issues. Anyone shooting steel shot needs to be aware of other hunters or the general public in the area that could be struck by falling pellets.

Some shotgun ranges restrict the use of steel shot and require only lead shot to be used on the range. For example, I am a member of a private shooting club and because of the encroachment of housing surrounding the property, only lead shot is permitted to be used on the shotgun range. This is because steel shot could travel past the boundaries of the range into new neighborhoods.

Projectiles, including shot, crossing property lines could potentially put the shooter in legal jeopardy. In Texas, it is illegal for the projectile or projectiles fired from your firearm to cross property lines onto the property of another. This means that if you are used to shooting lead shot and know the distance from property lines and you switch to steel shot, you must account for the further travel of the pellets.

Knowing your ammunition, including its qualities and distances it can travel, is just as important as knowing your firearm. When using a firearm, safety is the most important thing. Not knowing how steel shot acts when discharged can cause damage to your firearm, serious

bodily injury or death to the shooter or others, and can make you run afoul of the law. Remember, it is up to you the shooter to understand the quality and properties of the ammunition, including knowledge of steel shot, you are shooting.

