What's Your Spread?

The Importance of Patterning Your Shotgun

Whatever game you pursue, whether it be feathered fowl or clay target, you need to know the capabilities of your gun in the field and on the range. Many times we say, "it's good enough" or "it seemed to work well last year." This is not an adequate description of how the shotgun is performing, and broad statements such as these are not acceptable.

You should check routinely to see if your firearm is safe and performing properly, but you should also "know your spread." No two shotguns perform exactly alike, even those that came off the same assembly line and have the same choke and shot shell load. These variations are due to differences in manufacturing. It isn't that one gun is better than another, but each gun has its own personality when it comes to payload delivery.

Also, the type of choke that is used makes a difference. The three most recognized chokes are **improved cylinder**, **modified**, and **full**. Shot patterns, or spread, become tighter or pellets choked closer together as the chokes move closer to full. This is to say improved cylinder is much more open in "choke" than the full would be, but full would not be as open as the modified would be.

First, determine the game that you are going to go after. Then decide at what distance you feel comfortable shooting the target, keeping in mind that your comfort level may be farther away than the gun can perform. For example, you may want to shoot a turkey at 50 yards, but if the shotgun won't deliver a good pattern at that distance, you risk crippling the bird.

You can determine your spread using a roll of brown paper, a marker, and your shotgun. Retail stores commonly sell rolls of brown paper for less than $5. Cut off a large square of the paper—about 3 feet by 3 feet. Place the paper on an appropriate backstop, making sure that the area behind it is in a safety zone. With a magic marker, draw a dot about the size of a quarter in the middle. This will be your aim point. Then you will need to find the distance at which you will take the first shot. The typical starting point is 40 yards. You can measure this off with a tape measure or range finder, or you can simply step it off.

Once you are in your firing position, load your gun and take aim at the dot. Squeeze the shot off. This is counterintuitive when firing a shotgun, as most times the shot is make by pulling the trigger; however, concentrating on holding on target and squeezing the trigger assures that you are on target at the gun's report and are less likely to "pull off" target.

Once you have fired, place your gun in a safe, unloaded position and walk downrange. The paper should contain a majority of the shot shell load, and it should be apparent where the center of the pattern is on the paper. The center of the pattern is the most concentrated area of hits on the paper. If you cannot find the center easily, draw a small circle around each pellet hole. Once you have finished marking, you can step a few feet back and observe the pattern as a whole.

If the pattern seems to be extremely one sided, you may not have controlled the trigger correctly. Repeat the shot on a new piece of paper and discard the first paper.

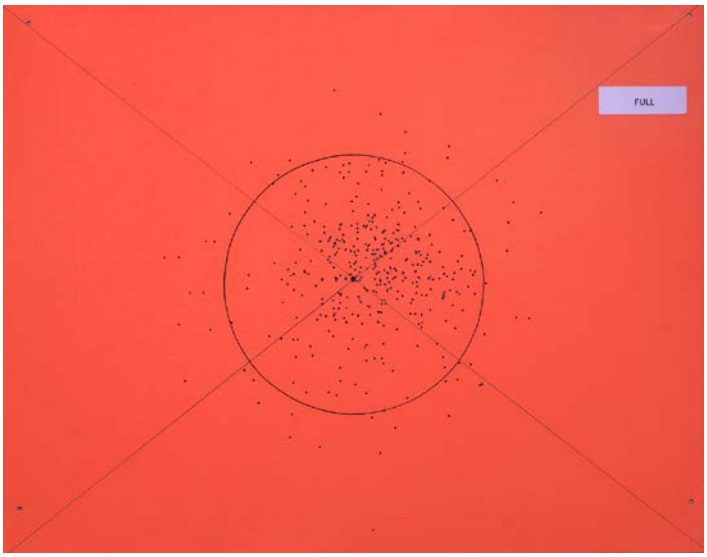
How does your pattern look? Is it splotchy with several gaps, or does the load seem evenly spread? If there are several openings around the target area, move so you are 30 yards from the target and repeat the process.

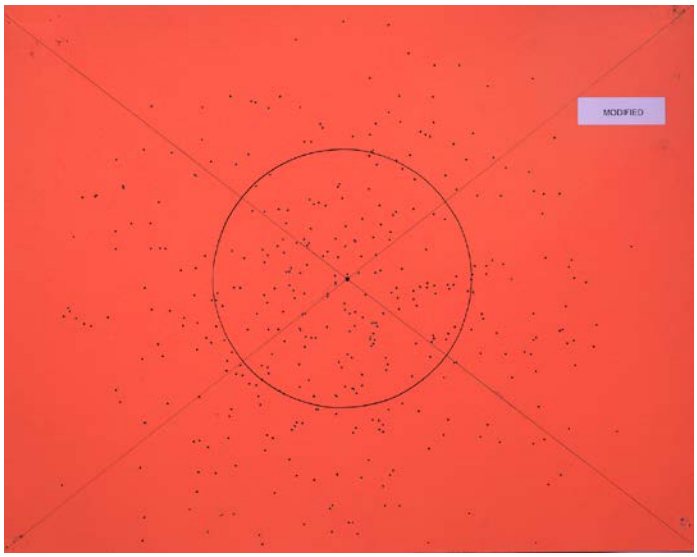
Now imagine the game that you are after. Does it appear that the target would be adequately covered? If so, it is now time to look at shot size. The size of the pellet

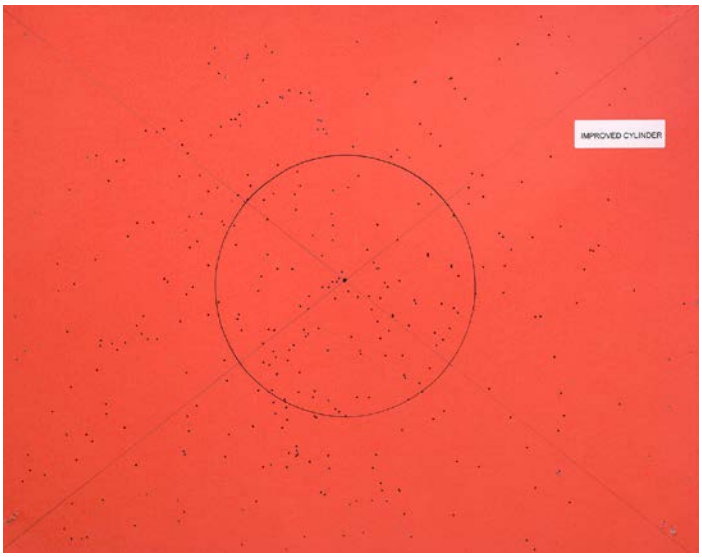
within the shell also plays a vital role in the performance of the gun. Is the shot size correct for the game? For instance, #9s work well on the skeet range but are woefully undersized for a large animal at 40 yards.

Typically, larger game, such as ducks, geese, and turkey, require a larger shot. Remember, the smaller the number on the box, the larger the pellet will be. For example, a #4 is bigger than a #6. You can also estimate the size pellet needed based on the size of the game. Squirrel hunting would be great with #6s, but most modern lead loads of that size would be inadequate for larger game.

Are you satisfied with your spread? If not, keep working on shell loads and choke types until you are on target and making every shot count!







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By **Dr. John Long**, Assistant Extension Professor, 4-H Youth Development.