



# Shotgun Fit and Wingshooting

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I am a lousy shot on upland game like woodcock and ruffed grouse.

Regardless of this fact however, I still enjoy hunting game birds and by the end of most seasons I will have put enough birds in the freezer for a meal or two. It was not until the fall of 2007 when I became keenly aware of my terrible shooting as bird after bird was flushed and remained unscathed by me and my scattergun. It was during this same season that I gained some valuable insight into why I was missing so often. For instance, during one particular hunt, a nice grouse flushed from the edge of a clearing and flew *into* the clearing in what must have been this thunder chicken's way of taunting me. I instantly shouldered my shotgun; a 12 gauge Remington 870 Special Field, and did my best impersonation of a skilled snap shooter. While I cleanly missed the grouse, what I gained was the priceless of knowledge of clearly seeing my entire shot column strike the ground well beneath and behind the bird.

So I began replaying this little scene in my mind and wondered why I was shooting so low. I shoot trap well and am a good wingshot on waterfowl...but only over decoys. My jump shooting of ducks and geese is reminiscent of my upland game shooting...lousy. Herein lies the answer. You see, given enough time to swing a shotgun I actually shoot quite well. But hunting upland birds like grouse and woodcock means snap shooting, and snap shooting does not offer the hunter time to establish a nice swing before firing.

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I have since read a great deal about wingshooting and what I learned is this: good snap shooting requires a properly-fitted shotgun. Indeed, expert wingshooters will tell you that **fit** is paramount to any and all good shooting but I will argue that when pass-shooting the hunter has plenty of time to compensate for poor fit and adjust his sight picture before firing. This explains why I can shoot trap fairly well and utterly miss nearly all birds in the uplands.

How can you tell if your shotgun fits you? Well, the experts say that if you bought your shotgun off the rack you can pretty much assume that shotgun does not fit you. While this is probably true it is also a flippant answer that evades the real question. So, how can you tell if your shotgun fits you? If you said that you must be measured to determine if your shotgun fits you then you are wrong. Having a fitting performed by a gunsmith with a "try gun" will only approximate the dimensions (length of pull, drop at comb, drop at heel, etc) of the shotgun that will fit you. Comparing these dimensions to your existing shotgun will tell you how different your shotgun is from the ideal, but it still does not tell you how well your shotgun fits you. In fact, even if you have a gun built to fit, you still will not know how well the shotgun *actually* fits you until you shoot it!

Similar to zeroing your rifle it is wise to determine how your shotgun fits you and to do this all you will need is 1) your shotgun, 2) five or six rounds of your favorite load, 3) a large sheet of paper (wide freezer paper taped together to give you a 4 foot by 4 foot target will work well), and 4) a safe place to shoot (e.g., your local rifle range). Here's how to do it:

- ⊕ Go to your local rifle range
- ⊕ Draw a simple "X" on your target
- ⊕ Place your target down range
- ⊕ Grab your shotgun and a pocket full of shotshells
- ⊕ Stand 13 yards from the target
- ⊕ With the shotgun empty, practice shouldering it as smoothly and quickly as you can. You should be focusing on the "X" on your target, not the bead, and certainly not aiming the bead onto the "X". Get into a rhythm that simulates your personal style of snap shooting
- ⊕ Load your shotgun
- ⊕ Now, this is the important part (and always remember to be safe), repeat the snap shooting rhythm you just practiced only this time, fire the shotgun once.
- ⊕ Relax a bit and fire five more times.

To get the most out of this exercise do not analyze your shot pattern between shots and do not try to adjust your shooting to "shoot better". What you are trying to do is learn how your shotgun fits you and to do this we simply need to see an overall pattern from 5 or 6 rounds fired more or less, instinctively.

Once you have fired five or six rounds you should see some sort of overall pattern emerge. Let's take a look at the pattern below and interpret what is happening.



Using the Remington 870, I fired five rounds at this target and the first thing you may notice is the five rather large holes surrounding the center point of the target. These are from the wads and they help us understand how this shotgun shoots (this is why I like paper targets). My conclusion is that this shotgun shoots more or less exactly where I am pointing it (and maybe a bit to the left).

You may be thinking that these results simply validate the fact that I am a lousy wingshot and that decades of missing birds is solely my own fault. My conclusion however is slightly different (but have nothing to do with my being a lousy wingshot). Because no swing is established to lead the bird, a good snap shooting gun should shoot a bit high thereby automatically leading the

flushing game bird.

I tried this exercise again but this time with my favorite shotgun, a 12 gauge Weatherby Orion. This is the shotgun I use for waterfowl and trap and the one that I shoot well. Take a look at the results of this test below.

I fired five shots at this target also yet only one wad can be seen cutting through the paper (the rest of the wads shot over the top). This shotgun indeed shoots slightly high and accounts for the better success I have had shooting it.



Now we return to stock dimensions to understand why one shotgun fits better than the other. Looking at the measurements in the table below it is apparent that both shotguns have very similar stock dimensions save that Weatherby has a slightly longer (1/16") length of pull (LOP) along with its extra 1/4" of drop at heel (DAH). Other differences in these shotguns are 1) the Weatherby has a traditional pistol grip stock while the Remington has an English straight stock, 2) the Weatherby has 30" barrels (superposed) while the Remington pump has a short 21" barrel, and 3) the Weatherby shotgun is heavier than the Remington.

	LOP	DAC	DAH
Remington 870 Special Field	14 1/8"	1 3/8"	2 1/4"
Weatherby Orion	14 3/16"	1 3/8"	2 1/2"



The three differences noted above (not to mention overall balance) are **not** part of a traditional fitting yet I am convinced they are equally important determinants describing the handling properties of a shotgun. In my opinion, the Weatherby Orion is a lively, well-balanced shotgun that just feels good in my hands. This is not because of its LOP, DAC or any other single trait, but rather how all these characteristics come together for a person of my height, weight, and build.