



Hunting safety is more than blaze orange

As summer gives way to fall, thousands of Wisconsinites take to the field to enjoy one of their favorite hobbies – hunting.

The most popular hunting sports include upland game (ruffed grouse, turkey, and pheasant), migratory water fowl (ducks, geese) and large game (bear, deer – archery and gun).

To many of us, the dangers of hunting are most associated with the deer/gun season, yet, statistically, upland game accident rates exceed those of big game accidents. For example, in 1997, turkey hunting accidents occurred at a rate of 1/18,000 hunters compared to 1/70,000 in the deer season. The common thread in nearly all of the hunting accidents was a statement by the shooter, “I thought that I was shooting at a turkey.” Shooters’ failure to know their targets led to most of the accidents across all hunting seasons.

Depending on the hunt, certain “unique” hunting safety issues need to be addressed, i.e. water safety issues in duck hunting; elevated stands used in deer/bear hunting. Aside from these unique and important aspects, most hunting safety issues share much in common.

1) Know your target

This seems so obvious and is especially to duck hunters and most small game enthusiasts, but for big game enthusiasts the identity of the target may be more difficult and therefore requires extreme caution and reality testing.

Poor lighting conditions (early and late hunting hours) can create visual impressions not confirmed with the light of day.

2) Know your weapon

Many times “going hunting” is a spur of the moment decision. Sometimes a hunting companion is inexperienced. He/she may carry a borrowed and unfamiliar weapon

Failure to understand the “safety” is a common concern. “Hammer guns” without a cross-bolt safety, present safety issues intrinsic by design and therefore are very dangerous.



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3) Know your shooting backstop

Not such a problem for waterfowl or grouse (shooting into the air), but a problem for turkey, bear, and deer hunters. Back stops may be unappreciated or missing completely as with making deer drives or attempting to capture a wounded animal. Drivers shooting at running deer while making a drive, and standers shooting “on level” and into a drive create specific hazards. Though the risks may be low, the consequences may be disastrous. With a wounded deer, driver and deer may be in close proximity. Since there is not predictability of location of quarry, pursuers or standers, this may be the most dangerous of scenarios. “Silent” drives, though often times productive are fraught with and increased risk.

4) Dangers of elevated stands

Over the past several years, hunting from an elevated stand has increased in popularity. Many of these stands are 15-20 feet tall. These stands offer several potential dangers.

- Failure to adequately secure the stand to the tree
- Failure to regularly inspect the stand for structural integrity and therefore, to provide adequate maintenance to ensure safety
- Failure to use a safety strap
- Fatigue from a previous day’s hunting and an early quiet morning may cause drowsiness, sleep and falling from the stand, resulting in injury or death. One such incident has occurred in Lincoln County this year.
- Failure to enter and leave the elevated stand with an *empty* weapon.

5) Inadequate blaze orange clothing

In 1945 Wisconsin for the first time required deer hunters to wear red clothing. However, in poor lighting conditions “red” becomes “brown.” In 1980, blaze orange clothing was required, a definite advance for safety. Yet, in 2001, hunting without blaze orange citations increased by 43%. Some of these accidents took place while field dressing the animal, when the shooter, perhaps “hot from the chase” removes the outer blaze orange



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clothing only to expose the underlying clothing, white or brown. Obviously, using a white handkerchief may be hazardous.

During any gun/muzzle-loader deer season, including the one day youth deer hunt (30 October), Zone T/EAB (earn a buck) 28-31 October and 9-12 December, and C.W.D. hunts, no person may hunt any game, except waterfowl, unless at least 50% of the person's outer clothing above the waist is blaze orange. A hat, if worn, must be at least 50% blaze orange.

6) Failure to control the muzzle of your weapon

At *no time* should the muzzle of your weapon cross the silhouette of another hunter. Therefore, never "check out" another hunter by viewing him through your gun scope. This may seem obvious, but unless taught or thought about, such events may regularly occur, with disastrous consequences.

7) Always treat a fire-arm as though it is loaded

Special attention should be directed during loading/unloading activities. Muzzle free clear zones must be identified and practiced. After any kill/near-kill, or wounded deer situations, each hunter is obligated to check the safety of each and every weapon.

8) Survival gear

There are other simple things you can do to enhance your safety. Always carry a compass and know how to use it, even if you know your hunting area "like the back of your hand." Poor lighting conditions or heavy new fallen snow can create a confusing landscape.

Carrying a flashlight can prevent falls and allow you to read the compass under poor lighting conditions or darkness.

Carrying a GPS, cell phone and matches/cigarette lighter add other measure of safety.

9) Never mix alcohol with firearms

Sleep in the following morning if you had "a few too many" the night before.

Remember: Hunting can be fun. Hunting can be safe. Enjoy the sport, but remember, when you pull the trigger, the consequences are in your hands – and the target!