

Different kinds of shotguns

Shotguns can be found in a bewildering range of types, designs, sizes and prices. In this installment, we will examine the various types of shotguns commonly encountered in Canada.

All shotguns found in Canada consist of three fundamental parts – the stock, the action and the barrel. The stock is what we hold onto when using the shotgun, while the action is the part of the shotgun that moves cartridges into position and discharges the shotgun. The barrel is a steel tube that contains the pressure generated by the cartridge and directs the shot stream or slug out of the muzzle. There are essentially five types of shotgun actions, namely, the single shot, the bolt action, the pump action, the semi-automatic and the two-barrel models. Of these, only the last three are commonly encountered in the clay target games.

We will examine each type individually, describing them and briefly touching upon both their appealing characteristics as well as some of the challenges they present.

Single Shot:

The single shot shotgun is one of the simplest and the safest shotguns available. They are typically quite inexpensive and ruggedly built, and they are often the shotgun used to introduce new shooters to shotgun shooting. They are generally available in all of the common gauges. The most common style is a hinge or break-open style.

Much of the appeal of a single shot is that they are inexpensive and one of the safest shotguns available. Following the CFSC ACTS-PROVE process, the single shot can be PROVED in a few seconds.

On the downside, this type of firearm does not produce a second shot easily or quickly, making them unsuitable for almost all sporting clays games. Almost all single shot shotguns are tightly choked, which does not lend itself well to the novice shooter trying to hit a moving target. Finally, their stocks are typically not well designed and can produce uncomfortable felt recoil for many people.

Despite these drawbacks, many of us were introduced to the shotgun sports with a single shot, and they are still a good bet for easing someone into our sport. They are safe, and they are a great way to teach a new shooter both the fundamentals of safety as well as the fundamentals of shooting. There is a real difference between taking a shot at a target knowing you have only one round on one hand, and knowing you have one or two more rounds in reserve on the other.

Bolt Action:

In the not too distance past, the bolt-action shotgun was a common inexpensive repeating shotgun. They are no longer a common kind of shotgun and are rarely seen today. They are not suitable for sporting clays or other shotgun sports that require a second shot in a relatively short period of time.

The bolt-action shotguns are typically fed from a box magazine, unusual in shotguns, and typically come with a long barrel and a tight choke, as most were hunting guns. While they are interesting guns, they are not suitable for sporting clays shooting, and most are not designed for the high-volume shooting game of trap. They are best suited to the duck and goose blinds, or for big game hunting with a rifled barrel and a discarding-sabot slug round.

Pump Action:

The pump action shotgun is a truly American invention – the need for an inexpensive, reliable repeating shotgun drove innovation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Older guns like the famous Winchester Model 12 have been in use for more than a century, with many Model 12s still in use today. For many years, the Model 12 was the gun of choice for trap and skeet shooting. While the Model 12 has been out of production for several decades, there are many other guns that have proven their worth. Modern pump action shotguns include the Winchester SPX pump action, the famous Remington Model 870 and the Benelli Nova/Super Nova. These and others are solid, reliable firearms, usually found at a reasonable price point.

The pump action shotgun does require the shooter to manipulate the action between shots, but this can be done rather quickly once the shooter becomes familiar with the firearm.

Almost all modern pump action shotguns come with suitable barrel lengths (26'-30") and many offer interchangeable choke tubes, adding to the versatility of the firearm. Some models are delivered with either a synthetic stock or a laminated wood stock and have military-spec finishes, making these firearms quite robust. They may not be the choice of the top-level competitors, but the pump-action shotgun is a proven performer and offers the new shooter a great entry-level firearm at a reasonable cost.

Semi-automatic:

The semi-automatic shotgun is the newest of the shotgun designs, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. John Moses Browning, a firearms design genius, developed several iconic firearms around this time, including the 1911 automatic pistol, the Browning Automatic Rifle and the Auto-5 semi-automatic shotgun.

The fundamental design of the Auto-5 was sound, however, it was ahead of its time and issues with ammunition quality prevented the Auto-5 from reaching its full potential. The Auto-5 operated on the long-recoil design, which was reliable but somewhat complex. As ammunition evolved, and hunters made the move from paper cartridge hulls to plastic, which did not swell up when they were exposed to water, and the Auto-5 became a very popular hunting shotgun. Other manufacturers developed the concept further, with companies like Beretta and Remington introducing gas operated shotguns. Both the recoil-operated and the gas-operated designs have continued to the present day, and both are quite popular.

The gas guns, such as the Beretta A400 series, rely on a small hole in the barrel that allows some of the propellant gas to be introduced into the operating system. This high-pressure gas operates the action, unlocking the bolt, pushing it to the rear, which both extracts and ejects the empty cartridge hull and cocks the hammer. An action spring is compressed during this rearward motion of the bolt, and as it returns to its normal position, it pushes the bolt forward, loads a live cartridge into the chamber and locks the bolt into the barrel, preparing the firearm to be discharged again.

The recoil guns, such as the Benelli, rely on the recoil impulse created by the cartridge to push the action open, eject the spent cartridge case, cock the hammer and chamber the fresh round.

Which one is better? That is a very subjective test – some people are passionate advocates of the gas gun, while others feel the recoil guns are the only way to go. Both styles are said to reduce felt recoil, and each have their advantages and disadvantages. In general, gas guns are somewhat dirtier to operate, as the products of combustion are introduced into the inner working of the firearm. Recoil operated guns, on the other hand, are usually somewhat lighter than an equivalent gas gun.

Picking one over the other is a personal choice – there is no right or wrong answer. Indeed, many people who own more than one shotgun will often have one or more of each kind of semi-automatic shotgun in their safe.

Two-barrel, or Double-barrel, shotgun:

Two-barreled shotguns can be categorized into two broad groups – those which have the barrels arranged horizontally, commonly referred to as side-by-side shotguns, and those with the barrels arranged vertically, commonly referred to as over/under shotguns.

There are several advantages to a shotgun with two barrels, including:

- The gun can be quickly loaded and unloaded
- The gun can be made immediately safe simply by opening it

- Many guns have different chokes and barrel selectors, allowing instant choke selection
- Double barrel shotguns are about 100 mm shorter than other repeating shotguns of the same barrel length

Although not a hard and fast rule, side-by-side guns are used for upland game hunting, while the over/under shotguns are used for both hunting and for target games. Most double-barrel shotguns come with a single trigger and some sort of device on the trigger or the safety that allows the shooter to pick which barrel to discharge first. The double trigger was more common in the past and can still be ordered on some semi-custom guns.

In general terms, double-barrel shotguns are more expensive than the other types. A decent, middle of the road over/under shotgun will typically cost around \$3,000 new, and about one-half of that used. Having said that, it is very easy to get into the \$7,000-\$10,000 range on a good quality shotgun, and many times that amount if someone wants the best.

The market for good quality guns has become somewhat specialized, with many firms offering virtually a custom-made gun – a service that a short time ago was unheard of for the average shooter.

Which one is the best?

The choice of a shotgun is largely dependent on two main factors – the intended use of the gun and the financial means of the purchaser.

Hunting firearms usually do not see a lot of use, and a lightly built gun can last for generations. Upland game hunting shotguns, for instance, are carried for long distances and long periods of time, and shot relatively little. Waterfowl guns are often semi-automatic models with camouflage exteriors and somewhat shorter stocks, as they are most often used during periods of cold weather when the shooter is wearing thick clothing.

Target shotguns, on the other hand, are designed to discharge high volumes of cartridges. They are usually heavier and exhibit a much more robust construction. Trap guns, for instance, will sometimes have two-barrel sets – a set of 32” over/under barrels for doubles, and a 34” single barrel for singles and handicap. Sporting clays gun tend to have longer barrels, in the 30” to 34” range, while skeet barrels tend to be shorter. Some of the better target guns will run into the hundreds of thousands or even millions of rounds before they are completely worn out. Furthermore, many of the better target guns are designed to be ‘re-built’ when the tolerances start to increase and the shotgun becomes loose. In the hands of a qualified technician, some critical parts can be re-fitted and the shotgun will feel like a new gun again.

As with most things in life, trying to do too many things makes it difficult to be a real expert at anything. There are some shotguns that can be used for both hunting and target shooting, but they are rarely as good as a dedicated shotgun for each discipline.