

Expert instruction

Adam Calvert is a freelance shooting instructor with a global reputation, offering bespoke training and support. He is also a Fabbri ambassador.

Q Can you recommend a way to reload a shotgun quickly that does not compromise safety? I'm all thumbs when the weather gets colder and was wondering if a stuffer or a reloading aid would be a good idea?

A This is a question I am asked time and time again. Many people seem to struggle loading even when it's not cold and raining, let alone when it's cold enough to freeze you to death or you feel as if you are standing under the shower whilst on a peg.

My first comment should be that the more accurately you shoot then the slower you will need to load as you won't have to fire as many cartridges, so spending time on improving your shooting rather than your loading is well worth while. That said, when you are practising, I suggest that you load for yourself, in order that you can improve your shooting and your loading at the same time. I also suggest that you carry out some flush-type scenarios, which are undoubtedly higher pressure, in order to improve both. As with all these things, practice makes perfect so the more you load for yourself then the better you will get at it.

There are, however, things that you can do to help stack the odds in your favour, so here are some tips, tricks and gadgets...

Use a specially designed jacket: if you are loading out of a pocket make sure the shooting jacket you are wearing is specifically designed for this purpose. If it has a flap on the pocket then there should be somewhere to tie the flap up out of the way. When you are buying a jacket or waistcoat make sure you think about loading, not just how it looks. I tried on a waistcoat made by a leading manufacturer recently and could not get

my hand in and out of the pockets without cartridges, let alone with two cartridges in my hand.

Once you have your chosen jacket or waistcoat, put more cartridges in the pocket than you need and shake the pocket up and down. You will find that the brass part of the cartridge comes to the top and the lead points downwards, so every time you put your hand in your pocket you stand a better chance of getting the right end of the cartridge so it can be loaded straight into your gun.

Pouches: many people now load from pouches in order to avoid any problems with pockets. Indeed, I frequently use a pouch whilst loading on busy grouse days. The same trick of shaking the pocket works just as well with a pouch.

Cartridge belts or clip belts: these are great for most types of shooting, particularly if you are not firing many cartridges. For speed, I tend to favour the clip-off type but these are not always great if you are moving or walking when shooting as the cartridges can fall off unintentionally. They do, however, mean that the cartridges you take out of the belt are pointing the right way.

Loadmasters, bags and Gannochys: people either love these or hate them. Many Guns absolutely swear by them. I tend to find when I am shooting that I want to be able to move around and not have a bag or Gannochy swinging around and being in the way – but each to his or her own. For some people, these are a great solution.

Shooting gloves: among the other things that can hamper loading is cold fingers. Numb digits will mean we are not as nimble with our loading as we should be. However, many of us find loading in gloves difficult. That said, there are now some shooting gloves that give excellent feel and dexterity whilst at the same

time offering good protection from the elements. These should allow you to be nimble enough to load quickly. I am a massive fan of Härkila Pro Shooter Gloves or Dents Leather Shooting Gloves.

There are other, cheaper options and one of the most frequently overlooked gloves in my opinion is a black pair of heavy-duty nitrile disposable gloves. These offer great grip and feeling whilst often just giving enough protection to keep you warm and dry. I am not a fan of gloves that use magnets to hold back a trigger finger as I frequently find a cartridge attached to the magnet when you pull your hand out of your pocket. This then gets dropped on the floor as you attempt to load your gun.

When all else has failed, there is the stuffer option: I really enjoy sharing my days with someone, especially if you know them well and they can make your life so much easier, not only stuffing for you but offering local knowledge on what the birds do on each drive.

This option is particularly helpful if you are like me and enjoy working your dogs as much as shooting. This allows you to take time to mark birds, especially wounded ones, whilst your stuffer is loading for you – and at the same time it avoids the wrath of the keeper if you are not loaded and ready for the drive.

Last but not least: no matter which method you use to load your gun, can I suggest that, from a safety perspective, you leave any dropped or fumbled cartridges on the floor until the end of the drive and do not load from anything that involves bending down to collect your full cartridges from the floor. The last thing you want to do is to end your day by sticking your gun in the mud or snow whilst trying to load. And remember that part of the fun of shooting is the birds getting away occasionally. ■

Cold hands can slow you down when reloading, so you could consider gloves?

BOB ATKINS