



The Matter of Firearms Safety in the Safari Environment

For the hunter traveling to Africa on safari the matter of firearms safety is distinctly different from what it might be under different scenarios. As a point of comparison, let's say you are the typical elk hunter in the American West. If you hunt with others (excepting guided hunts with an outfitter) those individuals are likely to be friends or family that you have known for quite a while and possibly hunted with for several seasons. Moreover, while you will certainly congregate together in base camp in the evenings, more than likely you will go your separate ways during the hunting day and likely will not see another hunter until you return to base camp in the evening. During your hunting day, the matter of firearms safety is mainly a personal one. In the evening, you have the comfort of having some level of confidence, born of familiarity with your hunting companions, that your partners are at least as safe with their firearms as you are with your own. Most likely they have the same level of comfort about you.



Clients, PH, and Trackers gather before the morning safari begins



Firearm safety prior to entering the bush is just as important as hunting in the bush.

In contrast, on your first day on safari you will be surrounded by a host of different people including any hunters or observers hunting with you, your PH, trackers, skimmers, tracking dogs and dog handlers. The large majority of these people will not have hunted with you before. Therefore, they are not likely to have the same degree of confidence in your gun handling as your familiar companions in elk camp. This scenario demands that you demonstrate on a constant basis your ability to focus on safe gun handling.

Your outfitter will have you sight in your rifle at his field range before he begins the first day afield with you. This is your first opportunity to demonstrate safe gun handling. When you take possession of your rifle case from the hunting vehicle, step away from the vehicle and all personnel, and remove your rifle from the case by keeping the muzzle pointed in a safe direction. Place the case back in the vehicle, and with the muzzle continually pointing in a safe direction open the bolt* and visually check the chamber (or insert a pinky finger into the chamber) to ensure it is empty. While you may recall from the airport inspection that the chamber is empty, this simple act demonstrates to all in attendance that *you* are suitably safety conscious to check it yourself.

**This article assumes the reader is hunting with a bolt-action rifle as that is the firearm of choice of most safari hunters.*

Keeping the bolt to the rear and the muzzle elevated vertically above everyone's head, move to the shooting bench and prepare to shoot. If the shooting bench is not suitably positioned to allow you to shoot comfortably bring this to the attention of your PH. Typically, many shooting benches have platforms that are too low for individuals with long torsos. Make sure your PH places enough material on the bench to raise the forearm of your rifle to a height that will allow you to sight-in comfortably without leaning over nearly double to access your sights. Make sure you are wearing suitable eye and ear protection. This demonstrates your safety consciousness as well.

When you are ready, ask your PH if it is now safe to shoot. This will draw his attention to the fact that you are ready and gives everyone notice that you are about to fire your rifle. Always keep your finger outside of the trigger guard until the very moment you intend to squeeze the trigger. When your PH gives the go-ahead chamber the first round, get set, and fire it. Immediately eject the empty case while keeping the muzzle pointed down range and your bolt to the rear. Look to your PH for instructions. Sometimes your PH will want to see a 3-shot group. Often he will be satisfied with the first shot if it is placed suitably.

When you are done with this initial range session your PH will instruct you whether to re-case your rifle or to load it if you are to begin to hunt immediately. If you do not receive these instructions, you should ask your PH what you are to do with your rifle. This is also the time to ask you PH how he will give you instructions to shoot when a suitable animal has been sighted. You should be clear regarding these verbal instructions as not all PHs use the same verbal instructions.

If your PH instructs you to re-case your rifle, step away from the shooting bench, the hunting vehicle, and all personnel, point the muzzle of your rifle in a safe direction away from the vehicle and all personnel and again check the chamber as before to demonstrate to all that you have performed this task. Leave the bolt to the rear and slide the rifle into the case and close it. If the rifle will not fit into the case with the bolt open, after making sure the chamber is empty, place the safety on "fire" pull the trigger to the rear and then close and lock the bolt. This act will release the sear and make the firearm safe.

At the point in time that your PH instructs you to load your rifle in advance of beginning your hunt, again, step away from the hunting vehicle, point the muzzle of your rifle in a safe direction away from the vehicle and all personnel and load it according the manufacturer's instructions. Make sure that the head of each cartridge is seated firmly against the rear face of the magazine wall. Note that the PH will instruct you as to whether you are to insert a round in the chamber or not. If you do not receive this instruction you should ask if you are to chamber a round or not. Finally, make sure that your rifle is "on safe".

If you have loaded your rifle upon your PHs approval to do so, that typically means you will begin hunting immediately. Ask your PH where you are to place your rifle. He may want it placed in a vehicle-mounted gun rack, or he may want you to hold onto the rifle in preparation for sighting your

first African game animal. In either case, you will climb into the rear of the hunting vehicle in anticipation of locating game. You should hand your rifle off to someone else in preparation for climbing into the hunting vehicle. When handing off the rifle to another person present the rifle in such a manner that the safety is clearly visible. Make sure the muzzle is pointed in a safe direction and inform the recipient that you just loaded it.

When in the hunting vehicle your rifle will be racked, or in your hands, according to instructions you receive from your PH. If your rifle is in your hands, keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction, your trigger finger outside the trigger guard, and your thumb away from the safety until such time as you are actually ready to fire the rifle. See our other articles titled “Understanding the PH-Client Relationship in Rifle Hunting”, as well as “Practical Hunting Marksmanship” for additional information. In Africa conditions may dictate that you fire from the hunting vehicle (perfectly legal), or dismount and initiate a stalk.

Once you have fired at an animal you should immediately chamber a new cartridge without prompting from your PH and prepare to fire again if instructed to do so. Keep the muzzle of your rifle pointed in the direction of where you fired the first shot, or where you last saw the animal. Keep the safety on and your trigger finger outside the trigger guard. The PH may decide to dismount the vehicle to follow up the shot you have just made. When dismounting the hunting vehicle follow the same general prescription as when mounting the hunting vehicle. Never dismount with a loaded rifle in your hands or on your person. Instead, make sure the rifle is “on safe”, keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction and hand your rifle off to another person until you are safely on the ground.

Once your quarry is down approach the animal from the rear where it cannot easily visually engage you. All wounded African animals are potentially dangerous. Stay away from both the feet and horns. Once close enough, toss a rock or heavy stick to determine if any signs of life remain. If the animal appears to be dead move around to the backside of the animal (away from the feet) and touch the eye with a stick or rifle muzzle. Usually, your PH will perform this function, but you should be aware of the need for this precaution and move with your PH in the process unless he instructs you differently. If no response is received you can conclude the animal is dead. Now is the time to completely unload your rifle unless instructed otherwise by your PH. Do not let the exhilaration of the hunt distract you from this important task. Your bolt should now remain open until you to demonstrate to everyone that your rifle is in no condition to fire. When it is time for the photo session to begin you may then close your bolt for the photos, but once this session is over with reopen your bolt until you receive further instructions from your PH.

There are few things in life more embarrassing than the accidental discharge of a firearm, and few more tragic than an unnecessary firearms accident. By following the set of procedures laid out above, you should have a safe day afield in the African bush.

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