

There have been some outdoor stories that have popped up in the general news recently. I have intentionally stayed away from them until this point but thought this might be a good time to offer my opinion on each of them from just average Joe outdoorsman.

The shooting accident involving Vice President Dick Cheney obviously is known to almost everyone. Of course a lot of the discussion about it turned into a whole political issue which I had zero interest in being involved in and was the reason I waited until this thing basically blew over before I wrote about it.

The first thing I will say is that accidents can and do happen. Unfortunately, accidents with firearms can lead to either death or serious injury. This type of shooting where a person gets shot by another in their hunting party probably only ranks second to someone accidentally shooting themselves when it comes hunting accidents involving firearms.

In the case of bird hunting where hunters tend to be in larger groups and fanned out walking across a field or in the woods, there is an even greater likelihood for this kind of shooting accident. In fact, you will occasionally hear of hunters getting “dusted” by another hunter. That’s where a shotgun was discharged and some of the shot hit another person who was far enough away not to be injured by it.

Of course I am not saying this is an excuse for Mr. Cheney. Anyone who uses a firearm needs to know not only what they are shooting at, but also what is between them and their target and what is behind their target.

When hunters are gathered in a hunting party like this, it has to be stressed that everyone needs to know where everyone else is at, at all times. No one should be walking in front of or behind other hunters and everyone must make sure they stay in contact with the other hunters so that no one ends up where they shouldn’t be. I think this is how many accidental shootings occur when hunters are doing deer drives.

In the case of this accident in Texas, my guess was that it was a pretty large group of guys and safety and control of the hunt may have become a bit lax. This happened even though it sounds like most of the hunters were pretty experienced.

Of more regional interest has been talk recently of moving the minimum age limit of a hunter able to use a gun from 12 years of age down to 8. Those in favor of lowering the age limit believe it will help bring more youngsters into the sport and thus help to improve the recruitment of new hunters.

Those opposed believe that allowing such young people to carry a gun while hunting will increase the number of accidental shootings.

I personally am not convinced that lowering the hunting age down to 8 will lead to larger hunter recruitment or cause any more gun accidents in the woods.

I think hunter recruitment is directly tied to how many adults are taking youngsters into the outdoors with them. The fact of the matter is that lowering the age does not fix the issue that dads or uncles are spending more of their time in other activities besides hunting and not taking the kids out in the field.

I think the hunting groups have to look for more effective ways to introduce youth to hunting and work with state and federal agencies to make sure there is plenty of public access to hunting grounds so that hunting does not become a sport for only those fortunate enough to own land or able to pay to rent land.

As far as safety, I think the requirement that only one person can carry a gun would eliminate most accidents. I also believe that most hunters become even more cautious when they have a youngster with them, especially one carrying a gun.

Maybe a compromise can be reached. How about allowing 8 or 10 years olds to start out with small game hunting and maybe waterfowl which has a lower hunter density than say deer hunting? Keep the 12 years of age minimum for all the other hunts

Maybe it would satisfy both groups concerns and would allow more data to be collected on hunter recruitment and safety before moving the minimum age down for all hunts.

Terry Bitz