

Why Have a Bead on Your Barrel?

Should you have a bead on your barrel at all, what type is best, and do you need a mid-bead?

BY TIM LE CRAS



Everyone knows that you point a shotgun at flying targets, ideally with both eyes open. On moving targets, you do not aim a shotgun like you do a rifle, which has a front and rear sight. So, what then is the function of the bead on your shotgun barrel? To shoot with a front bead or remove the bead has been a subject of debate for some time, so here is the key to using a front bead if you have one. Some shotguns also have a mid-bead, and the reason and benefits for this are not always clear.

The function of the front bead: The front bead on a shotgun is to provide a reference point to remind you where the gun is. It should only be in your peripheral vision, and the focus should be on the target. The shotgun bead is not an aiming device. The bead should not be looked at while you follow the target



and take the shot. The primary focus should be on the target, and the bead and barrel become blurred in your peripheral vision. If you focus on the bead just before pulling the trigger, to check your lead or swing, it is highly likely that you will slow down or stop your swing. This will cause you to pull your focus off the target and usually miss the target as you shoot behind.

Pros and cons of a front bead: This raises the question: do you really need that front bead? Some say no. If you have a consistent mount so that the barrel is always pointed where you are looking, then the front bead is redundant, and you can remove it. If you are not comfortable removing it, or if you find yourself getting distracted by the bead, then you can try switching it out for a smaller one. Small brass front beads are preferred by many competitive shooters for this reason, as smaller beads obscure distant targets less. The ideal bead is one that you largely ignore as you focus on the target.

Another opinion is that shooters should ref-

▲ Some shooters, especially when they're getting started, like a more visible bead that helps them learn what it looks like to have the muzzle in their peripheral vision.

erence the rib more and so do not need a bead. Others say that not having a front bead opens up the sight picture — since it is not in the way, you can focus on the target better. One way to avoid getting distracted by the front bead is to look flat down the rib, see the bead, then focus on the target and never look back. If you train yourself to do this, you might be fine keeping the bead on your gun. That said, some British shooting schools remove all the front beads from their teaching guns so that they do not distract new shooters.

Bead colors and size: Brightly colored or fiber-optic beads are com-

◀ Mid-rib beads can help with consistent cheek pressure and with aligning the eyes properly.



◀ Mid-rib and front beads come in a variety of colors and sizes. Avoid brightly colored beads and those made from fiber-optic material, as they're designed for hunting in low-light situations.

monly used for low-light hunting situations where it can be difficult to see the barrel. Duck hunters often switch their beads out for colored ones because they are shooting early in the morning or late afternoon/evening, and a bright bead helps them keep track of where their muzzle is.

As mentioned earlier, some shooters prefer small beads so that they are less of a distraction.

Often, new guns come with medium or large white beads. Changing to a smaller one may be a good idea, or going with a brass bead that is smaller and less colorful can help. Brass beads can also be more durable, as they are made of solid metal. Some people claim that colored beads can help correct eye dominance problems; however, this is a matter of some debate and likely personal preference.

Why have a mid-bead?

A mid-bead is usually a smaller bead (often brass) located in the middle of the rib. There are three main reasons for using a mid-bead:

- 1) It can help with obtaining a consistent gun mount. If the gun mount is consistent, then the mid-bead will line up with the front bead consistently. If it does not line up, your mount needs some work (assuming the mid-bead is in the correct place).
- 2) A mid-bead can help with generating a consistent amount of cheek pressure. If you put too much or too little cheek pressure on the stock, the beads will



▲ More experienced shooters will likely prefer smaller, less obtrusive beads or might remove their beads altogether.

stack up differently. After a while, the shooter will get to recognize the pattern of the two beads and know that they have a consistent mount and cheek pressure.

3) A mid-bead can help align the eyes down the center of the rib. If the beads align, with the mid-bead exactly behind the front bead, then the shooter usually has their eyes aligned and looking down the rib.

It is very likely that if you do away with your front bead, you will remove the mid-bead as well, so the ability of a mid-bead to help with gun mount, consistent cheek pressure and lining up the eyes down the rib will not be available. As was said earlier for the front bead, once you

have used a mid-bead to help with your gun mount and eye alignment and you are solidly consistent with both, then both beads should be ignored and the focus placed on the target.

Stacking the beads: If you have front and mid-beads on your gun, how should you use them? A simple answer is that you should mount and align the beads so that the front bead stacks on top of the mid-bead and they form a pattern like an 8. The key is to take your shotgun to a patterning board and check that it shoots where you look, then note what shape the two beads make when it is patterning well. This may not be an exact 8 shape, but just remember what shape works.

CLASSIC BEADS BY BRADLEY:

Bradley shotgun beads are very common and are manufactured in Connecticut by the Bradley Gunsight company. The company was founded in 1922 by Lewis Bradley, a very active shooter at that time. Bradley patented the durable, high-quality beads that he had designed. More than 100 years later, they are still being made in the U.S. and are very popular. Bradley shotgun beads screw in easily and are usually white, red or brass.

If you relocate and move the mid-bead back or forward on the rib, that will change the height at which the gun shoots. Hence, if you are going to get a mid-bead installed, you will need to figure out where on the rib you want it before a hole is drilled.

Like using a front bead, the benefit of using a mid-bead tends to be a subject of much debate and personal preference. Proponents say that having a mid-



INSTALLING A NEW BEAD

1. Purchase a new bead (or pack of beads) that match the thread dimension of the front sight bead. This might be in your shotgun manual or published online, or you might need to take your gun to a local gunsmith.
2. After checking that your gun is unloaded, remove the barrel.
3. Place the barrel in a vice with padded jaws so as not to damage the barrel.
4. Since it is likely that the bead was installed at the factory with thread locking compound, you will need to carefully heat the barrel with a heat gun or possibly a hair dryer to be able to loosen it. Be careful not to over-heat, or you may discolor the bluing on your barrel.
5. Place a shotgun bead installer tool over the bead and tighten.
6. Gently unscrew the bead using the tool.
7. Clean the threads in the hole in the rib with a pipe cleaner and solvent to remove any residual locking compound.
8. Check that the new bead screws in easily. If it does not, you might not have the correct thread size.
9. If the new bead goes in easily, back it out and apply a small drop of locking compound into the hole and then screw in the bead. Do not overtighten the bead, and wipe off any excess locking compound that comes out.
10. The process for replacing a mid-bead is very similar except you may need a different tool to remove and insert the new bead if it is a lot smaller.
11. When in doubt, consult a qualified gunsmith.

bead not only helps with achieving a repeatable gun mount, but also helps between shots to re-establish your mount. Others say that a mid-bead further clutters the sight picture and that if you learn to consistently mount your gun, there is no need for beads. One thing that all usually agree upon is that it is critical to focus on the target and not the gun muzzle or beads.

How do you adapt to a new bead? The first thing is to go back to the patterning board and work on your mount and check where your gun shoots with the new bead. Once you have this figured out, work on focusing on the target and adapting to the new bead by not looking at it as you follow the target.

Bead packs: A good option if you are thinking of replacing your bead is to buy a pack or kit of different-sized

▲ You'll have to work out for yourself what size bead (if you use one at all) is best for you. Whatever you land on, it should not serve as a distraction — don't look at it!

beads with the correct thread dimensions for the hole in your rib. Then you can try shooting with different-sized beads before you decide on the one you want. Once you make up your mind, and if you've decided to stick with the bead permanently, apply locking compound to ensure that it does not come loose when you shoot. **CTN**

► Tim Le Cras is a freelance writer, an outdoor photographer and a certified FITASC referee. Tim lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, and can be reached at: timdlecras@gmail.com or via his website: TLC-Outdoors.com