



Code of Practice

Sustainable Hunting and

Shooting of Deer, Game, and

other Quarry Species



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1. Background and Context

The hunting and shooting of game, deer and other quarry species are amongst the oldest forms of forest recreation which continue to be legally enjoyed by many people across the country today.

Acknowledging such traditions, respecting requirements of different interest groups, and recognising the social, environmental and economic benefits associated with these activities, Coillte permit certain types of hunting under licence on designated areas of their estate. This is in line with the Companies Recreational Policy and fully supports the principles of multiple-use forestry.

Coillte owns most, but not all of the sporting rights¹ on its estate. Some of these rights are independently owned and exercised by third parties. In addition, a small number of Coillte's sporting rights are exercised by third parties under long-term lease arrangements.

To ensure that Coillte's hunting licencing practices are not adversely affecting the sustainability of local populations of native quarry species, Coillte obtain annual assurances from the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

All persons licensed to exercise sporting rights on Coillte lands are required to be appropriately trained and competent, safe and responsible, compliant with legislation and licence conditions, and to commit to ensure the highest standards of animal welfare are maintained at all times.


This Codes of Practice aims to outline the minimum standards expected of all persons involved in the hunting and shooting of deer, game and other quarry species on Coillte lands.

2. Forest Certification

Coillte is fully committed to managing its lands in accordance with the principles of sustainable forest management. All aspects of Coillte's forestry business is assessed annually by independent auditors against standards derived from international Principles and Criteria.

By successfully demonstrating that its forests are managed in accordance with strict environmental, social and economic criteria, Coillte have obtained certification from the FSC® (FSC-C005714) – Forest Stewardship Council® since 2001, and the PEFC (PEFC/17-23-042) – Programme for the Endorsement for Forest Certification since 2014.

¹ **Sporting Rights** – In broad terms this is the legal right to enter lands to capture or kill the wild animals and fish upon it

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It is Coillte's expectation that all persons exercising sporting rights on its lands would do so in a safe, responsible manner, supporting the principles of Sustainable Hunting as outlined in the relevant certification standards.

3. Hunter Competence

Coillte believe that it is incumbent on all hunters to develop and maintain their skills and competencies with their firearms in order to minimise any associated safety risks and to avoid potential injury and unnecessary suffering by the quarry species. Regular practice on approved target ranges will assist a hunter in maintaining familiarity and proficiency with their firearm.

(Note:- The zeroing of rifles or other forms of target practice including clay pigeon shooting are not permitted on Coillte lands except under licence).

Coillte has moved to a position whereby only persons who have demonstrated their competence by satisfactorily completing recognised qualifications in safe firearms use and humane / sustainable hunting practices, will be licensed to hunt and use firearms on its lands.

Coillte's current policy:-


3.1 The hunting of game birds and other small quarry species

Coillte highly recommended that all game hunters complete a Nationally recognised, certified, firearms safety training course and have demonstrated their competence through the successful completion of an appropriate assessment.

Only persons who have satisfactorily completed an approved, certified, hunter competence assessment will be permitted to hunt and shoot game and other quarry species **on its lands**.

3.2 The hunting of wild deer

Only persons who have satisfactorily completed an approved, certified, hunter competence assessment are permitted to stalk and shoot deer on Coillte lands. This policy is implemented as follows:-

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3.2.1 Licence Holders and Stalking Permit Holders (standard)

Only holders of a recognised qualification can hold a licence to hunt deer on Coillte lands. Currently there are 3 courses approved by the National Parks & Wildlife Service of which only one of these is required:

- Deer Alliance – Hunter Competence Assessment Programme (HCAP) or
- Country Sports Ireland – Deer Stalking Training or
- National Association of Regional Game Councils (NARGC) - Deer Stalking Training (Lantra)

All persons nominated to hunt under such licences (“nominated hunters”) will also require this qualification in order to be issued with an annual stalking permit which covers the full duration of the hunting season (standard permit).

3.2.2 Stalking Permit Holders (restricted)

Nominated hunters who do not hold the HCAP qualification, but do hold an alternative, hunter qualification may, subject to additional conditions, be issued with a “restricted stalking permit” for a maximum duration of 2 weeks. A total of two such restricted permits may be issued to such an individual during the course of a hunting season.

3.2.3 Coillte Staff

Coillte staff members are no longer involved in the culling/shooting of deer/game in a professional capacity as part of their role profile. No Coillte staff member is authorised to transport or trade in game and/or firearms in company vehicles or in company facilities. Coillte acknowledges that some staff members may be involved in recreational hunting as part of Coillte’s letting and licencing programme in a personal capacity. In these cases, the utilisation of a licence is to be carried out in line with Coillte’s Code of Practice for Sustainable Hunting and should not involve the use of company vehicles or facilities.


4. Safety

While hunting and using firearms, personal safety and the safety of others, are the responsibility of the hunter. No matter how much experience a hunter may have, they should never be complacent with regard to safety.

Always expect the unexpected and plan for it!

4.1 Firearms and their handling and use

Firearms are potentially lethal weapons capable of killing or causing serious injury. Accidents involving firearms generally occur as a result of either faulty equipment or unsafe handling and use:-

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4.1.1 Faulty Equipment

Firearms should be checked periodically for serviceability and safety by a qualified gunsmith.

All hunters should maintain their firearms in good working order as per the manufacturers guidelines. Regular maintenance and inspections should identify obvious faults.

Particular attention should be paid to:-

- Pitting, dents, bulges, rust or other potential weakness or obstructions in the barrel/s.
- Loose actions or non-operating locking mechanisms
- Very sensitive trigger pressures which can often result in accidental discharges during loading and unloading.
- Non-operating safety catches or those that are too light which can be accidentally pushed off by clothing or vegetation.

Never use any firearm if there is the slightest concern over its safety. Have it checked immediately by a competent gunsmith.

4.1.2 Unsafe Handling and Use


Accidents mainly occur:-

- In and around vehicles.
- When loading or unloading the firearm.
- When there is more than one person shooting in the same area.
- While negotiating obstacles with a loaded firearm.
- When a barrel is allowed to become obstructed.

4.1.2.1 Guidelines for safe rifle handling and use – **DEER STALKING**

It is important to adopt and follow a set routine for handling rifles safely in the field.

- While stalking, it is recommended that the rifle be carried with an empty breech, bolt closed, the magazine full, safety catch applied, and the rifle slung over the shoulder preferably with the barrel forward and upwards, in order that the direction the muzzle is pointing can be seen at all times.
- It is recommended that the rifle should only be loaded before taking the shot.
- Always load the rifle in the same manner with the same number of rounds of ammunition.
- The trigger should only be touched if you intend to fire or to release spring tension having ensured that the breech is emptied.
- Continually check the safety catch as it can be pushed off accidentally by clothing or vegetation.

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- **Never take a shot without a solid backstop!** This should be preferably solid earth - trees and bushes are definitely not adequate. Avoid the risk of the bullet being deflected (ricocheting) either before reaching the target or after it.
- Always be aware of the position of roads, pathways, buildings, and areas regularly frequented by the public and never fire in their direction.
- Where more than one hunter is hunting in the same area, high visibility caps or vests should be worn at all times
- When crossing obstacles, gralloching (eviscerating) an animal, or climbing into highseats, ensure that the rifle is unloaded, the bolt closed and the safety catch applied. In low light conditions use a finger or torch light to ensure the breech is clear.
- Regularly check the barrel for obstructions such as mud, snow, heather, etc. Sealing the muzzle with insulating tape will prevent objects entering the muzzle.
- Never give or accept a firearm without ensuring the breech is cleared, indicate this by leaving the bolt open.
- In transit to and from the stalking grounds, the chamber and magazine should always be empty, the bolt removed and the rifle enclosed in a slip or case.

No shot should ever be fired if there is the slightest doubt about safety!

Taking the shot

- All responsible stalkers should be capable of properly identifying their quarry and only selecting those animals for culling that comply with the requirements of the annual cull programme.
- When culling female deer, Coillte require all stalkers to cull all accompanying juvenile animals **BEFORE** adult females to avoid the orphaning of dependant calves / fawns.
- Before taking a shot, all stalkers must ensure that the shot to be fired is in a safe direction, with a solid backstop behind the target . Thicket trees and scrub must never be considered as adequate to stop a bullet, nor, should it be assumed that these areas are unoccupied.
- A clear, uninterrupted view of the target animal should be obtained, ensuring that there are no obstacles such as twigs, grass or wire fencing in front of the target which may deflect the shot, or other deer behind the target animal, which may be injured by the exiting bullet.
- The location of the target animal and its proximity to nearby land features should be carefully noted before the shot is taken.
- No shot should ever be taken at a deer unless the stalker is 100% satisfied that they are capable of killing it cleanly and humanly. Long distance shots or other "trick" shots should be confined to the target range and never be attempted on live quarry.

If there is any doubt about safety, the shot must not be taken!

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- To minimise the risk of wounding an animal, Coillte highly recommend the stalker to shoot the animal through the heart and lungs (referred to as a chest shot) when it is standing fully broadside. A deer should never be shot in the head or while it is moving (unless taken as a follow-up shot on a wounded animal).


After the shot

- All stalkers should be capable of determining the appropriate follow-up action by observing the reaction of the deer to the shot. In the event that a follow-up shot is required, the rifle should be immediately re-loaded.
- Particular care should be taken if the animal drops instantly on the spot as a reaction to a "chest shot" through the heart and lungs.
- All shot animals should be approached cautiously, if necessary they should be dispatched immediately and humanely with a follow up shot if it is safe to do so.
- If a shot deer is lost from the stalkers view following the shot, a period of at least 10 minutes should be left before following up. The point where that animal was standing when the shot was fired should be carefully examined for sign of hair, bone and blood, which will indicate where the animal was hit.
- It should always be assumed that the animal is hit as a result of the shot, and every effort should be made to recover it.

All stalkers are required to have immediate access to a dog which is trained and competent in tracking wounded / lost deer, to assist in the rapid location and if necessary, the humane dispatch of any wounded deer.

Carcass handling and inspection


- All stalkers should be familiar with all relevant game meat regulations and ensure all deer carcasses destined for human consumption are handled in accordance with them.
- Every stalker must be capable of eviscerating (gralloching) and undertaking a field inspection of a deer carcass. Any abnormalities or other sign indicating that the animal may have contracted a notifiable disease must be reported immediately to the landowner and other relevant authorities.
- All responsible stalkers should carefully record detailed information relating to each animal culled. Such information would include: - Date, location shot, species, sex, age, body weight, body condition, reproductive status, trophy quality, diseases/parasites, etc. Such information should be available to the landowner.
- All stalkers should have and use appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the handling and transportation of deer carcasses.

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- No stalker should display any carcass in a manner that may cause offence to other forest users. All stalkers must ensure that all viscera, and other body parts removed from the carcase are disposed of properly in accordance with all relevant regulations and legislation.
- All deer carcasses intended for sale, must only be sold through a licensed and approved wild game processing facility.

4.1.2.2 Guidelines for safe shotgun handling and use – **GAME SHOOTING**

- Before loading, always check that the barrels are free from obstructions by looking through from the breech.
- Ensure the barrels are pointed in a safe direct while loading and re-loading.
- When closing a shotgun, the stock should be raised and not the barrels, which should remain, pointed downwards in a safe direction.
- Only load a shotgun when you intend to commence hunting.
- Ensure that the ammunition you intend to use is in good condition and is suitable for that particular firearm (chamber length and proof markings). Cartridges of different bore sizes should never be mixed together. **Never use damaged ammunition.**
- Always apply the safety catch (on “safe”) only releasing it just before you intend to fire. Extra care must be taken with non-automatic safety catches. Always reapply the safety catch after the shot is taken.
- Always carry a shotgun with the barrels pointing in a safe direction, and never pointing at anyone. When in close company the shotgun should be carried unloaded with barrels “broken” (open).
- When passing a shotgun to another person, do so with stock first, barrels “broken” (open), and only after demonstrating that it is unloaded.
- Unload your shotgun before negotiating an obstacle or when walking across difficult terrain or walking through cover.
- The triggers should never be touched until you intend to fire.
- In the event of a misfire, re- apply the safety catch and keep the barrels pointing in a safe direction while opening the shotgun to investigate the cause.
- Never put a loaded shotgun down and never place on the roof of a vehicle or leaning against something where it may fall.
- Special care must be taken when using self-loading or pump-action shotguns, as it may not be obvious that the gun is unloaded.
- Never shoot in the direction of power lines.
- Never shoot unless you have properly identified the target and are sure that it is safe to do so


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Taking a shot

- The target has been correctly identified as being a legitimate quarry species
- It is safe to take a shot. There is a clear uninterrupted view of the target with no obstacles, which may deflect the shot or conceal another person. The shot is in a safe direction. Thicket trees and scrub must never be considered as adequate to stop a shot, nor, should it be assumed that these areas are unoccupied.
- Not to shoot in a manner which will lead to either the shot travelling or the quarry falling outside the boundaries of the licensed area or across public or forest roads and tracks, footpaths or bridleways.
- Not to use steel shot in woodland areas which may increase the risk of ricochet.
- The hunter is 100% confident of killing the quarry instantaneously.
- The hunter or their companion is capable of retrieving the shot quarry.
- If it is safe to do so, all birds, which continue to fly after they have been hit by a shot, should be immediately shot again.

Recovery of Shot Quarry

- All persons hunting on Coillte's lands must be accompanied by a dog, trained and competent in locating and recovering shot quarry. Every effort must be taken to recover all shot quarry. This must be undertaken without delay. Any injured animal must be dispatched immediately in a humane manner.
- No carcasses of any shot animal or bird should be displayed in a manner that may cause offence to other forest users and these carcasses and any associated waste or by-products should be removed from the property and disposed of in a proper manner.

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4.2 Personal Safety

All hunters are responsible for their own personal safety while hunting on Coillte lands including the provision of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Common hazards to be aware of and plan for:-

- **Lone Hunting** - While hunting alone, a mobile telephone should be carried at all times, and / or arrangements made with a third party to confirm their safe return.
- **Hunting in Company** - Where more than one hunter is hunting in the same area, high visibility caps or vests must be worn at all times.
- **Hearing Loss** - Use of firearms without wearing hearing protection can result in permanent loss of hearing.
- **Manual Handling** - Serious personal injury can result from dragging or lifting heavy, awkward weights such as deer carcasses.
- **Difficult / dangerous terrain** - Be aware of the locations of rock outcrops, quarries, rivers, ponds, silt traps, brash, stumps, etc. Prevent against slips, trips, falls and drowning by avoiding these area. Risks associated with these hazards increase considerably in hours of darkness, in wet or icy conditions.
- **Protruding Branches** - Be aware of protruding branches when traversing through trees and take necessary precautions to protect eyesight.
- **Forest Operations** - All persons must comply with all warning signs around forest work sites. Please note:- hunters are not "authorised persons" in this context and such prohibition signs **must never be passed**. Never approach operating machinery.
- **Adverse Weather Conditions** - All hunters should obtain a local weather forecast before hunting and plan / dress accordingly. Forests should not be entered during periods of high wind when there is a high risk of serious injury from falling trees or branches.
- **Injured animals** - Approach all injured animals with care and dispatch quickly, safely and humanely, without risk of personal injury.
- **Lacerations** -Care must be taken when using knives.
- **Infectious diseases** - All hunters should be aware of potential risks of infectious diseases which may be contracted from handling carcasses of shot quarry or the hunting environment. The more common of these include Leptospirosis (Weil's disease) and Lyme disease (Lyme Borreliosis).

It is highly recommended that at least one hunter in a hunting party be trained in basic first aid and would carry a first aid kit in their vehicles as part of their standard PPE.

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4.3 Safety of Others

In addition to the considerable use of Coillte lands by people engaged in forest operations and other licensed activities, Coillte operate an “open access policy” allowing free pedestrian access to its lands. It is estimated that that there are over 8 million day visitors using these lands annually.

- All hunters must be constantly vigilant for other forest users and be prepared to immediately cease hunting in areas where other users are observed.
- All hunters should familiarise themselves fully with the hunting area and be constantly aware of the location of roads, pathways, rights of way, buildings, and areas regularly frequented by the public and never discharge firearms in their vicinity or in their direction.
- It must be remembered that the sound of a discharging firearm can itself present a potential hazard to other users of the forest, for example, pony trekkers.
- All responsible hunters should erect prohibition notices at all gates and entrances to the hunting area before commencing hunting and remove them on leaving the area.

The posting of such prohibition notices is a condition of all Coillte hunting licences and failure to do so may result in the licence being immediately revoked.

- These notices must conform to the specification outlined in **Fig 1**. The hunters mobile telephone number should be displayed on the sign as well as the time when the hunting is due to cease. It is recommended that a small red flashing strobe light (such as rear bicycle light) be attached to this sign to attract attention.
- **It is Coillte’s general policy that all hunters obtain agreement from the forest manager via HAMS at least 48 hours in advance of their intention to hunt the lands.** Merely providing notification of their intention to hunt is not sufficient. This is in the interests of both public safety and to avoid conflicting activities taking place in the same area which may affect the use and enjoyment of these licensed rights.

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4.4 Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (HIRA) / Safety Statement

Before commencing hunting it is good practice to undertake a basic HIRA, identifying potential hazards, evaluating the level of risk and determining appropriate measures to mitigate this risk.

Note:- When exercising a licence as a Commercial Shoot Operator (CSO) it may be a legal requirement to produce a safety statement which includes such a HIRA.




Fig 1. Prohibition Sign – Hunting

(Minimum size of 400mm wide and 600mm high).

5. Consideration for others

All responsible hunters should have the utmost consideration for all forest users and neighbouring landowners, and avoid causing them any undue disturbance or nuisance.

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6. Sustainable Hunting

Coillte is committed to the principles of Sustainable Hunting whereby hunting should only be undertaken at such levels which do not adversely affect the sustainability of local populations of native quarry species.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) are the statutory authority responsible for hunting and species conservation throughout the State. On an annual basis, Coillte obtain confirmation and assurances from the NPWS regarding the sustainability of local populations of wildlife quarry species.

Notwithstanding this, all responsible hunters must be cognisant of the potential negative impacts of shooting and disturbance on their quarry species and adopt a responsible and sustainable approach.

Licensed deer hunters are restricted to culling the number and sex, and species of deer contained in the annual cull programme.

Coillte require all hunters to maintain records of all deer and certain native game quarry species shot on its lands and return this information via HAMS at the end of every shoot event.

7. Environmental Impact

All responsible hunters should aim to ensure that their hunting does not have any negative impact on the environment.


The release of any animal, the introduction of any plant, or the erection of any structure including signs, highseat, feeders, mineral blocks, etc.. on Coillte lands requires written authorisation of the forest manager. Similarly for the cutting of trees, creation of pathways or any groundwork's.

The carcasses and viscera of all shot animals, cases of all used cartridges or other litter resulting from the hunting activity must be collected removed from Coillte's forest property and disposed of in an appropriate manner.

8. Animal Welfare

The highest respect must be afforded to all quarry animals. It should be the objective of every responsible hunter to ensure the clean, humane kill, and efficient recovery of any quarry shot.

All deer stalkers must only use a licensed firearm of a calibre legally approved for killing deer, and appropriate ammunition with a bullet type designed to expand/deform on impact. It is Coillte's recommendation that a minimum calibre of .240 inches and minimum muzzle energy of 1,700 foot-pounds should be used for killing deer. (i.e. .243 Win using a bullet weighing 100 grains).

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All rifles and sights must be correctly “zeroed” or “sighted-in” for a given range. This should be checked on an approved target range on a regular basis, particularly after the firearm receives a service, adjustment or other form of interference, after it is dropped or knocked, or following any un-typically “wild” shot. No responsible stalker should ever use a rifle if there is any doubt over its accuracy.

No responsible stalker should commence stalking without carrying a sufficient number of rounds of ammunition (minimum of 5 rounds) to allow follow-up shots to be taken if required to dispatch a wounded animal.

9. Legislation

It is the responsibility of every deer stalker to familiarise themselves fully with all legislation relating to their sport and adhere to it at all times.

10. Insurance

All persons hunting on Coillte lands under licence / permit must have adequate third party public liability insurance with a minimum cover of not less than €6.5 million for any one accident.

It is highly irresponsible for any person to hunt without appropriate insurance cover.

Remember – The highest level Insurance is not a replacement for safe firearm handling and use!

11. References – Best Practice Guidance / Codes of Practice

- The Deer Initiative – http://www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk/best_practice/
- Scottish National Heritage - <http://www.bestpracticeguides.org.uk/>
- Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust - <http://www.gwct.org.uk/game/advice/code-of-good-shooting-practice/>
- British Association of Shooting and Conservation <http://basc.org.uk/cop/code-of-good-shooting-practice/>