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FOREWORD FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

PAUL CHILDERLEY

I've always been someone who looks ahead, forever chasing the next challenge, so being invited to be Rifle Shooter's latest guest editor gave me a rare – if brief – chance to stop and take stock of my life in shooting sports.

As the son of a gamekeeper, you could say I was born into it. The countryside has always been where I felt most at home, and I've had a natural affinity with wildlife for as long as I can remember. Even at school, although I did well enough in the classroom and on the sports field, my mind was usually on getting home – whether that meant going ferreting or lending a hand to Dad with feeding and rearing.

I always wanted to be a gamekeeper, and I still see it as a profession to be proud of – one that truly stands as a guardian of our countryside. Over the years, the hunting and deer management side of my work became more and more important, not just personally but as part of my business as it grew. That journey has introduced me to people from all corners of the globe: hunters travelling from abroad to take their first muntjac or Chinese water deer with me, and more recently, giving me the chance to travel and hunt in many different countries myself.

It's led to some unbelievable experiences – the sort I could only have dreamed about – but, just as importantly, it's given me a real appreciation of fellow hunters, their traditions, and how they care for and manage their wildlife. I believe there's a great deal we can learn from one another.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have made a living from something I care so deeply about. It hasn't always been plain sailing, and there have certainly been challenges along the way, but I wouldn't change a thing.

Now, through my ambassadorial, training and media work, I'm in a position to give something back. If I can help promote the sport, encourage others to give it a go, or simply help people see it in a more balanced and informed way, then I feel I'm repaying, in some small part, the sport that's given me so much. I'd encourage every reader to do the same – to stand up for the next generation of shooters and ensure they have the same opportunities to enjoy what we cherish so dearly.

I hope you enjoy this latest issue.



Paul Childerley

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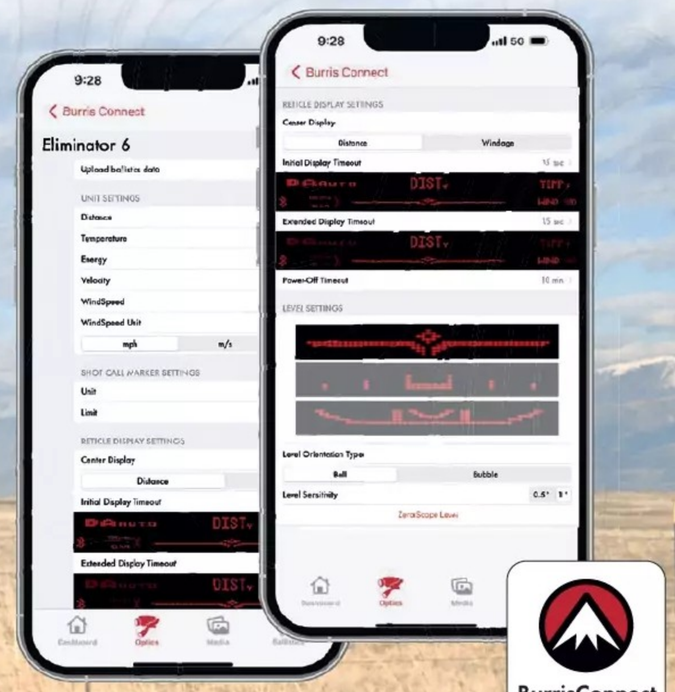
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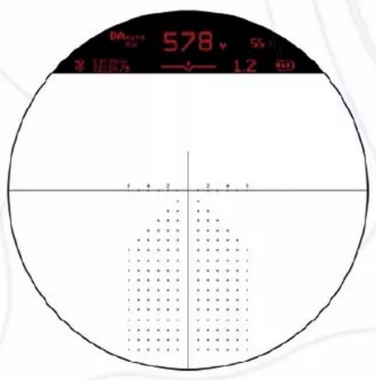
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Rifle Shooter

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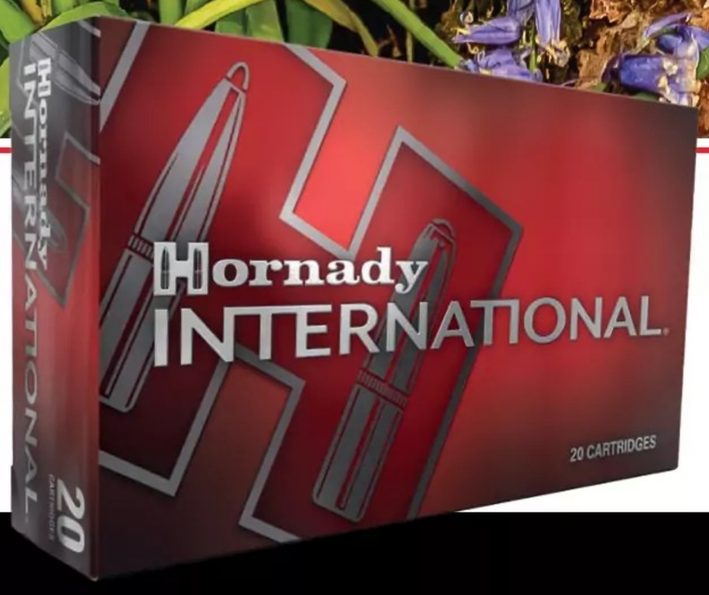
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CHANGING OF THE SEASONS

As I write, parts of the South and South West of the country have endured more than 50 consecutive days of rain. Here in South Lincolnshire, we have seen around 40 days, making it one of the wettest winters I can remember.

The result is that my pick-up has remained a delicate shade of field-brown for months on end, and we – along with many other deer managers across the country – have struggled to achieve the cull numbers required.

Despite the assistance of the excellent hoist I review on page 59, access and extraction in such waterlogged conditions have severely limited the number of deer we have been able to take. I can only hope that the final weeks of the season bring improvement, allowing us to finish with a flourish.

As the Government announces its 10-year plan to protect native flora and fauna from rising deer numbers, it will be interesting to examine the finer detail of how it intends to make it easier for deer managers to achieve the necessary figures, while still demonstrating the all-important respect for our quarry.

In his interview on page 14, our guest editor, Paul Childerley, makes his views on the subject clear. Will O'Meara also explores the issue in conversation with FRS Programme Manager Michael Keegan, gaining insight into Irish plans for managing deer numbers.

Providing the perfect foil, we join John Tooher (page 35) and Marc Newton (page 52) on memorable sika deer hunts that highlight the equally important need to cherish the emotional and aesthetic side of our sport.

Continuing the stalking theme, Martin Guy celebrates his return to the field by joining his son on a seasonal foray after his favorite CWD.

Despite the sodden winter, there are signs of spring and the promise of longer, warmer days ahead.

Whether that means early mornings and late evenings dealing with new litters of foxes, as described on pages 20 and 70, or looking forward to a new competitive season, as Ryan Charlton is doing on page 92, it is a time to relish spending more hours out with the rifle.

Finally, I could not sign off without mentioning this year's excellent Great British Shooting Show. It was my first with *Rifle Shooter* and as part of the show's new owners, Time Well Spent Group. The opportunity to meet friends both old and new, see the impressive range of new products on display – more of which will feature in future issues – and hand out a couple of well deserved awards (page 30), made for three thoroughly enjoyable days.

Plans are already underway for an even bigger and better show next year, so watch this space.

Enjoy this latest issue.

Rob Hardy
Managing Editor

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC NEWTON


GBSS BY MATT KIDD

SHOOTING SHOW BREAKS RECORDS AS INDUSTRY TURNS OUT IN FORCE

The shooting community turned out in force at the NEC Birmingham for this year's Great British Shooting Show from 13–15 February. It was the first under new owners Time Well Spent Group, which also publishes *Rifle Shooter*.

Attendance was up 20% on the previous year, no small thing given the pressure the industry is currently under. The Government's proposed firearms licensing reforms have generated anxiety across the trade, and Gun Trade Association chief executive Stephen Jolly used his main stage slot to address them head-on. But a busy show floor with major international product launches suggested the industry isn't rolling over just yet.

Olympic trap champion Nathan Hales put it plainly from the stage: "We're facing a lot of issues in shooting sports at the moment, so it's great to see everyone here fighting for the same goals."

The show offered plenty for rifle shooters. Mat Manning and Rich Saunders covered practical pest control, and Peter Jones of the Shooting and Hunting Academy spoke on deer management – while the standholders offered the Bergara B14² Cima CF and B14 Sierra, the Sauer 505 Iconic, the Sako 90 Finnlight, the Blaser R8 Professional 2.0 and the Browning X-Bolt 2 Stainless Varitech among the new releases.

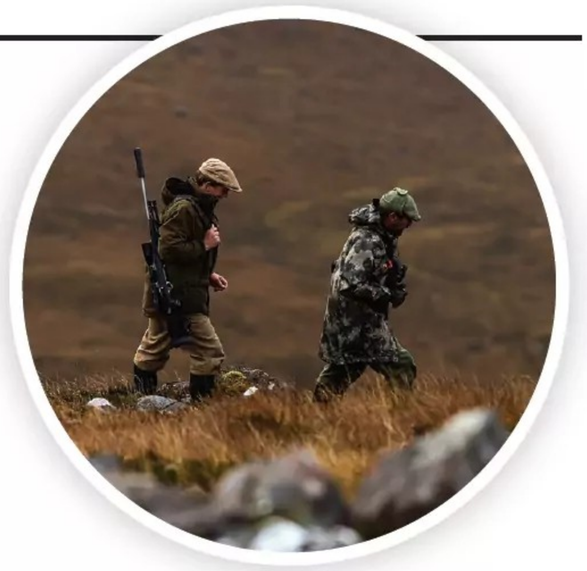
At the Great British Shooting Awards, Paul Chiderley of Chiderley Sporting took professional deerstalker of the year, while Scott McKenzie, head keeper at Fearann Eilean Iarmain estate, bagged gamekeeper of the year. In one of the more poignant moments, former shooting show organisers John and Annie Allison received a lifetime achievement award from Time Well Spent's CEO and COO Simon and Selena Barr.

On the product side, the Tikka T3x Ace Target was named rifle of the year, the Swarovski Z8I+ took riflescope of the year, and Hikmicro claimed both night vision optic of the year with the Alpex 4K A50E and thermal handheld of the year with the Lynx 3.0 LH25.

Next year's show runs Friday 12 to Sunday 14 February at the NEC Birmingham.

POLICY

HALF A VICTORY ON SCOTTISH SPORTING RATES


JEFF J MITCHELL VIA GETTY IMAGES

Scottish shoots are getting some relief. But not all of them, and not without a fight.

Back in January, finance secretary Shona Robison buried a bombshell in a 154-page Scottish Budget document: shoots and deer forests were to be stripped of Small Business Bonus Scheme relief, with no prior consultation with the rural sector.

Only operations exercising shooting rights solely for deer management, environmental management or vermin control would keep it. The word "solely" raised alarm bells as it penalised the shoots doing the most diverse conservation work.

More than 1,300 people signed BASC's open letter demanding a rethink. The organisation, along with others including the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, lobbied ministers directly.

Then on 13 February, secondary legislation brought welcome news: a partial reversal. Deer forests can now claim relief where shooting rights are exercised for a combination of environmental management and land protection purposes, not just one or the other. Estates and farms sending deer into the food chain as venison also now qualify, as do deer forests where no shooting rights are actively exercised in practice.

What the reversal does not do is help low ground shoots, except where they are putting deer into the food chain. Driven game operations and owner-occupied land where shooting forms part of a wider business all remain liable for a hefty tax bill.

BASC Scotland director Peter Clark welcomed the reversal for deer forests but said the move was insufficient, warning that "many small shoots and sporting businesses remain exposed to increased costs and continued uncertainty".

Scottish Land & Estates is pushing for the food production exemption to cover game meat beyond venison, while Tom Turnbull, chairman of the Association of Deer Management Groups, cautioned that how rates assessors interpret the new wording in practice would be "vital".

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POLICY

GOVERNMENT TO FUND SQUIRREL AND DEER CONTROL

Government plans to plant three national forests hinge on volunteers and stalkers controlling wildlife damage, according to two new policy statements covering England and Wales.

Grey squirrels are costing England and Wales £37 million a year in woodland damage, while deer have degraded one third of England's existing woodlands. Without effective control, Defra admits the destruction risks undermining its target of 16.5% tree cover by 2050.

The department's Grey Squirrel Policy Statement, published on 29 January, sets out new measures to tackle the problem. It commits financial incentives for landowners controlling numbers, as well as training for volunteers, and three project officers in Lancashire, Yorkshire and County Durham to coordinate control efforts around red squirrel strongholds.

Tim Weston of the National Gamekeepers' Organisation welcomed the policy's "emphasis on landscape-scale management, an approach gamekeepers have been delivering collaboratively and successfully for many years". He said his organisation was



DRIHERZ VIA GETTY IMAGES

keen to see details of proposed grant funding and training packages.

Later, on 20 February, Defra published its England Deer Impacts Policy Statement, promising a reduction in red tape for deer stalkers, with "potential changes" to night shooting and close season permissions. The Government will also back the domestic wild venison market to "help offset the costs of managing deer impacts by lethal control".

While those measures will be welcome news to the shooting community, BASC's Martin Edwards warned that firearms licensing delays threaten delivery. "There are real opportunities to build on the work of volunteer and professional deer managers," he said. "But licensing delays can stretch beyond 12 months. This must be addressed if we are to have enough deer managers."

POLICY

DEER BILL: THE WINS, THE WORRIES AND THE £40,000 THREAT

The Scottish Parliament has passed the Natural Environment Bill by 90 votes to 26, and for the shooting and deer management sector, the result is a mixture of genuine gains and real causes for concern.

The headline blow is compulsory training for deer stalkers – introduced, BASC Scotland director Peter Clark argues, "in the absence of any evidence to support it". Rural affairs minister Jim Fairlie MSP has promised consultation before the requirement comes into force, but timescales, costs and whether experienced stalkers will be exempt remain entirely unresolved.

More troubling for many is the expansion of NatureScot's powers. The agency can now intervene in deer management for 'nature restoration' purposes – not just damage prevention – with the ability to escalate from voluntary agreements to legally binding control orders. Landowners who refuse face fines of up to £40,000 or three months in prison. The Scottish Gamekeepers Association has warned the new powers will inevitably end up in court.

However, the sector did secure concessions. NatureScot's intervention powers are now softened as something it "may" use rather than "will", removing a presumption of state interference that land managers found objectionable. Muirburn rules were corrected so managers no longer have to attempt alternative vegetation methods before burning heather. Proposals to restrict gamebird releases were dropped following sustained lobbying. And a promising win for deer managers: a new venison plan aims to promote the meat and provide financial incentives for supplying the food chain.

The Bill awaits Royal Assent.

NEWS IN BRIEF

PROPOSED LICENSING CHANGES WOULD BLOW £2.35BN HOLE IN THE GUN TRADE

Aligning shotgun and firearms licensing could cost the shooting industry £2.35 billion, according to a Gun Trade Association report that makes grim reading for anyone who makes their living from the trade.

Three-quarters of the 211 businesses surveyed expect turnover to drop. For registered firearm dealers it's worse: a 50% fall in takings is on the cards, along with the loss of a quarter of full-time staff and nearly 900 jobs across GTA membership.

GTA chief executive Stephen Jolly says the Government's push for tighter controls is happening without credible national gun crime figures – and that high-profile incidents cited in support of change reveal a licensing system that's badly run, not one that needs recategorising.

Whether Westminster is listening remains to be seen.

SOUND MODERATOR DEREGULATION MOVES A STEP CLOSER

The Government has tabled an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill that would remove sound moderators from their current classification as Section 1 firearms in England and Wales. If it sounds familiar, that is because an opposition peer tabled a similar amendment at an earlier stage of the Bill, which received cross-party backing. However, it is rare for a Government to approve opposition amendments outright, so Labour has tabled its own version.

Under the proposed change, it would remain an offence to possess a moderator for a Section 1 firearm without holding a valid certificate, but moderators would no longer require a separate variation. The Bill is expected to be passed into law before the King's Speech in mid-May.

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A KEEPER FOR KICKS

Gamekeeper, businessman, YouTube presenter and newly crowned BSS professional deerstalker of the year, **Paul Childerley** discusses his life in fieldsports and what the future may hold

WHO IS PAUL CHILDERLEY?

Wow, that's a difficult first question! I'm comfortable talking about my work and interests, but I'm not very good at talking about myself. My job title is Company Director, and I always wanted to be one – at least until I realised what it actually entails – but in reality I still consider myself a gamekeeper who likes to go deerstalking.

I run Childerley Sporting, which is best known for its game shooting and stalking, but also encompasses a number of related businesses, including training events, consultancy, video production, media and ambassadorial work. I try to approach everything with the same work ethic that has made me successful in other areas of my life: I simply can't do things by halves. I aim to give my customers the same quality of service that I expect myself when I'm the client. I believe that's the right attitude, and it has resulted in a strong customer base, excellent reviews and a great deal of repeat business for both shooting and stalking days, from clients at home and abroad.

I certainly have no problem in being known as a gamekeeper. In fact it's what I prefer and I think it's a profession to be proud of; one which should be looked up to and appreciated.

WHAT WAS YOUR ROUTE INTO FIELDSPORTS?

I was born in Gloucestershire and my father, Martin Childerley, was a gamekeeper, so I've been around country sports for as long as I can remember. You could say I was born into it. We moved to the Eddington Estate near Hungerford and then spent four years in Southern Ireland, where my dad set up a shoot, before returning to Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds.

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> ***“On the flip side I put much of my success in kickboxing down to gamekeeping”***

My brother and I were always outdoors, helping with feeding and rearing. We ran our own trap lines and ferreted and shot rabbits and other pests around the estate. From about the age of 10 I helped dad to lamp foxes and even camped out with him while he watched over the pheasant pens with his .243 rifle. I shot my first deer – a roe – with that rifle when I was around 12, and I've loved deer and stalking them ever since.

I went to Sparsholt College at 16 and, after completing my training, secured my first keepering job at 20 as a beatkeeper at Stawell Park. I stayed there for four years before moving to Bedfordshire, to set up a commercial shoot.

From the age of 16 I had also taken up kickboxing, as a result of getting into an altercation with a group of lads and not coming off too well. I joined a local club and it quickly became my other great passion. I've been fortunate enough to win five world titles across two weight categories.

WHAT RIFLE AND AMMUNITION DO YOU SHOOT?

I'm sponsored by Sako, so I use their rifles and ammunition, but in truth I'd be using them anyway – I have done for many years. They're incredibly reliable and easy to use: the safety catch is intuitive, the triggers are excellent and the bolt cycles smoothly. They simply work, which is why I also use them for my stalking clients. I started with the old Sako 75s and now use the Sako 90.

In terms of calibres, I use a .243 for muntjac, and 6.5 Creedmoor, 6.5 PRC and .308 for larger deer species and even antelope. My favourite calibre is the .22-250, which I love using for foxes and Chinese Water Deer. I own a wide range of rifles, from a .22 for rabbits through to a .375 H&H for big game. For me, most rifles are tools, so I prefer synthetic stocks and either stainless or Cerakoted barrels.

I've been heavily involved in the development of Sako's copper ammunition for many years. I batch-tested the Powerhead Blade long before its release, did the same with the Gamehead and more recently the Powerhead Blade Pro. I have no issues whatsoever with shooting copper for all my stalking, whether alone or with clients, and I've taken hundreds of deer and other species with it.

There are, however, a few things to consider when transitioning from lead to copper. It's less forgiving, so shot placement needs to be spot on, as you don't get the same expansion. The upside is that it's extremely accurate, so you can't blame the bullet.

For the same reason you also have to be extra careful ensuring you have a really safe backstop, especially with the smaller deer species, or with herding deer that no other animals are behind before you take the shot. That said, these are things any safe and ethical hunter should be doing anyway. I think the most important thing is to select the appropriate calibre and bullet combination for your quarry.

OTHER THAN THE RIFLE AND AMMUNITION WHAT IS THE ONE THING YOU WOULDN'T GO STALKING WITHOUT?

Definitely binoculars and a sharp knife – an Emberleaf in my case – for me, they go hand in hand. I try not to carry too much, and we're fortunate that when stalking estates we're usually close enough to the vehicle to retrieve anything else if needed.

I do use a thermal spotter, but a good set of binoculars remains essential for proper identification and ensuring the correct animal is taken. As a professional, I find thermal invaluable for counting and recovery, but for recreational stalkers I think relying on it too heavily can lead to rushing and missing both opportunities and, more importantly, the challenge and skill that make up the magic of the stalk.

For my general stalking I prefer a set of carbon fibre Stable Sticks, because they are lightweight, quiet, and not cold in the hand. They may not be quite as strong as other brands like Viperflex or Spartan, but they're lighter and break down small enough to fit into my travel case.

When I'm calling roe or muntjac, or sitting out for a fox, I use the Primos tripod sticks with a spinny top. These allow me, or a client, to quickly and easily turn and track a moving animal with the rifle, without having to try and constantly reposition the quad sticks.

I take a very minimalist approach to gear, particularly



Where it all began – Paul stalking with his gamekeeper father Martin Childerley

when stalking for myself rather than shooting numbers. I'll carry only the essentials: a roe sack, sticks, binoculars, rifle and knife. Everything else stays in the car, including the thermal.

WHAT IS YOUR PERFECT DAY'S HUNTING?

I have been super fortunate to hunt around the globe. I have ticked-off most of the bucket list, from hunting buffalo and kudu in Africa to stalking red stags with a garron on the hill in Scotland and I've loved it all. For all that I still get a massive buzz and sense of achievement in stopping a fox killing my birds, it's in my blood.

The most memorable and magical hunt would have to be hunting capercaillie in the Arctic Circle in Northern Sweden. It involved skiing for six hours across open wilderness and living off-grid in temperatures as low as -38 – it was a true adventure. My most pleasurable stalking in the UK is roe buck in May, on an estate down in the Cotswolds, which I keep just for myself and close friends. It's such a lovely, peaceful place to be, at a time of year when the countryside is at its most vibrant.

TELL US ABOUT STARTING CHILDERLEY SPORTING?

It began around 15 years ago, when I was made redundant after the estate I worked on was sold. I already had my own ideas about how the shoot should be run, and the drive to move from gamekeeper to business owner came from the same desire to be the best and seek new challenges that had driven my kickboxing career.

I knew the job and understood the risks, so I bid to take the shooting on myself. I was fortunate that at the time I ran five kickboxing gyms, which provided financial backing. Martial arts instilled discipline, focus and a constant drive for improvement – traits that translate directly into my work. That mindset can be problematic at times, but it's also been key to my success. The two things have always complemented each other, as on the flip-side I put much of my success in kickboxing down to gamekeeping. I would spend 12 hours a day grafting, lifting sacks of feed, hammering in posts, running miles on the shoot and then head to the gym and train for another two to three hours. It was really physical and I was so incredibly fit that few people could match my stamina. It gave me a competitive edge.

At the time, deer control was simply seen as part of the job, with little commercial value. I have always had an eye for an opportunity and when I saw the CWD I just thought, "I have something here that few others can offer," and so it turned into a big part of the business. Shooting one is something every hunter wants to do at least once to tick it off the list.

Managing one shoot became two, involving up to 70 game days a year, two full-time keepers and eight guides, taking around 1,500 deer annually with clients across Bedfordshire.

I'm very proud that I have been able to turn a long-standing love of deer and the countryside into a successful business, but I don't see that success in just financial terms. I get a lot from my role teaching and providing experiences, like rifle training for new participants, which leads them to obtain their own license and begin to harvest their own food.

Shooting has given me a lot and I like to think I'm giving something back. This is where the training events and the media aspects come into play, it's a chance to represent the business but also the sport, talk to people and spread the word about the importance of good countryside management.

HOW DO YOU THINK WE CAN ENCOURAGE MORE PEOPLE INTO THE SPORT?

Organisations such as BASC, NGO and BDS already do a great job. The key is communication – engaging with both hunters and non-hunters and explaining the conservation and management aspects of fieldsports. Most people are genuinely interested. When

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A Cape Buffalo taken on a trip to Mozambique



Travelling light – a beautiful summer roe buck

my profession comes up socially, people are often fascinated.

I tend to say I "manage the countryside" rather than simply saying I shoot deer or pheasants. That's not out of embarrassment – it's about framing the conversation positively. If you explain what we do clearly and responsibly, people may not agree with everything, but they leave better informed. Education is central to improving long-term public perception.

Social media gives us a massive opportunity to spread the word to a worldwide audience, but I agree with the previous guest editor (Peter Jones) comments that the onus is then on all those involved to make sure they show the sport in the best possible light. Eyes are on us every day and while I'm fine with that, even small mistakes can be used against us.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING RIFLE SHOOTERS IN THE UK?

Licensing and the government's stance on private gun ownership are obvious issues. All we can do is continue to demonstrate that legal gun ownership is not the problem and that firearms are essential tools for effective countryside management. These restrictions do seem a contradiction, as the challenge with deer is the proper management of numbers.

The real issue isn't just numbers, but the ability to control them effectively in certain areas – something I hope will be sorted out fairly soon – and the demand and price of the resulting venison. If the demand isn't there and game dealers are only willing to pay low prices, then where is the incentive for recreational stalkers to shoot deer? Many are not willing to shoot and lug three or four fallow across a field for £30 a carcass. They might shoot one for themselves or friends – which is absolutely fine – but that is not going to solve the problem.

If the government is serious about reducing numbers there needs to be some sort of grant system, similar to farming grants, or for game dealers to enable them to pay an extra amount per carcass provided shooting and hygiene standards



Paul still thinks of himself as a gamekeeper who likes deerstalking

PICTURES: CJ FORUM

> ***"I believe this is the future of all countrysports, taking a much more holistic approach to things"***

are met. This would incentivise shooting and begin to reduce deer numbers at the pace and level needed.

WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON SOME GAME DEALERS NOW ONLY TAKING HEAD-SHOT DEER?

In my experience, the majority of UK stalkers are very good and experienced shots who want to harvest deer as humanely as possible; they see it as a massive point of pride.

I've travelled widely and rate UK rifle shooters very highly, certainly those who have done a lot of fox and vermin control with smaller calibre rifles. While in some situations head and neck shots have to be taken – providing the shooter has a good rest and is comfortable taking the shot – in reality when you are managing large numbers of deer, heart shooting is more effective.

It is a simple fact that I can shoot around two or three times as many animals, from a herd of fallow for instance, than I could if I was trying to head or neck shoot them. I think the crucial thing is that people should not feel pushed beyond their own limits.

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

I lost my largest estate last year after 25 years when new owners brought the shooting in-house. Initially it felt like a setback, but again I looked at the possible opportunities it might bring and decided to turn things on their head — or more accurately turn back the clock.

My remaining shoot is now a much smaller, premium operation, where the onus is on the enjoyment of the day rather than numbers. I have done away with painted white pegs and gone back to using split hazel sticks with feed card peg numbers. We have a military gun bus and lunch is in a safari tent, with a woodburner and a chef cooking game in the middle of the woods. It is a much more traditional approach, all based around the experience and sporting values and has been very well-received by clients.

I believe this is the future of all countrysports, taking a much more holistic approach to things. One that justifies putting money back into the countryside and puts the focus on spending time with friends and family and enjoying the results. Everything shot is used, with game being distributed between guns, beaters and within the wider community, such as our local Scout group who take pheasants which they then pluck and prepare themselves.

When it comes to my personal goals, I have just finished writing a book on Chinese Water Deer, due out this summer. This year a major focus will be making our new YouTube channel: **www.youtube.com/@paulchilderley** as good as we can, growing the numbers we reach as a platform for the sport.

From a hunting point of view, I would like to continue to hunt globally for the great experiences it brings. I like adventure and I've been looking at some extreme hunts where you live off grid, travelling around in old military vehicles. I have also looked at possible opportunities for the business in both Sweden and Portugal.

Most importantly, I've promised myself and my family that I will sit back occasionally, chill out and really appreciate the lifestyle and what we have achieved. As I said previously, I'm very driven and tend to only look forward, always chasing the next challenge, which is not always a good thing.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO ADD ANYTHING ELSE?

Yes – keep watching my YouTube channel.

More seriously, I'd encourage hunters not to be afraid of traveling to experience different countries and species. Traveling and observing how others operate, gaining a better appreciation for different environments, traditions and cultures is one of the most rewarding aspects of the sport.

Whether it's hunting buffalo in Mozambique or stalking red deer on a Scottish hill, fieldsports are about experiences. Get out there and give it a go. ■

SCAN TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT CHILDERLEY SPORTING

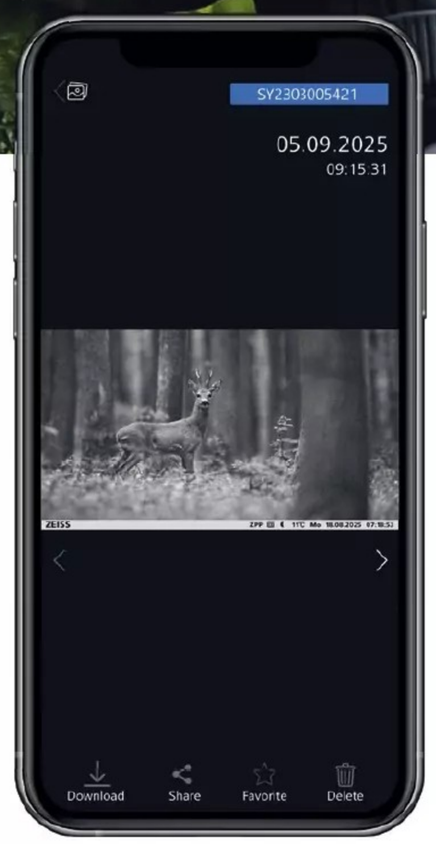
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FROM DAWN TILL DUSK

Understanding fox movements during late winter and early spring is the key to consistent control. Gamekeeper **Lance Barton** explains what to look for and when

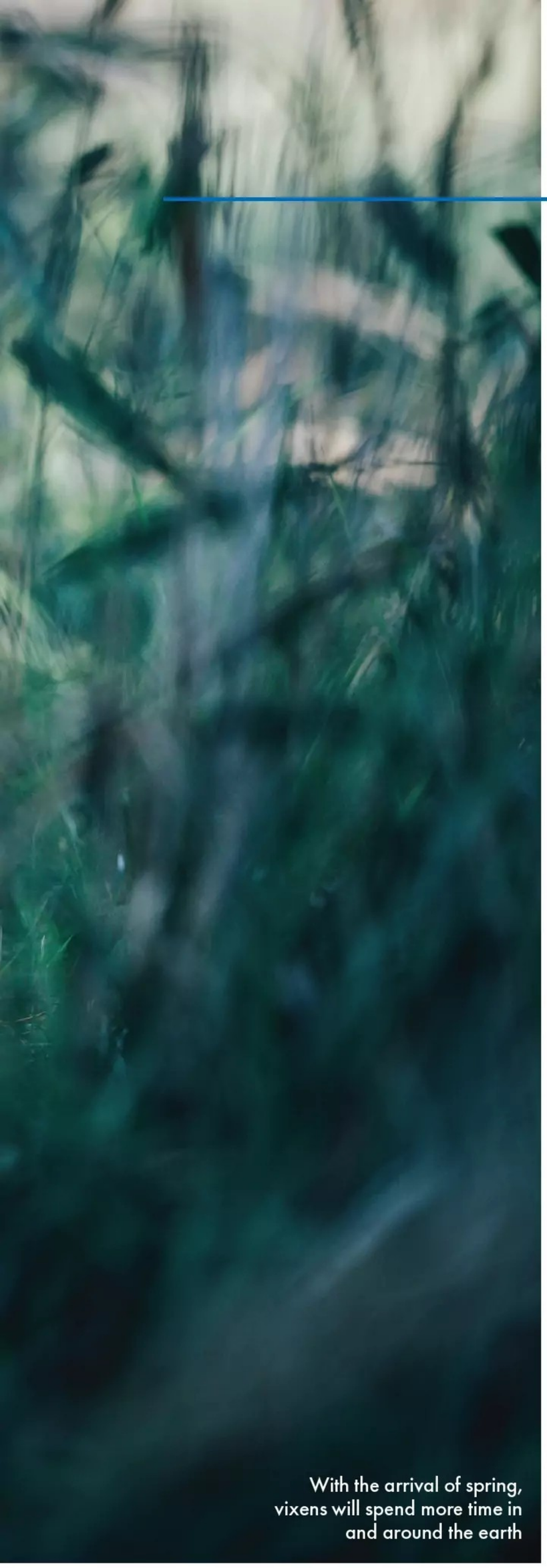
There is a period in the foxing calendar when the countryside begins to tell you exactly what is going on, if you are prepared to look. Late winter slipping into early spring is that time with February, March and early April loosing much of the random behaviour seen earlier in the season and replacing it with intent. Foxes are no longer simply feeding to survive, they are preparing for what comes next.

For the fox shooter this is one of the most revealing times of the year. Movements become predictable, routines form and areas of importance show themselves clearly. From dawn till dusk, foxes give away clues that, once understood, can be relied upon from one season to the next.

LATE WINTER: THE LAST OF THE ROAMING

By late winter the mating season is either coming to an end or has just

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With the arrival of spring, vixens will spend more time in and around the earth

“The key to success is understanding that parietal foxes are driven by necessity rather than curiosity”



Prime fox breeding ground - A nice overgrown corner with south facing bank

passed. Dog foxes have covered a lot of ground through January, often travelling miles in search of vixens and by February that frantic movement begins to slow.

Pairs are still feeding heavily but their range starts to contract. Nights are spent closer on home soil and early-morning sightings become more common as foxes linger longer before returning to cover. It is not unusual to see them slipping back along hedge bottoms or crossing open ground at first light, especially during settled weather.

This is a valuable time for observation. Foxes are still mobile enough to show you their wider territory, but already you can start to identify the areas that matter most. Certain fields, woodland edges and travel routes begin to feature repeatedly. These are rarely chosen by accident.

EARLY SPRING: A SHIFT IN PRIORITIES

As winter gives way to spring, fox behaviour changes noticeably. The wide-ranging nights of earlier months are replaced by more purposeful, localised movement. For vixens in particular, the focus turns inward towards security and preparation.

Most will now be in cub and their world begins to shrink. Energy is conserved where possible and unnecessary risk avoided. The need to feed still demands hunting trips, but routes become direct and familiar. You could say they stop wandering and start commuting.

Dog foxes also change their behaviour. Some remain closely associated with the vixen, helping to feed her both before and after cubs are born. Others drift further away once mating is complete, though they will still patrol territory boundaries and exploit easy food when available.

For the shooter, this is when patterns really start to become established.

Perhaps the single most important factor controlling fox movement in spring, is the choice of earth. Vixens do not choose cubbing sites lightly and once a good one is found it is often reused year after year.

South-facing earths are particularly favoured.



Dawn can offer some of the best opportunities during spring and summer

These offer warmth, dryness and protection from prevailing weather. A well-drained bank that catches the early sun provides an ideal environment for cubs, especially during cold or wet springs.

Preferred spots are usually relatively quiet places with established cover; woodland banks, thick hedgerows, rough corners, old quarries or along the edges of spinneys. While the earth itself requires minimal disturbance, predictable human activity is often of little concern. Foxes are surprisingly tolerant of people, provided routines are consistent.

Multiple entrances are a common feature, allowing both escape routes and ventilation and vixens will often improve or expand existing holes in the weeks leading up to giving birth.

Crucially, foxes remember the best places. A good earth is a valuable asset and many will be returned to time and again, sometimes by multiple generations.

> ***"Finally, rather than reacting to sightings, you start to anticipate them"***

LEARNING THE GROUND, YEAR BY YEAR

One of the greatest advantages in the fox shooter's armory, is a knowledge built over seasons rather than nights. Spring is when that begins to be built.

Once you identify a good earth, it becomes a reference point. Each year's activity around it tells you something new; when activity begins to increase, in which directions they travel out to feed and what times of day they appear.

Over time you begin to paint a picture of the ground. You learn which banks are likely to hold foxes in March, which hedges are used in April, and which fields suddenly become active when cubs arrive. That picture becomes clearer with every passing spring.

Finally, rather than reacting to sightings, you start to anticipate them.

MOVEMENT PATTERNS AROUND THE EARTH

Once the cubs are born, adult foxes operate on a hub-and-spoke system. The earth becomes the centre of their world and all movement radiates out from it.

Feeding routes are chosen for efficiency and safety. They will favour specific ground that allow for quick travel with minimal exposure and use it repeatedly, often at very similar times day after day.

Vixens in particular, become creatures of routine. They leave the earth, take the most direct route to a known food source and return as quickly as possible. This is when foxes are most predictable and when the careful shooter can be most effective.

TIMING YOUR EFFORTS

Spring foxing should not be confined to the hours of darkness. In fact, some of your best

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opportunities will be at either end of the day. Dawn often sees a fox slipping back to its earth after a late night feed. They are usually relaxed, intent on getting home and less inclined to deviate. Knowing this and their final destination allows you to position yourself accordingly.

Dusk, on the other hand, brings anticipation. Foxes leave cover with purpose, often appearing earlier than they would in mid-winter. On quiet ground, it is not uncommon to see foxes moving well before last light.

By understanding where they are based and which routes they are using, you can make short, targeted outings rather than long, speculative sessions.

CAPITALISING AS A FOX SHOOTER

Success at this time of year is rarely about covering ground, it is about an intimate knowledge of it.

The key to success is understanding that parietal foxes are driven by necessity rather than curiosity. They are not roaming out of interest, they are working to a plan.

By identifying their locations, regular feeding routes and preferred times of movement, you dramatically increase your chances of being in the right place at the right time.

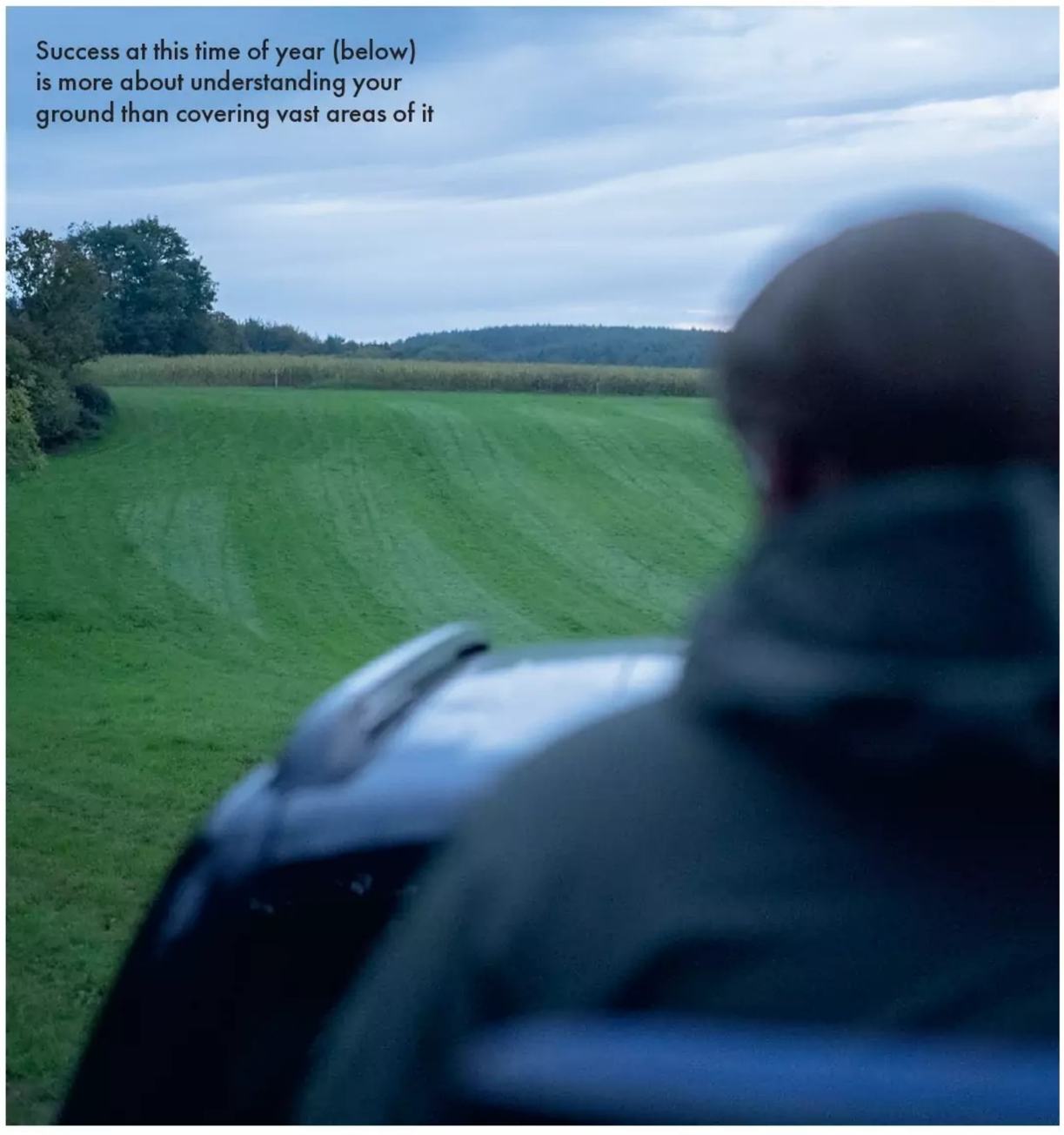
If they do not show up as expected, it is well worth returning. Spring foxes are habitual and once a pattern is established, it will usually be repeated until they are disturbed.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Each spring offers an opportunity to refine the understanding of your ground. Foxes show their hand now, more than at almost any other time of year, revealing where they feel safe, where they feed and how they move between the two. Notes made now, whether mental or written, will pay dividends in future years.

Scraps of knowledge, like which banks warm first, or a route to a favoured food source all builds into a bigger picture. Over time, you stop chasing foxes and start waiting for them.

That is the difference between luck and consistency. ■



Success at this time of year (below) is more about understanding your ground than covering vast areas of it

PHOTOGRAPHY: FIELD FOOD AND COUNTRY





A clear visual comparison of the two different designs on offer

A NEW BENCHMARK

Is this the end of the tripod? **Ed Jackson** provides an in-depth field test of the Swarovski AT and ST Balance, using groundbreaking stabilisation technology to offer the observer total freedom in the field

I genuinely look forward to reviewing new Swarovski products, as when it comes to hunting, their gear consistently represents the pinnacle of what is available on the market. For me, the premium optics deliver a view where colours are brilliantly vivid and shades are rendered with such clarity and detail that nature truly comes alive.

Consequently, the launch of the AT and ST Balance marks a pioneering milestone for the Austrian company. While integrated image stabilisation has typically been reserved for cameras or binoculars, these spotting scopes are the first to bring such high-level technology to a premium spotting scope. I was sent both versions to test: the AT Balance 18-45x65 and the ST Balance 14-35x50.

Swarovski's new Swarobalance technology aims to eliminate the need for a tripod by providing a stabilised image even at maximum zoom. It's a potential game-changer, but does it work?

UNBOXING AND ERGONOMICS

You get instructions, a lens cloth, a carrying strap, an ARCA tripod adapter, a USB-C-compatible charger with a cable, and a 1,860mAh rechargeable battery. Each spotter is fitted with a black captive rubber lens cap for the eyepiece and a solid 'pinch-to-remove' cap for the objective lens.

The bodies are wrapped in a robust, green rubberised material for a secure grip, while the twist-to-adjust eyepiece, strap attachment point, tripod adapter plate, and battery housing are all in black. Both AT and ST units share the same intuitive power button positioned at the front of the battery housing, which you press and hold to activate/deactivate the

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

AT BALANCE 65	
MAGNIFICATION:	18-45
FIELD OF VIEW:	55-30m / 1,000m
WEIGHT:	1,470g (51.9 oz)
LENGTH:	268mm (10.6")
WIDTH:	83 mm (3.3")
PRICE:	£2,980
ST BALANCE 50	
MAGNIFICATION:	14-35
FIELD OF VIEW:	70-39m / 1,000m
WEIGHT:	1,300g (45.9 oz)
LENGTH:	268mm (10.6")
WIDTH:	91mm (3.6")
PRICE:	£2,810

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I used the AT Balance spotting scope freehand to spot impacts on steel, which seemed so alien at the time

Swarobalance system.

The AT (angled) model is the larger and heavier of the two, weighing in at 1,470g, and features an eyepiece set at a 45-degree angle to the body for comfortable viewing over extended periods. In contrast, the ST (straight) model has the eyepiece in line with the lens to allow for faster, more intuitive target acquisition. It is lighter at 1,300g, and the different shape offers alternative ergonomics depending on your preferences.

On both models, the large magnification collar is ridged for grip and rotates approximately 120 degrees across the full range, with the figures cleanly debossed into the rubber outer. An even larger collar surrounds the main body for fine focus adjustment.

THE SWAROBALANCE REVOLUTION

Everybody knows that the limiting factor of high-magnification spotting scopes has been the necessity of a tripod or support system. Even the best glass in the world cannot compensate for the human body's movement when viewing at powers like 35x or 45x. This is where the Swarobalance technology marks a fundamental change in the capabilities of high-end spotting scopes. There is nothing more infuriating than a tripod-mounted image losing its edge because of wind or user-induced vibration.

Swarovski's optical stabilisation uses sensitive sensors to detect minute movements. This data triggers an electric motor to adjust the lens position, with the system processing over 1,000 measurements per second to compensate.

Out in the field, the experience is surreal, as there is a genuine sense of wonder and excitement as your brain registers a level of handheld stability that it is not used to. It triggers a relentless desire to revisit every familiar landscape or animal you've ever seen, just to experience them again through these superior optics, at a much higher magnification. It's genuinely very exciting.

Given that the technology needs to detect your hand movement and then compensate for it, there is very little, if any, perceivable lag, which is also pretty astonishing given the task at hand.

OPTICAL PERFORMANCE AND CLARITY

Known for unparalleled glass, Swarovski delivers brilliant colours and edge-to-edge sharpness in both the AT and ST models. This optical quality allows you to see 'into' the landscape rather than just scanning the surface, a feat mid-tier optics simply cannot match. While thermal is superior for pure detection, these scopes master light for those who want to truly observe and appreciate nature.

This glass maintains exceptional edge-to-edge clarity and brightness throughout its zoom range. However, at 45x, the eyebox tightens significantly, requiring precise head alignment that can quickly lead to fatigue. It serves as a reminder that, even with stabilisation, high-power observation remains a demanding task over long periods.

Fields of view are class-leading, ranging from 55–30m on the AT to a wider 70–39m on the lower-magnification ST. This breadth is designed to capitalise on the units' stabilised handheld capability, transforming the often-restrictive spotting scope experience into a more binocular-like one.

FIELD TEST

The week the scopes arrived, I was booked to shoot steels out to 1,132m at Bisley, providing the perfect

"There is very little, if any, perceivable lag, which is also pretty astonishing given the task at hand"



The AT and ST have different battery compartments, with both offering an effective, durable twist-to-unlock mechanism. Note the ARCA tripod adapter fitted on the AT

environment to truly test the limits of the AT Balance, which is the one I took with me. The conditions were tricky, with the sun directly in our eyes, but it was here that the premium Swarovski glass really stamped its authority over the spotting scopes provided at the range.

Handing the AT around, the stabilisation proved an instant hit and drew immediate praise as we spotted impacts freehand at various magnifications. The compactness of the unit was brought up in conversation as well, as the resulting agility allows for swift, intuitive movement when switching between targets at different ranges.

The controls are largely excellent, particularly the perfectly weighted magnification collar. The focus ring, however, feels a bit light. While it functions perfectly once you are on target, offering easy, precise adjustment, it is perhaps too eager to move when the optic is being handled or shared, leading to accidental adjustments. This is a minor gripe, but worth mentioning nonetheless.

I spent most of my time using the 18-27x magnification range. I found this to be the most relaxing 'sweet spot' for my eyes, as it provided a generous field of view, a relaxed eyebox, and excellent clarity. While the technology is groundbreaking, it is important to remember that environmental and human limitations still apply at 45x magnification.

After spotting from a standing position for several hours, my limit for precise freehand impact-spotting was 663m. Beyond this, a rest helps maintain clarity and combat fatigue. The battery lasted a freezing morning of constant use, though the unit remains a world-class passive optic even without power.

DIGISCOPING AND VERSATILITY

Swarovski's digiscoping system further extends the scope's versatility, allowing you to transform the optic into a high-end telephoto lens. You just need a Clamp Adapter (£41) and a Variable Phone Adapter (£165). Although I did not have the setup available at Bisley, I later tested it with an iPhone 16 while spotting wildlife along the local river, where it worked really well, capturing superb photos and video.

Calibration is critical here: always align your phone's lens at maximum magnification to prevent the image from shifting as you zoom. It is also important to remember that the phone's weight alters the centre of gravity, making handheld stability more of a challenge. Finally, while the digital results are impressive, no sensor can quite replicate the 'MK1 eyeball' experience. The raw clarity through that premium glass remains superior.

VERDICT

Choosing between the AT (£2,980) and ST (£2,810) depends on personal preference. While representing a significant investment, you are not just buying world-class glass but a two-in-one tool that bridges the gap between high-power binoculars and a traditional spotting scope. This potentially eliminates the need to carry both a heavy tripod and a separate spotting scope. With a 12-hour battery rating, it easily outlasts a demanding day in the field, ensuring you're never caught out and by the end of my day at the range, one shooter declared he was going to buy one.

When picking one, the AT model is best for extended glassing and digiscoping. The angled eyepiece offers a relaxed posture when looking uphill and keeps your phone screen facing upwards for easier viewing. Alternatively, the straight ST version provides a larger field of view and faster target acquisition. It is also more comfortable for looking downhill.

Ultimately, these scopes represent a genuine paradigm shift. Given that I was able to use the AT Balance unsupported to spot strikes at long range, it should give you total confidence that the stabilisation will be even more effective at closer ranges, right down to the minimum focus distance of 3.4m. Swarovski has not just added a new feature; they have fundamentally changed the rules of the game. For the hunter or observer who demands the freedom of handheld movement without sacrificing the power of a spotting scope, the Balance series is, quite simply, in a league of its own. ■

Scan to see Ed's video review on the Shooting Show YouTube Channel



Swarovski's Variable Phone Adapter (VPA2) was simple to set up and attached to the spotting scope via the Clamp Adapter for spotting scopes (CA-S)

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DO RED DEER HAVE TWINS

Q For most of this winter, close to my home in mid-Argyll, I have been watching a hind with what I am sure are twin red deer calves.

For their age, they are smaller than the others in the group and they are always in the company of the same dam, who looks to be a young animal. Is it possible for hinds to give birth to and raise twin calves?

A Iain Watson replies: Yes, it is possible and has been recorded. Certainly, twins in wild red deer are a rare event. It is also unusual to come across twin embryos when gralloching or lardering culled animals. Twins are more often found in farmed or park animals.

Sometimes an orphaned calf will tag along with another hind and calf, and this leads to the belief that the hind has twins at foot when she doesn't. In your situation, where the two calves are of a similar size but appear smaller than their peers, this would point to them being twins. Another indicator might be to see them both feeding from the hind at the same time.

It's been suggested that animals from particular localities – I think the Isle of Arran was one – have had a tendency to produce occasional sets of twins, so there might well be a genetic component to this.

SCOPE ADJUSTMENTS

Q Can you explain how my scope's 1/4in adjustments differ or relate to sighting-in at different ranges, please? For instance, if sighted-in at 100 yards.



A Bruce Potts replies: Most rifle scopes have a ¼in MOA adjustment, unless you have a European scope, which will usually have a 1cm adjustment per click. The principle is basically the same. With a ¼in scope, one click of the elevation or windage adjustment will move the point of impact ¼in at 100 yards – on a 1cm per click scope, it will move 1cm at 100m.

As the range increases, so does the change of impact. This means that a ¼in scope at 100 yards will be ¼in, at 200 yards it will be ½in, at 300 yards it will be ¾in, at 400 yards it will be 1in, and so on. For metric, it is 1cm, 2cm, 3cm and so on as the range increases.

Conversely, if you adjust at a shorter range, say 50 yards, then oneclick is halved and will now be ⅛in per click or 0.5 cm adjustment.

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TOP YEARS FOR HEADS

Q Is it fair to say that some years produce more very large medal-class heads than others? Last year in my local area, heads of any size and shape seem to have been in short supply, even from roebucks that were judged as mature and whose average age was certainly above three years.

A Iain Watson replies: Records of quality roebuck heads in the UK date back to the 1940s and in some cases well before that. Over that time, the roe population has expanded and for many it has become the quarry of choice to hunt.

One fact that emerges when you look at the records is that, over the period, more and more large heads have been taken. While that may be attributed to increased stalking effort and a larger population, it also is related to the diet of the animals and their access to nutrition.

Some years do seem to produce more exceptional specimens than others; recently the standout one was 2006, when the overall UK record was broken twice.

In 2021, the portents seemed good with one 200-point-plus head coming from Scotland and some exceptional heads from England. Perhaps in your area you were unlucky or the animals you were targeting were not as mature as you thought?

CARRYING AN AIR RIFLE

Q My son has permission to shoot his air rifle on a large estate to control squirrels and rabbits. The estate has a number of public footpaths running through it. He knows not to shoot near the paths, but is he legally allowed to carry his rifle on a sling over his shoulder and not in a slip when walking on them?

A Bill Harriman replies: This is an interesting question. The location of the footpaths is critical. You say they cross the estate.

That being so, there is no offence committed by shooting over one if by so doing nobody is endangered or injured.

As your son has permission to shoot on both sides of the paths, the pellet never leaves the premises where he has permission to be.

A footpath is a public place in law.

Section 19 of the Firearms Act 1968 makes it an offence without lawful authority or reasonable excuse to have an airgun (whether loaded or not) in a public place.

In my opinion, it would be a reasonable excuse to have an airgun in a public place in such circumstances. However, given that the purpose of a footpath is to pass and repass, it would be unwise to actually shoot from it.

There is nothing in law that says that any firearm must be in a cover while in a public place. However, in most instances it is common sense to do so. Great discretion should be observed and the test of whether or not it was reasonable to have an uncovered gun in public applied. "Reasonable" has to take account of all circumstances. If in doubt, always err on the side of caution and carry a gun in a slip.

Lastly, never underestimate the powers of misperception. Most members of the public have little experience or knowledge of firearms. Consequently, a pest controller can all too easily become a terrorist by the time someone calls it in to a police control room. ■

S&CTV

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THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING AWARDS 26 AWARDS



With more public votes than ever before, here's who came out tops in this year's BSS Awards





The Great British Shooting Awards returned this year to honour the very best in the industry, from pioneering manufacturers to the dedicated individuals who form the backbone of our rural heritage. Eschewing a formal sit-down ceremony, the 2026 awards took on a more dynamic format, with winners being presented with their accolades directly on their stands on Friday 13 February during the British Shooting Show at the NEC in Birmingham. This personal approach allowed the winners to celebrate their success in the heart of the action, surrounded by the very products and people that earned them the titles.

The event, which was originally launched in 2018, was particularly historic this year as it attraced more public votes than ever before. The sheer volume of participation serves as a powerful testament to the vitality of our sport and the high esteem in which these nominees are held. In an era where the shooting industry faces constant scrutiny, these awards provide a vital platform to showcase the gold standard of craftsmanship and conservation.

RANGEFINDER OF THE YEAR: ELEMENT OPTICS TITAN 3K

The Element Optics Titan 3K has set a new benchmark for precision. Lauded for its rapid target acquisition and crystal-clear optics, this high-performance rangefinder has become an indispensable tool for long-range marksmen and deerstalkers who demand absolute accuracy and reliability in the varied and often challenging British weather conditions.

"We are delighted to have won Rangefinder of the Year. We're extremely pleased with the Titan 3K that we've developed for the long-range shooting community. It reliably measures distances out to 3000 m and features an integrated ballistic chip with Bluetooth connectivity, so you can upload your ballistic profiles for use in the field without needing your phone."

RETAILER OF THE YEAR: SPORTSMAN GUN CENTRE

A titan of the UK trade, the Sportsman Gun Centre continues to lead the way with its unparalleled selection and expertise. Their commitment to customer service and their ability to provide a comprehensive range of equipment across multiple branches has cemented their reputation as the nation's premier destination.

"It's a fantastic honour to win Retailer of the Year again this year. We'd like to sincerely thank everyone who voted for us and continues to support what we do. We also couldn't achieve this without the incredible brands we're proud to work with – Benelli, ATA, Kofs, Perazzi, FX, CZ, and many more. We're grateful to represent such outstanding products, and thank you again for your continued support."

RIFLE OF THE YEAR: TIKKA T3X ACE TARGET

The Tikka T3X Ace Target continues the brand's legacy of exceptional out-of-the-box accuracy. Specifically tailored for the growing number of precision target shooters, its ergonomic design, modularity, and famously smooth action make it one of the most versatile and dependable rifles currently available on the UK market.

"We'd like to sincerely thank everyone who voted and supported us. The Tikka T3 Ace Target has firmly established Tikka in the target shooting arena, and we look forward to continuing to grow and innovate in this market."

RIFLE AMMUNITION OF THE YEAR: HORNADY INTERNATIONAL ECX

Hornady's International ECX line has redefined expectations for non-lead rifle ammunition. Designed for deep penetration and high weight retention on European game, it offers stalkers a reliable and ethical choice. It ensures that Hornady remains at the forefront of the global transition toward sustainable ammunition.

"We're absolutely delighted to have won Rifle Ammunition

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Clockwise: *Shooting Times* editor Ollie Harvey presents awards for Retailer of the Year and Rangefinder of the Year. *Rifle Shooter* editor Rob Hardy hands out Rifle and Ammunition of the Year. Paul Childerley looks delighted with taking Professional Deerstalker of the Year. Three awards for the team at Hikmicro and Swarovski Optik Director for UK and Ireland Adam Randall (right) receives a brace of awards from group reviews editor Ed Jackson

of the Year again. The Hornady International ECX is an outstanding product, and the continued expansion of Hornady's industry-leading non-toxic ammunition range is truly setting the standard. This award is a real testament to that innovation and performance."

BINOCULAR OF THE YEAR: SWAROVSKI NL PURE

The Swarovski NL Pure binoculars offer an unparalleled viewing experience. With an incredibly wide field of view and revolutionary ergonomic design, they allow observers to spot movement with ease, making them the gold standard for UK deerstalkers and professional wildlife enthusiasts alike.

"Thank you very much for presenting us with the Binocular of the Year award. The Swarovski NL Pure has been an extremely popular model with our customers, thanks to its exceptionally wide field of view and outstanding optical quality, enhanced by Swarovski's Swarovision technology. It's a real pleasure to see this product recognised as Binocular of the Year for 2026."

RIFLESCOPE OF THE YEAR: SWAROVSKI Z8I+

The Swarovski Z8i+ sets a new benchmark for optical clarity. Its expansive field of view and intuitive illuminated reticle make it a premier choice for various hunting scenarios, from tight woodland stalking to open hill shooting, providing the ultimate confidence when every shot counts.

"We're absolutely delighted to receive the award for Riflescope of the Year 2026. The Z8i Plus, and the Z8i family as a whole, has long been the benchmark for premium optical performance. With the Z8i Plus, the 5mm larger ocular lens has made a significant difference and truly feels like a game changer. Combined with the updated zoom ring and throw lever, it enhances what was already an outstanding model even further."

THERMAL SCOPE OF THE YEAR: HIKMICRO STELLAR SQ50L

The Hikmicro Stellar SQ50L has revolutionised night shooting by housing advanced thermal capabilities within a traditional 30mm scope tube. It provides incredibly detailed heat signatures, allowing for precise identification in complete darkness while maintaining the familiar mounting height and feel of a standard daylight optic.

THERMAL HANDHELD OF THE YEAR: HIKMICRO LYNX LH25

The Hikmicro Lynx LH25 is a compact powerhouse for spotting and surveillance. Its portability and high-resolution thermal imaging make it an essential tool for gamekeepers and stalkers who need to scan large areas quickly and efficiently without the burden of carrying heavy or cumbersome equipment.

NIGHT VISION OPTIC OF THE YEAR: HIKMICRO ALPEX 4K

The Hikmicro Alpex 4K delivers stunning clarity in low-light conditions. By bridging the gap between day and night optics with its ultra-high-definition 4K resolution, it offers shooters a seamless transition and a vivid digital image that significantly enhances both accuracy and safety after the sun goes down.

"As the official sponsor of the BSS Awards, HIKMICRO is truly honoured to have supported an event that celebrates innovation, craftsmanship and excellence within the UK shooting industry.

To be recognised as the winner of three awards this year is a moment

of great pride for our entire team. It affirms the strength of our technology, the trust placed in our brand by professionals and enthusiasts alike, and our long-term commitment to advancing thermal and digital optics across the UK and Europe.

"We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the organisers for delivering such a professional and influential platform, and also to express our heartfelt thanks to our users and partners for their continued support. Your trust, feedback and real-world experience are what inspire us to innovate and improve every year. We remain committed to standing alongside the shooting community and empowering every hunter – because at HIKMICRO, we truly believe: Trust Your Journey."

THERMAL ATTACHMENT OF THE YEAR: NOCPIX MATE ULTRA S60R

Nocpix's MATE Ultra S60R offers incredible versatility for shooters looking to convert their existing day optics into thermal systems. Its high-resolution sensor and easy integration make it a top choice for those who demand high-end thermal performance without the need to dedicate a specific rifle to night work.

"We're incredibly proud to have received the award for Best Thermal Add-On Unit for the Mate S60R. We're absolutely delighted to achieve this recognition, and it's a real testament to the product and the team behind it."

FOOTWEAR AND APPAREL OF THE YEAR: HÄRKILA

In a rare double victory, Härkila has swept both the Footwear and Apparel categories. Renowned for their rugged durability and advanced weather-resistant technology, Härkila products remain the definitive choice for professionals and enthusiasts who require gear that can withstand the most punishing conditions the British Isles can offer.

"We're delighted to take home two awards at the British Shooting Show – Best Footwear and Best Shooting Apparel. It's a real testament to Härkila's commitment to quality gear for hunters. Thank you very much."





PROFESSIONAL DEERSTALKER OF THE YEAR: PAUL CHILDERLEY

Paul Childerley is a pre-eminent figure in the stalking world, respected for his immense expertise and commitment to deer management. His professional approach and educational efforts via various media platforms have made a significant impact on the community, earning him this year's well-deserved top honours.

MEDIA CONTRIBUTOR OF THE YEAR: CONOR O'GORMAN

Conor O'Gorman has been awarded for his exceptional work in communicating the values and challenges of the shooting community. Through his insightful contributions, he has helped represent the interests of shooters and conservationists to a wider audience with remarkable clarity, balance, and passion.

"The sporting press is inspiring a united fight for the future of shooting, and I am proud to be able to play a part in that movement. Thank you to everyone who voted for me."

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO CONSERVATION: NIALL ROWANTREE

Niall Rowantree's lifelong dedication to conservation has left an indelible legacy. His work in managing complex landscapes highlights the positive environmental impact of well-managed shooting estates, making him a true champion for the natural world and a guardian of our wild spaces.

"I would like to say that I'm humbled and delighted to receive the award for an outstanding contribution to conservation. I've been fortunate to be surrounded by wildlife from childhood and firmly believe that country people and the shooting community in particular have a huge role to play in reconnecting our nation with its countryside and demonstrating sustainable living through the wise use of natural resources."



IMAGES GBSS BY MATT KIDD

Top left: Jamie Ransome, Hawke Optics UK Sales Director (right) receives the award for Thermal Attachment of the Year on behalf of Nocpix.
Top right: Spencer Tolly of Outfit International collects two awards for Harkila



Recognised for their dedication. Middle: Niall Rowantree for his work in conservation and above: Conor O'Gorman of BASC, an exceptional spokesman for shooting sports

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

The Lifetime Achievement Award is presented to John and Annie Allison in recognition of their remarkable leadership and enduring contribution as owners of the British Shooting Show, whose passion and commitment have left a lasting legacy in the shooting community.

"We're truly honoured to receive this award. The British Shooting Show has been our passion, and seeing the shooting community thrive has been incredibly rewarding. As we step back this year, we're grateful for the support and memories created together." ■

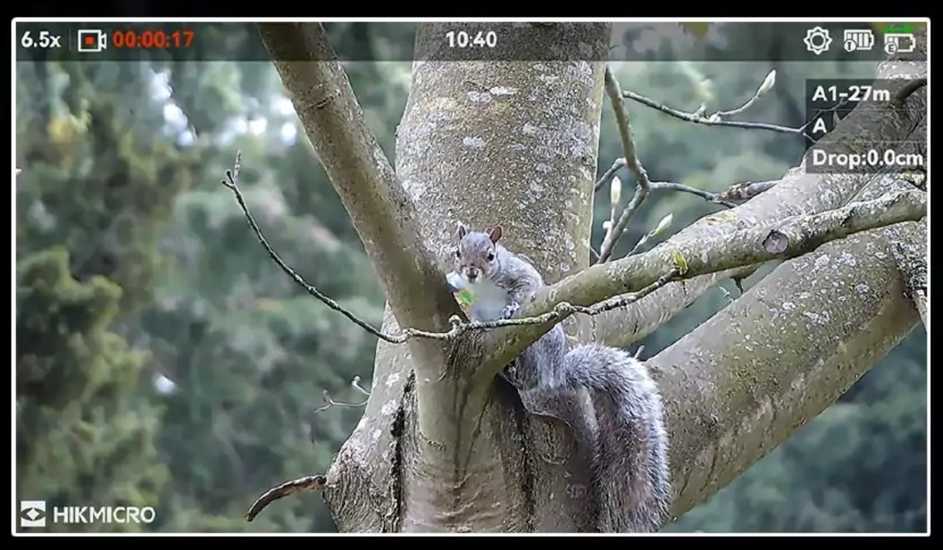
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WHILE THE RAVENS WAIT

Sika have earned a reputation for both their adaptability and the challenge they present. **John Tooher** recounts a memorable hunt and explores what it takes to meet that challenge

I exit the forest onto open ground, glassing the hill that lies before me

DEER STALKING

The ravens glide overhead, their harsh, grating calls echoing through the forest. I hear their wings slicing the air as the pair fly east into a sliver of light cresting the heather-covered hills. The once mild temperatures are noticeably absent on this early autumn morning, though I know the cool mountain breeze will be very welcome once the sun rises and I continue my climb.

I exit the forest onto open ground, glassing the hill that lies before me. I spot the silhouetted shapes of deer which, even in this light, are clearly hinds with calves at foot. My dilemma is whether to wait for them to move off or risk spooking them before the sun crests the skyline and gives me away. Fortunately, they do not linger, and as dawn cuts across the mountainside like a sword, I enter a long, narrow depression on the open hill.

I am soon aware that I am not the only hunter on the hill this morning. A fox, fully aware of my presence, comes within thirty metres of me, seemingly content to share his hunting grounds as we both continue our quests – though my ambitions are for larger prey.

The stags remain high on the mountain early in the season, taking advantage of the near-constant breeze to avoid the bane of biting insects. The objective of this hunt is the same as that of many fellow stalkers: to strengthen my bond with nature, assess the deer herd, and, if the opportunity arises, take a cull sika stag. Most importantly of all, it is to enjoy the experience in its entirety.

THE HUNT

As it is still pre-rut, the deer remain in separate herds. I locate a bachelor group grazing one of the pockets of lush green on the otherwise beige mountain. They are already on their feet as I formulate a plan to close the distance. Using the Spartan binocular adaptor mounted on the magnetic head of the Springbok quad sticks gives me exceptional stability, allowing me to range the deer accurately. I re-check the wind direction, then range the deer at their current position. I also range a location that I believe will provide a suitable shooting position and subtract one from the other to calculate an approximate shooting distance – assuming I can reach it without spooking them.

Conditions are perfect for autumn stalking: a bright, cloudless blue sky and a steady wind in my face. A scattering of conifers dotting the hill to my right should provide enough cover to close the distance. I drop my frame pack, taking only the essentials for the final stalk. Pulling up the hood of my Stone Glacier hoody to shade my face, its fern colour blends perfectly with the hill. A neck gaiter and gloves cover the remaining exposed skin as I begin my move.

The bachelor group, still some distance away, consists mainly of younger animals, with the oldest no more than around five years old. There are several spikers proudly wearing headgear some 100mm higher than their ears, along with a handful that do not. These are my target animals.

Moving through the shadows, the route is far from easy and takes around thirty-five minutes to complete. It begins as a slow walk, meticulously observing the ground at my feet and planning each step. This gradually becomes a crawl as I close to under 200 metres. Now lying prone, I wait for the animals to separate while still maintaining a safe backstop.

After a final confirmation of range – I take three to four measurements pre-shot to ensure they are all within a few metres of one another – and checking that the parallax is set correctly, I dial the BDC turret on my Swarovski scope. Applying slight forward pressure to load the bipod, I squeeze the trigger. As the shot sounds, I see the spiker stagger and fall to the strike before the recoil takes over. There is no need to mark the shot location on this occasion, as the white caudal



Sika are a damanding deer to hunt

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Shooting position: Another raven (Ravens Arms stock) ready and waiting



The first cull spiker

disc of the sika stands out starkly against the open hillside.

After a quick reload, a cull six-point stag standing on the edge of the plantation presents a second opportunity. The animal is of too poor a quality to pass up, so after adjusting the turret for the additional distance, I fire a second shot from the same position. I keep the animal in my scope as the rest of the herd melts into the plantation. Instinctively, I chamber another round just in case, but tough as sika can be, it goes no distance. I apply the safety catch and wait for everything to settle before approaching the deer with a loaded rifle and the scope set to minimum magnification.

After the obligatory eye-blink test confirms death, I make the rifle safe and begin work. As I gralloch the deer, I notice the pair of ravens perched in the treetops, patiently waiting for my departure. It is a harsh truth of nature, but life feeds on life.

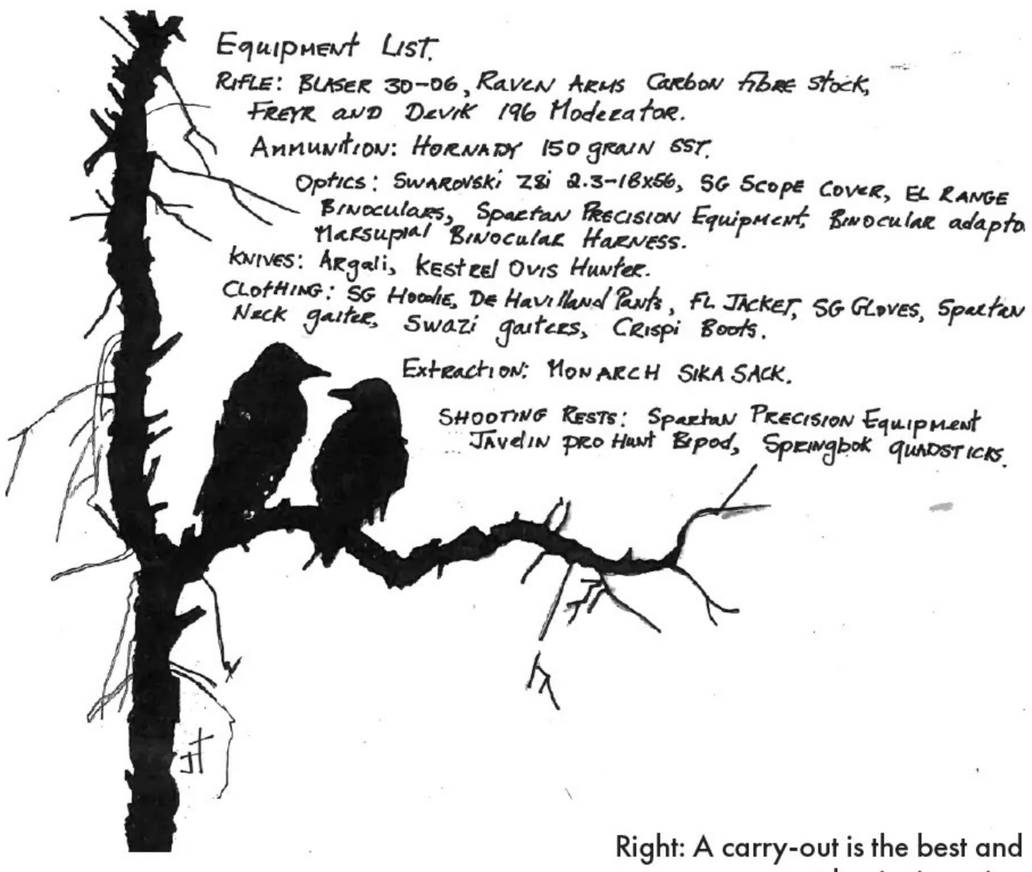


Such a poor six-pointer couldn't be left

EXTRACTION

Deer stalking, by its very nature, is a physical pursuit. Chasing animals in mountainous terrain makes recovery difficult regardless of species. The method of extraction is largely governed by the ground: dragging works well in some areas, while in others it is more practical to carry the animal out.

Sika are generally compact enough to allow a carry-out, which has the advantage of transporting the carcass in a sterilised bag, keeping it clean until it reaches the larder. For this, I have found a Kifaru frame pack to be ideal. I have configured the Ark Frame to suit my needs by adding a guide lid, side pouch, and gun bearer. The guide lid carries a first aid kit, spare knife, disposable gloves, and a head torch. By attaching the rifle to the side of the pack using the gun bearer, my hands are left free to use the Springbok sticks as a walking aid during the steep descent.





Right: A carry-out is the best and most hygienic option

If the terrain is particularly steep, I would opt to drag the animal to a more suitable location before carrying it out. When dragging, I gralloch the deer using as few incisions as possible and keep the legs and head on to minimise the risk of contamination.

Sika are now the dominant deer species in Ireland and are forecast to surpass red deer numbers in Scotland in the not-too-distant future. Considering they were only introduced to Ireland in 1860, their success is a testament to their remarkable adaptability. Like it or not, they are here to stay – and they deserve our respect as a formidable adversary. ■

FAIL TO PREPARE...

As hunters, we know that preparation is key to avoiding disappointment. Experience teaches us the importance of knowing our equipment intimately. Adjustments in the field – to rifle, optics, bipod, or quad sticks – should be seamless. Zeroing and practice sessions must be conducted to instill complete confidence in performance, so that when an opportunity presents itself, it can be taken within seconds; with sika, that is often all the time you are given.

Familiarity with your equipment is far more important than its monetary value, and this can only be achieved through regular handling. Dry-firing exercises help make shooting position and smooth trigger control second nature. A rifle should fit properly and be comfortable to use; if it does not provide a consistent and repeatable sight picture, adjustments should be made – whether repositioning the scope, altering the stock's length of pull, or fitting a comb raiser – until it does.

The most serious failing of all is a lack of knowledge of your ground and quarry. Sika are a demanding species to stalk, possessing exceptional eyesight and an acute sense of smell. They respond rapidly to hunting pressure, making the correct selection of cull animals and their removal with minimal disturbance to the rest of the herd paramount. This can only be achieved through time spent on the ground, observing and studying the deer throughout the year, and making the best use of terrain, cover, distance, and an understanding of where the animals are likely to be at any given time.

There is no shortcut to this, but do your research and there will be a better outcome. Your knowledge gathering need not be confined to your own experience but also learn from more experienced hunters. Keep records of your hunting trips, i.e. temperature, wind direction, number of deer seen and in what location. Remember, with deer stalking you often learn more from your mistakes than from your successes.

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	Lens	Thermal Detector	Mag. (8x)	F.O.V	Range Min.	Range Max.	
LE10	9.7mm f1.0	256x192 12µ NETD <20mK	1.4-11.2x	31.7m	3.4m	500m	£399
LE15	15mm f1.0	256x192 12µ NETD <20mK	2.2x - 17.6x	20.5m	7m	750m	£549
LH15	15mm f1.0	320x240 12µ NETD <18mK	2.2x - 17.6x	20.5m	7m	750m	£799
LH19	19mm f1.0	384x288 12µ NETD <15mK	1.9x - 15.2x	24.2m	3m	900m	£899
LH25	25mm f1.0	384x288 12µ NETD <15mK	2.5x - 20x	18.4m	3m	1200m	£1049
LH35	35mm f1.0	384x288 12µ NETD <15mK	3.4x - 27.2x	13.1m	3.5m	1800m	£1149

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LUMI
Portable handheld thermal monocular
Compact, mini body and superior capabilities, with in-house developed sensor technology and advanced Reality+ AI image algorithms, it delivers exceptional image quality that stands out in its class.



		Range	LRF Range	
LUMI P13	256x192px 12µm	670m	-	£539
LUMI L19	384x288px 12µm	980m	-	£899
LUMI L35	384x288px 12µm	1800m	-	£1269
LUMI L35R	384x288px 12µm	1800m	800m	£1399
LUMI H35	640x512px 12µm	1800m	-	£1599
LUMI H35R	640x512px 12µm	1800m	800m	£1699

- Silent Button
- 10mm Exit Pupil
- 7 colour palletes
- F0.9 Large Aperture
- Photo/Video/MIC/32GB
- Replaceable 18650 Battery
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Multispectral binoculars designed to offer an all-round observation experience packed full of cutting-edge technology.
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The 4K UHD digital night vision mode, with AI powered processing and Wizcolour technology, gives next-level image clarity, delivering sharp images in low-light conditions.



- **4-in-1 Functionality - Infrared Illumination, Laser Range Finder, Thermal Imaging & 4K Digital Night Vision**
- High-Sensitivity Thermal Imaging
- Ergonomic Grip, Lightweight Design
- 0.49-Inch Full HD OLED display
- Up to 9 hours of runtime

	Sensor (Thermal / Digital)	Lens (Thermal / Digital)	LRF Range	
D225-4K	256x192 / 3840x2160	25mm / 55mm	1300m	1000m..... £999.95
D335-4K	384x288 / 3840x2160	35mm / 55mm	1800m	1000m..... £1499.95
D635-4K	640x512 / 3840x2160	35mm / 55mm	1800m	1000m..... £1999.95

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Symbion LRF DXR50 640x480..... £3779.95
Symbion LRF DXT50 1280x1024.. £5399.95

Nocpix
THERMAL IMAGING

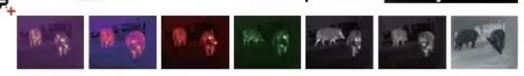
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- Ballistic Calculation
- 30mm Standard Ring
- Built-In & Replaceable Dual 18650 Battery
- 10mm Exit Pupil
- Video / Photo / Video / MIC / 64GB

7 Colour pallets



	Thermal Sensor		Lens	Range	
BOLT P25R	256x192px	12µm	25mm f1.0	1300m...	£899
BOLT L35R	384x288px	12µm	35mm f1.0	1800m...	£1499

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- Recoil-activation video & audio recording with built-in 64GB storage
- 1440×1080 FHD OLED Display combined with high-magnification eyepiece and PIPS technology for vivid, clear, 20ms low latency target imaging
- 30mm tube diameter & lower installation position
- Up to 15 hours battery life

	Sensor	Lens	Range	RRP	NOW
P435	384x288/12µm	35mm f1.0	1800m.....	£1489.95	£1199
P450	384x288/12µm	50mm f1.0	2600m.....	£1689.95	£1369
P635	640x512/12µm	35mm f1.0	1800m.....	£1869.95	£1499
P650	640x512/12µm	50mm f1.0	2600m.....	£2069.95	£1699

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- 60Hz Detector (excl. S60R)
- Ballistic Calculation
- 7 Distinct Colour Palettes
- Photo/Video/MIC/64GB

				LRF Range	Range	
ACE L35	384x288px	12µm	35mm f0.9	-	1800m...	£1859
ACE H50	640x512px	12µm	50mm f0.9	-	2600m...	£3189
ACE H50R	640x512px	12µm	50mm f0.9	1200m	2600m...	£3579
ACE S60R	1280x1024px	12µm	60mm f1.0	1200m	3100m...	£5399

THERMAL TECHNOLOGY
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Thermal Imaging Riflescope
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- High magnification
- Smooth digital zoom
- Frost-Resistant HD
- AMOLED colour display
- 8 Colour modes
- Video and Still-Photo Recording

STREAM VISION
PULSAR IMAGE QUALITY AUTHORISED DEALER



Customized display options.
Perfect detail recognition even in the harshest weather conditions with low thermal contrast.

Thermion 2 LRF XQ50 Pro..... £2659.95
Thermion 2 XG50..... £2189.95
Thermion 2 LRF XP50 Pro..... £3059.95
Thermion 2 LRF XL50..... £3819.95
Thermion 2 LRF XG60..... £4289.95
Thermion 2 LRF XP60..... £4489.95
Thermion 2 LRF XL60..... £5599.95

HIKMICRO
See the World in a New Way
WE ARE PROUD TO BE A HIKMICRO AUTHORIZED DEALER

STELLAR 3.0
Laser Rangefinding Thermal Riflescopes
The Stellar 3.0 features a large, immersive, widescreen display and shutterless technology which means no freezing of the thermal image. Also featured are the industry leading sub 15mk & sub 18mk thermal sensors and 1280x1024 "X" thermal sensor in the top-line SX60L model. All three Stellar 3.0 models have 1000m laser range finding with programmable ballistic calculation built-in, plus an array of software and engineering refinements - making these the ultimate thermal scopes.



	Lens	Sensor	Mag.	F.O.V	Range Min.	Range Max.		
Stellar 3.0 SH50L	50mm	384x288 12µ	6-24x	9.3m	500m	2600m	£2599.99	£2399
Stellar 3.0 SQ50L	50mm	640x512 12µ	3.6-26.6x	15.4m	700m	2600m	£3799.99	£3599
Stellar 3.0 SX60L	60mm	1280x1024 12µ	2.5-28.5x	25.6m	800m	3100m	£5249.99	£4999

ZEISS
SECACAM
TRAIL CAMERAS

Cellular trail camera | Compact design | Light weight | Convenient installation | Easy maintenance
Outstanding performance. New amazing price
Observe wildlife as undisturbed as possible: the barely noticeable Secacam is small with a camouflage pattern, so it effortlessly evades prying eyes. The wide angle version has an enlarged Field of View to overlook a wider area.

Secacam 3..... £129
Secacam 5..... £169
Secacam 5 Wide Angle..... £169
Secacam 7..... £214

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Accessories: Padlock - £12.99 • 4G Antenna - £14.99 • Tree Band - £9.99 • Battery Tray - £12.99

Leica Geovid R
The binoculars with rangefinder
Best-in-clas optical performance. Absolutely precise, fast, and reliable rangefinding.



The comfortable daylight specialist with the extra on field of view and stability. The new Geovid R product family makes Leica range finding binoculars more accessible than ever. With its excellent optical performance, precise laser technology, easy handling and proven mechanics, Leica's all-new Geovid R is tailored to the needs of hunters and long-range shooters looking for performance and value.

	RRP	NOW	SPECIAL OFFER
Geovid R 8x42	£1680	~~£1499~~	£1449
Geovid R 10x32	£1680	~~£1499~~	£1449
Geovid R 8x56	£1850	~~£1649~~	£1599
Geovid R 15x56	£2110	~~£1899~~	£1799

Leica Geovid Pro 10x42 AB+ NEW
The pioneer rangefinder with new, innovative technology



Displays ballistics correction values up to maximum range in less than 0.3 seconds, the on-board computer outputs the measured distance, plus a brand-new feature, the probability of an exact hit. Get absolute top values in the key areas for hunters and long-range shooters: first-class optics for greater detail, sharpness, contrast and color fidelity, high-precision rangefinding up to 2,950 meters, and the Applied Ballistics® Elite ballistics program pre-installed.

- Highest optical performance
- Highly precise laser technology
- Maximum ballistics functions with Applied Ballistics Elite®
- Shot Probability Analysis
- Easy and rapid handling

10x42 AB+
Rangefinding Binoculars
RRP £3225 **£2999**

VORTEX
RANGER HD 3000
10X42 LASER RANGEFINDER BINOCULARS

It's slim design, HD clarity, optimised with selected glass elements to deliver exceptional resolution, cut chromatic aberration, providing outstanding colour fidelity, edge-to-edge sharpness and light transmission. It's Red Oled Display has been optimised for low light. This is a combination of simplicity without compromising performance.

- 6yds (5.5m) - 3,000yds (2,743m) Range
- Weighs 32.4oz (918.5g)
- HD optical system
- Red Oled Display
- Fully multicoated lenses
- Nitrogen gas purged
- Armortek rubber armour
- Water, fog and shock proof
- Tripod adaptable

10x42 £899



SWAROVSKI OPTIK
EL RANGE TA
(Tracking Assistant Rangefinding Binoculars)

COMBINING STATE-OF-THE-ART OPTICS WITH PRECISE MEASURING FUNCTIONS

Combining Swarovision technology with precise range measurement, and an integrated Tracking Assistant to make it much easier to track your prey by guiding you to where you fired your last shot.

	RRP	NOW
8x32 Green	£2490	£2365
10x32 Green	£2530	£2400
8x42 Green	£3030	£2879
10x42 Green	£3070	£2915
12x42 Green	£3110	
8x42 Orange	£3030	£2879
10x42 Orange	£3070	£2915
12x42 Orange	£3110	



NEW

SHARPER DETAIL & LIGHT TRANSMISSION

VORTEX

CROSSFIRE® HD

Whether threading shots through dense timber or dialing in at range, Crossfire® HD delivers sharper detail and improved light transmission. And with an illuminated center dot to boost accuracy in low light, it delivers the confidence to own any hunt.

UNLIMITED LIFETIME WARRANTY

1-4x24 IR	£229	3-9x40 IR	£219
1.5-5.5x32 IR	£215	4-12x44	£195
2-7x32	£159	4-12x44 IR	£235
2-7x32 IR	£189	6-18x50	£255
3-9x40	£179	6-18x50 IR	£295

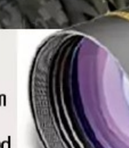
Choice of reticles available

- HD Optical System
- Illuminated Reticle
- Fully Multi-Coated Lenses
- Fast-Focus Eyepiece
- Aircraft Grade Aluminum
- Low-Glare Matte Black Anodize
- Waterproof, fogproof & shockproof

LEUPOLD VX-FREEDOM

LEGENDARY LEUPOLD DEPENDABILITY

With the VX®-Freedom™ you get best-in-class optics and unbeatable accuracy. It's everything you expect from a Leupold: designed, machined, and assembled in their Oregon factory, tested to the same ruggedness standards as their top-tier riflescopes, and guaranteed for a lifetime of performance.



VX-FREEDOM

1.5-4x20	£399
2-7x33	£399
3-9x33	£499
3-9x40	from £399
3-9x50	from £499



Aggressively Knurled, 1/4-MOA Finger Click Adjustments

SWAROVSKI OPTIK Z5i+

EXPANDING LONG-RANGE POSSIBILITIES

NEW FOR 2026

With the Z5i+ series, every hunter can experience the perfect blend of advanced technology, superior optics, and rugged durability. With objective lenses up to 56mm, you get crystal clear images at high magnifications, ensuring you never miss a detail when it matters most. Elevate your hunting game with precision, versatility, and reliability.



4A-I | 4Wm-I+ | BRW2m-I

Z5i+ 3.5-18x50 BT	£1900
Z5i+ 5-25x56 BT	£1980

SWAROVSKI OPTIK Z6i (GenIII)

BUILT FOR THE JOURNEY. REDEFINED FOR TODAY.

NEW FOR 2026

The new Z6i stands for what hunters value most: precision, versatility, and reliability in every situation. With premium optics and improved handling, it brings together iconic performance and modern usability. Whether you're stalking dense woodland or observing long-range terrain - the Z6i delivers. Instinctive to use - even in imperfect moments or when your eye isn't perfectly aligned. Reliable when it matters - year after year. Rugged and built to last - a true investment in your long-term hunting success.



4A-I

Z6i

Z6i 1-6x24 IR	£1620
Z6i 1.7-10x42 IR	£1700
Z6i 2-12x50 IR	£1780

Z6i BALLISTIC TURRET

Z6i 2.5-15x50 BT IR	£1900
Z6i 4-12x56 BT IR	£1980

SWAROVSKI OPTIK Z8i+

SEE MORE, ACT FASTER

Enjoy all the benifits of the Z8i+ with a large, comfortable eyebox for particularly fast sighting. A short zoom rotation of 160° and the proven CLICKONE function also help hunters to concentrate on the essentials at the crucial moment. The ergonomic TL+ throw lever in black and orange adds the finishing touches to the sophisticated design of this complete package.



	RRP	NOW
Z8i+ 0.75-6x20 IR	£2560	£2429
Z8i+ 0.75-6x20 IR Flexchange	£2810	£2669
Z8i+ 1-8x24 IR	£2560	£2429
Z8i+ 1-8x24 IR Flexchange	£2810	£2609
Z8i+ 5-40x56 IR	£3560	£3379
Ballistic Turret for Z8i+	£282	£265

SWAROVSKI OPTIK Z8i FACELIFT (GenII)

DESIGNED FOR YOUR SUCCESS

NEW

The Z8i stands for optical precision, versatility, and reliability. The revised version offers optimized ergonomics for even more intuitive operation - in every hunting situation. The new, redesigned cockpit ensures faster handling, even with gloves, andenables concentrated target acquisition at the decisive moment.

Z8i Facelift 1-8x24 IR	Reticle 4A-I	£2390
Z8i Facelift 1.7-13.3x42 P IR	Reticle 4A-I	£2970
Z8i Facelift 1.7-13.3x42 P IR Flexchange	Reticle 4A-IF	£3220
Z8i Facelift 2-16x50 P IR	Reticle 4A-I , 4W-I, BRX-I	£3140
Z8i Facelift 2.3-18x56 P IR	Reticle 4A-I , 4W-I, BRX-I	£3220
Z8i Facelift 3.5-28x50 IR	Reticle 4A-I , 4W-I, BRX-I	£3390



A newly designed, ergonomic cockpit ensures faster, more intuitive handling - for success in every moment.

KAHLES

HELIA RIFLESCOPES

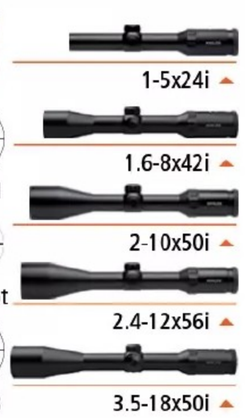
Uncompromising focus on the real essentials: functionality, reliability, handling and aesthetics. The perfect tool for hunting.



- Powerful optics system with exceptional edge sharpness
- Day/night illuminated reticle with intelligent automatic switch-off

		RRP	NOW
1-5x24i	Ret. 4DH	£1270	£1199
1.6-8x42i	Ret. 4-Dot	£1360	£1289
2-10x50i	Ret. 4-Dot	£1360	£1289
2.4-12x56i	Ret. 4-Dot	£1440	£1369
2.4-12x56i	Ret. G4B	£1440	£1369
3.5-18x50i	Ret. 4-Dot	£1530	£1449
3.5-18x50i	Ret. G4B	£1530	£1449

Ret 4DH | Ret 4-Dot | Ret G4B



1-5x24i | 1.6-8x42i | 2-10x50i | 2.4-12x56i | 3.5-18x50i

KAHLES

K18i & K16i RIFLESCOPES

Lightweight and ultra-fast, the K16i provides rapid target acquisition and unparalleled speed in short-range settings.

With an unequalled field of view, the K18i sets the standard for dynamic, short -range scenarios.



3GR | SM1 | SI1 | IPSC

K16i
Lightweight precision

	RRP	NOW
1-16x24i 3GR	£1660	£1579
1-16x24i SM1	£1660	£1579
1-16x24i SI1	£1660	£1579

K18i
Split second precision

	RRP	NOW
1-18x24i 3GR	£2160	£2049
1-18x24i IPSC	£2160	£2049

K18i-2
The match winner with 5 meter field of view

	RRP	NOW
1-18x24i 3GR	£2570	£2439

KAHLES

K318i RIFLESCOPES

The K318i means optical and mechanical perfection packed into an ultrashort design. With precise illuminated reticles in 1 st focal plane, sharply defined throughout the entire magnification range and the unique TWIST GUARD windage.



K318i 3.5-18x50 - **REFINED**
RRP £2910 **NOW £2765**

- Ultrashort & lightweight
- Optional left or right side windage
- Wide field of view and high contrast image
- Absolutely reliable repeat accuracy and precise, clearly defined click mechanism
- Innovative TWIST GUARD windage (patented)
- Parallax wheel integrated into the elevation turret (patented) (25m to ∞)
- Precise illuminated reticles in 1st focal plane

SKMR4 | MSR2/Ki

SMART SOLUTIONS
Optional Left or right side windage



KAHLES

K328i RIFLESCOPES

Setting new performance standards with a pioneering new-generation optical design. It offers a 40% wider field of view, exceptionally comfortable eyebox and 8x zoom with perfect optical performance across the entire adjustment range.



K328i 3.5-28x50i - **REFINED**
RRP £3740 **RRP £3549**

- 8x zoom
- 40% wider field of view
- Windage adjustment on the left or right
- Patented parallax adjustment integrated in the elevation turret (20 m to ∞)
- Reliable accuracy & clearly defined clicks
- Illuminated reticles in 1st focal plane

MSR2/Ki | SKMR+ | SKMR4+



KAHLES

K525i RIFLESCOPES

Rugged riflescope with a practical magnification range developed for tactical use & long distances. It is intended to help ambitious shooters to achieve records. The clearly defined, precise clicks, together with the exceptional repeat accuracy, provide highest precision and reliability.



K525i 5-25x56i - **REFINED**
RRP £3070 **NOW £2915**

- 10 MIL Windage
- +7% Field of view
- Updated Reticle Designs
- Enhanced Parallax Wheel Geometry
- True 5x zoom with uncompromised optical performance across the entire adjustment range.
- Robust competition-grade mechanics built for extreme durability
- Ergonomic, shooter-specific configurations for optimal control.

SKMR4 | SKMR | MSR2/Ki



KAHLES

K540i RIFLESCOPES

Absolute precision, repeat accuracy and unique handling for maximum performance.
Revolutionary optical design with a 40% wider field of view and an 8x zoom over the entire adjustment range.



K540i 5-4x56i - **REFINED**
RRP £3900 **NOW £3699**

- 8x zoom
- 40% wider field of view
- Windage adjustment available left or right with TWIST GUARD rotation protection
- Patented parallax adjustment integrated in the elevation turret (20 m to ∞)
- 160 clicks per rotation

MSR2/Ki | SKMR+ | SKMR4+



ZEISS

CONQUEST V4 RIFLESCOPES

Rugged, compact & precise

The Conquest V4 line of high-performance riflescopes combines the tried-and-true ZEISS optics concept with a rugged and functional design. The compact design and the balance between a large field of view and magnification are ideal for all types of hunting.



3-12x56		Illuminated 60	£1050
4-16x50 BT		Reticle Zbi	£1270
4-16x50 BT		ZM0Ai - T30	£1270
6-24x50 BT		#60	£1285
6-24x50 BT - Locking Windage		#89 - ZM0Ai - 20	£1385
6-24x50 BT - Locking Windage		#65 - ZM0Ai - T 20	£1385



ZEISS

CONQUEST V6 RIFLESCOPES

The most versatile riflescope from ZEISS

With the Conquest V6 riflescope, ZEISS has once again set a new standard in precision and long-range hunting and shooting. Whether for sitting or stalking game, driven hunts or long-range applications – the Conquest V6 with 6x zoom is engineered to impress in any environment or scenario.



1.1-6x24 IR	£1740
2-12x50 IR	£1890
2-12x50 IR with ASV H	£2090
2.5-15x56 IR	£1990
2.5-15x56 IR with ASV H	£2190



ZEISS

VICTORY V8 RIFLESCOPES

The ultimate super-zoom riflescope from ZEISS...

A combination of maximum zoom range, the brightest optics and optimal ease of use makes the VICTORY® V8 from ZEISS the ultimate all-purpose riflescope for all distances and situations - whether you are on a drive hunt, stalking or sitting game, or shooting at long range.



1.1-8x24 IR	£2450
1.8-14x50 IR	£2850
1.8-14x50 IR ASV-H (Elevation)	£3100
1.8-14x50 IR ASV-H (Elevation) / ASV-S (Windage)	£3350
2.8-20x56 IR	£3100
2.8-20x56 IR ASV-H (Elevation)	£3350
2.8-20x56 IR ASV-H (Elevation) / ASV S (Windage)	£3600
4.8-35x60 ASV H (Elevation) IR	£3400
4.8-35x60 ASV H (Elevation) / ASV S (Windage) IR	£3650



Leica

AMPLUS 6

Performance to rely on...

The well-balanced, high-quality optics feature an extremely crisp illuminated dot, 6x zoom, a large exit pupil and a wide field of view. The rugged design is ideal for uncompromising use in any terrain - even in the most adverse weather conditions.



Leica Amplus 6 2.5-15x56

	RRP	NOW
Amplus 6 1-6x24i	£1260	£1129
Amplus 6 3-18x44i BDC	£1450	£1299
Amplus 6 2.5-15x50i	£1440	~~£1289~~
Amplus 6 2.5-15x50i BDC	£1530	~~£1369~~
Amplus 6 2.5-15x56i	£1530	~~£1369~~
Amplus 6 2.5-15x56i BDC	£1630	~~£1459~~

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Leica Amplus 6 1-6x24



Leica Amplus 6 2.5-15x50



Leica Amplus 6 2.5-15x56



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Martin's Browning X-bolt takes a break while Geoff sorts out his muntjac

THE FAMINE IS OVER

After time away from stalking, **Martin Guy** relishes his return to the field alongside his son, pursuing his favourite quarry, the Chinese Water Deer

Having devoted the previous 18 months to a full-time humanitarian project with my wife, resuming the family tradition of harvesting our New Year holiday meat was both a joy and a privilege.

Morning stalks during the winter months still demand an early start, although mercifully not quite the crack of dawn of summer. My eldest son and I were setting out from opposite directions to the first venue of the day, each facing a journey of around an hour. Good planning saw us pull up just a minute apart, quickly kit up, and head out.

Cambridgeshire is one of the counties that has seen year-on-year growth in Chinese Water Deer for as long as I can remember, and I have done my "bit" over 18 years of stalking there, taking almost 200 of them,

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along with around 90 muntjac and 50 roe. Consequently, I had chosen our first venue expecting CWD, although any experienced stalker will admit that deer can be unpredictable at the best of times — and so it proved today.

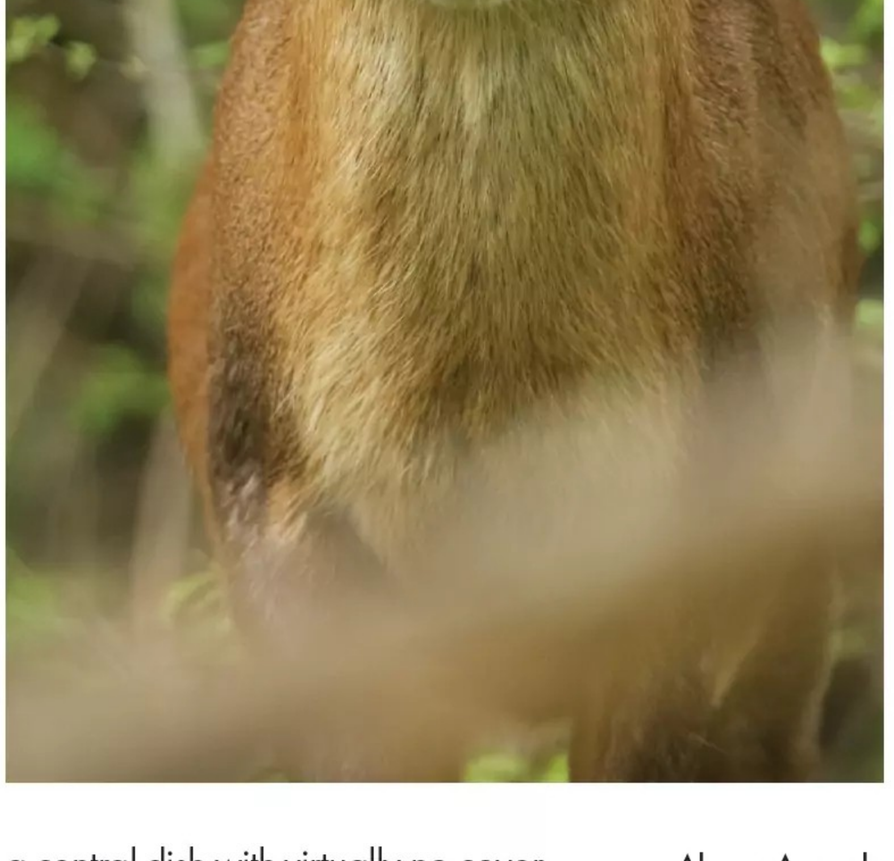
Geoff and I headed along the edge of a wood, facing downhill in a roughly southerly direction and about 500 yards off our boundary. We had legal, but not quite shootable, light, so we continued cautiously, glassing with binoculars every 20 yards. We spotted three roe halfway down, but they wasted no time in joining half a dozen more in the adjacent field, which was out of bounds. There was little choice but to press on, Geoff leading the way and fully expecting to see CWD in the lower half of the field. With around 200 yards to go, we spotted a small deer in light cover just on our side of the boundary. I was initially fifty–fifty between CWD and muntjac, but within another 50 yards we were both certain it was a muntjac. It was Geoff's turn first; he settled behind his .243, steady on the bipod, and sent the 100-grain Winchester soft-point on its way.

The solid thud of the bullet's arrival is always a reassuring sound, and the little fellow moved no more than a couple of feet. We found him dead from a traditional, well-placed shot just behind the shoulder. After the essential knife work, we trundled back up the hill; having disturbed the peace, there was little point in remaining.

Our second venue was only a short drive away. It consisted of a single field of almost 400 acres, irregular in shape, sloping downhill to a central dish with virtually no cover. We drove gently down until we spotted our first CWD — the only one in sight — so we stopped and I kitted up for the shot. It was absolutely typical CWD: a single animal couched in the middle of a field, with a barely germinated crop offering non-existent cover, and I needed to reduce the range from 350 yards to something more manageable.

I chose a low ditch line that provided wholly inadequate cover and would have been a complete non-starter on a roe stalk, but these animals had not been shot at for over a year. A CWD will sometimes sit tight, watching, until it perceives you as a threat. When my excellent Delta range-finding binoculars read 157 metres, I lay down and promptly zoomed my 6.5×55 Delta scope to ×8 magnification — at which point the deer sprang up and left at speed. It ran to the boundary hedge, looked back, stamped its foot, and fixed me with an irritated, teddy-bear expression. I stayed still, hoping it would settle, but after a few moments it calmly walked off, turned left, and disappeared

> ***"A very fine CWD buck stepped out and immediately commanded my full attention"***



PICTURE: SANDRA STANDBRIDGE/GETTY IMAGES



Above: An early find but not the expected species

Left: The 'fangs' of a good CWD buck. Note the tatty ear, a hallmark of a buck who has 'seen combat'



A highly satisfactory result and fresh meat for a New Year family celebration

> ***"A much smaller yearling buck eventually offered a chance and I took it"***

through the hedge into the neighbouring field.

I decided to follow, knowing that CWD move back and forth through this hedge all day. I soon spotted another on the hedgeline and gingerly moved towards it, although it was never a viable shot as there was no backstop. Welcome to flat Cambridgeshire.

Geoff was trying to alert me to another deer, but — like an idiot — I had left my phone on the dashboard of the car. Fortunately, I had seen it too and slowly crept along the hedge, brushing against it and desperately trying to blend in. I had covered only 150 yards but had already seen another three deer: two on the wrong side of the hedge and one without a backstop. I remained hopeful that eventually I would find a safe opportunity.

Shortly afterwards, a very fine CWD buck stepped out and immediately commanded my full attention. With the sticks set up and the rifle resting on top, all I had to do was wait for it to move into a position with a safe backstop. For several minutes I waited, repositioning the sticks half a dozen times, until finally it offered a perfect broadside shot at around 90 yards. The 139-grain soft-point struck with a satisfying thud and the familiar shower of hair one associates with shooting a CWD. The big fellow dropped instantly, with no more than a few momentary kicks. I knew he was dead and stayed still as other deer had been alerted by the shot and I awaited a second opportunity.

I soon had three live deer in clear view, but none presented a fully safe or suitable shot, so I moved briskly forward to improve my options. A much smaller yearling buck eventually offered a chance and I took it; unfortunately, my first shot was not perfect and a quick follow-up was required. I was disappointed with myself — a season and a half ago I would never have needed a second shot — but that is why trigger time is so important.

I called Geoff — the way we did before mobile phones — and we were soon hauling the venison back to a spot where the butchery could begin. Forty minutes later, our traditional New Year hunt was over and fresh meat was on its way home to feed our respective families.

I hope there will be many more New Year hunts with my shooting sons in the future, and perhaps, in due course, some grandsons too.

My motivation for hunting has always been to be outdoors and to provide a useful service to farmers, landowners, and conservation groups who need to protect trees and crops. The diminutive muntjac and the similarly invasive CWD have been my primary quarry for many years and hold a peculiar fascination for me. Their impressive fangs — particularly in larger CWD bucks — always intrigue hunters who have never seen them before. I have found great pleasure in taking visitors "from across the pond" who have heard of our "little deer" or "deer with fangs" and, until they see one for themselves, often regard them as folklore. Some even believe the images have been Photoshopped. I enjoy enlightening them.

They are peculiar little deer, often requiring considerable ingenuity to close the distance when they are lying in the middle of a large field or hiding in a crop so short you would think concealment impossible.

"Popping out for a Chinese" may entail crawling along a wheel rut for 200 yards or more, but to me it is always worth the effort. ■



Martin's book ***From Wasp to Water Deer:*** *A rifleman's journey through the countryside* is available on Amazon priced £22.50

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THE APR ADVANTAGE

Ed Jackson gets to grips with the extraordinary Anschütz 1727 APR Competition straight-pull rimfire rifle

In the UK, Anschütz is best recognised for its hunting-orientated bolt-action rimfire rifles, like the 1761. This rifle is offered in .17 HMR, .22 LR, and .22 WMR, making it ideal for rabbit shooting (see *Rifle Shooter* review Oct/Nov 2025), and is available with a choice of stock types, including Classic, Thumbhole, and Monte Carlo.

However, I wanted to expand my horizons and take a look at something from the Anschütz Precision Rifles (APR) line, as this would give me an opportunity to test a rifle that's built purely for competitive shooting, something that Anschütz is very well versed in, producing proven rifles for Biathlon and Benchrest, for example.

Aimed specifically at PRS shooters – an action-packed discipline where shooters engage targets at varying distances from multiple challenging positions – the 1727 APR Competition was the obvious choice for me, boasting Anschütz's legendary straight-pull action, which, as it turns out, is pretty special.

WEIGHT LIFTER

The moment I handled the rifle I thought of the expression "heavy is good, heavy is reliable", as this rifle weighs an absolute tonne! Well, around 19lbs actually according to the data sheet, not including the Leupold Mark 4HD 6-24x52 riflescope and mounts that came fitted. Being a demo rifle, it had definitely seen serious use, indicated by the heavy wear to the finish in the magazine well. Yet, the rest of the rifle remained in remarkably good condition, suggesting its inherent resistance to real-life conditions.

Now, there are two versions of this rifle, with the standard 1727 APR featuring a lighter fore-end and a price tag of £4,600, and the Competition (on test) which features a heavier fore-end and costs £4,925. Both can be specced with an adjustable bag rider (on test), which adds £177. So, it's a good thing that the rifle comes supplied in an Anschütz-branded Peli-type hard case!

BOLT-ACTION BE GONE

The rifle's unique selling point is the Fortner straight-pull action, which is an absolute gem. It has real pedigree and has thoroughly proven itself in competition and some pretty harsh conditions, making it an excellent choice for PRS. The advantages, of course, are the speed at which it can be operated and the fact that cycling it does not interfere with the rifle's point of aim, aided, of course, by the sheer weight of the rifle.

Taking a closer look at the bolt, its face shows twin extractors, with seven locking balls on the body for lock-up. The rifle features an adjustable, biathlon-type knurled

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

MANUFACTURER:	Anschütz
NAME:	Anschütz 1727 APR Competition
CALIBRE:	.22LR
BARREL LENGTH:	22" (559mm)
OVERALL LENGTH:	39.5" - 41.5" (1,005 - 1,054mm)
WEIGHT:	18.85lbs (8,550g)
MAGAZINE CAPACITY:	10
PRICE:	£5,102 as tested
CONTACT:	Viking Arms www.vikingarms.com



The Fortner straight-pull action. Note the gas pedal and biathlon cocking lever

cocking lever, complemented by an adjustable Anschütz Gas Pedal (AGP) positioned just behind it. As you will see throughout this review, adjustability is a key feature. The AGP functions both as a thumb rest, promoting a consistent grip, and as an aid to closing the bolt swiftly for rapid follow-up shots. With bolt travel of just 1.5", this action is seriously fast, and the fit, feel, weight, and precision engineering are out of this world.

Up top, the cylindrical action shows a matte black finish and an uninterrupted 30 MOA inclined Picatinny rail with numbered markings to make scope fitting quick and repeatable. There is a gas escape hole on the right side of the action and a bolt removal catch on the left-hand side. Measuring 22" (559mm) in length, the fully free-floating, blued barrel is substantial, featuring a 28mm diameter and a straight profile. The muzzle is threaded M18x1 and equipped with a knurled thread protector, so you can fit a barrel tuner, brake or moderator if required. So far so good, then.

CONTROLS AND FEED

A bit like Weihrauch in the airgun world, Anschütz has an excellent reputation for triggers. The rifle comes fitted with a comprehensively-adjustable (every adjustment you can think of), competition-proven, match-grade 5022 APR two-stage trigger. Factory set at 1.2lbs (550g) it is advertised as adjustable from 1 to 3.5lbs (450 to 1,600g), although the trigger on the demo gun broke even lighter at 351g. The blade can be adjusted by 11mm right/left for cant and 23mm forward/back. It sits in a large trigger guard and can be adjusted through the underside slots. In use, the trigger proved magnificent, breaking with repeated precision. A truly remarkable piece of engineering, just like the Fortner action.

An ambidextrous paddle-type magazine release catch sits at the front of the guard and can be operated quickly and easily with the trigger finger. Interestingly, the rifle includes Anschütz's Mag Tuner (AMT) system, which allows the user to fine-tune the tension/fit of the magazine to ensure reliable feeding and ejection of both magazine and ammunition. This is done using an Allen key via a small hole above the trigger guard.

A simple two-position lever-type safety catch sits on the left-hand side of the receiver. It is marked with 'S' and 'F', moving forward for FIRE and rear for SAFE. Everything on the rifle has been engineered to within an inch of its life, and that

> ***"It has real pedigree and has thoroughly proven itself"***



The uninterrupted 30 MOA inclined Picatinny rail, the safety lever, and the bolt removal catch



The cheekpiece on the skeletonized buttstock. This rifle came with the optional adjustable bag rider, controlled with a sprung button

CHASSIS

The aluminium chassis has a red anodized finish with a knurled barricade stop at the front of the magazine well. For a grip, Anschütz opted for one of MDT's Vertical Grip Elite units, which allows the user to adjust the reach to the trigger by approximately 10mm and the angle, helping the shooter to achieve maximum comfort and grip consistency.

The extra-heavy, QPQ-coated steel fore-end is bolted to the central section, allowing it to be removed if required. The weight means it offers impressive stability and balance when using support systems like a shooting bag, and it measures 17.7" (45cm) in length, meaning it pretty much accommodates the entire barrel for maximum versatility. Unsurprisingly, underneath you will find a full-length ARCA rail for the easy attachment of a bipod or tripod. There are even threaded holes for screw-in stops, so you can limit the movement of any accessories you plan to attach to the ARCA rail. Look to the sides of the fore-end and you will discover flared wings featuring Anschütz Thumb Index Pockets (ATIP), helping you to achieve a consistent thumb and support hand position every time. All pretty impressive so far!

To the rear of the central section, a skeletonized buttstock is attached via an easily accessible bolt. The includes the 10-shot magazine. The rifle came with two, and just like the rifle, they are also heavy, showing a significant build in the style of AICS magazines, to help with familiarity. You can visually check the number of remaining rounds via two windows, one for five rounds and one for 10. You can also check by touch that the mag is fully loaded, via Anschütz's Full Mag Indicator (AFMI), positioned at the base for accessibility. Finally, you can add weight to the base of the magazine to simulate the weight of a centrefire magazine if you so wish, again a feature designed to add familiarity. In use, even their weight when empty, means the mags drop freely into your waiting palm as soon as the release is activated.



MDT's vertical grip and an excellent trigger. Note all the screws are accessible through the slot in the base of the trigger guard

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Detail of the barricade stop, magazine release catch and the generously-sized mag well

length of pull (LOP) can be adjusted by using an Allen key from 13.5 to 15.5" (when measured with the trigger positioned fully forward). Up top, you have Anschütz's Floating Cheekpiece, which offers approximately 1.18" (30mm) of height adjustment and is locked in position by a single Allen bolt. The lateral adjustment range, also via one bolt, is about 0.6" (15mm), ensuring you get perfect eye/scope alignment for consistent shooting. The hard rubber butt pad can be adjusted 1" (25.4mm) up or down via a thumbwheel. The only missed opportunity in the design is its lack of angle adjustment.

The buttstock's design incorporates a hand hook/stop to help pull the rifle into your shoulder and plenty of surface area to be used as a bag rider when shooting from the prone position. The review rifle, however, came equipped with the optional adjustable bag rider. Simply depress a sprung button and it pops out to a maximum of 60mm, with a significant number of notches to achieve the perfect height.

RANGE TIME AND PERFORMANCE

When it came to accuracy testing, it is perhaps the highest compliment to say that the Anschütz 1727 APR Competition gave me an almost immediate, visceral 'I've got this' level of confidence. This rifle simply feels like the ultimate instrument for the task. Straight out of the case, with no adjustment or tweaking of any kind, and firing Eley Match 40gr ammunition, I shot consecutive 10-shot groups under 0.543" at 50m with minimal effort. Further 5-shot groups at 100m measured no more than 0.579". So, given the chance to test different brands of ammo, and even batch test them, who knows what this rifle would be capable

> ***"Given the chance to test different brands of ammo, and even batch test them, who knows what this rifle would be capable of"***



The 1727 APR Competition's magazine is a real unit and worked flawlessly during use

of. Undoubtedly the performance is there, and I have to say that I really enjoyed the addition of the adjustable bag rider, which seems a steal at the price. Velocity-wise, the Eley Match produced an average of 1025 fps, an extreme spread of 5 fps, and 93.4 ft/lbs of energy over a 10-shot string.

So, with the accuracy potential of the rifle ticked off, we must discuss the rifle's unique selling point: the action. As expected, it performed flawlessly, feeding and ejecting smoothly while offering increased speed and reduced interference with my point of aim. I am definitely a fan of the gas pedal, which ensures you close the bolt consistently, every time. The only disadvantage of a straight-pull action – the effect of the bolt slamming forward sometimes pulling the rifle out of your shoulder pocket – was mitigated by the calibre choice, its short cocking stroke, and the sheer weight of the rifle.

In terms of comfort, the adjustability of the chassis means that you can get the optimal fit, helping to make the rifle an extension of your body. This is obviously of paramount importance for PRS shooting, due to all the different positions you are likely to shoot from.

In use, the weight of the rifle brings stability, the reduction/removal of all recoil, and a solid feel of quality. Its mass is the only thing that slows the rifle down, as every feature, from the AFMI to the AGP thumb rest, is about saving time and ensuring a consistent shooting position. Basically, Anschütz have invested everything to make this rifle as good as it can possibly be, and they have done a very fine job indeed. All the features have a valid reason for inclusion and aid the rifle in its purpose.

VERDICT

Hands down the best rifle I have tested for a long time. Yes, it seems expensive, but considering the prices of some competition shotguns, for example, it is small change for a top-end competition gun. Anschütz has gone to town with both the features and the engineering, making this an easy rifle to recommend. Just make sure you factor in time at the gym, as the weight is substantial! ■

Scan to see Ed's video review on the Shooting Show YouTube Channel



Five shots at 100m with Eley Match ammo



A full length of ARCA runs along the base of the fore-end. Note the threaded holes for screw-in stops



Detail of the significant barrel diameter, the threaded muzzle and thread protector

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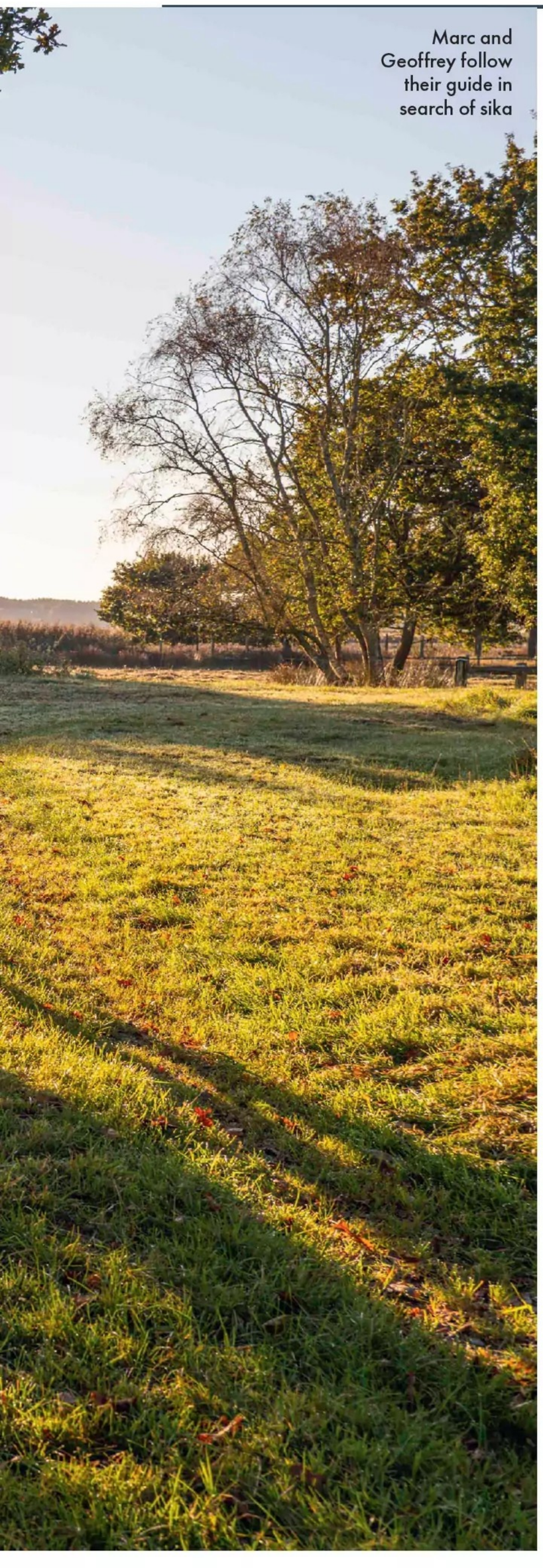
THE ART OF HUNTING SIKA

John Rigby & Co. MD **Marc Newton** takes the company's head of art, Geoffrey Lignon, on his first-ever sika stalk — an experience that would leave both men with lasting memories

Hunting sika deer in the British countryside isn't something you simply decide to do. It's a privilege. These elusive, non-native deer carry a certain mystique, one that I wanted to share with a friend. Where exactly were we hunting? That, unsurprisingly, remains a secret...

I haven't hunted a deer, any deer anywhere in the world, that's quite like sika. They have an ability to simply melt away, to disappear and then appear somewhere else. So, there's something quite mystical about them, even though they're very prolific in the part of the country we were in. I was accompanied on this hunting trip by our in-house engraver and head of Rigby Art, Geoffrey Lignon, and we were even luckier to be there in the rut. The rut is always fantastic to experience, no matter what species of deer you're stalking; the spectacle of stags calling, fighting and charging about chasing hinds.

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Marc and Geoffrey follow their guide in search of sika



The Rigby Highland Stalker – in the field, where it was made to be

Geoffrey is just as passionate as I am about the animals we share our wild spaces with, and I knew these mysterious deer would inspire him and his work. He has never had the chance to see one in the flesh, let alone pursue one. He's also excellent company and that's so important to me, as I believe we should always be hunting with people that we really care about and enjoy spending time with. An experience shared with the right hunter is always an experience doubled, and this hunt proved to be an experience we will both remember for many years to come.

> ***"We hunt for the experience, not just the outcome, and this hunt was delivering on every level"***

We hunted over two or three outings, one of which was genuinely one of the best mornings of my life. It was one of those late autumn days when the sunrise lights up the leaves and hedgerows, with just a hint of frost touching the earth. A day to savour, with endless blue skies overhead. For me, hunting is about more than just the final act of taking an animal. It's about the whole experience, the challenge and the respect for the pursuit. We hunt for



Marc spots deer movement on the edge of the forest

the experience, not just the outcome, and this hunt was delivering on every level. Everything just fell into place – excellent guiding, an abundance of deer and relaxed, engaged company.

We had stalked a stag through the wooded slopes, the morning light filtering through the trees in a golden haze. He was close – probably just 15 yards away – marking up on a tree, standing tall on his toes, utterly absorbed in his own world. We watched, barely daring to breathe, for five, maybe six minutes. When he finally moved off, we followed, weaving through the undergrowth until the landscape opened before us to reveal a clearing alive with movement. Fifty, perhaps 60 sika deer, rutting, fighting and chasing hinds all totally oblivious to our presence. The stags were in full voice, their eerie whistles

> ***“So long as you are ethical, safe and you enjoy the moment, that’s, frankly, what matters”***



The sika stags were in full rut

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carrying through the woodland, a contrast to the crisp stillness of the autumn morning. We avoided cracking branches underfoot, the damp scent of earth rising as we moved through the trees. Finally I was able to get a clear shot on the stag, from a good distance out, with my .275 Rigby Highland Stalker and we secured our first sika of the trip. It's always a privilege to take this rifle out hunting and it has become a truly trusted companion. Of course, these rifles look beautiful, and this one surely does, but it really comes alive when it's out in the field where it was made to be.

It's amazing to think that the Highland Stalker was just an idea in my head eight years ago. To manifest that into reality took a great deal of hard work and input from the team at Rigby, so it's quite something to be able to carry and hunt with it. Yes, we make beautiful guns, but we are all about the people, the experiences and the countryside. The fact that both Geoffrey and I used my personal Highland Stalker on this hunt, to each take a superb sika stag, made it even



Marc moves into position

Below: With the .275 on the sticks he waits for a shot to present itself





A successful shot and the hard work begins

A beautiful eight-pointer. Inspiration for Geoffery's future engravings



more special. Geoffrey shot so well and was justly rewarded with a wonderful, mature roebuck too.

I remember being quite young, shooting on my first pheasant drive and saying to my father, "Well, I feel quite nervous." He replied, "The number one thing is to make sure you're safe, that's vital when we're using any firearm anywhere.

But the second thing to remember is why you're here. You know that you're here to enjoy yourself. This is not a job, so don't get stressed about it. So long as you are ethical, safe and you enjoy the moment, that's, frankly, what matters."

His words echoed in my head on this trip, and I think we all gave ourselves up to enjoying it to the fullest and savouring our time together. We don't hunt to collect trophies. We hunt for the experience, the quiet moments, the interactions, the privilege of stepping into a world most will never see. On this hunt, that experience was truly doubled, watching Geoffrey take his first deer with such respect. Experiencing something anew through someone else's eyes is just as enjoyable – possibly more enjoyable – than when you do it yourself. There is something profound in providing that opportunity and seeing someone take a shot not just with skill, but with understanding. It touches something deeper in the soul. What a way to spend a day. ■

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TAKING THE STRAIN

Tired of struggling and straining your back when gralloching deer? **Rob Hardy** field-tests a practical, user-friendly solution



The hoist suspends the deer at a convenient working height

As all deer stalkers know, 'pulling the trigger is the easy part'; it is afterwards that the real work begins. This is certainly true if, like me, the majority of your deer management involves one of the larger species – in my case, fallow deer. It was for this reason that the tow-bar-mounted gralloching hoist caught my eye at last year's Stalking Show.

This ingenious device, designed by Mark Punter, Managing Director and owner of Wiltshire-based Deer Tray Covers, consists of a two-piece tubular steel boom that simply slots together, with no tools or additional fixings required. The lower section slides over a standard 50mm tow-ball hitch and also carries the manual winch, while the upper section features a hook at the top to take the hoist's single-wheel pulley. The entire system transforms from two compact sections – which fit easily into the boot or rear of a vehicle – into a fully functioning hoist in around 30 seconds. It is this simplicity and ease of use that truly set it apart from other multi-part vehicle-mounted hoists I have seen on the market.

You do need to check that the lower tube will fit over your tow-ball, as it can struggle with some towbars that have a pin behind the ball for a clevis hitch. If in doubt, it is worth sending Mark a photograph to confirm compatibility before purchasing.

Once assembled, the boom stands at approximately 1.8 metres, providing a comfortable working height for all but the tallest user and keeping any deer – from muntjac to sika – clear of the ground for a hygienic and efficient gralloch. The whole thing feels sturdy and Mark tells me he has lifted red deer weighing up to 119kg. The boom sections and winch are powder-coated to resist corrosion and are supplied with a stainless-



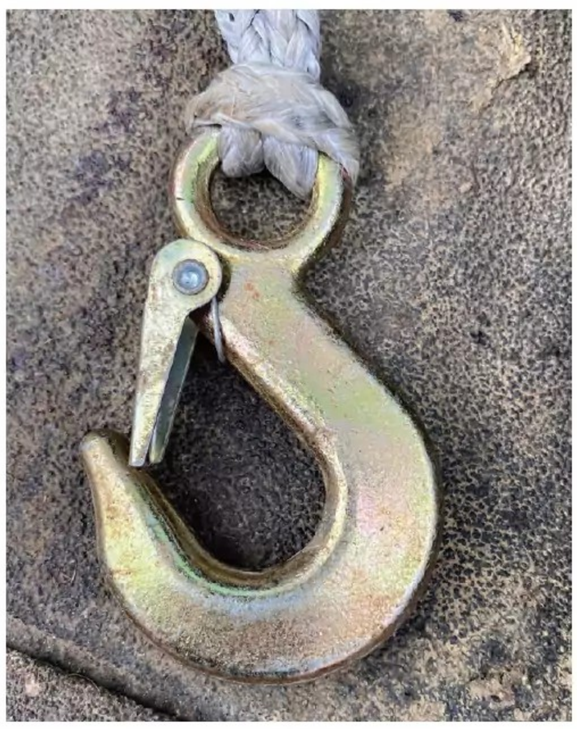
The lower section slots over a standard 50mm tow-ball and jams in place when loaded



Right: Manual winch with locking lever - go for the smoother and easier handling Dyneema option

Below: A single stainless-steel pulley and substaintial snap-hook are included





steel pulley for smooth lifting, along with a substantial snap-hook for attaching a gambrel.

The standard hoist is supplied with a wire cable, though an upgraded version – the one tested here – replaces this with a Dyneema rope. Not only is Dyneema smoother and stronger, it is also kinder on the hands and does not coil or splinter as wire can. I would strongly recommend opting for the Dyneema version, which is well worth the additional £20.

The manual winch is straightforward to operate single-handed. A lever releases the ratchet mechanism when feeding line out or winching up, and can then be engaged to lock the load securely at the desired working height. One point to note is that the handle spins as line is released from the winch. If you pull line out quickly, or disengage the mechanism while it is still under load, the handle can spin rapidly and deliver a painful wack. It is therefore essential to maintain control of the handle at all times when in free spool.

There is, however, one obvious drawback to the design on certain vehicles. While it is possible to have a single-piece or upper tailgate raised with the hoist in position, vehicles with a lower tailgate – as found on most pick-ups – cannot drop it with the hoist fitted. This means you cannot easily swing the carcass directly onto the vehicle once it has been gralloched. With two people, it is possible to rotate the upper section and manoeuvre it 'letterbox-style' through the upper half, but this is less convenient than some alternative systems.

That said, lowering the now much lighter carcass – gralloched with head and legs removed – into a tray and then lifting it onto the tailgate once the hoist has been dismantled is hardly an insurmountable task, especially as when dealing with the largest species of deer, you are unlikely to be working alone. For me, this was a small compromise in return for the simplicity and compactness of the Deer Tray Covers design.

If you find that larger bucks or red deer hang a little low when suspended on a gambrel, Mark suggests securing the snap-hook directly through one of the hocks. This allows the carcass to be raised higher to a more comfortable working height – a useful tip.

Having used this hoist throughout our winter cull, I can confidently say it has been a real game-changer, particularly when handling fallow. It has made lifting, gralloching and even the occasional skinning a far less back-breaking chore. In previous seasons, I carried pulleys, rope and S-hooks in my bag and had to locate a suitable tree from which to haul up carcasses. The sheer convenience of working at the back of the vehicle, with the carcass at an ideal height and all necessary equipment close to hand – and then being able to lower it directly into a clean tray before loading it – means I would not hesitate to recommend this hoist to anyone handling reasonable numbers of deer, especially if working alone. ■

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A LOSS OF PRESSURE

BASC head of firearms **Martin Parker** on why the loss of the Police and Crime Commissioner could spell trouble for firearms licensing



The government's recent announcement that the role of Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) will be abolished from 2028 may pass largely unnoticed outside political circles. For rifle and shotgun owners, however, it could have serious consequences – particularly for an already strained firearms licensing system in England and Wales.

There are currently 38 firearms licensing departments (FLDs) serving 43 police forces, each responsible for issuing and renewing firearm and shotgun certificates. While licensing decisions are a statutory responsibility of individual Chief Constables, PCCs have played a crucial, if often understated, role in holding forces to account for poor performance. Their removal risks leaving a significant gap in oversight at a time when the system is already struggling.

Although PCCs cannot dictate how a Chief Constable runs their force, they do control budgets and, critically, have the power to remove a Chief Constable who is failing in their duties. In practice, this has often made PCCs the most effective route for driving improvement in failing licensing departments.

Experience shows that where FLDs are underperforming, PCC intervention can make a real difference. In Cumbria, for example, concerns raised by shooting interests led to direct engagement between the deputy PCC and the Chief Constable. Within weeks, a commitment was made to overhaul the department, and within six months the licensing unit had been transformed into one of the better performers nationally – a position it still holds today. It is difficult to imagine that outcome being achieved without PCC involvement.

This is far from an isolated case. PCCs in Staffordshire and West Mercia have been instrumental in securing significant additional funding for their licensing departments. In Suffolk, the PCC has chaired stakeholder meetings focused specifically on firearms licensing, while in Bedfordshire constructive engagement has helped develop an action plan for the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire collaboration. In Sussex, robust performance scrutiny has ensured licensing remains firmly on the agenda, alongside continued support for lawful shooting activities.

Lincolnshire provides another telling example. PCC Marc Jones has consistently supported the need for an efficient, proportionate licensing system and even arranged for firearms licensing issues to be addressed at a national PCC conference. His force is, perhaps not coincidentally, one of the strongest performers in England and Wales.

Against this backdrop, the latest figures from the National Police Chiefs' Council make for worrying reading. Of the 43 forces, only 13 are currently processing 80% of applications within the NPCC target time of four months. In practical terms, this means that in around 70% of force areas, even applicants who submit renewals well in advance – and qualify for the eight-week extension – still risk their certificates expiring before replacements arrive.

When that happens, certificate holders may be forced to apply for temporary permits or place firearms into storage, often at significant cost and inconvenience. Alarmingly, ten forces have managed to process fewer than 30% of applications received over the past twelve months.

For shooters, the implications are clear. Firearms licensing is a core policing function, essential both to public safety and to the continued lawful ownership of firearms. Without PCCs to apply pressure, secure funding and demand accountability, there is a real risk that already poor performance will deteriorate further.

While PCCs remain in place, certificate holders would be well advised to make their voices heard. Licensing departments must be properly resourced, and Chief Constables must have a clear understanding of how licensing is conducted within their forces. Efficiency and cost-effectiveness are not optional extras – they are essential to maintaining confidence in the system while upholding public safety.

The abolition of PCCs may still be several years away, but unless alternative mechanisms for accountability are put in place, the impact on firearms licensing could be felt long before then. ■

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FINDING YOUR ZERO

Chris Rogers continues his guide for novice stalkers with advice on zeroing the rifle and some extras not to be without



Chris zeros on an 18-inch steel

Hopefully by now you have gained some good experience with either a guide, friend or family member. You may have also had some form of training to help support your rifle application and increase your knowledge of deer and their life circle. Now armed with some decent outdoor clothing and binoculars you are ready to take the next step.

For the sake of not repeating ourselves, let's assume you have been granted your firearms certificate and have chosen a rifle of the make and calibre of your choice. It's also likely that the gun shop will have included a scope – as part of a new or pre-owned package – or sold you one separately that suits the rifle. As a beginner, most good gunshops will have even offered to mount it for you. Before leaving the shop, check the crosshairs are in focus as this will change the eye relief and position of where the scope needs to be mounted in the rings, so it fits your eye and head position correctly when you mount the gun each time.

Now you will need to zero the scope and rifle before use. You should have undergone a zero check, or test fire routine before your guided stalks, so hopefully you will already have a good understanding of the following procedure. Like all things rifle shooting, zeroing can be as long and technical as you want to make it, but here are the basic steps I think you need to follow:

For most UK scenarios, a 100 metres or 100 yards zero is the norm as this is the average shooting distance while stalking. Understanding these two measurement units are important as most European manufactured scopes are adjustable in 1cm clicks at 100m, my preferred measurement. American made scopes use ¼ inch clicks at 100 yards and occasionally can also be printed with 1 click = 1 MOA at 100 yards. MOA stands for, Minute of Angle, which equates to one inch of measurement or movement of the crosshairs at 100 yards.

> ***"Like all things rifle shooting, zeroing can be as long and technical as you want to make it"***



Four inches or 11cms of bullet drop at 200m is average for most 308s

While this might sound very technical, it's worth noting that in stalking terminology, we quite often use both 100 metres, 100 yards, one centimeter or one inch to describe distances and bullet drop. This is because in the UK the older generation were educated in inches and yards, while my generation from the 1980s onwards were exposed to both imperial and metric. I started stalking referring to everything in yards as my scope was American made and adjusted as above, but now all my scopes are metric so I tend to operate in metres. This may sound confusing, but when out stalking bear in mind that whether 100 metres or yards, the difference in bullet impact is basically the same and even at 150 or 200 you will still hit a deer's chest area whatever the guide has called the distance in.

You need to be as stable as possible for setting up a rifle for the first time and consecutively checking zero as required after that. Here are some tips that will help.

- Shoot from a stable bench or prone position, avoid car bonnets, roofs or using sticks.
- Use a bipod on the front of the rifle with a sandbag at the rear of the stock so there is no pivot point along the gun. Alternatively use sandbags at either end.
- To save ammunition, use a suitably large target at 100m

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A client's shots on a steel muntjac target clearly hitting well inside the four inch chest area



Quad sticks have dramatically impoved people's accuracy while hunting, but they shouldnt be used for zeroing

or start close (50m) and work your way back. On the estate we have an 18-inch steel gong which I can bore sight (see below) onto, ensuring the first shot will be visible on the steel. I can then adjust accordingly

- Bore sighting is carried out by removing the rifle's bolt, looking down the bore (the hole through the middle of the barrel) and centring it on the the target. Then without moving the rifle, lift your head and look through the scope. You can then move the scope's crosshairs using the elevation (top) and windage (side) turrets until the two sight pictures roughly match up. If you don't have a big steel gong, you can use an A4 paper target in the centre of two larger A3 pieces of paper of a different colour, or a sheet of cardboard, like an opened out box. All you are looking for is to get initial hits somewhere on the paper or card. From there you can make the necessary adjustments, again using the elevation and windage turrets until you are on target.
- Take a minimum of three shots, as this will show the impact point more clearly and consistently. Avoid taking any more than five shots at a time as you will start to overheat your barrel which may lead to a wandering impact with some rifles or you will develop a heat haze through your scope, making it difficult to see your precise aiming point.
- When firing, do not break your position. Keep your head down on the stock and only move your bolt hand to reload. This will increase your accuracy as you are maintaining the same shape as much as possible, for each shot.
- Take your time when zeroing and allow your rifle to cool after shooting each group of shots. Remove the moderator (be careful it may be hot) so it and the barrel underneath can cool as much as possible.

In the past stalkers were advised to zero their rifles 1-inch (2.5cm) high at 100 yards, so that at 200 yards the average .243 rifle would only be hitting around a 1-inch low. This meant that on roe-size deer and above, you could always aim halfway up the body and still hit the deer in the chest area – roughly measuring a 4-inch circle – for a heart or lung shot. Now, most of today's stalkers zero to dead centre at their chosen distance and then dial (adjust the scopes elevation) or hold-over (hold higher on the target) to allow for bullet drop. However this isn't really necessary if you are shooting within 150 yards. The basic rule of thumb with most calibres on a muntjac deer for example is: aim tight behind the front leg and halfway up the body for shots from 20-140 yards. At 150 yards-plus, the same but aim two thirds of the way up the body and at 200 yards hold higher still, roughly level with its back. Having these hold overs in your locker will save you time in a rushed situation where dialling would mean missing your chance of taking the shot.

Once you have your desired zero your barrel will probably be fairly warm, so I always recommend allowing everything to completely cool down before firing a final 3-5 shot group, just to double check



William zeroing his .308 using a sand bag at the front and back to maximise his stability

> ***“Your first port of call is to check the sound moderator hasn’t come loose”***

before you leave the range. This is to ensure that when you go stalking and take a shot with a completely cold barrel, your zero will be where it needs to be. In reality the difference may only be a couple of centimetres, but if you were unlucky enough to also pull the shot, the two factors combined could lead to a miss, or worse still, a wounded deer, so it is worth the double check.

Finally, if you notice your groups suddenly shift to a different place or widen unusually, whether zeroing at a later date or when shooting on the range generally, your first port of call is to check the sound moderator hasn’t come loose. This is also true should you inexplicably miss a shot on a deer. Nine times out of 10 this is the culprit, although any looseness with scope mounts or the action in the stock will also cause you a serious loss of accuracy.

I’d always recommend keeping a small tool kit in your vehicle. A multi-headed screwdriver set, allen-keys or whatever fits your scope mount and action screws, just so you can check to see if anything is loose, should you lose accuracy. I also include a cleaning rod and brush to the kit when I go stalking, just in case I should take a fall and plug the rifle muzzle with mud or snow. If you can’t unblock and clean it back at the vehicle, then your day’s stalking is over.

ADDITIONAL KIT

The following kit is worth investing in at some point to aid your rifle shooting and stalking:

STICKS

Some kind of shooting sticks are a must. You won’t always be able to get down in a prone position to shoot off a bipod or bag. In the flat-lands of East Anglia we hardly ever use a bipod as you would lose what little backstop you have behind the deer. I would forget about old fashioned single, double or tripod sticks and buy a set of modern quad sticks if you can afford them. They are so much more stable, supporting the rifle at both ends and are a real gamechanger. Some even have a fifth leg option, but for most recreational stalking situations the four legs are sufficiently stable, lighter to carry and more manoeuvrable.

BIPOD

A bipod is a good addition for hunting and shooting at the range. I have a lightweight, magnetic bipod which I can carry in a pouch on my bino harness, meaning I don’t have a heavy bipod permanently fixed to my rifle. The general type fix to your rifles front sling stud, or you can also get ones that fix via a picatinny or arca rail depending on the make of your rifle. Decent rifle sandbags for the range are worth investing in, as they create very stable shooting platforms whether prone or sitting at a bench.

SCOPE COVERS

I’d suggest keeping the set of covers which your scope most likely came fitted with. These, with the elastic in between them, are known as bikini covers and while not the quickest to remove when hunting, they are the most reliable at keeping the glass dry when it’s raining. You can secure the elastic to the scope tube with some thin cable ties so as not to lose them, just don’t overtighten and crush the tube.

Alternatively, most scope brands also sell screw covers for either end or there are after-market options available. Ultimately if it’s not threatening rain, I don’t stalk with covers as it is far quicker to acquire your target and get a quick shot off without them.

NEXT TIME

I’ll return to additional qualifications and there’s a gralloching kit and some optional extras worth mentioning too. ■

Scan for the zeroing and bullet drop episode on Chris’s management series on the ‘Shooting & Country TV’ YouTube Channel

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TIME FOR A SPRING CLEAN



Professional pest controller **Ben Collins** offers advice on dealing with troublesome foxes, particularly those with a taste for spring lamb

As the greys of winter give way to early spring, the fox's mind turns from mating to parenthood and its behaviour changes accordingly, particularly where the vixens are concerned. Those in cub become far less visible as they spend increasing amounts of time at the chosen earth.

Older vixens that have bred successfully before will generally re-use the same earth year after year, whereas first-time mothers will either find a disused earth or improvise, making use of old bale stacks, hollow trees, or almost anywhere that is warm, dry and quiet. If you know your ground and have done your homework, you should be aware of the established sites, while new ones will take a little more finding.

By March and April most pairs will have litters, and the vixen will stay with them for the first few weeks, relying on the dog fox for the bulk of her food. While this may mean fewer foxes hunting your ground, the added pressure on the dog fox will force him to double his efforts, extend his range and become bolder – something that can prove his undoing.

You may well experience an

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With increased pressure on the male to find food, both poultry and lambs become a draw



PICTURE: MAREK OM/GETTY IMAGES

increase in 'trespassers' crossing your boundaries, especially if you have done a good job of reducing your resident pairs before spring. Increased activity around properties and smallholdings, particularly where chickens or other poultry are kept, also reflects the growing desire for an easy – and potentially regular – meal. While targeting the perpetrator on site may not be viable, a thorough search will usually reveal the tell-tale signs of his route in and out, and all you then need to do is find a more appropriate spot to wait and cut him off.

When discussing spring litters, the thorny issue of how best to deal with cubs will inevitably rear its head. My view is that if foxes are causing damage to livelihoods, whether it be shooting or farming interests, they must be dealt with at the first opportunity. If this involves the vixen and cubs, every effort should be made to do so as humanely as possible, either dealing with the vixen first and then the cubs, or, if feasible, dispatching all the cubs around the earth in one visit. Obviously this is easier said than done and, if you fail, you are unlikely to get a second chance, as the vixen will quickly move the remainder to a back-up earth. You then face the added problem of locating them all over again.

> ***"My view is that if foxes are causing damage to livelihoods, whether it be shooting or farming interests, they must be dealt with at the first opportunity"***

When to deal with cubs is a thorny issue



Below: A few peeps on a distress call can create a safer shot





> ***“Anything moving among an otherwise settled group is worthy of closer inspection”***

Therefore, unless they are causing genuine damage and must be dealt with, it is often better to leave them – if you can – until they are more independent and easier to control.

LAMB ON THE MENU…

With lambing well underway, it is a busy time for anyone controlling foxes in sheep country. The scent of blood and afterbirth is an instant draw and can lead to unusually high concentrations of foxes in relatively small areas, particularly around lambing sheds and pens.

I try to have a crackdown before March and April, visiting any known earths and concentrating on woods and covers once the gameshooting season has finished.

Even though most lambs are now born indoors, as the season reaches its peak, there will still be a steady stream of woolly bundles turned out into the fields to make way for new arrivals. While lambs are still small they tend to stay close to their mothers, which can make picking out marauding foxes difficult, even with a thermal spotter or scope. Groups of ewes and lambs often bunch tightly together, with foxes slipping through them at close quarters. Anything moving among an otherwise settled group is worthy of closer inspection, as is any heat source away from the main flock. Shooting in these conditions can be tricky, and extra care is needed both to identify your target – it could just as easily be a hungry badger – and to ensure you have a safe backstop clear of any livestock.

Although lambs are the main draw, a squeak or two on a rabbit or mouse distress call can either stop an opportunist fox in its tracks or tempt it to separate far enough from the flock to offer a safer and easier shot. These chances often need to be taken quickly, and you may also have to stay mobile and change angles, so shooting from quad sticks, a tripod or a bipod – if the ground allows – is usually better than shooting from a vehicle. It also causes less disturbance; the last thing you want is to unsettle the flock and risk separating mothers and lambs.

Things become even more challenging as lambs grow bigger and more active, although this increasing independence can also make them more vulnerable. I have often watched foxes sitting, or even laid up nearby, waiting for the right

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Using a tripod or sticks allows you to stay mobile and work the angles



Indoor lambing has reduced but not stopped losses to foxes

opportunity. A tell-tale sign that something is amiss is when one or more ewes stands staring intently in one direction and stamping their front feet.

Watching a field at dawn is often more productive than at night. The growing light makes it easier to read the situation and, provided it is quiet and undisturbed, foxes are generally in no great hurry to leave a productive area. This also allows for longer shots than you might feel comfortable taking in the dark, should the need arise.

I had just such a situation last year. The farmer had already lost a couple of lambs and asked if I could put a stop to it. I sat until midnight on the first night but, despite seeing a couple of likely prowlers on the perimeters, nothing came close enough to offer a shot. I returned a day later just before first light and set up overlooking the field. As the sun came up, I watched a fresh crop of rabbits chasing about, but it was not until around 8.45am that a big old dog fox appeared from behind a group of ewes and lambs and began quartering the field. I suspect he had been laid up nearby all along, but I had been unable to pick him out from the mass of heat signatures through the thermal.

He crossed in front of me clear of any livestock and with a good backstop, at around 180 yards, and I was able to drop him cleanly from off the bipod. I would like to say that things returned to normal after that, but it took another visit and a second, slightly shorter shot before those lambs were safe for another year and I could continue my spring clean elsewhere. ■



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A STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

Will O'Meara speaks with FRS Programme Manager Michael Keegan about the future of deer management across the Republic of Ireland

The hot topic in Ireland right now is deer. The headlines are plentiful; a new Deer Management Programme, sika categorised as an invasive species by an EU Directive, politicians calling for a 70% cull of the deer population and social media is full of rumours about contract cullers muscling in on recreational stalkers' permissions. I spoke to Michael Keegan, Programme Manager for the FRS (Farm Relief Services) national deer management plan to get his insights on these matters and to understand its objectives.

Let's start the story with the National Deer Strategy. This programme came to fruition under the NDS 2022 public consultation process. This resulted in five panels being established, all of which looked at particular aspects of the issue, all tasked with making recommendations that would contribute to a roadmap for deer management on a national level.

The November 2023 report was the outcome of this and it had 16 recommendations. One

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The programme's objective is to regain balance and manage the impact of deer numbers across the state

> ***"The groups themselves are simply a co-operative of local hunters and landowners working together"***

was to establish a programme of management to set up 15 collaborative DMU's (Deer Management Units) nationwide – each to cover large regional areas, together covering the entire Republic of Ireland.

This contract went to public tender and was won by Farm Relief Services Co-op (FRS). Who are FRS?

FRS is a farmer founded co-op, that provides essential services, support and sustainable growth for their members and the wider community. It was founded in 1980 and has evolved from a farm-relief (labour) provider into a multi-sector cooperative covering agriculture, employment (recruitment), training and fencing. In order to fulfil the task FRS have employed Michael Keegan as their Programme Manager. Michael, a farmer with extensive deer management and upland management experience, in turn has nine coordinators, six full-time and three part-time. These coordinators provide national coverage for all deer management-related issues. They each have separate geographic areas known as DMU's. Each DMU is centered on a hotspot, but together give national coverage.

Both cull figures and forestry damage reports were used to devise these hotspot areas, but in reality, the focus is on providing a local point of contact and coordination for landowners and hunters. The Programme Manager's main task is to establish and facilitate local Deer Management Groups. These groups, in turn, make up the building blocks of each DMU. The groups themselves are simply a co-operative of local hunters and landowners, working together to address deer management in their local area. The programme is in the very early stages but to date has 75,000ha covered and 500 signed-up hunters. The current number of licenced hunters in Ireland is 6,800, so there is a broad scope of work ahead.

I asked Michael what the main driver was for establishing a national deer strategy.

"The main reasons were increased crop damage and the environmental issue – ecosystem rehabilitation which was being hampered by a lack of natural regeneration and biodiversity."

Michael went on to explain the basic goals of the program:

"The endeavor here is to establish national DMUs. This effort is led by coordinators who facilitate the cooperation between landowners and hunters. This includes communication, coordination, structure and data capture – all of which should lead to reduced deer numbers. Facilitating co-ordination, bringing people and technology together to address the issue."

The next issue on the "hot-topic" list, is the recent recategorisation of sika deer as invasive species, via an EU directive. This has rightly raised some concerns amongst hunters. Michael pointed out that there has been no legislative change in Ireland. Will there be a change to licensing or seasons? This remains to be seen.

I am no stranger to organisational change and I know that there is always resistance and objections that need to be addressed. My question to Michael was: "What are the major obstacles or issues that your co-ordinators are having to deal with on the ground?"

"Misinformation and false perceptions amongst the hunting community are one of the main issues that coordinators are currently encountering. To be honest, I think that the information flow could have been better in the early stages. Social media is the major contributor to much of this misinformation. There is no aim to infringe upon hunting rights or permissions."

Michael then pointed out that hunters are the central enabler to successful deer management and that those who have large volumes of permission – beyond their management capacity – are an issue that somewhat foreshadows those doing a great job of managing deer. This really boils down to hunters realising that they have a duty to deliver a meaningful cull on their ground.

Other challenges can occur on the landowner side. Landowners are keen and pushing to be involved, yet follow-up engagement after the initial signup can prove difficult. Landowners need to be properly



Hunters have a duty to deliver a meaningful cull on their ground

engaged in the process in order to achieve the best outcome. This also needs to be coupled with reasonable expectations given that the hunters are the ones executing the plan on the ground.

"What does success for this programme look like to Michael?"

"It's as simple as having a structure in place that enables better communication and data capture, subsequently resulting in a reduction in deer numbers. There's a lot of time being spent on setting up the structure, developing meaningful terms of reference and dispelling misinformation."

Both myself and Michael agreed that quantifying deer numbers is a huge challenge. I asked him if he thinks we are seeing a population explosion or just an expansion in range?

Michael's thoughts were that it was likely a little of both and while he acknowledged the benefits of thermal drone counting as a great leap in technology, to carry out a national survey would be very expensive. For these reasons the programme's current focus is less on population numbers and more on the impacts and helping to reduce them. These include, but are not limited to forestry. Agriculture – grazing, silage, fences, stonewalls, RTA's, disease, environmental restoration work, peatlands (carbon capture, flood resilience), uplands, native forestry and woodland understory are also included.

Michael's statement that: "Balance in all things is good and this is an objective of the programme," gave me confidence in the programme and in his leadership. Far too often we see totalitarian views that lack balance and flexibility. His view that deer are part of the landscape of Ireland, but need to be in harmony and that working together is a central objective, seems a reasonable and hopefully achievable one.

"The Deer Management Programme aims to bring hunters and landowners together to ensure a balanced outcome in relation to deer numbers and that their impacts are within a tolerable range".

FRS have developed an App to help with data collection and analysis, which has two main elements; recording shot deer and recording deer sightings.

One of the program's future aspirations is to improve the route to market for venison, and help hunters with the logistics of dealing with deer carcasses. This might include improvements in the marketing of venison, a knowledge of best practice and increasing public perception to its benefits. We also discussed the idea of an incentive for hunters in the future; a step Micheal believes would be a positive move, supporting those who are key to the solution.

As yet there is no such incentive in place, nor is there any agreement on one, but he believes that it is something to consider in the future.

"Venison should be seen as an asset as opposed to deer being seen as a problem." said Michael, a viewpoint I wholly agree with and that education is the tool to change this mindset.

My discussion with Michael made me realise that we are only at the beginning of this journey. This is a long-term project that needs sustained effort, over a long period. To my mind having strong political support, funding and sound structures in place when it comes to the management of deer can only be good news for both the deer and hunters.

So my advice to all hunters and landowners is get involved, be patient and contribute in a positive manner. This is a unique opportunity to be part of the solution. ■

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SCANDINAVIAN VENISON MEATBALLS

A twist on a hearty recipe that many people may have first encountered at a certain Scandinavian furniture company. Traditionally served with mashed or boiled potatoes, chips make a fine alternative

INGREDIENTS

The meatballs
1 onion, chopped
1 garlic clove, chopped
100g breadcrumbs
1 egg
5 tbsp milk
¾ tsp salt
½ tsp white pepper
Pinch of ground allspice
500g venison mince
200g fatty pork mince

The sauce
40g butter
40g plain flour
150ml beef stock
150ml vegetable stock
150ml double cream
2tsp soy sauce
1tsp Worcestershire sauce
1tsp Dijon mustard

METHOD

Serves 3 to 4 people

1 Combine the onion, garlic, breadcrumbs, egg, milk, salt, pepper, allspice, venison and pork in a bowl. Mix together thoroughly and form into 20 evenly sized balls.

2 Coat a pan with a little vegetable oil and fry the meatballs on all sides to brown.

3 Once browned, set aside. Use the same pan to start the sauce (the residue in the pan from the meatballs adds to the rich flavour). Add the butter on medium heat and melt, then add the flour to make a roux. Stir for a minute to cook out the flour.

4 Add the beef stock gradually to get a smooth consistency and continue with the vegetable stock. This will make a nice, gravy-like sauce. Then slowly add all of the cream and keep stirring.

5 Add the soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce and Dijon mustard to finish. Once everything is in the pan and combined, add the meatballs and place a lid over the pan for 10 minutes on a medium to low heat.

6 Serve the meatballs with mash and vegetables, or chips and peas, with a side of cranberry or lingonberry jelly.

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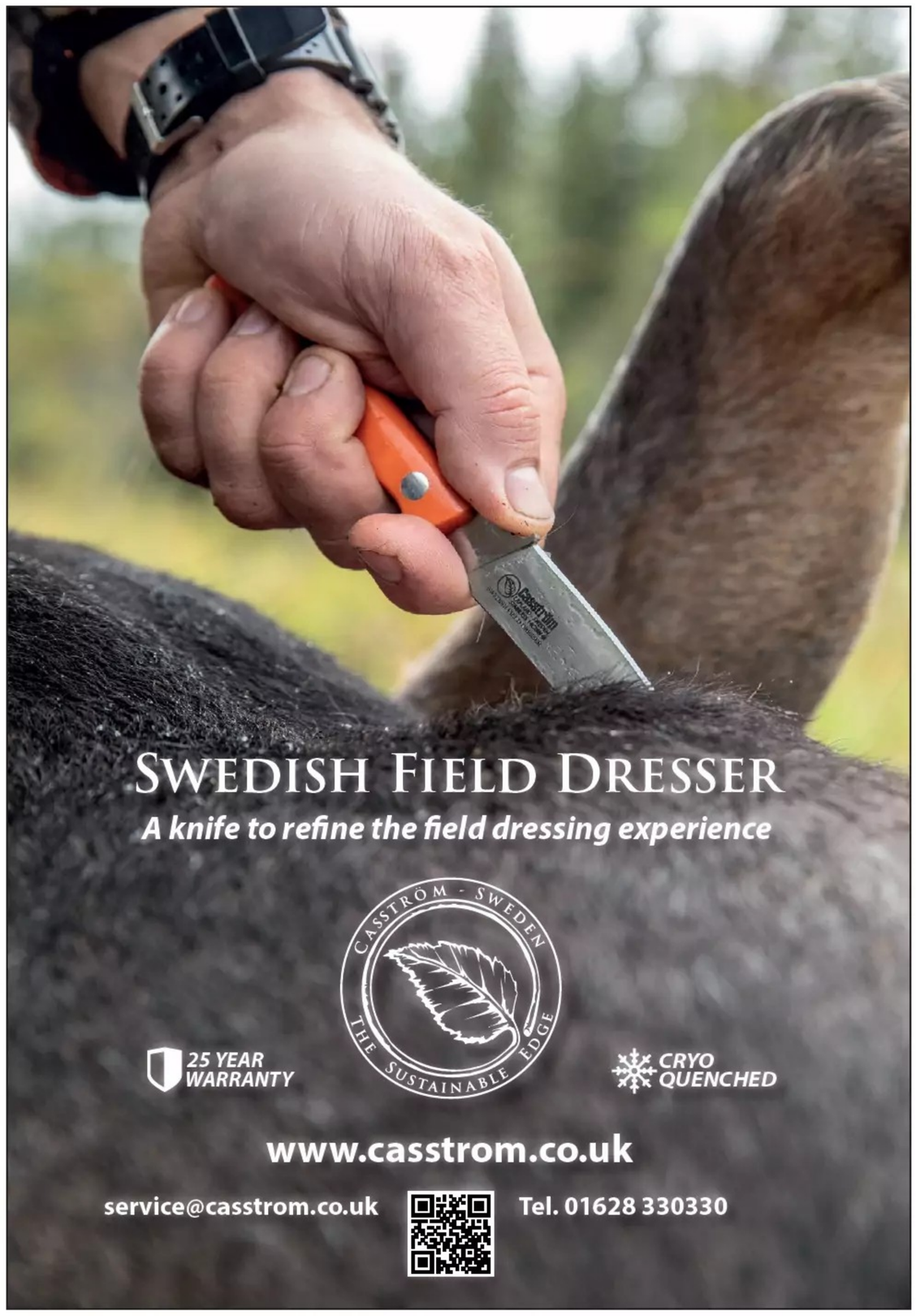
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GARY SCORES AT THE CIC

Chris Rogers looks ahead to the spring roebuck season and brings you the latest news from the CIC


A Bray Norfolk Gold 300 cic


M Guy Cambridgeshire Gold 299 cic


H Dickens Cambridgeshire Gold 284 cic


M Guy Cambridgeshire Gold 281 cic


I Bell Norfolk Silver 274 cic


I Bell Norfolk Silver 272 cic


M Guy Cambridgeshire Silver 263 cic


A Bray Norfolk Silver 253 cic


H Dickens Cambridgeshire Silver 252 cic


I Bell Bedfordshire Bronze 248 cic

With the end of winter on the horizon, deer stalkers' attention in the UK and across Europe will be turning to roebucks, with the traditional season across the UK starting on 1 April. Throughout the end of February and March, as the days draw out, the bucks will start to show up with the does and kids as they all start feeding together again. In arable areas, such as East Anglia, large groups can be seen laid out in the fields together, regularly reaching double figures depending on the management practices undertaken on individual's ground.

In CIC UK Trophy Evaluation Board news, we are pleased to announce that Gary Tatterton has been awarded the role of Senior International Judge. This reflects the knowledge and work Gary has put into the CIC since starting as a measurer in 2014. Gary is one of the UK's leading taxidermists, having started his career at the age of 14. He set up his own business in 1995 before travelling to Texas to gain more experience in game head taxidermy. Gary works out of his studio at Wetherby and would regularly send his clients' heads for measurement by Richard Prior. Following conversations with Richard about trophy evaluation, it was he who encouraged Gary to apply for a measurer's role, which was one of two advertised at the time.

After attending various shows under the tutelage of more experienced measurers, Gary soon gravitated to attending the South and North Yorkshire Shooting Shows single handed. More recently he

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M Guy Cambridgeshire Bronze 234 cic



J Patterson Bedfordshire Bronze 221 cic



A Garcia Norfolk Bronze 221 cic











> ***"Their home range seems to be expanding rapidly from their original strongholds of Bedfordshire and the Norfolk Broads"***

was heavily involved with changes to the CWD measuring formula and Muntjac scoring, providing materials and knowledge on the species which, through his work, he handles almost every day.

"I was slightly taken aback, but also very proud and honoured to be asked to take up the position," Gary told me. "I'm very much looking forward to the challenge of being involved in the decision-making process of the UKTEB Executive Committee and continuing to meet our valued clients, either in my capacity as a measurer or taxidermist."

Given Gary's day job, it's worth reminding readers that the CIC can not evaluate heads that have already been stuffed, as we need to be able to see the skull for a number of different reasons. These include taking accurate weight measurements in the case of red, fallow and roe. We also need to be able to check the skull and antler positions haven't been altered before being mounted back in the skin.

This month's pictures are still predominantly CWD as there are increasing numbers of these non-native deer being shot across the South and East of England. Their home range seems to be expanding rapidly from their original strongholds of Bedfordshire and the Norfolk Broads. There is also a picture of a lovely gold medal stag taken from Dorset, which scored 286.2 cic, and a fine example of a Scottish roe buck taken by F Hanner in Stirlingshire, which also scored gold at 170.15 cic. ■





CIC INFORMATION

For information on all things CIC trophy measuring including show dates visit, cicukteb.com and for information on the work of the international CIC organisation visit cic-wildlife.org. You can also subscribe to the CIC newsletter for regular updates on what the CIC is doing as an organisation around the world – cic-wildlife.org/newsletter

AN EVENING FOR LEGENDS

Gunmaker **John Rigby & Co.** brings together a veritable who's who of Africa's Professional Hunters





Above: Mike Kibble (Mike Kibble Safaris) and Derek Hurt (Robin Hurt Safaris)
Left: L-R Slade Stevens, Steven 'Monty' Monteith, Martin Bethell (Colonial Sporting), Tony Sinnett, Marc Newton, Maria Gil, Franz Davis, Gary Duffy, Jérôme Lanoue, Justin Prigmore, Maryke van Tonder and John Sharp (John Sharp Safaris)

On the eve of the Safari Club International (SCI) Convention 2026, John Rigby & Co. welcomed an international gathering of Professional Hunters (PHs) to The Rigby Legends Evening, an informal celebration held at the "Rigby Arms" pop-up at Teddy's Tavern in Nashville, Tennessee.

The evening was a gesture of appreciation for the PHs who play such a vital role in shaping the experience of visiting hunters. True to Rigby's philosophy, formality gave way to fun, with guests gathering over buffalo burgers and beers served alongside a tongue-in-cheek reminder to "please drink responsibly" – a nod to an audience more accustomed to standing between their clients and Africa's most dangerous game than to heeding barroom warnings.

At the heart of the evening was the introduction of the Rigby Legends Collection, a new line of safari clothing created as a tribute to the explorers and professional hunters whose lives and legacies are intertwined with the company's own history.

Each attendee received a Rigby Dagga Boy rugby shirt from the collection, further reinforcing the camaraderie that defined the occasion. Inspired by the old Cape buffalo bulls known as "Dagga Boys" – legendary for their toughness and battle-worn character – Rigby-branded scrum caps added an additional layer of symbolism. The name references the heavy, worn-down horns of ageing Dagga Boys, which are often likened to a "scrum cap".

Speaking during the evening, Rigby Managing Director Marc Newton stressed the importance of recognising PHs as true partners in the hunting experience.

"Our customers may first encounter Rigby through our rifles, but the true safari hunting experience is only possible because of Professional Hunters in the field," he said. "Their

> ***"They know that Rigby stands behind them just as firmly as they stand behind our clients"***



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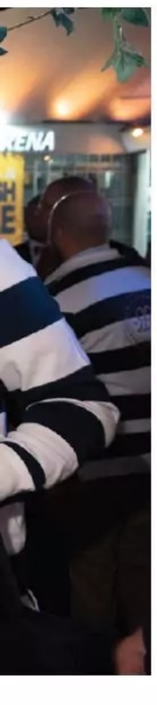






Left: Rigby's MD Marc Newton and Buzz Charlton (Charlton McCallum Safaris Zimbabwe)
Below: Marc thanks the guests and introduces the Legends Collection

PICTURES: TERRY ALLEN



Above: Derek Hurt gives a 'three cheers for Rigby'
Left: L-R Deon West (Cloete & West Safaris), Jérôme Lanoue and Grant Taylor (Mashambanzou Safaris)



knowledge, sense of responsibility and ability to create moments that become lifelong memories are what make this industry what it is. The Legends Evening was about saying thank you to the PHs and ensuring they know that Rigby stands behind them just as firmly as they stand behind our clients."

Derek Hurt of Robin Hurt Safaris, who addressed the room and led guests in a toast, also reflected on the significance of the occasion.

"It was a wonderful evening celebrating African Professional Hunters and launching the Legends safari clothing collection," he said. "We are deeply honoured that my father, Robin Hurt, has a safari jacket named after him in the collection. It means a great deal to see his experience and legacy recognised in this way."

The Rigby Legends Evening set the tone for a week of community, partnership and a shared respect for the people whose work continues to uphold the heritage and future of safari hunting. ■

SHOT SHOW & SIN CITY

Ryan shooting Matt's rifle for his first match win of the year. On American soil

Ryan Charlton travels to Las Vegas to view the latest shooting equipment and to fire a few rounds for good measure

Something I am incredibly grateful for is my job in the shooting industry. It allows me to pursue my passion and visit iconic events such as SHOT Show in Las Vegas. SHOT usually gives me the opportunity, between meetings, to scope out the latest and greatest gear. This year, however, things felt a little lighter. I largely put this down to suppressors becoming readily accessible in the United States. On 1 January alone, the ATF reportedly received 150,000 suppressor applications. As a result, suppressors were the hottest commodity on the show floor.

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The new 12x50 laser range-finding binos from Apex Optics have some amazing features



The golden Sin City Precision poker chip will take pride of place for a while

The other factor was the sheer number of meetings I was involved in. As the largest firearms trade show in the world, SHOT provides an invaluable opportunity for people from across the globe to meet face to face and plan their strategy for the year ahead.

That said, there were still some exciting developments for the PRS aficionado. Apex Optics has launched an intriguing new set of rangefinding binoculars called the Synergy. While integrated Applied Ballistics and multiple wind input options are now fairly standard, what sets these apart is the 12x50 configuration, offering a crisp, bright image for spotting. Combined with a digital reticle, this allows targets to be milled and wind calls calculated with impressive precision. Expect to see them available by late summer.

Sierra Bullets has been moving towards a more PRS-focused product range, and this year they have gone all out. Three new 6mm offerings have been introduced: the 107gr and 116gr Tipped MatchKing bullets, alongside a redesigned 105gr MatchKing boasting the highest ballistic coefficient in its class. Add to that a 136gr .25 calibre and a 153gr 6.5mm Tipped MatchKing, coupled with promises of improved availability, and it is a great time to have so many options.

Spending significant time on the MDT stand gave me the opportunity to gauge visitors' reactions to our new Precision Hunting chassis, the DRT (Dead Right There). Made from magnesium and weighing just over 3lb, it is aimed squarely at the night-time hunting market, as well as shooters competing in weight-restricted classes. It certainly attracted plenty of attention and even enabled me to meet a childhood hero: Lou Ferrigno — aka The Hulk. The DRT should be available in late spring or early summer, with possibly a few sneak peeks at UK shows beforehand.

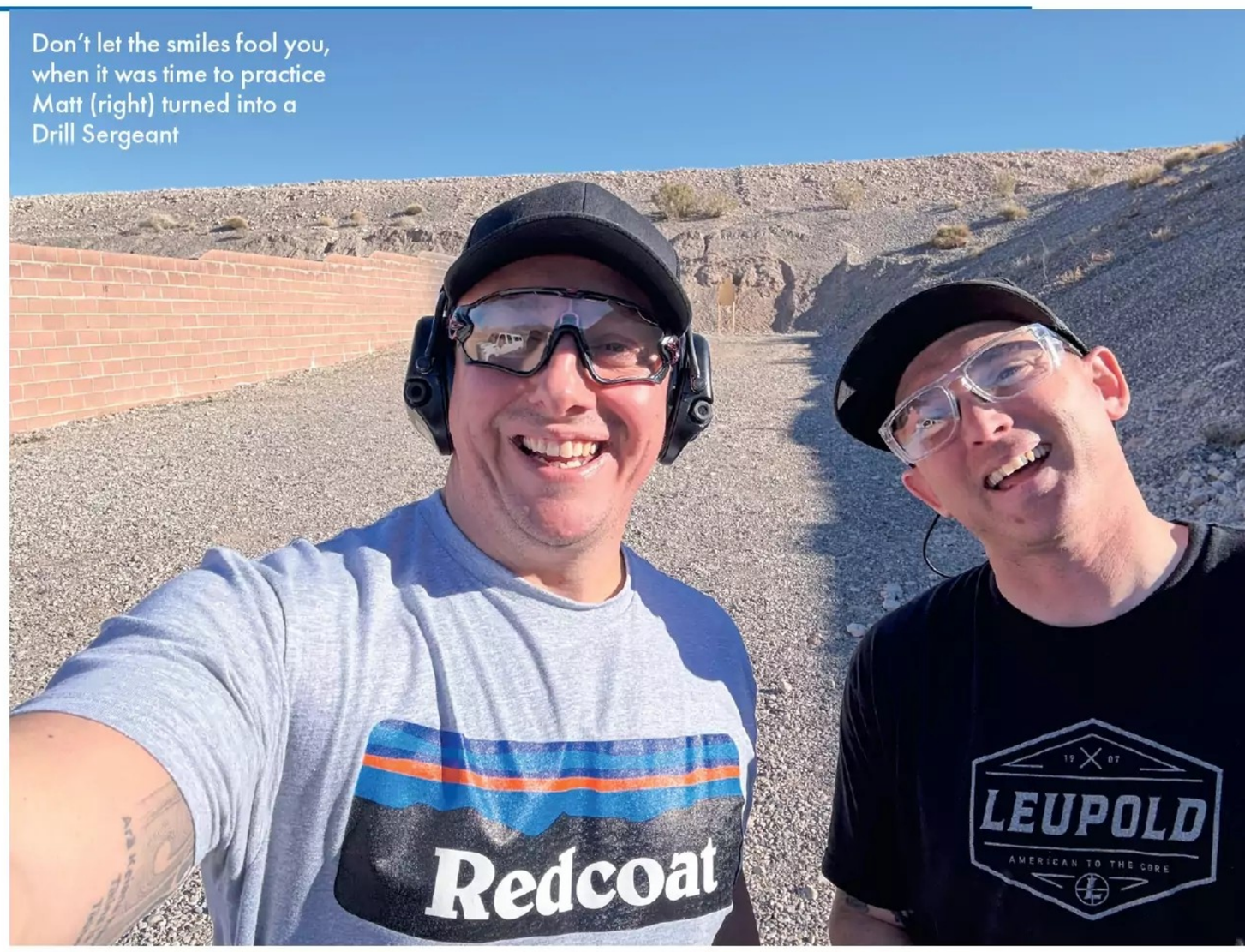
My personal schedule this year allowed for an extra day of "acclimatisation". One of my close friends lives in Las Vegas and, after meeting at the airport on Friday evening, we headed back to his place for a late dinner and an early night. This proved necessary as, less than 12 hours later, we were setting out targets in the dark in preparation for the first match of the weekend at Sin City Precision.

With the targets set and freshly sprayed, around 60 shooters gathered to confirm zero and kick off the first match of the year for many. Matt had kindly lent me his 6GT which, aside from the scope, was identical to my own rifle, so I felt at home almost immediately. I shot my first ever match with Matt and he has played a major role in my involvement in PRS, so it is always a pleasure to compete alongside him. Despite the lack of sleep, I was shooting well in a fantastic squad full of encouragement and good-natured banter – particularly as a Brit had turned up and won the first match of the year on just a few hours' sleep with a borrowed rifle.

After the bolt-action match concluded and I received a coveted gold Sin City Precision poker chip, we moved to the pistol bays to run some drills. Matt had signed me up for a pistol match the morning before I was due to fly home. While practising, one of our squad mates stopped by and asked whether I would like to try his full-auto M4. Naturally, I responded with an enthusiastic yes and let freedom ring. To round off the session, Matt put me through the Las Vegas Metro Police shooting assessment. That I finished only one point outside the hit zone — on just my fifth time ever shooting a pistol — is testament to Matt's excellent coaching. We returned home for grilled burgers and another



Ryan takes aim from his weak side during the gas gun match



Don't let the smiles fool you, when it was time to practice Matt (right) turned into a Drill Sergeant

early night, as a gas gun match awaited the following day.

A gas gun match is essentially PRS with an AR-15. Scoring is based on total time to complete all stages. The shooter starts with the bolt locked back and the safety engaged, and the safety must be applied whenever moving. Otherwise, it is broadly similar to a bolt-action match. Less familiar with AR controls, I fumbled slightly through the first half – dropping the magazine twice and forgetting the safety a few times – much to the amusement of the squad, and amplified by colleagues who had joined us. Matt and his friend Paul were neck and neck throughout the day, with Paul eventually taking the win by just 0.2 seconds. Once again, we headed home to grill dinner and relax. Matt's dog, who weighs over 60kg, has developed a particular fondness for sitting on my lap.

Following the excitement of the weekend, I found myself back at Matt's house with his dog on my lap, looking forward to an early night ahead of the pistol match and my flight home. This was the one I felt most anxious about, having virtually no pistol experience and little understanding of the format beforehand. I therefore set simple goals: be safe above all else and earn an invitation back. Watching some of the regulars move with lightning speed certainly set the tone. While pistols were new territory, competition was not, and focusing on controllables helped settle my nerves. As with the gas gun match, performance improved as familiarity grew, and I finished comfortably mid-pack.

With the first competitions of the year already under way, attention now turns to the upcoming shows and the start of the main season. It may be a phrase repeated every year, but 2026 genuinely looks busier than ever. Domestically, we have the PRS UK Centrefire and Rimfire Series, NRL Hunter UK Centrefire and Rimfire, and an expanded programme of matches at Bisley run by the NRA. With this being a GBPRA Rimfire qualification year and UK team places up for grabs, the Centrefire team will head to Texas in September for the World Championships.

Further afield, the European Pro Series Centrefire and Rimfire circuits culminate in a European Finale, alongside NRL Hunter events in France and Italy. I suspect many of us will be covering considerable mileage this year. ■

For more details, visit the relevant series websites.

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New territory, but competition is in Ryan's blood



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Rifle Shooter 10th anniversary winner

The lucky winner of *Rifle Shooter's* 10th anniversary prize draw was Stephen Clarke, from County Durham.

Stephen, pictured on the right receiving his prizes from Robin Walecki, owner of his local gun shop Emma Custom Rifles, wins an outstanding selection of prizes worth over £3,500, generously donated by some of the biggest names in the industry.

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- A Browning X-Bolt 2 Alpen Varitech Moter rifle (RRP £1,539)
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- Le Chameau Zermatt leather-lined boots (RRP £280)
- A one-hour rifle lesson for two at West London Shooting School (RRP £250)

We are extremely proud to be celebrating over 10 years in print as the UK's only dedicated rifle magazine, and we look forward to continuing to provide the very best information and entertainment for rifle shooters long into the future. ■

Cut for cancer

Those who know gunsmith Chris Bartlett from Hertfordshire will be familiar with his prized ponytail – all 450mm of it! Fewer people will know that five years ago Chris was diagnosed with cancer. Thankfully, following two operations, he is now cancer-free and keen to do his bit to help others.

Chris told us: "Amanda, one of the girls at our range is going through cancer treatment at the moment, so I'm going to have my head shaved to support her and raise money for Cancer Research UK."

Chris's close shave will take place at Emmett and Stone's Range in Little Marlow at 11am on Saturday 28 March. If readers would like to donate, details of the JustGiving page can be found below. Alternatively, if you would like to take a swipe at Chris's Barnet with the clippers, pop along — for £20 you can personally contribute to his impending baldness! ■

https://www.justgiving.com/page/chris-bartlett?utm_medium=FR&utm_source=WA.



Chris – with hair – and holding one of two air rifles he customised to raise money for the Royal British Legion. Now he is about to sacrifice his luscious locks to help Cancer Research UK

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I AM A SHOOTER

GLYN INGRAM

Deer and wildlife ranger, trainer and consultant **Glyn Ingram** has spent much of his life working with deer. We ask him how it all began and why he still loves to hunt them



Q: How did you first enter the world of fieldsports?
A: While at school, I undertook work experience with a local keeper and went on to spend all my spare time around nearby shoots. I then completed two years on the Youth Training Scheme before attending Sparsholt for a further two years. I was very fortunate to secure my first under-stalker position when I left college.

Q: How long have you been rifle shooting?
A: Thirty-eight years. I got my first FAC at 16 and went straight to the gunshop and bought a Browning pump action .22LR. I remember feeling so grown up. At that time I also had the use of an estate .22 Hornet and, very occasionally, the headkeeper's .243 Win. Looking back, good people put a lot of trust in a pretty naïve young lad.

Q: Walk us through your gun cabinet...
A: My everyday rifle is a semi-custom Sako in 7mm-08 Rem, which I use for both wild deer stalking and park culling, but I do have a few others. I believe the classic chamberings are classics for a reason, so I can't bring myself to part with my old .308 Win, .243 Win and .270 Win. More recently, I received a Tikka T3x in 6.5 Creedmoor from GMK as part of their generous sponsorship of the British Deer Society.

Q: Why did you choose to work with deer?
A: As soon as I started keepering, I realised I was far more interested in the deer than the pheasants I was supposed to be looking after. College placements at Petworth Park with Dave Whitby and with FC Rangers only reinforced this. I still get a buzz every time I see a deer.

Q: What is your favorite deer species to stalk and why?
A: I love stalking sika, although they are the one species I don't have regular access to where I live in Norfolk. I also find fallow deer particularly challenging for a number of reasons, and they certainly keep me on my toes.

Q: What is the biggest change in the sport you have witnessed over the years?
A: The most obvious change is the introduction of thermal spotters. I was a fairly late adopter, but I now can't imagine how I managed without one, particularly when dealing with woodland deer. Another significant change over my career has been the type of guests I host. In the early days, it was mainly wealthy European men; now it's a much more mixed group of everyday people from the UK, including far more women.

Q: What has been your most memorable stalking moment?
A: There isn't one single standout moment, but by far the most rewarding aspect for me is training others. That might be through short-term courses and stalking outings, or longer-term mentoring of trainees and junior staff. A number of my trainees have gone on to secure good positions within the industry, and I'm very proud of them.

Q: What's your biggest concern in relation to the future of fieldsports?
A: I'm encouraged by the fact that there are many good people in our industry, but there are also some who see it purely as a business opportunity– or a problem to be solved – and who lack the passion and respect for the animals, which I still believe is essential. I also remain concerned about the venison situation: standards, pricing, logistics and marketing are all, with a few exceptions, at a low point, and I can't see a clear solution emerging any time soon. ■

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