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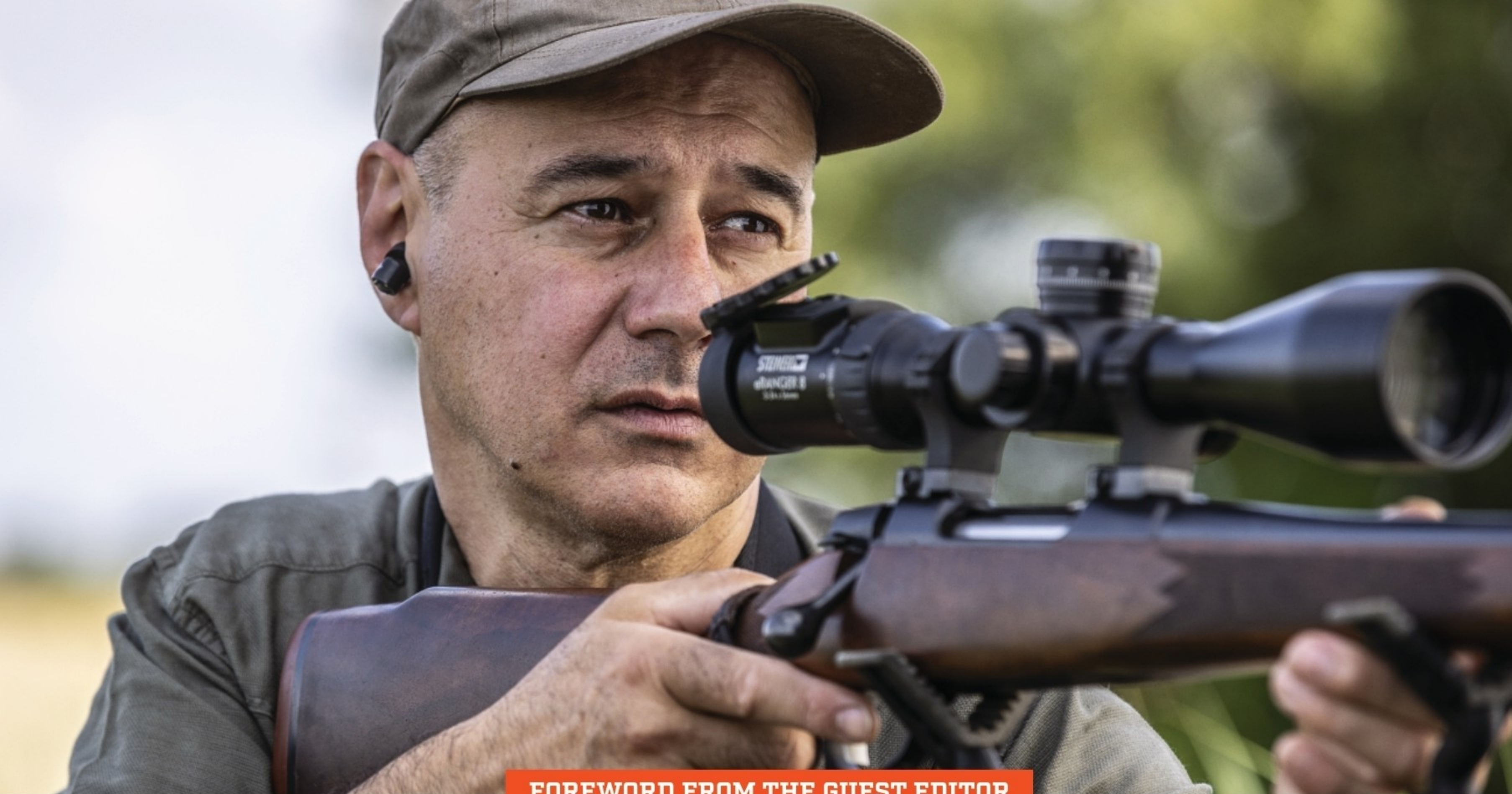
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FOREWORD FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

JOSÉ SOUTO

As a city boy, born and brought up in London, the countryside, to me, was simply anywhere that was green and overgrown. Even then, however, I had a deep love of nature and wildlife.

I believe our ancient hunter-gatherer instinct still exists within us all, although it is undoubtedly stronger in some people than in others. I loved gathering food from the wild, whether it was blackberries with my parents as a child or, later, clams and shellfish from the coast while staying with relatives in Spain, or spearfishing for octopus and cuttlefish.

Working as a chef made it even more important for me to understand where the produce I was cooking came from and how its origin affected its quality. Provenance and sustainability became my mission, and, I'm afraid, once you go down that rabbit hole (pardon the pun), it naturally leads not only to cooking your own food, but to harvesting it as well.

When I came to write my first book, *Venison*, it would have been easy simply to fill it with recipes and leave it at that. Instead, I wanted to show the whole process, not just the cooking, but what is now known as the journey from field to fork. So, working with my old friend and excellent photographer Steve Lee, we set out to introduce all six species of wild deer found in the UK, exploring their behaviour and habitats, as well as the processes of hunting, skinning, butchery and, finally, cooking them. It was far more work than I had anticipated, but I felt it was important for people to understand what a remarkable natural resource we have and how they, too, could make use of it.

Now, as a Chef Lecturer, I see every day how educating people about the harvesting, preparation and cooking of wild game and venison breaks down

barriers and dispels the myths that have surrounded them for years. That is why we must continue to educate the wider public and promote venison as the fourth meat, alongside pork, lamb and beef. Only through education, and by getting more venison products onto the shelves of supermarkets and independent retailers, can we win hearts and minds and show people that venison is the healthiest and most sustainable meat available.

As I mentioned in my interview, thankfully the public, and young people in particular, are becoming increasingly receptive to that message. With the growing emphasis on healthier lifestyles, better diets, and a greater interest in the provenance and sustainability of our food, there has never been a better time to spread the word. Thanks to the rise of social media, we now have the perfect tool, capable of reaching into almost every home.

That has been, and remains, my mission: through my work educating and inspiring new generations of young chefs, who I hope will, in turn, educate others; through my Instagram channel, @wild_food_boy; and through my demonstrations at Game Fairs and shows.

So, while you are reading—and, I'm sure, enjoying—this magazine, I encourage you to think about how you might help spread that message. It could be something as simple as giving venison sausages or burgers to someone who has never tried them before, or taking someone out to watch deer who might not otherwise have the opportunity.

Finally, we are blessed with an extraordinary wild resource. Let us treat it with the respect it deserves.



José Souto

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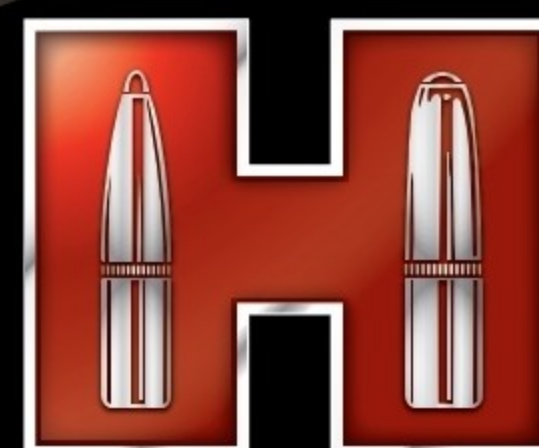


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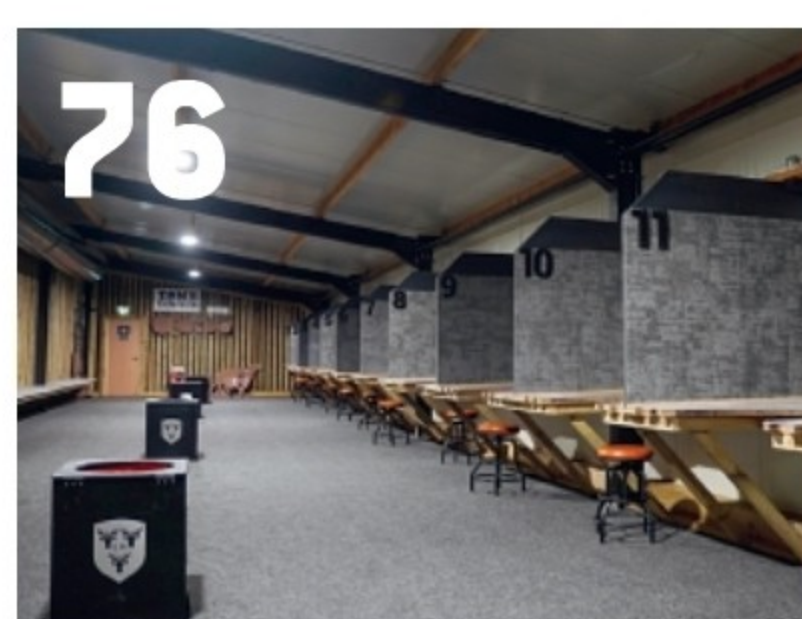
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EXCITING TIMES LIE AHEAD

With many of my friends across both the North and South of the country busily chasing roebucks from dawn until dusk, I've been feeling a little redundant by comparison.

Living in an area without a large roe deer population—in fact, it's only within the last 10 years that we've seen them at all on our ground—I have had to content myself with the occasional recce, looking for the odd buck that fits the cull criteria. Once spotted, they're noted down and, to maximise the sporting challenge, will be left alone until I see the first definite signs of the rut and can dust off my calls.

Although every roe enthusiast will be chomping at the bit to get calling, the need for restraint until conditions are right is highlighted perfectly by both Steven Connolly on page 59 and Chris Dalton on page 90.

The reason behind Lincolnshire's growing roe population—at least in the south of the county—has always fascinated me. While it could simply be attributed to the species' continued expansion and wider distribution, I have my own theory. I suspect it has more to do with the explosion in Chinese water deer numbers just across our borders in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. Historically, roe occupied the cover strips, reed beds and

drainage dykes of the Fens, areas that are now very much the stronghold of CWD. I believe increasing competition for both food and space has gradually forced roe further afield in search of new habitat. In short, they are being outperformed by this faster-breeding newcomer, much like our native red deer.

I'd love to hear readers' thoughts on the subject.

It will also soon be time for the annual feast of farming as the harvest gets under way. There's something about fields once full of crops being reduced to golden stubble that signals the start of another shooting season. As gamekeeper Lance Barton explains on page 20, it's also a critical time for fox control, with vulnerable game birds and young and disturbed foxes on the lookout for an easy meal. I'll certainly be out doing my bit, while hopefully putting some of the latest thermal and night vision optics through their paces at the same time—watch this space. In the meantime, be sure to read our optics tests on pages 24 and 42, along with our selection of five standout thermal spotters on page 79.

Talking of standout features, Will O'Meara shines a light on some groundbreaking research into rifle balance in line with the bore and how it influences both recoil and accuracy. It makes for fascinating reading, whatever your shooting discipline.

Our guest editor for this issue is the well-known chef and lecturer, José Souto. Many of you will have seen José's butchery demonstrations at the Game Fair and the Stalking Show, but his route into fieldsports makes entertaining reading, and you would be hard pushed to find a more passionate advocate for deer stalking, venison and the countryside. Be sure to take a look at his mouth-watering recipe on page 86 too—it's one I'll certainly be trying on the barbecue this summer.

Finally, I couldn't sign off without mentioning the changes to Section 44 of the Crime and Policing Act 2026, which came into force on 29 June across England, Wales and Scotland. These changes mean you no longer require a variation to your FAC to acquire a sound moderator. You'll still need to show proof that you hold a valid firearm or shotgun certificate, to your firearms dealer when purchasing one, but moderators will no longer be listed on your FAC. This welcome breakthrough follows lengthy and determined lobbying by our shooting and gamekeeping organisations and, we hope, signals a more practical and proportionate approach to firearms regulation in the future.

I hope you enjoy this issue. ■

Rob Hardy
Managing Editor

PHOTO: TWEED MEDIA



VENISON FUND REOPENS FOR LOW GROUND STALKERS

A third round of Scotland's Low Ground Venison Supply Chain Project has reopened with £150,000 on the table, offering deer stalkers grants of up to 50 per cent towards new larder and chilling kit.

Deer stalkers across low ground Scotland can again apply for grant funding to upgrade their larder and chilling facilities, after a third round of the Low Ground Venison Supply Chain Project opened with £150,000 on the table. The scheme, run by NatureScot and the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society (SAOS), offers up to 50 per cent towards the cost of new carcass handling and cold storage equipment, with the aim of getting more locally shot venison into the food chain.

The fund covers up to half the cost of equipment to upgrade larder, chilling and carcass handling facilities, from chillers through to processing kit. It is open to individual stalkers and to deer management groups working across Scotland's low ground, where roe deer in particular are culled away from the open hill.

Getting venison from low ground deer into the supply chain has long been harder than on the hill, where established larders and game dealers

handle large numbers of red deer. On lower ground, stalkers shooting roe and other deer often lack the chilling and processing capacity to move carcasses on quickly and legally, which can blunt the incentive to cull.

John Bruce, chair of Lowland Deer Network Scotland, said the scheme grew out of the group's own work. "This project was informed by a survey that LDNS carried out asking deer managers about their venison handling capacity, particularly their chilling requirements," he said. "We are already seeing an increase in carcasses entering the public food chain as a result of this funding."

Pete Moore, of NatureScot's wildlife management team, said feedback from previous rounds had been "really positive, with many participants reporting it has allowed them to increase their cull and produce more quality venison locally".

The first two rounds paid out grants worth £119,000 and £95,000 respectively, with early support going mainly towards new chillers and larder improvements.

The deadline for applications is 18 August. To find out more, visit: <https://saos.coop/what-we-do/supply-chain-development/low-ground-venison-supply-chain-project/>



POLICY

PET PASSPORT RETURN WOULD EASE EU TRIPS FOR DEER DOGS

Deer dog handlers travelling to Europe to work them could face less cost and paperwork under new plans to bring back multi-use pet passports. The Royal Kennel Club has welcomed a Government commitment to conclude EU negotiations on the passports, which it said is being pursued ahead of the next UK-EU summit on 22 July.

At present, owners in Great Britain must obtain an Animal Health Certificate for every trip to the EU. The vet-issued document is valid for a single journey and is both costly and time-consuming. A reusable passport would cut both the cost and the paperwork. Dr Ed Hayes, the club's head of public affairs, said the system was a burden on those who travel regularly with their dogs.

"Owners travelling to the EU should continue to obtain an Animal Health Certificate for each trip until the passports return."

POLICY

BASC CALLS FOR SINGLE LICENSING BODY

BASC has renewed its call for a single firearms licensing authority for England and Wales, arguing it is the only way to end the "postcode lottery" facing certificate holders.

Licensing is currently handled by 43 separate police forces, and the association says inconsistent standards and processing times leave applicants facing very different experiences depending on where they live. The renewed call comes as the system faces wider upheaval, with the ageing national firearms database due to be replaced. BASC says a single body would bring consistency, efficiency and accountability to the process.

COUNTRYSIDE CALLS FOR RESET AS STARMER RESIGNS

Sir Keir Starmer resigned as prime minister on 22 June, having lost the confidence of his parliamentary party. He will remain leader until Labour chooses a successor - widely tipped to be Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham, who returned to Parliament in a by-election last week - with a new leader expected before MPs return in September.

The Countryside Alliance has urged whoever follows Sir Keir to reset relations with the countryside.

Although Labour's 2024 landslide returned more than 120 rural MPs, the Alliance says much of what followed was a "war on the

countryside", citing the family farm tax, higher business rates, plans to restrict game shooting and a proposed trail hunting ban.

Chief executive Tim Bonner said: "This was undoubtedly a hard decision for the prime minister to make and we wish him and his family well for the future. The government will soon look very different and there will be plenty of time for ministers to consider a change of course. 'Change' does not start with culture war in the countryside and a return to the mistakes of the past. We stand ready to work with the next government to achieve the very best for our countryside."

COMMUNITY



LAKE DISTRICT TO LAUNCH WILD VENISON BRAND

A wild venison brand is being developed for the Lake District as part of a new five-year strategy to manage deer populations across the national park.

The Wild Deer Management Strategy, developed by eight organisations including the Lake District National Park Authority, Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the National Trust, puts a sustainable venison trade at the heart of landscape-scale population control.

The brand will sell meat from culled deer as traceable, high-quality produce through local hotels, restaurants and farm shops, the strategy states. Plans include new processing capacity, additional shared larders and dedicated routes to market.

The Lake District's native red deer herd is described in the strategy as among the purest in mainland Britain; protecting that status is among the pressures shaping cull targets. Hybridisation between red and sika deer is identified as a priority concern, with managers

working to prevent contact between the two species along the border with the Western Dales. Muntjac, spreading northward into Cumbria, are also targeted for suppression.

The strategy is explicit that fencing and other non-lethal methods cannot control deer at landscape scale and includes training support for stalkers, deer managers and farmers.

Cath Johnson, Natural Environment Adviser at Lake District National Park Authority, said: "Rising deer numbers present significant environmental and land-management challenges across the National Park. While native red and roe deer are an important part of our cultural and natural heritage, high densities can cause serious damage to woodlands and other sensitive habitats. This strategy brings together landowners, environmentalists, deer stalkers and deer experts to help protect our landscape while securing the future for native deer."

The full strategy is at lakedistrict.gov.uk/deer-strategy.



BASC PRESSES MPS TO BACK HIGHER DEER CULLS

BASC has urged parliamentarians to support an increase in deer culls, warning the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Shooting and Conservation that rising populations are harming woodland regeneration, biodiversity and carbon storage, while raising deer-vehicle collisions and disease risks. Head of deer and woodland management Martin Edwards said the stalking community was ageing - its average age now 62 - and called for more recruitment, stronger venison markets and grant-funded chilling facilities. He added that firearms licensing delays, with some applicants waiting between one and two years, were continuing to deter new entrants.

SHOOTERS URGED TO LOG SQUIRREL TREE DAMAGE

Shooters and land managers are being asked to help measure the damage grey squirrels do to Britain's trees. BASC is encouraging members to take part in the UK Squirrel Accord's annual UK-wide survey, which records bark-stripping damage to woodland caused by the non-native grey. The data helps build the case for continued grey squirrel control, which protects both broadleaf trees and the native red squirrel. BASC says recording the damage gives that work a stronger evidence base.



FINAL YEAR OF LICENSED BADGER CULLING CONFIRMED

The Government has confirmed that 2025 was the final year of industry-led badger culling in England's High Risk and Edge Areas. Alongside the announcement on 10 June, Defra welcomed and published expert recommendations for the next phase of its bovine TB strategy, targeting TB-free status by 2038. The plans favour earlier intervention through stronger cattle controls, better surveillance and vaccination, with a badger vaccination field force replacing the licensed marksmen who carried out culling.

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WILD FOOD BOY

Chef, lecturer and passionate deer stalker **José Souto** reveals his life-long love of cooking and the countryside

WHO IS JOSÉ SOUTO?

My parents were from Spain, but I was born and raised in Kensington, which explains my London accent — something that often surprises people.

At heart, I am a chef and countryman with an inquisitive mind and a deep love of nature. I fell into cooking entirely by accident, but quickly discovered a passion for it. I went on to study at catering college, spending two years at Westminster Kingsway College (now Capital City College Westminster, CCCW) in London, where I am now Senior Chef Lecturer.

I began my professional career as a chef at the House of Commons, where I worked my way up to be a senior chef de

Partie and acting Sous chef. I have also worked in some of London's finest establishments, including Le Méridien, Mosimann's, The Ritz, the InterContinental Park Lane, and The Savoy Grill. I now live in Cambridgeshire with my wife, Charlotte, and our son, Luis.

I am a falconer, rifle hunter and all-round countryman, and a former Chairman of the British Hawking Association. I am also the author of two game cookery books, *Venison the Game Larder* and *Feathers the Game Larder* which have sold more than 44,000 copies worldwide and been translated into three languages. Today, I am perhaps best known for my game preparation and butchery demonstrations at the Stalking

Show, the Game Fair, and various other events.

In 2022, I was honoured to receive the Craft Guild of Chefs' Chef Lecturer of the Year Award. I am passionate about food sustainability and the correct preparation and utilisation of all wild game. I enjoy stalking deer throughout Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Bedfordshire, and Scotland, and I also hunt and provide consultancy services at the Vale Feitoso Estate in Portugal and estates in Spain and the Czech Republic.

WHAT WAS YOUR ROUTE INTO FIELDSPORTS?

My parents had no connection with hunting or fieldsports, but I have

always felt a strong affinity with the countryside and the natural world. I remember when I was around nine years old, we would visit some old, overgrown railway sidings near Acton as a family to pick blackberries for jam. I loved it there and, to me, it was the countryside.

When I was 11, my mother decided that my brother and I should get to know our Spanish relatives. Every summer, we were put on an Iberia flight with little name tags around our necks and met at the other end by my aunt at Santiago Airport. I still remember the long drive along twisting mountain roads to their remote farm in Galicia.

Life there was traditional and rural. I absolutely loved helping on the farm and fishing in the streams for trout and frogs. We spent at least a month there every year.

At the age of 17, my mother sent us to spend the summer with relatives in Malaga, Marbella and Cádiz in southern Spain. Although this side of the family did not farm like our relatives in Galicia, my uncles were passionate hunters. In fact, my grandfather was Chairman of the La Línea Hunting Association. They regularly went bird and quail shooting over pointing dogs and hunted rabbits with podencos, the traditional Spanish hunting hounds.

I accompanied them and soon learned how to shoot. I also learned to spearfish and to gather clams and scallops along the coast. It was during this time that I developed a passion for harvesting food directly from the wild.

When I left school, I had no real idea what I wanted to do. I more or less fell into studying at Westminster College, where I discovered that my 'thing' was cooking.

I began achieving top grades and spent two of the most enjoyable years of my life learning how to prepare and cook all types of food. It was there that I was introduced to game, and was immediately fascinated by the variety of flavours it offered compared with conventional meats such as beef and lamb.

I have always been fascinated by birds of prey and became a falconer long before I started shooting in the UK. We still keep birds of prey at

home, and my wife runs a business called CJS Birds of Prey, providing flying demonstrations at country shows and game fairs throughout the country.

My introduction to deer stalking came through a close friend, Mike Collins, who was a senior deer park ranger at Epping Forest. Mike played a pivotal role in teaching me about the importance of effective management, always carried out with respect for the animals themselves. Those principles remain central to my approach today.

The remarkable thing is that although I stalked with Mike for many years, I never actually shot a deer with him. I was always more interested in watching and learning from his experience.

When I met my wife and moved to Cambridgeshire, I had the good fortune to meet Julian Stoyel, one of the country's leading authorities on

“It was during this time that I developed a passion for harvesting food directly from the wild.”

deer and antelope from around the world. At the time, Julian was Head Deer Park Manager at Holkham Hall in Norfolk, and I spent countless hours travelling around the estate with him.

It was Julian who took my understanding to another level. I shot my first deer with him—a beautiful six-point roebuck—and the trophy still hangs in my kitchen today. He also encouraged me to purchase my first stalking rifle.

WHAT RIFLES AND AMMUNITION DO YOU SHOOT?

My first rifle was a Sako 75 chambered in .243 Winchester, which I still own today. I chose a Sako because it was the rifle Julian used, and having shot his rifle, I found it suited me perfectly. They are very accurate and reliable rifles and that purchase marked the beginning

of a long association with the brand, through GMK, one of my sponsors.

The team at GMK, the UK importers for Sako, told me that once I started shooting the Sako 90, I would never look back. To be fair, they were absolutely right. When I open my gun cabinet today, I almost always reach for my Sako 90 in .308 Winchester.

However, my son, who is now 18, has started accompanying me on stalking trips and has taken over using the old Sako 75. He took his first roebuck with it last year, so we will never sell that rifle; it holds far too many memories.

As for ammunition, I am a strong advocate of non-lead rounds, primarily from a food-chain perspective. I believe modern non-lead ammunition is now more than capable of performing the task effectively. I have used a variety of Sako loads and, more recently, the 162-grain Powerhead Blade Pro, which performed exceptionally well on the red deer this winter.

I have tried to convert my .243 to non-lead ammunition, but I am not convinced that the rifle's twist rate is sufficient to stabilise the heavier bullets. However, my good friend Marcus Simpson of Simpson Brothers Gun Shop assures me that he has a non-lead load that will work in it, so fingers crossed we can keep that old rifle in active service for many years to come.

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

I remember an old stalker once telling me, "Whatever you spend on your rifle, spend twice as much on your optics." That advice has stayed with me throughout my shooting life, so good optics would definitely be my answer.

My first scope was a Leupold, but it was local gun shop owner, Dave Shipman, who introduced me to my first Steiner scope. I was immediately impressed and went on to buy a Steiner Ranger 8, which I used for many years and which through GMK, established a long association with the brand.

Last year, I upgraded to the new Steiner eRanger 8 riflescope and the eRanger LRF binoculars. Together,



they have completely transformed the way I stalk. They are an absolute game changer.

For me, confidence in my equipment is essential. I need to know that I can place a shot accurately and ensure that the deer is dispatched as quickly and humanely as possible. Having a scope that helps me achieve that level of precision is invaluable, and Steiner optics have enabled me to do that.

WHAT MAKES YOUR PERFECT DAY'S HUNTING?

At the moment, my nemesis is mouflon. Despite having successfully taken three of them, I simply cannot get enough of stalking these remarkable animals in the spectacular landscapes they inhabit.

I stalked my first mouflon in the Czech Republic, and the trophy still hangs proudly on my wall. Since then, I have taken another two in Portugal. They are incredibly challenging quarry—extremely wary, highly intelligent, and blessed with exceptional eyesight.

In the Czech Republic, I spent 10 days pursuing mouflon in the high alpine pastures, trying every trick in the book to get within range. I even resorted to sitting in a high seat, which anyone who knows me will know I dislike—I much prefer hunting on foot.

After numerous failures, countless changes of plan due to shifting winds, and many gruelling miles on the mountain, I finally managed to take a ram. It remains one of the most memorable stalks of my life.

Scotland also holds a special place in my heart. The first deer I ever stalked and shot entirely on my own was a young red 'staggy' on the hill, and that experience has never left me. To this day, I make at least one trip north each year to stalk with my good friend David Freer.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR LATEST BUSINESS AND ACTIVITY?

Lecturing at the college occupies the majority of my time. I also oversee all the meat, fish, game and poultry that comes into the college, as well as the associated budget.

Capital City College Westminster (CCCW) is the only catering college



in the UK with its own in-house deer larder and skinning rig. This allows students to gain hands-on experience processing between 15 and 20 whole deer carcasses each year, supplied by Lincolnshire Game and Highland Game.

This field-to-table education programme, delivered to our third-year students, includes a two-to-three-hour practical session covering shot placement, refrigeration protocols and full carcass butchery. In many respects, it is a mini DSC1 course.

We also host two game seminars each year for chefs and deer stalkers, covering small game, as well as all six species of deer found in the UK.

Outside the college, I deliver demonstrations for smaller private groups, tailoring sessions to whichever aspects of butchery and game cookery they wish to learn about.

One of my most recent projects has involved working with the Vale Feitoso Estate near Monsanto in Portugal. It is one of the country's most historic estates and was once used as a hunting ground by Portuguese kings. Covering some 27,000 hectares, the estate includes two hotels and supports populations of Iberian red deer, roe deer, fallow

deer, mouflon and wild boar, as well as limited numbers of ibex and Barbary sheep.

Traditionally, hunting on the estate was conducted as montería-style driven shooting. However, the owner wanted to improve the quality of the meat being produced and sold.

On traditional montería hunts, carcasses are left unbled, ungralloched and displayed in the midday sun. Consequently, the quality of the meat deteriorates and it is generally only suitable for casseroles and slow-cooked dishes, relying on red wine and marinades to mask the strong flavour.

I was asked to advise on the issue, and the first thing I did was have two fallow deer shot, bled, gralloched and placed in a chiller, exactly as we would in the UK. I hung the carcasses for six days before giving a presentation to the owner and his gamekeepers on carcass breakdown and cooking techniques.

The results were remarkable. Everyone who tasted the venison was amazed by its quality. They asked me what I had done to make it taste so good. My answer was simple: "Nothing." Apart from a little seasoning, the difference came entirely from proper carcass preparation and refrigeration.

That demonstration fundamentally changed their perception of the quality of venison they could produce. Today, most hunting on the estate is carried out through stalking on foot, which allows for better shot placement and immediate bleeding and gralloching. They have also adopted my recommended refrigeration, hanging and corrective-cut procedures.

As a result, the estate now supplies game and venison products to El Corte Ingles, Portugal's largest premium retail chain. The project has been viewed as so innovative that the Portuguese equivalent of DEFRA has taken an interest, and I am currently working with them to help establish these methods as recognised hunting best practice.

Another project born from my own frustration at trying to find the perfect set of field knives is a collaboration with Flint & Flame. Together, we developed the Stalker's Companion Knife Set—two knives designed to handle every task I encounter in the field.

The longer-bladed Boning Knife is ideal for bleeding, skinning and removing the head and legs, while the smaller Field Dressing Knife's blade shape helps prevent accidental puncturing of the gut, something that many less experienced stalkers struggle with.

The set is housed in a bespoke double leather pouch created by Anthony Ash Leather Creations and represents exactly the sort of practical, field-tested equipment I had been searching for.

HOW DO YOU THINK WE CAN ENCOURAGE MORE PEOPLE INTO RIFLE SHOOTING?

David and Leanne Freer have established the Newcomers Project, which is being supported by both the BDS and BASC. I believe initiatives like this are incredibly important because, unless you come from a stalking family or already have friends or relatives involved in the sport, getting started can be very difficult. I have high hopes for what this project can achieve.

Anything that encourages more young people to become involved in stalking and rifle shooting is a positive development. However, it is equally important that they

understand the responsibility that comes with using a firearm and shooting deer.

Most of the stalkers I know genuinely love deer, and my view has always been that if you do not appreciate and respect deer, then perhaps you should not be shooting them.

In fact, I think taking people out to observe deer often does more for our sport than simply encouraging them to pull the trigger.

I remember taking the Editor of *The Caterer* magazine out stalking to help promote my book, *Venison*. It was during the roebuck season and, after some searching, we spotted two bucks lying in a field. Following a lengthy belly crawl that left us both covered in mud, we managed to get within range.

She was looking through the binoculars while I watched them through my rifle scope. I asked if she could see them clearly.

"Yes," she replied.

I then explained that both animals were young six-point bucks with good height and width and that we would not be shooting either of them.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I want to leave them to mature and breed."

She admitted that she felt slightly disappointed, which led to a fascinating conversation about our ancient human instinct to hunt, harvest food and provide for our families.

By the end of the stalk, she completely got it. Looking back, I genuinely believe that experience did more to promote our sport than if I had simply shot a deer in front of her.

HOW DO YOU THINK WE CAN GET MORE OF THE PUBLIC EATING VENISON?

For me, it all comes down to education. The only way to encourage more people to eat venison is by educating them and dispelling the myths that game is strong-tasting and hard to prepare.

Game, and venison in particular, should not have a strong flavour and can be incredibly simple to cook. Whether it's sausages, burgers, mince or steaks, venison doesn't have to be complicated.

The challenge is helping the public understand that.

I work closely with Highland Game, and they have done an excellent job of introducing entry level venison products to the market through Aldi, which sells more venison than any other supermarket in the UK. Most importantly they are affordable, so people will take it home, cook it, enjoy it and as far as they're concerned, they like venison. It doesn't matter that it may have been mixed with 30 per cent pork, from that point on they are on our side.

Once consumers are comfortable with the flavour, we can begin introducing them to other cuts.

The challenge of making it more affordable to the public, is that the game dealer can't then pay the stalker more for the carcass. This is a major complaint I hear, but you can't have it both ways. A deer is not 90 per cent meat. In reality, only around 45 per cent is usable meat, with the remainder, skin, bone and other material that the game dealer must dispose of. There is also a misconception that game dealers make the largest margin, when in reality it is the supermarkets and restaurants.

In the case of restaurants, there are significant overheads to consider. As I often tell my students, every time a piece of meat is cut, the price increases because someone has to be paid to do it.

We are living at a time when consumers are increasingly interested in natural food, sustainability and provenance. In my view, there is nothing more natural or sustainable than venison. 

Far left: José is best known for his demonstrations at shows and Game Fairs. Below: Hunting in central Portugal





It is a truly wild, free-range resource that requires no feed, fertilisers or intensive farming systems.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING RIFLE SHOOTERS TODAY?

One of my biggest concerns is the current attitude towards deer management. While I totally understand the need to control deer numbers and manage them to avoid a negative impact on some environments, I can't accept the 'kill them at all costs' mentality that seems to be taking over the sport.

I think it is largely driven by a demonizing of deer in order to achieve other agendas. Either by the "we must plant more trees and deer eat trees, so deer are evil" brigade, or by individuals who see it as a way of making money. They then set up 'management' companies, hovering up massive acreages of land, promising landowners near annihilation of the deer and substantial grants as a result. In some cases, this creates an incentive to exaggerate deer populations in order to justify their actions.

I do not believe this is good for the future of the sport, for the deer themselves, or, in many cases, for the landowners.

Good management is, and always has been, about culling the right animals, from the right areas and in the right numbers. The aim should be to improve both the

overall health of the herd and the condition of the habitat. A "see it and shoot it" approach, where deer are treated as targets rather than the remarkable natural resource they are, is something that will never sit comfortably with me.

Another ethical challenge facing the sport is the growing trend for some game dealers to only accept deer that have been head-shot. This is contrary to all we were taught as responsible stalkers. Traditionally, head shots were regarded as being too risky, because of the greater likelihood of wounding. Ensuring a clean kill has always been the overriding goal of every stalker worth his salt. I don't see that this should change, just to get paid a few more pounds.

Lincolnshire Game, who I work closely with, do not pay a higher price per kilo for head-shot deer than they do for chest-shot deer. Their reasoning is straightforward: they do not want recreational stalkers, going out and taking shots that are unethical or beyond their capabilities.

I believe that is exactly the right approach. If we want deer stalking to be viewed as a responsible, ethical and sustainable activity, where the welfare of the deer comes first.

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

At the moment I am working on my third book in the series called *Fur*. Once again working alongside photographer, co-author and close friend Steve Lee. This latest instalment focuses on wild boar, rabbits and hares, while also incorporating new material on developments and new technology in deer stalking.

The existing books have sold as far afield as New Zealand. There's an American version and they have also been translated into French, with *Venison* soon to be translated into Spanish and Portuguese as well.

I also hope to begin taking hunting parties out to Vale Feitoso Estate, once a complete refit to one of the hotels is completed later this year.

Closer to home, my son has now started accompanying me on stalking trips and is developing a

genuine passion for the countryside. He has recently done really well in his GCSE results and in true family style his main course was venison, so, watch this space—there may well be another Souto preparing to continue the family tradition.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

I believe there is a strong case for all of our shooting organisations to work together for the common good. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that they should pool both their resources and funding when it comes to key issues such as promoting game and venison.

Social media now plays a huge role in shaping public opinion. Modern algorithms are designed to create highly personalised online environments. This in turn influences opinions and encourages people to engage with others who think similarly and spread those viewpoints.

For that reason, I believe our shooting organisations need to become far more social media savvy and deliver a clear, consistent and coordinated message. In the case of venison, that means promoting it as the fourth meat alongside beef, pork and lamb.

This provides a valuable opportunity to educate consumers about the sustainability of venison while also dispelling many of the myths that surround it.

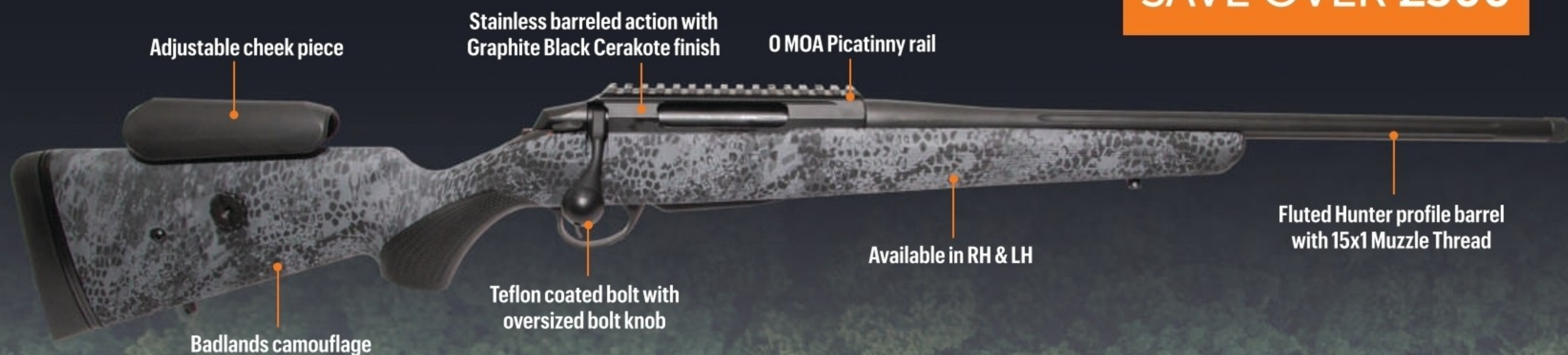
Thankfully, public attitudes are already beginning to change. Ten years ago, you would not have seen a picture of a cow displayed alongside a pack of beef. Today, not only do supermarkets feature images of the animal, they often highlight the farmer and tell the story behind the product as well.

Consumers are becoming increasingly interested in provenance, sustainability and how their food is produced. That presents a tremendous opportunity for the sport. ■



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HARVEST FESTIVAL

This annual cropping is about more than just farming says **Lance Barton**. For gamekeepers and fox controllers, it provides a valuable opportunity that, while often hard-earned, can bring greater rewards than any other period of the sporting year

As combines begin to roll across the countryside and fields transform from seas of standing crop into vast expanses of stubble, a significant shift occurs in the lives of both game birds and foxes. For gamekeepers, farmers and sporting estates, harvest marks one of the most important periods of the year for predator control.

It is a time when poults are settling into release pens, cover crops are beginning to establish, and young fox cubs are becoming increasingly independent. The combination of vulnerable game birds and inexperienced but hungry foxes

creates a perfect storm that can quickly undo months of hard work.

Effective fox control around harvest time is not simply about reducing numbers. It is about understanding changing fox behaviour and responding at the right time to protect game stocks while maintaining a balanced approach to wildlife management.

A LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMED

The arrival of the harvest dramatically alters the dynamics of the countryside. For much of spring and early summer, foxes benefit from standing crops that provide extensive cover. Fields of wheat, barley and oilseed rape

become ideal daytime resting sites, denning opportunities and concealed hunting grounds.

When the combine arrives, this cover disappears almost overnight.

Suddenly, foxes that have remained largely unseen throughout the summer become visible as they move across open stubbles and field margins. Traditional routes and resting areas are disrupted, forcing them to relocate and adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

For the gamekeeper and pest controller, this presents opportunities. Foxes that were previously difficult to spot can now be located at first and last light. Stubbles provide excellent visibility, making it much easier to

very short period. Beyond the immediate threat, repeated fox activity creates panic and stress within the pen, disrupting the settling process and leading to further losses.

As birds are allowed to venture beyond the pen boundaries, the risk increases. Young pheasants lack awareness of danger and can provide easy pickings for foxes and other predators, particularly during the first few weeks after release.

This is why most game managers regard this period as one of the most critical stages of the entire season. A fox that discovers a reliable food source now is unlikely to abandon it voluntarily.

THE FIRST NIGHTS ARE CRITICAL

Anyone who has reared and released pheasant poults will know that the first few nights are among the most demanding of the entire season. While a release pen is designed to provide protection and security long enough for birds to acclimatise to their new surroundings, it also acts as a powerful draw for foxes.

The arrival of hundreds, if not thousands, of poults creates an enormous concentration of scent that drifts across the surrounding

countryside. For foxes, it is the human equivalent of a brightly lit fast-food restaurant opening in the middle of their territory. Even areas that have seen little fox activity throughout the summer can suddenly become a hive of activity once birds arrive in the pens.

For this reason, it is not uncommon at this time of year to find a keeper camped out on a ride overlooking a release pen, spending long nights watching over newly stocked sites.

The challenge is often greatest during the first few nights after release. Birds are in unfamiliar surroundings and are easily spooked. The resulting panic can lead to casualties as they fly into the wire, injuring themselves in the process.

If a pen is poorly positioned, inadequately covered, or the netting does not fit correctly, poults may find themselves stranded outside. Once beyond the protection of the pen, they are exceptionally vulnerable, particularly during the hours of darkness when fox activity is at its highest and conditions are in the predator's favour.

That said, all fox controllers will recognise the frustration of sitting out until midnight, satisfied that all appears well, only to return in



identify regular travel routes and hunting areas. Harvest effectively exposes the fox population at a time when control measures are most needed and can be particularly productive.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELEASED BIRDS

At the same time, many shoots are welcoming their first poults into release pens.

These birds are entering a completely new and unfamiliar environment. Although they are gradually acclimatised to life outside the rearing field, they remain vulnerable to predation during the early stages of release.

Even a single fox gaining access to a release pen can cause significant losses in a



However much protection your release pen has, there is no substitute for being present



PICTURE GETTY IMAGES BREZINA

Baiting and calling can be particularly effective when hungry foxes are on the move

the morning and discover that a fox has visited in the early hours. The evidence is often all too clear: feathers scattered across the ground and multiple birds lost.

Consequently, the first week after release demands extra vigilance. For the professional keeper, long hours are simply part of the job. While good pen design, additional protective measures and early-season predator control all play their part, there is no substitute for being present.

It is a demanding routine, even more so for part-time keepers and fox controllers who must balance it with work and family commitments. Whether helping a gamekeeper or controlling foxes on your own shoot, this is a time of year when careful planning and good communication are essential.

No one person can be there all the time, so drafting in reliable help and establishing some form of rota is often the best way of ensuring birds are protected during their most vulnerable period. One person might cover the period from dusk until midnight before heading home for a few hours' sleep, while another takes over through the early hours. By the time the rest of the world wakes up, the threat has reduced considerably, with most

adult foxes returning to cover and keeping a low profile until things quieten down again.

Foxes quickly learn where opportunities exist and, once they discover an easy meal, they will return repeatedly. Preventing that first visit — and, ideally, removing the culprit early — is far easier than trying to stop a fox that has already developed a habit of targeting local release pens.

THE EMERGENCE OF CUBS

The harvest also coincides with a significant change within the fox family group.

Earlier in the year, cubs remained largely dependent on the vixen and dog fox for food. By late summer, however, many are beginning to explore beyond their natal territory. Some remain close to their birthplace, while others begin the process of dispersal that may eventually take them many miles from home.

These young foxes are often responsible for the increase in sightings around harvest time. Unlike mature adults, cubs can be highly unpredictable, frequently appearing during daylight hours and showing less caution when investigating potential food sources such as release pens, feed rides and farmyards. Their lack of experience may make them easier to spot,

but it also means they are constantly searching for feeding opportunities.

For fox controllers, this creates both challenges and opportunities.

While wandering cubs can quickly discover vulnerable game birds, they are generally more susceptible to control measures than older, wiser foxes. Baiting and calling can be particularly effective when young foxes are on the move. Removing these individuals before they establish territories can significantly reduce future predation pressure.

WHY HARVEST OFFERS CONTROL OPPORTUNITIES

The reasons why harvest can be one of the most productive periods of the year for fox control are straightforward.

Visibility improves dramatically. Large areas of standing crop are replaced by open stubbles, allowing shots to be taken over much greater distances.

Food sources become exposed. As fields are harvested, rodents, insects and other prey species are disturbed or killed. Foxes frequently patrol freshly cut fields in search of easy meals, creating predictable patterns of movement.

Young foxes become increasingly active. Dispersing cubs often expose themselves through inexperience, particularly during daylight hours, and are far more susceptible to calling.

The result is a period when foxes are often easier to locate and control than at any other time since early spring.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TIME

Consistent success during harvest often comes down to timing.

Early morning and late evening remain the most productive periods. Foxes frequently emerge onto stubbles shortly after sunset, taking advantage of disturbed prey and reduced human activity.

Similarly, the first hour after dawn can reveal foxes crossing open ground as they return from overnight feeding excursions.

Freshly harvested fields deserve

particular attention. Foxes can appear within hours of the combine leaving a field, attracted by newly exposed food sources. It is also worth monitoring areas close to release pens, including game crops, spinneys and cover strips. These locations often act as staging points or travel corridors linking feeding and resting areas.

The key is consistency. Regular observation allows you to identify patterns and focus your efforts where fox activity is greatest.

READING THE SIGNS

While direct sightings are valuable, successful fox control often relies on recognising the signs of activity.

Well-trodden routes along field margins, through gateways and along farm tracks can reveal regular movement. Fresh droppings deposited in prominent positions, together with the distinctive scent left by a fox, can indicate territorial activity.

Feathers around game covers

or release areas may signal predation, although care should be taken to confirm that a fox is responsible. Likewise, flattened vegetation can reveal regular resting locations.

Modern technology has become increasingly useful in confirming fox presence. Trail cameras positioned around release pens, feeders, feed rides and known crossing points can provide invaluable information on the timing and frequency of visits, while also capturing fascinating footage of other wildlife.

This intelligence allows control efforts to be targeted far more effectively than relying on chance encounters alone.

A BALANCED APPROACH

The fox remains one of our most adaptable and successful predators. It is an established part of the British countryside and performs an important ecological role.

However, on farms and estates

where significant resources are invested in livestock, poultry or game bird management—whether birds are released or wild—predator control remains a necessary aspect of responsible stewardship.

The objective is not eradication. Such an aim would be both unrealistic and undesirable. Instead, the goal is to reduce predation pressure to an acceptable level during vulnerable periods of the year. The same principle applies to the protection of ground-nesting birds and other breeding wildlife during the spring.

Harvest represents one of those key periods.

By focusing efforts around hotspots such as release pens, game crops and known travel routes, meaningful reductions in losses can be achieved while maintaining a sustainable and proportionate approach to fox management.

LOOKING AHEAD

As summer gives way to autumn, the opportunities presented by the harvest gradually diminish. Cover crops mature, fields are replanted, and both the fox and the fox controller must once again adapt to the changing landscape.

The work carried out during harvest, however, can deliver lasting benefits throughout the remainder of the year. Removing problem foxes before they become focused on release areas helps safeguard valuable game stocks, while controlling dispersing cubs reduces future pressure on both sporting and farming interests. Most importantly, it protects the considerable investment of time, effort and resources that underpins the rural economy.

For those involved, harvest is far more than just a farming milestone; it is a crucial window in the fox control calendar. With careful observation, sensible planning and consistent effort, the results can help lay the foundations for a successful season ahead. ■

“As fields are harvested, rodents, insects and other prey species are disturbed or killed”



Working through the night - trail cameras can provide vital information

LIGHTER, SLEEKER, BETTER?



Ed Jackson examines the brand-new Alpex Pro to see if its technological leaps can unseat the legendary Alpex 4K

The original HikMicro Alpex 4K has been a fixture on my rifles for a few years now, proving invaluable for deer stalking. This is not just the case for me, as this model has taken the UK market by storm, starting a digital revolution where more and more hunters are ditching their traditional day optics for digital/thermal gear. However, technology never stands still, and the arrival of the Alpex Pro signals a fascinating shift in HikMicro's strategy to improve upon an industry-leading optic. While I've always been a believer that 'heavy is reliable', the promise of a more balanced, lighter unit that supposedly defeats the laws of physics with a new 12MP detector and intelligent algorithms is a bold claim. This review isn't just a comparison of data sheets; it's a deep dive from a long-term user

to see if this new challenger can beat the compromise that's often made between daylight and night-time performance.

FORM FACTOR

Handling the Alpex Pro, the evolution from the 4K is immediately apparent. While the original 4K was what can only be described as a 'substantial' piece of engineering, weighing in at 1,176g before you even factor in the swappable battery, the Pro model tips the scales at a much more manageable 889g with the additional battery already included. This is not merely a numerical victory, as the reduction in bulk and the significantly smaller, sleeker objective bell massively improve balance. It makes the rifle less front-heavy and less top-heavy, bringing the Pro more in line with a traditional hunting optic.

HikMicro's next move has been to respond to the demands of hunters across the world by mirroring

the ergonomics of a traditional scope. They've introduced a rear magnification collar with a tall, removable throw lever that operates very smoothly. Perhaps more significantly, there's now a side focus dial that replaces the chunky collar found around the 4K's objective bell, which I have always found slow and clumsy to use. This is because you can only access it from one side, depending on which side your illuminator is fitted to. Furthermore, you stand no chance if shooting or observing freehand, whereas now you can at least reach over with your firing hand to adjust a side focus dial if needed.

The three rubberised control buttons, which manage everything from image recording and PiP to the laser rangefinder and power, have also been updated. Even the front lens cap has been swapped for a rotatable, magnetic version.

THE TECH

Getting down to the nitty-gritty, the Alpex Pro represents a bold attempt to defy optical physics with its massive 12MP



Top left: The new magnetic lens cover and the much smaller objective bell compared with its predecessor.

Top: The Pro features an updated, tethered battery cover and takes a 18650 rechargeable battery. Above: Better control with an improved zoom collar, throw lever and three rubberised control buttons. Top turret still acts as your menu button, the left now functions as the focus dial.

(4,512×2,512) CMOS detector, which represents a significant leap from the 3,840×2,160 sensor in the original 4K. Crucially, this increase in resolution aims to tackle a recognised weakness of the Alpex 4K: daytime performance, with the Pro showing a lossless image all the way up to 9x, tapering thereafter, which is a huge step up.

To achieve that sleeker, more balanced objective bell, the Pro swaps the 4K's adjustable f/1.2 to f/2.5 aperture, designed to Hoover up light, for a fixed f/1.8. To attempt to bridge this gap, HikMicro has developed the "Light Pro" algorithm, which is designed to constantly monitor the ambient light levels and adjust the processing of the image to boost performance in the dark. This shift in optical design also brings a welcome improvement to the minimum focus distance, which has dropped from 10m on the original down to a mere 3m on the Pro, bringing extra versatility for close-range work.

The viewing experience is further enhanced by a larger 0.6-inch AMOLED display with an 8mm exit

pupil, providing a more relaxed eye-box than the 0.49-inch OLED and 6mm exit pupil found on the older model. This helps reduce fatigue over long shooting sessions. While both currently operate at 50Hz, the Pro is slated for a future-proof 120Hz update at some point, further boosting performance. The laser rangefinder has also seen a range extension out to 1,200m, although the best reading I got off a hill, rather than a reflective surface, was just under 900m, which I think we can all agree is plenty. This, of course, is fully linked to the onboard ballistic calculator.

Finally, hunters should note that while the field of view is slightly tighter, moving from the original's 15.3m@100m down to 12.6m, the magnification control has been given a serious upgrade. The Alpex Pro covers a range from 4.0x up to 24.0x, whereas the original ran from 3.5x to 28.0x. Perhaps more importantly, the Pro offers incredibly precise 0.1x steps for its continuous zooming, allowing you to dial in the exact sight picture you need. All these advancements do

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

MODEL: HikMicro Alpex Pro A50PL

THERMAL SENSOR: 12MP (4,512×2,512) CMOS

OBJECTIVE LENS: 50mm, f/1.8

FIELD OF VIEW: 12.6m@100m

MAGNIFICATION: 4x - 24x

DISPLAY SIZE/TYPE: 0.6-inch AMOLED

DISPLAY RESOLUTION: 1920×1080 pixels

BATTERY: 18650 rechargeable

MAX. OPERATION TIME: 7hrs

LRF RANGING DISTANCE: 1,200m

WEIGHT (WITH BATTERY): 889g

DIMENSIONS: 442.8×83.5×90.5mm

PRICE: £849.99

CONTACT: hikmicrotech.com/en/

“My plan was to push the unit from broad daylight right through the transition of sunset and into the pitch-black”



require a trade-off in efficiency, as the continuous battery runtime has decreased from 11 hours on the original unit down to 7 hours, but seeing as you can slot a new battery in at any time, I don't see this as an issue.

Above: A USB-C port is used for charging and data transfer

TESTING, TESTING

With the tech details out of the way, it was time to get the Alpex Pro into the field. My plan was to push the unit from broad daylight right through the transition of sunset and into the pitch-black, all while



pursuing a decent selection of quarry. Ultimately, I wanted to try and provide the definitive answers to the key questions I've set out to investigate.

HAS DAYTIME PERFORMANCE BEEN IMPROVED?

Yes, although it requires some finessing. Initially, the Pro seemed comparable to the Alpex 4K, but 'tuning' the settings to the specific shooting environment is vital to unlocking the 12MP sensor's true potential. Different landscapes can challenge or complement the sensor in different ways, with woodland, hedges, grass, and trees, for example, really showing off the magnificently detailed image the Pro offers. On the other hand a monotone, featureless field clearly gives the sensor less to work with, leading to a much lower definition image.

Importantly, zeroing is also significantly more refined. I achieved a far more clinical, precise 100m zero on my .223 than the Alpex 4K typically allows, which will no doubt give those of us who shoot at greater distances more confidence. Things got even better once I put the Pro on a Daystate Delta Wolf, as I quickly realised that I had created one of the most capable and satisfying scope/rifle combos I have ever used. Together, they were absolutely incredible. At airgun ranges, the Hik's image quality is pin-sharp and allowed me to extract 100% of the Delta Wolf's performance, just like a traditional day scope but with the addition of a ballistic calculator.

DOES THE F/1.8 APERTURE AND "LIGHT PRO" ALGORITHM GET THE JOB DONE?

One hundred percent. I sat in a woodland high seat while waiting for a fox and was able to monitor the scope's performance from daylight, through dusk and into complete darkness. At no point did I miss my Alpex 4K. Admittedly, the maximum distance was 90m, but the fact it was woodland made for a challenging optical test. One thing I did learn is: do not bother with the auto-brightness setting, as it does not help you get the maximum out of the scope. It's best to set it yourself and adjust as you go.

Understanding that other shooters may want to extend the distances, I took the setup to the open fields and observed rabbits, hares, and foxes. The night-time performance is definitely there and, of course, heavily influenced by the illuminator that you use. Borrowing a more powerful unit, I was able to observe and identify a rabbit at 300m, meaning the scope should meet the requirements of most fox shooters.

DOES THE NARROWER FIELD OF VIEW AND 4X BASE MAG MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE?

Yes, it does, as 4x base magnification is quite high, especially in woodland. I bemoan the 3.5x on my Alpex 4K, so 4x mag was always going to be an issue for me. I find myself regularly taking muntjac at less than 15m, and while sitting in a high seat testing the Pro, I was faced with a fox at just



Above: Lossless magnification right up to 9x

8m, a distance familiar to any rat shooter, and it proved impossible to find the target quickly at 4x magnification. Even when the fox returned at 45m, in the pitch-black, it was still tricky to acquire. You will just have to judge for yourself if this base mag will be an issue, though acquisition does improve with practice and, evidently, I need more.

FORGIVEABLE QUIRKS

When obvious issues become hard to find, I start 'nit-picking'. For example, the throw lever on the magnification collar is quite tall and thin, which does increase the risk of it snagging or causing issues in a crowded gun cabinet. I also noticed a slight lag between moving the zoom lever and the image responding, which might grate with some users.

While the magnetic lens cap is a nice touch, I found the magnets a little weak, meaning it still managed to pop open inside my gun bag. Finally, despite being a generous size, the rubberised buttons require a precise press directly on the symbol to register reliably, though this soon becomes second nature.

VERDICT

The Alpex Pro is a sophisticated refinement of the 4K, trading raw bulk for superior balance and a higher-resolution sensor. By mimicking the ergonomics of a traditional day optic, HikMicro has addressed the physical clumsiness of the previous generation. While the higher base magnification requires consideration for close-range work, the gains in image detail and handling make this a compelling step forward. It isn't a reinvention of the digital scope, but a very polished evolution of an industry leader, crucially at the same price point, which is amazing. It gets a thumbs up from me. ■

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





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A SCOPE NOT HOLDING ZERO

Q The scope on my .22 Sako has started to lose zero when I go rabbiting. It is spot on one day, but the next it is off again. What is the problem?

A Bruce Potts replies: You do not state what scope you are using, but this can be a common problem in cheaper scopes, especially if they are getting a bit long in the tooth. First, check the mounts for tightness.

It sounds like the internals of the scope may have become worn and can no longer hold zero. This can occur sporadically or, as in your case, on a daily basis. If you are zeroing the rifle and the next day the zero has changed, it is possible that the erector tube inside the main body tube is not securely held. This

can be due to the retaining springs or bushes being worn, which is especially true in a zoom-power scope. It may stay zeroed at first but over a period of time the erector tube slips. This can also happen if you store the rifle upright and then hold it to your shoulder; the change in angle causes the scope to "settle" in a different place.

It might also be due to the change in temperature when going from a warm house to a cold environment, as different parts of the scope, made out of different materials — metal, plastic and so on — will heat up at a different rate. It is worth checking the zero before and after it has "warmed up" to see if this might be the cause.

If none of the above is the cause, the only real answer is to contact the manufacturer or replace it.

IS A FOLDING KNIFE ILLEGAL?

Q I have heard that it is against the law to have an automatic knife because it's now classed as a flick-knife. Does this mean that I will have to get rid of my Buck Sprint folding knife?

A Bill Harriman replies: The Buck Sprint is a very good folding knife that is as quick and easy to open with one hand as any self-opening knife.

It is not caught by the latest

definition of a flick-knife in Section 43 of the Offensive Weapons Act 2019. Its blade is opened by constant finger pressure on a small spur on the back of the blade, sometimes called a flipper.

A knife like this can be opened one-handed, but it relies on constant finger pressure on the spur to deploy the blade fully. Once pressure stops, the blade stops moving, unlike an automatic knife in which a spring propels it to the open position.

DRAWN TO THE FOOD

Q I am seeing quite large groups of roe out in open fields on my stalking ground and have been for the past few weeks. This seems rather strange to me. Could I have underestimated the numbers on the ground? The fields here are bounded by a large broad leaf woodland, which is quite dense and tricky to stalk through.

A **Chris Dalton replies:** It is always possible that you have underestimated the local population and we can all occasionally find ourselves in this situation. However, you do not say if this is new ground or if it's a block you have managed for quite some time. If it's the latter, I would imagine you have

a clear idea of the required cull and broadly speaking your deer numbers and distribution.

However, before rushing in, be aware that it is perfectly normal for roe at this time of year to be drawn from the woodland out to the fields to browse, attracted to the nutrient-rich feeding available. They do so in large numbers, often travelling a fair distance. This can lead to the assumption, as they are very visible at dawn and dusk, that the population has exploded.

Before long, however, as the nutrient-rich shoots and buds begin to emerge in the woodland, the roe will revert back to the cover of their preferred forests and hedgerows and, while you will still see deer on the grass at the key times, they will likely not be there in anywhere near the same numbers that you are seeing at the current time.



AIR RIFLE VS RIMFIRE

Q I am thinking of buying an FAC-rated air rifle for pest control. Would this be better than a .22 rimfire?

A **Bruce Potts replies:** I like FAC-rated air rifles for certain pest control duties. They offer a significantly higher energy rating over the legal standard 12ft/lb energy.

While this does not increase the range potential, the higher velocity will flatten the trajectory so that a hit is more certain.

It also means that if you are shooting an airgun pellet at half the weight of a typical .22 rimfire, then overkill — by which I mean expansion on impact — is less. This also means it's a bit safer to shoot around barns, equipment and so on, whereas a .22 rimfire would be prohibitive. But safety is still vital and correct backdrops mandatory.

Most pre-charge air rifles of 30ft/lb are about right, because at this rating the heavier airgun pellets are still accurate. Lighter ones tend to deform.

You can achieve much higher energy figures but this means fewer shots per charge.

I have used the Daystate .30 at 100ft/lb, which is an effective pest control tool. ■



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Knives like the Buck Sprint are not defined as flick-knives

BETWEEN SEASONS

Martin Guy fills the long wait between CWD seasons by making the most of every opportunity to top up the venison in his freezer

At this time of year, the dedicated roe stalker will be busy looking for bucks. Those with access to muntjac have their heads on a swivel all year round, while the red, sika or fallow aficionado waits patiently for August.

For stalkers like me, who are primarily focused on CWD, you fill the long 'dry' season with anything you can get. I'm fortunate enough to still have access to pockets of both roe and muntjac, and I also do an annual 'crop swap' with a shooting buddy who likes to come and take a CWD on my patch, reciprocating by inviting me to take a fallow on his.

There is always the risk, of course, that you sit patiently in a high seat waiting for a fallow when a muntjac or fox appears, leaving you with the dilemma of whether to take the opportunity or show restraint. We all recognise, too, the distinct possibility





that nothing will show up at all—we've all experienced that. They're simply part of the sport and what keeps it interesting.

My last crop swap was certainly that, and rather more varied and memorable than usual.

I had been placed in a high seat that had recently been relocated after a gale felled the tree supporting its original position. It was in a wood I knew well from previous visits, and I settled back with an excellent view down a long, well-mown ride. It was a warm August afternoon, mercifully free from biting insects, and my only company was the gentle hum of nearby honey bees. Resting on the shooting rail was my 6.5x55 Browning X-Bolt, loaded with the very capable 140-grain Hornady SST Superformance.

I had been in position for an hour, with the only moment of excitement coming when a cacophony from a pair of woodpeckers had me expecting something to appear. Alas, nothing did.

My host, Gavin, called to ask whether I'd seen anything. I replied that I was comfortable, but still alone. He reported that a muntjac had passed him, and I told him I'd heard one barking in the distance.

“One was a magnificent buck with ivory to match—undoubtedly a Gold Medal specimen”

Minutes later, I almost jumped out of my seat when a very vocal and agitated muntjac barked right behind me. Turning slowly to face it, I initially saw nothing.

Growing ever more agitated, it barked again, accompanied by some angry stomping. I now knew exactly where the belligerent little fellow was, although he was still hidden by the low cover. He was only 30 yards away and, judging by the direction he was travelling, would emerge into the open in just a few more steps.

With the scope's magnification turned down and the rifle at the ready, he stepped out and stopped to protest once more. Mid-stomp, the SST arrived and the verbal

exchange was swiftly brought to an end.

Gavin joined me just as I was placing the little muntjac into my roe sack. We compared notes before heading out of the wood, not overburdened but perfectly content with my morning's work.

As we reached the woodland edge, I caught a glimpse of a large fallow buck moving across the opposite side of the field. Gavin wasted no time in gesturing that he was mine, so I dropped the roe sack and set off in a low crouch.

Dropping to all fours down a tramline in the crop, I could see he was making steady progress and worried he might soon disappear from view or even cross out of bounds. With the buck momentarily stationary and now within range, I set up my sticks and wasted no time in sending another SST just behind his shoulder. He covered only a few yards before collapsing, and by the time I reached him he was stone dead.

We had already seen that he was a heavy-bodied buck with very little headgear, but close up he was an absolute giant. A hummel, I believe, with almost no antler growth at all. Having never expended the energy required to grow antlers,





Above: Martin's trusty Bergara BA13 in .308



Left: From roebuck stalk to muntjac double. Between seasons outings can turn-up a variety of opportunities

he had put every ounce into body weight. By the time Gavin arrived, I had removed the head, feet and gralloch, yet he was still as much as the two of us could manage to lift into the pick-up. Transferring him into my own car proved equally interesting, and I had to wait until my son got home before I could unload him and hang him for skinning.

This was one crop swap that went from a single, blank-saving muntjac to an absolute freezer full of venison and the largest deer I have ever shot.

MORE BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

Another between-the-seasons outing that didn't exactly go to plan was a solo stalk for a summer roebuck. It began with a gentle walk to a distant high seat. With the CWD season well and truly over, the first three deer I saw were, of course, CWD. One was a magnificent buck with ivory to match—undoubtedly a Gold Medal specimen, and one I hoped would still be around when the season reopened.

As I neared the wood where the seat was situated, I could hear half a dozen muntjac barking, as is often the case there. Halfway in, two roe

does bounded onto the ride ahead of me, gave me a dismissive look, and disappeared just as quickly.

I continued on my route and was only a few hundred yards from my destination when I detected a heat source through the thermal—or was it two? They were moving from right to left through broken cover and heading straight towards my high seat.

My companion for the day was my Bergara BA13, loaded with the excellent 123-grain Sako Gamehead—in my opinion the finest all-round .308 bullet for UK deer. I'll certainly miss it when we're forced to abandon lead.

The rifle was quickly settled onto the sticks and silently cocked, ready for the as-yet unidentified deer that was about to enter stage right.

It wasn't long before I saw the first animal: a heavily pregnant muntjac doe, which I naturally allowed to pass. The buck following a few seconds later was another matter. I gave him a hearty "Good morning" to stop him, and a second later the Sako arrived, dropping him on the spot.

Only then did I realise my good fortune. There hadn't been two heat sources after all, but three. My instinctive reload allowed me to repeat the process, and seconds later my outing for a roebuck had unexpectedly turned into a muntjac double.

I eagerly await my next crop swap later this year because, with a little luck on your side, the time between seasons can still provide a rich and varied harvest. ■



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

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BUILT FROM PASSION, ENGINEERED FROM PROBLEMS

How one man's desire for a personal rifle range grew into one of the UK's most ambitious shooting facilities

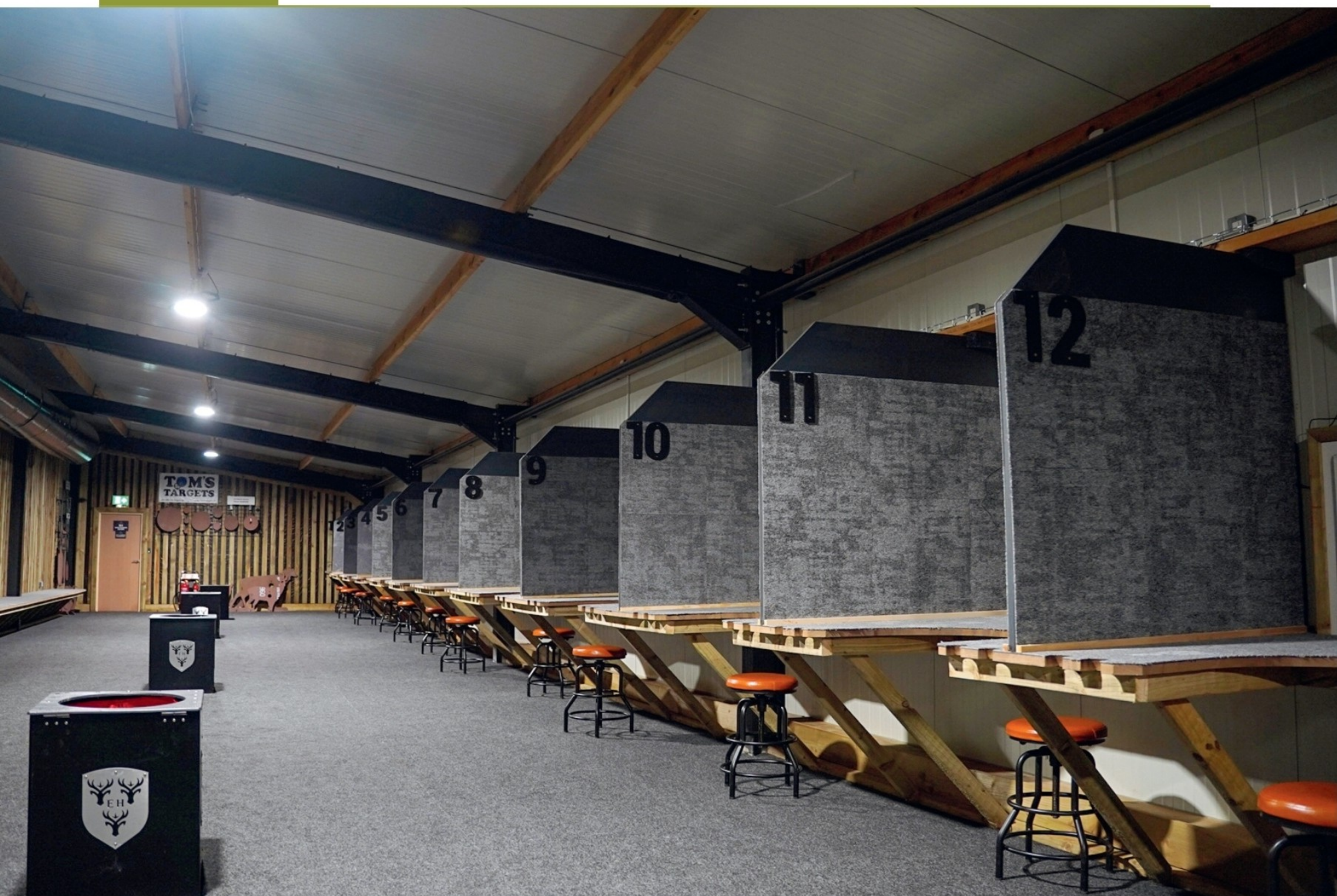


Shooting down one of Eaton Hall's underground tunnels

There is a particular breed of person who, when faced with a problem, simply gets on and solves it. Syd Phillimore, owner of Eaton Hall Shooting Ground — which recently claimed the title of Best Shooting Ground at the Great British Shooting Awards — is very much that person. The story of his new rifle range is not one of meticulous pre-planning or borrowed blueprints. It is, instead, a masterclass in adaptive thinking, civil engineering nous, and a quiet refusal to accept that something cannot be done.

It began, as so many great things do, with a personal want. "I wanted a rifle range for myself," Syd says, without a trace of self-consciousness. "That was the driving motivation." When the groundwork for Eaton Hall's clay shooting facility was completed, a pocket of redundant land emerged behind the new bund — a strip rendered unusable by falling shot from the skeet ranges. Syd looked at it and saw potential.

What followed was a process of escalating ambition. An initial plan for firing positions at 100, 200 and 300-metres expanded considerably. "We ended up with 10 positions at 100-metres, 10 at 200, and one dedicated 300-metre tunnel. Conversations with people in the trade further shaped the vision. The idea of a classroom emerged. Then a reloading room. Then an armoury. "I always said we're not going to keep guns on the range," Syd laughs. "We've now



Eaton Hall has ranges covering from 100-300-metres

built an armoury and there's guns on the range."

The facility as it now stands is a remarkable thing: a fully heated, pressurised indoor range with a proprietary camera-based target system, a dedicated reloading classroom, an on-site armoury, and a shop stocked with demo rifles and optics available to try before purchase. It operates Wednesday through Sunday, and membership — currently the only route to access — costs £250 per year with a minimum of six visits, each charged at £20. The 300-metre tunnel is available at £20 per hour for members.

THE APPROVAL QUESTION

One of the first hurdles for any private rifle range is Home Office approval, and it is a step that puts many would-be operators off entirely. Once approval came through, it acted as a catalyst. "It sort of said, right, we've got that — let's do it."

Crucially, Home Office approval is not a rubber-stamped inspection process. There is no independent body that arrives to verify safety standards. "You are marking your own homework," Syd explains. That responsibility is one he has taken seriously. Carl Cox, a former Army instructor and qualified range officer, acts as Eaton Hall's health and safety consultant, visiting twice a month to walk the ground and highlight any areas for improvement. "We've built the rifle range over and above his standard," Syd says simply.

Standard guidance suggests that a backstop bund for a rifle range should be some 12-metres high — approximately 40 feet — a requirement that would demand tens of thousands of tonnes of earth and an enormous logistical undertaking. Syd concluded early on that conventional wisdom was simply not achievable. Small six metre tunnels from each firing position on the 100 & 200-metre ranges was his solution

to eradicate any opportunity of shooters landing shot outside of the range.

THE TUNNEL: A PROBLEM IN ENGINEERING

The centre piece of the facility and the element that required the most creative engineering was the 300-metre tunnel. The structure uses steel containers set into the ground, topped with a concrete roof, with one-tonne sandbags stacked along both sides and subsequently buried — making the walls, as Syd puts it, "bulletproof, literally." The internal dimensions are eight feet by eight feet, accommodating the ballistic arc of most common calibres, provided shooters begin zeroing at 100-metres and work progressively to 200 and then 300.

One of the specific challenges of the tunnel's length was the ballistic arc itself. At 300-metres, some calibres require the shooter to aim as much as three metres above the point of impact. Getting that arc to

fit within a concrete tube of fixed height was an engineering puzzle that, Syd says, had not previously been solved at this distance. The solution was the progressive system: shooters do not zero at 300-metres from a cold start, but work through the distances, adjusting as they go.

Targeting at distance presented another problem entirely. Electronic target systems were explored and quickly dismissed on cost grounds. Instead, Eaton Hall developed its own HD camera-based system — in essence a sophisticated CCTV setup that allows shooters to assess impacts at each firing position via screens mounted above the bench. Electric gate motors, controlled at the firing point, open and close target frames at 100, 200 and 300-metres in sequence, preventing bullets travelling through multiple targets simultaneously. “Imagine if you had to go and change the targets every two minutes,” Syd says, “walking 600-metres there and back.”

EVERY PROBLEM, A SOLUTION

What is striking about the development of this range is that Syd had no precedent to work from. He had not built a rifle range before. He did not visit existing facilities for reference. He looked on the internet, found the standard guidance terrifying, and largely set it aside. “Every problem we came up against, we sort of found a solution to make it work in that area,” he says.

The ventilation is a case in point. Early live testing revealed that the range, configured as it was, functioned like a wind tunnel — drawing gun smoke back into the firing positions rather than clearing it. The solution was a pressurised system, designed with Eaton Hall’s own air conditioning and ventilation team, that maintains a greater internal air pressure than external. When the shooting windows are opened, air pushes outward rather than pulling smoke inward. A heat exchange element was added to the system as an afterthought, meaning the incoming air is warmed before it enters the range. The result is a facility that sits at a comfortable 20°C throughout.

Standing water, mould, and the associated risks of Legionnaire’s



disease also required attention — as did the practicalities of target management across a 300-metre structure. Each challenge was addressed in turn. “One problem creates another problem,” Syd reflects. “You come up with a solution and then you’ve got to deal with what that brings.”

A RETAIL REVOLUTION

Eaton Hall’s range is not simply a place to shoot. It is, deliberately, an extension of its retail and trade operation — and here Syd’s thinking is particularly sharp. The majority of rifles that the shop sells exist in demo form on the range. Every major scope brand they stock is available to mount and try. Sound moderators, thermal and night vision equipment can all be tested at appropriate

distances before any purchasing decision is made.

The 300-metre tunnel has a specific purpose in this context: it allows thermal and night vision equipment to be tested at the distances at which it will actually be used. For a gamekeeper claiming to shoot foxes at 300-metres at night, Syd’s question is simple: “Do you actually know how far 300-metres is at night?” The range lets the customer find out — and make their own informed decision about which equipment suits their situation.

BRINGING NEW SHOOTERS IN

Perhaps most encouragingly, the range has become a genuine gateway for new participants in the sport. Eaton Hall runs weekly probation courses for those without

There’s more to Eaton Hall than shooting ranges. It also offers classrooms, reloading facilities and a retail shop



A sophisticated CCTV setup allows shooters to assess impacts via screens mounted above the bench

existing firearms certificates, guiding new shooters through the full 12-week process. Since opening, the facility has brought approximately 200 new shooters to rifle shooting.

THE BLOODLINE

There is, it turns out, a reason this particular project meant so much to Syd personally. His grandfather was rifle captain of Great Britain. His uncle shot for Great Britain. He grew up at Bisley, marking targets as a boy. Rifle shooting is not a late-life hobby — it is a thread

running through his family's history. "It's just grown," he says of his own passion. "And then I've been fortunate enough to go all around the world — shotgun and rifle, but predominantly more rifle shooting. It's my thing. I love rifle shooting.

What began as a man wanting somewhere to practise his favourite sport has become, through sheer application and lateral thinking, one of the most complete rifle shooting facilities in private hands in the UK. Eaton Hall's rifle range is the product of no manual, no template and no outside consultant telling Syd how it

should be done. It is the product of someone who looked at a strip of no-man's land behind a clay bund, and simply decided to find out what was possible. ■

More information: eaton-hall.com

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325	384x288	≤18mk	2.8-22x	1300m.....£859
619	640x512	≤18mk	1.5-12x	1000m.....£999
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Sensor	NETD	Mag.	Detection	
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225	256x192	≤20mk	3.5-28x	1500m.....£799
325	384x288	≤18mk	2.5-20x	2300m.....£1199
335	384x288	≤18mk	3.5-28x	2710m.....£1399
635	640x512	≤18mk	2-16x	3000m.....£1799
650	640x512	≤18mk	3-24x	3500m.....£2499

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- Rechargeable battery

ATN THOR 6 ELITE THERMAL RIFLESOPES

A next-generation thermal optic designed for hunters, pest controllers, tactical professionals, and security operators who require dependable thermal performance in demanding environments. Built around ATN's advanced 6th Generation thermal engine, this thermal rifle scope combines ultra-sensitive thermal detection with intelligent imaging technologies to deliver sharp target identification in darkness, fog, dense cover, and low-contrast conditions.

Sensor	NETD	Mag.	Detection	
325	384x288	≤15mk	2.5-20x	2300m.....£1399
335	384x288	≤15mk	3.5-28x	2750m.....£1799
335 LRF	384x288	≤15mk	3.5-28x	2750m.....£2099
635	640x512	≤15mk	2-16x	3100m.....£2349
635 LRF	640x512	≤15mk	3-24x	3100m.....£2849
650	640x512	≤15mk	3-24x	3650m.....£2699
650 LRF	640x512	≤15mk	3-24x	3650m.....£2999

- Built in LRF (optional)
- Ballistic calculator
- Picture in picture
- Retical transparency mode
- Zeroing freeze
- Hot point tracking
- Multiple colour modes
- 9+ hours battery life
- IP67
- Lightweight
- 0.49" OLED 1920x1080 resolution
- Video & audio recording

HIKMICRO LYNX 3.0 Thermal Monocular

Industry-Leading Image Quality for Sharper, Smarter observation. Ultimate value for money entry thermal monocular receives some serious upgrades with higher sensitivity sensors, better displays, HSIS Shutterless technology, Zoom Pro & Image Pro 3.0 along with a completely redesigned, significantly more compact, pocket-ready chassis. • F1.0 Thermal Lens System • 5.5-4.5h practical battery life • High-resolution AMOLED display

Lens	Thermal Detector	Mag. (8x)	F.O.V.	Min. Max.	LRF	
LE10	9.7mm	256x192 NETD <20mk	1.4-11.2x	31.7m	3.4m	500m - £399
LE15	15mm	256x192 NETD <20mk	2.2x - 17.6x	20.5m	7m	750m - £549
LH15	15mm	320x240 NETD <18mk	2.2x - 17.6x	20.5m	7m	750m - £799
LH19	19mm	384x288 NETD <15mk	1.9x - 15.2x	24.2m	3m	900m - £899
LH25	25mm	384x288 NETD <15mk	2.5x - 20x	18.4m	3m	1200m - £1049
LH35	35mm	384x288 NETD <15mk	3.4x - 27.2x	13.1m	3.5m	1800m - £1149
LQ35	35mm	640x512 NETD <15mk	1.9x - 15.2x	13.1m	3.5m	1800m - £1459
LQ35L	35mm LRF	640x512 NETD <15mk	1.9x - 15.2x	13.1m	3.5m	1800m 1000m - £1699

HIKMICRO 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.	Min.	Max.	Range	
Stellar 3.0 SH35L	35mm	384x288 12µ	4.2-24.2x	13.1m	450m	1800m	£2099.99 £1699
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

Nocpix THERMAL IMAGING 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

- Silent Button
- 10mm Exit Pupil
- 7 colour palettes
- F0.9 Large Aperture
- Photo/Video/MIC/32GB
- Replaceable 18650 Battery
- Lightweight and Pocket Sized
- Reality+ Image Improvement Algorithms

Lens	Thermal Sensor	Mag.	F.O.V.	Min.	Max.	Range	
LUMI P13	256x192px 12µm	670m					£469
LUMI L19	384x288px 12µm	980m					£819
LUMI L35	384x288px 12µm	1800m					£1199
LUMI L35R	384x288px 12µm	1800m	800m				£1299
LUMI H35	640x512px 12µm	1800m					£1499
LUMI H35R	640x512px 12µm	1800m	800m				£1599

Nocpix THERMAL IMAGING BOLT

Thermal rifle scope with built in laser rangefinder

The Perfect Start to Your Night Hunt. Entry level thermal rifle scope with full function, built-in LRF & ballistic calculation for an enhanced vision experience. The self-developed thermal sensor offers <20mk NETD and a fast 50Hz refresh rate.

- Reality+ and Vision+ AI Algorithms
- 1200m Periscope-type LRF
- Ballistic Calculation
- 30mm Standard Ring
- Built-in & Replaceable Dual 18650 Battery
- 10mm Exit Pupil
- Video / Photo / Video / MIC / 64GB

Thermal Sensor	Lens	Range	
BOLT P25R 256x192px	12µm	25mm f1.0 1300m	£899
BOLT L35R 384x288px	12µm	35mm f1.0 1800m	£1499
BOLT H50R 640x512px	12µm	50mm f1.0 2600m	£2499

HIKMICRO ALPEX Day & Night Riflescope

The same 30mm tube chassis as the Stellar thermal scope but with HIK's advanced night vision technology.

ALPEX 4K Day & Night Riflescope with LRF

Built on an all-new robust 30mm tube chassis for conventional ring-mounting, the new ALPEX 4K LRF takes a winning formula and boosts specification and performance in every area - a new benchmark for 2024.

- Built-in Wi-Fi module
- Built-in video recorder
- Picture in picture
- Colour nightvision
- Switching surveillance modes
- Dustproof & waterproof
- 4k UHD sensor for extreme clarity in daylight, twilight, starlight and full darkness
- Onboard laser range finder with ballistic calculator
- Improved and enlarged screen
- Updated control wheel design
- Adjustable aperture

Alpex	RRP	NOW	Alpex 4K LRF A50EL	RRP	NOW
Alpex	£449.99	£399	Alpex 4K LRF A50EL	£849.99	£699
Alpex + IR 850nm Illuminator	£549.99	£499	Alpex 4K A50E	£749.99	£699

HIKMICRO ALPEX PRO Digital Day & Night Scope

The Alpex Pro A50P Delivers clear detail in both open terrain and dense forest. Powered by the Light Pro algorithm for brightness and clarity from dawn to deep night. Designed for pure imaging performance with a lightweight, streamlined solution for high-clarity observation.

The Alpex Pro A50PL For precise observation in varied terrain. The built-in 1200m laser rangefinder enables accurate distance measurement, while the Light Pro algorithm delivers clarity and brightness in extremely low-light conditions. Designed for professional hunters and observers.

Lens	Max. Res.	Mag.	F.O.V.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	
Alpex Pro A50P	50mm f1.8 4512x2512	4-24 6x	12.6m x 7m	3m	1500m			£699
Alpex Pro A50PL	50mm f1.8 4512x2512	4-24 6x	12.6m x 7m	3m	1500m	3m	1200m	£849

DNT OPTICS ZULUS 4K TUBE-STYLE DIGITAL DAY NIGHT VISION SCOPE W/LRF & DNT BALLISTIC ENGINE

Advanced digital rifle scope developed for shooters who require dependable performance across daylight, low-light, and night-time conditions. Designed for hunting and precision shooting, it integrates high-resolution digital imaging with ranging, recording, and ballistic support into a single optic.

- Built-in ballistic calculator
- Integrated laser rangefinder
- On-board video and image recording
- Digital day and night viewing capability
- Wi-Fi connectivity with mobile app support
- Supplied with 2x 21700 rechargeable batteries & 1x battery charger

Resolution	Min.	Max.	
Zulus 4K	3840x2160	5m	1200m £649.99

Nocpix THERMAL IMAGING NITE D70R Day & Night Digital Rifle Scope

NITE adopts an industry-leading 4K Ultra digital sensor. With its 3536x3536 resolution delivering up to 12MP it offers 50% more pixel density than conventional 4K systems. 60Hz frame rate delivers 20% more per second than 50Hz. The result: sharper details, richer colours, and cleaner images.

- 70mm F2.0 Lens
- 1200m Integrated LRF with Ballistic Calculations
- Interference Free Focus Adjustment
- Stepless Zoom Lever
- AMOLED 1920x1200 Display
- Photo / Video / MIC / 64GB

Thermal Sensor	Lens	Range	
NITE D70R 3536x3536px	2µm	70mm F2.0 1200m	£799

ZEISS CONQUEST APIA 65 SPOTTING SCOPES

87% Light transmission | 20-50x zoom ZEISS T* coating | Compact & Lightweight Carry Less. Discover More. Developed for observers who don't want to compromise weight for optical performance when they're on-the-go. With a compact design and a low weight of only 1,350 grams, it's the ideal companion for long and demanding adventures.



Conquest Apia 65 - 20-50x	£1275
Digiscoping Phone Adapter	£175
Digiscoping Eyepiece Adaptor S1/S2	£35
Conquest Apia stay-on case	£130

Leica APO Televid & Televid HD The New Leica Televid Portfolio

The new top model Leica APO-Televid HD offers the most colour neutral and colour fringe free image, outstanding image quality and sharpness. The new Televid models deliver the world's best light transmission in spotting scope segment. With the extensive accessories the Televid portfolio becomes even more modular and versatile to meet your needs.

APO Televid Bundles	Televid HD Bundles	
APO Televid 65 NEW MODEL c/w 25x-50x WW ASH...RRP £2425	Televid HD 65 NEW MODEL c/w 20x-60x WW...RRP £1900	
APO Televid 82 NEW MODEL c/w 25x-50x WW ASH...RRP £3140	Televid HD 82 NEW MODEL c/w 20x-60x WW...RRP £2420	
See website for latest prices		
Ever Ready Case 65 & 82 - £210 • Leofoto Tripod Kit - £510		

PASSPORT 10YR WARRANTY PLUS 2YR ACCIDENTAL DAMAGE

HAWKE VANTAGE HD 30

DEPENDABLE, ACCURATE, AFFORDABLE.

All models in the Vantage HD 30 range feature Hawke's H2 optics, fully multi-coated with 11 layers for exceptional light transmission, which boast a stunning wide-angle field of view and a 3.5 inch eye relief. Featuring red and green illumination with a stepped rheostat, the Vantage HD 30 delivers a crisp, daylight-visible central aim point.

• Exposed zero stop turrets

Model	RRP	NOW
4-16x50 SF LR2 Dot (16x)	£279	£259
4-16x50 SF Mil Pro II (10x)	£279	£259
4-16x50 SF 223/308 Marksman (16x)	£279	£259
4-16x50 SF Rimfire .22 LR (16x)	£279	£259
6-24x50 SF LR2 Dot (20x)	£299	£279
6-24x50 SF Mil Pro II (20x)	£299	£279
6-24x50 SF 223/308 Marksman (20x)	£299	£279

HAWKE VANTAGE HD 34 FFP

DEPENDABLE, ACCURATE, AFFORDABLE.

The Vantage HD 34 FFP range brings Hawke's H2 optics into new territories of tactical and competition shooting. The fully multi-coated optics create exceptional light transmission, which boast a stunning wide-angle field of view and a generous 4 inch eye relief.

Model	RRP	NOW
3-15x44 SF FFP Mil Pro II (15x)	£399	£379
3-15x44 SF FFP MOA Pro II (15x)	£399	£379
5-25x56 SF FFP Mil Pro II (25x)	£439	£419
5-25x56 SF FFP MOA Pro II (25x)	£439	£419

- H2 optics system with wide-angle design
- 34mm Monotube Chassis
- First Focal Plane (FFP) Optical System
- Zero-Stop elevation turret & exposed, locking windage

BURRIS FULLFIELD

Built lighter, shorter, and stronger, it's designed for unmatched maneuverability in the field. Precision-crafted with fully multi-coated lenses for exceptional clarity and maximum light transmission, it thrives in low-light conditions. The innovative Knob Synergy System introduces modular elevation adjustment, offering versatility and customization like never before.

Multi-coated lenses • High-performance glass • Improved 4x zoom system • Proven reticle technology • Rugged design • Burris knob synergy • Unmatched optical performance

Model	RRP	NOW
3-12x56 - Ballistic E3	£389	
3-12x56 - 3P#4	£419	
6-24x50 - Ballistic E3	£599	

STEINER RANGER 4 RIFLESCOPES

Nothing Escapes You

DETERMINED IN PERFORMANCE

Optimised optical quality, reliable mechanics and outstanding ruggedness. These high-magnification riflescopes with integrated mounting rail fully meet the diverse demands of hunters.

Model	RRP	NOW
1-4x24	£949	
2.5-10x50	£1039	
3-12x56	£1049	
4-16x44	£1149	
6-24x56	£1199	

- Optimised target point
- XL-field of view
- Best of it's class light transmission
- Highly precise mechanics
- Audible & tactile turrets
- Elegant, lightweight & aesthetic design

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.

Aggressively Knurled, 1/4-MOA Finger Click Adjustments

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

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

Model	RRP	NOW
1-5x24i	£1270	£1199
1.6-8x42i	£1360	£1289
2-10x50i	£1360	£1289
2.4-12x56i	£1440	£1369
2.4-12x56i	£1440	£1369
3.5-18x50i	£1530	£1449
3.5-18x50i	£1530	£1449

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.

Model	RRP	NOW
Amplus 6 1-6x24i	£1260	£1129
Amplus 6 3-18x44i BDC	£1450	£1249
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

SPECIAL OFFER - SELECTED MODELS NOW from £999 NOW from £1149 NOW from £1049 NOW from £1149

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.

Model	RRP	NOW
3-12x56	£1050	
4-16x50 BT	£1270	
4-16x50 BT	£1270	
6-24x50 BT	£1285	
6-24x50 BT - Locking Windage	£1385	
6-24x50 BT - Locking Windage	£1385	

SWAROVSKI OPTIK Z6i (GenIII)

BUILT FOR THE JOURNEY. REDEFINED FOR TODAY.

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.

Model	RRP	NOW
Z6i 1-6x24 IR	£1620	
Z6i 1.7-10x42 IR	£1700	
Z6i 2-12x50 IR	£1780	
Z6i 2.5-15x50 BT IR	£1900	
Z6i 4-12x56 BT IR	£1980	

SWAROVSKI OPTIK Z8i FACELIFT (GenII)

DESIGNED FOR YOUR SUCCESS

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, and enables concentrated target acquisition at the decisive moment.

Model	RRP	NOW
Z8i Facelift 1-8x24 IR	£2390	
Z8i Facelift 1.7-13.3x42 P IR	£2970	
Z8i Facelift 1.7-13.3x42 P IR Flexchange	£3220	
Z8i Facelift 2-16x50 P IR	£3140	
Z8i Facelift 2.3-18x56 P IR	£3220	
Z8i Facelift 3.5-28x50 IR	£3390	

HAWKE CARBON FIBRE PRO BIPODS

Ultra lightweight carbon fiber legs • Legs can be positioned forward or backward - 180° range of motion • Quick release picatinny rail mount • Swivel adjustment horizontally left & right to track moving targets • 40° of tilt adjustment left & right with resettable locking lever • Anti-slip rubber & spiked feet

Model	RRP	NOW
Smooth Leg (20-28cm) Compression sprung smooth leg with twist locks - 290g.	£119	£114.99
Notched Leg (20-28cm) Tension sprung notched legs with button locks - 340g.	£119	£114.99

SPARTAN JAVELIN LITE BIPOD

PRECISION EQUIPMENT ULTRA LIGHTWEIGHT AND COMPACT

Based upon the original & highly successful Spartan 'Javelin' bipod. Designed to be carried in a pocket or pouch, off of the rifle until required. The 'Javelin Lite' uses precision CNC machining and high quality edge carbon fiber materials to produce an innovative, modular & highly effective shooting support for the modern shooter.

Model	RRP	NOW
Standard Leg 18cm	£129	
TL (Twist Lock) Leg - NEW 18-24cm	£185	

JAVELIN LITE ACCESSORIES

Javelin Lite Standard Leg - Singles.....£27.99

Bipod Adaptors from £24.99 Davros Head from £64.99

A-TAC BIPOD

CLASS LEADING BIPODS

Ultra versatile, precision engineered rifle bipod for high performance shooting.

- Modular - change adapters and feet easily, in the field
- Lightweight - 7075 alloy
- Limitless positional versatility
- Rock solid - Smooth-Cam QD
- Silent Deploy

Model	RRP	NOW
ATAC Bipod - Aluminium 180mm	£344.99	£329.99
ATAC Bipod - Aluminium 230mm	£344.99	£329.99
ATAC Bipod - Carbon 180mm	£374.99	£359.99
ATAC Bipod - Carbon 230mm	£374.99	£359.99

ACCU-TAC PRECISION BIPODS AND ACCESSORIES

BR-4 G2 With Picatinny rail £379.95

BR-4 G2 PICTANY Bolt Action Bipod with the quick detach was designed, engineered, and manufactured in the USA. This smaller bipod is convenient for a more grounded shot. The BR-4 is 100% billet, made from the highest quality aircraft aluminum available.

BR-4 G2 ARCA SPEC The quick detach rail mount is simple, quick, and very secure. The quick detach attaches to a standard Arca Swiss or Arca style rail and mounts in seconds without the need to use extra tools for tightening.

BR-4 G2 FDE With Picatinny rail £399.95

BR-4 G2 FDE With Arca Spec £399.95

Seeland 4 LEGGED SHOOTING STICK

4 legged shooting stick for extreme stability. Easy to adjust using one-handed clamps, and adjustable rubber couplers allow use of either spikes or rubber feet. The legs have movable foam handles, and the cradle has a soft rubber coating. The shooting stick is easy to pack away due to its removable legs and quick connectors. It has no loose parts.

- Length: Up to 175cm
- Length when broken down: 90cm

Black - RRP £129.99 NOW ONLY £99!

QUAD STICKS

QUICKLY. SILENTLY. SAFELY.

Quad Sticks give you the ability to follow targets as they move while keeping your point of aim.

The Hydraulics allow you to keep your crosshairs on a moving target tracking its movement and waiting for the perfect shot.

Track and follow targets over large distances without having to move, panning 45° Left and 45° Right covering 300m at a range of 150m.

£399.95

UNIQUE HYDRAULIC TRACKING

Rifles held securely in Carbon Fibre reinforced Nylon 12 mounts

Hi Viz Toggle

Stainless Steel foot spikes

ENTER THE DRACO

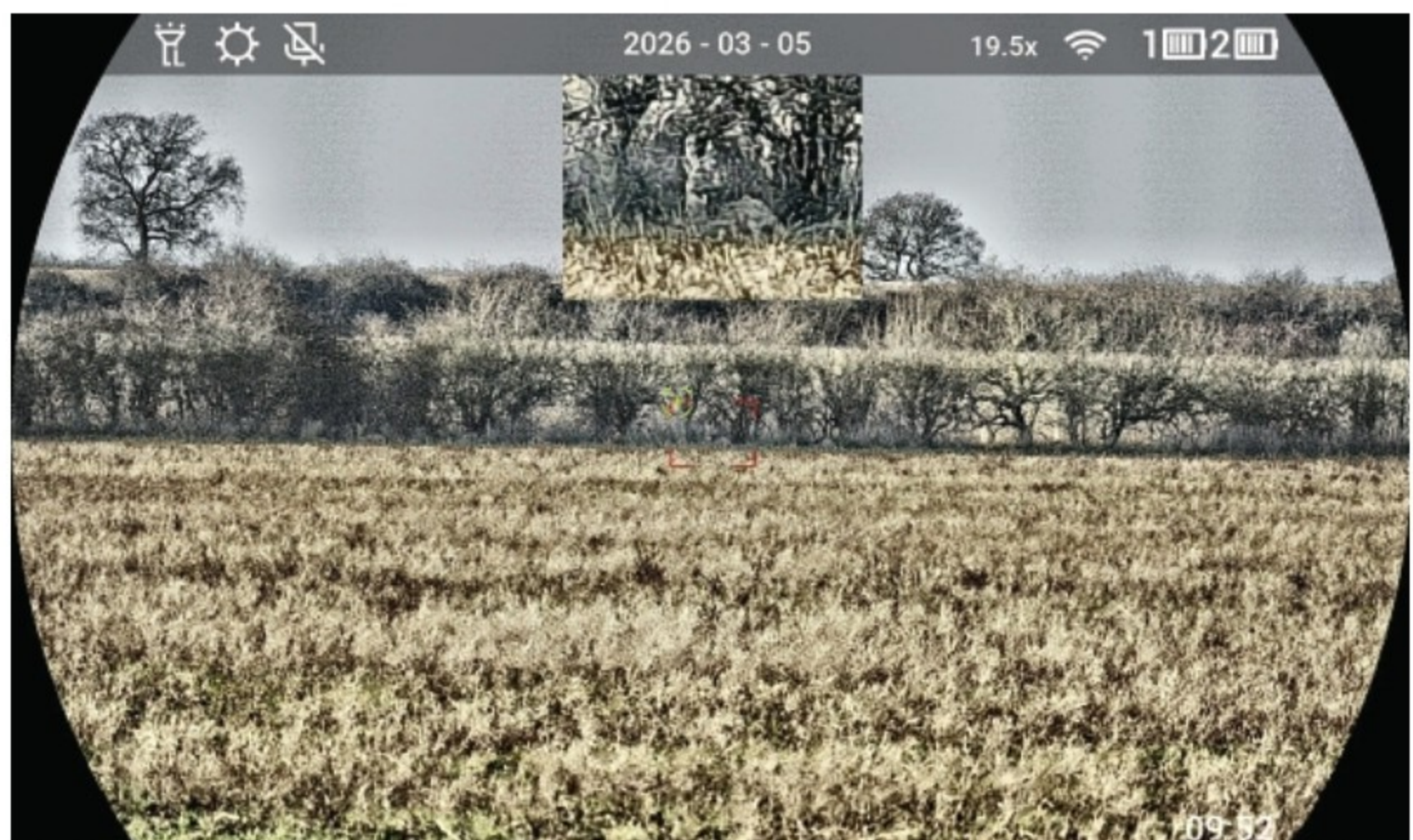


Jules Whicker tests Pixfra's D225-4K and finds a set of entry-level multispectral binoculars that get almost everything right

Multispectral binoculars are now firmly on the wish-list for hunters intent on setting out into the field with the most capable kit. Thus far, a single brand and model, reviewed here last year, has ruled the roost. But things change fast, and challengers are stepping up. Among them is Pixfra, a brand that has solidly established itself on price, features, quality and support through its UK distributor Thomas Jacks, who kindly supplied the entry-level Draco 225 reviewed here.

Before looking specifically at the Draco, let's clear up what multispectral binoculars are. First, they have the form of classic optical binoculars. This keeps them compact, favours a stable two-handed hold, and makes them easy to wear.

The latter is especially true for the Dracos, which come with an excellent chest harness in addition to a regular neoprene neck strap. This harness is unusually unobtrusive, in keeping both with the exceptionally handy dimensions of the Dracos (195 × 130.6 × 61.7 mm), and with the key advantage of multispectral binoculars as a substitute for multiple devices.





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

MODEL: Pixfra's Draco D225-4K
DIGITAL SENSOR: 4K 3840×2160 CMOS
THERMAL SENSOR: 256×192 VOx, 12μm
OBJECTIVE LENS: 25mm, f/1.8
FIELD OF VIEW: 12.7, 13.9, 21.2m @100m
BASE MAGNIFICATION: 4.2x - 4.7x - 2.6x
DISPLAY SIZE/TYPE: 4.9, 1920×1080 OLED
BATTERY: 2 x18650 rechargeable
MAX. OPERATION TIME: 9hrs
LRF RANGING DISTANCE: 1,000m
WEIGHT (WITH BATTERY): 610g
DIMENSIONS: 195×130.6×61.7mm
PRICE: Draco D225-4K £999.95; Draco D335-4K £1,499.95; Draco D635-4K £1,999.95
CONTACT: pixfraoutdoor.co.uk



Bottom left: A bedded roe viewed in daylight imaging, PIP daylight zoom
 Top: The Draco's primary power source comes from a pair of rechargeable 18650 batteries
 Above: A roebuck in Night Vision mode with no IR

With multispectral binoculars there's no need to carry a separate rangefinder, thermal or digital NV monocular. This integration means that everything you see can be recorded internally or streamed to an external device. It also means no switching devices, which minimises movement, while operation is simplified by only having one set of controls to learn.

About those controls. On each barrel, objective (target) and ocular (display) focusing is assisted by tactile rubber grips, complemented by a flanged rubber eye-cup that eliminates back-reflection in daylight and light-leakage at night. Additionally, the spacing between the eye-pieces can be adjusted to the distance between your eyes: optimising your view of the screen and reducing fatigue. Between the barrels, are a focusable infrared illuminator, a central multifunctional roller that resembles the focusing

“Question is, does this “Jack-of-all-trades” truly master any of them?”

wheel on a conventional binocular, and a power button. Flanking these controls are four chunky rubberised buttons: imaging and lasing on the left, and channel selection and illumination on the right. The dimensions and layout gave me an impressive degree of comfort and control.

Turning the Dracos over reveals the neat laser transceiver, a threaded tripod socket, and a USB-C port under a rubber cover. The port can be used for charging as well as data transfer, but the Dracos are primarily powered by a pair of rechargeable 18650 cells

mounted crosswise behind a cover on the L/H side. Run time depends on IR use, but is extended by a proximity sensor that activates the screen when you start viewing, and by a range of automated standby and shutdown options. Pixfra also supplies a spare pair of batteries with each unit. In practice, I never needed to switch batteries or top up from a power bank, but it was reassuring to know

I could. My only issue was the battery cover closure: it needs to be pressed home firmly against the rubber seal, and the latch positively clicked into place.

Returning to the controls, the roller is key to the uncluttered layout, because it can also be clicked to select menu options - many of which scroll in both directions- making configuration both rapid and precise. Pixfra's interface is well designed, with functions clearly identifiable by icon and text, and organised into sensible hierarchies that prioritise the functions you most want.

Another feature I like about the menus, is the ability to disable individual thermal and digital NV palettes, which removes the need to scroll through the whole range each time you want to switch between your favourites. That said, for night use, I would really like to have a Pulsar-style “red monochrome” for both thermal and IR.

To recap, with the Dracos we have a compact and ergonomically accomplished unit that lets us selectively exploit visible, near infrared (NV and lasing), and far infrared (thermal) spectra. So, the question is, does this “Jack-of-all-trades” truly master any of them?



DAYLIGHT IMAGING

The Draco's menu gives you several ways to optimise the daylight channel: as well as ample brightness, contrast and saturation adjustments, there are anti-fog and image-stabilisation modes. You get a ton of digital zoom, too: up to 44X from the native magnification of 5.5X. The display is a big 4.9", 1920×1080 OLED and draws on a capable 4K 3840×2160 CMOS sensor. The trouble is that none of this gives you an image that is anything like as clear or stable as a decent set of conventional 8X binoculars will deliver. Truth is, 4K daylight imaging simply hasn't caught up with optical imaging yet. That said, on the fringes of night, at dawn and dusk, the Dracos will outperform even the best glass.

NIGHT IMAGING

Image quality was excellent: sharp and well balanced, and the IR (which has low, high and smart modes) proved to have surprising reach for such a compact unit (around 250m). When foxing, the Dracos let me identify foxes, badgers and muntjac with confidence; and when ratting, they handled cluttered environments without washing out from backscatter. Both 850 nm and 940 nm LED inserts are available and interchangeable, for a choice of longer-range or more-covert modes.

LASER RANGING

Ranging was fast and accurate and integration with the thermal and NV means it works as well by night as by day. It'll reach out to 1,000m, and you can centre the image on the rangefinding reticle to avoid losing the reticle as you zoom in. The ranging button is positioned at the balancing point of the binoculars, too, making it easier to stay on target as you activate it.

THERMAL

This is where you get choices. The D225 has a 256 x 192, 12 µm sensor, but you can also opt for the D335 (384 x 288) or D635 (640 x 512) at price points of £1K, £1.5K and £2K, respectively. Key statistics are base magnification (4.7X, 4.2X,



Top: Roe buck using White Thermal with PiP NV
Above: A rat viewed using Thermal and Iron colour palette

2.6X) and field-of-view (12.7, 13.9, 21.2m @ 100 m), but just because the numbers get more attractive as you spend more - low magnification is good - doesn't mean the D225 won't get the job done. You just may need to tweak the settings a bit more to get there.

Also important, of course, is how well the digital and thermal channels complement each other. This is where the picture-in-picture (PiP) function comes in. PiP lets you view a second channel in a small window set within the main display. With a multispectral device, it makes sense to scan with thermal and use a digital channel in the PiP window for identification. With the Dracos there are two obstacles to this. First, the PiP window works like it does on a single-spectrum device: i.e., it automatically doubles the magnification, so your original 4.7X or 5.5X image is immediately twice

the size, heavily cropped by the PiP window, and much less use as a result. Thomas Jacks tells me Pixfra knows about this and will fix it in the next firmware update. Second, The Dracos let you combine thermal (main) with digital NV (PiP), but not thermal (main) with digital day (PiP). This means that in daylight you have to toggle the main screen between the daylight 4K and thermal channels, except you can't disable the NV channel, so there's always one unnecessary step. Hopefully, these are things that can be fixed in firmware as well.

All that said, Pixfra has got so much right with the form factor, build quality, component specification, interface design and pricing that buying a set of Dracos still makes a ton of sense, particularly if most of your hunting will be done at night. By day, I'd still take my binos: by night, it's Dracos all the way. ■

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"Wow, you won't see another stalking rifle like that," Benelli always seem to design uniquely superb rifles



A NEW ANGLE ON RIFLES

Bruce Potts tests Benelli's groundbreaking Lupu Alpha and finds that this innovative stalking rifle offers far more than just eye-catching looks

There are moments in shooting history that mark a pivotal step forward in firearms development. Having tested rifles for more than 35 years, I am old enough to appreciate genuinely innovative rifle design rather than simply another re-stocked version or variant of an existing model.

Benelli remains one of my favourite manufacturers because

it pays little regard to industry trends, preferring instead to forge its own path with unapologetically distinctive designs. Rifle shooters will appreciate not only the uniqueness of these rifles but also the considerable thought and engineering that have gone into them.

Every Benelli rifle I have shot has exceeded my expectations and, judging by the deer that have recently passed through my larder, the company has produced

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

MANUFACTURER: Benelli
NAME: Lupu Alpha
TYPE: Bolt action
BARREL LENGTH: 20 inch, 1 in 10 inch twist
OVERALL LENGTH: 40 inches
CALIBRE: .308 Win
FINISH: BE.S.T Dark Gray Matte and Crio
STOCK: 3D printed polymer
WEIGHT: 2.6 kg (500g less than standard rifle)
TRIGGER: Single Stage
MAGAZINE: Five shot double stack polymer
PRICE: £1,956.99
CONTACT: sportsmanguncentre.co.uk

another exceptional rifle with the Lupu range.

When you consider what is currently available on the rifle market, this Limited Edition Alpha model—currently offered only in .308 Winchester—is a genuine revelation. The rifle takes conventional design principles and turns them on their head.

Firstly, its completely unique and radical stock features a skeletal, 3D-printed design that makes it the lightest chassis-based sporting rifle currently available. Secondly, the combination of an ultra-smooth bolt operation and Benelli's patented BE.S.T. (Benelli Surface Treatment) technology, backed by a 10-year mechanical warranty and a 25-year corrosion warranty, makes the Lupu Alpha—retailing at £1,956.99—a hard act to follow.

ACTION

The Benelli Lupu features an unusual action design. The longitudinal grooves along the sides of the action are not only instrumental in making this an ultra-lightweight stalking rifle, they look pretty cool too.

Mounted to the receiver is a one-piece aluminium Picatinny rail, allowing the straightforward fitting of both conventional glass scopes,



as well as modern 4K, thermal and night-vision optics.

While the Lupo's action may appear unconventional, it is exceptionally pleasing to operate. The bolt body is scalloped to further reduce weight and incorporates Benelli's elliptical three-lug bolt head, providing a low 60-degree bolt lift and a red cocking indicator. The result is an action that cycles with remarkable smoothness and is bind-free.

One feature that may not be immediately apparent is the dog-legged bolt handle. It protrudes just enough to provide a secure

and positive grip while remaining compact enough to avoid snagging on foliage. It is an old design principle, but one that continues to work exceptionally well.

I particularly liked the tang-mounted safety catch, which when engaged can be by-passed by a small side lever allowing the bolt to lift but still remain on safe.

Like all Benellis, the Alpha model is finished in a satin black and grey BE.S.T. coating across all metal surfaces, with the exception of the bolt body, which is finished in gloss black. Both finishes are exceptionally hard-wearing,

highly resistant to the elements and backed by a 25-year corrosion warranty. The system works, and dedicated stalkers will undoubtedly appreciate it.

BARREL

Barrel weight can make or break a rifle's accuracy, harmonics and handling characteristics. Sensibly, Benelli has opted for an ultra-lightweight stalking barrel without using a carbon-fibre-wrap. This approach delivers a lightweight yet highly consistent barrel, backed by a guaranteed sub-MOA accuracy standard at 100 yards.

Benelli's CRIO barrel treatment relieves internal stresses, improves thermal resistance and enhances the longevity of the rifling, all of which contribute to improved accuracy and long-term performance.

The Alpha's barrel measures just 20 inches in length—ideal for the .308 Winchester in my view—and tapers from 26mm at the action to a pencil-thin 15.4mm external diameter at the muzzle. This gave no problems while hunting (see my video link below) but does mean that after shooting a five shot group, it needs time to cool down.

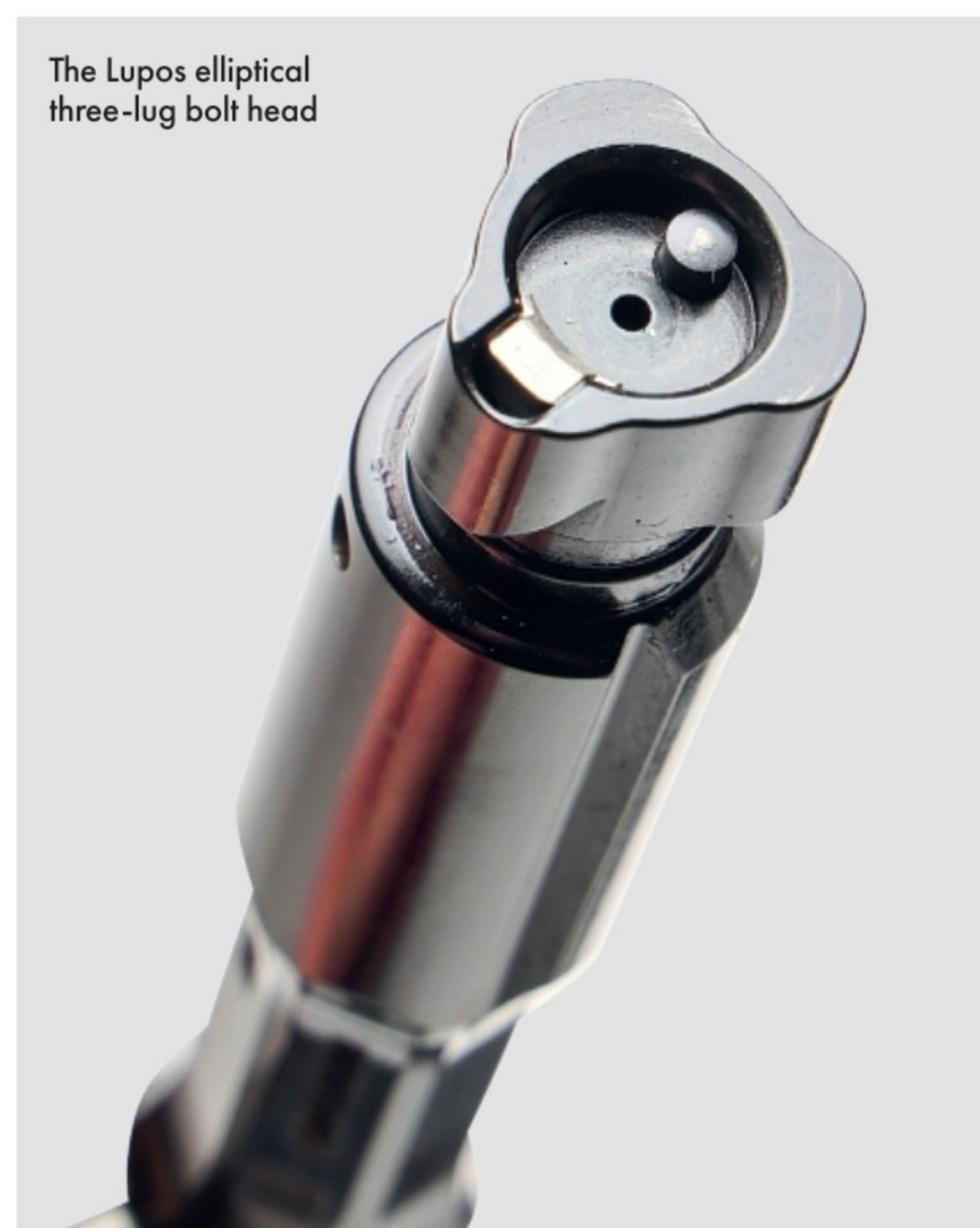
The barrel is fully free-floating



An Aluminium chassis system is at the heart of Benelli's unique styling designed to reduce weight



The Lupo's elliptical three-lug bolt head





Ten out of ten for this 3D printed skeletal stock. Lightweight, strong and weatherproof



The polymer magazine has a splitter down the middle to allow free flowing of staggered feed

and is threaded 5/8 UNEF at the muzzle, allowing the straightforward fitting of a sound moderator.

STOCK

Now for the truly remarkable aspect of this rifle. While I am a fairly conservative chap when it comes to rifle design, I can recognise genuine innovation and technological advancement when I see it. The Alpha's stock is something very special indeed. I have never encountered anything quite like it before, and it results in a rifle that is both distinctive and highly desirable.

Benelli has chosen to disregard traditional stock-making methods and instead pursue its own vision. Rather than removing material from a block of wood to create a shape, or bonding two moulded halves together as with most synthetic stocks, the Alpha employs a 3D-printed polymer construction built layer by layer from the ground up. This manufacturing process allows for incredibly intricate geometries with virtually no material waste, creating an organic, bird-like skeletal structure that is not only exceptionally light

but which handles every bit as well as it looks.

The stock is attached to a central aluminium chassis, providing a rigid and stable bedding platform for the action. The result is what Benelli claims to be the lightest chassis-equipped sporting rifle currently available, weighing just 2.6kg (5.7lb). The dark-grey anodised chassis and action are typically Benelli in appearance—angular, contemporary and purposeful—with additional scalloping incorporated to reduce weight even further.

The chassis houses a five-round, double-stack polymer magazine featuring an integral release catch at its forward edge. The magazine slots neatly into place like a piece of a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle and, once fitted, completes the angular lines of the action.

Comb height can be adjusted using interchangeable cheekpieces, while length of pull can be altered from 13.75in to 15in through the use of additional spacers, allowing the Alpha to be tailored to shooters of all sizes.

The textured grey finish applied to the stock and forend eliminates the need for conventional chequering, while Benelli's Progressive Comfort recoil pad system does an excellent job of taking the sting out of the .308 Winchester cartridge.

TRIGGER

For all its innovative technology, a rifle's accuracy can easily be compromised by a poor trigger. Thankfully, Benelli has an excellent track record in this regard and the Alpha proved no exception. The single stage trigger broke very crisply at 992 grams (2lb 3oz) on the test rifle, but can be adjusted from 650 grams (1lb 6oz) to 1650 grams (3lb 10oz) to suit the



The fully adjustable trigger and blade. Note the tang sliding safety and extra safety button



shooter's preference. The trigger blade is also adjustable by +1 mm using the spacers supplied.

FIELD TEST

With a lead ammunition ban on the horizon, I tested the Lupo exclusively with lead-free factory loads. First up was the 125-grain Hornady International ECX, a cartridge I rate very highly. It delivered a muzzle velocity of 2,996fps and an impressive 2,492ft/lb of energy at 100 yards. Accuracy was equally impressive, producing a three-shot group measuring just 0.45in—and that's with factory ammunition.

Next came a pair of Sako Powerhead Blade loads. The heavier 162-grain Blade produced an acceptable 1.25in group at 2,567fps, generating 2,370ft/lb of energy. The lighter 130-grain Blade, however, proved considerably more accurate, producing a tight sub-MOA group while achieving a brisk 2,870fps and 2,376ft/lb of energy. Of the two, it was my preferred option. ▶



Agile, lightweight and very accurate. The Benelli Alpha is a serious choice for stalkers

Hornady's 125gr ECX lead free round gave fast, hard-hitting and consistent performance

The Alpha is a very capable stalking rifle as this CWD doe shows



In .308 Winchester, I have always favoured lighter bullets, and RWS's new HIT lead-free load proved no exception. The 130-grain bullet, much like the lighter Sako Blade, performed exceptionally well, averaging 2,585fps and generating 2,403ft/lb of energy while producing a tidy 0.55in group.

Finally, the 150-grain Norma Eco Strike, a bullet weight synonymous with the .308 Winchester, demonstrated its credentials as an excellent all-round hunting load. It too delivered a sub-MOA group—meeting Benelli's accuracy guarantee—alongside a velocity of 2,722fps and 2,468ft/lb of energy.

It was encouraging to see the Alpha perform so well across a broad range of lead-free ammunition, although it will come as no surprise that I ultimately selected the Hornady ECX for my end-of-season Chinese water deer stalk.

Chinese water deer often bed down in ditches and dense hedgerows along field margins, remaining constantly alert and

ready to run at the slightest sign of danger. A slow and careful approach was therefore essential, aided by the superb Pulsar Symbion DXT50 multispectral binoculars, which enabled me to reach my soggy ditch-side ambush position without incident.

From there, I had a commanding view across a 100-yard-wide field bordered by dense scrub in one of my favourite Chinese water deer bedding areas. Resting on a Harris bipod, the ultra-lightweight Alpha proved exceptionally manoeuvrable. I picked up a CWD doe 180 yards away. After a short wait she popped out literally 20 yards away, winded me and bounded off, clearly aware that something was amiss but uncertain of my exact position.

Half an hour later, a fox emerged to test my resolve, but I remained resolute. Thankfully I did, because just five minutes later the doe reappeared. This time stepping out at 93 yards and, with the Alpha shouldered and on target in an instant, a single shot

dropped her where she stood—a fitting demonstration of the rifle's hunting credentials.

VERDICT

I have seen a great many rifles come and go over the decades, and it was refreshing to spend time with one that genuinely breaks from convention and still manages to get the pulse racing.

The Benelli offers excellent value for money, even in this "Limited Edition" Alpha model. It combines innovative design with a host of genuinely useful features that will appeal to the modern deer stalker. Throughout testing, it showed effortless handling and even more impressive accuracy, proving itself consistent from the bipod, stalking sticks and after some rough handling on the hill.

The Lupo Alpha is far more than just an interesting design exercise; it is a highly capable hunting rifle that delivers where it matters most. In my view, it deserves to be among the very top contenders on any deer stalker's wish list. ■

Scan to see Bruce's CWD stalk and non lead ammo test using the Benelli Lupo Alpha.



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PASSING THE BUCK

Simon Barr finds that while threatened in its native India, the blackbuck has found a stronghold in the New World



Dawn breaks over the pampas of Buenos Aires Province, and the grassland seems to move. Watch long enough in that low golden light and the reason for the blackbuck's success in South America reveals itself across the horizon: herd after herd of antelope streaming across the open country, more animals visible in a single morning than survive in many reserves in their native India.

The species was introduced to Argentina in the 1920s—though some sources place the first arrivals as far back as the late nineteenth century—and adapted to its new

home with a success few introduced species have ever matched. These are not park animals confined behind fences. They are wild, free-ranging and self-sustaining, and they have made the pampas their own.

Los Crestones Lodge, operated by the highly regarded David Denies organisation, sits at the heart of this remarkable landscape. The hunting concessions lie around 45 minutes from the lodge and encompass several of the original release sites. By the guides' estimation, we were hunting within 10 kilometres of the very epicentre of the blackbuck's introduction to Argentina.

The numbers certainly supported that claim. Throughout the day we watched thousands of animals in

herds representing every age class: healthy, unhurried and entirely at ease in their surroundings, heads down in the grass as they grazed across the endless plain.

FROM THE SUBCONTINENT TO THE PAMPAS

The blackbuck's journey from one continent to another is a conservation story with an unusual twist. Argentina proved almost perfectly suited to the species, not least because across much of its adopted range it has no natural predators to keep its numbers in check. What began as a modest founding population has grown into a thriving one, with herds spreading across the fertile country south of Buenos Aires.



PICTURES: SELENA BARR



The contrast with its native range could scarcely be greater. In India and Pakistan, the blackbuck contends with habitat loss and increasing human pressure, while benefiting from the full protection of the law. Listed under Schedule I of India's Wildlife (Protection) Act, it enjoys the highest level of legal protection available and may not be hunted anywhere in the country except in circumstances where human life is at risk. Where the species is carefully protected and increasingly constrained across its ancestral range, in Argentina it flourishes. It is precisely this abundance—managed and sustainably harvested—that gives hunting a legitimate place in the species' broader future.

“The blackbuck's journey from one continent to another is a conservation story with an unusual twist”

The blackbuck is an animal of open plains and lightly wooded country, typically gathering in herds of five to 50 animals under the leadership of a dominant male. It is also remarkably fast: speeds in excess of 80 km/h have been recorded, making a mature buck a challenging quarry on open ground. Primarily a grazer, it avoids dense forest, requires daily access to water, and will travel considerable distances in search of both forage and watering sites.

Males weigh around 38 kg and carry the spiralled horns and striking jet coat that give the species its distinctive appearance, standing out clearly among the smaller, fawn-coloured females. Identifying the right buck is seldom difficult.



A single shot threaded through the bushes and the 140-grain SST did its job



Getting within range of him is another matter entirely.

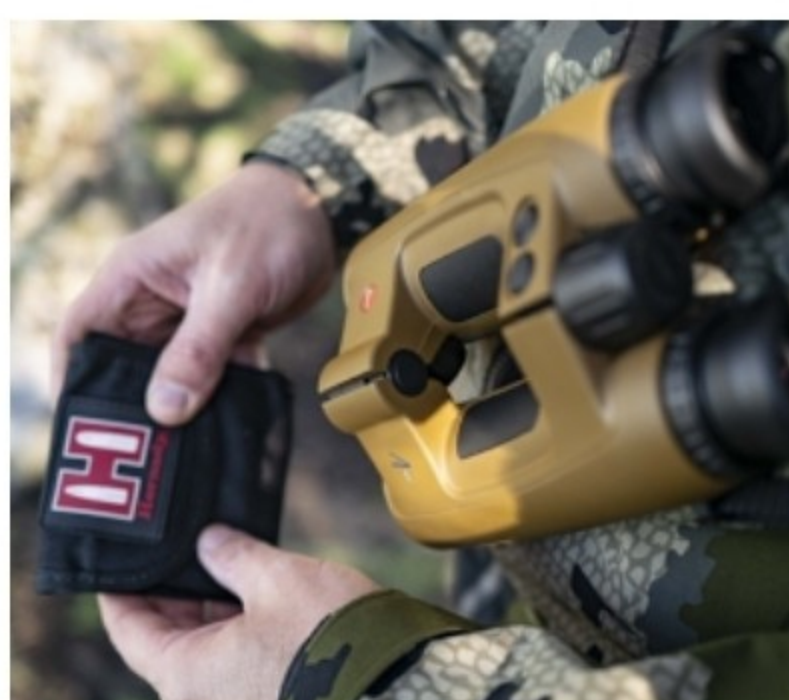
HUNTING THE OPEN GROUND

Our day in the field revolved around the animal's wariness. Blackbuck trust their eyes above all else and read open country with an alertness that borders on the uncanny. A careless movement, a shift in the wind, the wrong silhouette against the skyline—any one of them could send an entire herd streaming away in a single fluid motion. Even at 350 metres they would tolerate the slightest irregularity. It put me in mind of stalking large herds of fallow on the open downs of Berkshire, where the ground gives you away long before the deer do.

The method at Los Crestones is straightforward spot-and-stalk hunting. The openness of the terrain allows herds to be glassed from a distance and an approach planned before a foot is placed wrong. As our guide, Sebastian Casado, observed, finding blackbuck is no challenge when there are thousands of them; the real skill lies in closing the distance on a mature male.

We spent hours moving between different herds, with both wind and

“Finding blackbuck is no challenge when there are thousands of them; the real skill lies in closing the distance on a mature male”



sun working against us for much of the morning. The animals' speed meant that one herd spooked, was the herd gone. More than once we watched a promising stalk unravel in seconds as dozens of antelope flowed away across the plain.

Success came, as it so often does, through a single animal letting its guard down. We found a solitary buck resting near a small stand of trees and stalked through the woodland to within 120 metres. The shot had to be threaded between

trunks and branches, and when he rose, sensing that something was amiss, a single well-placed round accounted for him cleanly.

Los Crestones takes a practical view of equipment, recognising the inconvenience of bringing a rifle into Argentina. Its gun room is well stocked, and the rifle I carried was a fine example in its own right: a custom build on an original Argentine 1909 Mauser 98 action, re-barrelled in 6.5×55 Swedish.

The ammunition was Hornady's 140-grain SST, an old favourite of mine, and it performed impeccably—flat-shooting, accurate and decisive on the buck. The 6.5×55 has retained its reputation for well over a century for good reason. Its efficient 6.5 mm bullet and modest recoil make it ideally suited to the longer shots that blackbuck country can demand, while remaining comfortable to

shoot from field positions off quad sticks.

Good guiding does the rest, and the guiding here is the genuine article. Sebastian, working alongside the local gaucho Raúl, knew the daily movements of every herd, where the animals were likely to be at a given hour, and how to read the subtle signs that determine whether a group is worth the stalk.

A VARIED BAG

What elevates Los Crestones beyond a single-species destination is the breadth of sport on offer. The same ground supports axis deer, another Asian introduction that has flourished in Argentina, and over the course of a single day we encountered both species: axis favouring the wooded cover, blackbuck the wide-open expanses of the pampas.

The axis were impressive animals. One mature buck approached 90 kg in weight, comparable to a heavy fallow deer but benefiting from year-round feeding in a subtropical climate. In a single day we saw bucks in velvet, in hard antler and freshly cast, the entire annual cycle seemingly laid out before us.

The season runs from May through to July, the Southern Hemisphere's autumn and winter, when animals are in prime condition and the weather is generally favourable. With capacity for up to eight Guns, the operation retains an intimate atmosphere that allows for a highly personalised experience in the field.

For those seeking a trophy-class blackbuck, the lodge recommends allowing two or three full days of hunting. This is not because the animals are scarce—far from it—but because identifying a truly exceptional head among thousands requires patience, careful judgement and the discipline to pass over many good bucks in pursuit of an outstanding one.

A WORKING LANDSCAPE

The ranch itself covers an impressive 15,000 hectares of prime country in what the guides described as the lower basin of the Salado River, some 200 kilometres south

of Buenos Aires. Alongside its blackbuck and axis deer, it supports thousands of head of cattle—a working example of how a well-managed estate can maintain livestock production and thriving wildlife populations side by side.

The richness of the wildlife extends far beyond the quarry species. The trees rang with birdsong: ducks and parakeets, raptors and owls, all adding to the sense of abundance. Every gaucho seemed to be accompanied by four or five border collies trotting faithfully at heel. Raúl, who had worked on the ranch for nearly 40 years, knew every corner of it. Between drives he introduced us to the ritual of yerba mate, the bitter green tea passed from hand to hand in a shared gourd through a metal straw, just as it is among all social classes across rural Argentina.

The only resident predator of any significance is the silver fox,

while the occasional puma passes through without ever establishing a permanent presence—fittingly enough, the source of the name of Argentina's national rugby team. The near-absence of predation goes a long way towards explaining the remarkable abundance of game.

The country presents its own challenges in other ways. Flat and wet, the heavy rain that fell a few days before our arrival—enough to delay our programme by a day—had turned the access tracks into a skating rink. The vehicles pressed on, sliding through it gamely.

LOGISTICS AND THE LONG WAY ROUND

For anyone considering an Argentine blackbuck hunt, Los Crestones benefits from a convenient location, lying little more than a two-hour drive from Buenos Aires. The challenge arises when attempting



Simon's beautiful trophy blackbuck, the result of sound wildlife management



Above: Los Crestones Lodge offers the hunter spacious comfort and varied quarry

Right: Internal flights via Sundown Jet means less time in the terminal and more time in the field



to combine several lodges within a single itinerary. Argentina is a vast country, and most domestic flights are funnelled through Buenos Aires, making even straightforward journeys time-consuming. A hop from Córdoba to Salta, for example, can consume more than six hours via a commercial flight, whereas a direct charter covers the same distance in just one hour and 40 minutes.

This is where Sundown Jet comes into its own. By offering direct flights between hunting destinations, it removes the stopovers, queues and wasted hours in terminals. Its fleet includes Bombardier Learjet 45s and 40s for longer sectors, King Air turboprops for regional routes

and Cessna Caravans capable of operating from the smaller airstrips that serve many remote lodges.

The economics are more favourable than many might assume. A charter flight from Córdoba to Mendoza costs around USD 6,000 for up to four Guns; when shared between a party, the price per person compares with that of a premium commercial ticket, while providing a wholly private and direct service. Sundown's shared-flight programme on popular routes, such as Córdoba to Buenos Aires, together with its empty-legs programme, makes the option more accessible still.

For a sporting party moving between lodges, the time saved

can easily justify the cost, particularly when weighed against the value of an additional day in the field.

BEYOND THE TROPHY ROOM

The purpose of all this organisation is simple: the guest is left free to hunt while everything else is taken care of - and the hospitality is as much a memory as the sport itself. Evenings revolve around asado, the legendary Argentine beef cooked over a parrilla, with the day's stalks retold around the fire. Dulce de leche appears in one form or another throughout the day, from breakfast pastries to desserts, while the open, all-inclusive bar is never far away—whether the morning's hunting has gone well or simply gone.

At a time when sporting opportunities are becoming increasingly constrained across much of Europe, Argentina's blackbuck offer a glimpse of what true abundance looks like. From a handful of animals released more than a century ago has grown a hunting experience found nowhere else on Earth: a genuine fair-chase pursuit founded on sound wildlife management rather than artificially maintained stock.

To watch thousands of blackbuck streaming across the pampas at first light is to witness one of the finest wildlife spectacles still available to the travelling sportsman. It is also a reminder that, when managed well, hunting and conservation can maintain healthy populations on the land, precisely because someone has reason to value them. ■

Go there: daviddenies.com/ / redstagpatagonia.com

GEAR GUIDE

Rifle: Custom rifle in 6.5×55 Swedish with Argentine Mauser Action

Optics: Leica Amplus 3–18×44 riflescope and Geovid Pro AB+ 10×42 rangefinders

Ammunition: 6.5 x 55 Swedish Hornady SST 140 gr

Additional hunting: Perdiz, duck and dove shooting, and axis deer hunting

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AN EVENING TO REMEMBER

Obvious rutting behaviour - time to break the calls out

PICTURE GETTY IMAGES: JIMROCK



What has been your experience of calling roebucks during the rut? **Steven Connolly** recalls an exciting stalk and a dramatic change in his fortunes

I have always found using roe calls to be extremely hit and miss — in fact, more miss than hit. If truth be told, whenever I watch the lads on YouTube achieving spectacular success with them, it leaves me feeling frustrated and convinced that I must be doing something wrong.

Over the years, I have tried every type of call imaginable, from Buttolo and Cherrywood to Nordic calls, often looking more like a French onion seller than a deer stalker, with multiple calls hanging around my neck. Despite my enthusiasm and determination, my success rate has remained disappointingly low. I eventually put it down to poor technique on my part and comforted myself with the thought that Scottish roe deer must be considerably

smarter than their more gullible southern cousins.

However, in July last year, my luck took an unexpected turn for the better.

One late July afternoon, while looking out of my living room window, I noticed obvious rutting behaviour from my resident buck. Encouraged by what I had seen, I decided to head out that evening to one of my permissions — a small area of mixed forestry and farmland some 12 miles from home.

As I glassed the ground from the truck, I spotted a doe approximately 500-metres away and around 600-metres from where I had intended to set up. The location I had chosen had always been a productive spot for intercepting deer with the prevailing wind in my favour, so I parked up



and walked the kilometre or so to get into position. Although I would still be some distance from the doe, I knew I would be downwind and in exactly the right place.

As I laid my rifle down to climb a fence and enter the woodland overlooking two barley fields, a magnificent buck suddenly jumped the fence from the woods into the field no more than 20-metres in front of me. I froze, one leg suspended awkwardly over the wire.

Fortunately, he was so focused on the distant doe that he never even noticed me and continued on his way towards her.

Had I missed my chance? Had I arrived just a little too late? It seemed inevitable that he would soon be far away on the opposite side of the field.

I finished crossing the fence and set up my sticks. The buck and doe had disappeared from view, but from my position, with the two fields spread out before me and forestry behind, I had an excellent vantage point. As the sun began to sink, I settled in and waited.

After about 15 minutes, I gave three short squeaks on the Buttolo call.

Without wishing to sound dramatic, all hell broke loose.

Almost instantly, a doe came crashing through the forestry directly behind me, stopping only five metres away when she spotted me. She barked repeatedly before bounding



“After about 15 minutes, I gave three short squeaks on the Buttolo call”

back through the trees. Moments later, another doe emerged from the woodland to my right, while a third came charging down the fence line straight towards me. Both converged on my position at the same time.

One caught my scent, barked and vanished. The other approached to within 10-metres before stopping and staring intently, trying to work out exactly what I was.

To say my heart was pounding would be an understatement.

Then I noticed that the original doe I had spotted from the truck had also appeared and crossed the entire field towards me, with the buck in hot pursuit. They joined the doe on the fence line — who was still watching me suspiciously — before taking off again, the buck relentlessly chasing the doe around the barley field.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally paused at around 120-metres. His head was up with a shoulder visible above the crop and I was able to take him cleanly.

The does barely reacted, eventually drifting away while

I began the task of locating the buck in the fading light. Following the tramlines through the standing barley to avoid causing unnecessary damage, the search proved no mean feat.

Much to my relief, I eventually found him. After carrying him into the woodland and preparing the carcass, I took a few moments to sit quietly and absorb what had just happened. Had I been a smoker, it would have been the perfect moment for a cigarette and a period of quiet reflection on what had been a truly fantastic experience.

As I drove home, replaying the evening's events in my mind, I struggled to make sense of it all. I had done nothing differently from any other time I had tried calling during the rut. The only explanation I can offer is that the conditions were simply perfect that evening.

The results certainly were.

So, what is the moral of the story?

If at first you don't succeed, keep trying. You might just get lucky next time. ■

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NIGHT SHOOTING

James Sutcliffe, BASC Deer Adviser, shares his views on Natural England's CL55 night licence, including who may need to apply for one and in what circumstances

Readers may well be aware that Natural England recently unveiled their brand new licensing system for those looking to shoot deer at night.

There seems to have been a lot of talk and even confusion on the matter, so I thought I would put pen to paper and explain in a bit more depth.

Let's start by looking at why someone might want to shoot deer at night. Well, that's a poor choice of phrase from myself as it is not a matter of want, it's a question of need.

Night licence are only available to individuals that can demonstrate a genuine need to control deer at night. Natural England has helpfully categorised these needs as preserving public health or public safety, preventing serious damage to property or conserving natural heritage. Anyone that can't satisfy one of these needs won't be shooting deer at night.

Many stalkers will be all too familiar with the issue of nocturnal deer. Be it deer that have been put under a lot of pressure, or deer that spend all day bedded up in a safe sanctuary before spreading out under the cover of darkness to wreak

havoc on neighbouring land.

In these instances, night shooting represents a highly effective tool in the toolkit of deer managers.

A lot of comments online seem to be claiming that night shooting of deer is disgusting and is reducing deer to vermin. I don't agree. Where there is a real need for it, night shooting can prove effective. I'm not going to claim that it can solve all deer problems alone, but when done in conjunction with other management techniques it can make a real difference.

There's no need to apply but do remember that a lot of deer managers are in very different circumstances and may need to resort to night shooting to meet their goals. This isn't a question of sport; it's a question of vital management.

So, what's changed? I've already said that night licence have been around for almost two decades, so why all the fuss?

Well, as anyone that has applied for one of the old licence can attest to, the old system was not exactly streamlined, user friendly or likely to result in the grant of a licence. The general consensus was that every reason not to grant a licence was looked at instead of looking for reasons to grant one.

After a lot of conversations and meetings with the government, this feedback has clearly sunk in, along with the ever-growing pressure to reduce problematic deer numbers in priority areas. BASC worked closely with Natural England in the development of the new licensing system which, based on feedback, is far simpler, more intuitive and more likely to be successful where needed.

The new licence is a 'class' licence. This is a form of licence that sits right in between an individual licence, (like the old night shooting licence) where applications were very individual and scrutinised, and a general licence (such as those to control pigeons etc.) where no application is needed, just a list of conditions that need to be followed.

A class licence requires a bit of

information, a registration and some reporting, but represents a far more streamlined and slick system for those that have a genuine need to use it.

How can one apply for a licence?

If you've read this far and are still thinking you need to apply, you may be thinking what criteria must be met to apply for a licence.

Natural England has put in place four "routes to entry" for those looking to apply for a CL55 night licence. These are:

1. Have been named on and operated under an individual (old type) deer night licence in the last six years, with no incidents or complaints.
2. Hold a "basic deer shooting qualification" (DSC1) as well as a dedicated deer night shooting qualification (such as the DMQ Deer Night Shooting Certificate) and have been actively stalking within the last three years.
3. Hold a basic deer shooting qualification, been actively stalking in the last three years as well as having been named on a licence to control other wildlife at night in the past seven years (for instance the NE licenced badger cull).
4. Hold an "advanced level deer qualification" (DSC2), demonstrate knowledge of night shooting techniques and equipment and have been actively controlling deer in the last three years.

As you can see, a fairly rigid set of criteria that should go some way to dispel the notion that every Tom, Dick and Harry will be out night shooting deer willy-nilly.

In terms of how night shooting may be carried out, users may use a spotlight, digital or image intensifying night vision or, for the first time, thermal imaging rifle scopes.

It has always been legal to use a thermal scope for deer in the day in England, but not at night. Now, however, due to the rapid advancement in thermal technology, thermal scopes meeting a certain spec may be used on deer at night under licence.

Compliance with the Deer Initiative Partnership Night Shooting Best Practice guide is a condition of any night licence so I urge people to have a read.

Hopefully this has been of some use and eased some concerns on the topic of night shooting of deer. As I said before, it's not for everyone and nor should it be. For those with a genuine need, it's now far more streamlined to get the approval to act. ■





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WHATSAPP

STARTING STALKING

As I finish this final instalment of the *Starting Stalking* series, I am struck by just how much more I could have included, but also that you have to draw the line somewhere.

Once the novice stalker has obtained the necessary firearms certificate, qualifications and equipment for deer stalking and management, the greatest challenge for most newcomers is finding a landowner willing to grant permission to stalk over their ground.

You may have been fortunate enough to secure access from the outset, but most people are not so lucky and will be searching for land of their own.

I see people on social media getting very irate about not being able to find stalking opportunities, while others seem to have access to hundreds, if not thousands, of acres.

While I understand their frustration, and believe there should be more opportunities for newcomers—whether via recreational stalkers or professional deer managers—for the long-term benefit of the sport, I always try to explain the situation from the landowner's perspective.

After all, would you really want someone you do not know walking onto your property with a high-powered rifle and shooting deer, potentially close to farm buildings, houses or villages?

Given the size of the UK's deer population, most areas already have stalkers managing land to some degree. This means the remaining ground is often at a premium and can be difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to. Some landowners simply enjoy seeing deer on their property, while others may have had negative experiences with stalkers in the past. The good news is that expanding deer populations and an increasing focus on effective deer management are creating new opportunities all the time, so do not lose heart.

As a minimum, novice stalkers must be able to demonstrate that they are trustworthy, competent and professional. Holding recognised



ON THE HUNT

In the final part of this series, **Chris Rogers** explores how to obtain stalking permission and effectively manage your own land and deer population

Positioning highseats on your land can aid in gaining safe shooting angles

qualifications will always help. You will also need appropriate insurance for the activities you intend to undertake on the property.

Insurance can be obtained through membership of many shooting organisations or via specialist providers, but not all policies offer the same level of cover. It is important to do your research and ensure your insurance is suitable for deer stalking. A policy that covers you on a rifle range may not necessarily provide cover while shooting in the field.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

So how do you find land to stalk if you have no existing contacts or introductions through friends and family?

Some people try cold-calling at farms or approaching farmers while they are working in the fields. While this can occasionally be successful, I am not convinced it is the best approach. Personally, I would be reluctant to grant permission to someone I had only just met in those circumstances.

A far better route is to become involved with a local game shoot. Most sizable farms and estates operate some form of shoot, and the gamekeeper or shoot captain will often have significant influence over who is allowed access to the land.

Helping out on shoot days is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that you are reliable, trustworthy and capable of following instructions while treating the land with respect. If you can be introduced through someone prepared to vouch for you, even better.

Joining the shoot's beating team is often an ideal way to get your foot in the door. If you prove yourself to be dependable and committed, opportunities to assist with pest control—whether pigeons, rats, rabbits or foxes—often follow. These can help build confidence in your abilities before you eventually approach them about culling the deer.

While many landowners now recognise deer as a problem that requires active management, other family members may not share the same view. Their opinions can often



influence whether permission is granted. A professional, courteous and understanding approach is therefore essential when dealing with potentially sceptical individuals.

If you have followed my suggested route and gained experience under the guidance of a mentor or professional stalker, references from them can also provide valuable reassurance that you are competent, responsible and knowledgeable.

GET IT IN WRITING

If you are fortunate enough to secure permission to stalk, you will need to establish what sort of arrangement the owner is happy for you to operate under.

Some may be perfectly happy with an informal agreement involving no financial exchange, in return for a regular supply of venison or venison products. Others

“ Having something in writing is advisable, if only to cover yourself should there be a report from a local resident or member of the public ”



search for shooting or stalking agreement templates.

WORKING WITH OTHER STALKERS

It is entirely possible that the land you gain access to already has other stalkers operating on it. They may be friends, acquaintances or complete strangers.

Regardless, clear communication and agreed rules are essential to ensure safety and prevent the arrangement deteriorating into competition. A race to shoot the greatest number of deer benefits nobody and can quickly result in poor management and lost permissions.

A written agreement outlining responsibilities, permitted areas and agreed stalking times is highly advisable. The last thing you want is to encounter another stalker unexpectedly or arrive on the ground only to discover someone else is already stalking it.

Before beginning, ensure you are provided with detailed maps clearly showing public footpaths, bridleways, permissive routes and any other access arrangements. It is also worth checking the boundaries against an Ordnance Survey map to ensure you fully understand the extent of your

permission and the location of all authorised access points.

You should discuss with the landowner how they would like you to deal with the general public, so you don't cause the owner or yourself any issues for the future, but ultimately, expect to see people trespassing in any area and at any time and avoid any confrontation while carrying a loaded firearm.

DEVELOP A CULL PLAN

It is also sensible to agree a cull plan covering both species and sex ratios.

Some landowners may simply want the maximum possible reduction of a particular species, while others may prefer a more balanced management approach. Even if the landowner has a reasonable understanding of deer numbers, it is worth conducting your own survey.

This can be as simple as recording sightings during regular visits or undertaking thermal counts over several evenings. Consider factors such as crop damage, browsing pressure, woodland regeneration, habitat condition and available cover when assessing population size and impact.

Once you have established a reasonable estimate of deer



may prefer a formal arrangement involving an annual rent, based on acreage, per deer shot or some other agreed basis.

The value of stalking rights varies considerably depending on location, acreage, species present, deer numbers and local demand.

Whatever arrangement is reached, I strongly recommend putting it in writing. This ensures both parties understand their responsibilities and expectations. The agreement does not need to be complicated; it could be a signed document or simply a written exchange of emails.

Having something in writing is advisable, if only to cover yourself should there be a report from a local resident or member of the public which the police then follow up.

When it comes to drafting such an agreement, there are a number of templates available online, just



Above left: Joining a local shoot in the beating line is a good way of getting a foot in the door
Above: Thermal surveys can help establish deer species, sex and numbers present



Taking photos of deer shot on your permission is a good way of keeping records

such as date, time, species, sex, age, shot location, carcass condition and final destination should all be recorded.

Not only does this demonstrate professionalism when supplying venison into the food chain, but it also provides valuable evidence of the work being carried out on behalf of the landowner.

An end-of-season report, supported by accurate records, will further demonstrate that the landowner made the right decision in granting you permission.

I hope you are all successful in finding land of your own and can experience the enjoyment that comes from observing, stalking and managing a deer population responsibly.

Deer are not only a remarkable sporting quarry but also provide a real connection to our hunter gatherer roots. A trophy from a mature male can serve as a lasting reminder of a memorable stalk, while the venison harvested is among the healthiest and most sustainable sources of wild meat available.

I hope this series has been of value to anyone considering taking up deer stalking and that it has helped set them on the path towards a lifelong passion for deer conservation and responsible management. ■

pressure, you can discuss realistic cull targets with the landowner.

Where population reduction is the objective, greater emphasis should be placed on the culling of females. A common rule of thumb is to remove two to four females for every male, although the correct approach will depend on local circumstances.

It's important that stalkers and landowners are realistic about what can be achieved. This will also depend on the number and species in surrounding areas, along with the culling pressure, or lack of it. Again, communication with neighbouring landowners and stalkers is the key to effective management.

KEEP GOOD RECORDS

Maintaining accurate cull records is an important part of responsible deer management. Information

“Where population reduction is the objective, greater emphasis should be placed on the culling of females”



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DEER STALKING

HUNTING EARLY-SEASON FALLOW

John Tooher takes us on a successful early-season hunt and shares some fascinating insights into this remarkable deer species.

The ancient grove of oaks had long been a favoured refuge for summering fallow bucks, providing both shelter and a place to rest. Situated on high ground and close to their feeding grounds of lush green grass in the scarlet poppy-covered meadows below, it offered the perfect habitat.

For many years, 1 September marked the opening of the Irish deer season. However, following changes within the relevant government departments and in line with England and Wales, the season now opens on 1 August. As this was

our first outing of the new season, we hoped to cull a fallow pricket or two and replenish our dwindling venison stocks. We were targeting animals with good body weight but poor head quality, deer that had put on condition feeding on early autumn crops ahead of the rut.

Our hunt would begin in the fields where the deer grazed at first light before following them into the woodland where they would spend the day sheltering.

THE MORNING HUNT

The dew shaken from the knee-high grass left a distinct trail as we hugged the hedgerow, glassing every inch of the gently swaying



A group of fallow but which one to take?

EARLY FALLOW HUNT

observe both the plantation and the valley below. Before long, we spotted a small bachelor group of sorrels and prickets grazing downhill alongside a mountain stream.

Using the terrain to conceal our approach, we closed the distance before the deer could move into the thick pine forest. I had only moments to identify a suitable animal, confirm the range and ensure there was a safe backstop. Taking the shot from the quad sticks, I carefully noted the location of the first deer through the scope. It stood beside a distinctive silvered branch protruding from a sawn stump.

A swift reload followed and a second pricket was taken from my concealed position. The remaining deer slipped from the clear-fell into the standing timber, unaware of our presence. We then set up the springbok sticks in a tripod configuration and hung my coat from them as a reference point in case we needed to range back to the firing position while searching for the downed animals.

Carrying the loaded rifle, I reduced both the magnification and BDC setting on the scope before carefully approaching the first deer. Using the tip of the moderator to touch the eye, I confirmed it was dead. The process was repeated with the second animal. By now it was mid-morning and the strengthening sunshine meant time was no longer on our side.

To keep the venison in the best

possible condition, we dragged both deer into the shade of the standing timber, bled them and carried out the gralloch. They were then suspended from a sawn branch to cool and drain before we hocked the legs, removed the heads and placed the carcasses into sterilised bags for extraction in our backpacks.

THE EVENING HUNT

That evening, my father Tom and I were again stalking the fields adjoining the woodland. Tom's keen eyes were the first to spot the antlers of a buck lying in the long grass beside a large beech tree. Upon closer inspection, the young buck appeared to have one eye hanging from the right side of its head, and the hunt immediately became a welfare matter.

Tom quickly formulated a plan to get us into a shooting position, and I was not about to argue with more than 60 years of deer-stalking experience. His suggestion was to use the river course to conceal our approach, and a careful stalk began.

The deer was not ideally positioned and we had to approach from below, as taking the high ground was not an option in the circumstances.

Eventually, we closed the distance to less than 180-metres and waited patiently. When the buck stood, we were able to confirm the injury was severe and that it was being



pasture for the slightest sign of a fallow deer. Their summer coats blend remarkably well with the landscape and it is often a flick of a distinctive long tail or the pale brown gleam of antlers that first catches the eye. In early autumn, even the swarms of insects that plague the deer can reveal their whereabouts.

As we entered the oak grove, we found couches, droppings and tracks among the ferns. All the signs suggested the deer had been feeding into the wind on a recently clear-felled area that had since been replanted with broadleaf trees. The stump of an old spruce provided the perfect seat, allowing us to

“Tom quickly formulated a plan to get us into a shooting position, and I was not about to argue with more than 60 years of deer-stalking experience”



plagued by insects. A humane dispatch was clearly required.

The shot was taken and, through the scope, I saw the animal collapse. Over my shoulder came the familiar instruction: "It's down. Reload."

There were mixed emotions. On one hand, it had been a successful stalk followed by a swift and humane dispatch. On the other, the buck was still young and could have developed into a fine animal in years to come.

While I carried out the gralloch, Tom was already mentally designing a system for suspending carcasses from the back of my Jeep.

It was only the beginning of the season, with many months still ahead of us and much of the cull yet to be completed in far less favourable weather. It had been a memorable start, made all the better by the experiences and memories we had shared together.

Tom with the injured young buck



POINTS OF INTEREST FOR EARLY AUTUMN HUNTS

Early autumn offers the advantages of longer daylight hours and more favourable temperatures. However, with cool mornings often giving way to warmer days, proper carcass care and prompt removal from the field to the larder become priorities.

For gralloching, I carry an orange Kifaru bag in my pack. Its bright colour makes it difficult to misplace in long vegetation. Inside, I keep disposable gloves and alcohol wipes, which are invaluable for cleaning blood and fat from knife blades and forearms, while also providing an additional line of defence against ticks. Cleaning knives with alcohol wipes helps prevent cross-contamination and ensures the blade is always ready for the next gralloch.

A set of S-hooks and a carcass net, which provides protection from flies and other insects, are extremely useful if the animal cannot be extracted immediately. Other essential items include a first-aid kit, spare knife blades or a backup knife, and a head torch.

When selecting clothing for early-season hunting, choose colours or patterns that suit the terrain, which will generally be greener than later in the year. With warmer temperatures, lightweight and breathable materials will prove far more comfortable. My preference is for a lightweight synthetic waterproof shell, with merino base layers added as temperatures begin to fall.

My fallow ground consists of a mixture of broadleaf woodland, pine forest and hazel coppice, surrounded by agricultural land. In early autumn, standing crops are common, so shot distances are typically less than 20-metres and are predominantly taken from quad sticks to clear the lush vegetation. Shooting from the prone position is rarely an option, although I always carry a bipod just in case. It also provides a safe and convenient way to rest the rifle while gralloching or glassing an area.

BE PREPARED

The start of a new season brings responsibilities, not least ensuring

that all equipment has been safety-checked and is ready for the months ahead.

Every hunter has their own routine when it comes to servicing firearms, checking optics, organising ammunition and preparing equipment for the field.

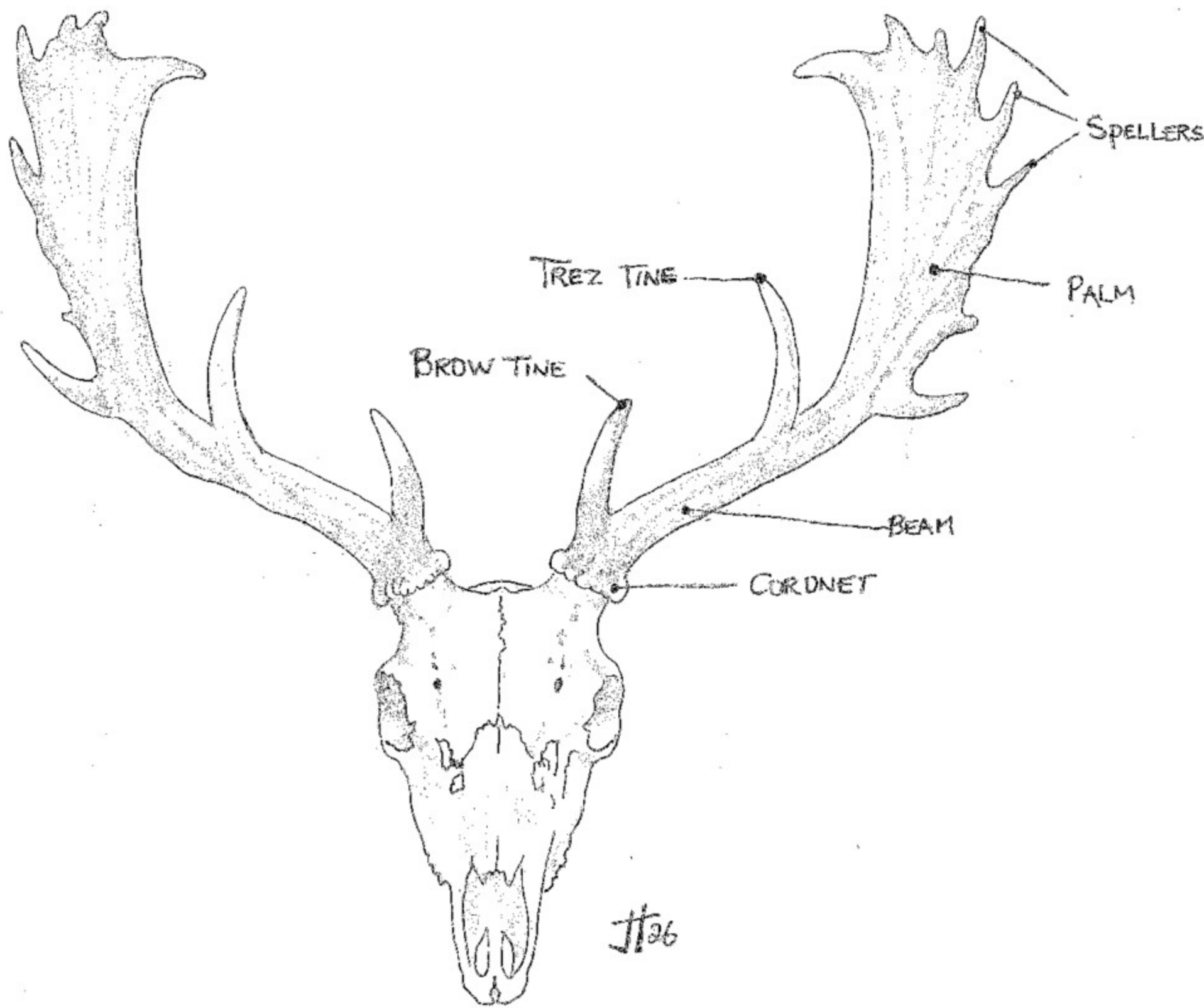
Proper preparation not only improves performance but also inspires confidence in your equipment. Taking the time to prepare now will ensure you are ready to deal with whatever conditions and opportunities the new season presents. Remember, however, that it is not only your equipment that needs to be prepared for the challenges ahead.

Regular trigger time is vital for consistent performance. I practise frequently, particularly from quad sticks, and ensuring they are set to the correct height is essential for accuracy. A useful guide is to stand with the sticks closed and resting on the ground, then adjust them until the cradles sit level with your chin.

Sticks are also useful for crossing fences, testing uncertain ground and confirming that a deer is dead. By using the ends of the sticks to touch the animal's eye, you can do so while maintaining a safe distance.

The fallow season opens with the males in season first, and they are often found in bachelor groups containing a range of age classes. This means that, while identifying the correct animal to cull may not be particularly difficult (see age classification right), obtaining a clear and safe shot may require both patience and careful observation. In these situations, quad sticks are indispensable, allowing the rifle to be supported comfortably while waiting for the ideal opportunity.

A final word of warning: another hunter lurks in the meadows and woodlands at this time of year — the tick. Despite the warm weather, always wear gaiters, long trousers and long sleeves to prevent them dropping into your boots or crawling up your arms and legs. Treat all hunting clothing with a suitable anti-tick treatment. I have found permethrin to be particularly effective.



THE FALLOW DEER

Of the three deer species found in Ireland, fallow deer are less territorial than either sika or red deer. However, they do maintain home ranges and will frequent some areas more than others, often favouring a mixture of agricultural land, forestry and open moorland.

Because they occupy such varied habitats, fallow deer can present real management challenges. As a result, a range of hunting methods must be employed, from slow-paced stalking through forestry to lying in wait at concealed positions or using strategically placed high seats at first and last light.

Fallow deer rut in October, with the timing largely determined by the shortening daylight hours. During the rut, bucks move into areas occupied by does and employ a breeding strategy unique among British and Irish deer species. Bucks gather in traditional locations, known as rutting stands, where they compete to attract females.

Competition for both territory and breeding opportunities can be intense, and bucks will often fight aggressively for dominance. Whereas sika stags whistle and red stags roar, fallow bucks produce a distinctive grunting or belching call to attract does and warn off rivals.

Evidence of rutting activity can often be found on surrounding bushes and saplings, where bucks have thrashed vegetation with their antlers and deposited scent from the preorbital and suborbital glands located around their eyes.

A mature fallow buck's antlers are palmated, resembling an open hand, rather than the long, branching tines characteristic of red and sika stags. Bucks begin developing these distinctive antlers from around their third year, with older animals ideally producing large palms, or "shovels", once they reach full maturity.

Unfortunately, due to the premature harvesting of many prime animals, such antlers are becoming an increasingly uncommon sight. If promising young bucks are consistently removed before reaching maturity, the result can be a population characterised by narrow, underdeveloped or poorly palmated antlers.

Interestingly for Irish hunters, despite being an introduced species, the fallow deer is the closest living relative of the giant Irish elk that once roamed the island.

COLOUR VARIATIONS

Fallow deer occur in four principal colour forms:

- **Common** – Light brown with white spots in summer, changing to grey-brown in winter. Characterised by a black inverted horseshoe marking surrounding the white rump and a black-and-white tail.
- **Menil** – Paler in colour, with more prominent white spots that remain visible throughout the year. The horseshoe marking and tail are brown rather than black.
- **Melanistic** – Very dark brown, dark grey or black in colour, with no visible horseshoe rump marking.
- **Leucistic** – White or cream in colour, lacking the horseshoe rump marking, but not albino, as the eyes remain dark.

On my ground, the first three colour forms occur regularly, with melanistic animals being the least common.



FALLOW DEER AGE CLASSIFICATION

Male fallow deer are described according to age classes.

In their first year, they are known as buck fawns and can be identified by the presence of the penis sheath, or "pizzle", which is clearly visible even at this early stage.

In their second year, they become prickets (above) and develop small, single-spike antlers. At three years old, they are classified as sorrel bucks, with the first signs of palmation beginning to appear in the upper tines.

At four years old, a buck becomes a sore, progressing later to a bare buck before eventually reaching full maturity as a master or great buck.

Female fallow deer are classified into four broad age groups: fawn, yearling, adult and old. ■

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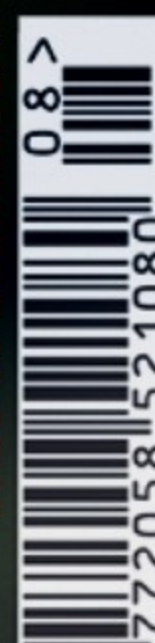
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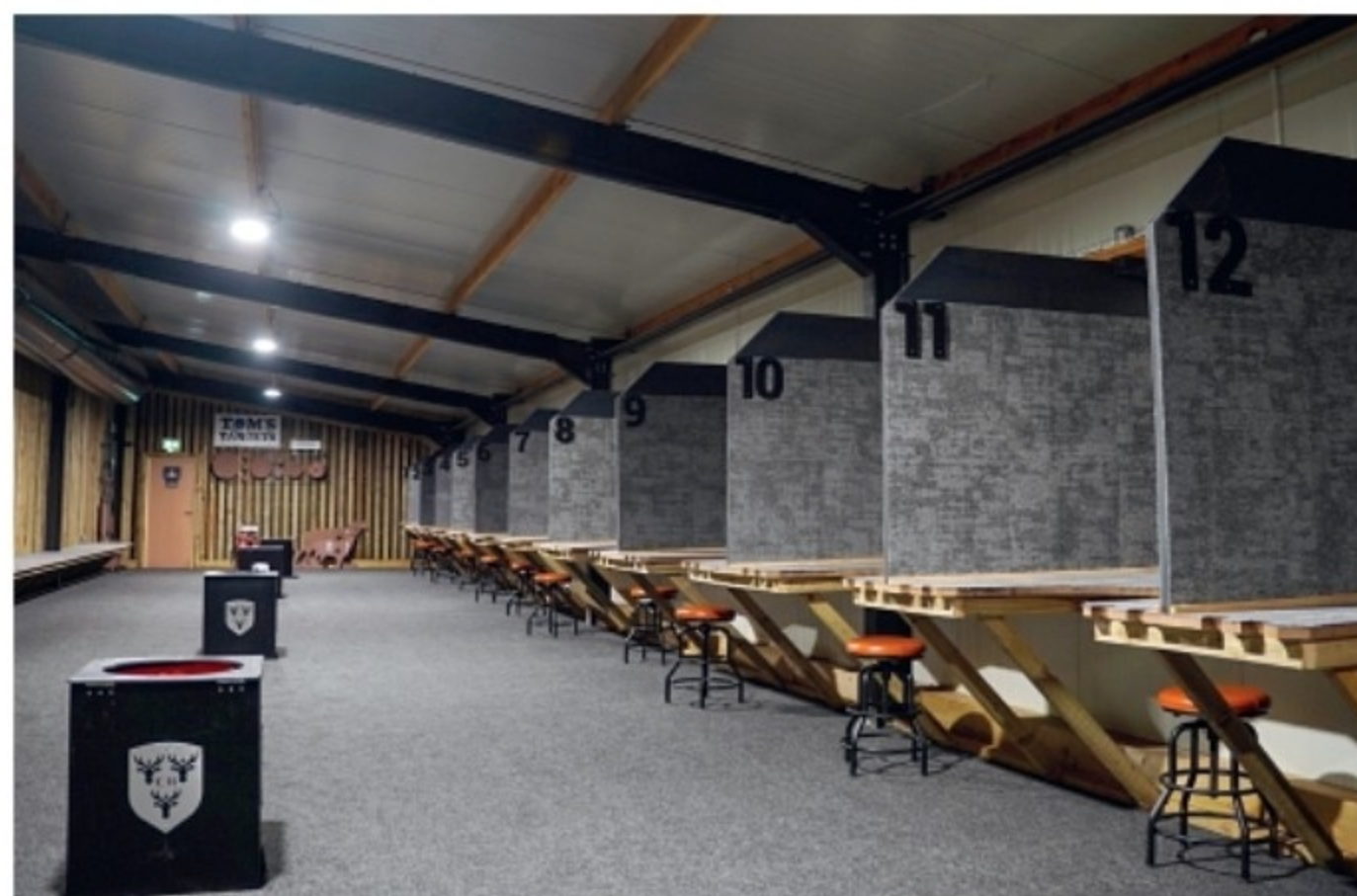
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FROM THE PRODUCERS OF

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5 OF THE BEST THERMAL SPOTTERS



The Hand held thermal monocular has revolutionised the way we hunt. Here we look at some of the best on the market

Thermal monoculars, or 'spotters' as they are more commonly known, have transformed modern pest control and deer management.

Where dense cover, poor light or complete darkness once made locating quarry difficult, if not impossible, thermal imaging has levelled the playing field by detecting an animal's heat signature rather than relying on ambient light. The result is greater

efficiency in the field, allowing hunters to operate confidently in almost any conditions while building a far clearer picture of the movements, numbers and behaviour of deer, foxes and rabbits on their ground. A quality thermal spotter also proves invaluable after the shot, making it far easier to locate fallen quarry, be it in dense woodland, standing crops or complete darkness.

Our choice are five of the best — though not necessarily the most expensive — on the market.

NOCPIX LUMI H35R

Proving that great things really do come in small packages, the LUMI Series combines ultra-compact dimensions with impressive thermal imaging performance. One of its standout features is the generous 10mm exit pupil, delivering a comfortable viewing experience and a bright, full image that's easy to acquire, even when scanning on the move.

Our pick of the range is the LUMI H35R, a genuinely pocket-sized thermal spotter that delivers premium performance thanks to its 640×512, 12µm thermal sensor with a sub-18mK NETD, fast 35mm F0.9 objective lens and advanced Reality+ AI image processing. It is capable of producing sharp, high-contrast images in even the most challenging conditions. Native magnification is 2.5x, extending to 20x with digital zoom, while the detection range reaches out to 1,800 metres.

A built-in 800m laser rangefinder, crisp 1024×768 AMOLED display, 32GB internal memory and replaceable 18650 battery make it a practical choice for serious vermin controllers and deer managers alike. Weighing just 385g and rated IP67, it's built for demanding days in the field.

RRP: £1,599 RRP

NOCPIX.UK



THE HIKMICRO LYNX 3.0 LQ35L

A compact thermal spotter that punches well above its weight, combining impressive image quality with practical field performance. Built around a 640×512, 12µm VOx thermal sensor with an exceptional sub-15mK NETD rating, it delivers crisp thermal detail even in poor weather and low-contrast conditions. The 35mm F1.0 objective lens provides a useful 1.9x base magnification, expandable to 15.2x via digital zoom, while detection ranges extend to an impressive 1,800 metres. An integrated laser rangefinder offers accurate distance readings out to 1,200 metres, making it a valuable companion for foxing and deer management. The 1920×1080 AMOLED display is bright and sharp, complemented by Hikmicro's Image Pro 3.0 processing and HSIS shutterless technology for smooth, uninterrupted viewing. Weighing around 355g, with IP67 weatherproofing, onboard video recording, 64GB internal storage and replaceable 18650 batteries, the LQ35L is an all-round choice for those demanding both easy handling and performance.

RRP: £1699.99

HIKMICROTECH.COM/EN/OUTDOOR-PRODUCTS



THE PULSAR TELOS XP50

The Telos XP50 represents the latest evolution in premium thermal spotters, combining exceptional image quality with an ergonomic design that's built for serious field use. At its heart is a 640×480, 17µm European-made Lynred thermal sensor with a sub 18mK NETD, producing superb detail and contrast even in rain, mist and high humidity. Paired with a fast 50mm F1.0 germanium objective lens, it offers 2.5x native magnification with digital zoom to 10x, while detection distances stretch to an impressive 1,800 metres. The crisp 1024×768 AMOLED display and Pulsar's advanced Image Boost processing deliver sharp, natural-looking thermal images, helping users identify quarry with confidence. The Telos XP50 also features 64GB of internal memory, integrated photo and video recording, Wi-Fi connectivity via the Stream Vision 2 app, an IPX7 waterproof rating and a rechargeable LPS 7i battery providing up to eight hours of runtime. Rugged and upgradeable, it's a first-class companion for professional pest control and deer managers.

RRP: TELOS XP50, £2689.95 - TELOS LRF XP50, £2949.95

PULSAR-VISION.CO.UK



PARD LEOPARD 640 LRF

The Leopard 640 LRF from PARD, is a very compact thermal monocular measuring just 169x58x48mm, while still offering an impressive blend of image quality and features. Built around a 640x512, 12µm VOx sensor with a sub-20mK NETD, it produces crisp thermal images even in challenging British outdoor conditions. A 35mm objective lens delivers 2.2x base magnification with digital zoom extending reach when required, while the integrated 1,000-metre laser rangefinder takes the guesswork out of range estimation and is neatly built into this slimline spotter. Detection range is a quoted 1,800 metres, making it equally at home for pest controllers and deer stalkers. The lightweight aluminium-bodied unit, has a IP67 weatherproof rating and weighs around 360g, including the single rechargeable 18650 battery. Extra functions like Wi-Fi connectivity, video recording and six colour palettes complete this well-specified and very portable package.

RRP: £1589.00

UK.PARD.COM



THE PIXFRA ARC 635 LRF

The Pixfra ARC 635 LRF takes the proven performance of the ARC thermal monocular range a significant step further by integrating a precision laser rangefinder into its compact, field-ready design. Built around a high-performance 640×512, 12µm thermal sensor and a sensitive sub-20mK NETD with a 35mm f/1.0 objective lens, the ARC 635 LRF delivers crisp thermal imagery, excellent target definition and reliable detection up to 1,800 metres. The seamlessly integrated laser rangefinder provides accurate distance readings out to 1,000 metres, allowing shooters to make faster, more informed decisions when judging range in the field. Despite the added capability, the unit remains lightweight, ergonomic and easy to operate.

The ARC 635 LRF is a versatile all-in-one thermal spotter that offers serious capability for both professional and recreational users alike.

RRP: £1589.95

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HANGING IN THE BALANCE



Above: Shadowing through the scope caused by poor scope or eye alignment

Why do we miss? **Will O'Meara** examines some intriguing research suggesting that rifle balance is a major factor – though not balance in the way you might imagine

Centre Mass/Gravity **below** the line of the bore: launch angle change due to recoil, rifle shoots high.



Centre Mass/Gravity **above** the line of the bore: launch angle change due to recoil, rifle shoots low.

Below: How Centre/Mass Gravity in line with the rifle's bore will change the launch angle and result in bullet deviation

The dark art of riflecraft leads us to believe that some rifles shoot exceptionally well while others simply don't. It also encourages the idea that some rifles are a pleasure to shoot, whereas others are not. In this article, I want to explore how a rifle behaves under recoil and how we, as shooters, can understand, manipulate and ultimately manage that recoil.

Recoil is just as important to me now as a hunter as it was during my military career. Quite often, it is the difference between a hit and a miss. We used to say that the "one-shot" phenomenon was a reasonable expectation at shorter distances. However, once you begin pushing beyond conventional ranges and scenarios, success becomes all about shot correction. That means seeing where the first round lands and applying the appropriate correction, with wind usually being

the greatest influencing factor. If you cannot see where your miss strikes, you have no idea what correction to make.

The same principle applies when hunting. Seeing the bullet strike and observing the animal's reaction is vital. I believe that a small but significant number of deer that are shot and killed are mistakenly presumed to have been missed simply because the shooter never saw the strike.

Too often I hear clients say, "It sounded like a good hit." That immediately tells me they had no visual confirmation of the bullet strike. Observing the impact comes down to two things: shot discipline and recoil management.

By shot discipline, I mean activating the trigger without disturbing the sight picture and keeping your eyes open until the bullet strikes the animal. It sounds simple enough, doesn't it? In reality, this discipline is developed through focused practice, mental

engagement and a consistent emphasis on process.

Dry-firing is an excellent example. Taking yourself through every stage of the shot and developing a repeatable routine. A short-routine provides a default process that you know will produce results under real-world conditions. It can be as simple as a checklist: body position, butt placement, cheek weld, sight picture, parallax, trigger finger position, breathing and trigger activation. Every one of these elements requires deliberate practice.

In my opinion, trigger activation is the single most important factor, followed by sight picture and then body position.

An Olympic shooter once asked me a leading question:

"What is the most common reason for missing?"

The answer was much simpler than you might think.

"Because you're not aiming at the target."

That can mean many things. You may have rushed the shot, aimed at the wrong target or failed to establish the correct sight picture.

Many stalkers also miss because something has taken them off target. Common causes include snatching at the trigger, parallax error, shadowing in the scope, or incorrectly applied windage or elevation.

So, part of the equation lies with the shooter and part with the rifle.

Let's look at the rifle's role.

Over the years I have been fortunate enough to own rifles capable of extraordinary accuracy. I attribute that to good design, quality materials, a properly set-up system and both consistent and well matched ammunition.

Among those rifles were a few that, despite their exceptional accuracy, were thoroughly unpleasant to shoot. Let me explain what I mean by that. It wasn't simply the amount of felt recoil that mattered, but how the rifle behaved under recoil.

My favourite rifles recoiled straight back with very little muzzle rise or muzzle flip. My least favourite were those that threw the muzzle upwards and off to one side, giving the impression that the rifle was twisting or torquing during recoil.

So why do some rifles behave so differently?

That was exactly the question Eddi Graef of PSE Riflestocks

set out to answer. Not one to ponder aimlessly (pardon the pun), Eddi applied his engineering background and rifle-building expertise to the problem. The results led him to a clear conclusion: rifle balance. More importantly, they showed him how to measure it and revealed the profound effect it has on recoil behaviour.

THE MAN

Eddi is an engineer who understands that science can explain not only how things work, but why. That pursuit has been a lifelong passion. His curiosity, commitment and meticulous attention to detail have resulted in a range of rifle stocks that sit at the forefront of both materials technology and design.

His latest innovation was inspired by a simple question: why do rifles behave so differently under recoil? The result is the Rifle Balance—a straightforward, easy-to-use tool designed to measure a characteristic that has long been overlooked.

Most shooters think of rifle balance in terms of front-to-back weight distribution. PSE, however, approached the problem differently. Their focus was on the rifle's balance above and below the bore's centreline. The Rifle Balance tool provides a simple and accurate way of measuring this, revealing an aspect of rifle dynamics that has a significant influence on recoil behaviour.

THE SCIENCE

The ideal objective is to achieve a zero launch angle when the rifle is fired. In simple terms, this means the muzzle does not rise under recoil, but instead the rifle moves directly backwards in a straight line. In theory, this can only be achieved when the rifle is perfectly balanced above and below the bore's centreline. However, balance is only part of the equation. Rigidity also plays a crucial role.

When a rifle recoils, any component that lacks sufficient rigidity, or is not securely connected to the barrelled action, fails to move at precisely the same moment. This loss of synchronisation can occur at any junction between components. The first is between the recoil lug and the stock, but it also applies to the bottom metal, magazine, scope mounts and the scope itself. The greater the rigidity and the tighter the tolerances between these components, the truer your measured balance will be in practice.

Carbon fibre offers significant advantages in this respect. As both a stock and bedding material, it provides exceptional rigidity while also helping to dampen recoil. The microscopic air pockets within the composite, together with the orientation of the fibres, absorb and dissipate energy, while carbon fibre's outstanding stiffness-to-weight ratio has long been proven in high-performance engineering and motorsport.

Achieving a true zero launch angle in a hunting rifle is extremely difficult, if possible at all. However, it is certainly possible to get close. Most of us have encountered rifles that produce the same point of impact with different bullet types, bullet weights and velocities. That level of consistency is only achievable when the entire rifle system is exceptionally well balanced.

To validate his theory, Eddi enlisted professional physicists to investigate the relationship between rifle balance and launch angle. Their findings were conclusive and closely matched his own findings.

One particularly interesting discovery was that a rifle balanced

The PSE Rifle Balance uses two sets of frame mounted rollers which allow the rifle to rotate freely and test its Centre Of Gravity specifically in relation to the centre of the bore



just 2mm away from its centreline produced a launch angle that translated into approximately 10mm of deviation at 100 metres. Conversely, a rifle balanced precisely about its centre of gravity produced a zero launch angle—effectively eliminating muzzle flip. In a more exaggerated example, a rifle with its centre of gravity offset by 20mm produced a point-of-impact shift of 97mm at 100 metres—almost four inches. It leaves little doubt that rifle balance matters.

I have previously taken part in some of Eddi's testing, comparing a balanced rifle with an unbalanced rifle on the range. Over the course of several hundred rounds—albeit with only one shooter, myself—the results were striking. The unbalanced rifle produced an average group size of 0.67 MOA, while the balanced rifle averaged just 0.29 MOA. Both are impressive across that sample size and sound like a small difference, until you consider that it actually represents a 100% differential. In practical terms, the balanced rifle delivered groups that were more than twice as tight.

Another interesting finding from Eddi's work was the positive effect that a sound moderator can have

on recoil behaviour. By reducing muzzle flip, a moderator can make it significantly easier to maintain the sight picture through the shot. Eddi demonstrated this with examples using his own .300 Winchester Magnum, weighing 4.4kg and firing 208-grain bullets—a formidable yet exceptionally well-balanced combination.

Eddi also made the observation that the sight picture and recoil that the shooter experiences are simply afterthoughts to what is the greatest influence on ultimate accuracy: the bullet's journey down the barrel.

We all know that the most unpredictable part of the shooting equation is the shooter. We also know there are countless variables that can influence shot placement, particularly in a hunting environment. With that in mind, it makes perfect sense to eliminate as many equipment-related variables as possible and extract every last ounce of precision from the rifle.

THE TOOLS

PSE's Rifle Balance is a simple but highly effective diagnostic tool designed to determine a firearm's Centre Of Gravity (COG) in relation to the centre of the bore and ensure

your rifle is correctly balanced. It allows you to experiment with different scopes, scope heights, bottom metal and other components to achieve a rifle that is as close as possible to perfect balance.

Once the rifle is balanced, there are several techniques the shooter can use to manage recoil.

Shoulder position: Rather than placing the butt firmly into the pocket of your shoulder, try moving it slightly inwards towards the centre of your chest—but definitely not on your collarbone unless you fancy a trip to A&E. Ideally, your shoulders should be square to the target, with the butt positioned on the chest, directly beneath your eye.

The closer the butt is to the centre of your body mass, the less the rifle has a tendency to hinge or pivot under recoil. It also allows more of your body mass to absorb the recoil.

Cheek weld: The traditional approach of burying your cheek into the stock has its benefits, but as the rifle moves rearwards under recoil, it can force your cheekbone upwards, lifting your eye out of alignment with the scope.

Instead, try aligning the top of the cheekpiece with the corner of your mouth. It is important to achieve a clear, balanced sight picture and ensure your scope's parallax is correctly adjusted. A simple way to check this is to gently bob your head while looking through the scope. If the crosshairs appear to move, the parallax needs adjusting.

Hand position: This is another often-overlooked factor. You'll notice that many experienced shooters keep their thumb on the same side of the stock as their fingers, rather than wrapping it around the grip. This helps prevent the thumb from shifting under recoil. Even small movements can transfer through the wrist, elbow and shoulder, subtly disturbing the rifle.

Rifle ergonomics, stock design and butt-pad construction also play their role in recoil management. However, I hope I have demonstrated that good rifle balance is one of the most effective ways of reducing muzzle flip and ultimately improving accuracy. ■

To learn more about rifle balance check out riflebalance.com

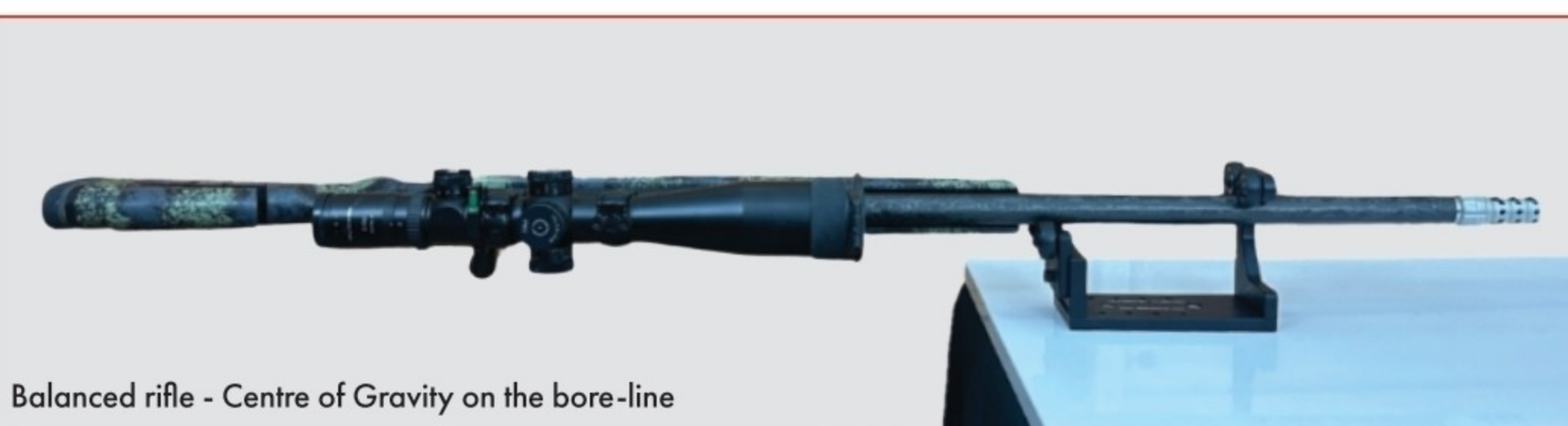
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Unbalanced rifle - Centre of Gravity above the line of the bore



Unbalanced rifle - Centre of Gravity below the line of the bore



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PICTURE: STEVE LEE

BARBECUED BUTTERFLY HAUNCH OF VENISON

WITH A ROSEMARY GARLIC AND OLIVE OIL SEASONING

This recipe is from our guest editor, **José Souto's** book *Venison*

INGREDIENTS

Serves 6 (depending on size of haunch)

1 venison haunch, boned and butterflied
3 tbsp rosemary
4 large cloves garlic
75g Maldon salt
150 ml olive oil

THE METHOD

- 1) Take the haunch and cut the shank off at the joint. Keep this for another day as a shank is too tough to cook on a BBQ. Open bone the thigh by cutting down onto the bone, following it then cutting around it.
- 2) Once the bone is out, place

a cut either side of where the bone had been to flatten out the venison and make it all one thickness. (Ask your butcher to butterfly it for you if you have problems)

- 3) Place the rosemary, garlic, olive oil and salt into a liquidiser or food processor and blitz to make a paste
- 4) Use Maldon salt as it has large flaky crystals which make a good paste without being too 'salty'.
- 5) Take the paste and rub well over all the venison.
- 6) Place venison into a plastic bag and pour the rest of the paste over it, then tie a knot in the bag and leave for 2 hours or place in your fridge overnight.
- 7) If it has been in the fridge overnight, take it out and allow to sit for an hour or so

before cooking.

- 8) Light the BBQ and allow it to get hot. In the case of charcoal, allow to burn until the coals turn white.
- 9) Scrape off the marinade from the venison.
- 10) Place the meat on the BBQ and seal well on both sides, then remove from BBQ.
- 11) Take a large square of foil doubled over 4 times with the shiny side out to reflect a little heat.
- 12) Place this thick foil in the centre of the BBQ and then place the venison on top. Close the BBQ lid and allow to cook, turning after 15-20min then cook for a further 10-15min.
- 13) Venison should be cooked to rare or medium then allowed to rest for 10min before slicing and serving.

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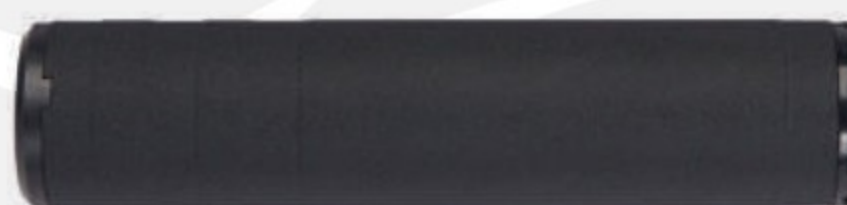
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ECONOMICS & CONSERVATION

Chris Rogers examines the measures being taken to safeguard hunting as a key component of sustainable wildlife-based economies in the face of growing pressure

With the roe rut beginning for most stalkers around the middle of July, it is a time of great excitement across the UK as they attempt to call in the buck of their dreams.

Throughout the spring and summer, the team has been busy attending the various shows held across England and Scotland. As I write this, only The Stalking Show has taken place, but it is now, without question, the busiest event for the CIC measuring team.

Unfortunately, due to a mix-up by one of our suppliers, a number of CIC medals bearing the word "Ireland" on the reverse were distributed instead of those correctly marked "United Kingdom". While many of these medals have already been recalled and replaced, anyone who discovers one should get in touch via the website to arrange a replacement free of charge.

Back in April, the 72nd CIC General Assembly was held in Vienna. By any measure, it was a landmark gathering, bringing together more than 700 participants, including ministers, diplomats, policymakers, scientists and conservation leaders from across four continents and 43 countries. Held under the theme of the Wildlife Economy, it became one of the best-attended events in the organisation's history.

At the Assembly, the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation formally adopted a resolution entitled *Advancing the Wildlife Economy through Sustainable Use*. This substantial policy statement calls upon governments, international institutions and conservation partners to recognise and support wildlife-



based economies as a cornerstone of effective biodiversity conservation.

The resolution comes at a time of growing tension within international conservation policy. Blanket prohibitions on hunting, increasing restrictions on the trade of wildlife products, and fragmented regulatory frameworks are placing mounting pressure on the incentive structures that underpin conservation efforts in some of the world's most biodiverse regions. By affirming that sustainable use, including regulated hunting, contributes directly to habitat conservation, species management and local livelihoods, the resolution makes clear that well-functioning wildlife economies are not a threat to biodiversity but one of its most reliable and proven safeguards.

As the resolution states: "The wildlife economy is a cornerstone

of effective conservation, linking biodiversity, livelihoods and responsible use." It recognises that billions of people depend upon wildlife resources for food, income and cultural identity, and that the erosion of wildlife-based economies undermines both conservation outcomes and human wellbeing. It also recalls international commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, both of which explicitly recognise sustainable use as a pillar of effective biodiversity policy. Furthermore, it expresses concern that these principles are not consistently reflected in national and international decision-making.

In its operational provisions, the resolution calls upon governments to integrate wildlife-based economies



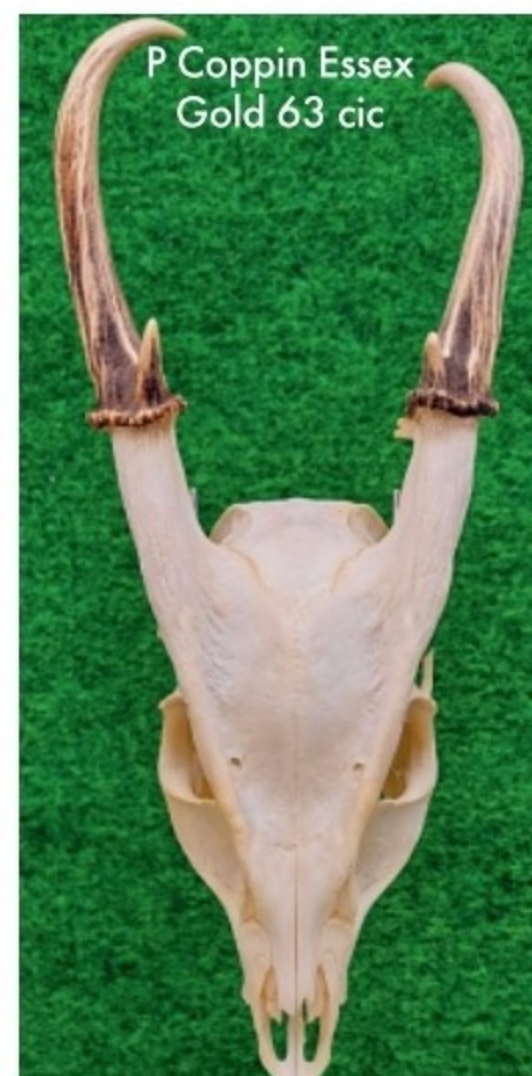
T Ewin Norfolk
Gold 70.5 cic



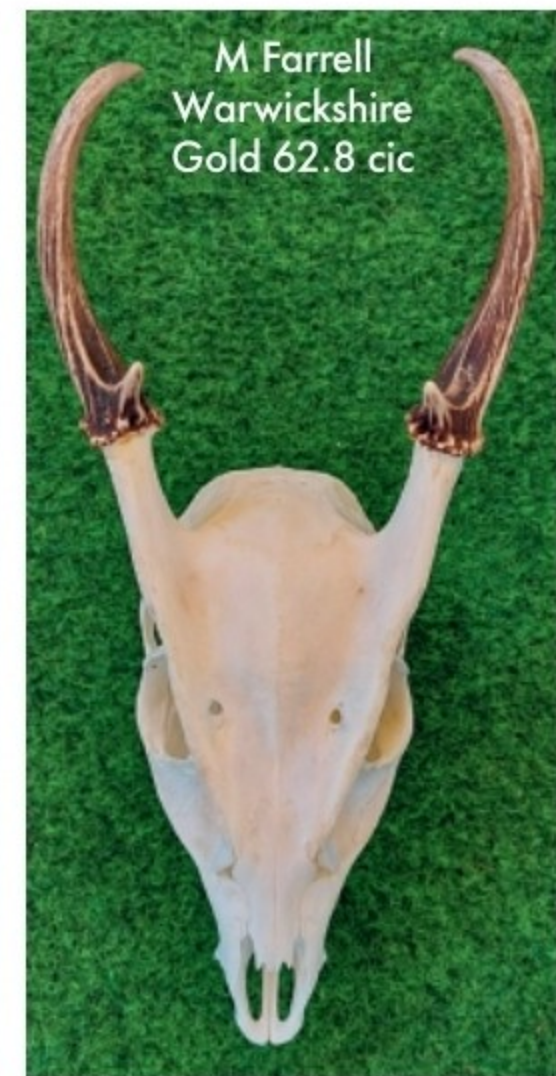
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P Coppin Essex
Gold 63 cic



M Farrell
Warwickshire
Gold 62.8 cic

into national conservation and rural development strategies and to ensure science-based, adaptive management of wildlife populations. It urges international institutions and policymakers to avoid restrictions that are not evidence-based and which undermine conservation outcomes, to recognise regulated hunting as a legitimate conservation tool, and to promote policy coherence across biodiversity, trade and rural development frameworks.

The private sector and conservation partners are encouraged to invest in wildlife-based enterprises that deliver measurable conservation outcomes and support community benefit-sharing mechanisms. The CIC Secretariat, Divisions and Members are also tasked with developing a CIC Wildlife Economy Framework and strengthening the organisation's advocacy within the CBD, CITES and IUCN. ■



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D Wootton
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Silver 60.8 cic



T Phillips
Northamptonshire
Bronze 164.82 cic



J Smith Northamptonshire
Silver 173.69 cic



S Voak Suffolk
Non Medal 158 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



S Voak Bedfordshire
Silver 268 cic



M Thomas Norfolk
Bronze 239 cic



S Bright Norfolk
Bronze 234 cic

RESIST THE CALL

As **Chris Dalton** looks forward to the upcoming spectacle of the roe rut, he advises patience and self-control when it comes to using calls



Warm, humid and damp, good conditions for calling in bucks

At this time of year, most roe stalkers will be thinking about the rut; I am no different as we approach such a significant period in the calendar. However, recent events have brought the rut into particular focus.

The first of these was a young roebuck that had suddenly appeared on some private ground close to the house. I picked up evidence of his presence a few days before I actually saw him. His territorial marking was distinctive; he was prone to scuffing up the vegetation and bracken by pawing with his hooves and slashing at the turf with his antlers, often flinging clumps of grass some distance as he thrashed around.

I caught up with him a few mornings later and, at first glance, thought he was a cracking buck. However, a closer look through the binoculars revealed that what I had initially mistaken for a good head was, in fact, a single pair of very long, thin and viciously sharp antlers with no tines — a murder buck. These beasts are so called because, when fighting, an antler configuration such as this can lead to death or severe injury, particularly around the eyes.

I once watched a roe doe being hard-pressed by a similarly adorned young buck, which eventually killed her. I was unable to intervene in time and, when I got to examine the animal, the spiked antlers had penetrated her flank and entered her abdomen. So this buck quickly ended up in the larder; I did not want him fighting with any other bucks or pressing any more ladies later in the month.

ROBUST RESPONSE

In addition to this incident, the usual messages and calls have already started.

"Are they rutting yet?" I am asked.

They get earlier each year; it is a bit like the appearance of Christmas decorations in garden centres. The first such question came in early June.

"No, and they are not likely to. We are only just out of May, for goodness' sake," was my robust response.



Selective culling remains important during the rut. Any buck exhibiting antler malformation that could cause injury to other deer should be removed at the earliest opportunity

I also found it amusing to follow the many comments on social media surrounding the rut, along with the long threads debating — often deteriorating into argument — whether it has, in fact, started or not.

I often wonder what members of the public think the source of the unusual squeaking noises is as they enjoy a quiet evening walk along a favoured woodland track.

It reminded me of a young couple who stayed with us at Garryloop last year, whom I convinced that I could call in a mating haggis — they are living critters, of course — using a piece of cherry wood. I did own up before they left.

On a serious note, many of our woodlands will already be echoing to the "peep, peep" coming from one or other of the myriad calls available, as stalkers give their best imitation of a roe contact call.

All they are doing by starting

early is educating the deer or, worse, stressing the animals — particularly the does, which will be highly protective of their offspring.

The rut is a fantastic time to be out; there is nothing to beat the thrill of a fox-red roebuck in prime condition charging to your call. But it is also a time to exercise restraint and select the animal to cull in accordance with your predetermined plan.

Moreover, if you want to increase your chances of calling in a buck, wait until you have seen some activity and avoid the temptation to start calling too soon. As with most things in stalking, patience is king. ■

MORE INFORMATION

Chris Dalton is the founder of South Ayrshire Stalking. Visit ayrstalk.co.uk

PRECISION RIFLE SHOOTING

CZECH ADVENTURE

customs officials. Once the checks have been completed, travelling through Europe is straightforward. Just ensure that your paperwork is well organised and use common sense when storing your firearms.

After driving across Germany, we had an overnight stay in Nuremberg before travelling the final few hours across the Czech border and arriving at the range for the zero check and sight-in day. What we had not expected was the sunshine, Mediterranean temperatures, or the opportunity to be shooting from an aircraft. My latest batch of Lapua ammunition seemed to relish the warmer weather, with the chronograph showing a small increase in muzzle velocity and a tightening of the ES/SD.

Unusually, full access was given to most of the props and targets, although the course of fire had not yet been released. This gave us the opportunity to test some of the props and our shooting positions. This was especially useful on the more unusual props, such as the fuselage. It turns out that shooting from a cockpit window is trickier than shooting from a car window, and we quickly realised that the thinner doors produced more vertical

Ryan Charlton and his wife, Annie, head to the Czech Republic to shoot one of PRS's new European Pro Series events, where they face challenging conditions and some unusual props

Above: The very cool plane stage

Right: Annie stood at the ready, on top of the connex pyramid

One of the most exciting developments in PRS Rimfire has been the establishment of a European Pro Series, offering UK shooters the chance to test themselves against Europe's top competitors at a range of different venues. I would strongly encourage anyone who is interested to "take the plunge", as these matches offer not only the chance for a European road trip but also the opportunity to make new friends and see some great places.

Travelling with firearms is not as difficult as it may first appear. Be aware of, however, to check the local firearms laws and any paperwork required to enter the country. Match Directors are used to advising on the requirements of the host nation and will always provide a letter of invitation to explain the purpose of your visit.

For our trip to the Czech Republic, a Transit Permit was required, which is available via the Czech Embassy in London. After an email enquiry, we were sent the application forms, and the Deputy Consul was incredibly helpful throughout the process. Once our online forms had been completed and copies of our passports, FACs and invitation letters had been scanned and emailed, we were informed that the permits were ready to collect.

This had to be done in person at the Embassy in London, so Mrs C and I planned a day out around our appointment. There is no charge for sports shooting, only for hunting, and the permit is valid for the duration of your stay in the country.

With all our paperwork in place, we headed for the Channel Tunnel. At this point, you must declare that you are travelling with firearms. The immigration staff will direct you to the declaration building before you hand over your paperwork to the



wobble than we would have liked.

Alongside the fuselage were more traditional props, including large tyres, cable reels and a skills stage. The crowning glory of the range had to be the impressive pyramid, constructed from three separate shipping containers to create stages on three different levels, as well as the perfect place to display the flags of all 13 nations represented.

Something else we noticed was that the targets were somewhat larger than those we would typically shoot in a UK match. However, it quickly became apparent that their size was necessary to compensate for the unpredictable winds. With so many berms, slopes and valleys, the wind whipped and swirled in every direction. With wind flags pointing one way and dust blowing another, this was going to be a really interesting match.

After a fantastic dinner at our hotel, we had an early night, ready for the 7am start at the range. Early starts are commonplace when shooting abroad. Given the high temperatures forecast, the prospect of finishing before 2pm was a welcome one and made the early start much more appealing.

Arriving at the range that morning, we took the time to chat with fellow shooters, catching up with old friends, many of whom we had first met in the UK at the World Championships the previous year. The zero ranges opened promptly at 7.30am, with the match briefing scheduled for 8.30am. After the usual safety briefing, we all headed off to our designated first stage.

We started beneath the connex, shooting two targets from a metal frame at different angles. This forced an almost 180-degree pan between each shot, which was fine, except that Annie was caught out by not realising how blinding the sun was when stepping out from the shade of the container. Needless to say, she very quickly learned to shoot with her cap on. I, on the other hand, got off to a smooth start, cleaning the first stage.

Our next stage was a Know Your Limits (KYL) stage shot from some tyres, engaging two targets before changing position. Although this was a hit-to-move stage, you still

had to change position every two shots. Fortunately, Annie and I both cleaned the stage, but it was easy to see how trying to keep track of your hits and position changes could trip you up mentally.

The next two stages were familiar to us, both involving shooting from vehicles. One featured a large digger, which proved challenging both because of the number of targets and the rather awkward final position on the rear tyre. This made it difficult to keep the rifle in position, as it kept slipping off. It also caused the vast majority of shooters to time out, as the awkward final position forced you to slow down in order to keep the rifle level.

Our final stage of the morning was a prone stage, shot from the back of a trailer that sloped downwards. Fortunately, we were able to set our parallax before the stage. For experienced competitors, this also provided an opportunity to adjust the bipod height to suit the slope, allowing a comfortable view of all the targets. Again, this stage involved single shots and a large pan of the rifle, so fast target acquisition was the key skill.

After this stage, lunch was served, which is certainly something other Match Directors could emulate. Expecting a sandwich and a bag of



crisps, we were pleasantly surprised by flavoursome pulled beef, mashed potato and a roast vegetable poke bowl. It was absolutely delicious and provided the perfect fuel for the afternoon.

The afternoon began on the skills stage, engaging two targets at different distances from the traditional five positions. We then moved up onto the connex stages, where we realised just how much the wooden railings wobbled. Strict instructions were given for everyone to remain still while shooters completed the stage. A flurry of activity then ensued as people moved or prepared themselves to shoot.

Above: Both food and props were better than average

Below: Ryan on his way to taking third place overall and Top International Shooter

“This stage involved single shots and a large pan of the rifle, so fast target acquisition was the key skill”



One particularly interesting stage was the troop line – or, more accurately, two troop lines. One was shot from the left-hand position, near to far, and the second from the right-hand position, far to near. To add another layer of complexity, the hit-to-move rule applied across both sides.

By now the heat was beginning to take its toll, and concentration was beginning to fade. Many shooters lost points after losing track of either their position or their target. The key to success was talking yourself through the stage aloud, confirming which target you were engaging in order to stay focused.

As always after the final stage, Annie and I lent our spare magazines to the Range Officers, and it was great to see them making some impacts after having to watch everyone else enjoying themselves all day.

Whilst we always make a point of thanking the ROs for giving up their time, I would like to say just how impressed we were by the ROs here. The match was run in English, but every RO spoke at least two other languages, delivering stage briefs in multiple languages to make life easier for the international competitors. I even tried to catch

Annie letting one of the RO's shoot her rifle. It's nice for them to get some trigger time too



“The chronograph showing a small increase in muzzle velocity”

one out by speaking Russian, but he simply replied in fluent Russian.

We headed back to the hotel tired and hot, but with the whole afternoon to relax, having left the range by 3pm.

Sunday began with a zero check before heading to our opening stages. This time we were shooting on the opposite side of the range, which meant learning a completely different set of wind calls. On Saturday, there had been a fairly consistent headwind, with the directional changes coming from the target positions. This meant either a left or right hold, depending on which side of the range the targets were located. Today, however, the wind was full-value, switching continuously from left to right across the range. With few flags to guide us, we had to rely on mirage and the vegetation around the targets to make our wind calls.

Our first stage involved engaging three targets from the boot of a car before moving to the prone position, changing position every three shots. Initially, we planned to place the rifle into the car through the open side door—the designated shooting position for firing from the boot. However, our first shooter came up with a much better solution. He ran to the back of the car, placed the rifle in the boot, then ran to the side-door shooting position. This not only made placing the rifle into a stable shooting position much quicker, but also avoided trying to squeeze the rifle into the boot without knocking either it or the scope on the roof. We all followed his example, allowing

most of us to complete the stage within the time limit.

Next, we moved up the hill to the back of the range, where the wind was completely unpredictable. This is where the importance of spotting really comes into its own. Watching each shot carefully through the binoculars gives the best indication of a bullet's flight and the prevailing wind direction. Annie was first to shoot the troop line stage—near to far on the way out, change position, then the same targets from far to near. To demonstrate just how changeable the wind was, she had to shoot the first sequence holding left edge and the return sequence holding right edge.

Completing the hill stages brought us back onto the adjacent range, where we were now shooting into a completely different wind because these stages ran at right angles to the hill. I noticed that the line of national flags beneath the connex was blowing in the same direction as the wind we could feel on the firing point. Watching other shooters confirmed this, so I told Annie to use the flags to confirm her opening wind call.

The plane stage proved less difficult than we had anticipated, despite a wobble on my first two shots. That didn't bother me too much. After all, I was in the Czech Republic, shooting from an aircraft in 28°C sunshine. What could be cooler than that?

To make life even better, lunch on day two lived up to the standard set on day one: hoisin pork with sticky rice and Asian slaw. After enjoying our lunch, we tackled the final three stages: rocks, a wooden barrier and tyres. Although we used the flags to fine-tune our initial wind call, they were by no means a guarantee of consistency. Annie was caught out on the rocks by three separate wind changes during her stage. Fortunately, she had already done enough to maintain her position as second lady.

I just missed out on second place, finishing third overall. In an unexpected Brexit benefit, I also finished as Top International, with Annie taking second and Michael Look (USA) rounding out the international podium. ■



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(*Based on the comparison to K318i (2025))

THE MODERN MAGNUM

Rob Hardy looks at the short history of Hornady's 7mm PRC and explores the pros and cons of the most modern interpretation of the classic 7mm magnum

Introduced by Hornady in 2022, the 7mm PRC (Precision Rifle Cartridge) is the latest chapter in the long and distinguished history of the .284-calibre sporting cartridge. Designed from the outset as a modern long-range hunting and target round, it aims to deliver everything shooters like about the 7mm Remington Magnum while eliminating many of the compromises inherent in that older design.

The story begins with Hornady's successful PRC family. Following the introduction of the 6.5 PRC and .300 PRC, the company identified a gap between the two. Many US hunters wanted the excellent ballistic performance of modern heavy-for-calibre 7mm bullets without stepping up to the recoil and rifle weight of a .300 magnum. Hornady necked down the .300 PRC case (itself derived from the .375 Ruger case), resulting in the 7mm PRC, a cartridge engineered around long, high-ballistic-coefficient projectiles and modern rifle actions.

Unlike the 7mm Remington Magnum, introduced in 1962, the 7mm PRC is a non-belted design. It headspaces on its 30-degree shoulder, promoting more consistent cartridge alignment and

potentially improving accuracy.

The cartridge is based on the same modern design principles as the other PRC family members and is intended to function in a standard long action with a maximum overall cartridge length of 3.340 inches.

The 1-in-8-inch twist rate (compared with the 7mm Remington Magnum's standard 1-in-9 twist), allows the cartridge to stabilise the long 175- to 180-grain bullets that define its performance envelope. Factory ammunition typically launches a 175-grain hunting bullet at around 3,000 fps, while 180-grain match bullets achieve approximately 2,950 fps.

In practical terms, the 7mm PRC offers a useful blend of flat trajectory, retained energy and manageable recoil. It comfortably outperforms cartridges such as the 6.5 Creedmoor at extended ranges, yet generates noticeably less recoil than most .300 magnums. For deer, plains game and mountain hunting, it provides more than enough authority while remaining pleasant to shoot from field positions.

There are downsides to the 7mm PRC, however. The first is availability. The cartridge is still relatively new, and although support has grown rapidly,

it cannot yet match the availability of established cartridges such as the 7mm Remington Magnum, .308 Winchester or 6.5 Creedmoor. If you travel abroad or need ammunition at short notice, finding 7mm PRC ammunition can be more difficult and expensive.

The second is barrel life. While the 7mm PRC offers slightly better barrel life than the .300 PRC and 7mm Rem Mag, it still burns a substantial amount of powder behind a relatively small bore diameter. Typical barrel life is around 1,200–2,000 rounds, significantly less than the 6.5 Creedmoor's 2,500–4,000 rounds or the .308 Winchester's 5,000-plus rounds when firing standard factory ammunition.

My final point is a relative one: is the 7mm PRC too much gun for the average UK stalker? A roebuck, fallow deer or even a red stag at 200 yards is well within the capabilities of established cartridges such as the .270 Winchester, .308 Winchester and 6.5 mm calibres. Where the 7mm PRC comes into its own is when firing heavier bullets at longer distances, particularly in mountainous terrain, open-country hunting and on international hunts.

Whether the 7mm PRC ultimately supplants the venerable 7mm Remington Magnum remains to be seen. What is certain is that it represents the most thoroughly modern interpretation yet of the classic 7mm magnum concept: efficient, accurate and purpose-built for the demands of today's long-range hunter. ■



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I AM A SHOOTER CONNAH BAKER

Lancashire-based **Connah Baker** works in sales and social media at Bamfords Guns. He talks about foxing, sponsorship and why social media might be the most important tool in our armoury

What is your passion when it comes to rifle shooting?

I'm massively into my foxing, and I'm doing a lot more deerstalking now. It's become more available - people are reaching out and inviting me to places, whereas in the past if you wanted to go stalking you were paying for the privilege. A lot of that has come through Instagram. Estate owners have seen what I do and wanted to get me up there, so I'm doing far more day stalking than I ever would have before.

Who taught you to shoot?

My dad taught me how to shoot - he did it more than anything just to keep me off the streets, to be honest. We were out three or four times a week, constantly. Safety was the absolute foundation. He drilled it in hard: if you ever had any doubt at all, you didn't shoot. That's stayed with me.

Tell us about your day job.

I work at Bamfords in Ecclestone, which has been in the same location for over 100 years. I'm in sales and social media, and part of the job is loading and driving for private clients - I might do 30 days of that through the season. I'm also away for three weeks in the autumn taking clients stalking in Scotland, which is a different world from foxing the permission ground at home.

Are you sponsored by any brands?

Edgar Brothers have been brilliant. They've put together a full rifle package - Bergara rifle, Hornady ammunition, Salomon boots, Spyderco knives, Hawkins scope mounts, Bushnell scope and a Svemko sound moderator. I'd had a Bergara rifle for about two years before anyone from Edgar Brothers approached me, so I already knew the brand stood up. It makes it easy to talk about gear you genuinely believe in. I am also sponsored by Nocpix - their thermal imaging kit makes a real difference when you're out at 1am scanning hedgerows.

How much ground do you have permission over?

I've got around 14,500 acres of foxing permission, most of which are in Lancashire. A lot of farmers have my number saved in their phones for when there's fox trouble, and they know I won't keep them waiting - I'll be there that night. Keeping on top of that acreage without losing the permissions is a serious challenge. My mate and I go out together, and on a big circuit you could drive around in the dark for two solid days and still not get around it all.

What does a typical night's foxing look like?

A typical night starts at around 10pm and runs until about 3 in the morning. In winter I've gone straight from foxing, driven home, grabbed my goose kit, loaded the dogs in the car and been out on the foreshore - then turned up at work for 9am. At 25 you can get away with it.

What is your current rifle set-up?

My main foxing rifle is a Bergara Sierra Stainless in .223 with a Bushnell scope. For after dark I run a .22-250 Bergara HMR with all my Nocpix thermal imaging gear mounted up. I keep the two set-ups separate so there's no faffing around when conditions change quickly.

What's your secret for success with foxes?

People see the social media posts and think it looks effortless, but I spent years from the age of nine sat in a hedge shooting nothing. You learn more from the blank sessions than the good ones - why are they not coming in, why did they veer off? You've got to understand the animal: how it moves, what it's looking for. In 2022 and 2023 we were taking between 250 and 280 foxes a year. We've got on top of



them a lot now, so it's closer to 150. No one hands you that knowledge. You just have to be out there.

You're a big advocate for shooting on social media. Why?

I get more grief from shooters than I ever have from anti-shooters, which always surprises people. But without social media, who would know about the changes that affect us? The section 1 and section 2 firearms petition got over 100,000 signatures - almost all of those came through social media. The woodpigeon general licence changes, the sound moderator debate - all of it circulates online. Without that reach, people are shooting without knowing the rules have changed. For me, it's not just content. It's education. ■



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