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FOREWORD FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

PETER JONES

The active management of UK deer over the past two decades has been one of the greatest privileges of my life; it has allowed me to indulge a profound passion and reverence for deer with a deep love of the countryside. Coincidentally this has run parallel with an explosion in social media. Love it or loathe it, social media has brought with it an increasing opportunity for individuals to share their experiences and shine a light on the issues they consider important.

For me, this has included a sense of disappointment at how certain long-standing approaches that exist within the wider deer-management sector have evolved. In my view, deer numbers have been allowed to become too high in a great many areas, while the skills that are required to manage them effectively have proved difficult to access. These are, of course, industry-wide issues that are shaped by many factors and perspectives.

I believe that while tradition has an important and valued place in our sector, a reliance on established ways of working, such as long-familiar training pathways, traditional organisational structures, and historic assumptions about how best to manage deer, has at times made it harder for us to adapt quickly to the new challenges before us. I also feel that a reluctance in some quarters to engage more openly with emerging voices has contributed, at least in part, to the situation we now face – one in which government is increasingly inclined to consider broad policies that risk treating

all deer as a problem. I recognise that others may see matters differently, but this remains my personal interpretation of the landscape.

It is an environment in which innovation and change are needed, and that is what I have long sought. What we have achieved through the Shooting & Hunting Academy, the Proficient Deer Stalking Certificates Level 1 & 2 and now the Deer Management Certificate Level 3, has encouraged change and innovation that benefits the consumer, the environment, and ultimately the deer that we manage.

Today more than a thousand people enrol each year on deer-management courses delivered by the Shooting & Hunting Academy. This is helping to create a new landscape in which accessible online training is available to a broader and more diverse audience – something that has long been needed and which can only strengthen our sport as a whole.

It is a future about which I am extremely excited, and one that I hope will lead to us arriving at a Goldilocks zone in which deer are managed at suitable numbers that not only ensure they continue to be admired and treasured – rather than treated as vermin – but also supports biodiversity and improves the overall impact that deer have on our natural habitats.

A very happy new year and I hope you enjoy the issue.

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Rifle Shooter

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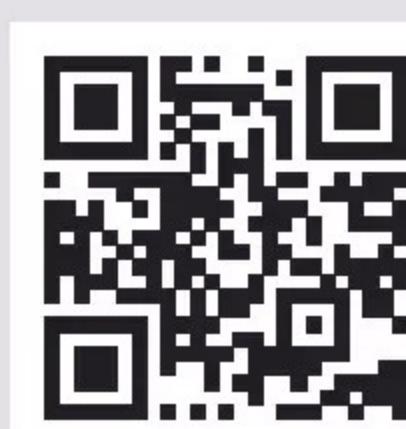
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CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

By the time you read this we will have waved goodbye to the old year and stepped into a brand-new one. For many of you the festive break will have provided a welcome opportunity to reconnect and spend some quality time in the countryside. I only hope the weather has played its part.

No doubt it will also have been the perfect excuse for those sporting shiny new kit or the latest outdoor clothing to venture out and try it for the first time. As gamekeeper Lance Barton (page 20) and stalker John Tooher (page 35) remind us, having the right equipment and clothing is not only central to our efficiency as hunters, but also greatly enhances our overall experience.

I've been having a little fun on page 30, exploring some 'New Year weight loss' and looking at how I might shed a few pounds from a favourite rifle. I've also been testing the latest rangefinding binoculars from Vortex (page 65) and I hope you enjoy reading about them as much as I have enjoyed using them.

The beauty of a new year is that it enables us to look ahead with fresh eyes. I'm not one for New Year

resolutions – in my case, I'd simply be setting myself up for a fall – but I do like to think of it as making a quiet promise to myself: to spread my wings a little and experience new places and new things. This year I've vowed to grab a rifle and fly rods and head for some of the Scottish islands, an area I have long wanted to explore, yet have seen all too little of. Perhaps I'll also follow Simon Barr's lead (page 52) and look at the sporting opportunities in Europe.

Whether it's hunting abroad or simply seeking a new challenge amid the varied beauty of the British Isles, the new year is a sporting blank page, just waiting for you to make your mark.

And talking of making a mark, this issue's guest editor has certainly left his imprint on the shooting landscape. Through his use of modern media, Peter Jones has reached new audiences, introducing them to the benefits of sustainable deer management while retaining a deep respect and reverence for the countryside and its traditions. In his thought-provoking interview on page 14 he sets out his case for change, and while you may not necessarily agree with all his views you cannot doubt his passion for the sport.

Two aspects of our conversation particularly stood out for me. First, his recognition that while social media offers enormous opportunities to enter people's lives and spread our message far and wide, such a powerful tool demands careful and responsible handling. As the saying goes, 'with great power comes great responsibility', and we must all play our part in ensuring that our message remains positive and a force for good.

Second, Peter's invitation for readers to reflect on their own self-improvement struck a chord. Every trip into the field teaches me something new – if only how much I still have to learn – and here again the new year presents us with an opportunity.

Whether it's learning a new skill or exploring a broader aspect of the sport, there is much to be gained from embarking on a journey that deepens our knowledge and understanding of the pursuit we love. I would like to think that such a journey can begin right here, within the pages of this latest issue of *Rifle Shooter*.

Wishing you a very happy and prosperous 2026.

Rob Hardy, Managing Editor





POLICY

RURAL SECTOR VOWS TO FIGHT ON AFTER DEER BILL AMENDMENTS REJECTED

Lobbyists say they will keep pressing MSPs to fix "major flaws" in the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill before it passes through Holyrood. Their pledge follows a parliamentary committee debate on 3 December in which amendments tabled by Edward Mountain MSP to address concerns for deer managers were rejected.

As reported in our last issue, the Natural Environment Bill threatens to halve stalker numbers in Scotland by requiring anyone who is shooting deer to be entered on a register of authorised persons. NatureScot would be responsible for assessing whether a shooter is "fit and competent", but critics challenge the need for such a provision.

"There is no official study into the wounding rates or second shot data that would suggest that mandatory training is required," Mr Mountain told the Rural Affairs Committee, before pointing out yet another flaw. "If an individual is not on the register, they cannot lawfully shoot deer and, therefore, they may no longer meet the good reason test for possessing a suitable firearm."



PHOTOGRAPH: JEFF MITCHELL/GETTY IMAGES

Agriculture minister Jim Fairlie said further consultation would follow on the provisions, but BASC warns that leaving details to secondary legislation – regulations made after the bill has already passed – offers "little certainty for those affected".

The bill would also grant NatureScot sweeping new powers to intervene in deer management for "nature restoration" purposes, a term without a clear definition. By comparison, current law only permits intervention when deer are causing damage or threatening public safety.

George Macdonald of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association's Deer Group warned: "If people are forced to cull on some subjective premise that doing so might restore something, it will be very damaging to the sector. The Scottish Government and NatureScot should be incentivising greater deer management, not pushing people to the brink."

His sentiments were echoed by BASC's Peter Clark, who urged MSPs to reconsider the provisions, in order "to ensure the final legislation supports rather than undermines the very people who deliver Scotland's deer management".

COMMUNITY

RIFLE SHOOTERS URGED TO RESPOND TO FIREARMS LICENSING CONSULTATION

Shooters are being urged to respond to a Government consultation on aligning shotgun licensing controls with those for firearms. Failure to act could devastate the gun trade and result in other shooting sports being "picked apart" by regulation, campaigners warn.

The proposed changes would subject shotgun owners to the same rigorous controls currently in place for rifle owners. A Home Office spokesperson said: "Shotguns are no less lethal than other firearms and

it is right to look at the differences in the controls, and whether it is sensible, in order to address the risks that shotguns and firearms present if misused, to consider greater alignment of the controls."

Leading shooting organisations have pointed out that while there are several other tests for rifle applications, the safety assessments for Sections 1 (firearm) and 2 (shotgun) certificates are identical: Can this person have a shotgun or rifle and not be a danger to the public? BASC's Christopher Graffius

said: "I think there's been pressure from police and officials, and this is a test of the minister's determination to resist that pressure."

While shotgun certificate holders are the direct target, firearm certificate holders have been warned about the detriment to renewal and variation turnaround times. Official figures released in November show that every force except two has taken longer to process licences since the fees increased in February 2025.

The changes would also hit gun shops, wholesalers and manufacturers hard. The Gun Trade Association surveyed its more than 400 members and

estimates the changes could trigger at least a 40% decline in retail business. BASC estimates up to a third of shooters could leave shooting entirely.

In response, grassroots campaign Support Our Sport UK has been mobilising since November. Founder Claire Bagehot

commented: "If we're not all together, [the Government is] going to pick apart the whole lot because it's easier to pick on smaller groups and dismantle them."

At the time of writing, the consultation was expected to commence in January.

QUARRY

SIKA COULD COME TO DOMINATE SCOTTISH WOODLANDS, STUDY WARNS

Non-native sika deer may eventually come to dominate Scottish woodlands unless management practices change, according to a study published in November 2025.

The research, titled *The ungulate pretender: Why the non-native sika deer may dominate Scottish woodlands*, warns that non-selective deer-culling strategies are inadvertently helping sika outcompete red and roe deer.

Sika's greater resilience and higher breeding rates mean that general deer culls disproportionately reduce native species, shifting the competitive balance further in the sika's favour. The deer are thriving in conifer plantations and mixed woodlands, with the ability to reach higher numbers than native species under current management.

The British Deer Society, highlighting the findings, stresses the importance of species-specific culls. Modern deer management pilots, including NatureScot schemes, are placing greater emphasis on controlling non-native deer in forestry and woodland restoration areas.

TRAINING

DEER MANAGEMENT CERTIFICATE LEVEL 3 LAUNCHED

A new advanced qualification in deer management has been launched across the UK. The Deer Management Certificate Level 3 (DMC3), introduced on 9 November, represents the highest level of vocational qualification available in the sector, bringing together learning pathways from organisations including BASC, the British Deer Society, LANTRA, the National Gamekeepers' Organisation and the Shooting & Hunting Academy.

The qualification is open to holders of either PDSC2 or DSC2 and comprises four units covering knowledge, practical skills and strategic management. Candidates must demonstrate academic achievement through higher-level qualifications, prove field competence across multiple deer species including both invasive and non-invasive populations, and submit a deer management plan demonstrating strategic thinking.



PHOTOGRAPH: ASHLEY COOPER/GETTY IMAGES

Complicating matters, a 2019 genetic study found that 26% of deer thought to be pure were actually red-sika crossbreeds. These hybrids look like pure animals, making them difficult to identify without genetic testing.

Charles Smith-Jones, BDS technical adviser, told Rifle Shooter: "Sika can be highly adaptable and secretive, so they can quickly gain the upper hand if deer management strategies are not carefully targeted. By focusing on species-specific control and coordinated monitoring, we can protect Scotland's native deer populations and the woodlands they rely on."



PHOTOGRAPH: TEDD D'VISCOUS/GETTY IMAGES

Peter S Jones, founder and chief executive officer of the Shooting & Hunting Academy, said: "The DMC3 isn't just a qualification, it's a unified standard that recognises professional capability. For the first time it brings together qualifications and experience from all respected training providers under one recognised framework."

NEWS IN BRIEF



BDS ANNOUNCES TWIN EQUIPMENT PARTNERSHIPS

The British Deer Society has struck two major partnerships with equipment distributors to support its training programmes and field operations.

Under an agreement with Thomas Jacks, candidates on BDS DMQ Night Shooting Certificate courses will use Pulsar thermal imaging equipment. Thomas Jacks is the exclusive UK and Republic of Ireland distributor for Pulsar optics and Spypoint trail cameras.

A separate partnership with GMK Ltd will see BDS instructors field-testing rifles, moderators and stalking kit from brands including Tikka, Beretta and Sako.

The society's head of training, Nick Rout, said: "I'm thrilled because it represents perfectly why having top-notch equipment is one of the key elements for ensuring best practice standards in deer management."

THE STALKING SHOW PARTNERS WITH BASC

BASC has been announced as the official partner of The Stalking Show under a new three-year agreement. The association will work with show organisers to deliver live demonstrations and seminars that highlight best practice in deer management, habitat conservation and firearm safety.

David Freer, director of The Stalking Show, said: "BASC's expertise and leadership in shooting and conservation will bring enormous value to our visitors, exhibitors and the wider stalking community."

The 2026 show will take place on 11-12 April at Staffordshire County Showground.

EAT WILD CHIEF EXEC STEPS DOWN

Louisa Clutterbuck stepped down as Eat Wild chief executive in December after nearly eight years. Chairman Alan Beynon praised her dedication in introducing consumers to game and opening new markets. Her successor had not been announced at the time of writing.



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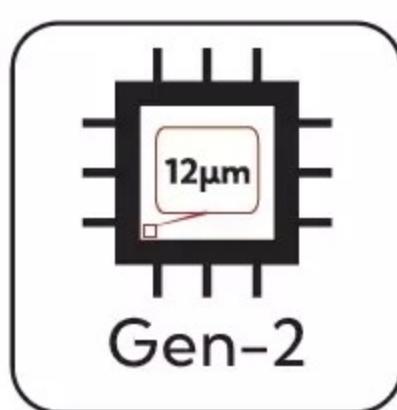
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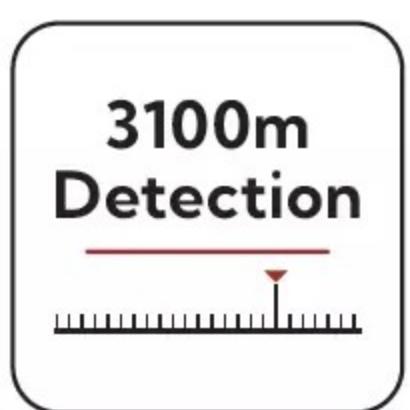
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GUEST EDITOR INTERVIEW

A LEARNING CURVE

This month's guest editor is **Peter Jones**, professional deer manager, YouTube presenter and a man known throughout the shooting industry for his straight talking and sometimes controversial opinions. In this exclusive interview we find out what makes him tick



**WHO IS PETER JONES?**

I am a person out there on the ground doing the job of managing deer and, I hope, championing consumer choice. This is because I've been a consumer and experienced the frustrations of the status quo. My current roles include being editor of *County Deer Stalking* online magazine, presenter of the *County Deer Stalking* YouTube channel, co-founder and CEO of the Shooting and Hunting Academy, and chairman and founder of the Capreolus Club. In the little time I have off work, I try to be a loving husband and father to my three beautiful children.

WHAT IS YOUR BACKGROUND AND YOUR JOURNEY INTO FIELDSPORTS?

I grew up on a farm near Ashdown Forest in East Sussex, an area of the country renowned for its high numbers of deer. I have been involved in wildlife management and the use of rifles since I was a young boy. I enjoyed a successful career as a detective in the Metropolitan Police, where I was proud to receive a commendation for bravery and professionalism for my handling of an incident where a colleague was stabbed. I left the force in 2007 with an Exemplary Service Certificate, in order to pursue my life-long passion for deer management. It is a passion I have had since my parents pointed out deer on the farm with a sense of admiration, which I suspect has contributed to my love of these wonderful wild creatures.

WHAT RIFLES AND AMMUNITION DO YOU SHOOT?

There is a wonderful and funny clip in the film *Layer Cake* in which the gangsters refer to having a favourite gun. In truth, my line of work means that rifles are tools, each with a slightly different application. However, hunting on my own with no pressure to shoot numbers, I have to express a love for my K95 Kipplau rifle. There is something about the "one shot, one kill" mentality that appeals to my soul and my ethos behind hunting deer.

The choice of cartridge is an age-old debate. If you had asked me a few years ago I would have said the .308, but it's important to change and adapt, and these days it depends on the rifle and cartridge combination. I prefer 93gr RWS Evo Green in 6.5 Creedmoor for the K95. Through my .308 Blaser R8 I shoot 150gr rounds from a variety of manufacturers. For the .270 I find the guys at Virtus Precision are at the top of their game. I could go on about my .17HMR, .22 Hornet, .243, .30-06, .300 win mag and .416 Rigby – but you get the picture.

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

This changes as technology advances. Currently my go-to items are a pair of Swarovski EL Range binoculars and a thermal monocular from HikMicro. I consider both crucial for any trip into the field. While thermal imaging is excellent for spotting animals, I don't feel the technology has yet reached the point – if we are truly going to identify the animal before taking the shot – where we can dispense with traditional optics altogether.

As a professional stalker I sometimes need to look for the number of tines or at the pearling on the antlers, or gauge fine detail on the animal. Thermal and night-vision optics don't yet quite give the clarity needed. That said, I do think they are an increasingly important part of the stalker's repertoire, especially when large numbers of deer need to be culled.

WHAT IS YOUR PERFECT DAY STALKING?

It is surprising, after all these years, that deer stalking still remains my means of escape. I find it simply impossible to choose a 'best day's stalking', but as Robert Burns once said, "My heart is in the highlands a-chasing the deer." That said, stalking deep in the woods for fallow deer during the rut is still exhilarating, as is the eerie call of the sika on the heath or silently observing the elegant elves of the forest that are the roe deer during early summer mornings. I think my



Peter has a wealth of in-field experience to pass on

indecision speaks volumes about the quality and beauty of the animals we manage.

I'm very fortunate to be chairman of the Capreolus Club and as such have access to some of the very best stalking the UK has to offer. Whether it is red stags in the Highlands, sika stags on the Isle of Purbeck, or Chinese water deer in Bedfordshire, we will be there at the very best times. That is not a privilege I take lightly, but something I treasure.

TELL US ABOUT SETTING UP THE SHOOTING AND HUNTING ACADEMY?

Well you now have me in my element. In my opinion it has been highly regrettable that some have sought to maintain a stranglehold on deer management training, which in my view has not been in the interests of either the consumer or the industry as a whole. Through the Shooting and Hunting Academy we have sought to give the consumer what I regard as a much needed choice. I remember a quote from Steve Jobs, who said "Most overnight successes took a long time." Though it may seem that the success of the PDS1 and PDS2 has been overnight, in fact the courses have been delivered now for over a decade.

Thanks to the dedication of a brilliant and innovative team and the support of over 100 approved verifiers around the country, we have been able to arrive at a

“This new higher level vocational qualification formally recognises academic achievement, practical field experience and strategic thinking”

training model that provides the perfect blend of theory, practical and in-field experience. The PDS1 has grown organically as a result of us being out there, doing the job and experiencing what works and what doesn't. I think that's why it has proved so popular. It is a course created by deer managers for deer managers. Couple that with proper third-party accreditation from LANTRA (an Ofqual regulated body), as well as recognition from the Forestry Commission, Forestry England and NatureScot, allowing PDS1 and PDS2 holders to register as 'fit and competent', and you have a winning combination that is

appealing to hundreds of both beginners and experienced deer managers alike.

It gives me great pride that the academy also now hosts courses and masterclasses resulting from fabulous collaborations with supporting organisations that include the National Gamekeepers' Organisation, UKDTR, Wildlife Pro and Jelen PWS, expanding our offering with popular courses such as Night Shooting, Deer Tracking and Recovery, Damage Assessments and now a Level 3 Deer Management Certificate.

This new higher level vocational qualification formally recognises academic achievement, practical field experience and strategic thinking. It acknowledges prior learning, including degree level study, vocational diplomas and specialist courses, drawing from established learning pathways that are inclusive of other respected organisations such as BASC, the Shooting and Hunting Academy, the British Deer Society, DMQ and others. The new DMC3 will help employers and landowners differentiate between individuals with varying levels of experience, addressing the current issue where both a novice and a seasoned professional might hold the same Level 2 certificate.

In my view training is absolutely crucial to the future of deer management, and through the

Shooting and Hunting Academy these courses go a long way to delivering training that is enjoyable and accessible to all.

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

Regrettably a lack of accessibility and information in the past has made our sport appear opaque and difficult to penetrate. This has held many people back from getting involved and why, in my view, the rise of social media has been so important. Across our own platforms we are now able to engage with thousands of people daily, some of whom would not otherwise get to see what we do. It breaks down barriers and shines a light on the important job we do in managing the countryside.

We often find that the people who contact us already feel that they know and trust us, which along with accessible online training is why we have been instrumental in bringing new people into the sport. Thousands of people seek training each year and over a million each year watch our films or engage with our posts promoting sustainable deer management. Through this ability to reach a wide and varied audience, we continue to encourage people into deer stalking.

As a sport we need to engage with those outside the traditional shooting community, rather than just preaching to the converted. Otherwise we are effectively working in an echo chamber where we are just talking to one another. Our customer base has very much been beginners who didn't know where to go for information. It's very important that we don't just go to shooting shows, but also exhibit at events like the Outdoor Show at the NEC. We were among the only people there from the shooting and fieldsport industry, and we didn't do that because we thought it was going to be especially lucrative, but felt that as an educational and training provider it was our duty to reach out to those who didn't necessarily understand about shooting and deer management. It was a wonderful opportunity in which we were able to talk face-to-face with hikers, campers, dog walkers and mountaineers.

These are the sort of people we need to be getting our message to, rather than talking again and again to people who already understand it. This also needs to include people in towns and cities, not just those living in the country. We often view urbanites as the enemy and this is to our detriment, as even if they may never participate personally, trying

to educate and inform them about the importance of what we do may mean they ultimately view things in a different light.

What I don't think we should tolerate is hypocrisy – on the one hand being told by people how dreadful it is that we go out and shoot a deer, while they tuck into their intensively farmed chicken nuggets or slab of beef. Rather, we should capture the moral high ground by highlighting the sustainability and health benefits of wild, free-range meat, compared with the intensively farmed, high-carbon alternatives.

We should not be ashamed of what we do, or shy away from that conversation. If we are not talking about it, we are in danger of treating the subject of shooting like a dirty word. Instead, we should openly discuss our role in maintaining a healthy and natural environment.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING DEER MANAGERS IN THE UK?

While I believe social media has been positive for the sport – as I've just mentioned – the larger the audience grows the more important it becomes to get that message right. My life has gone from being a solitary deer stalker to recognising that the more people you reach, the





Peter is passionate about deer and teaching the benefits of good management

more responsibility you have. This includes the wider aspects of the sport and I believe that if we don't self-regulate what we do, we will get regulation imposed upon us.

I remember Theresa May, when she was home secretary, telling the Police Federation to "change or government will impose change on you". It is the same with what we do. I have never been in favour of mandatory training, but we must ensure that deer managers are properly trained or it will be forced on us. The writing may already be on the wall where this is concerned, and proper training does standardise best practice, improve safety and encourage good decision making. With increasing scrutiny, isn't this something we should all strive towards?

The time it now takes to obtain a firearm certificate is also a restriction on the sport. A great frustration is that the criteria of police forces around the country varies so widely. I think it is unfair to the consumer that it becomes a geographical lottery, which can range from some forces taking a few months to issue a new certificate, to others taking up to a year and a half to do the same thing. While extra funding is promised from increased pricing, it remains to be seen if that will improve the situation.

It is shameful that in a digital age it can take 18 months to carry out the due diligence for a licence

“I would like to invite people to engage with us. This includes other organisations such as BASC and the BDS”

application. This inhibiting of people gaining access to a legal firearm is contrary to the message coming from other government departments – Natural England and Defra – that want more deer shot. They are clearly pulling in different directions and indicative of a government that hasn't got to grips with what's happening on the ground.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO ADD ANYTHING ELSE?

We want the Shooting and Hunting Academy to grow, but we want it to grow sympathetically and for the consumer and industry to tell us what they need, rather than the other way around. Our focus is on making sure we are representative of the wider shooting community – a resource that they value and is there to support them.

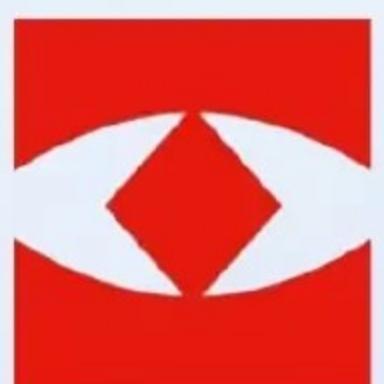
We recognise that we must be consumer driven if we are to continue to succeed, and I would like to invite people to engage with us. This includes other organisations such as BASC and the BDS, so that we can create a more unified approach that really serves the consumer and the industry much better. If we are all pulling in the same direction we will be a far more powerful force.

I would also like to invite readers of *Rifle Shooter* to take responsibility for their own continuous development. Whether you are a relative newcomer to the sport or an experienced deer manager, there is always something to learn. I recommended visiting shootingandhuntingacademy.co.uk for courses and master classes I hope they will find rewarding.

Another completely free access to learning is to visit our YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/user/countydeerstalking. All I would ask is that is that visitors like and subscribe, which helps improve rankings and enables us to continue to put out great content. Finally I would like to thank *Rifle Shooter* for the opportunity to speak my mind and engage with its readers. ■



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FATAL ATTRACTION

Winter is a time to exploit paired foxes' predictable nature and head off potential problems later in the year, says **Lance Barton**

Winter changes the fox's world. As the cold sets in and the nights become long, foxes begin pairing up, moving with purpose across their ground as their breeding season approaches. For the keeper or pest controller, this is the time when a bit of understanding and strategy can combine to make their work both effective and often surprisingly swift.

Once foxes are paired, their behaviour becomes wonderfully predictable. A dog fox escorting a

vixen will follow well-trodden routes, marking regularly and patrolling boundaries with the kind of consistency you can set your watch by. It's this natural order that makes winter baiting so effective. When you place bait along an established route, be it a hedgerow, a farm track or the sheltered lip of a wood, you aren't luring in a random passer by. You're intercepting a pair on their nightly routine.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A good bait site doesn't need to be complicated. A few well-chosen offcuts, fishy scraps or a can of pet food are enough to leave a

tempting scent hanging in the air like a Sunday roast. The real key is establishing consistency; once a pair finds a reliable food source they'll return night after night, until you choose to sit out and take your opportunity. The trick is keeping the site quiet. Too much disturbance and the boldest winter fox may decide that even a free meal isn't worth the risk.

One thing that has transformed my winter baiting in recent years is using the gralloch from our fallow deer culls. Nothing anchors a bait site quite like it. This is because a fox can't simply snatch it and disappear; it has to stay and work at it, giving you all the time and angles you need for a clean shot.

The smell is something else entirely. Powerful, lingering and drifting a long way on a frosty winter night. Even when the gralloch has been



Paired foxes show a consistency you can set your watch by

PICTURE: DANIEL PARENT/GETTY IMAGES

stripped by corvids and raptors during the day, the site remains effective. The earth itself holds the attraction. I've watched a pair of foxes standing over nothing more than a damp patch of blood-stained soil, licking the ground where it has seeped in. That kind of natural lure is hard to beat, which is why I make a habit of using every spare part of the culled animal to its full potential.

SOUND STRATEGY

But bait alone only solves half the puzzle. A winter fox can quite happily feed whenever it chooses to, and on a freezing night, trying to wait them out can test even the keenest shooter's resolve. This is when the call box earns its keep. With paired foxes being at their most vocal and territorial, the right sound can turn a slow evening into a short outing.

“A vixen’s scream played on a still January night can draw the attention of both members of a pair – one out of lust, the other out of jealousy”

A call box offers two big advantages – consistency and timing. While your bait gives a fox a reason to be there, a call gives it urgency. A vixen's scream played on a still January night can draw the attention of both members of a pair – one out of lust, the other out of jealousy. A dog fox's bark can provoke an instant response from a male who believes a rival has wandered too close to his patch. Even the faintest rodent squeak can coax a fox those crucial few final yards, towards a bait it planned to inspect later.

As winter progresses and your central ground is cleared, a call box becomes equally valuable out on the boundaries. Once resident pairs have been dealt with, working outwards is the key. Starting centrally ensures you're removing the foxes that spend the most time on your ground and present the most

risk. Then, and only then, do you turn your attention to the perimeters.

On the boundaries, volume is becomes your ally. A loud call, whether a vixen's scream or a dog fox's challenge, carries an incredible distance on a still night. It draws in the soon-to-be problem pairs from neighbouring land or the transient singles that are drifting along your margins. It's astonishing how far a fox will travel to investigate a sound it believes shouldn't be there. It's a great way of revealing those roamer that might otherwise slip past unseen.

CLEAR VISION

Another advantage winter offers is how well a good thermal performs on those cold, crisp nights. The difference can be remarkable. With the air dry and the ground cool, every living thing stands out with exceptional clarity, and a fox



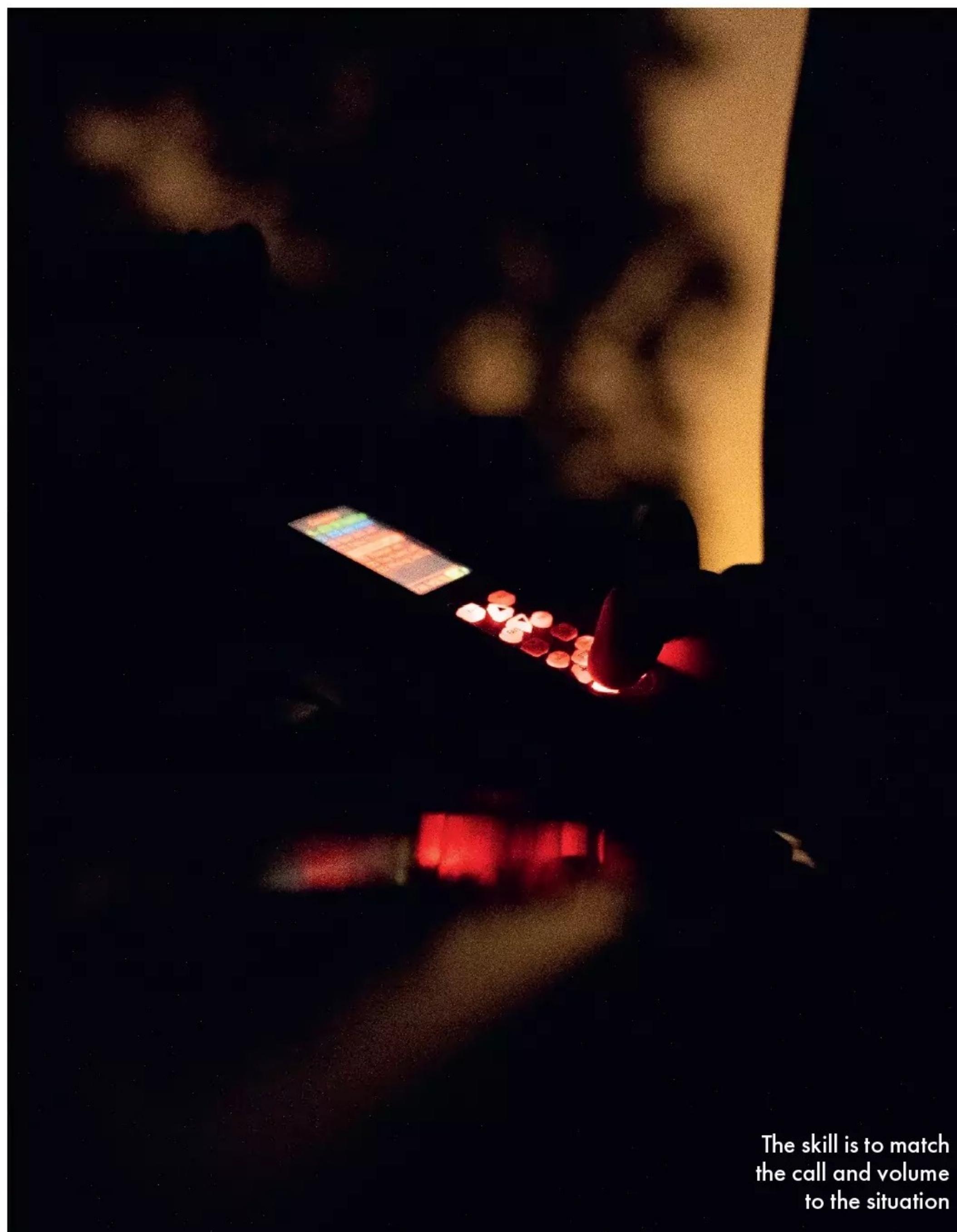


“As a general rule, think of it like attracting a customer”

moving through the hedgerows or cutting across open ground almost glows against the background.

Spotting a fox early, before it's anywhere near the bait or the call, lets you manage the encounter on your terms. You can judge its direction, pace and even mood simply from its body language through the spotter. With such clarity, a timely call becomes even more effective. You know exactly where the fox is and exactly when to play the sound to get maximum reaction; you can even judge its reaction and act accordingly.

Many of my shortest outings have come from that perfect combination of a cold night, a sharp thermal image and one well-timed call, resulting in a job cleanly done and home in time for supper.



The skill is to match the call and volume to the situation

TIME FOR RESTRAINT

I know this may seem in contradiction to my earlier comment, but there are times when foxes are already close or moving quietly along their established pathways when restraint is needed. A subtle call, delivered with confidence and timing, is then more believable and effective than one blasted out at unrealistic volume across the field. The real art lies in knowing when.

As a general rule, think of it like attracting a customer to a market stall. You may need to shout to attract the attention of distant passers by, but scream in the face of someone right in front of you, or a regular customer, and they will run a mile.

When everything comes together – predictable behaviour, a well-placed bait site, the scent of a fallow gralloch and a thoughtfully chosen call – the efficiency can be remarkable. Long gone are those

marathon winter vigils or driving around on the back of a truck on a freezing night, scaring everything and making your resident foxes even more difficult to get. Let the bait do the anchoring and the call do the persuading, and the response often comes more quickly than you could ever have hoped for.

WRAPPING UP

No winter outing is complete without considering the right clothing and personal comfort. Layers are essential, from a thermal base to an insulating mid-layer and a waterproof outer shell, ensuring you stay warm and dry on cold nights. Hot drinks are a must – not just for warmth but for keeping energy levels up – as are a small selection of high-calorie snacks that are easily eaten in the cold. They can make all the difference when you're sitting for hours.

Even the seat you choose matters. The chair I use on the back of my truck is carefully chosen to keep me

comfortable and stable, allowing me to focus on the foxes rather than stiff joints or a sore back. Being properly dressed, well-fed, and comfortable means you will stay alert and remain patient and ready for action, turning a potentially miserable night into a manageable and enjoyable experience.

Ultimately a willingness to work with the fox's natural habits during the pairing season can turn winter into one of the most productive seasons of the year and result in a job well done and in harmony with the rhythm of the countryside.

For me this isn't just about sport – it's my livelihood. So every decision I make has to have a purpose. Winter, with the foxes paired up and on the move, is what I consider the most crucial season of all. Success here has little to do with chance; it's about preparation, patience and, above all, easing the inevitable problem of multiple litters come spring and summer. ■



A stable and comfortable sitting and shooting position keeps your focus on the foxes

HOT MULTI-RIFLE OPTION

Jules Whicker checks out Pixfra's innovative Taurus T650 LRF, an AI-enabled clip-on with integrated rangefinding, precise ballistic solutions and a knockout price



The view through my scope at 15x. The image is distinctly pixelated but still very usable. I found a sweet spot for smoothness and detail at 10x

I don't get to test many clip-ons, but I enjoy it when I do, especially when the device in question is as good as Pixfra's Taurus T650 LRF. It's rugged, well-finished, nicely designed and has intuitive controls. But what really makes it interesting and innovative is its combination of integrated laser rangefinding and ballistic compensation. Consequently this review will focus on operation rather than physical characteristics, because that's where the Taurus stands out, delivering exceptionally practical performance in a package you can swap between rifles.

Until now integrating laser rangefinding with ballistic

compensation has been the preserve of dedicated thermal scopes, which, barring the use of a suite of inter-compatible, high-quality, zero-retaining mounts, effectively tie you to one rifle. The beauty of clip-ons, in general, is that they can turn any day scope into a thermal in seconds.

For example, my own Pulsar Krypton (a.k.a. Old Faithful) does solid duty on everything from a sub-12ft-lb air rifle for rats all the way up to a deer rifle for woodland stalking. When I need thermal, I've got it; when I don't, I enjoy all the advantages of glass optics, including a pin-sharp image, reliable mechanical adjustments and no battery icon hovering in the corner of my view.

My Krypton can't do ballistics, though. For that, I've relied either



The Bluetooth remote snaps into a magnetic cradle



on a programmable hand-held rangefinder or a basic rifle-mounted unit backed up by old-school holdover stickers on my elevation turret or inside my lens cover. Both systems get the job done and can even feel satisfyingly low-tech, until something like the Taurus LRF comes along, which does it all in one hit.

PROFILES AND PRECISION

The Taurus pairs via wi-fi with Pixfra's Outdoor app, which offers a live stream from the device, remote configuration and the ability to create profiles for different rifles and loads. For the latter you'll need to enter scope height over bore, projectile weight, BC, muzzle velocity and zeroing data, such as range and atmospheric conditions. Here, as ever, accuracy matters, as the quality of your inputs directly affects the precision of the firing



solutions. If you prefer, you can enter the ballistic parameters directly into the Taurus itself, but the app makes it faster and easier to keep multiple profiles organised.

Zeroing works in the familiar digital/thermal scope fashion: fire a shot, zoom in, freeze the frame with the crosshairs on your point of aim, move a secondary cross to the point of impact, save, then confirm and fine-tune with further shots. The Taurus even displays the click value for each adjustment – perfect for dialling in small corrections. This is worth doing because the system permits sub-0.1 mrad precision. It's the first clip-on I've tested that offers more than calibration.

It's often said that clip-ons don't need zeroing or calibrating, but I consider it an essential. Better yet, each profile can be individually zeroed, gives you tuned electro-optical precision and ballistic data.

HOLDOVERS ONLY

In the field, ranging a target generates holdover data in the top-right quadrant of the display, above a windage value. The laser range interacts with the data in the active ballistic profile to generate both values. I found configuring my profiles with a wind value of 10 km/h at 90°, and guesstimating the offset applied to each shot based on the prevailing weather conditions worked well.

Offsets are shown in centimetres or inches, which is usable, but I would prefer MOA or mrad. What's lacking is a secondary aiming point (SAP) that shows you exactly where to aim. Unlike a dedicated digital or thermal sight, where the reticle and zoom belong to the same electronic system, the Taurus doesn't know what reticle you're using or what magnification it's set to, and so cannot know where to generate

an SAP. Consequently you have to apply the correction that is indicated in the display manually by dialling in or adjusting your point of aim, which results in a slightly longer engagement time than if you were using a dedicated rangefinder-equipped electronic sight. That said, it's still a fair bit slicker than combining handheld or rifle-mounted ranging with stick-on drop guides, especially at night.

Thermal isn't just for night work, of course. In daylight it's also invaluable for spotting quarry in deep shadow or dense cover, such as feral pigeons in the rafters of a cowshed, rats in brambles, squirrels high in the trees and deer in thick woodland. With practice you learn to read the intensity of a heat signature to judge Even so, the usual rule applies: never touch the trigger without 100% confidence in your ID and backstop.

Pixfra's integration of a laser rangefinder and ballistic solver into the Taurus takes the practicality of the clip-on format to the next level



A roe buck, lased at 268m, complete with holdover data. Windage data would show, too, but I forgot to enter a baseline value in the profile!

THREADS AND BAYONETS

Mounting the Taurus was straightforward. The distributor, Thomas Jacks, asked for the outer diameter of the scope I'd be using, then supplied an adapter to match. This slipped over the objective bell and locked with a fore-and-aft cam lever. The Taurus screws into the front of the adapter via a male thread, and once you've found the best view through your day scope, you lock it in place with a threaded ring, using the supplied flat spanner.

The adapter stayed perfectly aligned throughout testing, but it's not as flexible as the Pulsar design, which includes bushings for different objective bell diameters, so you'll need a dedicated adapter for each scope. Additionally, if you opt to dedicate Pulsar adapters to different scopes, the current model features a bayonet mount for rapid swapping. The Taurus has a similar feature, but it's a different size from Pulsar's and currently serves only to mount a monocular eyepiece (available from Pixfra or Rusan). Nevertheless it raises the possibility of a full QD system in the future. Overall, the information on Pixfra adapters for the Taurus is sketchy at present, so it is worth looking to Rusan and Smartclip for immediate solutions.

ZOOM SWEET SPOTS

With the right adapter you can mount a clip-on to almost any scope, but magnification is a key

factor in compatibility. On a zoom scope, 2.5-3x is ideal, as it shows the maximum display area without intrusive pixelation. Zooming in narrows the field of view and makes individual pixels more noticeable. With my Krypton, these constraints make zooming in beyond about 7-8x counterproductive. On the same 3-15x50 Minox ZP5, the Taurus stayed usable right up to 15x, with 10x a sweet spot for image smoothness and precision aiming. Beyond 5x, the tightened field of view began to crop out the on-screen information, but this was easily fixed via a menu option that shrinks and centres the readouts.

You still have to reach to operate the focus knob, but a remote puts all the other controls at the fingertips of your supporting hand (left or right). The Taurus's Bluetooth remote is particularly good, as both it and the magnetic cradle it snaps into are made from the same light-but-tough magnesium alloy as the Taurus itself, and the unit comes with a roll of double-sided hook-and-loop tape, so you can mount it anywhere.

AI WE LIKE

The image quality was everything I've come to expect from Pixfra's combination of a 640x512, 12µm thermal sensor, 1920x1080 0.49in OLED display, PIPS 2.0 algorithms, and AAIC technology. The latter employs AI to learn from every frame. It works, and I think this is how.

As the device moves or the scene changes, each 50Hz frame captures a slightly different signal. 'Dumb' thermals discard this extra data, but AAIC remembers it, combining information from successive frames to build a more detailed image. The effect is similar to having a sensor with more, smaller pixels, only better, because AAIC's cumulative processing improves not only detail but also accuracy, complementing the precision already provided by the Taurus's zeroing capability and ballistic profiles.

The Taurus LRF series comprises four variants: the T425 LRF, T435 LRF, T635 LRF and the T650 LRF tested here. The numbers are logical: 4-prefix variants have 384x288 sensors, and successive digits indicate lens size (25, 35, or 50mm). Across the range, weight variation is only 50g, and battery life from the 3,200mAh 18650 cells supplied is seven hours for the 384x288 models and six hours for the thirstier 640x512 models. Everything else, including the dimensions, is the same, except the price, which is amazing at both ends of the scale, kicking off at a mere £1,299.95 for the T425 LRF and topping out at just £2,649.95 for the T650 LRF.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The T650 LRF I received was an early sample, so I had some feedback to offer the manufacturer on both hardware (adapter options) and firmware (menu layouts). Even so, the unit's performance, pricing and promise, combined with Pixfra's build quality, the underlying versatility of clip-on devices and, in LRF models, the innovative and practical inclusion of integrated laser rangefinding and ballistic compensation, make the Taurus T650 LRF an exciting and highly attractive route into thermal, especially for anyone with an enduring appreciation of high-quality conventional optics. ■

CONTACT

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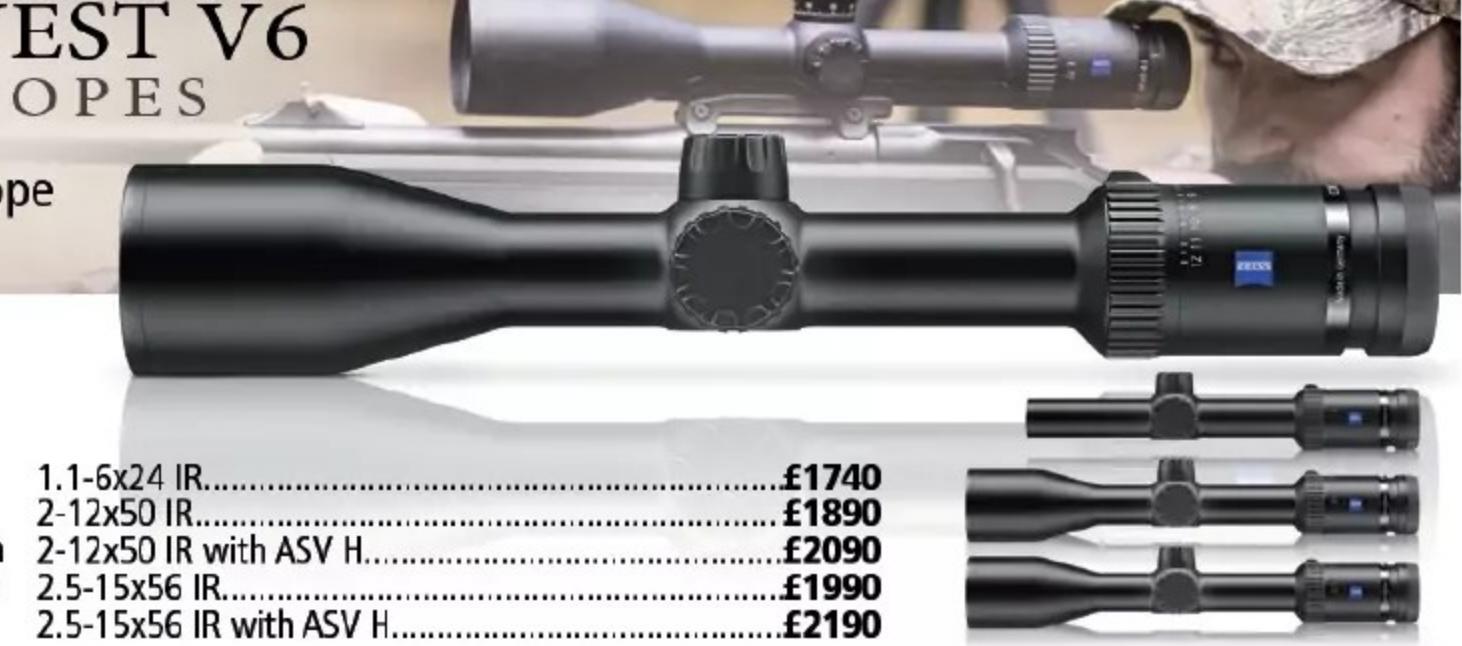
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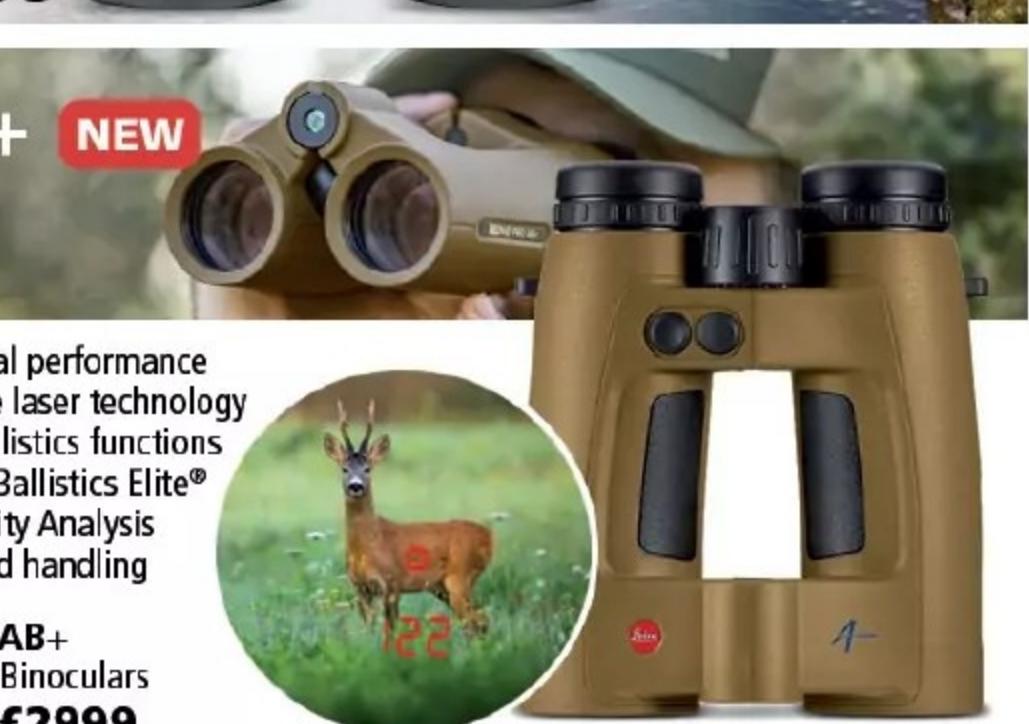


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POWDER CHARGE DANGERS

Q I want to load reduced powder charge cartridges for humanely despatching deer if I come across an injured animal or accidentally wound one. I have heard it is dangerous to fire a full powder charge at close range. Do you have any suggestions on how I should go about making such a lighter load?

A **Bill Harriman replies:** It is dangerous to fire a full charge rifle cartridge point-blank at a wounded animal as it can create a phenomenon known as a splashback. Fragments of bone, the bullet jacket, soil and stone chips may be blown back towards the firer, causing injury. There is no

way of knowing what the ground is like under an injured animal and the impact of a large bullet at high velocity could well be dangerous to the shooter.

Loading reduced charge cartridges needs to be done with care. There is a phenomenon known as detonation that can theoretically occur with a reduced powder charge. This can be prevented by filling up the cartridge case above the powder with an inert substance, such as semolina. This serves to keep the powder charge against the primer on firing.

It is always a good idea to use a soft lead pistol bullet as it helps to distinguish it from normal rounds. Another good way to indicate a reduced charge round is to blacken the case with a marker pen or brass blacking solution.

FLAT ANTLERS ON MUNTJAC

Q In the south Midlands where I live there are some muntjac that have little and not-so-little flat antlers that look odd. Do you know what might cause these flat antlers, as I see some every stalking season?

A **Iain Watson replies:** When muntjac grow their first set of antlers, as well as being small, they can appear oddly developed compared with those of mature animals. Mature animals' antlers would normally have a four-point head,



with each antler having a main beam and a brow tine. First heads are mostly single spikes with no coronet present. This form might continue into a second head, only a bit longer. If the animal lives long enough the mature antler will grow in shape and form.

First heads will also grow as two little flat palms that look nothing like

muntjac antlers, and again this might carry on into a second head. Overall these juvenile antlers will be short, say 20-25mm in length. Little flattened antlers like this are not unusual. If, however, you are coming across animals that are obviously mature in terms of body structure, teeth wear and so on, but have palmated antlers, that would be unusual.

HOW TO CHECK THE TWIST RATE

Q I am attempting to source non-lead ammunition for my stalking rifle. I have been told some copper bullets will fail to stabilise in rifles with looser twist rates.

How do I check the twist rate?

A **Graham Downing replies:** If a manufacturer has not listed the twist rate of your barrel, try using a cleaning rod, a jag and a dry cleaning patch. With the bolt removed and using a bore guide, insert the rod into the breech until the patch engages with the rifling. Take a piece of adhesive tape — electrical insulating tape works very well — and attach it to the cleaning rod about 14in back from the bore guide, so that it forms a vertical "flag".



With a tape measure, check the distance in inches between the flag and the bore guide. Then push the rod slowly into the barrel and watch the flag rotate. When it has made one complete revolution, measure the distance between the flag and the bore guide. Subtract the second measurement from the first. This is your twist rate.

If the rod has travelled 10in to make a single revolution, your barrel has a 1-in-10 twist rate. If it has travelled 8in, you have a 1-in-8 twist rate.

AGEING MUNTJAC BUCKS

Q Is it possible to tell the age of a muntjac buck from its antlers?

A **Graham Downing replies:** Estimating the age of a muntjac buck from its antler growth is complicated by the fact that muntjac breed all year round.

Bucks start to develop their pedicles at about five months and grow their antlers four or five months after that. Subsequently they will synchronise the date at which their first antlers are cast to the following May or June, the period at which most bucks shed their antlers. Thus, a buck born in late spring will grow his first antlers towards the end of the following winter and keep them right through to midsummer the following year, whereas one born in the winter may shed his first antlers at the age of only 14 months.

The first antlers have no coronets, while the second set have coronets but no clearly defined brow points. A better way to age a buck you have shot is by removing and boiling out his tusks. Those of a young buck have wide, open roots, the walls of which are thin and brittle. From the age of three years the root progressively closes and after five years, there will be only a pinprick left. ■



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Looking great and ready for a stalk. The B14 fitted with MDT CRBN stock in limited-edition Veil camo and the MDT Mountain bipod



NEW YEAR WEIGHT LOSS

It's time to shed some pounds. **Rob Hardy** explores the options for reducing the weight of his much loved, but decidedly heavy, dual-purpose rifle

The ideal weight for a rifle is a very personal choice. While one shooter will only have the lightest and most easily carried rifle available, another will actively seek a bit of weight in their rifle, to aid in its stability and help soak up recoil. It very much depends on the individual and their requirements.

Take one of my own rifles, for example. A few years ago I bought a Bergara B14 Wilderness HMR in 6.5 Creedmoor as a true hybrid: something I could shoot regularly with my rifle club yet also call on for a specific aspect of deer management. This involves controlling fallow herds on large, open arable fields, where a lack of cover – and an abundance

of watchful eyes – often made it impossible to close the distance beyond 200-250yd.

With its heavy barrel, integrated mini-chassis and fully adjustable stock, combined with the excellent ballistic performance of the 6.5 Creedmoor, the HMR allowed me to fire more rounds, at extended ranges and with low recoil. It did exactly what both rifle and cartridge were designed to do, and I've been delighted with its performance both on the range and in the field.

That said, I always felt I would like to try to reduce its weight without sacrificing stability or accuracy. Fully dressed with a 20 MOA Picatinny rail, a substantial target-grade scope, moderator, Harris bipod and sling, the rifle tipped the scales at 13lb 8oz. Perfectly manageable on the range, perhaps, but a long

crawl down a drainage ditch soon becomes a shoulder-wrenching, lung-busting affair.

The breakthrough came during a conversation with PRS specialist and Rifle Shooter contributor Ryan Charlton, who also happens to be MDT's International Account Manager. Ryan suggested I try MDT's new CRBN stock.

THE STOCK

The CRBN is a foam-filled carbon-fibre stock featuring a magnesium micro-chassis with V-block bedding, yet it weighs a remarkable 27oz, excluding bottom metal. I've never been keen on full-blown chassis systems – despite appreciating their advantages – but this felt very different. It offered everything I liked about the HMR stock: an adjustable cheekpiece and length of pull, a

comfortable 20° grip with integrated thumb rest, and a rigid bedding platform. It even incorporates an Arca-rail with M-Lok slots moulded into the forend, eliminating the need for additional metal rails and further reducing weight.

Could it get any better? Yes it could. Available in standard Black Carbon, Hunter Blaze, Woodland and a range of limited-edition camouflages, it also looks superb. The only additional choice is in the bottom metal: either the lightweight Hunting version at 3.35oz (95g), with a lockable magazine catch, or the Precision option at 5.12oz (145g), with barricade stop and flared mag well.

Ryan kindly offered to loan me his CRBN stock, and as the Bergara uses a Remington 700 short-action footprint, it dropped straight in. Fitting couldn't have been easier. I removed the two action screws, lifted the barrelled action – scope and rail still attached – from the HMR stock, and dropped it into the CRBN. After tightening the screws, giving the butt a good tap to seat the recoil-lug, and torquing everything to the suggested 65in-lb, the job was done after only 15 minutes. I checked the rifle's zero before taking it hunting and it was unchanged.

What had changed dramatically was the weight. With the CRBN

stock and Precision bottom metal fitted, the rifle was around 2lb 8oz lighter. It was a revelation.

THE BIPOD AND SLING

I was now on a roll and started looking for further savings. Once again Ryan had the answer: MDT's new Mountain Bipod. With its minimalist design, adjustable carbon-fibre legs and aluminium/titanium Arca-rail clamp, it weighs just 5.7oz – 5.9oz lighter than my Harris. Combined with a lighter sling using aluminium QD cup fittings rather than stainless sling-swivels, the rifle now weighed a very respectable 10lb 8oz.

But how did it shoot? Simply put, superbly. Despite the reduced weight, the foam-filled stock absorbed recoil effectively, leaving the rifle feeling pleasingly dead in the shoulder. The 6.5 Creedmoor is hardly punishing, but staying in the scope was easier than ever, follow-up shots were quicker, and even my group sizes reduced.

Despite its delicate appearance, the Mountain Bipod proved rock-solid. Offering height adjustment from 2.7in to 15.8in and a low leg-splay feature, it actually gave more flexibility than my existing Harris.

Buoyed by success, I began to wonder how far I could push this weight-loss regime. The remaining

candidates were obvious: the scope and the moderator, so I went to the internet for some weight watching.

THE SCOPE

The first scope that came up as one of the lightest available was the Leupold VX-3HD. Options range from a compact 4.5-14x40 at just 13.4oz (379g) to the more comparable 6.5-20x50 with dialable turrets, weighing 20.8oz (589g). That meant that even if I went for the larger option the Leupold would still save around 10oz, over my existing 31.1oz (882grams) scope.

If I wanted to step up to the VX-5HD 4-20x52 with its 5:1 zoom ratio and Firedot illuminated reticle, I would only sacrifice around 3oz over the VX-3HD, at 23.5oz (666g), both were viable options.

THE MODERATOR

For moderators, the Freyr & Devik UTS131 stood out, weighing just 131g (4.6oz) thanks to its aluminium and 3D-printed titanium construction. It is an end-of-barrel mod available in .224 to .30 cal. The most popular mod in the company's Featherweight range is the FW196, also made of aluminium and titanium and weighing – you guessed it – 196g (6.9oz). It protrudes just 109mm in front of



Above: MDT's Precision bottom metal with barricade stop and flared mag well

Right: The Mountain bipod has twist-lock height adjustment and the legs can be splayed wider to lower the shooting position



the muzzle. Either would make a substantial saving on my existing Hausken XTRM MkII, which weighs a modest 10.7oz (285g).

With these changes, my rifle could realistically come in at between 9lb 8oz and 9lb 11oz. Yes, I could have shaved a little more weight with a full chassis such as MDT's HNT26, or by starting with a lighter barrel, but as I said at the outset, rifle weight is deeply personal. Balance, in the long run, matters far more.

While much of this exercise became about exploring what was possible rather than what was financially sensible, I hope it provides some useful ideas if you're considering shedding a few pounds in the new year. One thing, however, is certain... Sorry Ryan – you're not getting that stock back.

STOCK AND BIPOD

MDT CRBN

Weight: 27oz

Material: Foam-filled carbon fibre

Chassis: Magnesium with V-block bedding

Features: Adjustable cheek height and length of pull, integrated Arca-rail with M-lock slots and thumb rest

Available inlet: Remington 700 SA profile. Tikka and Remington 700 LA options in 2026

RRP: £1,699.99

Hunting Bottom Metal, £295.99,

Precision Bottom Metal, £271.99

MDT MOUNTAIN BIPOD

Weight: 5.7oz

Material: Carbon fibre with aluminium and titanium fittings

Features: Twist lock height adjustment from 2.7-15.8in. 180° cant, splay-legs, quick button 90° deploy/fold, spiked feet

Mounting: Picatinny and Arca-rail fittings

RRP £492.99

Contact: Highland Outdoor stockists

Web: mdttac.com

SCOPE

LEUPOLD VX-3HD 6.5-20 X50MM

Magnification: 6.5-20x

Objective lens dia: 50mm

Tube diameter: 30mm

Reticle: Second focal plane (SFP), CDS-TZL2 fine duplex

Adjustable parallax: Side (SFP)

Turrets: CDS-T (target), capped elevation and windage. Other models available with exposed

elevation and lockable zero

Click value: 1/4 MOA

Weight: 20.8 oz (589g)

Length: 14.37in (365mm)

Field of view: (at 100yd): 14.1ft (low mag) to ~5.8ft (high mag)

Eye relief: ~4.4in (low mag) to ~3.6in (high mag)

Construction: Waterproof, fogproof, shockproof, nitrogen purged

Lens coating: Multicoated for clarity and glare reduction

Key features: HD clarity, Leupold's Elite Optical system, CDS-T custom dial system, fast throw lever

RRP £1,180

Web: vikingarms.com



Leupold's VX-3HD series has a wide range of options to choose from

The best-selling Freyr and Devik FW196



MODERATORS

FREYR AND DEVIK UTS131

Suppression: 29-31 dB

Weight: Approx. 131g

Length in front of barrel: 122 mm

Total length: 138mm, front mount

Diameter: 42.9mm

Core: Titanium

Housing: Aerospace aluminium

RRP: £435



The Freyr and Devik UTS131 front-of-barrel moderator

FREYR AND DEVIK FW196

Suppression: 29-31 dB

Weight: Approx. 196g

Length in front of muzzle: 109 mm

Total Length: 154 mm

Diameter: 49.5 mm

Core & thread: Titanium

Housing: Aerospace aluminium

RRP: £345

Contact: Cluny Country Guns 01592 882600

Web: clunyguns.co.uk



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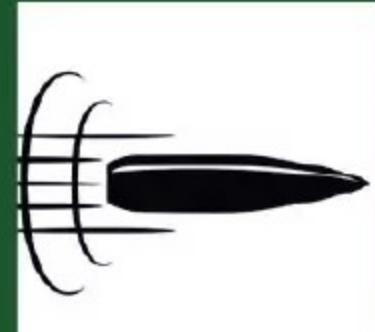
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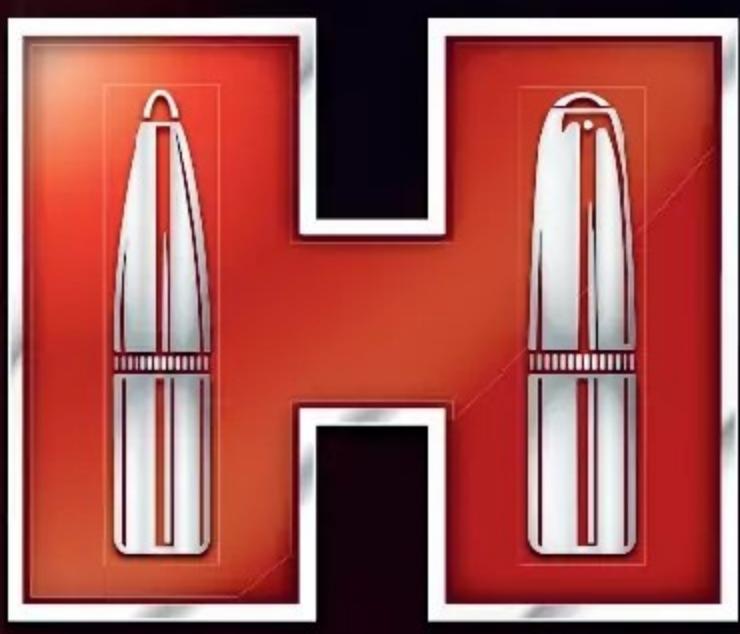


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RED DEER PROJECT

A photograph showing two red deer hinds standing in a clearing of a forest. They are looking towards the camera. The background is filled with tall, green coniferous trees. The foreground shows some fallen branches and mossy ground. The sky is clear and blue.

John's management plan means hinds are now prioritised during the cull

HINDS – THE ULTIMATE TEST

In the final part of his Red Deer Project, **John Tooher's** attention moves from stags to hinds, which combined with the winter weather will test his preparation, willpower and equipment to the limit

There is a noticeable difference in the forest from our previous hunting trip just two weeks ago. The grey skies and branches, now devoid of leaves, are in stark contrast to the ground, decorated in its annual finale of vibrant

autumn colours. There is an eerie stillness. Gone is the spectacle and roaring of rutting stags, but there remains the most important aspect of deer management still to be achieved – the hind cull.

Deer populations can only effectively be maintained or reduced by culling females. In November

both sexes of deer are in season, so we prioritise hinds and, if the opportunity arises, also take a number of cull males. Removal of these stags is for the betterment of the herd. An example of what we are looking for is stags that are not crowning (see image 36). At this time of year we also occasionally encounter stags that



The warmth of a fire is welcome if you are allowed one

were injured during the rut and will not survive the winter.

DAY ONE

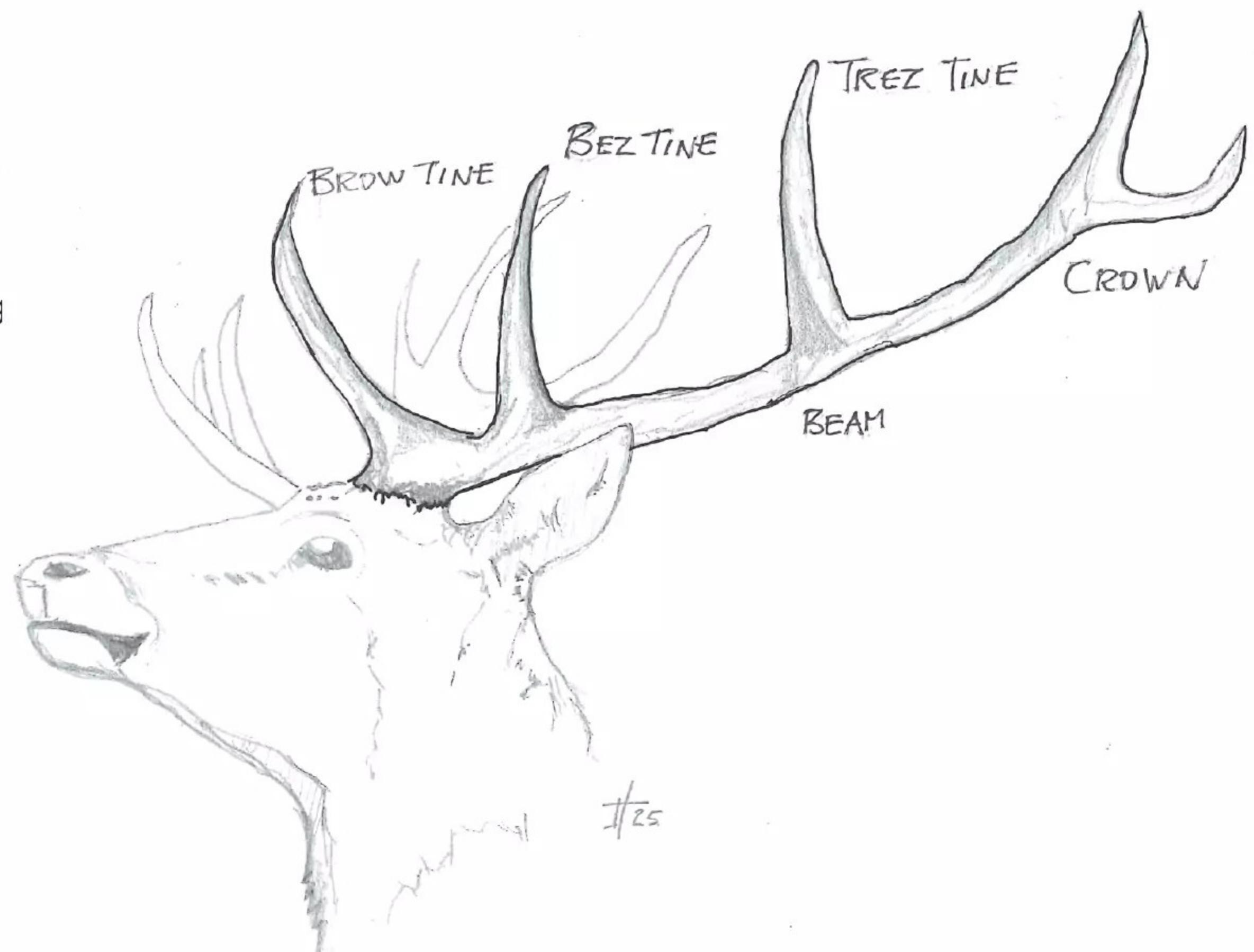
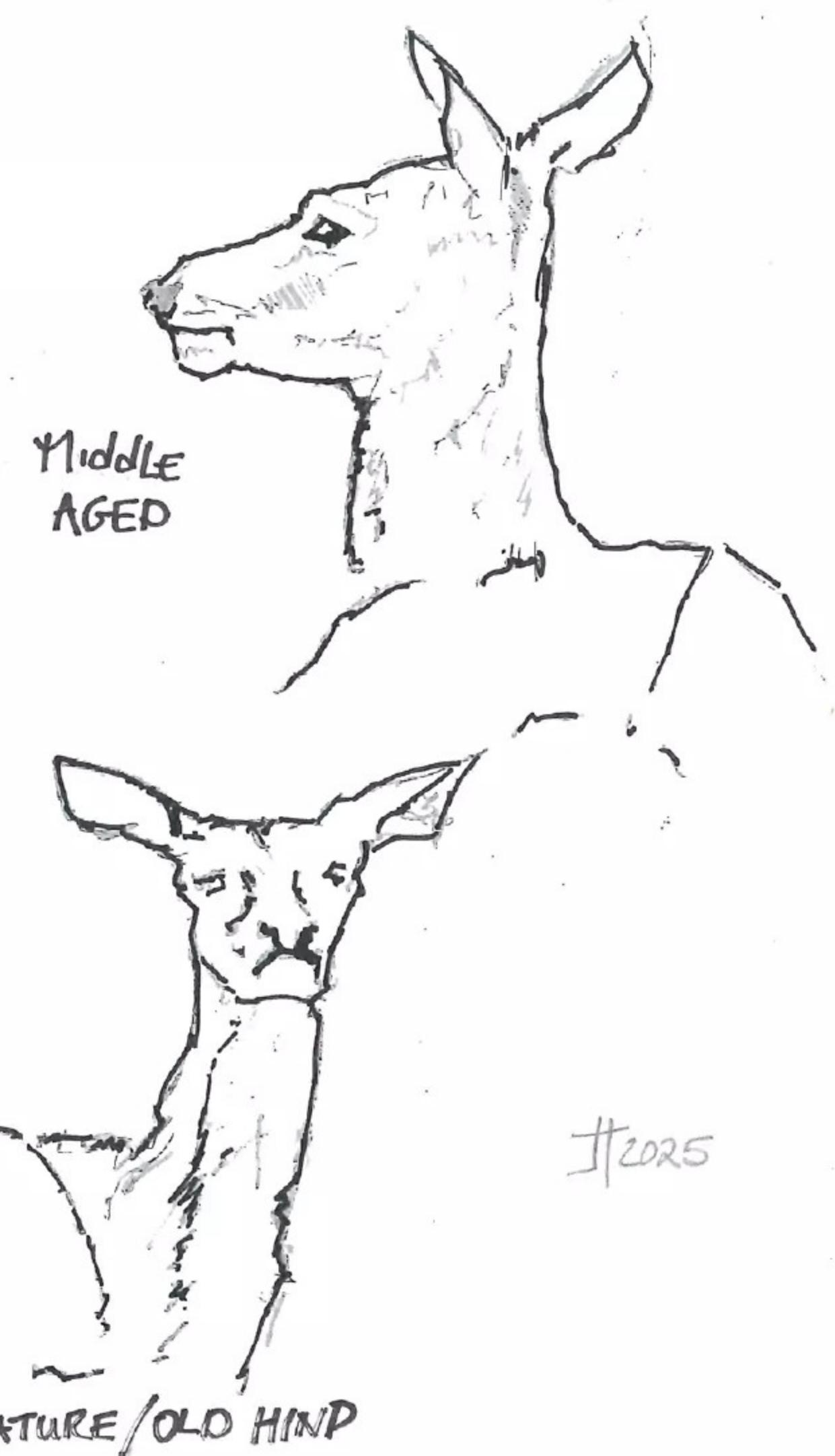
As I warm my hands by the campfire on this early winter morning we hatch a plan for the day's hunt. Andrew is brewing coffee that makes Red Bull seem like chamomile tea. We load our frame packs in order of necessity, keeping the rain gear in the top lid. Other often used items – ammunition, drag ropes, signal tape and rifle cover – go in the side pockets.

We start in an area that, from our experience, usually holds a herd of deer. It's a long, narrow, steep valley with natural woodland hugging both sides. It opens at the top onto heather hill, dotted with large boulders. The deer like to bed down among these rocks on the high ground after feeding in the morning on the more palatable grass at the valley bottom. Red deer, particularly hinds, can become 'hefted', meaning they develop a strong attachment to a specific area of a few square kilometres. This is linked to available cover and open feeding and resting areas, even though their home range may be much larger. This may also change with population density or pressure.

As we move into the scattered birch woodland, we notice fresh droppings and tracks in the damp ground. Glassing the distant treeline we spy a herd of deer, grazing at a decent pace through the high



Graphical description of three age classes of hinds



Cull stag: young animal bearing no formed crown



Marking the location of shot animals means the cull can continue, with cooled carcasses being retrieved later

beige grass, parallel to the conifer forest 20m behind. It is made up of hinds, yearlings and calves. We start by checking the wind direction at our current location, then use our binoculars to assess the wind direction where the deer are by studying the movement of grass and tree branches.

We cautiously make our way towards the herd, while scanning every section of ground with our binoculars. Peering through the trees, we carefully look for the most minute part of a deer, whether it be an ear, tail or the rusty red colour of their winter coat. The last thing we want is for a sentry hind to spot or scent us and bark out a warning.

We note a distinctive Scots pine, just behind where the herd is currently feeding, and use it as a landmark,

eventually closing the distance to just 150m. Maintaining a low profile, we crawl forward through the knee-high grass and begin the process of selecting suitable cull animals.

Identifying the lead hind and her calf, we dismiss them from the cull plan and assess the rest of the herd. Trying to pair the correct calf and hind takes time, but we see that two animals in particular are not in as good a condition as the rest, with their heads hanging lower and the coat being of a coarser appearance.

In single file we crawl to a small, moss-covered mound beside an old tree stump, hoping that using its extra height will give us both a clear path for the bullet and a safer backstop, as the last thing we want is to injure other deer with the bullet passing through.

From a prone position I adjust my Spartan bipod, followed by the ballistic turret on my scope for the correct shot distance. I chamber a round and take the first hind, confirming the animal is down before Andrew takes a second hind only meters from the first.

When culling hinds it is important to concentrate fully on taking one animal cleanly at a time. This can only be achieved by taking your time and watching the shot unfold through your scope. Only then should you follow up with a fast reload before moving onto the second animal.

DAY TWO

The following morning welcomes us with a cold northerly wind rustling through the tall pines. We expect the deer will use the available terrain to their advantage, shielding themselves from the cold wind. Trudging across the damp ground, we suddenly spy deer on the forest edge. To our surprise it's a small herd of deer bedded down, testament to how hardy these animals really are.

Closing the distance for a better view, we count a small herd of hinds and calves. The hinds appear to range from young to middle age, all healthy animals with strong calves. Scanning the area again, we spot antlers among the deer grass, 80m away to the right. With my image stabilising binoculars I can quickly see that this stag is a cull animal, missing a crown on the right antler, and the stalk begins.

Not wanting to alert the bedded hinds, we slowly move into a small woodlot in order to use the trees as cover. With only 100m or so to get into a shooting position and provide a safe backstop, it still feels like an eternity as the mounds of tussock grass underfoot will only allow a standing shot. In such terrain it takes time to get the quadsticks into a suitable and stable position.

The stag knows something isn't right and his body language tells me he is about to depart this arena pretty quickly. As he moves towards the forest I have the rifle on the Springboks, my illuminated reticle lit, the distance dialled in and I'm just waiting for the right opportunity. Only meters away from the forest edge, the stag stops for one last look, turning broadside just long

EQUIPMENT

During the winter cull the weather can often get pretty spicy, with cold winds, heavy rain or even snow. I find an outer shell of decent rainproof gear indispensable, while the damp winter winds warrant a change to a layering system of quality synthetic and merino wool, under a down insulation mid-layer. I use good scope covers to keep the lenses dry and clear and I always keep a lens cloth handy on my binocular harness.

A tarp acts as a quick shelter when the rain gets too heavy, and also comes in useful for laying equipment on when gralloching. Other items include signal tape for marking the location of shot animals. This means that if we are successful early on we can use 'S' hooks to hang the hinds from a suitable sawn tree branch to cool and drain, returning to retrieve them later. I also have a Riserva gun cover, Akah ammunition holder, Work Sharp pocket sharpener, Peak headtorch, gaiters, knife, Kifaru frame pack, drag ropes for extraction, Swarovski STC spotting scope and Sig Zulu 16x42mm image stabilising binoculars. I also carry laminated A4 size aerial photographs of the forest, as there isn't phone reception for apps with maps or GPS.



enough for me to get a good shot off. He barely makes it to the trees before collapsing.

Familiarity with your equipment and a stable shooting platform are the keys to success. I use Spartan precision equipment, both the Springbok bipod and quadsticks. They are lightweight and robust enough for my type of hunting, and with the ability to lock the quadsticks onto the front of the rifle using the adapter, I can pick the rifle up with the stock remaining on the rear rest and move shooting positions without having to separate the whole setup.

CONCLUSION

I started this series by detailing how I familiarised myself with my chosen equipment to suit this style of remote

backpack hunting. I also revealed how I mix the opportunity to scout for deer in the offseason by coupling it with predator control. While those warm summer evenings may seem a lifetime ago now, the attention to detail was worth the effort. This includes such things as using a chronograph to get the correct bullet speed, then inputting this data, along with other information, into a ballistic app to get the correct bullet drop compensation.

I also tested the new Zniki ballistic rings, fully adjusted my Akila chassis to my length of pull and comb height, and zeroed my rifle using the target I designed and included in Part 1 of this series, using suitable ammunition to ethically hunt our largest land mammal.

Although we have not yet finished our winter cull and there will be many more days spent in the forest, I will end this series with a quote from Part 1, in the hope that it will encourage you to give it a try.

"Hunters who backpack hunt will know the importance of having tried and tested gear. Remote hunts are tough, both physically and mentally; comfort is never really in sight. You almost feel unwelcome in the dark, damp forest until you come to terms with it. It is you who must adapt, as the deer and forest are unapologetic. However, remote backpack hunts are extremely rewarding and a true adventure. Reconnecting with nature while gaining an unfiltered experience and testing yourself is a truly incredible experience." ■



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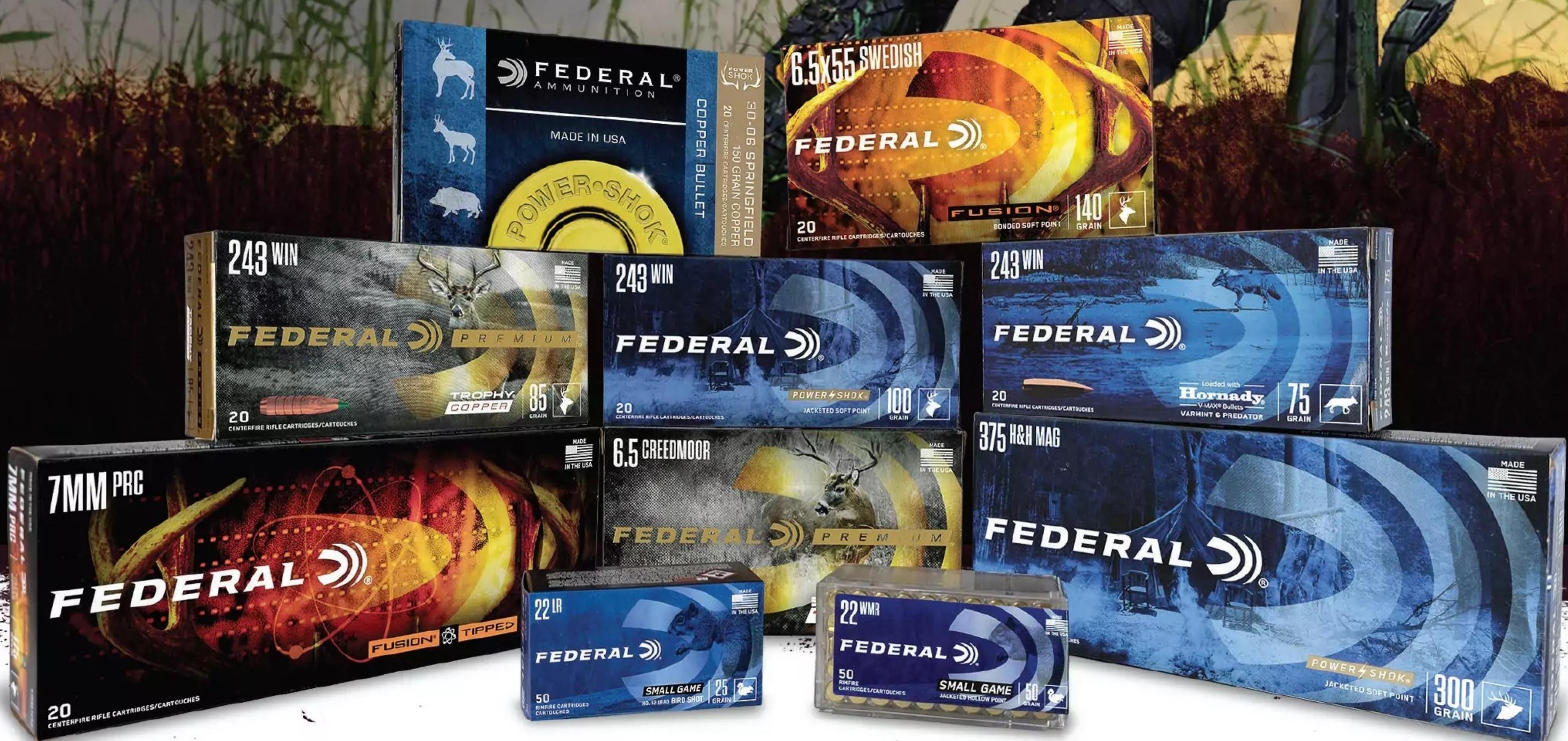
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KIT BAG

Gamekeeper **Lance Barton** reveals the items that he never goes foxing without



Successful fox control is all about preparation. There is little point sitting out for half the night only to discover that when the fox finally appears your thermal scope has run out of charge, or you are down to your last round of ammunition. For that reason I always make sure I carry my kitbag, stocked with spare batteries for all my technology – including the call box, thermal spotter and thermal scope – as well as a fresh box of ammunition. It may sound like overkill, but you cannot shoot foxes without bullets.

I take this small kitbag with me on every outing and it has become the foxing equivalent of a man drawer, full of all the little bits and bobs that make life easier. The bag itself is a soft, waterproof Thinking Anglers camera case.

For me, routine is everything, and I am very particular about how I lay out my gear on top of the truck. I always follow the same setup so that everything is immediately to hand, avoiding fumbling, unnecessary noise and the risk of spooking a fox. I will even leave the kitbag zip

partially undone to prevent noise, or the need to use a torch to get into it.

It is all muscle memory now, as I am often doing this between four and seven nights a week, depending on the time of year. After a particularly busy period guarding this year's partridges, I have toned down the setting on my thermal spotter from the bright White Hot to the more eye-friendly Green. I find this greatly reduces the eye strain and headaches I used to suffer from after prolonged use. Likewise I have switched the rifle scope from White Hot to Black Hot, which I find produces a much crisper image, especially on cold nights.

While the spotter, call box, binoculars and rifle are not technically kept in the kitbag, they all go everywhere together and I would never be without any of them. Although I shoot very few foxes in daylight these days, I still like to carry binoculars, mainly for ranging prominent landmarks around my position. This means there is no fiddling with buttons on the scope when a fox presents itself, allowing me to concentrate fully on making the shot. I also enjoy watching other wildlife while I am out, and you can always learn something new simply by observing.

The call box can be more or less effective depending on the time of year, but it remains a standard part of my kit and is always set out according to my routine. As I explained in my first article, I like to camouflage the truck. While this may not always be necessary, it certainly does no harm. I secure the netting with small magnetic hooks, which I keep in a packet inside the kitbag.

Two products I have recently started carrying and would highly recommend are waterproof scope and rifle covers, made by Deer Tray Covers in nearby Wiltshire. They pack down neatly into a small



carry bag. I use the scope cover in drizzle or light rain, and if conditions worsen or the rain becomes prolonged I cover the entire rifle. This allows me to stay out on the wettest nights, which is often when foxes cause the most damage as soaked partridges are slower and less able to escape.

The kitbag also contains a lens-cleaning kit and cloth, just in case rain or mud spots one of the lenses, along with a headtorch and a pair of small oval rechargeable hand warmers to keep my fingers trigger-ready on cold nights. These days I am far more careful about handling dead foxes than I once was, and I now never touch them without gloves. A pack of baby wipes is useful for cleaning my hands, or if I get caught short. Finally, I carry a few spare foil packs of cat food, just in case I need to freshen up a baiting spot. ■

LANCE'S FOXING KITBAG

Nocpix Vista thermal spotter
HikMicro Stellar 6.0 thermal rifle scope

Rifle: Remington .243 with GRS stock, fitted with a Harris bipod
ICOtec Hellion+ call box and bluetooth remote

Swarovski EL binoculars

In the Thinking Anglers camera case:

Spare batteries for the call box, spotter and rifle scope

Full box of 20 rounds

Pack of small magnetic hooks

Waterproof scope and rifle covers

Lens cleaning kit

Rechargeable hand warmers

Baby wipes

Headtorch

Pair of black latex gloves

A few spare foil packs of cat food

STALKING

Chris and his 'wingman'



BETTER EYES AND EARS

Stalking with a four-legged sidekick is still not the norm in the UK, but **Chris Dalton** believes that those who do, shoot more deer

I am lucky enough to host stalking clients from across the world. They join me in Ayrshire, this cold and wet corner of Scotland, from some of the most fascinating places, and have incredible stories to tell. But at some point the conversation invariably turns to my deer dog, Zosia.

She is similarly high on the agenda of any post-outing debrief as we tuck into a full Garryloop breakfast. She's a popular member of our team and I always tell my clients that stalking is better with a hound by your side.

It's certainly the case that you can get away with not having a

dog with you most of the time, but there will be instances when a dog is the difference between finding the animal you've shot and going home empty-handed. Crucially, if an animal is injured we should dispatch it as quickly as possible, and part of achieving that is finding it promptly, which generally means a little help from a canine friend.

It doesn't matter how good a shot you think you are. If you stalk long enough you are going to miss or wound a beast, and I have been doing this job long enough to know that some of those 'misses' will result in a dead deer. I see a lot of deer shot when I'm with clients and watch through binoculars as they shoot.

You can normally tell if the shot is good or not by the reaction and the sound of the strike, but that is not always the case. There have been occasions where I have called a miss, only to be proved wrong after sending Zosia to check. In this game you can never assume.

WATCHFUL EYE

Zosia is a nine-year-old German shorthaired pointer (GSP) – the first of the breed I have trained and worked with. I distinctly recall the comments of a well-respected and experienced GSP trainer who counselled me: "Until they are five, you have to watch them like a hawk all of the time. After that you only



PICTURES: DUNCAN IRELAND

It's not always possible to determine a good or bad shot

have to watch them like a hawk most of the time." His words ring true to this day.

I have worked gundogs pretty much continuously since getting my first shotgun at the age of 16. Until relatively recently, though, my dogs were used for game shooting and fowling. Using dogs to assist with stalking is a fairly recent phenomenon in the UK. When I first started stalking it was without a dog.

There was certainly a different mindset back then and woodland stalking has only really developed and become popular in the past 50 years. One of the driving factors behind this was military personnel

returning from Europe, who saw the sporting potential of deer and brought some of those practices back to the UK.

The first dog I used for stalking was my working cocker, Katie. She easily adapted to stalking but continued to excel during driven days. Today all manner of breeds are used for stalking, not only those from traditional sporting stock. Spaniels and Labradors are more than capable, but I prefer deer dogs from a hunting, pointing or retrieving background.

If you want a specialist, then it's best to get one and use it solely for its intended purpose. A lot of our

stalking hounds have originated from European breeds, but it's worth noting that the continental approach to tracking quarry is quite different from our own.

FIRST-CLASS TRACKER

My first specialised deer dog was Burt, a Bavarian mountain hound. He was as stubborn as a mule – my wife still maintains that dogs mirror their owners – and I'm still not sure who was training whom. But he taught me a lot as a stalker and, after the training phase, he developed into a first-class deer dog. He once tracked and located a sika stag 36 hours after it had been shot, in some of the most horrendous conditions imaginable through thick Sitka spruce and bog. It remains one of my happiest memories as a stalker.

For most Guns the idea of going game shooting without a dog is unthinkable, but that is still not the case with a lot of stalkers. Even if they own a cocker or a Labrador it's not uncommon to see it left at home. This is because traditional British stalking would have been for red stags on the open hill and a dog was not required to find the beast. As woodland stalking has increased in popularity, so has the use of dogs.

As well as finding deer that are wounded, a stalker with a dog will shoot more deer. I've read about the American army using dogs in Vietnam to find the enemy in the jungle. I don't regard deer as the enemy – far from it – but you get the point.



Early warning system – a dog will alert you when deer are ahead



“They would all tense up and switch to high alert, creeping forwards and testing the wind with a twitching nose”

Initially, as I transitioned from working dogs on game to working them on deer, I kept them very close at heel. But I soon found that allowing the hound some freedom to work, around 10m or so in front of me, meant they could scent far more effectively. A dog acts as an early-warning system and provides the ability to find deer in thick cover or to follow up a wounded beast. Taking a back seat and simply following as your dog does its thing is a wonderful feeling.

ON HIGH ALERT

Every dog I have ever worked with has been able to alert me to the scent of deer. While each had a slightly different behaviour when sensing deer, they would all tense up and switch to high alert, creeping forwards and testing the wind with a twitching nose. Zosia stands still and slowly turns her head to look back at me before easing forwards again,



as if encouraging me to hurry and catch up with the deer ahead.

There is currently a lot of debate as to the merits of all stalkers having a dog with them. Reading comments on social media is quite an eye-opener. I wouldn't suggest that it should be a requirement, but the benefits to me as a professional stalker are immense. If you asked me to operate as an outfitter without a dog, I would emphatically say "No." Not least because a lot of my stalking ground is made up of commercial conifer plantations and newly planted restock sites.

Finding a well-shot deer could mean a crawl under dense conifers, interspersed with deep planting ditches, and it would be almost impossible without a dog. Thankfully this environment, which can be dark and dank, seems to be much loved by Zosia.

I must admit, though, that there are instances where a dog can be a hindrance. I frequently stalk Chinese water deer, a species that prefers large open fields away from dense cover. CWD are particularly vulnerable to poachers and such activity is generally undertaken at night with running dogs.

Consequently they are extremely wary of dogs, so Zosia's presence would have the deer on edge. Any follow-up on CWD is likely to be over open arable land and unlikely to require a dog, so whenever they are on the menu Zosia is kept at home, much to her disappointment.

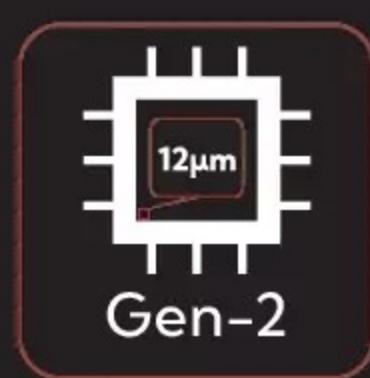
As well as the ethical aspect, I truly believe that working a dog makes stalking much more enjoyable. Zosia is my wingman. While I have expensive gadgets to help me find lost and injured deer, specifically thermal-imaging units and quality binoculars, none is more effective than a well-trained deer dog.

There's something very pleasing about knowing that millions spent on research and development can't get close to making products that compare to the handiness of a good dog. Standing there in the field after a successful stalk, giving a bit of venison kidney to Zosia, is an unbeatable feeling. ■



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THE X-FACTOR

Bruce Potts revisits Browning's X-Bolt 2 rifle and finds that the Eclipse model is his favourite so far

I tested the revised version of the X-Bolt last year and shot two nice Chinese water deer bucks with the Browning Tech X-Bolt 2 Nordic Varitech. It is, admittedly, designed as a lightweight rifle, but the stock felt a bit flimsy. Today I have the pleasure of reviewing the version in a walnut thumbhole stock.

Called the Eclipse, this nicely styled and proportioned thumbhole stock is available in two versions. The Nordic Eclipse has a shorter barrel of 18.5in (47cm), and the one I have on test is the Distance Eclipse with a longer 22.8in (58cm) barrel – a very odd length.

Priced at £1,539.00, this Eclipse is £360 dearer than the plastic-stocked Nordic, and to my mind is a much better deal. So let's see how well it performs.

STOCK AND ACTION

The stock is what the eye is instantly drawn to and often forms the basis of whether you like or dislike a rifle. It immediately feels so much more substantial than the Varitech model. It is a conventional, well-designed and laid-out thumbhole with the bonus of an adjustable cheekpiece, which is so popular these days.

The cheekpiece elevates on twin blued steel pillars and is secured and released by a single Allen screw in the centre. The 6in long cheekpiece has a travel of 1.0in and, when locked in place, is very sturdy, which is much better than some carbon fibre alternatives I have tested recently.

Unlike the Varitech, the LOP is set at 14.25in with the 25mm Inflex recoil pad. You can buy an optional 32mm Inflex pad and external 7mm spacers separately to alter the

LOP as desired. The pad grips and cushions recoil admirably.

I like the openness of the thumbhole. It is not too large and is proportioned for right-hand use, but you can also use it left handed. The grip is reasonably upright, again achieving a natural feel, and although it is devoid of chequering it feels easily controlled in the hand. By contrast, up front is the slim and finger-grooved forend, which has some really good, deep-cut chequering that looks nice and does its job perfectly.

The best bit of the stock has to be the walnut itself. Browning states grade-two walnut is used but someone at the factory must have been asleep when they graded this one, as it is much better than that. The whole stock has a deep honey hue to it, contrasted by very striking vertical striping that shimmers in the light when the Eclipse is angled.

The weight of the stock better balances the whole rifle, especially with this longer-barrelled version. It feels so much more robust and



A fine looking centrefire rifle with its excellent walnut thumbhole stock and longer barrel on this Distance Eclipse model

warm when out stalking. Consistent bedding is assured by a twin-point bedding location and steel recoil lug, but no compound is used.

The finish is a bit variable in places, a cross between a rubbed oil and light lacquer. Nonetheless it repelled the British rain well enough during the shooting test. The metalwork has a hunter-friendly dull but practical matt-blued finish on both barrel and action.

There is no one-piece Picatinny rail, just a drilled and tapped receiver top for scope mounts. The action is nicely contoured and compact, facilitating speedy operation, and the new spiral fluted bolt with its smooth three-lug arrangement delivers a low lift. You also get the option to customise the bolt knob from the tear drop standard to Hurricane, Hexagon, Drop or Twister. Ejection and extraction are very positive.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

MAKER: Browning
NAME: X Bolt 2
MODEL: Distance Eclipse
TYPE: Bolt action
BARREL: 22.8in (58cm), 14mm/1 thread
CALIBRE: .308 Win on test
OVERALL LENGTH: 43.25in
WEIGHT: 3.2kg/7.1lb
STOCK: Thumbhole walnut Length of pull 360mm, 14.25in
TRIGGER: DLX trigger 1.75-3lb adjustable
SAFETY: Tang safety
MAGAZINE: 4-shot polymer
SIGHTS: No sights, separate mounts available
PRICE: £1,539
IMPORTER: Browning International
www.browning.eu

The tang-mounted safety catch has always appealed to me, as it falls neatly just where the thumb lies and is still easily accessible from the thumbhole with its simple action. However, an additional small push-button at the top of the bolt handle allows the bolt to be opened when the safety is applied. ▶





The polymer four-shot
detachable magazine feeds
with total reliability and
won't rust

The Eclipse has a slim profiled
barrel with a 14mm/1 thread for
a muzzle brake or moderator



Trigger-wise, the DLX model is
pretty decent, offering adjustment
from 1.75lb to 3lb. The trigger on
this rifle broke with just a slight creep
on take-up, but it provided a good,
safe pull for stalking.

X-Bolt magazines are practical,
being all polymer, they are hard
wearing and will not rust. In .308
Win, the magazine offers a four-shot
payload that fed without issue.

The Distance, as mentioned, has a
longer barrel at 58cm, which is even
longer in magnum calibres at 63cm.
All have a slim sporter profile with a
diameter at the muzzle of 15.55mm
(0.612in) and a 14mm/1 thread.
Again, the option to customise the

The standout part of the
Distance Eclipse rifle was the
walnut thumbhole stock with
adjustable cheekpiece



rifle with various muzzle brakes is there if you so wish. All the barrels are free-floated.

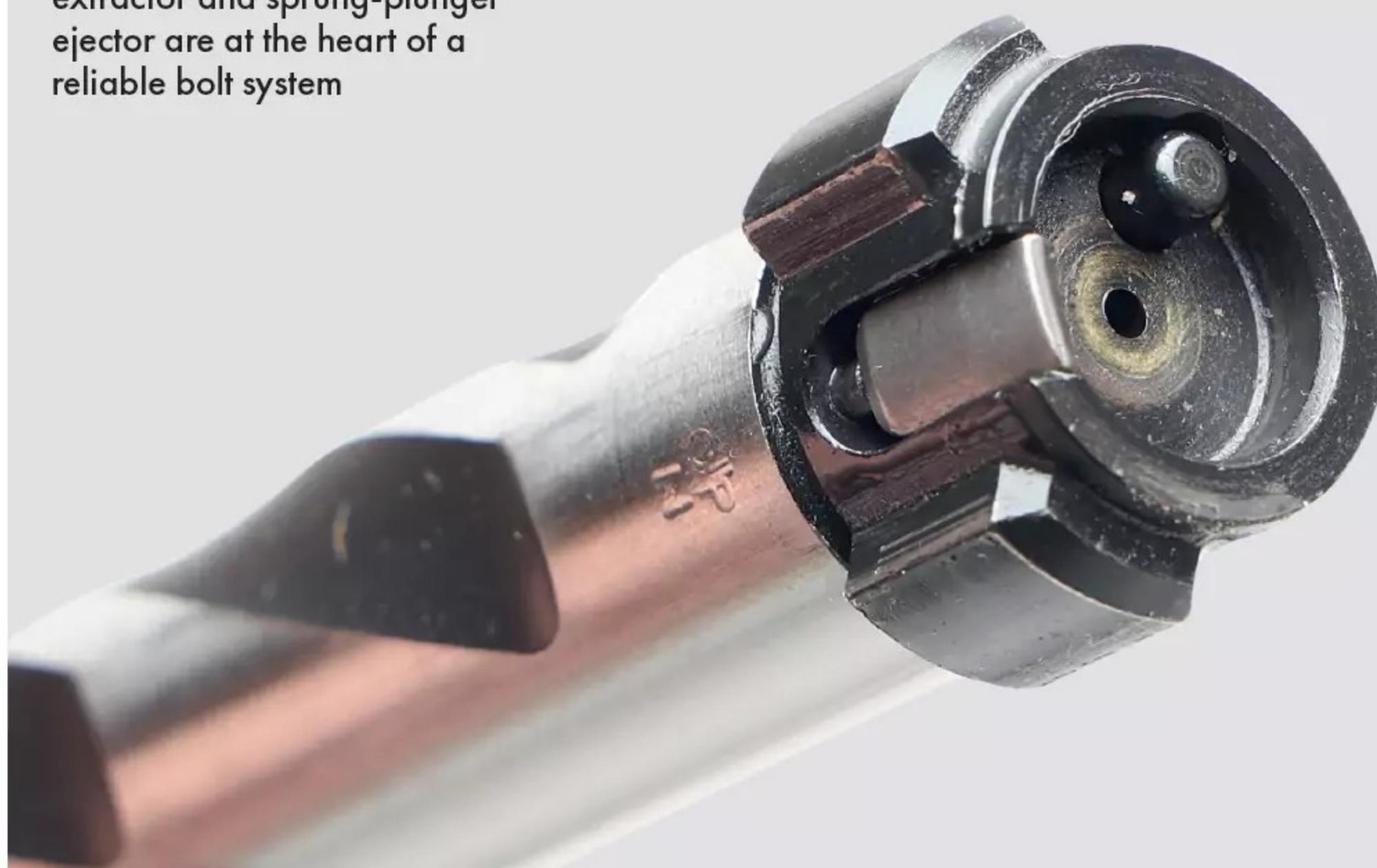
FIELD TEST

The test rifle was fitted with a Kite 2-12x50mm rifle scope, and I shot mainly lead-free .308 ammo, as that's where we are all heading. I did shoot Sako 123gr Game Heads, as they performed well in the Nordic Varitech 18.5in barrel. I got 0.75in groups and an increase of velocity and energy from 2,810fps/2,157ft·lb to 2,887fps/2,277ft·lb. That is not a lot, really.

Next, my number-one go-to lead-free round, the Hornady ECX 125gr, shot 1.35in groups at 2,990fps/2,482ft·lb. These are good for everything from muntjac to red deer.

Sako Power Head Blade Pros with their 130gr loading are again a really good lead-free option that are pricey but consistent. I got 2,945fps/2,504ft·lb energy with three-shot 0.95in groups.

A three-lug head, claw extractor and sprung-plunger ejector are at the heart of a reliable bolt system



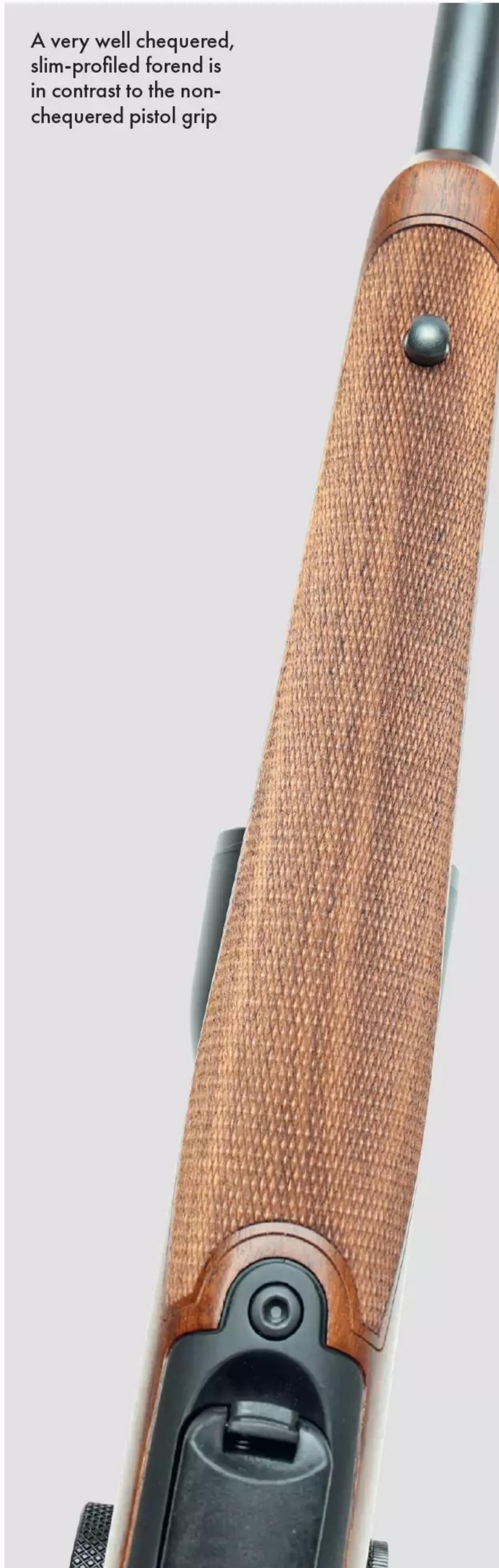
Norma Eco Strike 150gr projectiles can be a bit fickle sometimes, but they shot well in the Tikka Ace Game recently. Today velocities were decent at 2,786fps/2,586ft·lb, and 1in groups were definitely more than good enough.

Winchester's Copper Impact can like some rifles more than others. Today I had 1.75in to 2.0in groups. Not too good. That is rifles for ➤



The override button on the bolt handle allows it to lift while still on safe

A very well chequered, slim-profiled forend is in contrast to the non-chequered pistol grip





Although it is a tad long with a moderator fitted, I liked the reassured handling and sturdiness of the Eclipse model

you: they know what they like and you need to try a selection or work up a decent reload.

I have had good success with the next loading for deer. These were the Remington 150gr Copper at 2,789fps/2,591ft·lb, and groups hovered at the MOA mark. RWS 165gr Hit Green, which is a real premium loading, shot a disappointing 1.25in group at 2,611fps/2,498ft·lb but would still make a decent red deer round.

Sadly the rifle arrived right on the deadline for copy, so I had no chance to take it out stalking. However, from the test session and handling in the field, the Eclipse is a capable bolt-action rifle for the price.

I did like the overall feel and styling of the thumbhole design and thought that the grade of walnut used was excellent for the money. I have said before that I like to have a shorter barrel for my type of stalking, so personally, I would have preferred the Nordic version.

The X-Bolt action is always reliable and smooth to operate, even with wet and numb fingers. The Iridium sound moderator from Browning did a really good job of decibel reduction and was light too.

CONCLUSION

The X-Bolt rifles are just good, no-nonsense, get-the-job-done tools with a variety of stock options to keep the shooter happy. This Eclipse is my favourite and worth the extra cash, as in my view, it balances the rifle far better.

Although I would opt for the shorter-barrelled Nordic version, the difference between a 47cm and 58cm barrel length in .308 is academic. I think the Eclipse proves that walnut is far from being dead. ■



Sako's PowerHead Blade Pro 130gr proved the most accurate in tests through the Eclipse



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Neil Davies picks his shot between the trees on the opening drive

For the first time in centuries, one of Europe's most respected hunting estates opened its annual driven-boar hunt to guests from outside its inner circle. **Simon K Barr** was one of the lucky few

There are few invitations in European hunting that carry the heritage and significance of joining Prince Franz-Albrecht Oettingen-Spielberg on his family's annual driven wild boar hunt. This is not just a recreational hunt or simple social fixture. It's a once yearly, carefully orchestrated management day on one of the continent's finest non-fenced,

free-range estates. A landscape shaped and protected by the House of Oettingen-Spielberg for centuries.

The setting is Schloss Oettingen, a baroque palace built between 1679 and 1687. The Oettingen lineage stretches back more than 1,000 years, with connections to the Imperial Hohenstaufens. At its height the family ruled one of the largest secular domains in East Swabia. Despite the upheavals of the 19th century the family

remained deeply rooted in the region and today they continue to manage their land with a sense of continuity that few estates in Europe can match.

This year marked a historic first. The family opened their famous driven boar hunt to a group of international journalists to witness and participate. To stand on ground traditionally reserved exclusively for the Princely family and their closest companions was an immense privilege.



The weekend, co-hosted by Hornady, Savage, Leupold and A-Tec, began at the MSZU shooting cinema in Ulm, a state-of-the-art training facility that reveals a shooter's strengths and weaknesses with total honesty. Full size moving boar footage is projected onto a cinema screen and shot with any rifle. This demands instant judgement, correct lead and repeatable technique. This is as close to the real thing as you can simulate and, I can confirm, includes adrenaline. It exposes hesitation and flaws much more effectively than any paper range could. The screen freezes after the shot to show where your shots hit.



The MSZU training facility in Ulm



The night before the hunt – time to catch up with old friends

We were using Savage Impulse rifles in .308, Hornady's .308 ECX 125gr ammunition and Leupold Gen 2, 1-5x24 VX 5HD scopes. I particularly liked the throw lever on the magnification that offered fast changes for closer and farther targets. It was the ideal warm up before stepping into the forest, and by the end of the session the entire group had found their rhythm.

From Ulm we travelled to the beautifully preserved Bavarian town of Oettingen and checked into the hotel, not 100yd from the castle. That evening we prepared for one of the most memorable parts of the weekend.

Entering Schloss Oettingen for dinner felt like stepping across a threshold into a living history. The trophies, vaulted ceilings, heavy beams, carved crests and oil portraits all spoke of a lineage that has shaped the region for centuries. The atmosphere was not theatrical but authentic. The castle is used by the family regularly as an extension of their own home, not a museum, and the welcome we received reflected that.

Sharing a five-course silver-served meal in such a setting on the eve of the estate's most important hunt of the year was a rare privilege. I knew many in the international group from having spent a couple



of decades on the media circuit in Europe. It is always nice to reconnect with some old faces. Guests from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Norway, Serbia, Bulgaria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Sweden, the US and the UK all brought their own perspectives and stories. Yet everyone understood that the next day would be something unique.

Despite the hospitality there was no late-night atmosphere; the significance of the coming day was abundantly clear to everyone. We left the castle early, stepping out together into the cold Bavarian night with quiet anticipation.

The next morning began with a full briefing in the courtyard of the castle from Franz-Albrecht himself. The Oettingen Forest rules are among the most refined and ecologically grounded I have seen. Yet practical and far removed from the anxiety-inducing trophy hunting – that often excludes larger females and males above 50kg – I have witnessed elsewhere in Germany. This reflects a deep understanding of wildlife biology and long-term sustainability, and also that getting the job done in a way that is enjoyable for all participating means that hunters relax, and in my opinion, shoot more accurately.

This is a once-a-year activity for the forest. One day of extreme disturbance in return for the rest being quiet and peaceful. Management is essential, and this is a way of conducting the entire year's cull with minimal disturbance for its inhabitants.

Wild boar were the primary focus. All age classes and sexes could be taken, but younger animals were prioritised. To maintain sounder structure, leading females were protected unless alone, or all followers had also been taken. Roe and fallow deer were restricted to fawns and does, while foxes were actively targeted for predator control. Mouflon were not to be shot.

Safety rules reflected the ethical discipline expected. Naturally no dangerous shots, correct identification of targets, particular caution shown to the dog teams that run free in the drives, and mandatory marking of every single shot for the blood tracking teams following each drive. This was not



a standard shoot. It was a carefully coordinated management operation where meat would be optimised, yet still rooted in tradition and ecological responsibility.

For the first drive I shared the stand with an old friend, Neil Davies of Hornady. We had decided to switch shooter after each shot, and in true Brit fashion I let the American shoot first. Sharing a peg with someone you trust brings focus, rhythm and humour, and the forest rewarded us quickly.

A young *Frischling* (juvenile boar) broke cover at speed onto a ride and Neil took the opportunity cleanly, with minimal wiggle room between the trees. Moments later a medium sized *Keiler* (male) crossed the same ride; I hit him in the lungs on the first shot but he ran on. I anchored him with the second closer to the head and it flipped in true Franz-Albrecht *Wild Boar Fever* style – a satisfying spectacle whenever it happens. The drive was now rich with movement. Neil added a mature *Überläufer* (two-

year-old) and I took a young sow towards the end of the drive, with one clean shot.

A huge herd of 20 mouflon passed silently through the trees in between the action, including some incredible rams. Such a pity they were not on the list for the day, we both thought. Roe deer settled into pockets of cover, while the dog teams worked tirelessly, always present in the background. This was about as good as it gets, with action every few minutes throughout the two-and-a-half-hour drive. ▶



Neil is up on the stand first



An opening drive to remember

DRIVEN BOAR



The torchlight tableau back at the castle



Horns are played in respect



We had all been given an exact time to leave the stands. We gathered up our boar for the ground crew and headed for a hearty Bavarian lunch, in a Hansel and Gretel cabin deep in the forest. Sausages from the grill, red hind stew, hearty bread and of course some quality company.

The second drive placed Neil and I near one of the estate's most celebrated stands. It was a location where Franz-Albrecht had once experienced such an extraordinary drive that he had shot from the same stand for the following five years.

As we were being dropped off before the drive, reports came in that a sounder of 50 boar had slipped into the block just ahead. The forest began to move almost immediately. Groups of *Frischling* flowed through the undergrowth. Sows steadily guided their young and lone boar probed the edges of the wind. The dog teams entered smoothly in coordinated waves, their voices rising and falling across the landscape.

Shooting was evenly distributed around the enormous forest – a sign of broad and consistent game movement. More than 200 shots would be counted during the drive. Neil took the only clear opportunity presented to us, accounting for another male *Überläufer* with two controlled shots. We saw a lot of animals near us, but nothing close enough to offer ethical shots. Not

that this mattered, given we were in such a beautiful place and had experienced the stand of a lifetime on the previous drive.

The behaviour of the game demonstrated the depth of the estate's management. Roe deer lay low rather than running. Boar hesitated at scent pools. Foxes

slipped back to their earths. The forest felt like a living system responding to a single day of carefully applied pressure.

At dusk the provisional bag was recorded as 57 wild boar, 12 roe deer, three hares and three foxes. But the process did not end there. The following morning

➤





blood-tracking teams revisited every marked shot location. Four additional boar were recovered and added to the total. Their recovery confirmed the effectiveness of the estate's ethical framework.

The tableau to celebrate the day's hunt was spectacular yet

understated. An animal of each class was laid out, together with all the big males, lit by flaming torchlight next to the castle. Horns were played, speeches were made and we reflected on a special day that we were all privileged to have been part of.

The final dinner in the castle's stables hall was another memorable moment, surrounded by trophies and history. Yet what stood out most was the teamwork behind the day. The beaters, dog handlers, bloodhound teams, gamekeepers, foresters, estate staff, sponsors, journalists and the family all contributed to a highly coordinated operation. Hunting is a universal language that we had all been speaking fluently during the day. This for me is such a rewarding part of the hunting experience, with so many people coming together to take part.

To be invited as a guest in the first group of outsiders ever to take part in this Oettingen tradition was a genuine honour. It was a driven hunt that was carried out with precision, respect for the animals and a sense of heritage that is unique to this family and demonstrates centuries of passion and commitment to both wildlife and conservation. ■

EQUIPMENT USED BY THE AUTHOR

Savage Impulse Driven Hunter in .308 Winchester

The Savage Impulse Driven Hunter delivered exactly what driven boar hunting demands. Its straight-pull action allowed rapid follow-up shots without losing the sight picture. The short, light barrel made the rifle quick to mount and steady from improvised positions. The AccuTrigger and AccuFit systems provided consistency and comfort. Combined with the 20MOA Picatinny rail the rifle offered the perfect balance of speed and precision.

Hornady ECX 125 grain in .308 Winchester

Hornady's ECX ammunition was exceptionally well suited to the varied distances and speeds of driven-boar hunting. The monolithic construction delivered decisive penetration while its design allowed reliable expansion even at lower velocities common in European calibres. The 125gr loading offered high velocity and a flatter trajectory, which made judging lead easier on fast moving animals.

Gen 2 Leupold VX 5HD 1-5 x 24 with FireDot

For driven boar the Gen 2 Leupold VX 5HD was ideal. The true 1x setting allowed both eyes to remain open, optimising the field of view and offering rapid target transitions. The FireDot illuminated reticle stood out clearly in dark woodland. Low-light performance was excellent and the optic remained completely reliable despite cold, moisture and forest debris. Its combination of clarity, robustness and speed made it the

perfect optic for a driven hunt of this nature.

A-TEC Optima 45

For driven boar the A-TEC Optima 45 proved to be an excellent sound moderator. Its lightweight modular design kept the Savage rifle fast to mount and did not disrupt the balance needed for moving targets. The reduction in recoil and muzzle blast made shot recovery noticeably quicker, especially when opportunities appeared in rapid succession.



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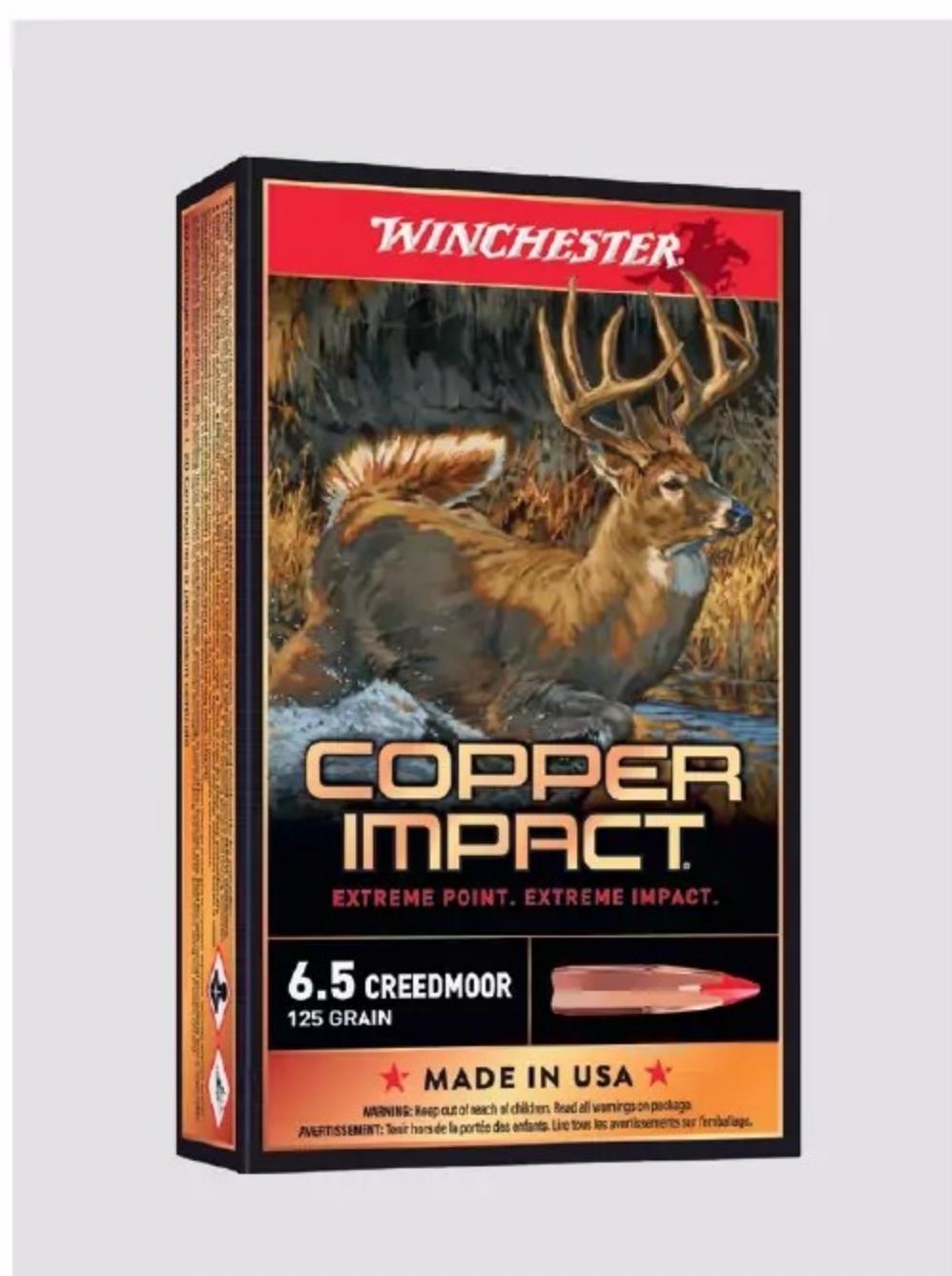
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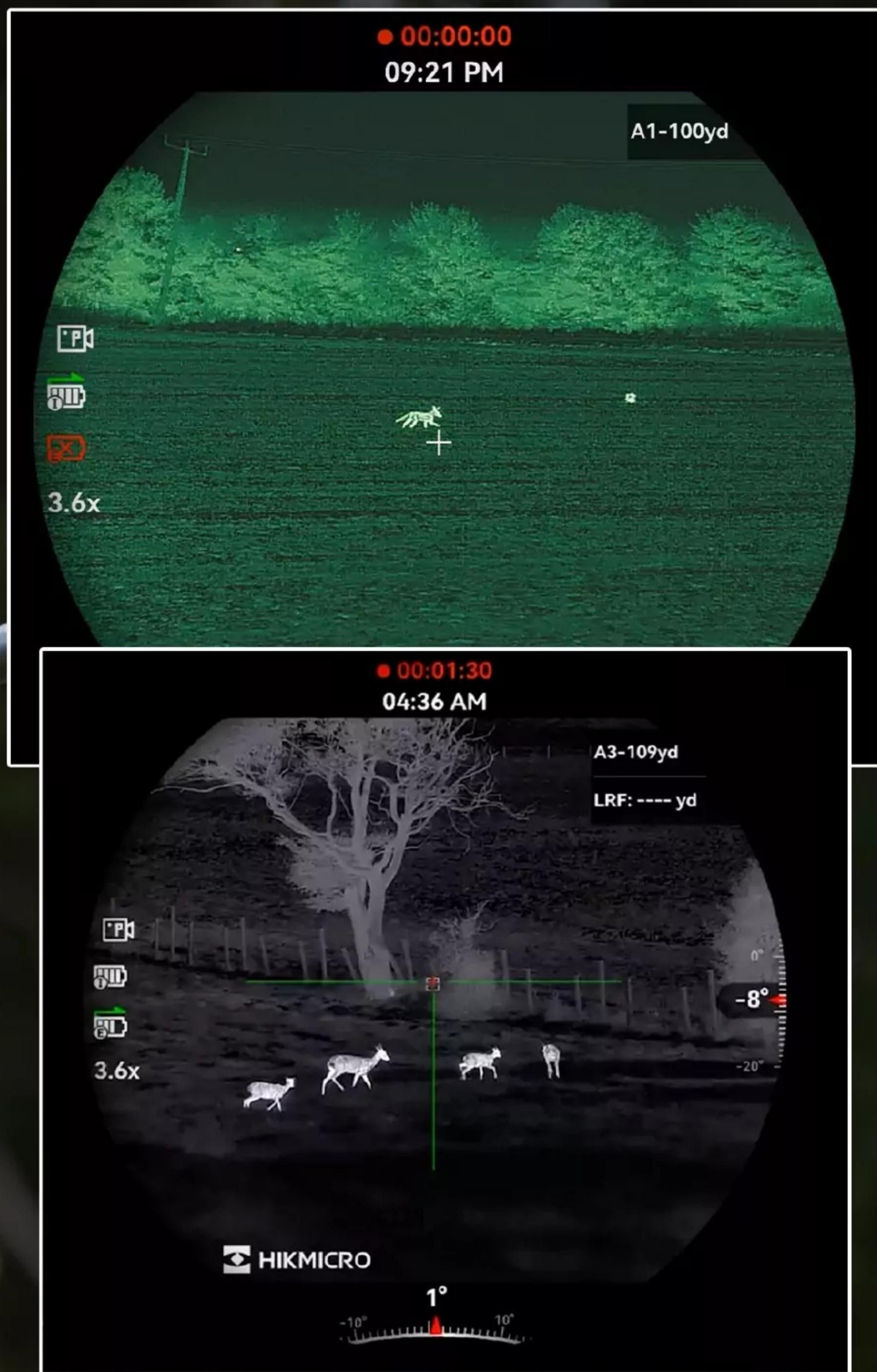
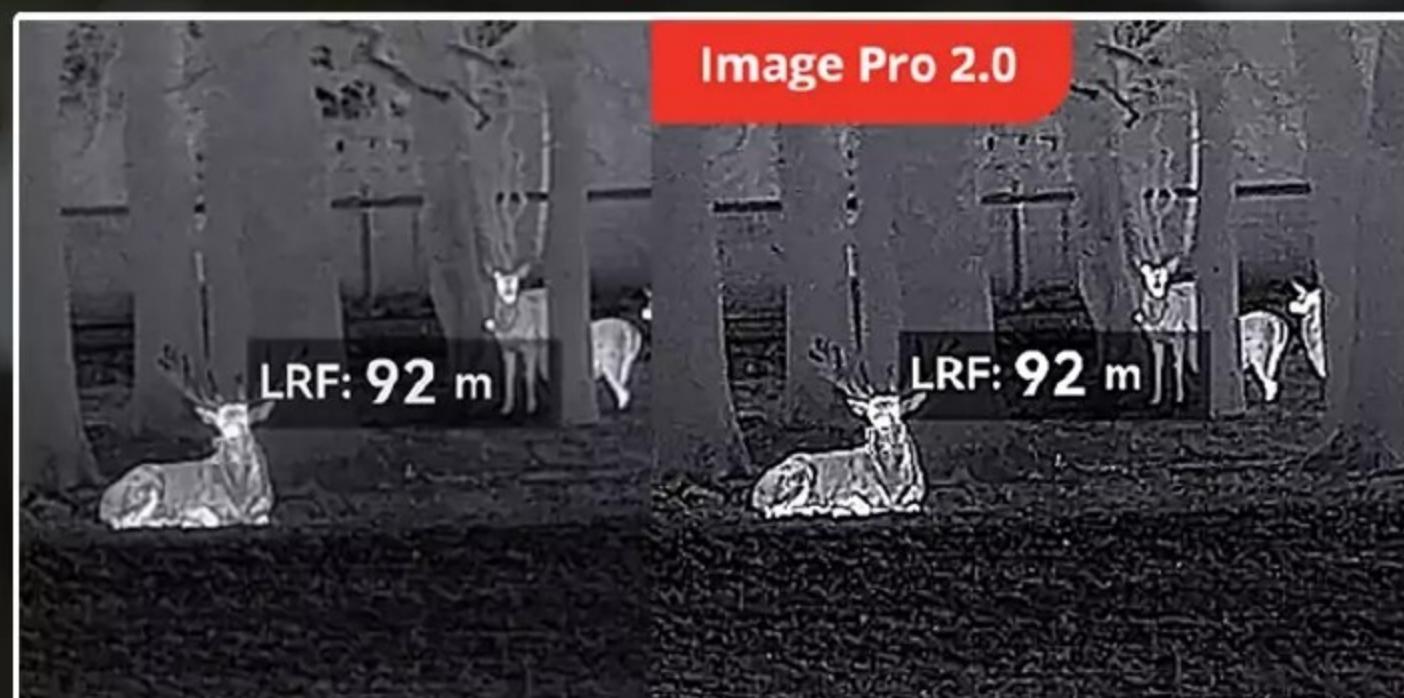


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PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

You may already be following best-practice guidelines without even realising it, but it's essential that all shooters keep up to date as procedures evolve, says BASC deer advisor **James Sutcliffe**

The term 'best practice' gets used across all sectors and walks of life. In the world of deer management we are very fortunate in that best practice is well documented in a series of useful guides that can be found on the Deer Initiative website for England and Wales, and the NatureScot site for Scotland, for anyone curious about the dos and don'ts of deer stalking.

These guides cover a huge range of topics, including legislation, welfare, species ecology, records, management plans, disease, meat hygiene, firearms safety and use, carcass handling and a whole lot more.

So what exactly is best practice? In short, best practice should detail the best way or options for doing any task. For deer stalking this is most often guided by a few key

themes, with safety and animal welfare being at the top of the list.

I like to think that in deer management we have three levels to consider. At the top of the tree is legislation – the laws that we should all be very familiar with and absolutely need to follow. Then we have best practice. This sits under legislation and represents the things we should be doing. Often there's no absolute requirement to follow it, but it should be considered in order to do the job to the highest possible standard. Then there is the third level, which is what happens on the ground. These are the actions that deer stalkers take when out and about in the woods and fields.

The deer stalking sector is a very good example of upholding high standards. Safety levels are good, with very few reported incidents, as are our welfare standards. And linking this to best practice, I would wager that most of us are actually

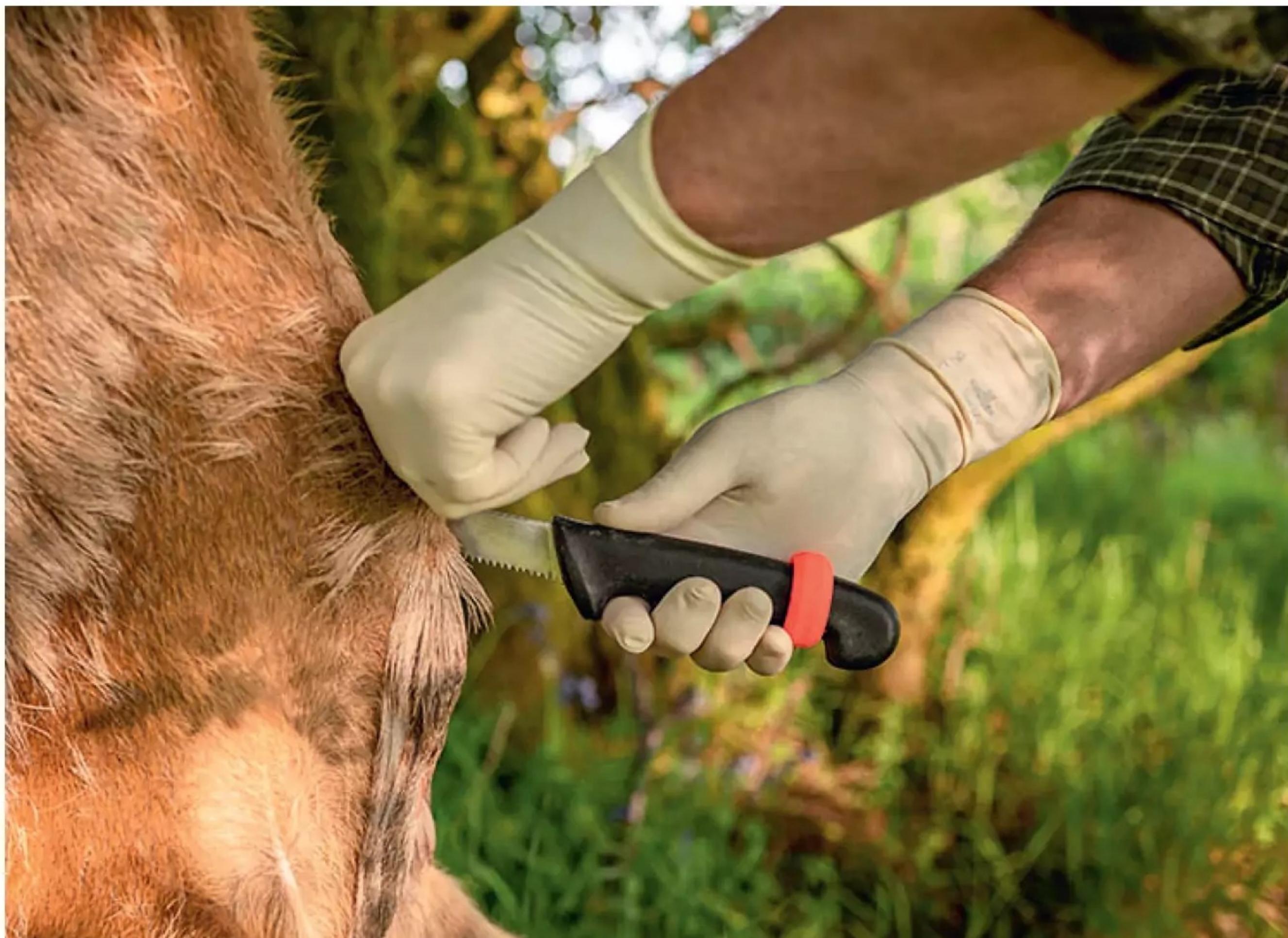
following and sticking to a lot of best practice guidance without even knowing or thinking about it.

Things like wearing rubber gloves when gralloching, to using a plastic-handled knife or checking a thermal imager heat source with your binos before deciding to aim the rifle are all examples of best practice and all things that most of us do without a second thought. If any of you are operating under a licence for deer, be it an out-of-season licence or a night-shooting licence (something becoming increasingly common as a tool for deer managers), compliance with the relevant best-practice guidance is a condition of the licence. So being able to demonstrate that you know and understand the relevant legislation and guidance will be essential in your application and implementation of the licence.

And as the methods, techniques and situations we use or encounter evolve, it's hugely important that best practice evolves with it – something currently happening across the UK. With things like thermal imagers, drones, highly accurate rifles, rests and digital riflescopes, advances in deer stalking are truly staggering to behold. Being able to use these methods and tech efficiently and safely is vital, so best practice needs to move with the times.

This is currently underway across the UK, with the Deer Initiative Partnership looking at England/Wales best practice and the NatureScot Wild Deer Best Practice Group covering the Scottish updates. BASC is leading on the editing and update of English/Welsh best-practice guidance and sits on the Scottish group providing guidance to the updates. We also run a number of best-practice events throughout the country, providing hands-on training or experience in a variety of aspects of deer management, so keep an eye on what's happening in your local region if you're interested.

You can also take a look at our deer stalking code of practice and find out more information on the BASC website, www.basc.org.uk.



Many stalkers will already follow best practice, wearing rubber gloves and using plastic-handled knives when gralloching

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WHEN LESS IS MORE

Rob Hardy puts the new Vortex Ranger HD 3000 LRF rangefinding binoculars through their paces

Being able to determine the distance to a potential animal quickly is one of the most important things in hunting.

It not only tells you whether it lies within your effective range, but also whether you need to account for bullet drop.

Nowadays we have the luxury of rangefinders built into our optics, although this usually comes at a considerable price. So when I saw the new Ranger HD 3000 LRF binoculars from Vortex, they immediately caught my attention.

These 10x42 binoculars are built with quality components, including multicoated, high-definition glass that reduces chromatic aberration and improves colour fidelity, edge-to-edge sharpness and light transmission. The built-in laser rangefinder has a maximum reflective range of 3,000yd, and between 1,500 and 1,800yd on non-reflective objects such as trees and deer. What particularly appealed to me, however, was their clean, simple design.

The laser is housed within the rubber-armoured magnesium

alloy body, so there are no protrusions, bulges or additional lenses sticking out. In fact the only external indications that these are LRF binoculars at all is the small, recessed, toolless screw cap covering the single CR123 battery under the left-hand tube, and the two flat rubber buttons on top of the prism housing. This makes them aesthetically pleasing and very straightforward and intuitive to operate, even one-handed.

A press of the right-hand button activates the red OLED display and the small circular aiming reticle in the

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

MAGNIFICATION:	10x
OBJECTIVE LENS DIAMETER:	42 mm
EYE RELIEF:	17.0mm
ANGULAR FIELD OF VIEW:	6.4°
CLOSE FOCUS:	6.0ft
INTERPUPILLARY DISTANCE:	55-74mm
LINEAR FIELD OF VIEW:	335ft @ 1,000yd
RANGE REFLECTIVE:	<3,000yd
RANGE TREE:	<1,800yd
RANGE DEER:	<1,500yd
MINIMUM RANGE:	6yd
HEIGHT:	6.7in
WIDTH:	5.1in
WEIGHT:	32.4oz
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PRICE:	£799

right-hand lens. A second press fires the laser, and the display returns the distance within a split second, even at extended ranges.

Holding down the left-hand button for five seconds brings up the menu options, which includes Normal, First and Last Target modes; Horizontal Component Distance (HCD); Line of Sight (LOS) and Scan ranging modes; measurement in metres or yards; five brightness settings for the display; and timings for automatic shut-off. The same button is used to cycle through the menus and the right-hand button makes your selection.

It sounds a lot, but in practice the system is very simple to use. My only slight criticism is that the abbreviated menu titles can be hard to decipher until you become familiar with them. It's a minor quibble in an otherwise commendable package.

The brightness settings enable you to tailor the display to accommodate use in bright or low-light conditions, and the HCD mode provides angle-compensated distances – ideal for when you are shooting in steep terrain. The only feature I struggled to find a real-life use for was the Scan mode, which constantly updates the distance as you pan. This might suit some when assessing firing options from fixed position, but I prefer to range prominent landmarks around my arc of fire for quick reference.

At 36oz (with battery, eyepiece caps and neck strap attached) they are not the lightest LRF binoculars on the market, but I found the extra weight and solid feel reassuring. They proved more than capable of taking the knocks that my equipment inevitably gets, whether bouncing around on the dashboard of my pickup or out on a stalk.

Most importantly, the Ranger HD 3000 provides a clear, bright and crisp image, excellent low-light performance and accurate distance readings. That's all you can reasonably ask of any rangefinding binoculars – especially a pair priced well under the £1,000 mark and supplied with its own GlassPak harness, cushioned neck strap, lens cloth, lens and eyepiece covers and battery, and comes covered by Vortex's full warranty, including the electronics. For me that makes the Vortex Ranger HD 3000 LRF one of the best value-for-money options currently available. ■

STARTING STALKING



TICKETS, TOOLS AND TRAINING

Chris Rogers guides us through the complexities of navigating police licensing, choosing the right calibre, and proving proficiency through training qualifications

In my previous article I talked about the importance of noting evidence of deer present on the ground, particularly when you go on a paid stalk. I also offered my thoughts on clothing, boots and which binoculars would be best for budding recreational stalkers.

Now that you have undertaken a number of guided stalks and have hopefully started to get a feel for the basics, you are probably considering getting your own rifle rather than using someone else's. A major point to bear in mind here is that as well as government led requirements, which applicants have to comply with, each police constabulary has its own system and policy concerning firearms licensing. They differ in terms of what they

require from an individual before granting a firearms certificate (FAC) or even variations to an existing one.

Therefore what I say below can only be a rough guide, gleaned from my own experience. Be warned that the application process can take many months depending on the regional constabulary you fall under and its backlog, meaning there is a real postcode lottery between different areas. All I can say is stick at it – it will be worth it in the long run.

EXISTING SHOOTERS

I'm guessing that the majority of the people who want to start stalking deer have already done some form of shooting before. You may have been game or clay shooting and already hold a shotgun licence, or have been using smaller-calibre

rifles for vermin, rabbit or fox control and already have a FAC. You may even be a member of a rifle club and have a suitable calibre to shoot deer, but your licence conditions will be restricted to target shooting only.

Generally such experience will act in your favour, whether applying for an FAC, which can run coterminously with your shotgun licence, or, in the case of existing FAC holders, contacting your firearms enquiry officer (FEO) to ask for a variation to your certificate. This will either allow you to add a deer suitable calibre or allow you to hunt with a suitable rifle you have previously been using for target shooting only.

In all cases you will need to provide evidence of the land you have permission to stalk over, as would a new applicant. As a stalking provider, we give permission to shoot over the estate as a paying client. The issuing police force will most likely ask you to provide evidence that you have done the required number of outings



.308 ammunition is affordable and there are plenty of options to choose from

with someone experienced who will vouch for you before they will grant the variation.

Although technically you can use a .22 centre fire, such as a .222 or .22-250 for roe stalking in Scotland and muntjac and Chinese water deer in England and Wales, when we talk about deer calibres we really mean .243 and above. This is because in most areas – certainly in England and Wales – it is likely there will be more than one species present and as soon as you have roe deer or larger on your land to shoot, you will need to use a minimum of .243 calibre to comply with the law.

I'm very much of the school that likes the deer I shoot to fall over as quickly as possible, and preferably with the largest exit hole possible. This gives you the most blood on the ground to follow through woodland and suchlike.

NEW SHOOTERS

As a first time applicant, you will need to show 'good reason' for owning a rifle; hunting deer certainly ticks that box. You will also need to contact your GP to supply a medical history as part of your application and mandatory checks. If all goes well, you can then start to think about the calibre you would like and that will very much depend on the species you will be stalking. In the old days a .243 was the most common calibre and the most

likely the police would grant for a first rifle. Now, with the phasing out of lead ammunition in the not too distant future I would argue that a .243 is only good for regular use on muntjac, Chinese water deer and roe. This is because lead-free ammunition is lighter and has less impact energy.

Traditionally the .243 would fire a 100gr lead bullet, whereas now it is likely to be an 80-85gr copper bullet. This means that, in my opinion, if you are regularly stalking larger deer species you should apply for a larger calibre such as the 6.5 Creedmoor, 6.5x55 SE or .308, all of which use bullets around the 120-150gr mark. My preference for most stalking scenarios is the .308, which is the calibre we use for our estate rifle. In purely practical terms, you can nearly always find a good selection of rifles and ammo for the .308, and of the range of calibres out there it offers a reasonable price per box of 20. That said, in Scotland many professional stalkers still favour the .270 for its flat shooting trajectory and punch. Unmoderated it can be fierce in both sound and recoil, but with a moderator fitted its ferocious nature is sufficiently tamed.

MODERATORS

As we are talking moderators, you should apply for one at the same time as the rifle – although you should also always use ear

plugs or ear defenders while shooting on the range. In addition to their hearing-protection benefits, sound moderators also reduce disturbance to the deer we shoot – certainly in family groups and herding species. They also reduce disturbance to the general public in more populated areas.

A good moderator will lessen not only the sound but also recoil, which will improve your shooting. It will need to be matched to your rifle's calibre and the thread on the muzzle for it to be screwed on. There are many options on the market. I prefer to choose the lightest possible, even though a heavier model might be quieter.

SCOPES

Once you have a rifle, you will also need a scope for it. In many ways the scope does much of the outfit's heavy lifting. It is what displays the



Spend as much on a quality scope as you can afford



The DSC1 qualification is a three-to-four day course

target at a shootable size and what you use to dial the bullet impact into place on the target, which ultimately results in a harvested deer. It needs to be sturdy enough to take the recoil, knocks and occasional drops we all have. It also needs to have good low-light transmission as that is when the majority of deer species will be shot.

Almost all new scopes have variable magnification but I'd advise training yourself to use the scope on no more than 8x. For average distances this is more than enough, and any higher magnification will result in visible shake and a smaller field of view. This can result in the deer being lost through the scope after the shot, missing its all-

important reaction to the bullet. It will also take longer to acquire the target again should a second shot be required, or you need to take a second deer from a group.

Traditionally the most common hunting scopes were 6x magnification with a 42mm objective lens. These were more than good enough then and still are for most UK stalking. The scope we use on our estate rifle is 1.7-13.3x42, set on 7x magnification. It also has an illuminated reticle for low-light shooting.

STALKER TRAINING

Having covered the above, the likelihood is that a novice applying for their first FAC will be told to undertake some kind of deer-stalking qualification, in addition to proving any experience they have already gained. While a number of businesses and organisations offer introductory courses, there are two main stalking qualifications recognised by the police and other bodies such as the Forestry Commission. These are the Deer Stalking Certificate Level 1 (DSC1), administered and awarded by Deer Management Qualifications Ltd, which has been running since the late 1990s, and the more recent Proficient Deer Stalking Certificate (PDS1), which is a LANTRA approved qualification offered by The Shooting & Hunting Academy.

The DSC1 course, mainly delivered by companies and organisations as a three- or four-day course, covers the basics of UK deer identification, legislation,

safety, firearms handling and practical shooting. The award is reinforced with written tests and practical assessment, making it an all-round certificate for novices and more experienced stalkers.

The PDS1 enables candidates to achieve trained-hunter status through the completion of online theory and practical in-field assessment, carried out by an approved verifier in their local area. Through a series of online modules, classes and exams, candidates are guided through the syllabus, which teaches the theory and practical elements involved in becoming a trained hunter, such as safety, legislation, deer ecology, marksmanship and safe rifle handling. Included with the course is a large-game meat-hygiene certificate that complies with FSA guidelines for placing large-game meat on the market for human consumption.

In the next issue, I will expand on the qualification options for all stalkers and elaborate on other pieces of optional kit for you, your rifle and stalking in the field.

Chris Rogers presents the Deer Management Series on the YouTube Channel Shooting & County TV. If you are interested in stalking with Chris on the Euston estate and other areas email: eustondeerhunting@yahoo.co.uk ■



Scan for the Deer Management series on the 'Shooting & County TV' YouTube Channel



The PDS1 qualification includes a large game meat hygiene course and LANTRA approval



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STALKING

Franz-Albrecht
stalking the ghosts
of the forest



GHOSTS AND KINGS

Understanding age structure and genetics is crucial for a stable, healthy red-deer population, says **Franz-Albrecht Oettingen-Spielberg** as he reflects on the 2025 stag rut



PHOTOGRAPH: STEVEN WHITEHEAD / GETTY IMAGES

There is something timeless about the stag rut, the moment when the quiet ghosts of the forest transform into the kings of the woodland. Every year, as the summer heat fades and the first roar echoes across the forest, I sense the same blend of anticipation and humility. No two seasons are identical, yet each rut follows in step with an ancient rhythm.

In early July, before the rut has begun in earnest, the red deer stags are silent. They have just

shed their velvet and their antlers are freshly honed. They exist in bachelor groups, moving quietly through dense undergrowth, feeding hard, conserving strength. I call them the ghosts of the forest because in that phase they are unseen, slipping between trees, unseen by most hunters and even most game managers. Only since the advent of trail cameras can we be sure they are there, and this technology has given us a wonderful insight into their behaviour at this time of year.

During this period my principle is simple: disturb as little as possible.

Mature stags provide social structure to the herd

“I call them the ghosts of the forest because in that phase they are unseen, slipping between trees, unseen by most hunters”

The red deer stag is arguably the most sensitive large game species. He learns quickly and adapts rapidly. If you pressure him too often you shift his patterns, he moves out of his forest feeding routines, and the natural balance is lost. Red deer, I know from years of field work, need quiet, access to good feed close to rest sites, and undisturbed movement. In our managed forest estate we create small meadows in the cover of woodland so that the stags can graze during the day. Everything we do in the preparatory phase of the rut is about patience and respect.



Cast antlers tell an important story





Confidence in your equipment is paramount

PREPARATION

The formal season for red deer stags in the region I manage opens in early August. From then the tension builds: they test each other, rub antlers, move more. You can feel it in the air. The first roars tremble down the ridges. And then, when the nights cool, the full rut begins.

This year the rut came slightly earlier than usual, aided by a dry August and crisp September nights. By early September the forest ridges were alive with sound. I had already been watching particular stags for weeks – old individuals I knew intimately, whose cast antlers I had collected each winter, whose movement patterns I had logged season after season.

From a management point of view this is essential: age-structure, genetic quality and behavioural knowledge matter far more than simply chasing trophy antlers. Old stags bring social stability, create a condensed mating season, and maintain herd health. Without them the rut drags out, with young stags chasing hinds long after the main event, wasting energy and disturbing herd dynamics.

Research confirms this behaviour: stags greatly increase movement and vocal activity during the hinds' fertile period. In other words, understanding rut timing and stag behaviour isn't just useful for hunters; it's critical for wildlife managers too.

WHY OLD STAGS MATTER

In many ways, the real king of the forest is not the one with the biggest antlers, but the one with the right age, experience and social stature. Older stags regulate the hinds in heat, help compress the rut into a short window, and produce male offspring who will disperse and extend genetic diversity across valleys.

If you only have young stags, the rut becomes prolonged and chaotic. Hinds cycle again in November, stakes rise, stress increases. An old stag helps contain this. Studies show older male red deer produce more male offspring. That is important, because young males expand their range and foster genetic exchange between herds.

So when I choose not to shoot a young heavy-antlered stag, I'm not passing on a trophy: I'm preserving structure. A well-matured 11- or 12-year-old stag is worth more to the forest dynamics than another early shot trophy.

HUNTING DURING THE RUT: A FIELD ACCOUNT

By mid-September 2025 the roar was fully underway. The forest throbbed with it, particularly deep in the forests of north-eastern Germany where I manage our estate.

Every season brings one hunt that defines it. For 2025 it was the pursuit of a stag we'd known for nearly a decade. We first identified him as

a five-year-old, with a distinctive cut in his right ear and a cast antler we had found. Over many years he matured slowly but surely. By now he was 12 or 13, the perfect age to be managed out of the herd.

For almost a week we tracked signs, rubbings and tree marks. He appeared only once at dusk. Then he vanished again into the deep forest. We waited. We hunted wind. We moved quietly.

Finally the moment arrived. It was cold, still evening. I had the 6.5 Creedmoor barrel in my Herbert Scheiring single-shot custom rifle that night. The adrenaline is high, the stags are hard to predict, they fight, they charge, they retire wounded, so perfect shot placement is essential. With the 6.5 Creedmoor and Hornady ELD-X bullet I'm confident the shot will be ethical, quick and clean.

We spotted him stepping onto a meadow from the pines. He roared in answer to my cow-call. The shot was 190m, slightly quartering. I placed the bullet at the base of the neck, expecting it to cross-through the vitals. He collapsed within 70m.

I stood in silence. The moment was heavy. To harvest a stag you've known for years is more than a hunt: it is respect, memory and conservation.

Later we sent the jaw for age and tooth analysis, one of the most

accurate ways to confirm age in free-ranging stags. I believe he was 13 – a fine example.

ANTLERS AND AGE

Antlers tell stories and each year's cast is a chapter. You can trace the brow tine angle, the crown thickness and coronet circumference. With this stag I have found cast antlers dating back eight years. His beams thickened, crowns expanded and tray tine moved upwards. One side bore odd growths – likely from a leg injury he had sustained in earlier years. Those quirks made him easy to recognise.

I keep detailed logs, photograph wallows, collect cast antlers and compare year-to-year changes. That is both hunting and research. It informs my decision making. For example, I may decide not to shoot a heavy 10-pointer at eight years old if I believe his body still holds room for improvement.

In our managed forest we measure not just trophies but body weights, herd dynamics and age cohorts. A heavy antler means less if the body is weak or the age too young. I say this because credible research shows that stags' movement and behaviour during the rut is deeply influenced by their age and condition, and the distribution of hinds.

EQUIPMENT AND ETHICS

Gear matters, but ethics matters more. My Scheiring rifle has two barrels – 6.5 Creedmoor for earlier season work and .338 Lapua for the heart of the rut. I use a Swarovski Z8i scope. For sound moderation I use a Svetko Hunter 1.0 in the Standard and Magnum versions, both quick-detach with a quarter turn, to protect my hearing and reduce forest disturbance.

The 6.5 Creedmoor is a fantastic all-rounder – minimal recoil, precision at range, sufficient for many stags if placed correctly. But when the rut is full-on, stags are charged with adrenaline and the risk of movement increases. For those situations I prefer going larger with the .338. I once said: "It's not so much the calibre, but the projectile [Hornady ELD-X] and your shot placement that count." I still believe this.

Ethics include shot placement, waiting time after the shot, ensuring minimal suffering, and proper harvesting of the animal and its components, from the jaw for age analysis to the cast antlers for records.

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS

Red deer are extraordinary creatures. They are majestic, introspective, powerful and vulnerable all at once. One day they appear invisible, the next they roar like kings.

Each season they teach me something new. In 2025 I was reminded of the fragility of balance. A few wrong moves, over-hunting young stags, excessive disturbance, ignoring age structure, and the herd dynamics unravel.

Responsible hunting is only part of the picture. Sustainable management means working with the forest, the undergrowth, feeding sites, neighbours and local ecology. Our team has evolved its approach over 20 years, with less trophy-chasing, more measurement and more patience. We now see stronger bodies, better antler sets and more stable age distributions. That is progress and a strong indicator of a herd with improving health.

To every hunter, manager or conservationist I say: the stag is a teacher, not just a target. The tracks you follow, the roars you hear, the antlers you find – they all speak of time, survival, adaptation. Recognise that.

AFTER THE RUT

When the rut ends, the forest falls quiet again. The kings retire. Their bodies are battered from weeks of conflict. Soon frost will come. By January the antlers will drop and the cycle begins anew.

Collecting cast antlers is like paging through a year book of the forest. Each one has a story. Collectively they build an important dataset – not just of trophies but of population health.

As I raise an antler to the light and smell the faint trace of moss and bark, I am reminded: we are temporary. The forest predates us and outlives us. Our role is caretaker, not conqueror.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

This season's rut was full of emotion: the close calls, the stillness after a shot, the years of study culminating in that perfect moment. I feel immense gratitude to the animals, the forest, the team behind the scenes and the privilege of watching nature's most dramatic performance.

Every trophy wall I have is not just about size; it is a memory of patience, respect and connection. Ethical hunting equals sustainable management. That is the core of what matters. As the leaves fall, the forest rests and the stags once again become ghosts. But I will wait, quietly, respectfully, for the day when the rut begins again.

To view Franz-Albrecht's stag rut on YouTube visit: [youtube.com/@Franz-Albrecht](https://www.youtube.com/@Franz-Albrecht)

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It is not about size, it is a memory of patience, respect and connection





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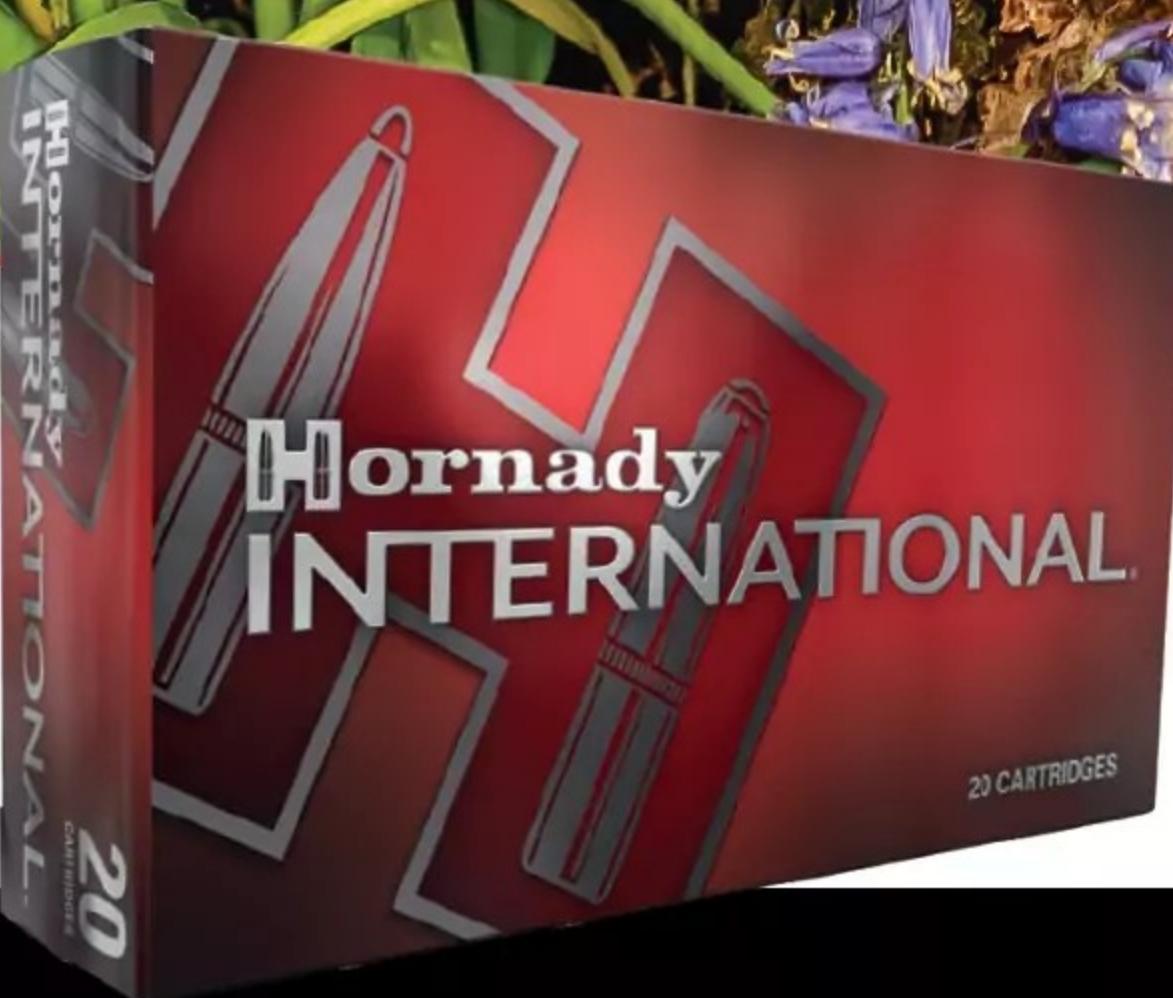
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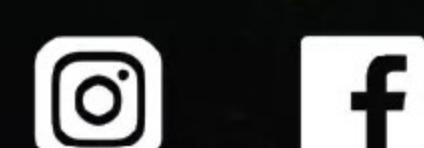


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5 OF THE BEST TRADITIONAL HUNTING RIFLES



If you are the type of hunter who prefers the warmth and figure of wood and the sporting lines of a more classic rifle, then we might have just the thing for you

While we all know the benefits of modern synthetic stocks and stainless or cerakoted metalwork, there is still something special in hunting with a classic, wooden-stocked rifle. The feel in the hand, the glow of the oil finish

and the elegant flowing lines give a certain timeless quality.

But classic looks don't have to mean old or out of date. The rifles we have chosen share quality modern materials, excellent accuracy and superb balance and handling. Some might be built more traditionally than others, but they all offer today's hunter form and function that is as relevant today as it ever was.

JOHN RIGBY & CO HIGHLAND STALKER

The Highland Stalker from Rigby is a rifle that seamlessly combines traditional styling with genuine field performance. Rooted in the company's storied heritage, it follows the classic small-calibre sporting rifle tradition and is designed for stalking in the Highlands and beyond. The woodwork (Grade 5 as standard) and hand-finished chequering reflect the level of craftsmanship expected from a luxury gunmaker.

One of the rifle's key strengths is its overall balance: slim enough to carry all day, with the pedigree and build quality of a high-end manufacturer, yet entirely suited to real game work rather than mere display. Feel is central to its appeal, with well-considered stock, ambidextrous options and traditional iron sights fitted as standard, all enhancing its practical stalking credentials.

Inevitably the Rigby name and finish command a premium, but for those who value classic aesthetics allied to dependable performance, this is a rifle you could happily carry for a lifetime. Available calibres include .275 Rigby, .308 Win and .30-06, making it versatile enough for the vast majority of hunting situations both at home and abroad.

RRP FROM £10,200

JOHNRIGBYANDCO.CO.UK



BERGARA B14 TIMBER

The Bergara B14 Timber offers a slightly different proposition: high build quality and outstanding performance at an accessible price point. Stalkers can expect sub-MOA accuracy from a brand known for delivering excellent barrels. The Timber variant of the popular B14 range places emphasis on traditional aesthetics, with an oil-rubbed walnut stock and well-executed chequering lending it a distinctly refined feel.



While it may lack the historic prestige of some names on this list, its strengths lie in accuracy, reliability and overall build quality. In practical stalking terms, that translates to dependable performance and handling in the field. This is a rifle that does not compromise on the fundamentals – barrel, action and stock – while offering a more traditional look than other models in the range.

For stalkers seeking something between a budget workhorse and a bespoke trophy rifle, the B14 Timber is a compelling value proposition that makes it difficult to ignore.

RRP £1,050

EDGARBROTHERS.CO.UK

BROWNING MARAL 4X

The Browning Maral 4X stands out for its fast handling, modern features and distinctive straight-pull action – an ideal combination when speed and instinct are paramount. The latest Maral 4X benefits from an improved hand-cocking system, with reduced travel and a larger bolt-knob for easier use in the field.



For hunts where a rapid shot may present itself rather than a carefully stalked opportunity, its smooth cycling, instinctive feel and good ergonomics shine. The Maral shoulders more like a shotgun than a traditional rifle and feels well suited to freehand shooting without becoming unwieldy.

It is undoubtedly a more specialised choice, but for those who prioritise speed, smoothness of operation and handling, the Maral 4X delivers. In practical use, its refined hand-cocking system, sensible magazine options and robust finish make it a highly capable high-end hunting rifle.

RRP FROM £1,795

BROWNING.EU

SAKO 100 EXPLORER WOOD

The Sako 100 Explorer Wood represents the pinnacle of modular European rifle design,



bringing together refined aesthetics, advanced engineering and real-world field utility. Build quality is exemplary, and one of its standout features is its ability to switch-barrels. Sako's barrel-locking system allows calibres to be changed with ease, creating a single rifle capable of covering everything from UK deer species to destination hunting around the globe.

The Explorer Wood variant features a high-quality walnut stock, adjustable cheekpiece, soft-touch grip panels and a superb overall finish. Out-of-the-box the Sako has also been capable of sub-MOA groups during field testing, making it a compelling solution for the hunter seeking precision and flexibility in a single rifle.

While it sits firmly at the upper end of the price spectrum, that reflects the premium materials, additional features and long-term versatility on offer. The Sako 100 Explorer Wood is a genuinely top-tier rifle, blending elegant craftsmanship with highly capable performance.

RRP FROM £4,895

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HAENEL JAEGER NXT

The Haenel Jaeger NXT brings a fresh, contemporary approach to the traditional hunting rifle, combining modern ergonomics, sustainability-focused construction and solid in-field performance. Its clean, streamlined lines are matched by intuitive handling and consistent accuracy. Its laminated beech stock is sourced from sustainable materials, while the magazine and trigger guard are produced using bio-plastics – setting it apart for its ethical considerations as well as its functionality.



In practical hunting terms, this translates into a rifle that performs in all conditions. While still positioned as a premium option, the Jaeger NXT offers a distinctly modern alternative to other traditional walnut-stocked European rifles.

For the hunter looking for classic lines, premium build quality and ethical credentials, the Haenel Jaeger NXT is a strong and thoughtful offering.

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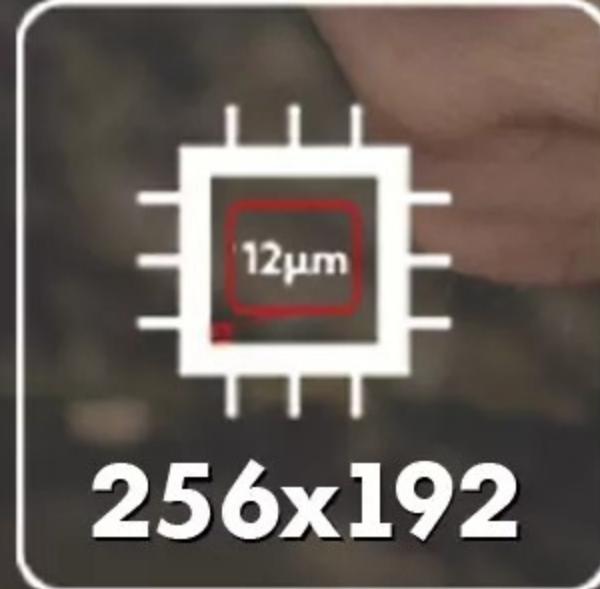
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THE WINDS OF CHANGE

While all rifle shooters consider bullet drop, the effects of wind are all too often overlooked. Former military sniper **Will O'Meara** offers some practical, in-the-field solutions



Asaying that holds true for many aspects of hunting is "It's all in the wind." Deer and other quarry species will often find shelter from the wind, especially on the open mountain – it's not a hard and fast rule but it becomes ever more likely the deeper you get into winter. Lower temperatures mean they lose valuable body fat by the day, so they are often found in sheltered spots where they can conserve their reserves. The wind factor

doesn't stop there – we all know that a whiff of our scent will send our quarry fleeing faster than anything. It's the most important factor in any hunt.

The third element of wind is the effect it has on your bullet. With the availability of modern tools such as ballistic apps and wind meters there is no excuse for not thinking about and practicing for wind compensation. I think everyone who shoots a rifle is aware that wind can push your bullet off target, but there are fewer who can judge its speed and how much to compensate at any given distance.

Todd Hodnett is a man who knows all about wind, and well known for his training of military snipers. The reason he is held in such high regard is his ability to simplify complex issues that surround long-range shooting. One such example is his 'perfect wind' formula, which allows you to compensate for wind very quickly and easily, doing the working out in your head.

PERFECT WIND

The first thing to establish is the 'miles per hour' of your gun. Every rifle and bullet combination falls into an mph category, and to find

what it is for your gun you need a ballistic app. Enter 5mph as the wind speed and see what the wind compensations look like – you are looking for a correlation between distance (in metres) and wind hold (in 1cm or 0.1 mrad). Ideally I want my wind holds to look like this:

RANGE	WINDHOLD
200m	0.2mrad
300m	0.3mrad
400m	0.4mrad
500m	0.5mrad

So at 200m it is 2 clicks, at 300 it is 3 clicks, etc. If it doesn't work out at 5mph then try 4mph or 6mph. I've found that the average .308 Win and rounds with a similar muzzle velocity to be 4mph guns, while faster rounds such as .270 Win and 6.5 Creedmoor are generally 5mph guns. The likes of the 7mm Rem Mag/.338 Lapua Mag are 6mph or even 7mph guns. All we are doing here is playing with the maths to find a wind speed that gives us a nice tidy correlation.

This formula is usable out to a specific distance but will then change. For example – with my 6.5 Creedmoor it is usable to about 1,100m. With a .308 it is generally fine to about 700m, which is far in excess of practical hunting ranges. After this distance you just need a simple cue, such as "at 800 add 0.1". Thus 700m = 0.7mrad, 800m = 0.8 + 0.1 = 0.9 and so on.

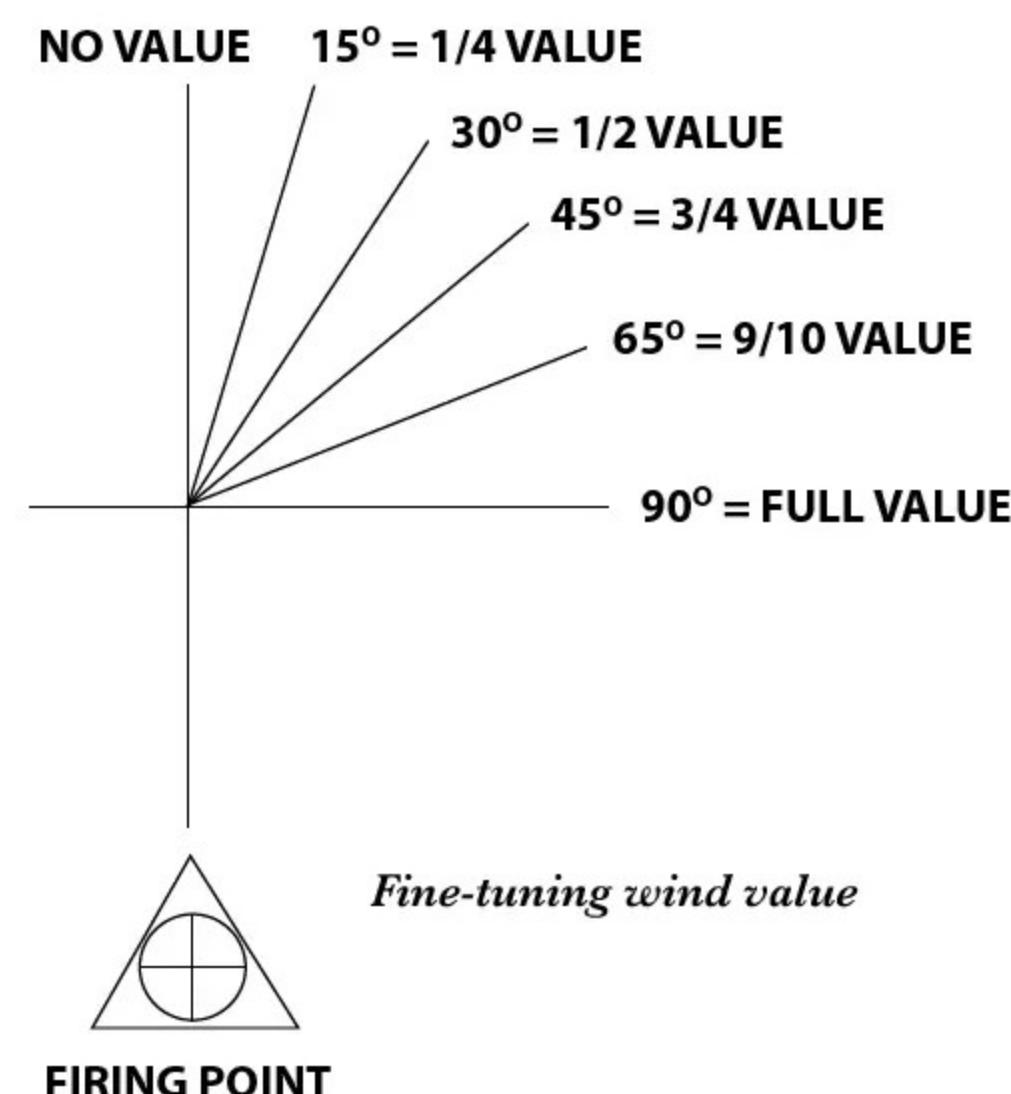
READING THE WIND

The starting point is to learn the speed of the wind. For this I use a handheld Kestrel, but any wind meter will do. However, it is unlikely you will take it with you when actually hunting, so you should practise at guessing the wind speed and then checking on the meter. Note what it feels like on your face and how much it affects trees and other foliage.

As a rough field guide, to move leaves, long grass or rushes continuously the wind has to be at least 5mph. To push them over in a noticeable direction or start to move larger foliage such as bushes and twigs, it is 7-10mph. When larger foliage and branches start to bend and nod in a noticeable direction then the wind is 12mph or above.



The next thing is to figure out the direction of the wind. Again, use clouds, grass, foliage and your senses. Once you have the wind's direction, add it to the speed. When estimating the value of the wind it is common to use the clock method. Winds that are at 90° to your bullet (or 3 or 9 o'clock) are called full-value, so a 5mph wind remains 5mph. The problem is that it's not as simple to then say that 1 o'clock is 1/3 value and 2 o'clock is 2/3 value. It acts in a stronger manner, as can be seen here:



Remember that you always compensate into the wind. I prefer to hold for wind rather than dial, so in a left-to-right wind your central crosshairs will be placed further in the direction the wind is coming from – to the left of the target.

THE THREE QUARTERS METHOD

Now you know the wind speed – where you are standing – and also its value. Next you have to figure

out what the wind is doing between you and your target, as that is what will affect the bullet the most. This is because as the bullet loses speed the wind affects it more, but you must also factor in that the earlier the wind affects the bullet in flight, the greater the deflection will be at the point of impact.

To simplify this I use the 'three-quarters' method. This requires picking a spot at around the 3/4 point of the bullet's flight to the target, looking through your binoculars or a spotting scope and using the same criteria as above to apply what the wind is doing there. So for a 400m shot I look at what's happening at 300m.

One important thing to remember is that wind behaves like water, so any mountains or valleys will channel it, and when the wind is channelled its speed increases.

You can practice making these calls by taking your wind meter out on a walk. Or take readings after the shot as you walk along the flight path of the bullet.

THE BRACKET METHOD

In practical application you cannot always gauge the wind exactly. In such cases I use the bracket method. Let's say the wind is around 6-8mph. I will then look to see what the wind holds for these would be. So for a .308 at 400m that would be 0.6-0.8mrad (4mph gun at 400m is 0.4mrad, so 6mph wind will be 0.6mrad and 8mph will be 0.8mrad). So what happens if I place both my 0.6mrad and

Assess the wind three quarters of the way to your target



You can choose to dial or hold for wind

0.8mrad marks on the target at 400m? Well 0.1mrad at 100m = 1cm, so at 400m it will be 4cm. My bracket in this case is 0.2mrad, which equates to 8cm. So I choose a point of aim that will prove fatal anywhere in that 8cm zone.

This is where having the animal presented broadside for the shot is important. In such situations it is also beneficial if the deer is tail to the wind and even better still if the neck is straight out, thus offering the widest target zone and minimising the risk if your wind call is off. Even if your reticle doesn't have allowance for holding off for wind you can still use the data – just multiply the hold by the distance. So for a 5mph wind with my .270 at 600m I know my wind hold is 0.6mil or 36cm. How did I get 36cm? Well, 0.1mil is 1cm at 100m and 6cm at 600m, so at 600m 0.6mil will be $0.6 \times 6 = 3.6$ mil (36cm).

POINT TO NOTE

Milliradians can be abbreviated to mrad or mil. They are the same thing.

At 100m 0.1mrad = 1cm
At 500m 0.1mrad = 5cm
At 600m 0.1mrad = 6cm
At 76m 0.1mrad = 0.76cm
And so on.

The best advice I can give anyone is to practise, and if in doubt get closer to your target, where the effects of the wind will be reduced.

SPEED DROP METHOD

The next arrow in your quiver should be to have a similar data solution for distance. Speed Drop is a formula you use to quickly (speed) get your elevation (drop) for that range. It works like this:

Distance divided by 10 minus speed drop factor = elevation in mrad divided by 10
Example, using my 6.5 Creedmoor (which has a speed drop of 17)
350m becomes 35
35 minus 17 (speed drop) = 18
18 becomes 1.8

Therefore hold or dial 1.8mrad for a target at 350m. If you are dialling (in 1cm or 0.1mrad) it is 18 clicks.

To figure out your speed drop factor you will need a ballistic app and a pen and paper.

SPEED DROP FACTOR

Open your ballistic app. Look at the relationship or correlation between your range and your elevation adjustment.

A speed drop is a quick reference – maybe for a follow up shot that only offers a fleeting chance.

There are limitations to this formula, it only works at medium ranges, in the case of my .270 it works from 250m to 575m. It is also not spot-on at every single range – but is always within 0.2mrad. Be aware of this and apply it where appropriate.

CALCULATING SPEED DROP FACTOR

Start at 250m for speed drops. Divide the range by 10 and multiply the elevation by 10. So 250m becomes 25 and 0.5mil becomes 5. The difference between these figures is 20.

Then go to 275m and see that the elevation is 0.7. So 275 becomes 27 and 0.7 becomes 7. $27-7=20$, so the speed drop at 275m is also 20.

Keep doing this and see where the correlation drops off.

Elevation at 300m is 0.9, so $30-9=21$. Not quite 20 but it is close enough.

As I do this all the way out to 525m the answer is always 20 or 21. Thus my speed factor is 20 or 21 – pick the most common one and go with that.

To have exact data for distance you will need a good rangefinder, knowledge of how to use it, a spare battery, an understanding of when atmospherics start influencing bullet drop and a data card for your rifle. In my case I always have my data on the inside of my scope cap. It's right there in front of my eye, so I don't need to fumble around or search for it.

I also have a data card printed and laminated in my bino harness as a backup. I am safe in the knowledge that if I am hunting in Ireland or the UK, then my hunting calibres are tolerant to local atmospherics out to about 500m. This allows me to focus on getting my range, wind, fundamental mechanics and shot placement correct.

In my eyes, the important part of riflecraft theory is not learning all the minutiae of ballistic science, but rather finding ways to simplify the theory and apply it practically. Know when it matters and when it doesn't. Most of all, prove the theory to yourself on paper and practise the art before applying it in the field. ■

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INGREDIENTS

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Salted water
A selection of chopped vegetables, such as carrots, potatoes, onions, swede, celery and leeks
A handful of pearl barley, rinsed
1 bay leaf
Chopped parsley to garnish

THE METHOD

Serves 6

1. Place the bones in a slow cooker with the salted water an inch below the rim. Leave to cook on low overnight.
2. In the morning, remove the bones and the meat should fall off them. Discard the bones.
3. Skim off any fat from the surface of the water and put

the meat back in, along with the vegetables, pearl barley and bay leaf.

4. Leave the slow cooker set on low and head off for a day's stalking. When you return, give the soup a stir, serve in a large bowl with a sprinkle of chopped parsley and crusty bread, and enjoy an ideal dish at the end of a long day.

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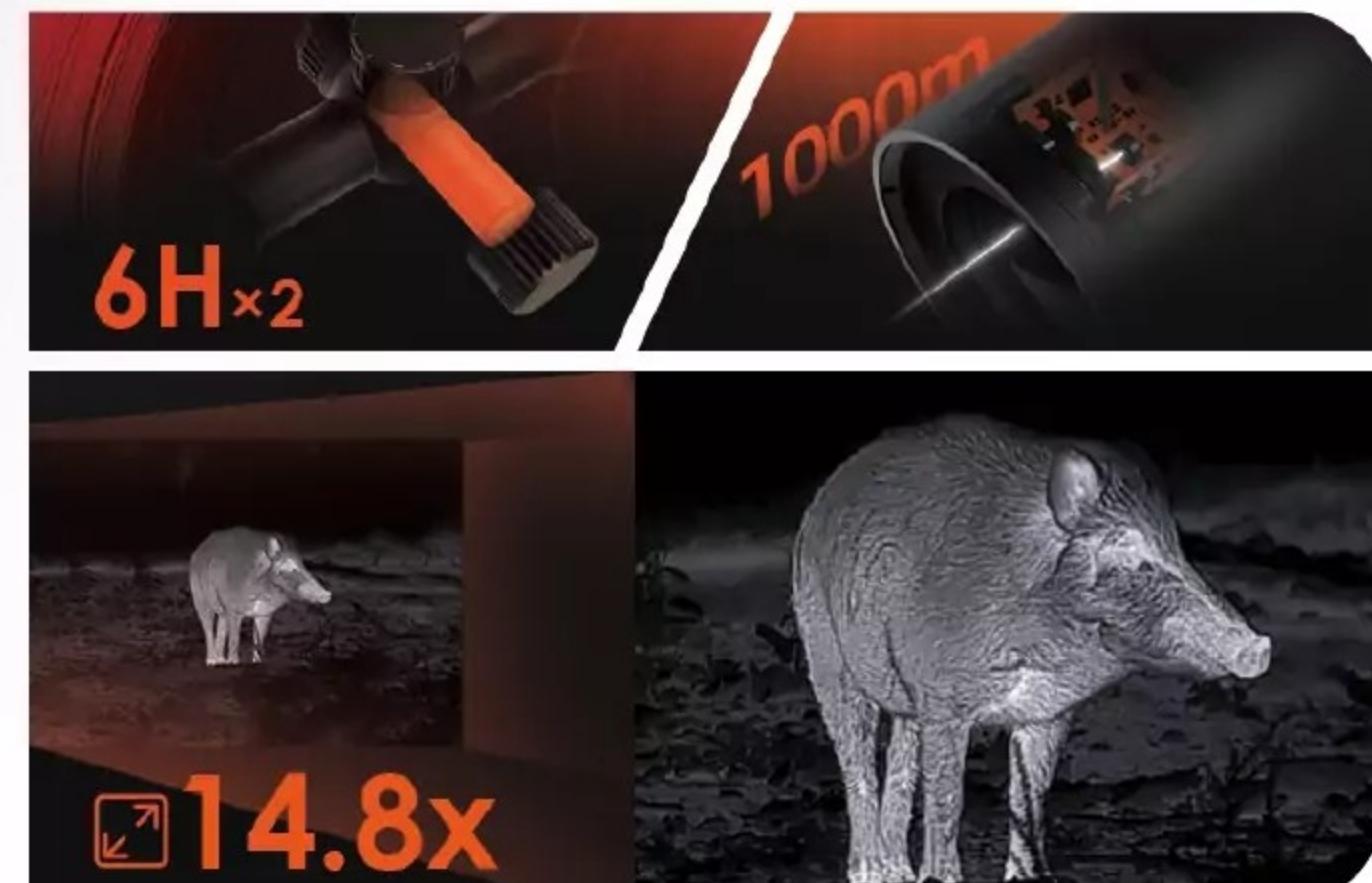
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CWD TUSK SCORING

Chris Rogers reports on the effect of CIC rules changes on CWD scoring, as well as news from around the world

As you read this, we should be well into the winter culling period. The red, sika and fallow deer ruts will be a distant memory, with the Chinese water deer rut being the most recent over the month of December. As with the roe buck rut, CWD bucks will find a female that is in season and chase her relentlessly until the act of mating is carried out. While this is a great spectacle to watch, it can make the culling of the bucks tricky as they are hard to stop when in full flow.

I was recently asked what length a CWD's tusks must be to be in with a chance of making a gold medal. Due to the score changes a couple of years ago this is hard to answer accurately, as there are now additional points for the physical effects of aging on the tusks themselves.

These additions, or bonus points are rewarded for:

- Thickening at the root where calcification or additional deposits are present;
- The visibility of the incisal nerve on the inside of the sharp tip of the tooth as the buck wears the tooth wall away over time;
- Additions for fully closed roots on both tusks.

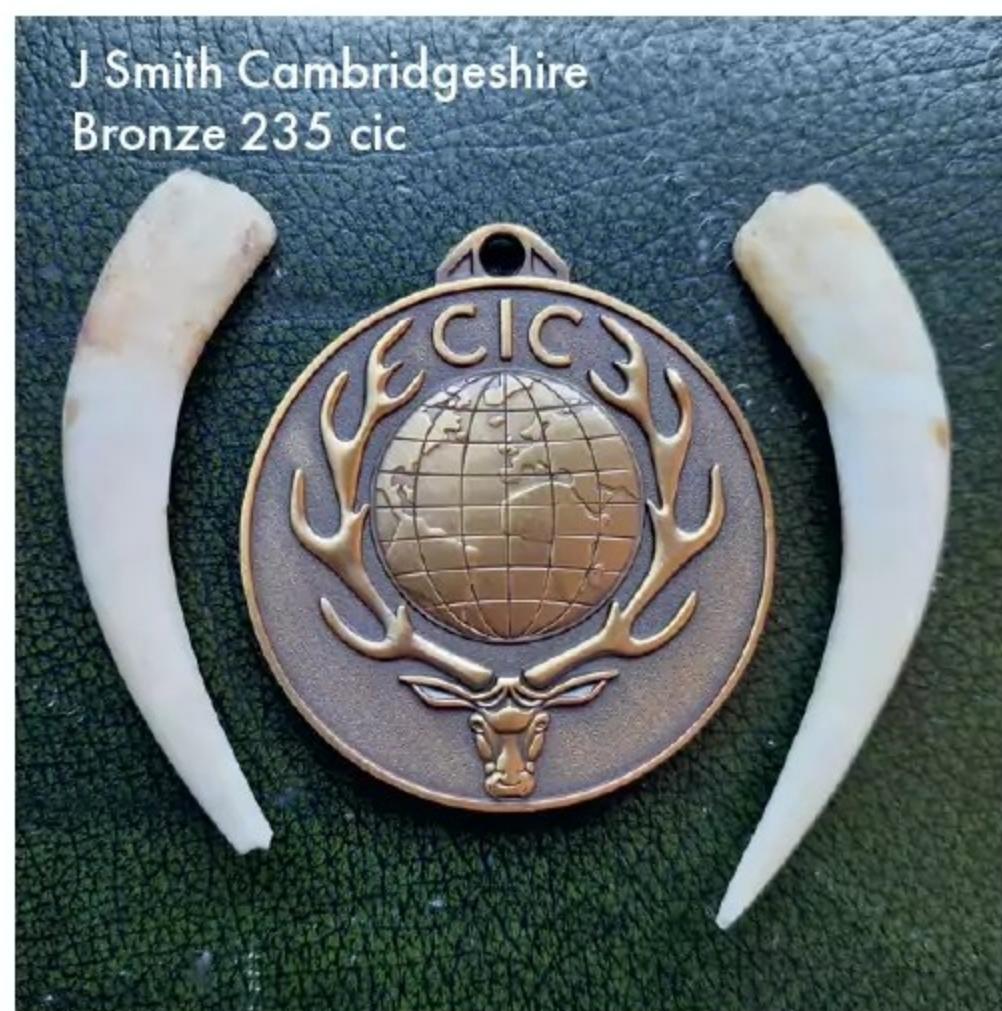
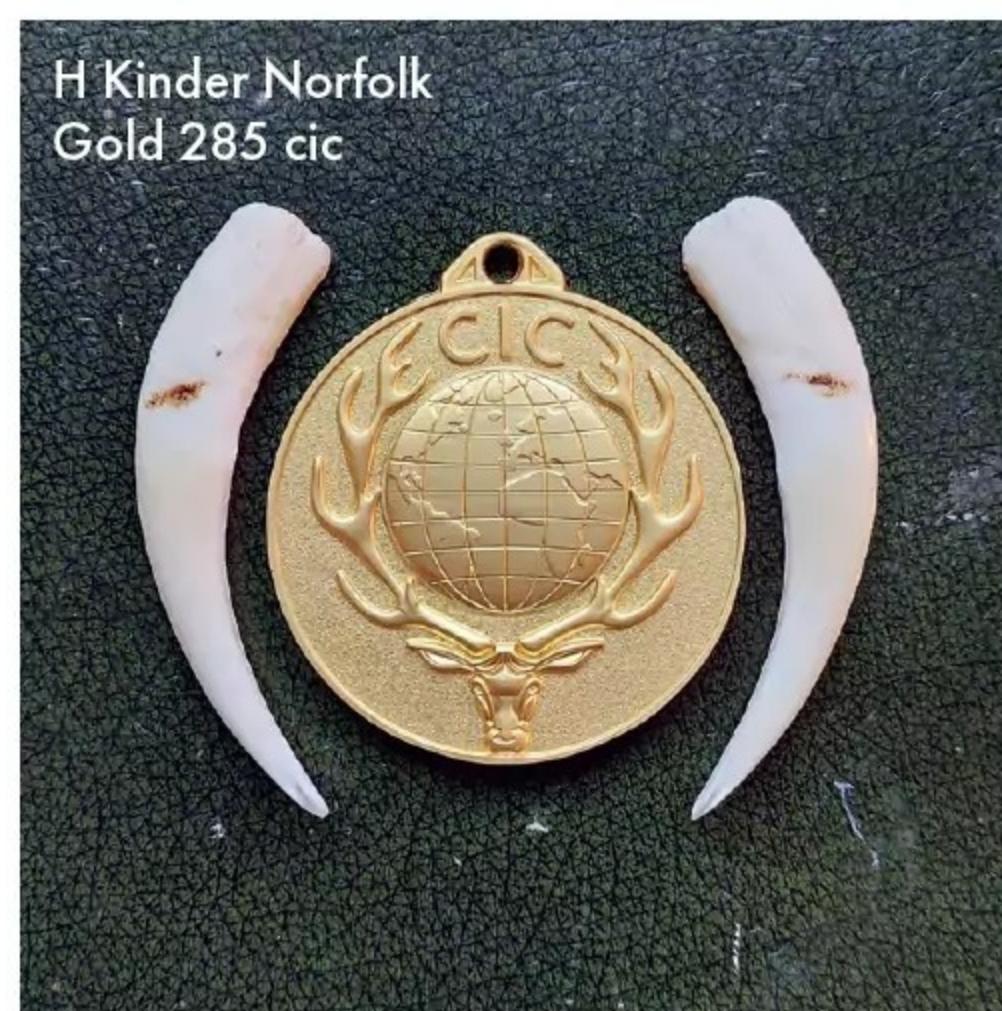
As a result of these factors it is probably more accurate to state that rather than being judged on the length alone, bucks that have all the above traits and are in possession of normal-length tusks that have not been broken off should achieve a gold medal, although there are always variations, so this is only a guide rather than a guarantee.

As the new year starts, the team will have already been discussing which shows and events we will be trying to attend. I would imagine

The Stalking Show will definitely be one of them, in addition to the usual shows in Scotland, but as ever the full list of events where we will be present will be confirmed on our website.

The CIC as an international organisation has been busy over the autumn at various events, including actively participating in the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi. Representatives contributed to high-level sessions and policy discussions. The Congress served as a major





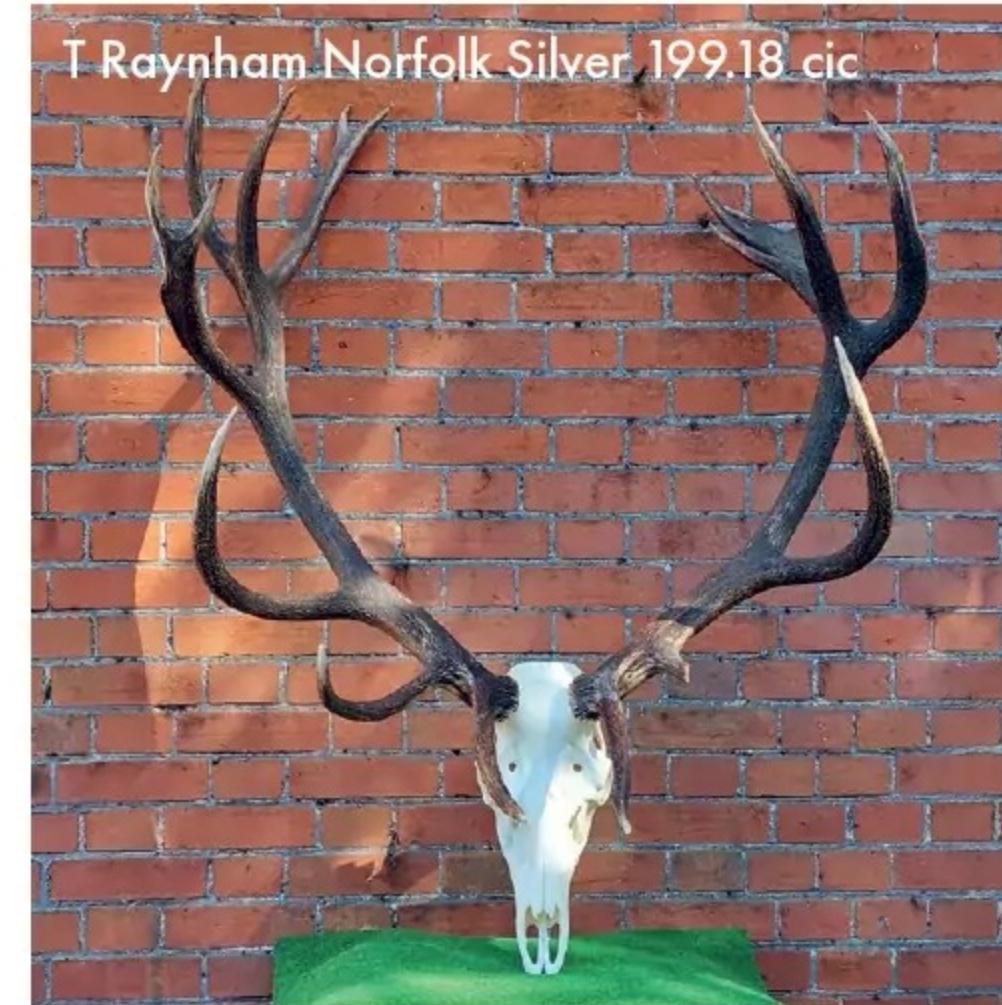
platform to highlight the importance of sustainable use and hunting-led conservation worldwide.

In Europe, the CIC together with FACE, the European Federation for Hunting and Conservation, warmly welcomed the decision of the Albanian Government to reopen hunting after several years of a national ban. In a joint letter addressed to the Prime Minister and key officials, the two organisations stressed that hunting in Albania must be rebuilt on strong, community-based governance. Central to this is the role of local hunters' associations and their national federation, the Albanian Hunters Federation, a proud part of the CIC network of over 90 NGO members. Key recommendations include:

- Prioritising local hunters' associations and their national federation in the reopening and governance of hunting;



- Avoiding privatisation of hunting rights, which would exclude local communities from their traditional role as custodians of wildlife;
- Ensuring alignment with international best practice and agreements, such as AEWA and the European Charter on Hunting and Biodiversity, and working with FACE, CIC and the Albanian Hunters Federation to establish sustainable and transparent hunting frameworks



that benefit wildlife, communities and nature conservation.

For information on all things CIC trophy, measuring including show dates visit, cicukteb.com. 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. ■



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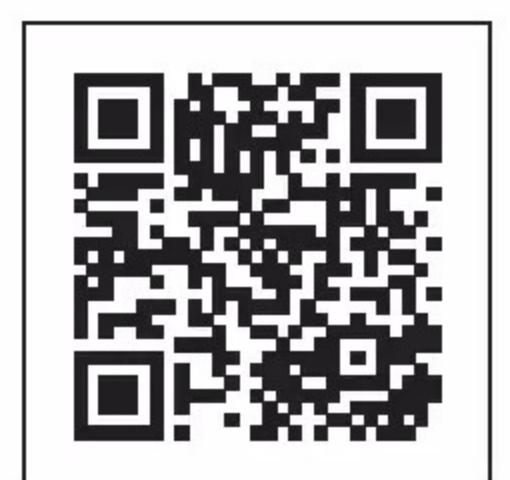


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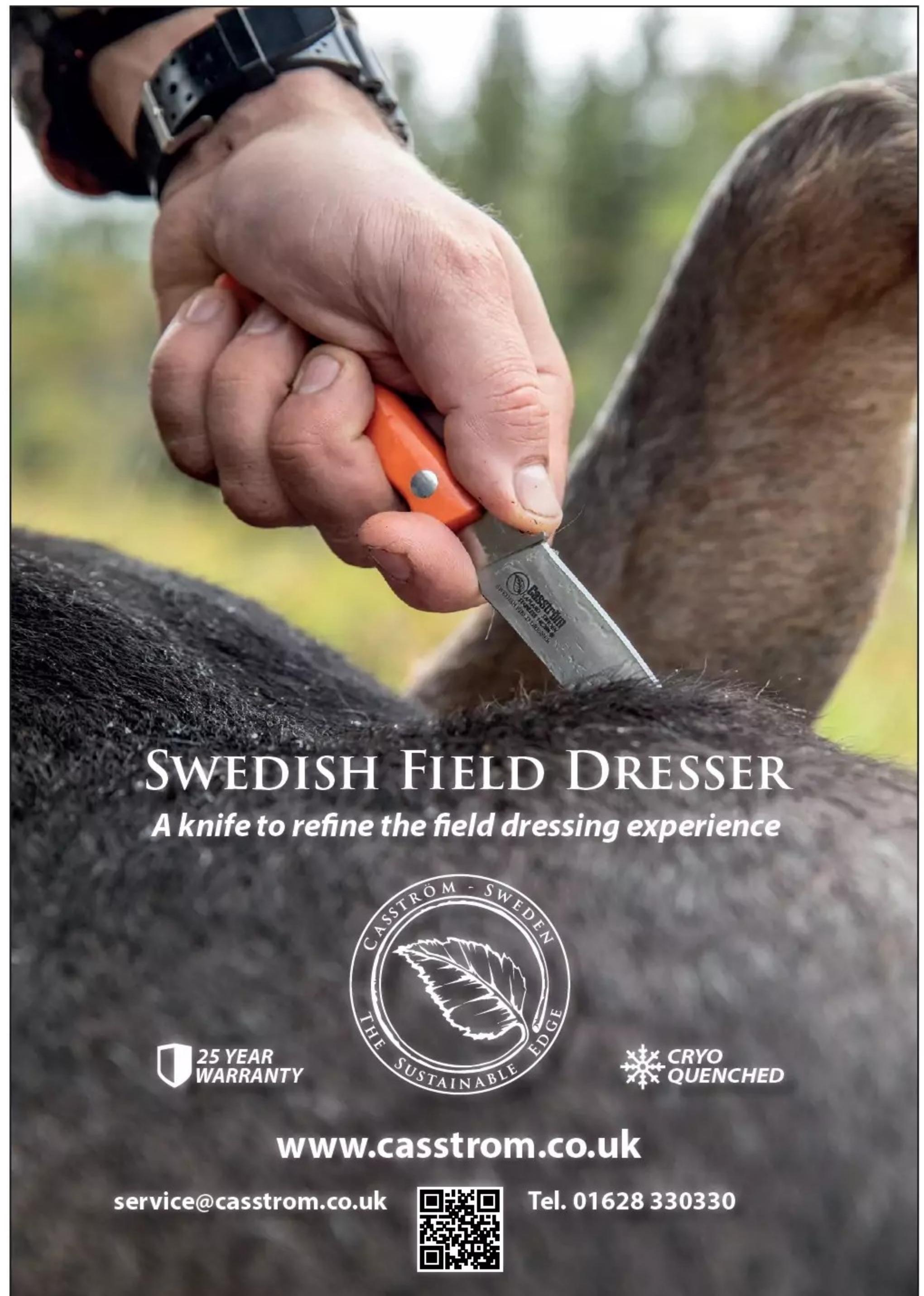
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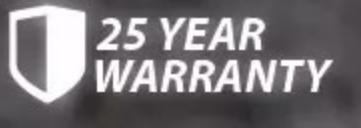
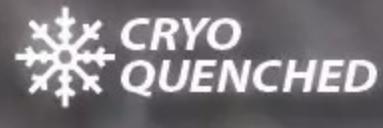
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With more events and courses to shoot than ever before, PRS throughout the UK is seeing healthy growth



2025 SEASON ROUNDUP

PRS shooter **Ryan Charlton** looks back over last years PRS season and forward to the events and shooters to watch out for in 2026

2025 was a big year for precision rifle shooting (PRS). As a qualification year for the 2026 Centrefire World Championships and a World Championship year for Rimfire, shooters were looking at having a full calendar.

With the UK also being the host nation for the rimfire world championship, the stage was set for a very busy year with high stakes at each match.

RIMFIRE

The highlight of 2025 has to be the IPRF World Championship, hosted by the UK at the West Midlands Shooting Ground (WMSG) in Shropshire. A new venue on the calendar, WMSG set a high bar for rimfire competitions.

The ground invested heavily in creating PRS stages throughout the woodland venue. Other venues, such as Paintmine Woods near Carnforth and Derwent Valley near York, also saw high attendance as the UK competitors sought out

opportunities to get some match practice in ahead of The Big One.

Many articles have already been written about the success of the British team this summer, so instead we will focus here on the legacy of the World Championship and the impact it has had on UK PRS. As part of the sponsorship deal, many of the purpose-built props were donated to PRS clubs across the country so that they could develop their PRS competitions.

If you want to try your skills from the Apex scope and Fat Boy tripod props, head on up to Paintmine Woods, where those props now form part of the PRS competitions. The spotting equipment donated by Apex Optics was also distributed.



The UK's NRA and Bisley have embraced precision rifle shooting. Here Ben Tadiar takes aim from a tank trap on Bisley's world famous Stickledown range

Derwent Valley Gun Club received tripods and binoculars in recognition of the enormous effort the club has put into setting up PRS matches that are beginner friendly. DVGC continues to be an excellent venue for anyone wishing to try PRS in a more relaxed atmosphere, without the formality of a national match.

One of the most positive legacies to come from the World Championships has been the growth in rimfire PRS, particularly in the Ladies and Junior categories, which have both seen considerable expansion over the past 18 months. One to watch for the future is young Nina Spedding, who only started shooting a few months ago and is already a crack shot. Now that she has her own custom pink rifle, she is a strong contender for the Junior and Ladies teams in the coming years.

A special mention must also go to Duncan and Ben McIlwaine, a father and son duo who have shot all four IPRF World Championship competitions since they began in 2022. Although Duncan has chosen to retire this year, he remains an integral part of the UK PRS community and will be a key figure behind the scenes moving forward.

CENTREFIRE

With the 2026 IPRF Centrefire World Championship set for Texas, this was a qualification year for team selection. With selection matches held by PRS UK at ProShoot in Wales and by the NRA at Bisley throughout the year, a lot of shooters were trying to qualify for the 2026 centrefire team while also preparing for the Rimfire World Championships.

2025 has also seen more shooters travelling abroad to try

Travelling further afield means some spectacular scenery: Norway's Sindre Nyland at La Arcate Range in Italy



their skills at different venues. UK shooters have travelled to Italy, Spain and Ireland for the European Pro Series, which is a European-wide PRS series where shooters are able to accumulate points across matches in different host nations.

This culminates in a series finale held at the Arcate range near Pisa, Italy. The range is a beautiful venue, set in spectacular Italian countryside with, of course, a vineyard on site and its own range of wines. It is hosted by PRS Italy director Davide Pasenti, who is an exceptional match director and creates a very welcoming atmosphere for new and seasoned shooters.

For those wishing to travel slightly less further afield, the Midlands Shooting Range near Tullamore, Ireland, is highly recommended. An easy one-hour drive from Dublin, the journey can be done without needing to fly.

The European Pro Series matches are hosted by Daniel and Rory Gibbons, two brothers who are well-known in PRS both for their

One of my favourite faces to see at a shoot, Nina Spedding is my junior to watch for the coming 2026 season



The UK's Josh Martin has had a memorable year, achieving tremendous success. It's exciting to see what 2026 will bring

excellent shooting abilities and their friendly and generous personalities. Their match was well-run with what was described as "a shooter's course of fire", followed by a BBQ and Irish hospitality on full display.

Back in the UK, PRS continues to grow at Bisley, with the NRA hosting one-day matches as well as training days. These events are ideal for anyone wishing to try PRS without committing to a two-day match.

They allow shooters to try their hand at shooting steels from a selection of PRS-style props such as barricades and tyres. Those who scored highest in the PRS UK Centrefire Series were offered the chance to participate in the Pro Series Finale in the USA, at the Geissele Automatics range in Pennsylvania.

Due to the US government shutdown, several UK and Irish competitors were unable to secure the necessary 6NIA paperwork to import their own rifles for the match. However, international cooperation was once again employed, so some of the top US shooters offered rifles for the weekend.

With the best 200 US shooters alongside the top performing PRS shooters from the rest of the world, the US Finale is always a tough match. It is designed to test the best shooters, so the course of fire is particularly challenging, with smaller target sizes and more movement than an average regional match. This one was notable for the challenging winds, which were switching direction during stages and coming from different angles on each area of the range. For a full run-down

of the Finale, be sure to check out the Miles to Matches podcast, featuring top US shooters Chad Heckler and Frances Colon.

SHOOTER OF THE YEAR: JOSH MARTIN

Although PRS has yet to grow to the level that requires an awards ceremony, the unofficial Shooting Oscars must recognise the outstanding year that Josh Martin has had. In 2025 Josh secured his position as Britain's top rimfire shooter, placing third overall in the World Championship standings and securing the World Champion title in the Factory Division.

In Centrefire, Josh finished top of the GBPRA qualification leaderboard, fourth overall in the European Pro Series and fifth overall and top international at the US Finale. Representing Team MPA, Josh is one of the most respected shooters in the UK and runs training sessions for those new to PRS or wanting to improve their skills. He also runs the C2 Precision shop, which specialises in PRS builds and accessories – www.c2precision.co.uk.

LOOKING AHEAD

The highlight for many in 2026 is the World Championship in Texas. With the team selected based on their 2025 season scores, they will be trying to get as much centrefire practice in as possible ahead of next September.

The PRS UK Series will be running matches at ProShoot between February and October, and the European Pro Series will run from February to September, with matches held at various ranges across Europe.

There will also be qualification matches for the upcoming 2028 Rimfire World Championship. Although the host nation and venue is yet to be confirmed, there will be a number of qualification matches for UK team selection on the 2026 match calendar.

Based on the success of the team in 2025 and the growing popularity of rimfire PRS, it is likely that this will once again be a competitive process. Whether you are trying to qualify for the team or not, these matches are a great way to test your ability over a two-day world-class course of fire.

An exciting and new series for 2026 is a European Pro Rimfire Series, which will run rimfire PRS matches across Europe. This is an exciting addition to the PRS calendar, opening up new shooting opportunities in countries where centrefire is not possible and encouraging more international competition within this growing discipline.

For full details of the 2026 UK PRS Centrefire and Rimfire matches and training days, head to the GBPRA website. Information about European matches can be found on tomgun.org. ■



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FROM WILDCAT TO WINNER

Mark Underwood traces the much loved .22-250 varmint round from wildcat speedster to commercial success

Like so many loads, the .22-250 started life as a wildcat cartridge. Developed from the .250-3000 Savage case, which was necked down to accommodate a .224in diameter bullet, it was one of many very similar calibres that various wildcatters were experimenting with at the time.

There was great interest in breaking the 4,000fps barrier with a .22 calibre and in 1937 it was finally achieved with a 40gr bullet in a 26in barrel with one such round, developed by Grosvenor Wotkyns, J E Gebby and J B Smith, named the .22 Varminter. Following a few minor tweaks it was Gebby and Smith who were said to have come up with the final design of the .22-250 wildcat.

In 1937 Phil Sharpe was one of the very first gunsmiths to build a rifle for the .22-250 and he was also credited with incorporating the steeper shoulder angle on the cases, a factor he believed contributes significantly to the performance of the calibre. He stated that this steep shoulder kept the powder burning inside the case, rather than in the throat of the rifle, and also prevented case stretching and neck thickening.

It was not until 1963 that commercial production of a

rifle in the calibre began, with the Browning Arms Company introducing a .22-250 version of its Browning High Power rifle to its product range. At that time the .22-250 was still considered a wildcat cartridge and there was no commercially produced ammunition. It was an unusual move for Browning to introduce a rifle for which there was no factory ammunition, but such was its confidence in the calibre and its likely commercial success.

Two years later, in 1965, Remington Arms introduced a .22-250 version of its Model 700 rifle and, more importantly, a line of commercial ammunition in the calibre. With the introduction of the factory ammunition Remington established the commercial specification for the calibre and led the way for other ammunition makers to introduce their own versions. With factory ammunition now available, the calibre became a huge success among hunters in America, who now had a very hot .22 calibre capable of killing small game at ranges up to a quarter of a mile.

In the 1980s, in an attempt to reduce ricochets and over

penetration, the .22-250 was adopted by both the British SAS and the Australian SAS Regiment, in Tikka M55 sniper rifles, for urban counter-terrorism duties.

The .22-250 is a high-velocity calibre that uses relatively light bullets to great effect on small game. A typical factory-loaded .22-250 round can propel a 55gr spitzer bullet at 3,680fps with approximately 1,650ft·lb of energy. With lighter loads the velocity can exceed 4,000fps and energy remains high enough to be effective. The calibre outperforms many similar varmint rounds and it is less affected by cross winds.

One of the great advantages that the .22-250 has over other high-velocity .22 calibres, such as the .220 Swift, is that barrel erosion is not as severe and rifles tend to retain their accuracy much longer. Accuracy is also very good and the calibre is capable of meeting the demands of competitive target shooting.

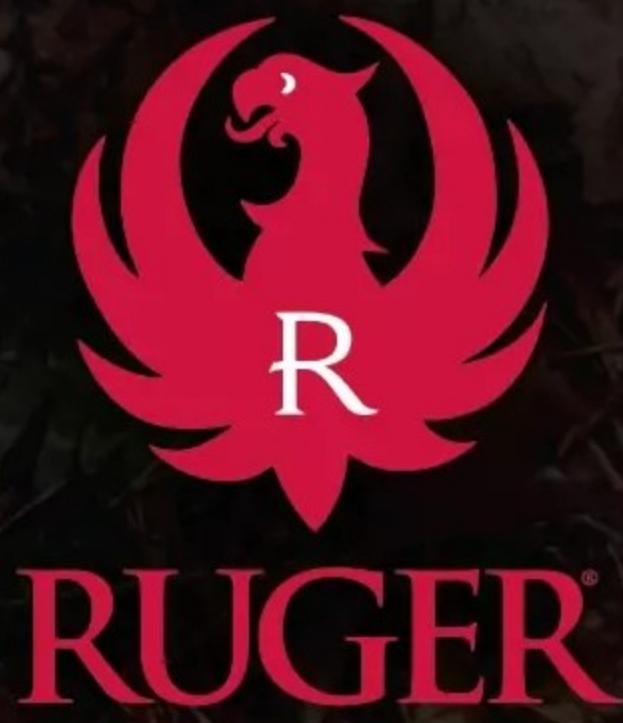
For those shooters who like to reload their own ammunition, the .22-250 is a good choice because the relatively small powder charges and the light bullets make it particularly economical. There are many sources of reloading data and components readily available, making it possible for you to experiment and develop a load for a particular rifle and application. ■

The .22-250 firing a 50gr bullet is a proven combination



THE .22-250

Year of introduction	Designed 1937
Parent cartridge	.250-3000 Savage
First rifles	Browning High Power
Case type	Rimless, bottleneck
Bullet diameter	.224 in
Typical bullet weights	40gr, 50gr, 60gr



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I AM A SHOOTER HOLLY DUGGAN

In just a few short years Holly has gone from controlling feral pigeons to being one of the UK's brightest prospects in ladies' PRS. Here she tells us more about that journey and falling in love with rifle shooting

HOW DID YOU FIRST ENTER THE WORLD OF FIELDSPORTS?

I didn't grow up with guns but have always lived rurally, surrounded by shooting and hunting. I got a job working for a pest control company and part of my job was controlling feral pigeons. I went to a clay ground gunshop to buy an air rifle but tried clay shooting instead. That was the start of a very slippery slope of shooting as a hobby, which turned into shooting for my country.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN RIFLE SHOOTING?

About 10 years. I have a big family and love to cook – the idea of field-to-fork with low food miles really appealed. I was more than happy to learn how to prepare game, but soon wanted to be the one pulling

the trigger. There is something deeply primitive about eating something you have stalked, shot, processed and cooked – far removed from this modern world of plastic-wrapped mass-produced food.

WALK US THROUGH YOUR RIFLE CABINET

My stalking rifle is a Tikka T3x Stainless Synthetic in 6.5 Creedmoor. I love this calibre for stalking. I can see shot placement and have a wide range of bullet weights and types to choose from. It is topped with a Zeiss Victory HT 3-12x56, which is one of the best scopes on the market for light gathering and suits my woodland stalking perfectly. I am waiting for MDT to bring out its gorgeous CRBN stock with a Tikka inlet to give this rifle an upgrade.

My competition .22 rifle is a CZ LRP in an MDT Premier Gen2 Chassis with a Vortex Razor HD Gen II 4.5-27x56 scope. Rifles in chassis really didn't appeal to me until I started shooting PRS, when I soon learned that for accurate repeatable shooting you need a rifle that is perfectly balanced and completely fits you. Chassis allow just that.

DO YOU SHOOT HOME OR FACTORY LOADS?

I haven't got time for reloading. My stalking rifle shoots factory loads perfectly well

WHEN DID YOU START SHOOTING COMPETITIVELY?

Two years ago a friend from the gun trade rang asking me if I fancied a trip to Italy. He explained that the UK team needed extra ladies to make a full team at the first World Championship in PRS rimfire shooting. I had no idea what this shooting was but had never been to Italy, so figured it was worth a go. It turned out that I loved it and

my hunting skills and experience were very transferable. We got ladies' team bronze, which was amazing and I've continued with PRS ever since.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE SHOOTING MOMENT SO FAR?

Winning the ladies' bronze medal at the second World Championships in August this year. We got silver as a ladies' team too. Being on the podium in our home country, in our UK team jerseys with the rest of the team, was pretty special.

WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS IN THE SPORT?

To encourage as many people to have a go as possible. I think some hunters dismiss target shooting, but PRS is a brilliant way to practise. You are taking difficult shots, under time pressure, at various distances, in lots of different positions. Trigger time is always beneficial and I have taken tens of thousands of shots I never would have taken in the field. It has changed my rifle shooting dramatically for the better. I love spending time with the junior PRS shooters – we have some insanely talented kids who have no idea how good they are. They are the future and it's a pleasure to help them where I can.

WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST CONCERN IN RELATION TO THE FUTURE OF FIELDSPORTS?

We are a small minority and we aren't the best at banding together to help ourselves. Whether you are a shooter, stalker, falconer or fisherman – we are all in the same boat and should be supporting each other. We should all be encouraging others to try our sports. A wise man once said to me: "Imagine if everyone with a licence got one other person into shooting? It would double our voice." ■



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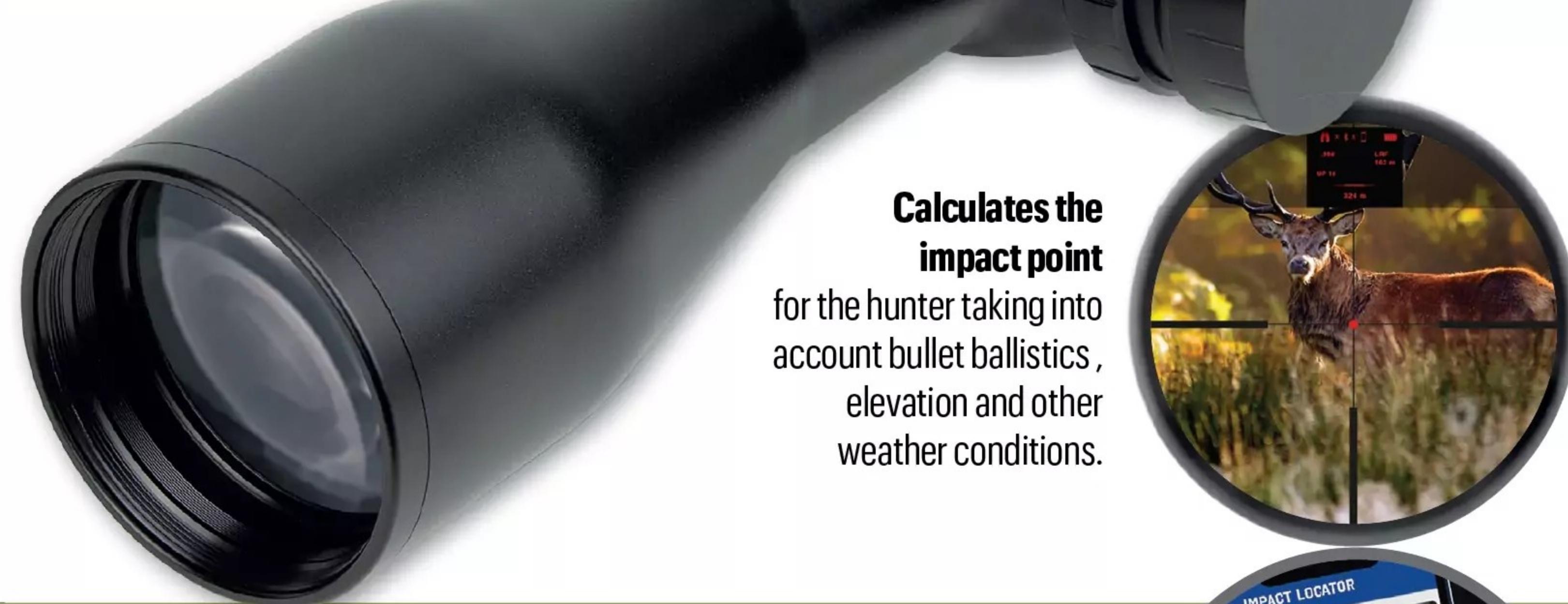
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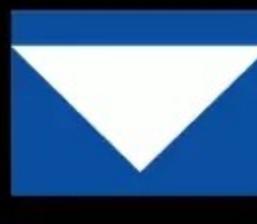
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