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2 AUGUST 2023

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SKINNER'S

BORN TO BE OUTDOORS

DOG OF THE WEEK



Finn

Eighteen-month-old Finn is a German wirehaired pointer/springer spaniel. He's very enthusiastic for anything fur or feather, and while he's trained primarily as a stalking dog, he will hopefully do some retrieving later this year.

Owned and photographed by David Thompson

SHOOTING TIMES

Under scrutiny



Last week, I received an email telling me that the Met is very sorry but it will take them at least a year to process

my request for a 6.5 Creedmoor. To be totally fair to them, they are always immensely polite and the firearms enquiry officer, when he comes round, is a lovely guy. The reason, they stated, is that they are still dealing with the Covid backlog.

From time to time, I receive letters from readers telling me that they think we pay more than enough for our firearms and shotgun certificate applications. Times are undoubtedly tough, but how much would you pay for a quicker system? A system that processed applications within a month, perhaps? I'm not sure how much such a system would cost, but I do think it would be worth paying. A year is a hell of a long time. Would £200 be worth it, or £250? In today's climate, £250 equates to about 3.5 driven pheasants. Surely getting your applications processed speedily is well worth 3.5 pheasants? At the moment, firearms licensing is under tremendous scrutiny in Britain and I for one would be happy to pay for a more efficient service.

Patrick Galbraith, Editor

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Many gamekeepers affected by the decision are worried about the future of their jobs



Grouse shooting in trouble

United Utilities, Britain's largest water company, has announced it will not be renewing any grouse shooting leases when they come to an end

Shooting Times understands that United Utilities, Britain's biggest water company and also Britain's largest corporate landowner, is going to end grouse shooting across its 56,000-hectare holding by way of not renewing any grouse shooting leases when they come to an end.

Anti-grouse shooting campaigners, including Luke Steele, the executive director of Wild Moors, said that the news was "amazing" and claimed that it reflects the values of those who "believe wildlife and habitats should be protected and enhanced". The shooting community and a suite of practical conservationists took

a very different stance. Lindsay Waddell, veteran grousekeeper and former chairman of the National Gamekeepers' Association, told ST that it is another sorry chapter "in the drip, drip, drip against the management of the uplands".

Mr Waddell said the decision will almost certainly see all keepers losing their jobs. When

"It will almost certainly see all keepers losing their jobs"

that happens, he continued, predator control will end and "the density and diversity of wildlife will decline". By way of evidence, he pointed to unmanaged grouse moors

in Wales where wading birds such as lapwing and curlew are almost extinct.

ST contacted United Utilities to ask whether, in spite of evidence that wildlife does well on grouse moors, they have pulled these leases because they're caving to pressure from activists. We also asked what happens next in terms of

management. They are yet to come back to us.

Peter Peder, who has run a grouse shoot on United Utilities' land in Lancashire for 25 years, told ST that the news is very

disappointing. They've not yet had anything in writing but it will mean that his gamekeeper is out of a job, which will mean one less family in the area. Mr Peder has been told that the new CEO of United Utilities is 'anti-shooting' and believes that she simply hasn't listened to the concerns of local people.

The deputy director of communications at BASC, Garry Doolan, assured ST that as soon as the news broke, they started creating a plan to fight back and told us that they are in correspondence with local MPs. ST is looking forward to keeping a close eye on how biodiversity and habitat changes once the leases are up and the keepers are gone. **PG**

Hound trailing given the boot



More than a century of hound trailing has been brought to an end on Langholm Moor because its new owners will not continue to grant permission.

Devon-based carbon-offsetting company Oxygen Conservation bought Blackburn and Hartsgarth farms in April this year from the Buccleuch Estate, adding nearly 11,500 acres to a growing portfolio across

the UK. The company states on its website: "Our commitment [is] to restoring natural processes and ecosystems."

The company's founder, Rich Stockdale, told *The Eskdale & Liddesdale Advertiser* that hound trailing is not consistent with their conservation-based objectives. "Running a group of dogs across the landscape, though I

appreciate is important to a small group of people who are passionate about the sport, does untold damage to flora, fauna and fungi," he said.

George McGimpsey, a keen local houndsman, told the paper he disagreed: "Where we lay the trail, that's where the hounds go. They don't run all over, they only go where we pull the rag." **SF**

White-tailed eagle success

A white-tailed eagle chick has hatched in England for the first time since 1780. The chick is the first offspring from an initial release of 25 birds on the Isle of Wight in 2019. The release has been licensed by Natural England and follows a successful reintroduction programme in the Scottish Highlands, which started in the 1970s.

Roy Dennis, founder of the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation, explained: "Restoring a breeding population in southern England has been our ultimate goal. We knew food for eagles — fish, rabbits, hares and wild birds — was plentiful."

Shoot managers and gamekeepers may have

concerns about the species threatened by Britain's largest bird of prey, however. A 2022 plan to reintroduce the eagles in Norfolk was shelved due to opposition from farmers and conservationists worried they would predate waders.

In Scotland, where there are now 150 pairs of white-tailed eagles, Jonathan and Daisy Ames from Rothiemurchus Falconry are training two Maremma sheep dogs to protect their flocks from the birds. Mr Ames hopes that if their training project is successful, it could secure funding to help other farmers.

A NatureScot spokesperson said there are schemes to "support holdings affected by sea eagle predation of livestock". **OH**



White-tailed eagles are often called sea eagles due to their diet

Weekend Twitter poll

Do you clean your shotguns after every use?

63% Always

19% Every so often

9% I really should

9% I tend to forget

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Respondents: 236

To do this week



SHOOT

Combines are rolling across

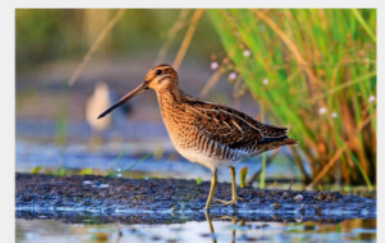
the country and wood pigeons are hitting stubbles hard — there is also a lot of flat barley after the wind and rain. Why not dust off your decoys and dig out your hide nets? Pigeon shooting can be a lot of fun. It's great sport, it provides essential crop protection and pigeon meat is delicious.



APPLY

Shooting will always evolve

— it always has. Across the country, there are a lot of shoot tenants who have decided to call it a day due to rising costs and restrictions around releasing birds. Why not have a think about taking on some ground and starting a syndicate of your own? You could release a modest number of gamebirds, as well as looking to improve habitat for waders and wild game. There are plenty of grants available to fund conservation efforts.





While the top and bottom end of the market still appear to be selling, it's the middle area that is proving sticky

Shooting proving hard to sell as season looms

With rising costs across the board hitting us all, are some Guns starting to question the value that a driven shooting day represents?

It will come as no surprise, given the pinch we're all feeling, that shooting for the forthcoming season is proving hard to sell. Digby Taylor, of GunsOnPegs, told *Shooting Times* that they are seeing more discounted days than ever before. And, for the first time, they've had prestigious estates such as Floors Castle approaching them to advertise days, whereas in the past it was impossible for ordinary Guns (albeit ordinary Guns with deep pockets) to get a look in at such places. Days there sold year in, year out to return clients. ST has also noticed that Cambrian Birds in Wales, which has some of the big-name shoots such as Dyfi Falls, has just reduced the price it is selling days at, per bird, by 10%.

Interestingly, Nick Mason at Davis & Bowring, a sporting agent and industry veteran, reassured ST that they are still seeing

days right at the top end of the market selling. He said there was a brisk trade in the smallest days too, but they are finding that the middle of the market is proving sticky. People, according to Mr Mason, are wondering whether they should turn their 300-bird day into a 150-bird

"Picture a dinner party scenario," he said, "where keen Shots are sitting round and chatting about the reality that birds have gone from £30 a go to £70 a go within a decade."

It's a bit of a bleak picture in terms of a direction of travel, and Mr Taylor's sentiment

"People are wondering whether to turn their 300-bird day into a 150-bird day"

day. The trouble, though, is that those days hardly cover costs for estates.

Digby Taylor doesn't think that those who usually buy days no longer have the money. "We are talking about people," he told ST, "who are really very wealthy but they are starting to question whether shooting represents good value given the price hike.

was echoed by Sam Higgins of EJ Churchill, who thinks that this year has been tricky but that next year could be harder still. He noted an American team of his that paid £48,000 for two days last year are paying £62,000 for the same two days this year. Eventually, he thinks, people do sit back and wonder. **ST & Felix Petit**

THEY SAID WHAT

Who said it:
Kerry McCarthy MP

Why: Labour's shadow minister for climate change cheered the news that United Utilities will no longer allow grouse shooting on their land. It seems she knows very little of wader conservation.

The Duchy of Cornwall helps curlew recovery

ST readers will be relieved to learn that the Duchy of Cornwall is set to release a further 30 curlew in July and August, having already released 60 on Dartmoor to date. As with the lapwing — a bird that has suffered a similar decline in Britain and which nature writer Mary Colwell last month announced was now absent from Dartmoor — curlew numbers have been

smashed by predation from crows and changes in land management. The rises in predation are likely resultant of the lack of gamekeepers and effective pest control on Dartmoor.

The red-listed curlew's breeding population has declined by 85% since 1985 in Devon. This year, the Duchy of Cornwall continues to support the conservation

of the species and will drive forward the recovery project again this summer.

The Dartmoor Curlew Recovery Project takes place on Duchy land, where landscape-scale plans have been devised to enhance curlew habitat, undertake targeted predator control and use an innovative technique developed by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) to 'head-start' curlew.

The WWT and Natural England identified curlew eggs laid alongside RAF runways in East Anglia that are otherwise removed to protect aircraft, which could be incubated, with the chicks reared to support smaller populations elsewhere. The Dartmoor project is the first UK upland example of its kind for curlew conservation.

Felix Petit



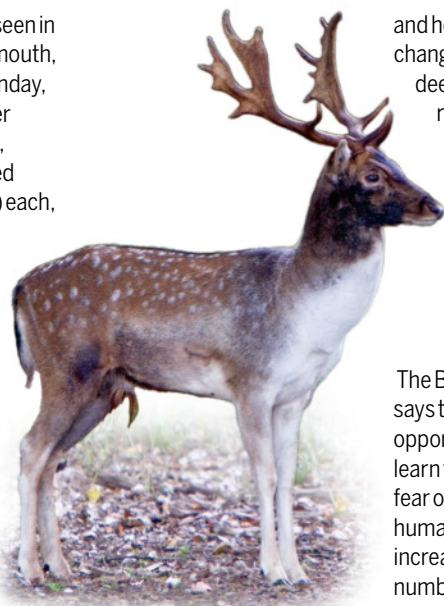
The curlew population in Devon has declined by 85% since 1985

Fallow deer seen romping through Plymouth hospital

Two fallow bucks were seen in Derriford Hospital, Plymouth, in the early hours of Monday, 24 July. A Plymouth deer expert said the animals, believed to have weighed about 100kg (15st 10lb) each, could have posed a safety risk.

A hospital spokesperson said: "The deer accessed via a door that had been left open and we would remind staff and visitors to please close doors behind them."

Paul James, a keen local deerstalker, said the deer population in the city had swelled in recent years



The fallow bucks gained access to the hospital via a side door that had been left open

and he had seen behaviour changes as a result. "Fallow deer should be wild and running away from human activity," he said.

Around 250,000 new homes are built in Britain each year, and this has expanded urban areas.

The British Deer Society says that deer are great opportunists and can quickly learn to overcome a natural fear of man. As the land that humans and deer occupy increasingly overlaps, the number of deer killed on the roads also rises. It is currently somewhere between 40,000 and 74,000 deer deaths per year. **Felix Petit**

NEWS IN BRIEF

A wedding? Game on

Gundog trainer Emma Mather, 32, and keeper Nathan Bamford, 33, have married near Inverness with a wedding breakfast entirely of local game. The game was sourced solely from local estates that Emma and Nathan work on.

Emma, who founded and runs working gundog kennel Foxhope Gundogs near Tomatin, worked with Alec Cruikshank, catering director for Blair Castle International Horse Trials, to build a bespoke menu that celebrates game in all its forms. It included 'pissed pigeons' — pigeon with raspberries soaked in Scottish gin; 'stag balls' — venison wrapped round a quail's egg; 'bunny on a stick'; 'wokked up pheasant' and 'tandoori pigeon'.



Keepers fighting fire

A film released by Loch Ness Rural Communities and Scotland's Regional Moorland Groups has praised gamekeepers as they provided expert knowledge and vital equipment to help contain a blaze near Cannich.

The film also expresses concern about plans to introduce punitive new controls to muirburn. Lianne MacLennan, of Scotland's Regional Moorland Group, said the Scottish government should value expertise and skills of gamekeepers and "take a step back from measures to penalise estates and grouse moors".



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**FIELDSPORTS
PRESS**

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Maize: it's got to go

In your issue of 26 July, both
Liam Bell and the *Secret Land
Agent* (SLA) wrote about game
covers, an essential feature on
every serious shoot. The SLA
wrote that the game covers on
the estate he manages were
found to be some of "the most
environmentally unfriendly
places on the whole estate",
a statement that doesn't
surprise me. For far too long
stands of maize have been
the standard game cover, but
surely it's high time that maize
was succeeded by crops that
have a much broader appeal
to wildlife and are also more

appealing to
the eye?

Maize
may have the
advantage
of standing
upright to the end
of the season,
but there's not
much else going for it. It's a
crop that attracts pigeons,
badgers and rats, but it offers
little, if anything, for other
wildlife. These days there
are numerous attractive and
interesting alternatives such
as sorghum, millet, kale,
sunflowers and quinoa, all of



**Maize is a common game cover, but it offers
little benefit to other wildlife in the area**

which offer cover and food to
a variety of farmland birds,
as well as pheasants and
partridges. Maize may be the
easy option, but if shoots are
going to justify their existence
by claiming to be good for
nature, then it's got to go.

Stephen Wilde, Norfolk



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**Swallows are diligent parents,
producing two or three clutches a year**

PARENTAL INSTINCTS

I thought your readers might be
interested in the following story.
Our retired handyman, Dave,
found a house martin nest on the
ground. Three of the young were
dead but the fourth was still alive.
Dave put the living fledgling in
a swallow's nest and very soon
the swallows were feeding the

orphan, even though there were
unhatched eggs in the nest.
Two weeks on, the house martin
has fledged and the swallow is
incubating her eggs.

Emma Paterson, by email

WILL LICENCES EVER RENEW?

We are now halfway through the
Home Office consultation on

tightening firearms licensing,
and I hope that all *Shooting
Times* readers have submitted a
response. The BASC website
gives an excellent guide on
what the questions mean, with
suggested responses, and I can
vouch for the fact that it does
only take five minutes to register
your views.

If anyone is wondering
whether to bother, please
consider my own case. Because
of the postcode lottery that
gives individual chief constables
the discretion to decide how
licensing is administered, I am
in one of the worst counties,
Dorset. My shotgun and
firearms certificates expired in
early December, and despite
my renewal application going
in three months before, I was
given an automatic two-month
extension because the police
knew they would be unable to
complete the task on time.

After a bit of nagging in
January, I was given a six-month
section seven temporary permit
to possess, and I have now been
promised a further nine months



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HOW MUCH KIT DO YOU NEED?

I am currently perplexed by the staggering array of equipment carried by the modern Rifle while out stalking. There is the rifle of course, which is now adorned with a sound moderator, the telescope sight, perhaps with a night vision attachment or perhaps heat sensitive equipment with, of course, the usual binoculars. All this paraphernalia is in turn seated atop a three, perhaps even four, legged support.

The whole set-up weighs a considerable amount, which needs to be carted around while trying to be silent on the stalk.

Not satisfied will this impressive array, the stalker

seems now to be accompanied by a companion who uses a night vision/rangefinder in monocular form as a sort of sniper's spotter.

I approach my stalking with just my .243 rifle mounted with a decent 6x42 telescope sight and carrying my pair of sticks. My question is, have the deer and foxes changed to such a degree that it necessitates a level of sophistication that my light, simple and thus far effective equipment will no longer suffice, or have I missed something?

**Alan Smith,
Gloucestershire**

Right: there is now a plethora of kit on the market thanks to new technologies



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until the end of April 2024, with a comment that they "sincerely hope" to complete my renewal before then.

We are all paying for this incompetence through a combination of the fees that we are charged and the taxes that we pay. At the end of the consultation there is a free box to add comments. Mine included the view that we need efficient and consistent use of the current system across the country before there is any reason to

accept any further restriction or increased costs. I hope other readers might make similar comments.

Mike Swan, ST contributor

ALARMING AND INVIGORATING

The recent *Secret Land Agent's* article (26 July) on the vitally important work of the Groundswell Agriculture Festival was both alarming and invigorating. That the soil supporting game crops is virtually inert does not surprise me. I read recently that vinicultural soil is similarly dead. How can this be addressed, and can *Shooting Times* commission qualified contributors to inform us? Of course, game crops do still make a contribution to wildlife as we well know, but in order not to be accused that this is skin deep we clearly need to address soil matters. The *Secret Land Agent* is also correct in his conclusion that we need to act before being compelled to.

Ian Fraser, Cheshire

PREPARING VENISON ON THE HOOF

Thanks for publishing my recent letter (*Keeping the balance*, 19 July); it was from the heart. I scanned this week's magazine for any interaction on the letters page, but nothing. It's not surprising — I'm only preaching to the converted within a shooting magazine. It's the politically influenced who need to know.

Patrick Galbraith's opener seemed to recognise some of the gist and also stood me back on my soapbox. Around 15 to 20 years back I was asked on to a farm to control whatever by the gun. I would bring deer back to the pub next door where the landlord has an outbuilding with trunk freezers that were ideal for butchering on. Every once in a while the door opened, a face peered round, "Urgh." Door closed. An hour later I was back in the pub threshold having bags of warm meat practically snatched out my hand by the same faces because it was



There's nothing quite like freshly prepared, delicious venison

free, because it was delicious, because it was on the hoof a few hours ago.

Name and email supplied

SHOOTING TIMES
9 August

Stalking ahead of the rut, getting ready for grouse, how to improve your eyesight and the view from the Game Fair.

... **AND MUCH MORE!**

"The wildlife of today is not ours to dispose of as we please. We have it in trust. We must account for it to those who come after." King George VI

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Country Diary

Patrick Leigh-Pemberton presents a beginner's guide to becoming a model houndsman at a new hunt – even if you might be bluffing it

When I moved away from home, some of my friends were worried that I might struggle to make new connections in a new area, and I always responded with blind confidence that I would make new friends through hunting. But, having moved in spring, after the end of the hunting season, I cannot meet people in the field until autumn hunting begins. Roll away clouds, roll on harvest. So, I have been turning to the high point of hunting's summer scene, which is the puppy show.

The nominal purpose of a puppy show is to judge the youngest hounds in kennels, to celebrate the best breeding among them. The secondary nominal purpose is to thank the puppy walkers, who take a huge burden off the hunt staff by raising two or three hound puppies for a few months, when these puppies are at their most destructive and least obedient. The actual purpose, though, is for everyone to gather round, catch up, and have an enormous gossip while the judging is taking place.

If you are new to an area, it might well be the best time to meet as many people as possible, because they are all in one place at one time and are not as likely to jump a hedge and leave you on your own as they might be out hunting. Although, depending on the quality of the tea and bar afterwards, this is an eventuality you can't rule out, even if they aren't mounted.

In my case though, it is an important chance to pretend that I am very interested in hounds. I am no great equestrian, and as I would like my new acquaintances to think I am not completely inept, expressing an interest in hounds is a useful way of establishing early that if it turns out that I can't ride, at least I am interested in hounds. If anyone else would like to take this summer shortcut into the world of hunting, I have prepared a short duffer's guide to the hound show.

Expert attire

Wear a hat; all the pros wear hats. Straw hats are suitable for both men and women, but avoid bowlers or flat caps as these are marks of office and will identify you as an expert. People might ask you questions you



The puppy show is often the high point of a hunt's summer calendar as a way to thank walkers

can't answer, and the trick is to only answer the ones that you can.

To this end carry a pen, and during the judging make illegible markings in the card you will be given. Make sure people see you making the markings, but ensure they can't be understood. I find a decent mix of underlining individual entries and circling aspects of the breeding works best. Do not

a bit light," or, "That dog didn't have a very intelligent head."

There will be at least three men on the side of the ring wearing dark suits; talk to them. It might be difficult to get a word in, but if you listen attentively, agree with almost everything that they say and add something about those roughcoated hounds seeming more independent, they

"It is completely acceptable to disagree with the judges on some of their choices"

offer an opinion until after the judging has been completed, and when you do don't forget to say how different these hounds are to the ones you have known before (this isn't foolproof, but most people will buy it).

It is completely acceptable, almost expected, to disagree with the judges on some of their selections, so be prepared to offer a vague but hard-to-disprove theory as to why they are wrong. Some of the classics include: "In my eyes that bitch was

might leave with the impression you are an intelligent houndsman. And, as they fly over the ditch in which you find yourself in December, they may still think this, even if they now also know you're no horseman. 🐾

∞ Patrick Leigh-Pemberton has recently bought a small farm in County Durham. Here he intends to graze beef cattle and follow hounds in his spare time.



Alan Edwards is conservation manager at Bywell, a Purdey Gold Award estate in Northumberland

Gamekeeper



Alan Edwards believes unique, private experiences can help keepers become more competent and passionate custodians of the countryside

A gentle plop at the end of a straight line on an almost perfect cast. Surely this time a fish would show some interest in my offering? Sadly not. Wondering how on earth that cast was so good, when so many more before were terrible, I concentrated hard to repeat the sequence. Alas, a crumpled leader landed awkwardly. Briefly my attention was deflected as a mallard duck and four well-grown chicks glided into the pool on a speeding far-bank current. I recast, better I thought, and as the fly took its path down the pool the ducklings were enjoying a find of newly hatched fly life.

Suddenly, the mood changed. A gentle alarm call instructed the chicks back into order; mother had sensed something was wrong. I'd seen nothing. A quick glance upward revealed no aerial predators. What had caused this concern? Then, the water around the ducks erupted. I couldn't believe my eyes when an adult otter burst from below. In the flash of a second, the brood was scattered and the otter had its prize. As invisibly as it appeared, the otter vanished and I never saw it again that day. Mother gathered her three chicks and made away downstream.

A rare glimpse

This episode was a rare glimpse into life at its most primitive and brutal, which many never get to see. I'm often reminded of the words of my first headkeeper, who



The otter is there and gone again within seconds, making off with its prize duckling from the river

an integral part of that environment, and if you don't feel that way you're not doing it right. This intimacy allows you to see the countryside in a different way to others. You're simply not looking into the countryside as you would a fish tank — you're actually in the fish tank.

Wildlife begins to understand you and treats you as a friend or foe. Daily

Farmers once had this relationship with partridges but for best part it's been lost in the chase for modernisation and progress; the days of the farm running at the same pace as the wildlife is long gone. As partridges cannot understand modern agriculture, a once vitally important relationship is broken.

Fear of humans

It's not only partridges that recognise the keeper. Carrion crows certainly get to know the approaching vehicle is a threat and become harder to outwit. They recognise the keeper on the ground and alter their activity to avoid him. There's no such fear of humans in areas where there are no keepers; they can conduct their activities undisturbed.

The long-term benefits to the landscape that a good, diligent, caring and honest wild bird keeper brings is immeasurable. We simply cannot view the countryside through tinted glasses; it's a living, breathing entity that needs us at its heart, understanding and working with it to make it thrive in a sustainable way. 🐦

“This intimacy allows you to see the countryside in a different way to others”

proclaimed: “Every day brings something new, a new experience never witnessed before.” At the time I didn't understand his comments. Believe me when I now say I do fully understand his sentiments; it's happening to me. Despite working intimately with the environment, there's so much I've never witnessed.

Wild bird keeping allows you to work with nature in a way that is very private. You build a relationship with the land and woods and all the life that lives there. You become

rounds conducted in a thoughtful manner bring you up close to the wildlife. Grey partridges are one of the first to accept you as a non-threat, and much has been written by keepers who have built up this relationship to an even greater extent than I have. However, frequent encounters with individuals and family groups where the birds remain calm and unthreatened has, for me, reinforced the understanding that this behaviour is an acceptance of our presence as something they understand.

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Davy Thomas is a professional deerstalker and estate manager in the Highlands



Stalking Diary

Davy Thomas believes stalkers would do well to respect their land and learn about the often-intriguing history of the ground they work on

Stalkers can be a sentimental bunch, and they often carry a huge attachment to their hill. For me, a knowledge of the history of the land and those who stood here before me is something that fascinates me. However, many of us who work in the sporting sector struggled in school, as being cooped up in a classroom failed to channel our energy. Ironically, my own school grades, including history, resembled the latter half of the alphabet.

While resting the pointers during a morning's grouse counting, I sat down beside a stone known by just a few as 'McAlpines'. John McAlpine was perhaps the first professional stalker to have arrived in the deer forest in which I work. I have a few photographs of him, a typical burly Victorian with a fore and aft and big beard to boot. He and his wife took up the position around 1890. Sadly, she passed away from TB, and he lost his only son in the Somme.

Summer downpour

Some years ago, while working on an estate in Speyside, I finished a fruitless morning's roe stalking by taking shelter from a heavy summer downpour in an old lunch hut. In the corner, on a wooden panel I saw etched in pencil a small inscription that I have never forgotten: "17th August 1917; 947 and a half brace of grouse, 183 hares, 2 brace black game."

Sadly, I doubt that old lunch hut still stands now, and with it probably went this small piece of sporting history. However, impressive as that day must have been, I must confess that I found it a little distasteful that more pressing matters were afoot just a few hundred miles away in Europe.

The previous year, on 24 June 1916, the British had begun a seven-day bombardment of the German fortifications on the Somme. Sir Douglas Haig's ambitious plan was to destroy the enemy defences and sever the seemingly impenetrable barbed wire in front of the enemy position. At 7.20am on 1 July the bombardment ceased, and 10 minutes later whistles blew and all 14 British divisions attacked. Having fired over 1.5 million shells



John McAlpine may well have been the first professional stalker on Davy Thomas's patch

in the week leading up to the push, the artillery were unable to keep up with the barrage that was supposed to take them through to the German trenches, and one of the bloodiest days in history began.

This 10-minute delay proved fatal, giving the Germans time to scramble out of their concrete dugouts, man their trenches and

of the keepers failed to return from the trenches, and investment in moors in the coming years was suppressed by a lack of working-age men. Indeed, the record-breaking moor that the lunch hut stood upon is now under trees.

At a recent social event I was attending prior to the onset of a busy season,

"Many of those moors may never again see bags like the pre-World War I era"

open fire. Haig's infantry were cut down by a storm of machine-gun, rifle and artillery fire. They suffered over 57,000 casualties during the day, 19,240 of which were fatal. My own great-uncle was among the wounded on the day, historically described as "a sunlit picture of Hell".

Many of those moors may never again see bags like the pre-World War I era. Without doubt, the reason is that many

conversation drifted to school reports. One well-respected local headstalker, a mountain of a man, broke out in a deep voice. "Well, Mother always said that if I studied hard and got good grades, then I could go to the foxes with my father." The room fell silent in anticipation of his next sentence. He paused, raised his eyebrows and looked at his boots before muttering: "I never did get to the foxes with Dad." 🦊



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BEAT PROFILE

Morphie

The Morphie is a beat with everything a salmon angler might hope for, but the team aren't resting on their laurels, says Sam Carlisle

In 2012, cracks appeared in the Morphie Dyke. The barrier, which corralled fish into one of the most prolific salmon fishing pools in the world, had long been out of use. Its wooden and iron struts were decaying and its concrete crumbling. The 2012 cracks were exacerbated by high water in 2013. Two years later, Storm Frank was the final nail in the coffin. The dyke was fully breached, and passage for salmon on the North Esk, one of the most productive salmon rivers in Scotland, was eased.

Despite the unobstructed passage for salmon, Morphie remains one of the finest beats to fish, and for the first time in many years is available to day Rods. Previously, a syndicate of timeshares divided the fishing, which very rarely came on to the market. That timeshare agreement expired in 2021, and this season Rods can book by the day, and at a very reasonable cost.

Endless pocket water

Morphie has everything a keen salmon angler might hope for. Just a mile from the sea, fresh fish enter

the beat every day of the season. There is endless pocket water with strategically placed boulders, which will hold pods of grilse, in pools such as Cages. At the bottom of the beat there are the Upper, Middle and Lower Batts pools – lugubrious glides that flow smoothly but with enough

of tonnes of gravel, under licence from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, to improve various pools. They have added boulders, under the direction of hydro-engineers, to direct the flow and create more lies. And they have planted tens of thousands of trees – not just to

“It is moving with the times, adapting to the wants of the modern angler”

current to keep your line taught. They are ideal holding pools and are well worth concentrating on for the few hours around high tide.

The 13 pools are all promising, and more than enough to rotate among the four Rods. Being so close to the sea, Morphie is the rarest of things: a beat on a spate river that fishes better in low water. It is worth timing your trip to coincide with the high tides in spring and summer, getting the chance to fish at each of the high tides, if you can.

The North Esk, and Morphie in particular, is not a fishery that is resting on its laurels. The new proprietors have extracted thousands

keep the water cool to help smolt survival, but to shade pools and allow more effective fishing during bright weather. It is a beat that is moving with the times, adapting to the wants of the modern angler (no being off the water at 5pm here, if you wish to fish on) and is reaping the rewards.

Unlike many beats, the five-year average at Morphie is showing a steady increase. The approach at Morphie is modern, and when dusk coincides with a spring tide, the fishing can be magical. 🐟

 Days on Morphie can be booked at fishpal.com

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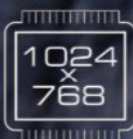
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Two bucks before breakfast

A journey from old South London to rural Hertfordshire to stalk muntjac suggests that the two aren't as far detached as they might seem

WRITTEN BY PATRICK GALBRAITH ♦ PHOTOGRAPHY BY CALLUM MCINERNEY-RILEY

Patrick Galbraith and Paul Childerley pause to glass one of the estate's many walks

With the Sako rifle on sticks, Patrick takes his time to line up the muntjac in the crosshairs before taking the shot



When the alarm went off at 3:30am, it felt as though my head had just hit the pillow. There was rain falling across the window, there was no light in the sky, and in the hall my spaniel pup was beating her tail against the side of her crate. I guess she'd noted me piling coats, binoculars and boots up the previous evening and reckoned we were going

By 4am, Jessie and I were on Walworth Road heading towards Elephant and Castle. We were on our way Hertfordshire to meet my friend Paul Childerley, deer manager and former British kickboxing champion.

The streets were quiet, save for a few students heading to falafel shops after having been out partying, and men shuffling wide-eyed down the damp pavement, going

“A gamekeeper recently asked me why the editor of *ST* lives in town”

somewhere exciting. She is just starting her sporting life, but even now she knows the signs – the gun cabinet keys, cartridge bags, bottles of beer and the packet of Marlboros that always mean fishing.

nowhere in particular. A young gamekeeper recently asked me why the editor of *ST* lives ‘in town’. “You’d like it round my way,” I replied. The market on the road where Charlie Chaplin was born still runs on ➔



Paul uses a call to grab the small deer's attention as Patrick prepares to pull the trigger of the Sako

Saturdays, the shop is full of old boys buying *Racing Post*, and if you go into the local pub, The Nag's Head, you'll always find somebody who wants to talk about pigeon racing or long dogs. The city and the countryside once weren't so far apart, and what London once was lives on in Walworth.

It only took Jessie and me an hour to get to Hitchin, and when we arrived at the cottage on the edge of the estate, where we were meant to be meeting, it looked as though Paul had been there for some time. He was standing out of the rain with the keeper discussing the arrival of

partridge poults and how glad they were that we finally had a bit of rain. We exchanged a few pleasantries, then climbed into Paul's truck and drove towards the big house – our brief was to shoot as many muntjac as possible from the grounds. The owners' gardens were being hit hard.

A wilderness

Some years ago, I used to sit across from *Country Life* magazine's gardening editor. From time to time they'd tell me about the great gardens of England and about how garden design has evolved down the centuries. "A wilderness," they explained to me one summer's day, "is a sort of very formal compartmentalised gardens." The compartments created spaces for walking, reading or flirting with suitors. I realised not long after we got going that the grounds we were in were a perfect 'wilderness', and I later learned that, being created in 1830 and still maintained lovingly to this day, the grounds are one of the best surviving examples of a 'wilderness' in the country.



The first muntjac buck suddenly senses the pair, disappearing with alarm into the laurels



A second muntjac is accounted for as Patrick spots the buck between two trees

When the gardens were designed, muntjac were almost entirely unknown in Britain, but a century on they were immensely popular among aristocrats, who used them to adorn their gardens. Some years ago, I found an early 20th-century price list for Jamrach's Exotic Animal Emporium in Wapping, East London. A muntjac was around £12 and a bear wasn't much more. Jamrach was a supplier to the Duke of Bedford, which is where the whole muntjac issue supposedly started.

If you ask deer managers how many muntjac there are in the UK, they generally fob you off – nobody really knows. But if you really press them, they tend to shrug and mutter that there could be as many as a quarter of a million or so.

Muntjac for lunch

As we wandered along the avenues, Paul with his binos and me with a Sako S20 6.5 Creedmoor, I mentioned in a whisper that the previous day I'd had a funny conversation with Chris Packham. I'd asked him what his favourite shoot day would be, and he'd replied to say that it would be one where muntjac, shot with non-toxic rounds, was eaten at lunch. Paul shook his head as I told him.

He absolutely understands, he replied, that muntjac are a problem – they are destroying swathes of woodland – but he also thinks we should treat them with respect. The more time he spends out stalking them, he admitted, the more he likes them. What he doesn't get, he added, is why some people who are opposed to fieldsports generally find the idea of shooting lots of muntjac to be acceptable. "A life is a life," he shrugged, and then he went quiet.

In front of us, a buck was coming through the trees at pace, and in a moment it would be out in the open, just to the left of a statue. Before I even had the rifle off my back, Paul had the sticks set up.

"Just let it come," he whispered, "it hasn't seen us." The little animal slowed a bit as though it knew that something was wrong, and then it stopped and looked round. For a moment it stared at us and then it ran, disappearing into the laurels with its white tail held high in alarm.

I was just looking round at Paul when he pointed towards the trees to our right. Another buck, a smaller one, was trotting the same way. When it broke cover it stopped and I was more ready than I'd been before. The copper round hit home and the creature stumbled, then collapsed into the stillness of the damp morning.

"I sort of thought it might not happen," I said, turning round. ➔

Patrick's stalking kit list

-  **Rifle:** Sako S20 6.5 Creedmoor
-  **Rounds:** Sako 120-gr Blade
-  **Boots:** Crispi Hunter
-  **Binos:** Zeiss V6 2.5-15x56





The estate is a fine example of a garden 'wilderness', with compartmentalised walkways through which Patrick and Paul stalk

Paul laughed. "You doubted me?" We left the buck at the base of a beech tree and carried on through the grounds.

There is meant to be a predictability about a 'wilderness',

"The round went straight through the beast"

but there was something labyrinthine about the ground, with very similar statues placed at the end of each walk. As we wandered, Paul told me about the joy of taking on new land.

His approach, he explained, is never to get clients in to shoot all the deer and then disappear into the sunset with a fat wallet. What he likes to do is to try to balance the client's needs in terms of forestry regeneration with selectively culling animals, so that the deer on a given patch improve in quality. Over the years, he's seen plenty of cowboys turn up, take on a bit of ground and then have clients in from dawn to dusk to shoot every beast in the area.

As light came into the sky, a cold breeze started to blow and deer moved ahead of us, our scent carrying towards them on the wind. We were

almost ready to call time when I spotted another buck, some 70 yards ahead, standing between two trees.

"Take it if you can," Paul whispered, "you've got time." All I could do was go for a neck shot, and although I had every confidence of killing the animal I didn't want to destroy the meat, but we were there to do a job. The round went straight through the beast, ripping through one of its back legs.

Butchering the bucks

By mid-morning I was standing in my garden in Camberwell, butchering the two deer on the grass. I live next to a block of flats and I always half wonder if I'll end up with the police coming round at some point. Perhaps in posh London I would. Instead, I had two men leaning over the balcony. I was doing, they confirmed in broken English, a fine job. Perhaps I should get them round.

I quite understand why people think it's strange for the editor of *ST* to live in SE5. But with the Poles who fish in my local park, the Chinese guys who I caught the other day poaching eels in the Thames, and all those taxi drivers who, when they pull up outside Purdey or Holland & Holland, seem to know the history of the English gunmakers inside out, I sort of wonder if parts of London are now more rustic than the commuter belt.



It's a morning well spent as the pair carry the deer back to the car for Patrick to take home to London

 Paul Childerley offers muntjac stalking, roe stalking, Chinese water deer and fallow, and he's also an extremely nice guy. To stalk with Paul, email info@childerleysporting.co.uk

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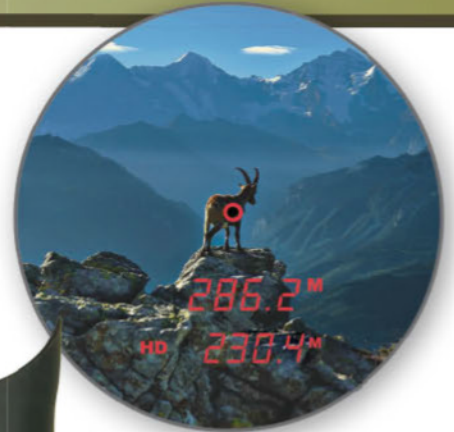
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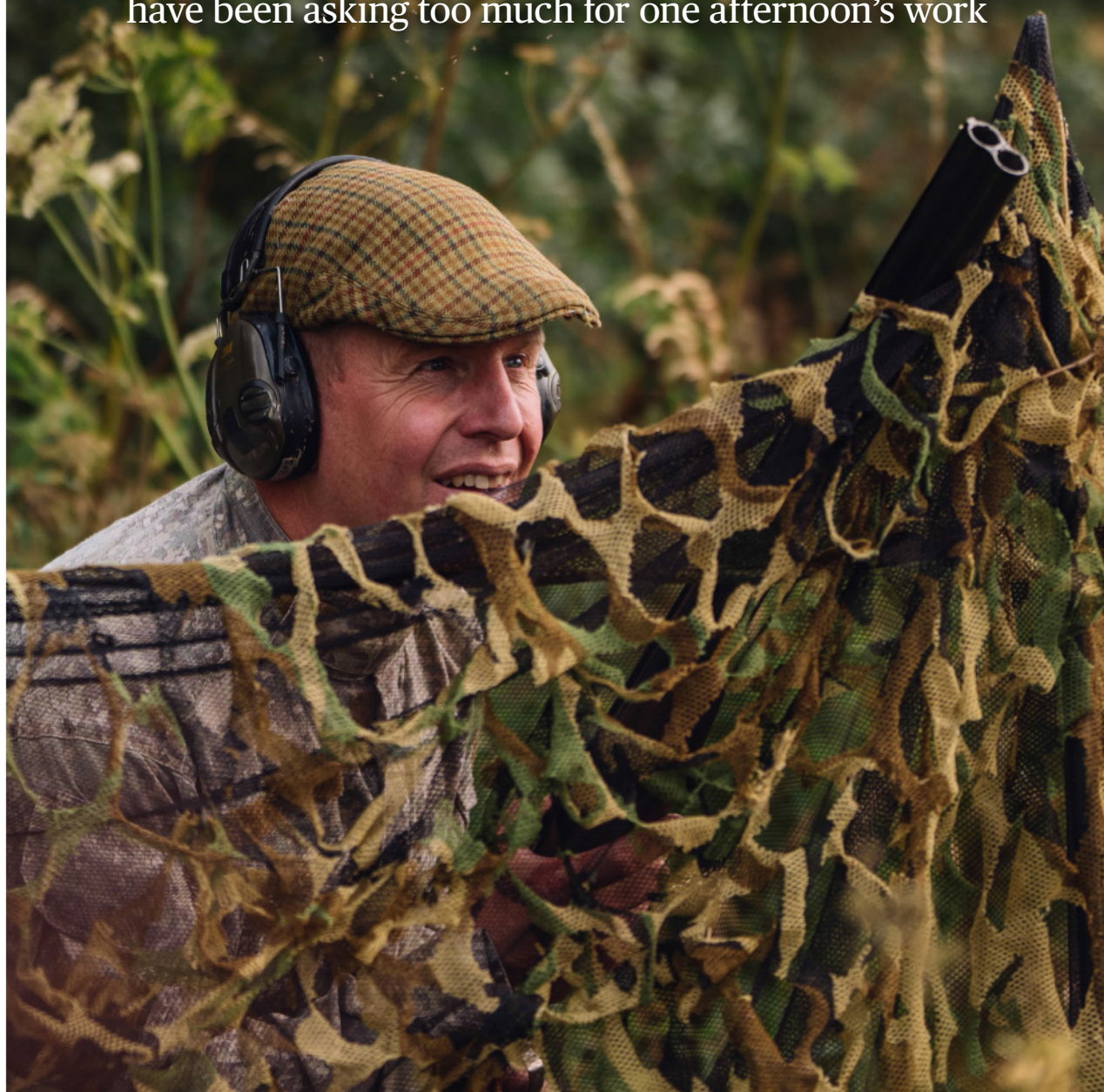
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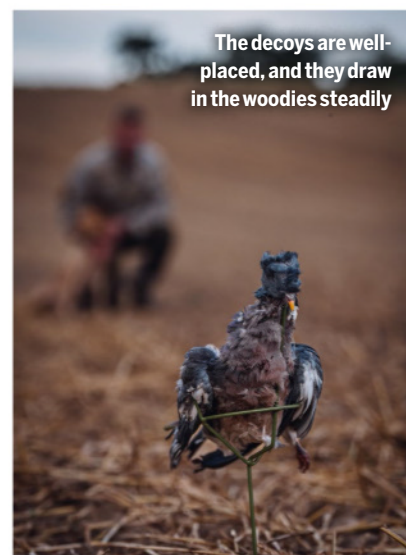
A step too far?

Simon Garnham wonders whether a new dog, a new gun and two different fields in need of protection might have been asking too much for one afternoon's work





Simon Garnham sets up his decoys in the barley near to some sitty trees



The decoys are well-placed, and they draw in the woodies steadily

I missed my fifth shot in a row. Meg the cocker whined and pulled at her lead. Pigeons were coming from all directions into the line of oaks behind me or straight over the decoys to the front. But could I hit them? Could I heck. The dog tried to jump into my lap and failed, catching me square in what cricket commentators call ‘the box area’.

It was my first outing with a new Beretta, bought out of necessity rather than choice. A break-in had seen my beloved Miroku stolen (though not its fore-end). This new weapon felt heavier at the muzzle; the safety catch and barrel selector were unfamiliar. And whereas my Miroku flopped open when I broke it, this new addition to the armoury needed a strong pair of forearms – not ideal in the confines of a pigeon hide.

Textbook shot

A sixth bird approached. Easy: straight in from the front, gently dropping and reducing in speed. It was a textbook decoying shot coming directly into the pattern.

I mounted the gun deliberately, pushed through the bird and squeezed the trigger. Nothing. I nudged forward on the safety catch again with my thumb. It didn’t shift. I squeezed. Still no report. The bird turned on its tail, followed by language I’d reprimand my kids for using. Looking down, I could see the barrel selector sitting midway between its settings for top and bottom; neither barrel would fire. At this, the dog gave a determined yank and the hide collapsed. The warm air became warmer and the sky a little more blue.

While Europe and America sweltered, the English harvest moved on through showers and gentle sunshine. In my part of East Anglia, combines rolled as early as 1 July. A dry June had ripened the barley to 13% moisture and given sufficient quality for malting. “Let’s get it in,” encouraged Farmer Charlie,

“The land was set out like a feast for the wily woodie. Where best to ambush him?”

and after two days of hard carting, it was home.

Then more rain came, softening the stubbles. “No combining to be done now. Let’s drill.” So by Tendring Hundred Farmers’ Club show day (always the second Saturday in July), oilseed rape was in, direct-drilled and rolled for good measure.

Essex fields don’t sit still in July for very long, so pigeon shooters can’t sit still either. This was an unfamiliar situation for me and also, I suspect, for that adaptable, gregarious forager *Columba palumbus*, the woodpigeon. Many of my neighbours hadn’t harvested their barley, which was now gently subsiding from vertical to

horizontal, whereas I had oilseed rape planted on half of my little farm. Most of it hopefully was an inch below the surface but some inevitably would be lying loose.

The land was set out like a feast for the wily woody. Where best to ambush him? Protect a standing crop of this year’s harvest and ➔



It's Meg's first experience of shooting over decoys, but she expertly retrieves the birds to hand with ease

Pigeon shooting

build a bag over my neighbour's laid barley? Or prevent damage to the seed of the next harvest and protect the rape? As usual I decided it would be nice to have a Victoria sponge and to consume it all. Surely two forays in one day would be possible.

With 10 pups at home to think about and poults newly arrived in the release pen – which I'd had to shift 250m to comply with GL43 (thanks Defra) – it was beginning to feel like a stretch. And I was shooting my first location – the barley – very badly.

Sitty trees

Some sitty trees, near the smallest of three reservoirs, seemed a natural position to begin the adventure. Barley lay flattened thick before me, matted and solid enough that Meg could stand on it in parts; she couldn't be more excited, deputising for Scout the lab who was still nursing pups at home.

In reconnaissance, I'd watched hundreds of birds sitting perched like locusts. But would they return? It was 2pm. Butterfly weather. Skippers and painted ladies hovered over the headland. Dragonflies – cruisers, chasers and darters – were resplendent in multicolour. Half a mile away, the RSPB woods lay cool and inviting. Behind me, cattle grazed. Reservoirs were on either side and the sun and the wind on my left. Birds were, if not pouring in, at least arriving steadily singly, in pairs or small groups.

“I was shooting my first location – the barley – very badly”

I reset the hide, put out another couple of decoys and spent a bit of time calming Meg. It was her first experience of shooting over decoys. We'd had some good training sessions but not experienced the real thing. Of course she'd be excitable. She could also be perfect; small and lightweight enough to creep around below the level of the barley if I dropped a bird into it – or dropped a bird at all.

I took off her lead, poured her some water and had a quiet word with myself. A new gun, a raw cocker and the need to be in two places at once didn't mean I had to shoot like a novice. I determined to try to build a bag any way I could. ➔



It takes a while for Simon to get the hang of his new Beretta, but he manages to tally up 22 pigeons in the first field



Simon loads two more cartridges into the Beretta as the pigeons keep coming over in steady numbers



Labrador Scout takes over for the second part of the afternoon as Simon sets out decoys in the rape



Simon picks the last of the woodies in the barley before heading home to shoot over his oilseed rape field

Pigeon shooting

Popping up from behind the hide, Simon takes a left-and-right as the afternoon draws to an end



A singleton approached over my left shoulder, heading directly into the trees behind. Making sure that the safety and selector were on the right settings this time, I slowly emerged from behind the scrim netting, swung through the bird and watched it tumble into the ditch behind.

Meg, now much calmer, gave me a little look; with a nod, she was out, fighting through thick field margins, down into the damp of the ditch and back with her first woodpigeon retrieved. I'd proven that the gun worked. Meg had retrieved to hand. We could both relax and enjoy a warm summer's afternoon. Somewhere in the distance, a combine thrummed into life. Farmer Jim and Foreman Sid had won their battle deep in the bowels of a John Deere. The barley would soon be harvested. Time to make the most of it.

Birds kept coming. With the wind in their tails, they approached the trees over my left shoulder, curling into the decoys or settling on the wire overhead. Apart from the pigeons

With that in mind, as my confidence improved, I began to try to drop birds behind me into the ditch, on to the headland or away to the right where an area of crop had failed. The land was left bald perhaps by some mishap of agronomy or some flooding at the wrong point of the winter. It meant I was taking longer crossers and higher driven-style birds, which eventually became more routine. A left-and-right following the line of the trees behind was enough to prove that the Beretta and I might get on okay after all.

Picking the last

The shadows were lengthening as the clicker hit 22 to pick. We worked the hedgeline and wild margin. The buttery colours of beaked hawksbeard and fleabane merged with moorland purples of thistle and knapweed shaded in the height of hogweed and cow parsley. Meg stuck close, much closer than Scout who tends to range off at distance, and picked the last of the birds. The combine continued to rumble.

"I emerged, swung through the bird and watched it tumble into the ditch behind"

coming straight in from the woodline to my front, most of the action was not straightforward. The trees behind me obscured their approach from both sides, but the tally began to grow.

Florence Nightingale once said that the first requirement of a hospital is that it should "do the sick no harm". Shooting over laid barley needs also to do more good than damage.

I was keen to return home to check the pups and give the oilseed rape field some attention. I gave Scout a break from her maternity duties and left the exhausted Meg sprawled out on the kitchen floor.

The sun was setting by the time I'd thrown up a hide and put out some decoys on my rape field. The field was unoccupied, save for a

Christening the new gun

With hindsight, a new gun would have been better christened on clays. I've recently trialled the Nordic Clays TrapMaster. It can fire biodegradable clays singly or in pairs at speeds of 60km/h for distances of 100-plus yards. At 2kg, the handheld throwing device is lightweight but powerful and the similarly lightweight clays offer a very different sort of target to conventional clays. There's no set-up time; just get it out of the carrycase, switch it on, load a clay, select a speed and fire. I found it to be incredibly convenient and very realistic, much easier for trialling a new gun than woodies.

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dozen jackdaws, which left noisily as we set up.

"Not much doing here," Scout seemed to say so we practised a retrieve or two after her long lay-off.

The late evening light cast shadows of clouds scudding overhead. The rape would have to wait for another day. Two fields in one afternoon was indeed a step too far. 🐦

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The Field Guide To British Deer

BDS 60th Anniversary Edition

BOOKSHELF

CHARLES SMITH-JONES

In this excerpt from the 60th anniversary edition of the BDS's *Field Guide To British Deer*, Charles Smith-Jones considers the noise they make

Deer are generally quiet animals. Alarmed deer generally choose to depart unobtrusively but may issue a vocal warning to others of a potentially dangerous intruder in their vicinity. An observer who has been detected by an unseen deer may at least be able to identify it by the sound it makes.

The males of most deer species make characteristic calls during the rut. Females and young will maintain contact with each other using various bleating or piping calls.

Red deer

This species is characteristically silent apart from during the rut. During the rut the stag roars, especially around first and last light. The sound resembles the bellow of a bull but with

a deeper intonation, and usually ends with several grunts. Woodland stags often give a single resonant groan at long intervals. During the rest of the year the stag may make a rare warning bark if alarmed, and grunts when troubled by flies.

The hind likewise makes little sound except for a gruff bark to her calf when returning to it. She may also make a more frequent nasal call, and utters a crisp warning bark if suddenly disturbed or unsure of a potential threat that she cannot identify.

The calf has a high-pitched bleat and screams if alarmed.

Sika

For most of the year this species is generally silent unless alarmed. The rutting call of the stag is impossible

to confuse with any of the UK's other deer. It consists of a carrying whistle, rising to a crescendo and descending again to a concluding grunt, usually issued three or four times in rapid succession. The stag then remains silent for the next ten to fifteen minutes and often for up to half an hour.

A rutting sika can be difficult to locate by its call because of these long silent intervals. (The more frequent calls of a rutting red stag or fallow buck make them easier to pinpoint.) This sound is heard chiefly at dusk or in the early morning and has been compared to the sound of a gate swinging on its hinges.

Another type of rutting call, usually made by a stag accompanied by hinds, is a single drawn out querulous whistle rising to a peak,

tailoring off and ending in a grunt, and is uttered every two or three minutes. A stag challenges another with a sound rather like the “raspberry” made by expelling air through closed lips. A low bleat or grunt is uttered in the vicinity of a hind in season.

Both the stag and hind when alarmed make a short, piercing whistle, sometimes ending in a grunt, often repeated several times with a space of some fifteen to twenty seconds between calls. The hind makes a similar sound when guiding its calf though undergrowth. It is used most frequently in summer and can carry distances of up to half a mile. Stags have been heard to make a peevish squeal, especially during high winds.

When in heat, sika hinds have a special plaintive and subdued bleat which appears to be irresistible to an unmated stag. The calf bleats in a similar manner to a fallow fawn; the sound can be imitated by blowing on a blade of grass held between the thumbs.

Fallow deer

This is another species that is generally quiet when adult. The typical voice of a fallow buck during the rut is a rather fast and continuous groaning or belching with a marked rhythmic intonation. In still weather it can be heard half a mile away. A doe, and particularly one with a fawn, gives a crisp and resonant bark as a warning call if disturbed; a buck may utter a similar bark especially during rutting time. The doe makes a whining bleat when communicating with or searching for her fawn.

Fawns communicate with does using a plaintive nasal bleating “mee-ulk” which increases if they are pestered by bucks.

Roe deer

A buck challenging an intruder utters a loud, staccato “bo... bo... bo” bark similar to that of a collie dog. Both buck and doe can make a more drawn out “bao...bao...bao” warning bark, often uttered as the animal takes flight and which coincides with the animals’ bounding pace. The bark of the buck is gruff, shorter and less continuous than that of the doe which is higher pitched. Barking often continues as the animal moves off into the distance. As a general rule, the deeper the call, the older the deer.

During the rut the buck grunts when pursuing a doe or a rival. The doe calls to her kids with a high-pitched “pee-you” or “peep peep”. When in oestrus she makes a faint and high-pitched piping note which the buck can hear at a considerable distance and to which he usually responds immediately by coming in search of the doe.

A doe hard pressed by a rutting buck and unready to mate utters a loud, two-tone distress squeak: “pee-ah”. Kids make a shrill, lamb-like bleat.

Muntjac

Both sexes make a single, loud and fox-like bark, less gruff than that of a roe and repeated at intervals of four to five seconds over long periods, sometimes for up to an hour. They do this when separated, disturbed,

excited, advertising their presence to others of their species, or when the doe is in oestrus.

Muntjac also grunt and make clicking sounds. They also make a piercing and distressing cry if in extreme difficulty. Does and fawns will squeak if disturbed. A fawn separated from its mother has a characteristic and pathetic bleat, uttered in a very much higher pitch, and squeals and bleats to attract its mother if in danger.

Water deer

Largely quiet. Both sexes utter a harsh bark similar to that of the muntjac, but with a more rasping edge. Barking is often carried out when alarmed and may also serve other purposes. It seems to be more prevalent during the summer which suggests that it might also have something to do with maternal behaviour.

Rutting bucks make a variety of clicking or chattering clicks and squeals, and courting animals may squeak. If caught or trapped, an animal will scream loudly. 🦌

The Field Guide To British Deer BDS 60th Anniversary Edition

by Charles Smith-Jones

The new 60th anniversary edition of the British Deer Society's *Field Guide to British Deer* has been fully updated and revised by Charles Smith-Jones. A lifelong naturalist and countryman, Charles has always had a special interest in deer, which he has studied and worked closely with for more than 40 years. Previously a lecturer in countryside management at Sparsholt College, Hampshire, Charles is currently technical adviser to the British Deer Society (BDS).

The guide has a new colour section to help with the identification of species to be found across the UK and up-to-date distribution maps for those species. The guide has long been considered an essential tool for all those interested in finding and identifying deer in their natural habitat, including naturalists, walkers and lovers of the countryside.

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Both sexes of muntjac make a single, loud fox-like bark



When the going gets rough

◆ AL'S SPORTING TOUR ◆

Al Gabriel returns to the West London Shooting School to brush up on his rough shooting technique

Al Gabriel is put through his paces on the clays by Mark Heath at the West London Shooting School



On my last visit to the West London Shooting School, (*Al's sporting tour*, 5 July), I also managed to get a chance to have a go at clays with world-class coaching from Mark Heath. It is not often that you step into a clay lesson after spending a few hours on a large-calibre rifle. I met Mark near the gunroom, and we didn't waste time picking up a gun for the day. As far as shotgun coaching

goes, Mark is as good as it gets, and, let's face it, I need all the help I can get when it comes to clays.

There were so many delightful guns to choose from, it was heavenly. I needed to impress Mark, so I went for my personal favourite, the Browning B525: the 15in stock length has always fitted me best. I remember the time I went to a gunshop for my first game gun; the first thing I pulled off the rack was a B525, but only because I really

enjoyed the woodwork. Little did I realise I was going to turn out to be a Browning aficionado. I did have the option of elegant side-by-sides, but baby steps.

Professional coaching

I must admit, shotguns are becoming a bit of a rarity in my shooting career. My shotgun days now seem to be localised to pigeon days, where nobody can witness my terrible shooting. Professional coaching is just what the doctor ordered.

The West London Shooting School (WLSS) was opened in 1901 by Richmond Watson. It is considered one of the best shooting grounds in the country and has won several awards. It has world-class facilities that cater for corporates, shooting parties and private sessions. I did have to keep reminding myself that, although I was within the M25, it did have a refreshing country feel.

On our way to the first clay stand, I couldn't help but notice a gigantic mound made from spent cartridges. It must have taken decades to amass. It was an impressive site, a cartridge masterpiece. Over the years, the WLSS cartridge mound has become a type of modern art and expressionism. And this old mound has one last trick left.

After several decades, plans are now underway to recycle the mound for other uses. The WLSS has linked up with H&M Recycling, a leading cartridge recycling company, to achieve this. It is a testament to the sustainability of shooting and our desire to make the sport greener. I hope the mound serves as an example for all shooting grounds.



Al is spoilt for choice in the gunroom but he settles on his personal favourite: the Browning B525

The rabbit target is Al's least favourite but he soon gets the hang of it



We first started at the dreaded clay rabbit target. It is never my favourite; every miss seems so close yet so far. Historically, I have always struggled with fast rabbit clay targets. It is to do with my timing. The rifleman in me seems to have developed the habit of pulling the trigger and coming to a dead stop; the follow-through leaves much to be desired.

It was quite noticeable how fast Mark was picking up my movement. He told me every little error I was making, even those I hoped he didn't see. I was quite impressed. Proper tuition is gold dust, and I wish I had sorted out my bad habits years ago. I have always been plagued with inconsistency in my clay shooting.

Next up was down the line. I love DTL, it has always been my favourite. I was hoping to prove Mark that this was my thing but I was wrong. On this set-up, I had underestimated the speed of the clays. I was taking my shot either too close or what felt like the other side of the M25. Particularly when two clays were in mid-air, I

Timing is everything. We immediately moved to the grouse butt. It was fast and furious but seemed more natural to me. It was by far my best stand, and a part of me wanted to think that Mark thought there might be hope for me after all.

Like most people, side-crossers are not my favourite. As the angle

“I was either taking my shot too close or what felt like the other side of the M25”

was taking the wrong clay first. With Mark's suggestions I did improve, but my issues were never going to be sorted in one day. Although I hoped DTL would give me a confidence boost, it wasn't going to be.

of clays got sharper, I did drop a couple of shots. It was mostly with my stance, which a regular clay shooter will adjust instinctively. I was acting as if my shotgun were resting on a shooting stick. For the most part ➔



Above and right: Al feels the pressure with Mark watching him closely, but his bad habits are soon ironed out thanks to Mark's advice





Al's confidence grows as the day goes on, with Mark's top-class tuition setting him up well for the Glorious Twelfth

it is muscle memory and consistency, but a world-class shooter watching your every move does put on some pressure: the right kind of pressure.

I saw a young couple preparing to have a go at another stand in the distance. It must be refreshing for Londoners to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. A short Tube ride away, you are in an environment that is welcoming to any green, tweed or shooting jacket. London being the cultural melting pot of the country, I was not surprised that the clientele had more diversity. Similar patterns are happening throughout the country – our industry has come a long way.

During a break, I asked Mark about the type of shooters they cater for. He told me the clientele is mixed given the proximity to central London, although corporate days make up a big part of the business. Shooting is still enjoyed by many from different backgrounds, and the key is being able to provide excellent service that is world class.

As we got to the end, Mark suggested I have a go at the high tower clays. This is not for the faint-hearted, and certainly not a range I would normally dream of shooting. Predictably, my first two shots were nowhere near the target. But I did get my eye in once Mark suggested the type of lead that was required, which was a lot. With an appropriate lead

“Shooting needs to be understood by the powers that be”

and follow-through I was successfully hitting both clays.

I think my better-than-expected performance on the grouse butt had given me the confidence I needed. With the Glorious Twelfth around the corner, I was pleased to have had some professional tuition. In many ways, clay shooting is like learning to play the guitar; deep-ingrained habits

are difficult to break. But it is never too late to get on the right path.

Introducing urbanites

On my way back to central London on the Tube, I couldn't help but appreciate the advantages of having facilities such as the WLSS so close to Westminster. As modern life continuously becomes urban-based, gems such as the WLSS are key to introducing urbanites to shooting.

The importance and necessity of shooting needs to be understood by the powers that be and future voters. The significant distance of the uplands from Westminster and disconnection of urbanites from the value of shooting are not to be underestimated.

Given education is at the heart and mind, sites such as the WLSS play pivotal roles in cross-fertilisation of ideas between rural and urban communities. As shooters we need to educate, and great education requires a fantastic school. 🐦

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A gentle introduction will produce a confident gundog for many seasons

Debutant gundogs

There's lots to think about when it comes to making the decision about when to introduce your dog to shooting, says David Tomlinson



MANY YEARS AGO, I belonged to a small walk-one, stand-one syndicate that shot fortnightly in the Sussex Weald. It was demanding ground, with small streams sunk in deep valleys while the woods were thick with brambles. Dogs were essential, and one of the rules of membership was possession of a suitable dog, though there were no stipulations as to how well trained it should be. On a normal Saturday we would usually have a dozen or more dogs out – mostly springers, but with the odd labrador and the occasional German shorthaired pointer.

The first day of the season was always one of the most interesting, not because of the bag (we seldom shot many birds in October, though we invariably picked lots of wild mushrooms), but due to the fact that it was generally the first day that new canine recruits appeared. These were the puppies that had been trained all summer and were now making their debut in the shooting field.

In many ways, these early October days were ideal for puppies to get their first experience of the shooting field, as there were never

too many distracting bangs to get them overexcited, while the cover was still thick enough to slow them down. However, it was also obvious that certain members of the syndicate couldn't wait to bring their puppies out for the first time, even though the latter may not have been ready in any way for what was a baptism of fire.

Just when you should take a dog shooting for the first time is probably the most difficult decision you will ever make about your dog. Sadly, the

much more quickly than others. The most important factor is really how well prepared the dog is, not how old it is. I've met dogs that were taken shooting for the first time at nine months and never had a problem, and others that even at the age of two scarcely seemed ready.

Some, of course, never make it. I had a springer once that performed well in training, showing lots of promise, but could never be used as a picking-up dog as she found the

“The most important factor is how well prepared the dog is, not how old it is”

old adage that the quickest way to ruin a gundog is to take it shooting is all too true. There can be few, if any, gundogs that became better workers because they were taken shooting for the first time when they were still puppies, whereas there are certainly many that are spoilt, if not ruined, by coming out when too young and not properly prepared.

The trouble is that there are no hard and fast rules about when a dog should make its debut. Age is important, but some dogs mature

experience of a driven day just too exciting, with too many people, too many dogs and far too many bangs. She was, however, fine out rough shooting. I might add that she hadn't been taken shooting until she was nearly two, and even then had been introduced gradually, standing well back from the action. However, her temperament just wasn't suited to a driven shooting day.

I checked with the training books in my library as to when the experts think a young dog should make

DAVID'S VIEWPOINT

CONQUERING CANCER

New research is a step in the right direction

Cancer is by far the biggest killer of otherwise healthy dogs, just as it is in humans. Many of the cancers dogs suffer from have their equivalent in humans. Older male dogs, for example, may suffer from prostate cancer, as do many men, while the mammary tumours that afflict bitches are not dissimilar to breast cancers. Thus I was fascinated but not surprised to read of recent research published in America that demonstrates that dog and human cancers share more genomic similarities than previously known.

Researchers looked at nearly 42,000 genetic mutations found in the tumour samples of 671 pet dogs and compared them to genetic mutations found in 25,000 human tumours. The results revealed a

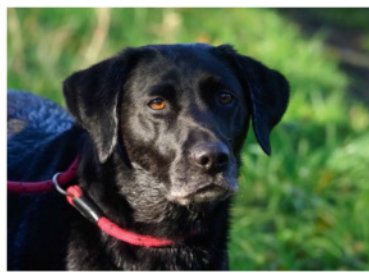
previously unknown degree of similarity in key genetic mutations. Put simply, this means that human cancer has many similarities with dog cancer. According to a co-author of the study, "Human cancer research has been moving toward a genomics-based treatment paradigm for decades, but research on canine cancer genomics hasn't kept up."

The study found 18 genetic mutations that are most likely the primary driver of cancer in canine patients, eight of which overlapped with so-called "hotspots" in

human cancers. For example, the most commonly mutated gene in human cancers is called TP53, and it is the most commonly mutated gene in dogs, too. In the study, it was found to be in 25% of all the analysed canine tumours. The TP53 gene that causes cancer cells to grow and spread are most commonly associated with leukaemia, breast cancer, bone cancer and soft tissue sarcomas.

What is encouraging about this new research is that it is possible that treatments used on humans to target this genetic mutation could be used on dogs, and the other way round.

We may still be a long way from a cure for cancer in humans or dogs, but this research is an encouraging step in the right direction, as it is likely it will help advance research and treatments for both dogs and humans by providing more people with a more robust database. Any step forward in the battle against cancer has to be welcomed, so this is good news.



A study has found that cancer in dogs shares many similarities with cancer in humans

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its debut. All agree that a gentle introduction is ideal. Some suggest rabbit or pigeon shooting as a sensible way to introduce a puppy to the real thing, but both have disadvantages. Jeremy Hunt, in his book *Training the Working Labrador*, points out that "rabbits can be more of a wind-up for a youngster than sitting on the sidelines for half a day on partridges in September".

Sitting in a pigeon hide is certain to bore a young dog, while getting a mouthful of pigeon feathers isn't going to encourage its retrieving.

Honest answers

Margaret Allen, in her book *In the Bag!*, comes to the point quickly in her concluding chapter, titled "The Real Thing". She insists that you need to ask yourself some serious questions and to answer them honestly. Does your dog come to you reliably under all conditions? Does he stop on the whistle at a fair distance in the face of temptation? Does he walk nicely to heel on and off the lead without repeated reminders? If you can't answer yes to all these questions, then your dog isn't ready.

Looking back to my syndicate days, I'm pretty sure that none of my



There are no hard and fast rules about how old a dog should be before it makes its shooting debut

fellow Guns could have answered yes to any of those questions, even for dogs that had been shooting for many seasons. It's easy to make excuses, but the dogs were all really pets that just a couple of times a month were asked to be shooting dogs. Practice makes perfect: these dogs didn't get a lot of practice, though they did have a lot of fun.

There was a marked reluctance among my fellow syndicate members

to put their gun aside and concentrate on their dog instead. In many ways this was quite understandable, as their hobby was shooting and the dog was an accessory.

However, I'm sure they all knew that if they really wanted a steady, responsive dog, the only way to achieve it was to give up shooting for a season and to concentrate on their dog instead, but it was too big a sacrifice to make. 🐾

They're not always as easy as they seem

While coneys of the furry variety don't pose a problem for *Blue Zulu*, he's left frustrated once again by bolting bunnies of the clay sort

It was a gentlemanly clay shoot between two London livery companies, all just a bit of fun. Which meant, of course, that it was seething with a competitiveness that would have embarrassed a Manchester football derby.

I'd put in decent scores on the two driven birds stands, including the specks thrown off the high tower, smashing 18x20, thought, "Well, I'm on reasonable form, should end up with a respectable card," and then turned the corner and came to stand three: the rabbit. All hope disappeared quicker than a double malt down a gillie's gullet. I hate clay rabbits, especially when they're slow and close. They've bugged up my scores in the past and will continue to do so as they appear as fast-breeding as their natural counterparts.

Course-setters love them when they're designing layouts for occasional clay shots because rabbits are 'easy'. The boys and girls may not cope with a 40-yard Mach five midi but a fat, old clay saucer trundling along the ground 20 yards out is a gimme, putting neat rows of kill crosses on a score card splashed with noughts. I've watched squads of indifferent shooters clobber the lot. But I'm lucky if I shoot 5x10.

Lamentable

On this particular shoot, it was even more lamentable – a pathetic three. After I'd missed the first two pairs the instructor was about to open his mouth when I interrupted him: "Yes, I know, I'm about a yard in front." He watched me miss the next pair and then said: "Just slow down, shoot straight at it and you'll have them." It didn't

work. "Try shutting your left eye," he then suggested. Still no joy. I finally managed to knock some bits off the final three by shooting a yard behind them, which has become my method of last resort with beastly bunnies.

My problem, stupidly, is my inability to tune down gun speed. In the field, fast reactions and gun speed work pretty well, especially

when you're walking-up snipe and grouse or taking partridges zipping over a hedge. Undoubtedly, that's because there's also minimal think-time, so you just shoot instinctively without dithering over length of lead. I can also manage slow birds, such as pigeon coming into decoys, because the time to take the shot is actually very short, given you must



stay hidden behind the hide until the *moment critique*. But with bolting rabbits, you know they're coming, you hear the trap release, you're all wired up to take the shot – and if you're me, you miss.

With real rabbits, it's a different story. Bunny doesn't lollop towards the hedgerow when you're out for a summer evening's potter for the pot, not once he's sussed you're there: he goes full-pelt, leaving a wake of swaying wheat or barley as he hits the field margin, and if your gun speed's slow he'll make the brambles and you won't have supper.

It's fine sport for a couple of hours and one we pursued hard when rabbits were plentiful and farmers seldom sowed right up to the hedgerows and really wanted rabbits controlled. Now, it seems to have gone out of fashion and I rarely hear the distant *pop-pop* of someone bowling bunny over. As a result, our local

rabbits have become emboldened to the point of tameness. Myxy hasn't hit them for a few years now, so there are plenty of them, watching me with complete indifference on my daily walks with the terriers. They'd be less cocky if I released the Sealyhams but once those two start rabbiting – and know they have *carte blanche* – that

“Rabbit control was taken seriously and locals owned Jack Russells, not cockerpoos”

would be most of the morning written off as I try to retrieve the dreadful duo from a 20-acre block of rape.

I do find this coney cockiness infuriating, though, and it would never have materialised in earlier years when every countryman's hand was agin them. Our local hardware shop isn't entirely devoted to Le Creuset casserole dishes and lavender candles – it stills sells nails and twine – but it hasn't stocked rabbit wires and purse-nets for decades. They were once standard range items, together with airgun pellets and Eley Grand Prix cartridges, in the days when rabbit control was taken seriously and locals owned Jack Russells, not cockerpoos.

I set wires regularly and there was an art in finding the rabbit runs, fashioning the snare's loop into the pear shape and sitting it at just the right height with a hazel teal. It's an ancient but very effective method and there was primitive satisfaction in collecting stone-dead bunnies in the morning.

Purse-netting was equally effective and there are few sporting experiences more enthralling than watching the ferrets snake down the burrows on a February morning and hearing the muffled rumble of a rabbit about to bolt its sanctuary and cannon into the net. A sharp pull to dislocate its neck, boot over the hole to stop another exiting, and then a quick reset of the net: that was the discipline and you earned a muttered curse if you ballsed it up.

I haven't kept ferrets, though, since an 'incident' when one escaped and slaughtered the muscovy ducks; and with a freezer still stuffed with pheasants I don't have the urge – or bravery – to fill the remaining space with jointed bunnies, which rather puts a curb on running lines of rabbit wires.

But I do like to wander out with my old but highly effective Weihrauch HW77K .22 air rifle and clobber the rabbits after the paddocks have been topped. It's easy enough to nail a leash of them on the first few outings, but once they've been missed (unpardonable really, with modern scopes) or seen their fellows do the death leap after a head shot, they realise an enemy's afoot. Then the game becomes far more interesting, a miniaturised form of deerstalking without all the hassle of the gralloch and carcase disposal.

Destined for a casserole

To ensure a clean kill, I don't take shots over 25 yards, so there's a lot of creeping round the sides of gateposts, the barn and through the adjacent spinneys while bunny has his head down feeding. At some stage, he'll sit up, the crosshairs will settle on his head and that's him destined for a casserole with bacon and apple dumplings.

As with all stalking, the real skill is getting within range rather than the shot, which should be accurate given the range and a scope. For satisfaction in gun handling, nothing beats the bolting rabbit, and my friendly farmer has suggested I follow him round when he combines the wheat this month.

I think we've both read too many old farming books written before myxy appeared in the UK in 1953, when anyone who could carry a gun or stick knocked them over by the score as the rabbits finally fled from the last uncut acres. When we've done it in the past, we've been lucky enough to go home with half a dozen.

But there's no doubt that bowling over bunny as he careers towards cover is immensely satisfying, and most of the time I send them somersaulting. I just wish I could do that with their clay counterparts... 🐰



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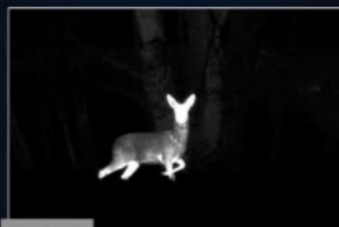
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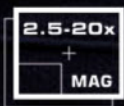
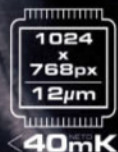
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Serious matters

An old gamebook prompts a contemplation on punt-gunning

Third Gun: Holland & Holland — bought 1889. Bore 1½in — length of barrel 8ft 3in. Load 4oz. Powder; 20oz shot. In 1890 8¼in blew off the end of the barrel. The jagged end was cut off and the gun shot better than ever. Nickel plated 1892."

This is an excerpt from the first page of a gamebook that came into my possession by a circuitous route some years ago. It is the only gamebook I have come across that is laid out specifically for use by a punt-gunner in pursuit of wildfowl, having columns for up to five shots for each recorded outing as well as headings for birds bagged including "Mallard — Teal — Widgeon", "Geese", with "Curlew" and "Green and Golden Plover" under "Various". It is a record of a very different time.

One point that is well demonstrated is that you have to be seriously committed to the undertaking if you are going to have anything like success. As Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey asserts in his chapter on punt-gunning in *The Badminton Library*:

Shooting Moor and Marsh (1909 edition): "Wildfowl shooting with punt and big gun is without doubt one of the most arduous.... most exciting, as well as the most uncertain of sports." It is not, he declares firmly, a

"As you bear down on the flocks, you must peek to ensure you are on target"

matter of poling up to a great quantity of birds and blowing large gaps in their ranks with an enormous gun. And the records of outings in my book endorse this view.

The puntsmen were diligent enough in their application, going out almost nightly through September and October but with "No Shot" entered frequently. And when they did get to let off the big gun they, as often as not, collected a mere handful of fowl.

Payne-Gallwey's description of punting is instructive. The object is to get yourself into position at low tide on a backwater somewhere down the estuary where you can watch the packs of birds as they feed on the mudflats. The plan is then to wait

until the incoming tide squeezes them close enough together to offer a productive shot, at which point you edge out of your hiding place and paddle ever so carefully towards where the birds are concentrated thickest.

This is done with short hand-paddles while lying face-down in the bottom of the punt.

As you bear down on the flocks, you must peek from time to time above the thwart to ensure you are on target and the birds are still relaxed and all unawares. Paddle, paddle, paddle. Peek. Paddle, paddle, paddle. Peek. All of this being probably against the start of the tide and usually against the wind.

The aim is to get to somewhere between 60 and 50 yards of the target species. If you are punting with a mate in the double-punt then one will paddle while the other peeks. Once in a firing position, it is a question of the paddler holding the punt steady while the shooter adjusts the big gun and, in due season, discharges the monster.

Considerable experience

I have never done it. Indeed, I have never seen it done but I imagine that it is an impressive sight. And sound. And a considerable experience. Especially if the thing is not strapped down tighter than a gnat's whatsit in the proverbial sandstorm. Trunnions, ropes, cleats, springs and crutches are all specified as a means of preventing the whole outfit, with its crew, whizzing backwards into a sandbank with their teeth rearranged and their hats on fire. Then it is merely a matter of collecting the slain and mooching home with the gathering tide. And agreeing to do the whole thing again at dawn the next day.

Aye, it's proper sport, right enough. Worth a punt. 🦆



A punt-gunner would lie face-down in the punt, carefully paddling into position before firing the gun

🦆 Giles Catchpole is a freelance journalist as well as a keen Shot and angler, and he has written several humorous sporting books

Know the signs and when to take action

If your birds are to thrive, it's important to be able to identify sick poults early on and then know how to treat them, says Liam Bell



Keep a close eye on your pheasants as you walk the pens, and take action quickly if you suspect there are any signs of illness

One of the most difficult things to call when you have birds in a pen is whether they are huddled up because they are cold, because they have had a wet night and are waiting for the sun to warm them up and dry them off, or because there is actually something wrong with them. And while the temptation might be to leave them untreated, assuming that they will pick up when the weather improves, the difference between losing only one or two birds and having the whole pen go down with something always hinges on an early diagnosis and the correct treatment.

A swift diagnosis is so important. Our local vets will have a look at any birds we drop off and get back to us with an update and treatment

recommendations the same day. Providing, of course, that we drop them off early enough in the morning. Some bacterial cultures can take a little longer to show up on slides, but in most cases we will know what is wrong with them and can have the water treated and the birds on the mend within 24 hours.

Dedicated practice

A dedicated poultry or gamebird vet will have a better understanding of the way release pens work – and the challenges of treating free-ranging birds that have access to alternative food and water sources – than someone who is more used to dealing with farm animals or pets. That is not to say your local vet won't be up to it, but they do tend to have their own

areas of expertise and a practice with a dedicated poultry or gamebird vet is more likely to carry a stock of the medicines needed to treat pheasants and partridges than one that deals with them only occasionally.

The vet will want to know the birds' history. They will want to know their age, how many birds there are in the affected pen, how many birds there are in the batch if more than one pen was filled by the same delivery, where you got them from and their treatment history, if any. They will also ask you if you have any in-date medicines in stock, and whether you are adding tonic or multivitamins to the water.

Whether illnesses are the responsibility of the game farm or the shoot very much depends on the

severity and scale of the problem. How long after delivery did the issues start to arise? Personally, I think that if the birds start dying within a week of delivery, then there was something wrong with them when they turned up. If it is more than a week, it is less likely to be the game farm's fault and more likely that they have picked something up, or that conditions within the pen have brought something on post-delivery.

A hunched-up, stilt-walking poult is a classic sign of a bird with something wrong with it. Although, by the time they get to this stage, a lot of them will be beyond saving. The early signs of a lot of the more common illnesses and diseases are very similar. Things to look out for include loose and brightly coloured faeces, birds that are just that bit slower to move away when they are disturbed, and birds that are hunched up when viewed from a distance but which jump up and move off as normal only to stop and hunch themselves up again when they get close to cover.

Watch and learn

Sitting and watching will often give you a better feel for how the birds are doing than walking the pen and moving the birds about. Not that walking them and seeing how they

move is a bad thing, and you do of course have to walk the pen to check for bodies and kills, to check the feeders and to look for things like the discoloured faeces.

Spilled feed and a reduction in food consumption are another two early warning signs, although in some cases the spilled food could be down to something as simple as a

“A hunched-up, stilt-walking poult is a classic sign of a bird with something wrong”

dodgy feeder spring. Birds that have intestinal problems will be hungry and want to eat, but will pick away at the food and scatter it about instead of actually swallowing it because eating it and digesting it will hurt their stomachs.

They will still drink if they are ill, which is one of the reasons why medicines are more usually added to the water. The other reason is that it is quicker to collect something from the vets and add it to the water than it is to email a prescription to a feed mill and wait for them to make and then deliver the medicated feed.

The only exception to the observation and treatment when you see the signs is the worming, which should be done as a matter of course – at least once while the poults are in

the pens. We do ours when they have been in for a week or 10 days, but no earlier.

If they are done straight away, they may not have picked any worm eggs up and the dosing will, in effect, be a waste of time. If they are left until they are showing signs of being wormy, it has probably been left a little late. And a wormy bird is more

likely to go down with something else than a bird that has been wormed, as the wormed bird will be both fitter and stronger.

There are two products on the market that are licenced for the worming of gamebirds and both appear to work equally well, although I would recommend using an in-feed wormer if the pen has an alternative water source such as a ditch or stream running through it. If birds look wormy or are starting to ‘snick’ and gape before they start getting out properly we will worm them again, but the once is usually enough.

Here's hoping the weather is on your side when they go to wood, and that it stays relatively dry and sunny for the first week or so. It can make all the difference. 🐦



Birds with intestinal problems will pick away at their food and scatter it rather than eat it



A dedicated poultry or gamebird practice is more likely to have any necessary medication to hand

Seekins Precision Havak Pro Hunter 2 in .308 Win £2,770

Bruce Potts finds the new Seekins Precision Havak Pro Hunter 2 to be practical and accurate, with top build quality for the price point

The stock is available in three colourways: mountain shadow, desert shadow and urban shadow



OUR VERDICT

Edgar Brothers is now the proud importer of the new hunting rifles from Seekins Precision in Idaho, USA – and we have the Havak PH2 on test in .308 Win. These are very striking sporting rifles, primarily due to the spiral-cut fluted barrels, three colour stock finishes (mountain shadow, desert shadow and urban shadow) and spiral fluted bolt.

You also have a lightweight carbon composite stock, which is hand-bedded for consistent accuracy potential and all backed by a lifetime warranty. It all sounds very good, and on closer inspection

Build quality is very good, and despite the semi-tactical stock and odd chequering, the Seekins Precision Havak PH2 shoots well



Right: perfect bedding makes for a consistently accurate rifle, while the trigger is sublime (above)

the build quality for the £2,770 price seems reasonable.

Like a lot of American rifles, they tend to have that semi-tactical stock design conducive to shooting from

“The use of cheap aftermarket Magpul detachable magazines is very sensible”

any position. The calibre options range from the short-actioned models in 6mm Creedmoor to .308 Win and long-actioned rifles from 6.5 Creedmoor to .338 Win mag. Seekins

has also fitted the superb TriggerTech trigger for precision fire control, and the use of a cheap aftermarket Magpul detachable magazines is very sensible for availability and price point.

Small touches like a tough black bead-blasted finish makes it impervious to moisture, the bolt head



is exchangeable and in the field it feels like a very well-thought-out rifle.



The barrel is finished off with a 5/8x24 UNEF thread for a sound moderator

The fore-end features the same chequering as the stock

Bruce puts the Havak through its paces as he stalks a roebuck on the edge of some forestry

The spiral fluted barrel is not only great looking (inset, above), but it's practical too for weight-saving and cooling during use in the field



Bruce Potts discovers the rifle has good accuracy with a wide range of factory .308 Win loads

NEED TO KNOW

- ▶ **Manufacturer** Seekins Precision
- ▶ **Model** Havak PH2
- ▶ **Calibre** .308 Win on test
- ▶ **Overall length** 40.5in
- ▶ **Weight** 6.9lb short action, (7.2lb long action)
- ▶ **Barrel** 24in, 416 stainless steel spiral fluted, threaded muzzle: 5/8x24
- ▶ **Finish** Matt black bead-blasted barrelled action
- ▶ **Stock** Carbon composite
- ▶ **Magazine** Five-shot Magpul (carbon fibre option)
- ▶ **Trigger** TriggerTech, adjustable 2.5lb to 5lb
- ▶ **Safety** Side lever
- ▶ **Price** £2,770
- ▶ **Supplier** Edgar Brothers Ltd, 01625 613177 ➔



RIFLE TEST

IN DEPTH

Let's tackle the stock first. The semi-tac design is popular, and although I prefer a true classic slimline Sporter design, it's a very lightweight stock weighing in at 880g. This is because of the carbon fibre composite nature, which installs rigidity for a solid bedding platform and total weather protection, so there's no wrapping to destroy accuracy. You have a generous hand-applied bedding compound and aluminium pillars so the action is secured rock solid and the ambidextrous nature is welcome. But the pistol grip is very wide, with double palm swells, and short, so my hands don't fit very well. The moulded-in X-type chequering works but isn't to my taste.

Weight saving

Better is the metalwork that wears a very tough bead-blasted finish; in black it is both non-reflective and very smart. What really stands out, though, is that impressive barrel of 24in made from premium 416 stainless steel and slender Sporter taper with those eye-catching deep-cut six spiral flutes. This not only saves weight but cools the barrel quickly and adds rigidity too. It's finished off with a 5/8x24 UNEF thread for a sound moderator.

The action is equally well-appointed with a beautifully engineered and no tool mark construction, fitted with a full-length Picatinny rail for scope fitment. The integral recoil lug really helps with a consistent bed to the stock and the bolt's spiral flutes mimic that of the barrel. I like the four lug removable locking head as it allows a precise and strong lock-up as well as aiding easy cleaning. You also have a very good

I headed to Scotland for the roe rut and first sighted in and tested the Havak with a selection of factory loads. Straight up you notice how very smooth and precise the whole bolt cycling system is, a sign of quality. Accuracy was very consistent and recoil was surprising light for a .308 Win. The Geco Express 165-gr round shot 2,675fps and 2,622ft/lb with excellent 0.75in accuracy, while the new Hornady Outfitter 165-gr CX lead-free shot less accurately at 1.25in but achieved 2,619fps and 2,514ft/lb.

Norma's TipStrike are a heavier 170-gr load, good for reds, and shot 2,623fps and 2,598ft/lb with consistent inch groups.

Going light, I love the Sako Gamehead 123-gr bullet, which achieved great accuracy at 0.75in for a fast, flat-shooting 2,968fps and 2,407ft/lb. A lead-free option for a lighter roe bullet was the new Hornady International 125-gr ECX at a stonking 3,100fps and 2,668ft/lb and an inch group. Finally, my all-round favourite, the Hornady SST 150-gr, shot 1in or less at

well over 3,000fps — that's extremely fast for a 150-gr.

Long morning stalk

I chose the Sako 123-gr Gameheads and woke early for a long morning stalk. I headed to the loch side as the roe had been feeding and chasing during the rut on the level shoreline. Sure enough I spotted two roe, does on closer examination, but bucks would be close by.

After an hour's wait nothing was moving, so I decided on a slow stalk through the forestry. This was where the lightweight nature of the Havak was appreciated and damp morning foliage brushing the rifle as I stalked just dripped off. On the forestry edge, overlooking a solitary field, were two red hinds feeding quietly, and sure enough a lone roebuck at a laser 131 yards slowly moving to the shore line.

Up on sticks and that superb trigger sent the Sako Gamehead for a perfect heart shot.

M16-style large extractor claw for positive ejection, while the long, straight bolt handle gives a perfect hold.

The TriggerTech Field trigger model comes adjustable from 2.5 to 5lb (2lb 11oz on test) and is an industry standard with side safety. I use these on my custom rifles, so enough said. Seekins has also opted for the Magpul magazine system that allows a range of reliable mags such AICS-style to fit, thus benefiting from affordable aftermarket five and 10-shot versions. 🐾



A nice roebuck is harvested with a Sako 123-gr Gamehead steered accurately by the Havak

CONCLUSION

I wasn't keen on the looks when it first arrived, I will be honest, but this Seekins earned its good review with fine accuracy and very practical use where it's meant to be; out in the field. Yes, the stock is not pretty but other models are available and certainly the Havak is worthy of consideration primarily due to the great action and accuracy.

18
/20

Accuracy

Good all-round accuracy with the factory ammunition.

17
/20

Handling

Handles well and has a very good overall feel to the rifle.

18
/20

Trigger

TriggerTech triggers make the most of the accuracy potential.

17
/20

Stock

Solid synthetic stock but not keen on the chequering.

17
/20

Value

Loved the barrelled action, not keen on the stock.

88
/100

Overall Score

A practical, accurate rifle when out in the field.



Will Pocklington speaks to some of our leading shooting instructors

Instructor of the month

The 'real' shooting experience is available year round, with not a feather in sight, believes Huw Tudor Stephens

Sim days have grown in popularity over the past decade and are now hosted all over the country. Barbury Shooting School in Wiltshire was early to the party, having been offering them since 2010, and today puts on more than 100 days a year across five local estates. Huw Tudor Stephens, founder and managing director of the school, has watched simulated game shooting develop from the beginning. I was keen to chat to him about how best to approach these days if our aim is to use them as practice for when feathers are part of proceedings; what should — and shouldn't — we be doing?

Make a plan

If you're striving for self-improvement, it's all about slowing down and making a plan, according to Huw, who still manages to fit two or three days of coaching into his working week. "A common mistake is to see a clay and think that you have to shoot it," he says. "There's no need to rush. If you see a target too late, just leave it. If you scramble to catch up with it, any technique will go out the window and you won't move your feet or mount the gun properly. It's easy to reinforce bad habits."

"A common mistake is to see a clay and think that you have to shoot it"

Huw emphasises the importance of practising the 'whole' shot; picking out a clay early on in its flightpath, setting yourself correctly — your feet, your address point — and deciding where you are going to break the clay before mounting smoothly and finishing the shot.



Huw Tudor Stephens manages to fit in two or three days of coaching into his working week

He's quick to point out that taking advantage of the variety on offer on a sim day is also key. "We make a real effort to present a mix of targets, at all kinds of angles and speeds," he says. "If you've

smashed 10 of the same clay in a row, why not test yourself and try something a little different? This is where having a host who understands what shooters are looking for and their level of ability pays dividends. These days are far more enjoyable if you're challenging yourself."

Standing in a line of Guns as flurries of clays pass overhead is also an opportunity to practise composure and timing. "The best game shots are smooth and fast. Again, it comes back to preparation, picking a bird early and making the necessary adjustments before the gun is in your shoulder," explains Huw. "And don't overlook the value of practising the things we often take for granted — like reloading smoothly and following a process, rather than fumbling from one pocket to another and losing all rhythm and focus."

Bridging the gap

At a more basic level, Huw reckons sim days can help bridge the gap between the clay ground and a peg on a pheasant or partridge shoot. "This is where the services of a coach — something we offer at Barbury — come into their own," he says. "For those who haven't been game shooting, there is often a lot to think about. Having someone by your side and treating a sim day like a proper day's driven shooting is a great way to learn about everything from safety to bird selection and when to reload."

"Crucially, our coaches are more than happy to discuss the things you need to be thinking about on a driven day that you don't need to think about when there's no live quarry — the likes of marking shot birds properly — and they'll highlight key differences such as how much further apart you will typically be pegged, and how important it often is to make your way to the pegs quietly before a drive starts."

"Ultimately," says Huw, "it comes down to how seriously you want to take it. In terms of practice, you really do get out of simulated days what you put into them." 🐦

➔ If you know an instructor you would like to nominate for Instructor of the month please send details to shootingtimes@futurenet.com

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Remembering the experience that ignited a lifelong passion for stalking

My first deer



Bruce Potts was hooked for life after taking a roebuck as a teenager

I first started deerstalking as a gradual progression from pest control and rabbiting on my uncle's farm in Kent when I was a lad. I used to help out whenever I could, harvesting, potato picking and ferreting with my uncle Lez. It instilled a true love for the outdoors, wildlife, fieldcraft and hard work. My first deer was a roe doe taken on the farm for venison with my uncle, but my true love for deerstalking — and roe in particular — came from my first roebuck.

I had bought a Tikka LSA 55 rifle in .308 Win when I was 17 (which I still use today) and learned how to use it on the farm in all weathers, positions, ranges and stalking situations. Although I often stalked alone, outings with my uncle were very special;

his deer kidney, liver and bacon breakfasts in the field were superb. I was just 19 at the time, helping out farmers and forestry friends with their culls, before I was invited by a good friend, Roger, to stalk roebucks just outside Winchester. I can remember

“The Norma 150-gr bullet steered by the Tikka dropped the buck where he stood”

vividly the excitement the night before and the early start to travel the 150 miles to meet on a motorway bridge at 3.00am before first light.

The terrain was very different to Kent and Surrey where I usually shot with long wide open fields and rolling hills. Stalking at

Roger's heel was thrilling. All the woodland noises were heightened, the foliage as you passed smelled delicious and the whole experience had me well and truly hooked. Roger instilled the need to look and really see; to move as quietly as a church

mouse while checking ahead, side to side, underneath and behind every tree or shrub for signs of roe.

On the approach to a large field after tracking some fresh slots, we saw three roe out on the field feeding: two does and a young buck. Game on. The wind was dodgy so we had to edge back around the field margin and use the intervening trees and shrubs that bisected the field for cover until, at 60 yards, Roger said to wait for a safe shot and take the buck.

Motionless position

As I raised the rifle to my knees, a fox walked from cover and sat directly in my line of sight. He started nibbling and looked around for what seemed like an age. My heart was racing. But with a good wind and our motionless position he trotted off, and the Norma 150-gr bullet steered by the Tikka with precision dropped the buck where he stood. I have never seen a fox run so fast as that day with his large, plump tail whirling around like a helicopter behind him as he headed for cover.

My parents subsequently moved to Scotland, so there were plenty more roe and red deer on the cards. I started to photograph and video deer as well as stalk them. So that very first roebuck — along with tuition by real and true countrymen who knew their quarry as well as the land they lived in — has kept me getting up at the crack of dawn ever since. I've been stalking roe now for over 40 years. 🦌

Left: the experience of stalking his first roebuck at 19 has stayed with Bruce ever since



United we stand

Following United Utilities' decision to end grouse shooting on its land, Lindsay Waddell asks what will happen if we ignore our vital moors

The largest landholding company in Britain, United Utilities, with 56,000 hectares, folded under pressure and announced last week that grouse moor management will cease on its nine leased moors when those leases end. The company had already banned burning on them, so the management was either cutting heather and legal predator control anyway.

The change of tack came after Wild Moors, a green lobby agenda organisation, had, by becoming a shareholder, put itself in a position of influence. They then placed a resolution to the AGM in July 2021, which has been implemented. The leased moors will cease to be shot or managed once the leases expire, which will be on a staggered basis. A note of concern to all grouse moors will be the enthusiasm with which Kerry McCarthy, the shadow climate change minister, greeted the announcement, saying it was "great news" and ending with "not to

mention the birds", inferring that it was a good day for them.

Gamekeeper Dan Fearis, who works on the Stiperden grouse syndicate near Todmorden, commented, "We were shocked to learn that the company is not going to renew our lease. Since we've managed United Utilities' land we've counted increased numbers of raptors, hares, plovers, curlew and lapwings. All that's now at risk. We've been told that the company

views it as politically inexpedient to be seen to support shooting."

Sadly for the birds, the majority of them anyway, this announcement has signed their death warrant and, long term, Wild Moors may have to change its name to Wild Woods. This is not a good day for anything if you bother to look at the science, and it is certainly not a good

day for all those employed by the shooting tenants. But that, as has been shown from north of the border where the Scottish government is emptying the glens of rural workers, seems to matter little to those who govern us.

"United Utilities is under pressure because of Environment Agency reports that show they have dumped untreated sewage more frequently than any other company, 70,000 times last year alone," adds Dan. "This seems like a diversionary tactic and is a massive blow to our shoot and many others in this area. Unless the decision is changed, this will be our last season and that will have a big knock-on effect in the local community."

Man-made environment

The British Isles is home, or used to be home, to 75% of all the heather moorland in the world. I doubt if we can now claim that as millions of acres of it have been covered in pine forests. It is a predominantly man-made environment that has been created over thousands of years when man first began to clear the trees in order to graze animals and, at lower altitudes, cultivate crops on the cleared land. Like hay meadows and chalk grasslands, it is a product of our agricultural system.

The latter two we value greatly, and woe betide anyone who even suggested damaging them. So why change the management of our heather moorland? As far as I can see, there is only one thing that occurs



Curlew often choose to nest in cleared areas of burnt vegetation

SHUTTERSTOCK: RICHARD FAULKES; MARK BEEDIE: ALAMY



Britain has been said to be home to 75% of the world's heather moorland — but without grouse shooting, would that still be the case?



Grouse shooting brings vital revenue to the moors, allowing keepers to manage this rare habitat

there that is driving this, and it is grouse shooting. Setting that to one side, the management that is done for the grouse has, when done within the law, huge benefits for numerous other species.

The Special Protection Areas for breeding waders in England are all on the grouse moors, and the reasons are quite simple. Predator control and the clearance of old heather creates clearings in which the waders prefer to nest. This was shown many years ago in two PhD studies in Co Durham by Mark Whittingham and Glen Robson, who studied golden plover and curlew respectively. Glen in particular showed that some 20 pairs of curlew all chose burnt patches of heather less than three years old on which to nest.

We all know, as should Wild Moors and Kerry McCarthy, that the curlew

especially is a red-listed bird in serious trouble, which this edict will only do more harm to.

Langholm Moor in Scotland is perhaps the most studied areas of moorland given the fact it was used by a consortium of organisations engaged in research into the hen harrier, that ground-nesting raptor and icon to the bird world. If the shadow minister and Wild Moors think that they are going to see United Utilities' moorland holding swarming with harriers and waders, then they are in for a shock.

Look to Langholm and other moors that have been 'abandoned'. Many are becoming woodlands – and not native woodlands, but sitka spruce forests with a scattering of native trees for good measure. In the

“The curlew is a red-listed bird in trouble, which this edict will only do more harm to”

absence of predator control, that top predator the fox then holds sway and no ground-nesting birds are safe. You can forget a 'natural balance' – this is not Norway or Sweden.

Langholm was bought by a local buyout with massive help from the Scottish government. It had a very good number of breeding harriers and a smattering of wading birds on it and had been subject to some very good heather restoration work by the gamekeeping team. Most of that restored ground, which had a lovely variety of moorland vegetation growing on it, including cranberries and other dwarf shrubs, has now been swallowed up under tree cover



The Trough of Bowland is one of the many areas affected by United Utilities' decision

in the few years since the change of management.

There are, as far as I can ascertain, no wading birds left successfully breeding on the site, and the harrier numbers are so low the site should be denotified by NatureScot as not meeting its criteria for numbers. But that will not happen of course, as it would be a loss of face for the Scottish government as it is funding the local buyouts as part of its policy to break up private ownership of land.

Change of fortune

Langholm is not the only moor to have undergone this change of fortune, and the common features from all the sites are the loss of diversity of birdlife as well as plant diversity. As the heather becomes very long, it acts almost like a miniature forest, blocking out the light to the understorey. Even sphagnum, the holy grail of moorland re-wetters, is

scarcer under long, mature heather than when the canopy is opened up.

Managing that canopy is vital for so many things, not least in our warming, drying climate to mitigate wildfire risk. Thousands of years of peat can be burnt when a summer fire strikes. All that stored carbon is lost, and it will take another 1,000 years to replace it – and all because some in a position to do it want to stop grouse shooting.

This has nothing to do with carbon sequestration; if it was they would continue to manage the moors to keep our open spaces, like hay meadows, one of the rarest habitats in the world. 🐾



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NEW SERIES: In this new *Shooting Times* series, historian Donald Dallas tells us about the remarkable guns he's encountered of late

In 1900, King Umberto of Italy was gifted a Royal rook rifle but he only owned it for two months before he was killed, writes Donald Dallas

By the spring of 1900, King Umberto of Italy was eagerly looking forward to his new acquisition, a best double-barrel .295 Royal hammerless ejector rook rifle by Holland & Holland. As the king of Italy, he had previously ordered several Holland & Holland guns and rifles and in 1883 had granted the firm his Royal Warrant.

One can only imagine the delight upon King Umberto prising open the crate, in late May 1900, and gazing at his little double Royal rifle in sparkling factory-new condition. It remains in its original condition today and unfortunately there is a very good reason for this.

This actual Royal rook rifle came for sale at Holts Auctioneers recently with the high estimate of £12,000 to £16,000, such was its rarity, exclusivity and fascinating provenance.

Speciality

Holland & Holland began selling rook and rabbit rifles in the late 1860s and tended to make a speciality of them. By the 1870s, well over half of Holland & Holland's production was rook rifles and they sold them in prodigious quantities. These rook rifles varied considerably — central hammer, side hammer, boxlock and so on — and were available in all qualities from the Belgian-made to the very best. Their calibres were .297/.250, .295/.300 and .360.

However, King Umberto of Italy's rook rifle no. 17667 of 1900 is a very different kettle of fish indeed. This was no ordinary Holland rook rifle built in Birmingham and



This Holland & Holland rook rifle is a top-quality Royal sidelock hammerless ejector double rifle

tiny yet such best quality and weighs in at just 6lb 4oz, a far cry from its bigger .450 and .577 cousins.

When King Umberto finally held the rifle in his hands, he must have been quite delighted by it with its diminutive scale and high quality. How he must have looked forward to firing it with the tiny .295 rook cartridges. But his elation was short-lived, as he only owned the rifle for a mere two months.

“It is, in effect, a miniature version of the Royal double big game rifle”

retailing at around £5 to £10; this was a Royal sidelock hammerless ejector double rifle of the very best quality. It is, in effect, a miniature version of the Royal double big game rifle that Holland & Holland became so famous for.

This little .295 Royal double rook rifle just oozes charm and desirability. It is so

King Umberto was born in 1844 and succeeded to become King of Italy in 1878. He was a militarist and a proponent of colonial expansion into the Horn of Africa and spent large sums of money on the military rather than at home. His conservatism, militarism, contempt for parliament and his repression of civil

liberties bred much opposition to him and resulted in various attempts upon his life. In 1898, during large-scale demonstrations in Milan over the price of bread, military rule was imposed and over 80 people killed. King Umberto lauded the general in charge for his restoration of order and even awarded him a medal.

In Monza on 29 July 1900, anarchist Gaetano Bresci, incensed by the massacre in Milan in 1898, ran up to King Umberto and shot him four times with a .32 revolver. King Umberto had received his Royal rook rifle in late May 1900, yet just over two months later he was dead. I wonder if he ever had the time at all to actually try out his little Royal rook rifle? 🐔

🔗 Donald Dallas is the in-house historian for Holts Auctioneers and is author of numerous books, including *Boss & Co, Builders of Best Guns Only* and *Holland & Holland, The Royal Gunmaker*.





Game Cookery

Tim Maddams calls for a return of the underrated and misunderstood 'soup of the day' as the best way to make the most of those leftover cuts



This tasty carrot and hare soup is a great way to use up any hare shoulders in the freezer

Ingredients

⚠ **PREP TIME:** 15 MINUTES

⚠ **COOKING TIME:** 2 HOURS

Note: the use of a pressure cooker will save you 1.5 hours of your time and lots more energy

🍴 OLIVE OIL

🍴 2 HARE SHOULDERS

🍴 2 MEDIUM ONIONS, PEELED AND CHOPPED

🍴 1 BAY LEAF

🍴 A FEW HERBS; FRESH THYME AND OREGANO IF YOU HAVE IT, OR A PINCH OF DRIED MIXED HERBS WILL DO

🍴 SALT AND PEPPER

🍴 3 GARLIC CLOVES, PEELED

🍴 1 TABLESPOON SHERRY VINEGAR

🍴 4 LARGE CARROTS, PEELED AND CHUNKY CHOPPED

🍴 SOME GOOD BREAD AND BUTTER TO SERVE.



Soup. So underrated and misunderstood, and often maligned by chefs. In recent years, meaty soups seem to have almost vanished from restaurant menus up and down these isles as 'soup of the day' has become a bit old-fashioned.

but do eat fish — and I have to say I feel a little bit sorry for poor old meat-filled soups. They are such wondrous and useful culinary creations, useful for using up odd cuts and stocks and wondrous for the marriage of savoury, salty meaty goodness and sweet and textural veg.

“Chefs are making vegetable soups that are a tick in the box for the meat-dodging fraternity”

Instead, time-starved chefs are opting for ease and making vegetable soups that are a tick in the box for the meat-dodging fraternity.

Fish soup often makes an appearance — no doubt a nod to those who don't eat meat

I'm fighting back — and I also happened to have a couple of hare shoulders I wasn't sure what to do with and a few carrots that needed using up. I have to say, the result was everything I could have hoped for and more. 🐰

CARROT AND HARE SOUP

THE METHOD *Serves 4*

1 Find a suitable saucepan or pot that will hold around 1.5 litres. Place the pan over a high heat, add a little olive oil and begin browning the hare shoulders. Add the onions, bay leaf and half the herbs. Cook over a high heat until some colour and savour begins to emerge.

2 Season with a little salt and pepper, then add the three whole garlic cloves and the vinegar. Cook for 1 more minute, then add 1.25 litres of water, bring to a boil, pop the lid on the pan and simmer for an hour.

3 After an hour add the carrots. Replace the lid and simmer for a further 30 minutes until the carrots are super-tender. Remove the hare shoulders and allow them to cool a little on a plate; the meat should

be falling from the bones, or easily encouraged from them.

4 Place the remaining contents of the pan — except $\frac{1}{3}$ of the liquid — in a jug blender and blend to a very smooth soup, adding more liquid as needed. Season and return to the hob to keep warm. Do not boil it.



5 Remove the meat from the bones, heat a small frying pan and add a little olive oil, and briefly sauté the hare. Add the remaining herbs, well chopped. Season the hare meat well once done.

6 Serve the soup with scatterings of the sautéed hare meat on the top, a little more olive oil drizzled over and a side order of the best bread and butter you can lay your hands on.

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More bang for your buck



An otter in the valley

Jack Ivester Lloyd joins the Kendal and District Otterhounds in the Lyth valley as the pure-bred pack showcase their much-lauded music

I had pulled a tendon in my left leg. On referring to hunting diaries of the past few years, I find this to be an annual event occurring at the same time each year. It must be because of the hiatus between the beagling and the otterhunting seasons and the consequent lull in violent exercise. The injury actually happened when I was walking the Bagley Rat Hounds in a lane and thought to impress my young whipper-in by breaking into a sharp trot. Her enquiry as to what I was making so much fuss about confirmed my theories about the heartlessness of the young.

After a week, the crown of a martyr was becoming irksome to my head and I decided to get on the M6 and drive into the Lake District for at least a look at the Kendal and District Otterhounds.

John Wright was not at his Aynsome Manor Hotel, near Cartmel, being somewhere down south instead, organising an important music festival. Anyhow, his charming wife Lucille took very good care of us and, next morning, a packed lunch was ready. While this branch of an otterhunter's activities may raise smug smiles on the face of other sportsmen, it can make a vast difference to a day's enjoyment. I have heard the old saying: "Foxhunting for riding, beagling for exercise but otterhunting for love and lunch," but we will let that pass.

Somewhere on the road between Cartmel and Levens Bridge is a turning, by taking which one rounds a craggy spur and enters the Lyth valley. I gather that, if you carried on, you would come eventually to Windermere, but we stopped when we came to the Lyth Valley Hotel, which is where the Kendal and District were meeting.

Scarlet and gold

The next arrivals were Newton Bacon and Katie, his wife. He is, of course, joint-master of the Holcombe Harriers whose masters and hunt staff wear scarlet and gold, a privilege granted by King James I when he went hunting with their predecessors. Newton's

considerable height is made even greater by a shock of snow-white hair.

"Here comes the dog box," someone remarked, using an otterhunters' euphemism, as, with the huntsman Tommy Harrison at the wheel and a couple of whippers-in seated beside him, the hound-van rolled on to the car park.

The Kendal and District and the Dumfriesshire are the only packs that are now composed entirely of pure-bred otterhounds. Like shaggy-coated bloodhounds in appearance and with voices as resonant, this breed gives an impression of great antiquity. In fact, it was not evolved until after 1870 when a pack of roughcoated hounds was presented by a French count to



"Like shaggy-coated bloodhounds in appearance and with voices as resonant, this breed gives an impression of great antiquity"



"Watched by a flock of inquisitive herdswicks, hounds and a hard-bitten terrier were taken up the slope"



"Being a weekday, there was a small but keen field out on this occasion with the Kendal and District"

an English gentleman. One of these Nivernais griffons was crossed with a bloodhound and the union produced the famous Boatman, whose blood is said to flow in the veins of every present-day otterhound.

Being a weekday, there was a small but keen field out on this occasion. Robin Percival, who accepted my cap, reminded me of his family's connections with the old Widford Beagles that hunted in Hertfordshire and whose master was Captain Jack Pawle, a great friend of my own father's and, for so many years, secretary of the Association of Masters of Harriers and Beagles.

Carried away by the sporting atmosphere, I had forgotten my strained tendon until, finding myself falling farther behind hounds, I made an effort to catch up with them. A horrid twinge reminded me of my infirmity and I gratefully accepted the offer of a lift in a car to a little bridge.

The valley was filled with lush summer green against which Tommy's scarlet coat was brighter than a robin's breast as he walked the riverbank towards us and encouraged hounds. After the bridge, we went on by way of narrow lanes to an old millhouse and then to yet another bridge.

We leaned on the coping and listened to the bubbling of curlew and the reedy piping of a whitethroat. A dipper flitted below the lowest branches of the alder saplings. Then down the valley echoed a sound that set our pulses racing.

Deep and soul-stirring is the voice of a single otterhound, but when the music comes from the throats of a pack it is moving indeed. "They're speaking!" said someone. "Must have found," commented another. "At least there is drag," remarked a third. "May be mink," said the first speaker: "Better than being blank!"

Tommy's voice could be heard adding to the merry chorus and the watchers left the bridge and started walking determinedly towards a gate that gave access to the meadows. We could see the huntsman's splash of scarlet at a distance of about a field and a half away. I cursed my leg trouble and had decided to ignore it when I saw that hounds and huntsman were coming on again.

There was less music now. In fact, only the occasional note of a single hound rang through the valley. But the huntsman's intention was obvious: he was "making good" the water upstream.

Out of the water

Within 100 yards of the bridge where I was still standing, hounds were called out of the water and Newton Bacon told me about the big drain that runs under the field from halfway up the hillside to the river itself. Watched by a flock of inquisitive herdswicks, hounds and a hard-bitten terrier were taken up the slope.

The whole day made a scene that would have delighted a sporting artist. Under the welcome June sun, shining from a blue sky across which drifted a few high and fleecy clouds, a pack of hounds and a handful of

"A sound echoed that set our pulses racing"

sporting folk set me wondering "why men depart to seek the Happy Isles", as Kipling put it when writing of somewhere else altogether.

The drain producing no response either in hounds or terrier, the pack was taken back to the spot where they had marked so strongly. This was also at a drain and it undoubtedly held an otter. After they had treated us to a little more music, hounds were called off and we all went back to the Lyth Valley Hotel.

In the opinion of the experts, the otter in the drain was a female. So we drank the otterhunting toast I learned as a young man: "Good sport on the old dogs and a long life to the little bitches!"

➤ *This article was first published in the 29 July 1972 issue of Shooting Times.*

The experts

THE ULTIMATE SHOOTING QUIZ TEAM



◆◆ BILL HARRIMAN

BASC's head of firearms and global authority on guns



◆◆ MAT MANNING

Airgunner and journalist from the West Country



◆◆ DIGGORY HADOKE

Vintage gun expert, firearms dealer, author and journalist



◆◆ BRUCE POTTS

Shooting Times rifle reviewer and stalker



◆◆ MIKE SWAN

Conservation expert and head of education for the GWCT



◆◆ DAVID TOMLINSON

Highly regarded writer and ornithologist



◆◆ LIAM BELL

Shropshire gamekeeper, keen wildfowler and amateur naturalist



◆◆ GRAHAM DOWNING

Shooting consultant and sporting author



◆◆ TONY BUCKWELL

Veterinary surgeon with a special interest in Gundogs



◆◆ TOM PAYNE

Professional shooting instructor and avid pigeon shooter



◆◆ ELLENA SWIFT

Award-winning gundog trainer and canine behaviour specialist



◆◆ TIM MADDAMS

Former head chef at River Cottage and runs a shoot in Devon



◆◆ SIMON WHITEHEAD

Author, professional ferreter and rabbit controller



◆◆ IAIN WATSON

Keen stalker and senior CIC international trophy judge



◆◆ CHRIS DALTON

Professional stalker and regular presenter on *The Shooting Show*



◆◆ MARK RIPLEY

Well-known fox controller and long-range shooting expert



Position feed stations in areas where it's safe to take a shot

Ratting out the problem

◆◆ AIRGUNNING

Q A friend has asked if I can use my air rifle to deal with rats that are causing problems around the compost heap in his garden. Would this be legal and, if so, how can I do it safely?

A It is legal to use an air rifle in a garden as long as pellets are not permitted to stray beyond the boundary.

The best way to achieve that end is to make sure that all shots are taken in the direction of a safe backstop such as a wall. I often use the same bait stations I use for grey squirrel control when tackling rats in a garden scenario. I fill a feeder with cut maize, position it in a safe area and leave it for a week so rats can home in on the new food source. When I return with my airgun, I know that rats that settle by the feeder are safe to shoot. **MM**

GUN LABEL OF THE WEEK

MURCOTT

Theophilus Murcott was at 68 Haymarket from 1861 to 1878. He is best known for his 'Mousetrap', the first successful breechloading hammerless gun, patented in 1871. This small paper label is from a pistol case, containing a pair of percussion pistols, dating from around 1861. Murcott labels are very



rarely seen. His business eventually sold to WW Greener. **DH**

Contact the team

Email: ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

Do dogs need dewclaws?

◆ VETERINARY CARE

Q Should dogs' dewclaws be removed?

A Opinions will differ on this subject. Some people, particularly breeders of show dogs, might argue that they serve little purpose, that they can easily become overgrown or injured, and their removal will 'improve' the appearance of the dog. Others, myself included, consider that the dewclaws form part of the dog's normal anatomy. The dewclaw has five tendons attached and, when intact, the muscles of these tendons are well developed, implying they are used on a regular basis.

If the dewclaw is removed, these muscles become atrophied. This finding argues toward the dewclaw being an active appendage. Physically active and working dogs use their front dewclaws

for stabilisation and gripping, and when the dog runs and turns, the dewclaws come in contact with the ground.

Consequently, because front dewclaws serve several important purposes, in my opinion they should not be removed unless there is a good reason to do so.

In rare cases, a dog's dewclaw may be severely injured, and removal under those circumstances will be in the dog's best interest. But these problems occur relatively infrequently so routinely removing healthy front dewclaws as a preventative measure makes less sense.

Some puppies do have loosely attached dewclaws, particularly on the hindlegs, and these certainly seem to serve little purpose and can render the appendage more prone to injury. I would typically remove such dewclaws in puppies less than four days old using a local anaesthetic to provide pain relief while performing the procedure. **TB**

Dealing with the midges

◆ STALKING

Q I am heading to the west coast of Scotland in late July for the roe rut and I am aware of the fearful reputation of the Scottish midge – any suggestions to keep them off?

A Probably take up smoking a pipe. Seriously though, there are many repellents on the market and they do work to a degree. I tend to use Smidge, but if the midges are bad then really none of the repellents will be sufficient

on their own. I always wear a midge net at this time of year and I would recommend the hoodie type, which you wear over the top of your baselayer. It has long sleeves, you pull it on over your head and tuck it into your trouser waistband. The hood has a zip so you can wear it down, but if the midges start to hammer you, pull the hood up over your head and zip it up so that it completely covers your face, similar to a beekeeper's suit. It's not ideal as the hood reduces visibility but at least you won't be getting eaten alive. Good luck. **CD**



Hoody-type midge nets are ideal at this time of year, as you can zip the net up to completely cover your face

Blackpowder safe storage

◆ BLACKPOWDER

Q I plan to apply for a blackpowder licence to load cartridges for a hammergun. I've heard the powder has to be stored in a special box and not in the gun cabinet. How can I find out more?

A Storing powder in a metal cabinet is highly dangerous as it becomes a bomb in a house fire. The following is a precis from the Explosives Regulations 2014:

"The powder must be kept in containers with no more than 550g per container. Plastic/polythene or paper/cloth are suitable containers – metal must not be used. Care is required to ensure where plastic is used that it does not induce static electricity. The containers must be kept in a box constructed of plywood with a minimum thickness of 18mm, or a material of equal or greater fire and physical resistance to attack.

"The box must be constructed to provide 30% additional height between the top of the container and the inside of the lid. If the box is to hold more than one container of powder, the interior must be divided by 6mm wooden partitions securely fixed to the walls of the box. It is a good idea to fit an intumescent strip around the lid – a strip that expands when it gets hot. The box must not be stored in any box, drawer, locker or cupboard made of metal.

"It should not be stored on or under any means of access or escape. It should not be kept in the same room as flammable liquids or in any areas where there is a risk of fire. The box must be kept in either a secured room or other suitably secured place.

"Where not kept under the above provisions, the box should meet certain minimum requirements: have securely fixed robust hinges; a secure hasp using a security-grade padlock; have suitable arrangements to frustrate attempts to remove the box (securing by its handles or similarly attached ring to a strong point using a good-quality chain or fixing device)."

Boxes can be bought ready-made if your carpentry skills are not up to making one. **BH**



Many feral goats have impressive headgear, but there is debate as to whether they are a sporting target

A silver medal feral goat

MEASURING

Q Is it possible for me to get a wild goat I have recently been given scored for a medal, as I understand that it is big enough to qualify? I have checked the score levels online and it should be a silver medal.

A This is a question that has been asked before and which comes up regularly. While some measuring organisations continue to measure wild (or feral) goats taken in the UK and Ireland, the CIC stopped doing this in 2014. The scores and measuring methods you can find on the internet are those that applied until 2014 when the CIC moved on from using the Red Book and went on to its current system.

Since 2014, there have been motions presented to the CIC on behalf of some continental hunting associations to reinstate feral goats, but these have not been successful. There is no doubt that some mature feral billies produce large and impressive sets of headgear and that this appeals to stalkers, particularly

those from the Nordic countries and the USA.

The main objection to the reinstatement has been the long expressed view that the established populations are not truly wild and that their numbers have been augmented in all the areas in which they occur in the UK and Ireland by the release of domestic animals. In other words, feral goats are a hybrid of a number of types of domestic goat.

In addition to this, there is a clear perception that they do not offer a sporting target, a view expressed in *Shooting Times* as far back as the 1970s by the late Lea MacNally, then one of the national foremost deerstalkers and naturalists, who observed that they are not challenging to stalk and they don't run away.

It's unlikely that feral goats will return to the CIC lists in the future, and no score levels will be reinstated for them. **IW**

Right: the Spudz is a great cleaning tool that hangs from your rifle's sling

Prevention over cure

OPTICS

Q What's the easiest way to clean my rifle's scope?

A People tend to put a scope on a rifle and then pretty much forget about it. They never really consider cleaning it until something goes wrong. Prevention is better than cure in the case of scope maintenance, and just a few simple products can keep your scope in tip-top condition. Scopes, especially for fox or deer rifles, are becoming incredibly expensive these days, and while we clean the bores of our rifles to maintain good accuracy, we should consider a routine scope maintenance regime as well.

Probably the most common cause of scope damage is wear to the lens coating, resulting in water or dirt not being removed properly. There are some excellent lens clothes and brushes available from photographic shops as well as dedicated scope cleaning kits, such as those from Swarovski, Zeiss or Schmidt & Bender.

Products such as the Spudz, which hangs from your rifle's sling, are excellent because you have a scope-cleaning cloth protected in a fabric pouch that is ready for use instantly if rain or dirt comes in contact with your scope's lens. **BP**



Disturbing the poults

ON YOUR SHOOT

Q Does pigeon shooting and crop protection disturb pheasant and partridge poults? The reason I ask is that I have been told to stay away from one of my farms because I was disturbing things, and I am at a loss to see what I was actually disturbing?

A It very much depends on where you are shooting them, and at what time of day. If the fields in question are nowhere near a release site, and the shooting is from a hide, I can't see there being much of a problem. If, on the other hand, the fields are in the middle of a partridge drive, you have a dog with you and you drive up and down it setting up and collecting your kit at the end of the day, I can see how it would disturb things.

My guess is that there is more to this than meets the eye, and that they may have used the shoot as an excuse to edge you out (for whatever reason), and will either do it in-house or have a friend or relative already lined up to do it for them. **LB**

Right: pigeon shooting is unlikely to disturb poults if you are well away from a release site



Tips for unsupported rifle shooting

ACCURACY

Q I'm quite new to rifle shooting and have gone from an air rifle to now shooting a .22LR. I'm struggling to hit anything standing up without leaning on something; I just can't seem to hold the rifle steady. Can you give any tips please?

A Don't worry, you're not alone. The truth is it's almost impossible to hold completely steady unsupported and shoot 'freehand'. The trick is to accept the natural movement and time your shot when the crosshair is over the target. The easiest way to do this is to firstly not hold the rifle up for too long, which will quickly fatigue the muscles of the arms and cause more excessive movement.



A good technique is to mount the rifle and then lower the crosshair down on to the target and fire the moment the crosshairs fall on the target. Some people prefer to come up on to the

target and fire and a few like to draw a diagonal line up on to the target.

Once you find the method that suits you best, practise a lot to get comfortable with it. **MR**

Pheasant chicks can make their first flight at around 10 to 12 days old



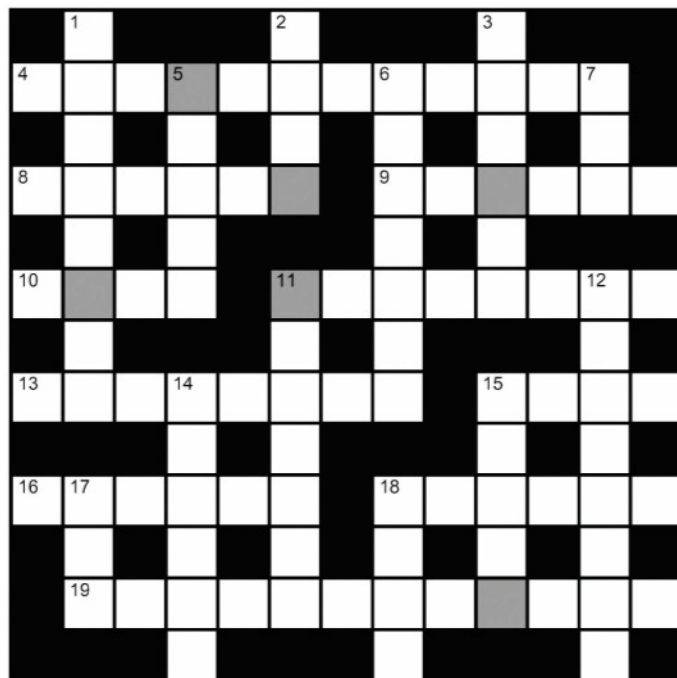
What age for their first flight?

➔ GAMEBIRDS

Q At what age can pheasant chicks fly?

A Like most other gamebirds, pheasant chicks can make their first fluttering flight at anything from 10 to 12 days. As anyone who has reared gamebirds will know, the initial feathers to develop are those on the wings. The mortality rate for gamebird chicks is high, which is why these birds produce such large broods, and the chicks are especially vulnerable before they can fly. Of course they are still at risk from predators when able to fly, but being able to flutter, even a short distance, can be the difference between life and death.

Gamebirds chicks are what are called precocial and nidifugous. The former indicates that they can run and even feed themselves as soon as they have hatched, while the latter means that they leave the nest soon after they have hatched. Waders and wildfowl all come into the same category, though there is less urgency for ducklings to be able to fly as living on water gives them some protection. Woodcock chicks, like pheasants, can fly at around 12 days. The only birds that can fly on the day they hatch are certain species of megapodes, birds from tropical Asia and Australasia that lay their eggs in mounds. The chick never has any contact with their parents. **DT**



Crossword / Compiled by Eric Linden / 1624

Across

- 4** Gun case seen at the awards event? (12)
8 The hard-hitting effect of a bullet means a little rascal must behave (6)
9 Bad-tempered women are mousy types (6)
10 Go under a water feature (4)
11 The airborne trooper is on location with a flea, for one (8)
13 The gain is in creating a gunmaker's logo (8)
15 Gun part found in the rainwater barrel (4)
16 The RC cartridge is cold on account of the spy agency (6)
18 Prepares gundogs for the field - these ones are on track (6)

- 19** Simulation is spontaneous on both sides when clay pairs are in unison (12)

Down

- 1** Grip a man wandering the mountains of Scotland (8)
2 Designated containment of a biting insect (4)
3 Incorrectly relist according to airgun charging cylinder capacity (6)
5 A sound moderator's baffle component should fill shelves (5)
6 Down Under, AI is removed from Kahles country (7)
7 A novel option for gun buyers from the north-east and west (3)

- 11** Numeric passcode on the rear end of a quarry duck species (7)
12 A unit Tim designs using a lightweight gun metal (8)
14 Money earned by shoot workers comes before tax (6)
15 Prepare yourself for a sporting double (5)
17 The gun case material shows its muscles! (3)
18 Shooting an animal catcher? (4)

Solution 1622 / 19 July 2023

Across: 4. Give 6. Ground game 8. Standard 9. Mate 10. Calls 11. Bronzes 13. Hybrids 16. Greys 19. Glen 21. Whippets 22. Field trial 23. Leaf
Down: 1. Brittany 2. Tunnel 3. Ladder 4. German 5. Vent 7. Draw 11. BDS

12. Egyptian 14. Run-off 15. Downed

17. Report 18. Pied 20. Lake

PRIZE WORD: GUNSLIP

WINNER: ANDY CAMERON, MORAY

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Rules: Entries must be received by 9 August 2023. All usual conditions apply. Solution and winner will appear in the 16 August 2023 issue.





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Are you a member of the Woodcock Club?



Join us in September at the Savile Club
in Mayfair for the annual dinner



We are delighted that after a short hiatus due to Covid, the *Shooting Times* Woodcock Club dinner will be held in London on **Thursday, 14 September**. We have a brilliant auction organised with some fantastic lots provided by our writers, from ferreting with Simon Whitehead to stalking at the Euston Estate and pigeon shooting with Tom Payne. Proceeds, as ever, go to woodcock conservation. We are also looking forward to launching the *Shooting Times* Woodcock Club awards, which will recognise shoots and estates that are doing their bit to conserve one of our most beautiful birds. Please email steditorials@fieldsportspress.com to book your tickets. We look forward to seeing you there.



The Shooting Times Almanac

— 2 - 9 AUGUST 2023 —



AUGUST MOON PHASE ○ 1st ● 8th ● 16th ● 24th ○ 31st | Saturday, 5 August 🌅 Sunrise 05:29 🌇 Sunset 20:42 🌙 Moonrise 22:32 🌑 Moonset 10:19

TIMES SHOWN FOR LONDON

THOUGHTS FROM THE FIELD

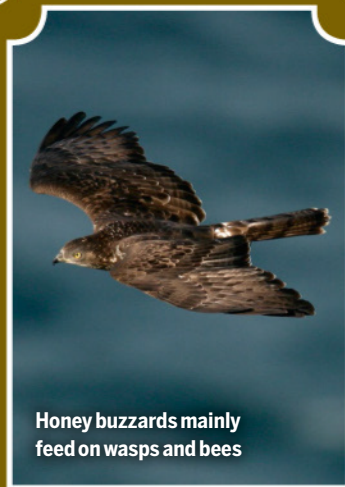
One of Suffolk's greatest sons, Thomas Gainsborough, died on 2 August 1788. Although famed as a portrait artist, the Sudbury man merely painted people to pay the bills. Gainsborough was in part a misanthrope, disdainful of his wealthy patrons, once writing: "...damn Gentlemen, there is not such a set of Enemies to a real artist in the world as they are."

Gainsborough was, however, passionate about dogs and the Suffolk countryside. His landscapes



provide an insight into how the county has changed since the mid-18th century — and its working dogs too. His earliest known painting, *Bumper* (1745), portrays an athletic-looking bull terrier. *Bumper* possesses an intelligent eye and a strong jaw more akin to a modern Patterdale. His forelegs are straight and his hindquarters ripple with muscle.

One wonders what Gainsborough would make of the grotesque bulldogs of today. **Richard Negus**



Honey buzzards mainly feed on wasps and bees

PARLIAMENT OF FOWLS

I had only ever seen one once before in the UK, but I recognised the honey buzzard the instant I saw it. They are such odd creatures, and it seems incongruous that a raptor of that size can make its main living by feeding on wasps and bees. I also wonder at its ability to raid nests with impunity.

My instant recognition dated back to the spring of 1981 when I was studying thistle pollination in the south of France. Sitting at my desk, identifying insect specimens, I spotted three distant raptors heading north up the Rhone valley and grabbed the binoculars for a closer look. With their tails twisting and turning, I thought they were kites at first, but then realised they were migrating honey buzzards. That afternoon I counted over 500, and I will always remember the silhouette with its slender, protruding head and neck profile that reminds me of a cuckoo.

Mike Swan

The finer things

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Book club

Open Season, An Artist's Sporting Year by Rodger McPhail

Published by Airline, priced £15.95

My neighbour, a shepherd in his seventies, recommended this book to me. "It's the only one I've read since school," he explained as he passed it over. It's not the words that stand out in

this book; it's the glorious illustrations, divided into seasons. This week, I'll be studying the summer images of grouse as they hug the contours of a heather-clad rocky hillside. The perfect way to prepare for the start of the new season.

Simon Garnham



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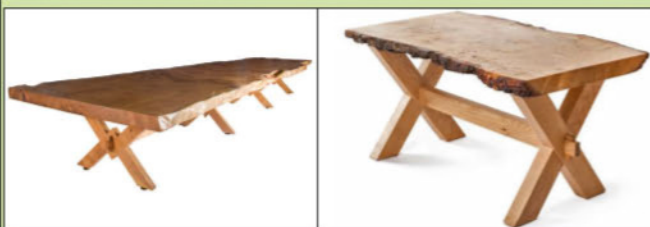
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Sharpshooter



It's high time sound moderators were taken off section one firearms certificates to free up police resources, argues Alasdair Mitchell

The first rifle sound moderator I ever saw was made in a school workshop. The older brother of a girl I knew built it as his final metalwork project. The teacher was impressed, awarding him top marks. Can you imagine that today? It is worth noting that the boy in question later won a place at Cambridge and went on to have a career in the medical profession.

The moderator was used on his father's BSA Supersport Five .22 rimfire rifle. I seem to recall that it had a push-and-twist fitting mechanism, locking behind the foresight ramp. You could put it on or off in a jiffy. The device was heavy, being made of relatively thick steel, and very quiet when used with Eley subsonic hollow points. Cleaning was a doddle, because you could unscrew one end and tip all the baffle rings out. Apparently, the design had been published in a US magazine.

Today, sound moderators have become almost standard fitments for deer and foxing rifles. They have always been popular on rabbit rifles. It's got to the

point where most hunting rifles, of any calibre, now come from the maker with the muzzle already screw cut. We use sound moderators to help protect our hearing, to reduce countryside disturbance and as an aid to accuracy through lower recoil and muzzle flip.

Wasting time

Yet, due to the arcane nature of the relevant legislation, sound moderators for section one firearms are classed as firearms in their own right. This is utterly daft, of course. As matters stand, these inert bits of tubing amount to an astonishing 32% of all privately held section one firearms in England and Wales. Administering such huge numbers of sound moderators under the current system soaks up police, dealer and customer time that would be better spent on making sure renewals and grants got done efficiently.

Absurdities abound. The same sound moderator that can be purchased and screwed on to an ordinary air rifle without any paperwork might also fit onto a .22

rimfire, where it would require justification under the good reason test and written police consent. Many sound moderators do not carry serial numbers, yet they still have to be listed individually on your certificate. If you need to change a moderator, you have to go through the rigmarole of applying for a certificate variation. Yet sound moderators can corrode or wear out; they seldom last as long as a rifle barrel.

In my own case, after several years of hard use, my moderator started blowing at a seam. I had to replace it. The rifle in question is actually owned by me but is also on my son's certificate. He lives in a different police area. The variation process became a bit of a farce as the two forces differed in their procedures.

I have been assured that both the police and the shooting organisations are united in agreeing that sound moderators should come 'off ticket'. There are persistent rumours that this should happen this year. Yet I note that the issue doesn't feature in the current Home Office consultation on changes. Could it be that it is already decided and will be enacted by means of a simple administrative change? Or has it simply been kicked into the long grass?

It is possible, I suppose, that anti-gun activists might try to denounce anything seen as a concession to gun owners. This is despite the fact that nobody has ever shown that treating sound moderators as guns has the slightest benefit for public safety. But you know the politics of gun control; I suppose it is possible that ministers might be scared of provoking tabloid headlines about "deadly silencers". Mind you, they could always point out that the move would lead to a massive drop in the number of registered firearms and free up police resources. 🐦

Sound moderators for section one firearms are classed as firearms in their own right



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