NEWS: WILL SCOTLAND AMEND 'UNWORKABLE' LICENCES?

SHOOTING TIMES
& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

31 JANUARY 2024

Since 1882

Nature or nurture?

Does training guarantee success?

TAXIDERMY

Should we still preserve birds?

ALL ACTION

The best semi-autos for ducks and geese

SPORT ABROAD

BREATHTAKING TUR STALKING

WILD GAME

THE WONDERS OF A WALKED-UP DAY

A400 Xtreme Plus Black

The synthetic stocked A400 Xtreme Plus features all of Beretta's technology in one gun. The new Kick Off Mega, mounted just behind the grip, means that only the hand moves backwards while the stock remains still to the cheek. There is no other recoil reduction system to touch it. This new version includes all the excellent features of the Xtreme but with a raised rib, bigger ejector port, oversized bolt handle and magazine release plus a soft cheekpiece.

A400 Xtreme Plus Max.7

A400 Xtreme Plus Bottomland

A400 Xtreme Plus OptiTimber

A400 Xtreme Plus Green ATS

	A400 Xtreme Plus Black **12G**	A400 Xtreme Plus Black **20G**	A400 Xtreme Plus Max.7 **12G**	A400 Xtreme Plus Max.7 **20G**	A400 Xtreme Plus Bottomland **12G**	A400 Xtreme Plus OptiTimber **12G**	A400 Xtreme Plus Green ATS **12G**
Barrel length	26,28,30"	28"	26/28/30"	28"	26/28/30"	28"	26/28"
Chamber	3.5"	3"	3.5"	3"	3.5"	3.5"	3.5"
HP steel shot proof	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Extended chokes	Yes/5	Yes/5	Yes/5	Yes/5	Yes/5	Yes/5	Yes/5
Weight (kg)	3.45	3	3.45	3	3.45	3.45	3.45
L/H action available	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
SRP	**£2,250**	**£2,250**	**£2,450**	**£2,450**	**£2,450**	**£2,450**	**£2,450**

GMK

For further product information and details please call GMK on 01489 587500 or visit www.gmk.co.uk

BERETTA

BERA400PLUS

SHOOTING TIMES
& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

EST. 1688
SKINNER'S
BORN TO BE OUTDOORS

DOG OF THE WEEK

Archie

Three-year-old Archie has become an integral part of the picking-up team on two separate shoots. He is happy to work in all weathers and has a useful knack for finding lost birds.

Owned and photographed by Daniel Neal

31.01.24
Issue 6,486

SHOOTING TIMES

Hit the white one!

I've heard it many times in the opening address – words along the lines of: "Don't shoot a white pheasant; if you do there is a fine of £50." Much as I like the concept that the fine will be a donation to a worthy cause – with the Gamekeepers' Welfare Trust particularly close to my heart – I really don't like the starting point.

White pheasants are not natural but a mutation that has been propagated in captivity, which we should be doing our best to eliminate. To outside observers they are an artificial creation and therefore a bad advertisement for what we do.

So on my shoot the rule is very different. We have a white cock pheasant that has strayed on and, as far as I am concerned, he does not belong on my modest wild bird shoot. What's more, I certainly do not want him passing his genes on to the next generation.

Thus far he has kept a low profile on shoot days, but my rule is: "Please shoot him, and don't miss. If you do, its £50 to the Gamekeepers' Welfare Trust, rising to £100 if you decline a reasonable chance."

Mike Swan

Contact Managing Editor
Ollie Harvey at ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

Subscribe today

Enjoy great subscriber benefits

Never miss an issue and get every issue delivered direct to your door.

See page 45 for subscription offer

Contents 31 January 2024

This week's cover image was supplied by Duncan Ireland

24 Woodcock among the brambles
The delights of hunting the hedgerows for a wild harvest FEATURED STORY

34 Top guns for the low tide
With a few weeks left to flight ducks and geese, we pick the best semi-autos

42 A clay gun to beat all clay guns?
Browning's latest edition is put through its paces on the clay ground

30 Mountain goats in the Caucasus
A week in Russia on the trail of the surefooted tur proves quite an adventure

40 If you love it, get it stuffed
Done well, taxidermy is an artform, but sadly it's not always done well...

48 Cartridges worth shelling out for
We choose our favourite cartridges for keeping pigeon numbers down

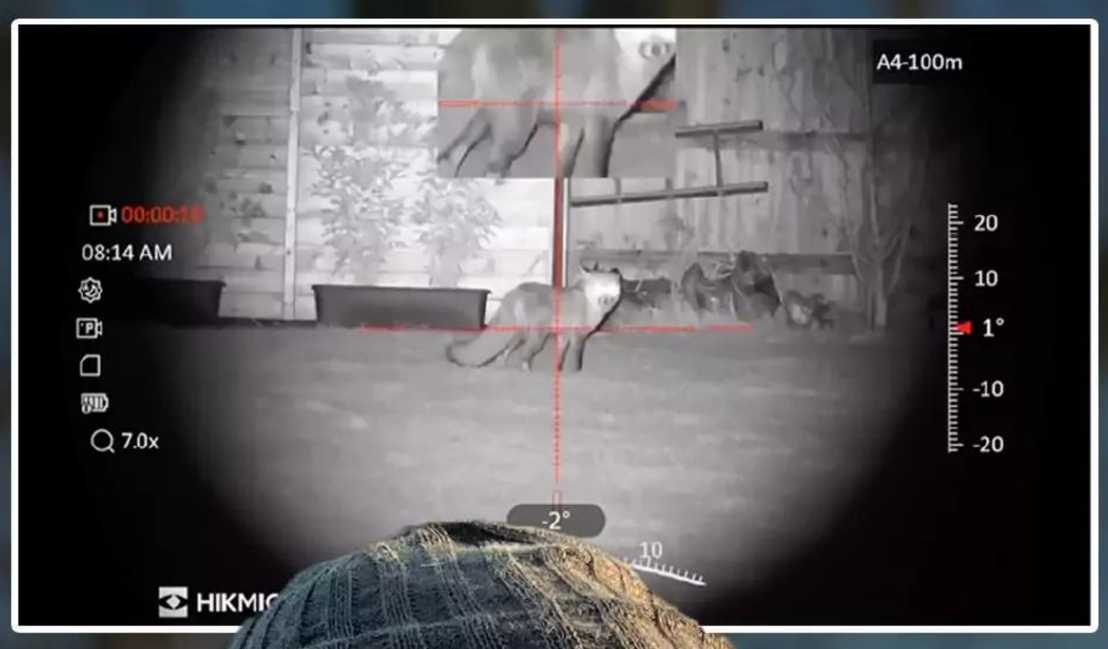
News & Opinion **06** News **10** BASC **12** Letters **22** Countryside Alliance **Features** **24** Rough shooting **30** Sport abroad **34** Semi-automatics **40** Soldier Palmer **42** Shotgun test **48** Ammunition **Regulars** **14** Gamekeeper **16** Wildfowlers' jottings **18** Country Diary **20** Stalking Diary **38** Gundogs **52** Vintage Times **56** Cookery **58** Sporting Answers **61** Crossword **63** Almanac **66** Sharpshooter

HIKMICRO ALPEX LRF

Day and Night Vision with Ballistic Laser Rangefinder

The all new Alpex A50EL LRF 4K features a state of the art 3840x2160 4K sensor, delivering unparalleled performance, with full colour by day and incredibly detailed night vision at night.

With an integrated LRF with ballistic calculator, it is easy to determine ranges in the field, and obtain an accurate shooting solution at any distance.



"The Alpex LRF is a very clever unit, combining a laser rangefinder and ballistic calculator all within a slimline day/night scope, no bigger than a normal day scope, a perfect all rounder for rabbit, fox and deer."

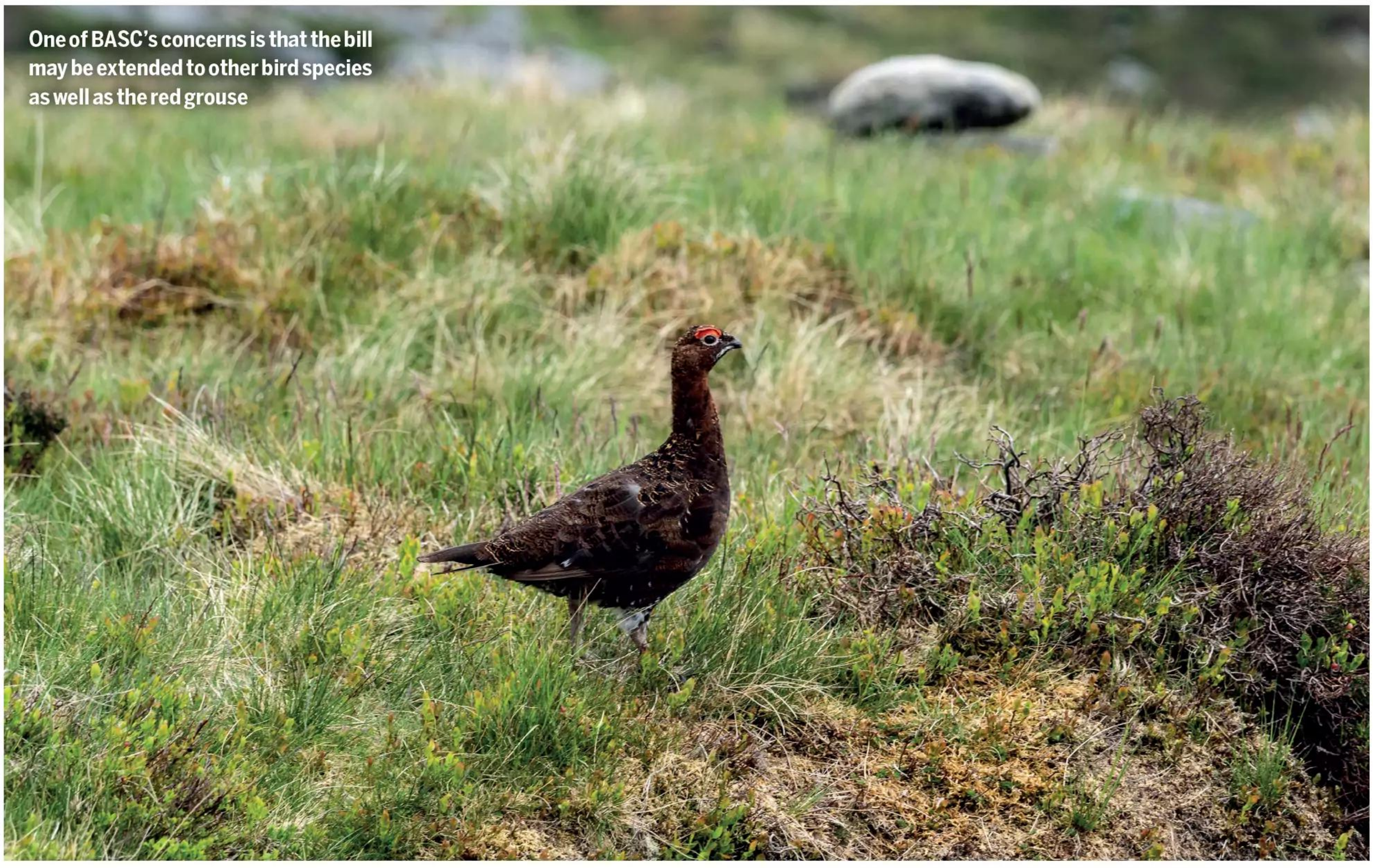
Mark Ripley - 260 RIPS

ALPEX LRF 4K

£849.99

Scott Country® INTERNATIONAL

WWW.SCOTTCOUNTRY.CO.UK
01556 50 3587 or 01556 50 3175



One of BASC's concerns is that the bill may be extended to other bird species as well as the red grouse

Scottish licences should last at least 10 years, insists BASC

The shooting group presents a letter signed by 1,000 people to Scottish ministers, urging them to reconsider the grouse and muirburn bill

More than 1,000 members have signed a letter from BASC to the Scottish parliament, requesting substantial amendments to the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill.

BASC, which is opposed to the implementation of grouse shooting and muirburn licences, is calling for their removal. It wants them to be replaced with, at minimum, a 10-year licence. Other amendments would include an overhaul of proposed government powers around suspending and revoking licences, as well as removing clauses that alter the definition of peatland.

BASC has also raised issues around the proposed powers allowing Scottish ministers to add further bird species to the red grouse shooting licence. And the letter calls for a compensation scheme for licence holders who have their suspended licence reinstated after a finding of no wrongdoing.

In its current form, it is argued that the bill threatens moorland management, farming practices, conservation efforts, hundreds of jobs and millions of pounds in economic value.

"This bill is unworkable and impractical for our members"

Peter Clark, BASC's director of Scotland, told *ST*: "The letter signed by over 1,000 BASC members sends a strong message to MSPs ahead of the crucial vote on amendments. BASC has been consistently clear that the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill is unworkable and impractical for our members, many of whom are land managers and gamekeepers.

"It is vital that the amendments proposed by BASC around removing the disproportionate licence suspension powers and extending the licence duration be adopted," he emphasised.

Upland keeper Lindsay Waddell, former chairman of the National Gamekeepers' Organisation, added: "The sad fact surrounding most of what this bill, and others in the recent past, would seek to do is based on a complete lack of knowledge on behalf of legislators of just what the positive contribution management of the countryside contributes to the whole environment, economy and — despite what our detractors would say — biodiversity of the countryside.

"They are simply seeking to restrict management for the sake of it for no other reason than they as individuals don't like it, based on what some would have them believe. Go into the glens and speak to the people who carry out the work, look for yourselves at what it produces, then go where it has ceased and see what's left," he urged. **OH**

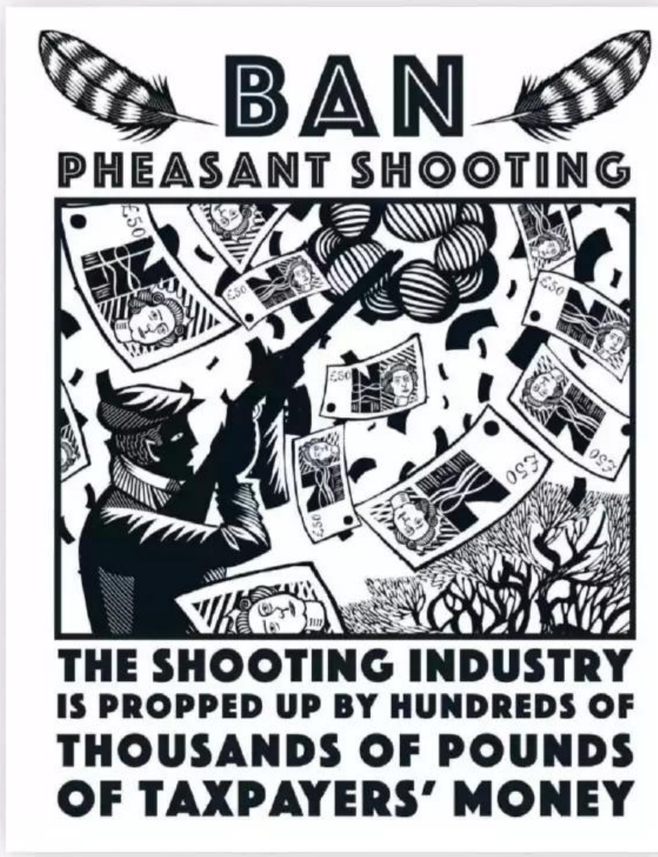
RICHARD FAULKS ISTOCK;

Big Issue calls for shoot ban

The *Big Issue* has encouraged a ban on pheasant shooting after running several full-page adverts paid for by Animal Aid.

The advert appeared on the first page of a January edition of the magazine and encouraged readers to sign an online petition to "ban pheasant shooting" because it is "propped up by hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money".

The *Big Issue* is a weekly magazine largely sold by street vendors who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, thus providing them with an opportunity to earn a legitimate income.



Several adverts have been placed in the *Big Issue* by Animal Aid

Large quantities of game shot by the fieldsports community is funnelled to the homeless community and those suffering from food poverty through charities such as the Country Food Trust, which provides meals for thousands made from game meat.

Sir Johnny Scott, president of the Gamekeepers' Welfare Trust, said: "The *Big issue* has long afforded a platform to animal charities like Animal Aid and IFAW. It's a shame that Animal Aid is unable to see the good the shooting fraternity does and instead focuses on destroying a community that is a key part of British countryside life."

Curlew filmed defending its nest from a pheasant

A video of a curlew defending its nest from a pheasant has raised questions over the impact of gamebirds, as critics claim that pheasants cause more problems than raptors.

Posted on X (formerly Twitter) with the comment, "We have more issues with pheasants on our curlew nests than we do with the numerous resident kites in North Glos", the video highlights the need for more research on the impact on ground-nesting birds of the estimated 50 million pheasants released each year in the UK.

As ground-nesting birds, curlew are under threat of predation

ST contributor and curlew conservationist Patrick Laurie said: "We don't understand how the relationship between pheasants and curlews actually works. It's quite possible that high pheasant releases have an impact on curlew, but the impact is likely to be highly localised and complex. It's important to base conservation plans on hard data, and there simply isn't enough on this subject to know what should be done for the best.

He continued; "Some great research is under way, but we mustn't be tempted to jump the gun and leap to conclusions — particularly when it's clear that people who dislike pheasant releases are sometimes using curlew as a weapon to attack shooting."

Weekend X poll

At what age did you start shooting game?

- **31%** Under 13 years old
- **36%** Between 13 and 20
- **13%** Between 20 and 30
- **20%** 30 or older

follow us @shootingtimes

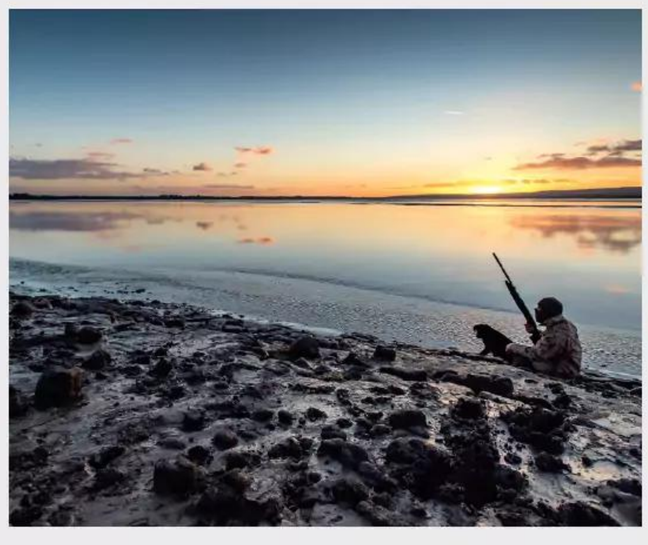
To do this week

PROTECT CROPS

A dry, cloudy and windy day should offer great pigeon shooting. Crops such as oilseed rape attract the birds in late winter, so observing flightlines and constructing a hide on a rape field can let you shoot an excellent bag. If the wind is really howling, roost shooting might be more productive. However you decide to approach your pigeon shooting, you'll need a decent cartridge — see five of our favourites on *p48*.

SHOOT

The inland fowling season finishes today (31 January) but in England, Scotland and Wales there are still a couple of weeks when you can shoot below the tideline. Ducks and geese, but not gamebirds or waders, are legal quarry till 20 February as long as they are hunted below mean high water.



James Wills runs an impressive sporting estate in Gloucestershire

Shoot owner triumphs in gun licence appeal

The owner of a £15,000-a-day shoot has his licence returned after it was revoked by police when a Class A drug was found in his cottage

A member of the Wills tobacco family has won a court battle to regain his shotgun licence after police decided he was unfit to keep it.

James Wills runs the £15,000-a-day Soundborough pheasant shooting estate in the Cotswolds, but Gloucestershire Police revoked the 39-year-old's shotgun certificate after a 10-month-old baby girl was found with ecstasy in her mouth at his family holiday cottage in Suffolk in July 2020. The constabulary revoked Mr Wills's licence because officers investigating how the baby — the daughter of a family friend — came into contact with the Class A drug felt he had not been fully open and co-operative with them.

However, at Gloucester Crown Court last week, a judge and magistrate upheld Mr Wills's appeal against the police decision and restored his certificate. Mr Wills told the court that he requires shotguns for vermin control on the family farm and for running the commercial shoot on the 1,300-acre Soundborough estate , where he needs to be on hand in case any replacement guns are needed by guests.

In July 2020, while Mr Wills and his wife were hosting a get-together in their cottage near Ipswich, the baby girl of a friend somehow ingested ecstasy. Mr Wills immediately called the emergency services because no one knew what the substance was, he told the court.Police and paramedics attended the scene, but the child suffered no ill effects. Six weeks later the substance was confirmed to be ecstasy.

Mr and Mrs Wills said they had no idea how the substance had come to be at the property but that the cottage is rented out to the public and occasionally for stag dos.

"Running a farm, he has a very good reason to be the recipient of a shotgun certificate"

Mr Wills's barrister, Leon Kazakos KC, told the court: "He is a fundamentally serious, honest and decent man who has a very good reason, running a farm, to be the continued recipient of a shotgun certificate."

Judge Ian Lawrie KC said the court had decided to allow the appeal and restore the certificate to Mr Wills. **FP**

ISTOCK

THEY SAID WHAT

"Each bird was celebrated, each shot remembered"

Who said it: Miles Malone

Why: On a rough shooting day, the bag may seem meagre by the standards of driven days, but there is pleasure to be had in taking a variety of quarry, and knowing you've had to work hard for it

Stalking Show falls foul of Faceback algorithms

If an exhibitor's name contains a 'forbidden word', it is flagged up by Facebook and Instagram

The country's largest stalking trade show has had its Instagram page disabled and its Facebook page put at risk of closure due to new social media restrictions.

The Stalking Show and other legitimate sporting businesses have suffered with words such as "gun", "rifle" and "ammunition" being flagged up by Facebook and Instagram algorithms.

Meta — the parent company of Facebook and Instagram — says in its policy documents that users are allowed to make posts pertaining to firearms and ammunition sales so long as they are "representing legitimate brick-and-mortar entities". The Stalking Show itself and all 250 trade stands conform to these regulations and organisers claim they are being unfairly targeted.

Deanne Freer, organiser of the Stalking Show, told *ST*: "Once your post is taken down and you are told your page is at risk of being permanently disabled, you have an option to appeal the decision, but there is only a drop down with no options that are relevant.

"If we tag or write a company name in a post and it has a forbidden word within the name, it puts us at risk. In a nutshell, a computer decides your fate with no investigation or care if you are a legitimate company operating within the law or not."

This issue bears strong similarities to the ongoing debanking scandal that has hit the fieldsports community (*News*, 24 January).

Billionaire conservationist's businesses record £9.3m loss

Scotland's richest man has reported an operating loss of almost £9.3 million on his hospitality and estates business. The annual accounts for Anders Povlsen's conservation and eco-tourism firm Wildland show turnover of £2.9m in the 12 months to July last year, down from £4.2m in the previous period.

Povlsen, 51, is a Danish businessman who made his fortune in retail. He is the largest shareholder in online giant Asos and a major investor in Zalando. He is also Scotland's largest landowner, with 220,000 acres across 13 estates, and has been investing heavily in conservation for several years.

Anders Povlsen has invested heavily into conservation

Povlsen commented: "The cost of running and maintaining the landed estate asset base remains a significant and necessary overhead, being the landscape within which the companies' conservation and regeneration takes place."

However, the group's asset base increased by £36m to more than £244m and it is committed to achieving profitability "over time". Last year Mr Povlsen was ranked the richest person in Scotland, with a fortune estimated to exceed £8.5 billion.

NEWS IN BRIEF

BDS condemns hunting 'loophole'

The British Deer Society (BDS) has revealed it is against deer hunting with hounds in a "position statement" published at the end of 2023. It suggests staghound packs have got round the Hunting Act 2004 by relying on the observation and study exemption, which was "widely seen as the cynical use of a legal loophole".

Although supporters argue that hounds can detect diseased animals, the BDS says the use of hounds is "not comparable with the selective and efficient use of an appropriate firearm for deer control". The Countryside Alliance says the group has a "fundamental misunderstanding of the post-ban operation of staghunting".

Atlantic salmon landed in London

An angler landed one of the first Atlantic salmon to be caught in London for around 200 years. Hector Rodriguez caught and released the 3lb fish on the river Wandle, a tributary of the Thames. Atlantic salmon were all but wiped out by pollution from the capital's factories in the 18th century and they have recently been reclassified as endangered across the UK (*News*, 10 January). Stuart Singleton-White from the Angling Trust said it was exciting but added: "This is possibly a stray fish which lost its way."

Find us on social media

INSTAGRAM
@SHOOTINGTIMESUK

FACEBOOK
SHOOTING TIMES & COUNTRY MAGAZINE

X
@SHOOTINGTIMES

YOUTUBE
THE SHOOTING SHOW

This is not a slight to those without DSC2

While BASC recognises many stalkers have invaluable experience, its register requires DSC2 to reassure landowners, says Conor O'Gorman

In mid-January BASC announced its new register of competent stalkers (*News*, 24 January). Its aim is to connect qualified deerstalkers holding BASC membership with landowners, government agencies and institutional bodies looking for individuals to carry out deer management on their land.

Members can apply to be added to the register on an online form via the BASC website. It is a quick and easy process and there is no fee. The main information is your contact details, location and qualifications that you hold. Then, when opportunities arise, BASC will contact all members on the register in the areas surrounding the property and put them in contact with the relevant parties.

As for qualifications, the register is designed primarily for those who have achieved their Deer Stalking Certificate level 2 (DSC2) qualification because this is the minimum qualification that many large landowners require.

The launch has caused a bit of a stir on social media, to say the least. On the one hand there are many BASC members with relevant qualifications who are delighted with the project and signing up, but on the other there are some people making quite negative comments online about the project.

As I read it, the criticism has been triggered by the use of the word "competent" in the title of the register and the requirement for stalkers to have some qualifications to be on it.

There are lots of deer managers with decades of experience and no qualifications who are very good at what they do, and with no end of permissions from landowners requiring their services. They have built solid reputations and trust through hard work at all hours and in all weathers. How did they get started? They knocked on doors, or gained permissions through local contacts, family or friends. Many a journey began with pigeon, rabbit or fox control.

The idea of the BASC register is to put qualified stalkers on the ground wherever they're needed

Getting permissions for deerstalking or any form of shooting today is very different to that of many decades ago. Many of the doors have been well knocked and much of the land is taken. There are still ways and means of getting permissions, and qualifications can make a difference.

Many people getting into stalking gain their initial experience and mentoring from qualifications and they build up their competency from there. BASC members can avail themselves of the stalking schemes BASC runs in Arran (Scotland), Baronscourt (Northern Ireland), Bowland and Hampshire.

Going back to the register, this is why DSC2 is particularly relevant because it is obtained via a portfolio of evidence that the stalker gathers and submits to the industry-leading body, Deer Management Qualification, for formal assessment. This includes an accompanied stalk with an approved witness.

No threat

The large landowners interested in the services of deerstalkers on our new register see qualifications as evidence of competency — but that should not be seen as a slight to the experience and expertise of other stalkers, nor a threat to their permissions. I hope the project is a success for all involved.

BASC's deer officer James Sutcliffe says: "The BASC register of competent deerstalkers is gathering traction and we are getting lots of names on the list. We aim to use the register as a list of qualified stalkers by area. That way, when we are approached by landowners who are seeking people to take out deer management on their land, we can put you in touch with them to provide you with opportunities to get out on to the ground and carry out some deerstalking.

"This is a free service for any member who has achieved the DCS1 and DCS2 qualifications. Your membership proves to landowners that you have a rock-solid insurance policy," he points out. "Your qualifications prove to landowners that you have achieved industry-standard levels of firearms and deer knowledge, and can safely and humanely cull deer on their land and put them into the food chain."

"DSC2 proves you can humanely cull deer and put them into the food chain"

I hope that helps ally many of the concerns about the project, but if something has been missed, please let me know by email to ***conor.ogorman@basc.org.uk***

CALLUM MCINERNEY-RILEY

FSA

Fine Shooting Accessories

www.fineshootingaccessories.com

SHOOTING TIMES & COUNTRY MAGAZINE
ISSN: 0037-4164

Fieldsports Press, Macnab House,
14 Belford Road, Edinburgh, EH4 3BL

For editorial and picture enquiries:
ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

Subscription enquiries
To contact us about subscription orders, renewals, back issues, missing issues or any other subscription queries, please email subscriptions@fieldsportspress.com or call 01371 851890

Subscription delays
Disruption remains within UK and international delivery networks. Please allow up to seven days before contacting us about a late delivery.

Managing editor Ollie Harvey
Staff writer Felix Petit

Head of design Mark Cowling
Art editor Rob Farmer

Production editor
Nicola Jane Swinney

CEO Simon K Barr
Managing director Dom Holtam
Editorial director Selena Barr

Advertising
Alex Armstrong
alex.armstrong@fieldsportspress.com
0131 573 0353

International licensing and syndication
Shooting Times is available for licensing and syndication. Contact the licensing team to discuss partnership opportunities

For print licensing, contact Dom Holtam
dom.holtam@fieldsportspress.com

BASC
The British Association for Shooting & Conservation

Shooting Times is the official weekly journal of BASC. BASC, Marford Mill, Rossett LL12 0HL, tel 01244 573000
We reserve the right to edit letters. Letters should be sent to: The Editor, *Shooting Times*, Macnab House, 14 Belford Road, Edinburgh, EH4 3BL, or stletters@fieldsportspress.com

Recycle | ipso. Regulated

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.

FIELDSPORTS PRESS

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Should've seen it coming

My late father was a great reader of *Shooting Times* and I continue in his footsteps. If I ever faltered in my efforts or motivation, he would look me straight in the eye and say "Pull your socks up, lad!"

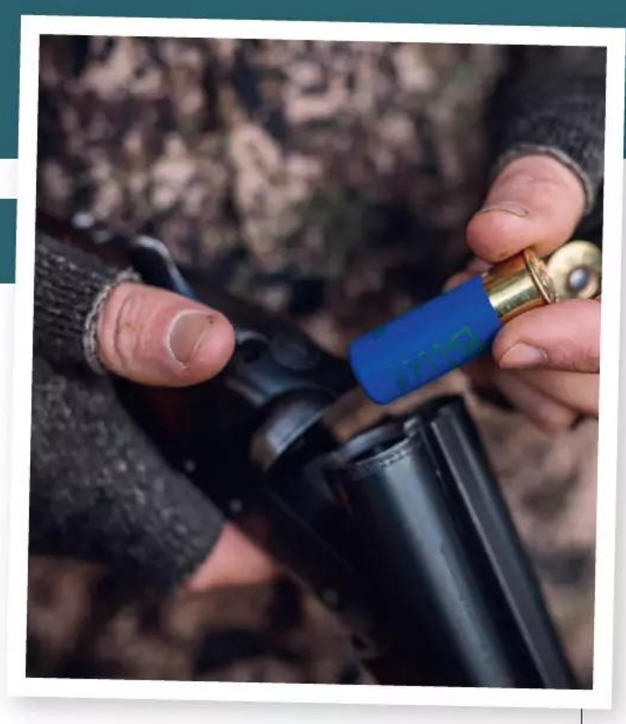
I inherited a number of old English guns from him and have purchased a few myself. I'm very proud of our manufacturing heritage and do like an old side-by-side. Like many, I have concerns about the banning of lead shot but have been trying out bismuth and BioAmmo with good results.

I took part in a BASC steel shot day and realise that the inevitable is coming. So let's get on with it.

There are many thoughts in the *ST* regarding self-regulation, of which I am in favour (rather than legislation), but it does make me giggle when I hear that industry hasn't had enough time to change tooling and so on. As I was going through my late father's effects, I came upon this an article from *ST* on 12 June 1997: "If we continue to delay, the inevitable will come and it may be enforced."

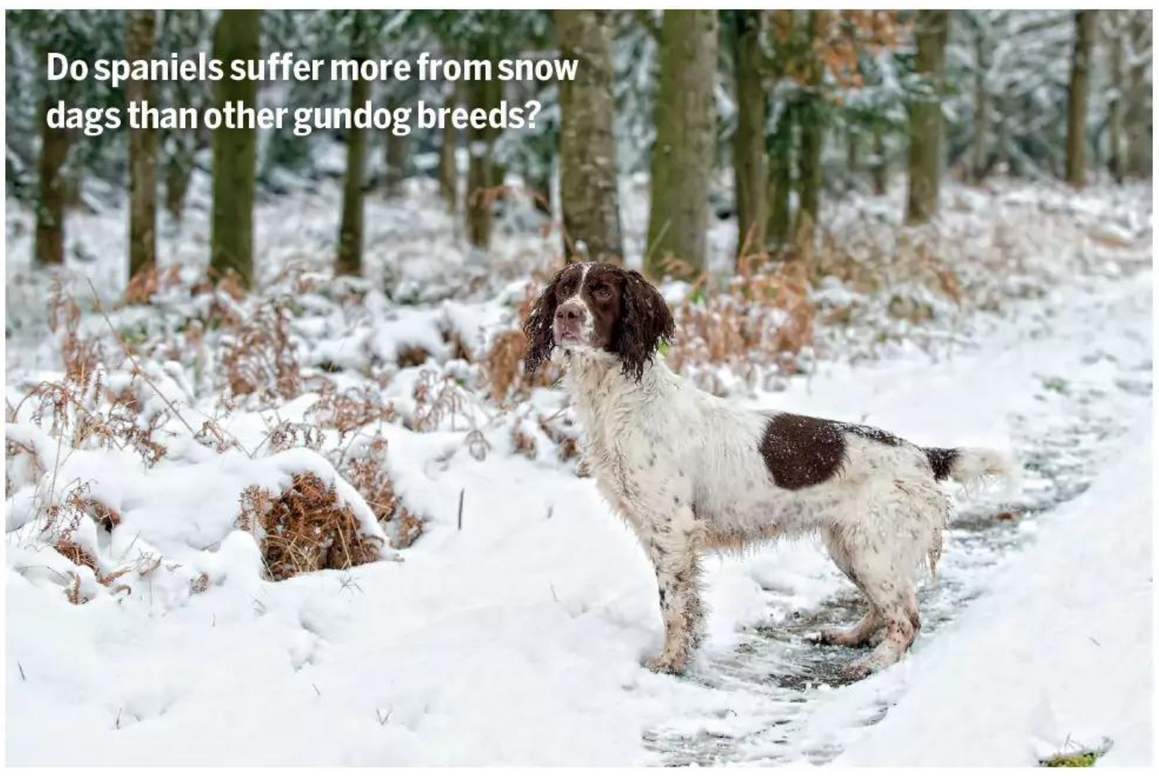
In a world governed by the court of public opinion, we must tread firmly but also carefully, particularly when it seems we've had 27 years to get this right. Perhaps we all need to "pull our socks up".

Nigel Vardy, Derbyshire



Good results have been recorded with both bismuth and BioAmmo in place of traditional lead shot

Editor responds: The writers in the 1990s were clearly on to something as lead was soon legislated out of use on the foreshore. I compare the issue to the car industry; electric vehicles have evolved so quickly in the past decade, and we can see similar progress with non-toxic ammunition. I wonder if our current writers will have as much luck prophesying for 2050?



Do spaniels suffer more from snow dags than other gundog breeds?

GOING IN TOO DEEP

I was recently on a shoot in the deep snow attended by a number of cocker and springer spaniels, a red setter and several labradors. The poor spaniels, especially the springers, developed apple-sized snowballs that clung to the backs of their legs and the longer hair on their chest as they bounded around throughout the day. The setter did not develop these icy dags very much and the labradors not at all.

The beaters and Guns would break the snowballs off the poor devils periodically but they would reform again almost immediately. I wonder first of all if it is entirely due to the quality and curliness of the spaniel hair or because they are lower to the ground and immersed in it for more of the outing.

I wonder if anyone knows of a solution or preventative measure to avoid this build up? Bio oil, olive oil, hair conditioner?

Name and email supplied

ON THE HUNT FOR MORE HUNTING

I am on a circuit of five or so close friends who all invite one another to their family farms for a small shoot most years.

One friend in this round-robin has, for myriad reasons, wound down the shooting operation on his farm, so for the past couple of years the group has not

CALLUM MCINERNEY-RILEY ; ISTOCK

SHOOTING TIMES
7 February

End-of-season woodcock, fantastic driven sport on a small shoot, building the perfect game larder and fishing for grayling

... AND MUCH MORE!

Subscribe today

Enjoy great subscriber benefits

Never miss an issue and get every issue delivered direct to your door.

See page 45 for subscription offer

DO WE HAVE 'NEPO BABIES'?

NEWS

police look into kite death

Scottish landowners could be forced into deer culls

Sweeping new powers would allow NatureScot to impose more stringent controls on deer numbers to 'meet biodiversity and climate objectives'

"It leaves the door wide open to unreasonable decision-making"

Crackdown on antisocial behaviour on Dartmoor

To do this week

Enforced culling in Scotland highlights the difficulty of finding ground to stalk over

On reading your article on the enforcement of deer culling in Scotland (*News*, 17 January), I find it sad that, after more than 44 years' shooting experience with shotguns, it's still a nightmare to get permission or get into a syndicate for deer culling. The biggest problem in shooting is nepotism and a snobbish attitude. Both perceptions are among the reasons why the general public hates fieldsports.

Brian Duffy, by email

convened at his for the usual sport and revelry.

I think all members of this friendly sporting consortium enjoy the outings but we truly attend the events to see our friends. I suspect in the coming years we might wind down our own shoot, for time and cost reasons, but I would hate to lose another event from the calendar. Men, in particular, seem to find an outdoor event a useful social template around which to invest time and care into personal relationships, but shooting is an expensive pursuit.

I am currently hunting for alternative activities that offer the thrill, adrenalin, touch of tradition and exposure to nature that shooting has offered in spades all of these years and which my circle of pals can rally around. This is a tall order so the hunt, as it were, continues.

Gary Wiggins, Northumberland

Time on the peg with in glorious surroundings is an ideal moment for a little quiet contemplation

THE TIME OF GIFTS

Although I love to be in the heavy traffic of a drive as much as anyone, there are few delights that compare with the moments of serenity that precede the first flush. If you stand alone on your peg and have yet to put on your ear defenders — or have an exceedingly smart pair that allow you auditory access to the world around you — this really is a time of gifts. If not overwhelmed by wind and static, electronic ear defenders often help you hear a nearby babbling brook with greater clarity, and your senses begin to sharpen as the wait continues. The cawing of a far-off jay or the chirruping of songbirds can be a the most wonderful soundtrack to your wait.

It is a time to let the countryside percolate through you and achieve a sense of calm that can only to be interrupted by a rogue blackbird darting forth from the woods, causing you to raise your gun in false alarm. Equally, if it is a stinker of a day, this time can be used to lament the lack of an extra layer and contemplate the ambrosial delights of a buttery crumpet.

Name and email supplied

GAMEBIRD GUIDANCE

As the shooting season draws to a close, we are starting to go on site to provide veterinary health plans (VHP) and bird flu prevention assessments, giving advice for the year ahead, and the future, to businesses across the UK.

Among others, these are the kind of industry topics that we cover in our VHPs: mycoplasma testing, disease prevention plans and AI. It's so important to discuss these things with your vet and put together a bespoke plan for the future of your business. Having a conversation over a cup of tea, on site, in person, and thinking ahead of potential issues is much more effective than waiting for a problem to occur before speaking to your vet.

There are multiple benefits of VHPs, both for us and for our clients. By being physically on the ground and visiting a variety of sites, we have fantastic visibility on what game farmers, rearers, layers and everyone else is doing.

This directly informs the advice we are then able to offer to clients, whether it's to help with where the chicks are coming from, where laying stock is hatched, different disease management, or simply the products that are being used.

Dr Kenny Stokes-Nutting
BVetMed MRCVS, director of St David's Game Bird Services

"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*

Mark Fitzer is the headkeeper on the famous Holkham estate in North Norfolk

Gamekeeper

It must be the keeper who decides how many birds can be shot on each drive, not the Guns, however well meaning their reasoning may be

There is usually plenty of time to catch up with your fellow Guns — but while you're on the peg you should be concentrating on the birds coming over

When five keepers are sitting in the beaters' room trying to guess which hole the resident mouse is going to appear from next, you can tell it's getting near the end of the season. As much as we may love this job there comes a point when you're glad the season is drawing to a close.

January can provide some fantastic sport for the Guns, but if you're hitting a sensible return on your released game things are probably starting to get a bit tighter. There's a little less room for error. A keeper friend rang me the other day and, as all keepers do, had a good old moan about one thing or another. One thing he did gripe about was a team of Guns who had decided they would only shoot a certain number of birds per drive and, when they reached their quota, they would put their gun away — even if they were halfway through the drive.

Greedy

I'm sorry but that would not have cut any ice with me; I could not have let that pass. I understand Guns not wanting to overdo it or appear greedy but let's not forget we are shooting game, not clays. You can't turn the tap on and off as you choose. I know the keeper runs an excellent shoot and guarantee that he would have managed the day accordingly and brought it to a successful conclusion, without the Guns dictating what was shot on each drive.

Along with this, don't forget the beaters who are working hard to produce the birds only to see their efforts being wasted. Actions like this can be demoralising for everyone concerned.

The upshot of this day was that, while the Guns got the bag they had turned up for, they shot lesser birds in the afternoon than the ones they had turned their noses up at in the morning. Sometimes, things have a way of working out.

"A bird appeared from nowhere and soared magnificently over the peg"

A couple of weeks ago I was running a day with a relatively small team of Guns and, because of the nature of this, they were placed pretty far apart. As I placed the last Gun his peg, I cast my eye back down the line and noticed that number two was proceeding to walk to number three. He must have been lonely. The gentleman didn't smoke so he didn't need a light and he had his gun and cartridges, so I can only assume he wanted to continue chatting while he waited. We'd just had a 15-minute journey to the drive in the Gun bus — perhaps not enough time to catch up?

I stood there wishing a bird would go over his empty peg but knew that was a forlorn hope, as the beaters were still a way back. Then, as if by magic, one of the highest pheasants I have seen here this season appeared from nowhere and soared magnificently over the empty peg. Just to rub salt in the wounds, two more equally good birds followed in quick succession. The Gun scuttled back to his peg, bemoaning the fact he had moved. Surely the quiet anticipation before the start of a drive is something to savour.

As soon as we close the book on the game shooting season, we turn our attention to finishing our wild deer cull, which will keep us nicely occupied for a while. While preparations are made for the next season, you never really get off the merry-go-round in this job, but every stage brings something different and, as they say, a change is as good as a rest.

IONA NICOLL

PULSAR
IMAGE.QUALITY

THERMAL IMAGING

Thermal Imaging Binoculars

MERGER LRF XQ35

NEW

The Merger LRF XQ35 is equipped with a highly sensitive 384×288, 17µm, <25mK NETD, European-made Lynred thermal sensor and a 35mm f1.0 fast aperture germanium objective lens to provide crystal-clear images at a range of up to 1350m. Thermal imagery remains sharp and well-defined, and the smallest temperature differences will be clearly visible during heavy rain, dense fog, snow, and high atmospheric humidity.

1024×768 AMOLED HD Display / 10.7° x 8.0° FOV / 3.0 – 12.0x Magnification / Ergonomic Design / 50Hz Refresh Rate / PiP Mode / 1000m ±1m Built-In Precision Laser Rangefinder / Interpupillary Adjustment / Proximity Sensor / Smooth & Stepped Digital Zoom / 8 Colour Palettes / Dual Battery System / Rechargeable APS3 Battery Pack / 11 Hours Operating Time / 8x Digital Zoom / Video Recording with Audio / Wi-Fi / 16GB Memory / USB-C Port / -25°C to 50°C Operating Temp. / IPX7 Waterproof Rating / Magnesium Alloy Body

Merger LRF XQ35 / PUL-77483 / SRP £2,999.95 Inc. VAT

THOMAS JACKS

Thomas Jacks is the exclusive UK trade-only distributor for Pulsar and Yukon. To find a dealer or to become a dealer, please contact us.
t. 01789 264100 e. info@thomasjacks.co.uk www.thomasjacks.co.uk @ThomasJacksLtd /ThomasJacksLimited @thomasjacksltd
All prices & specifications are subject to change without notice.

Mike Swan

JOTTINGS FOR WILDFOWLERS

A CLASSIC SERIES REVISITED

An outing to flight ducks on a well-filled splash brings a timely reminder of just how unpredictable floodwaters can be

For coastal wildfowling purists, evening flight inland is merely duck shooting, and on fed ponds I can understand the distinction. But I am lucky indeed that there is a spot on my wife's cousin's farm in south-west Scotland where a splash often forms on the inland side of a flood bank alongside the river Annan. Cousin Aitken plants spring barley there every year for livestock feed and in winter the ducks love to come at dusk and dabble in the flooded stubble for spilt grains. So while this may not quite be wildfowling, it is still about wild ducks and detective work to figure out what they might do, with no artificial feeding.

My younger son Pete and I went there on the Saturday before Christmas and enjoyed 10 minutes of wonderful sport. Out of our nine birds, Pete shot six mallard to my one and I suspect that the only reason for my eyewipe was that his gun misfired on the second barrel. My joy was two single teal that snuck past him unseen; especially the last one. As I mounted the gun and fired, it dropped below the distant horizon. I waited for it to flare, but no, I had the line right and it fell dead on the splash.

A spring of teal over a splash provides excellent sport — even if not technically wildfowling

Danger

We returned on Boxing night, knowing that such a spectacular flight was beyond expectation, not least because it had rained all day, giving the ducks many more splashes to choose between. When we arrived, Aitken was there to warn us of the dangers of the rising river. Truth be told I suspect he would have told us not to chance it if he could.

I half-understood his concern because the river was bursting its banks as we stood there outside his house, with the waters cascading over the slightly raised edge on to his lowest field. I reassured him that our objective was not there, but the high flood bank; that there was no low spot to cut us off; and that we would be keeping an eye on the river for any sign of trouble.

The rains had much increased the size of our flash, but I still had high hopes of seeing a few ducks and I set out a couple of decoys hoping to focus any that came within shot. Meanwhile, we contemplated the fact that the river level outside our flood bank was at least 4ft higher than our splash and it was ripping towards the Solway at almost whitewater-rafting speed.

"The river was ripping towards the Solway at whitewater-rafting speed"

It was only then that I properly cottoned on to Aitken's concerns. He had lived with that river for more than 60 years and knew just how easy it was to get caught out by the rising waters. Being used to 10m tides on the south Wales coast, I was very aware of changing water levels on the shore, but watching the 20 acres of the low field go under in 10 minutes, and seeing the potential danger if the floodwaters topped the high bank, gave me a new respect for spate rivers.

Being there was worth it merely for that lesson, both for Pete and me, but we were lucky too. We had almost left it too late, sheltering in the car from the driving rain, but just after we arrived a group of three mallard came, followed by two more small lots. We ended up with three fine fat birds to take home at the end of a memorable flight.

Mike Swan is a keen wildfowler and the senior adviser for the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust.

ALAMY

23rd - 25th FEB 2024

THE BIGGEST THE BEST THE BRITISH

NEC Birmingham

HUNTING, STALKING & CUSTOM SPORTING RIFLES

MASSIVE RANGE OF TOP BRAND SCOPES & OPTICS

NEW IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS

ALWAYS A GREAT ATMOSPHERE AT THE SHOW

GAMEKEEPING SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT

CHECK OUT THE BEST SHOW ONLY OFFERS

AMMUNITION AND RELOADING

BUY ON THE DAY FROM HUNDREDS OF RETAILERS

THE SHOOTERS' SHOW

The premier event in the shooting calendar

The UK's largest retail shooting show

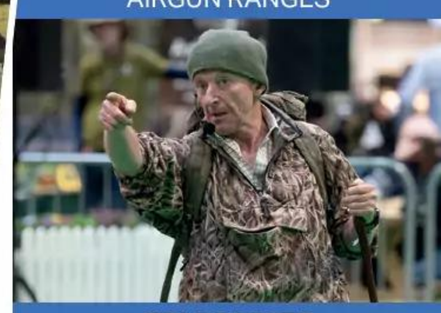
The UK's largest retail shooting show held at the UK's largest and best connected venue - the NEC, Birmingham. Jam packed with the world's leading gun manufacturers and retailers as well as shooting accessories and clothing **which is only shooting related**.

The Show That Everyone's Talking About...

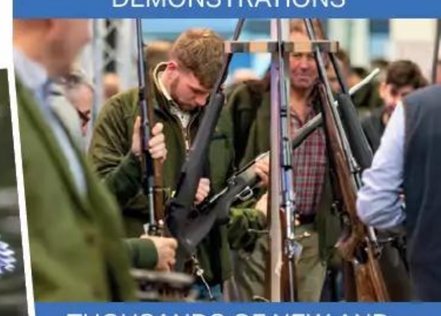
THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING SHOW

GUN REVIEW · FIELDSPORTS Channel EST 2009 · THE FIELD · FIELDSPORTS · The National Gamekeepers' Organisation · The Countryman's Weekly

TRY YOUR SKILL ON THE AIRGUN RANGES



FIELDSPORTS DEMONSTRATIONS



THOUSANDS OF NEW AND USED SHOTGUNS

MANUFACTURERS STANDS FOR INFORMATION & ADVICE

HUGE SELECTION OF TARGET & TACTICAL RIFLES

VEHICLES AND ACCESSORIES

CLAY SHOOTING EQUIPMENT

GAME COOKING DEMONSTRATIONS

Official show partners

Pinewood SCANDINAVIAN OUTDOOR LIFE · ARTEMIS OUTDOORS

ISUZU THE PICK-UP PROFESSIONALS

23rd, 24th & 25th February 2024

At the NEC, Birmingham

SHOW TIMES: 09:00 - 16:00

BOOK ONLINE & SAVE

GET A FREE DIGITAL COPY OF THE FIELD MAGAZINE WITH EVERY TICKET ORDER!

shootingshow.co.uk

Giles Catchpole

Country Diary

It's the end of the season; all of those 'last days' have gone and it's time to clean your kit and put it all away – unless you're a wildfowler

The final shoots — beaters' days and the keepers' day — are great fun but mark the season's end

The final week of the season is taken up with beaters' days. Well, some are beaters' days and some are cocks-only days, others are keepers' days. Time was when there was a tenants' day and a day for the resident agent as well. I dare say that on large and traditional estates there still are.

There was also a time when the Guns would turn out to beat on beaters' day to demonstrate their appreciation for the effort put in across the season but, again, that is a tradition that has largely gone by the board.

"Just as well," one of my beating colleagues opined, "if they beat as well as they shoot, we wouldn't see a bird all day."

Since the beating and picking-up teams together number a couple of dozen regulars, we divide into three teams of eight Guns and stand for a couple of drives each. It's a fun day with plenty of commentary, both positive and negative.

Hare shoots

Not long ago early February would also have featured organised hare shoots where much larger teams — 40 Guns was not uncommon, half walking, half standing — would assemble for the purpose. It was a specialised operation and carefully managed by the keepers.

I used to enjoy it very much. Not because I particularly liked killing hares but because it was a wonderful opportunity to meet and mingle with a select crowd of country people whom you don't routinely get the chance to talk to. It was a rare privilege. I don't know if anyone does it now. Perhaps they just don't ask me any more.

"Dog drool, claret splashes and sausage butty drips make a feast for a moth"

There are some jobs associated with the end of the season. The first is to clean and store all the formal shooting gear. Tweeds need to be dry-cleaned before being put away. Moths love tweed but dirty tweed is a feast. Blood, sweat, dog drool, soup spots, beer stains, claret splashes, cake crumbs, sausage butty drips and crisp crumbs are a dream menu for the little devils. If you don't want to find the front of your favourite britches chewed to lace, down to the cleaners with them. And coal tar soap in the pockets when they come back, if you want to be on the safe side. Which you do.

Cartridge bags, gun sleeves, belts, gloves and boots can all do with a wipe down at the very least. A good going-over with saddle soap is never a bad thing for any leather as a matter of fact. Then a gentle drying — not on the radiator or the top of the stove — before a coat of leather balm and a buff.

If you are not going to use the gun again for a while, a deep clean before it goes back in the cupboard is advisable. Wet, both rain and snow, is an obvious risk to polished surfaces but blood — from hands that have been carrying game, for example — is an absolute destroyer. So be sure to check carefully under fore-ends and round trigger-guards where sticky fingers may have gripped.

Of course, if you are a hardened wildfowler who has three weeks of dyke-diving below the high-water mark in pursuit of fowl still to enjoy, all of this is academic; although I suspect that most of your gear will be different from your game days. A different gun – probably 3in magnum semi-automatic (*see p34*), and different clothes — waders, thermals, fleeces and combats. Probably only the hat and the dog remain the same. Actually, only the dog.

And then it will be time for the roost shooting. It's perhaps sensible to get in a couple of pints for the keeper — or a bottle of his preferred tipple — so your name is on the list when the covers and copses are being allotted.

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

RICHARD FAULKS

R&B SPORTING

Side by Side

with the shooting community since 2006

VOTE NOW!

SHOOTINGUK.CO.UK

Retailer of the year

The Great British Shooting Awards 2024

Proudly supported by PULSAR

Presented by FIELDSPORTS PRESS

Sponsored by THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING SHOW · EUROPE ATN · BROWNING

Shotguns • Rifles • Clothing • Optics • Repairs

01989 763859 rbsporting.co.uk

Units 5 & 6, Cropper Row, Haigh Industrial Estate, Ross-on-Wye. HR9 5LA

Chris Rogers is a deer manager in East Anglia, CIC head measurer and NGO committee member

Stalking Diary

Escorting clients helps the estate turn a profit, but culling is vital and taking a suitable beast often requires experience and a bit of good luck

January is halfway through our female open season in England. We're once again flat out with clients as we try to juggle the cull requirements and the income we generate from commercial outings. This income covers the cost of my employment and makes the deer side of the estate's sporting activities a profit-making enterprise.

Although there was talk of it last year, we are now entering the woodland grant scheme under the raft of new countryside grants from the government called ELMs (environmental land management). Under the grants, landowners can obtain specific payments for helping with deer management, grey squirrel control and other forestry elements such as rides and fencing. From discussions with contacts, it seems almost all landowners with woodland blocks large enough to qualify for such payments will be applying for this — and why wouldn't they? They need to recoup income lost from Brexit.

Value for money to the taxpayer is paramount and it's likely that, if estates don't hold up their end of the bargain, the money will stop. Successful applicants will be trying to cull more deer across the species they have. At the same time, we will be trying to retain our valued deerstalking clients, some whom have been coming out with me for more than 20 years.

Lifespan

It's going to be a busy few years in the woodland, with thinning, coppicing, ride edge reconstruction and fencing where required. This is all to be carried out within three years of the five-year grant lifespan.

We will also be buying more high seats to aid with culling. This will be helpful for me personally, as it will result in less movement of our existing seats at different times of the year. Deer damage enclosures must to be set up and fixed-point photography locations will need to be started to help monitor any changes in habitat as the years pass. And finally, deer impact assessments must be carried out each year.

With the high deer density all over East Anglia, it will be a challenge to get to a point when deer numbers remain low enough without totally wiping out deer in our landscape. The herding species probably present the biggest challenge to us because they move in and out — sometimes within a day or two — as culling or game shooting moves them around the local and wider areas.

More high seats on the estate means less moving them around during the course of the year

With a recent cold snap and limited edible crops around the estate, the red deer have grouped up in large numbers. While impressive to see, it makes them harder to cull because the more of them there are, the easier it is for them to spot us. Culling individuals is more difficult as they are generally standing in front of each other.

And if stalks are successful, it makes the remaining herd even more wary of the slightest movement that might result in a shot coming their way. Culling these deer with clients becomes increasingly difficult. We limit clients to roe and muntjac unless they are experienced, and the scenario offers an easy chance to take a red.

In terms of weekly cull results, the numbers are up and down as weather, deer density and stalking client bookings fluctuate, allowing me time to stalk the reds. The most important thing is to make the most of the opportunities as they arise. Getting into a shooting position before first light is the most productive way to cull the reds at this time of year. Once the first shot is fired, the number that are taken is largely a result of luck.

"If stalks are successful, it makes the remaining herd even more wary"

For stalking opportunities, email ***eustondeerhunting@yahoo.co.uk***

BRX1

FAST • ACCURATE • RELIABLE

£1,500
Scope sold separately

NOW in .243Win and 6.5CRM

High viz double stack polymer magazine

Easy adjust trigger to 3 weight settings

3 position safety

Picatinny mounting system

The BRX 1 is a revolution in rifle design, developed over many years to bring true innovation at a reasonable cost. The NATO validated linear reloading system delivers incredible cycling speeds with pinpoint accuracy. The locking system employs a rotating bolt head with 8 lugs (16 for magnum calibres) for maximum safety.

The innovative design allows the user to switch the bolt and extraction side from right to left without the need for tools. Barrel interchangeability allows multiple calibres to be used on one action, ideal for foreign hunts. Stock and bolt ergonomics allow the shooter to keep focus on the target and maximise accuracy. The BRX 1 is simply the most innovative rifle of this century and is now also available in .243Win and 6.5CRM.

Calibres Available:
.243Win/ .308/ .30-06/ 6.5CRM/ .300WMag

Calibre conversion kits available for 2024 delivery
SRP: £850.00

Barrel Length	MT	Twist Rate	Calibres
20"	14x1	1-11"	.243Win /.308 /.30-06
22.5"		1-8"	6.5CRM
22.5"		1-11"	.308 /.30-06 /.300WMag
24.5"		1-11"	.300WMag

GMK

For further product information and details please call GMK on 01489 587500 or visit www.gmk.co.uk

BERETTA

BER_BRX0623_Ad

On the Campaign Trail

Tim Bonner

Great sport might be harder to come by but it can still be found in unexpected places – the only failure would be in not looking for it

My oldest boy is at what he calls a university, although people of my vintage still consider an agricultural college. The curriculum does not seem to have changed with its name and the compulsory elements remain racing at Cheltenham, beer, rugby and, of course, shooting.

Given his father's failure to have either inherited a large estate or earned even a small fortune, he does not have ready access to driven shooting to repay the various invitations he has received. Instead, for the past couple of years, he has taken a group of friends to the farm on the north coast of Scotland his grandfather, a London lawyer, bought in the 1970s.

Next to my desk at home is a photo of three students from a far superior, but now defunct, agricultural college 30 years ago with about 25 greylags and a smattering of ducks on our return from a trip to the same farm. It was our first wildfowling trip and, fired by the spirit of *BB* and other *Shooting Times* fowling writers, we approached it very much on a wing and a prayer.

We navigated the epic 600-mile-plus journey, searched for geese, knocked on farmers' doors for permission and, on one particularly memorable afternoon, experienced an epic flight as thousands of geese battled back through a gale from a large field of unharvested barley to the loch where they were roosting.

My wonderful springer, Oscar, who was allegedly a more attendant student than me, picked ducks and geese, and hunted snipe from the bogs. We drank beer in the pub by the harbour and, miraculously, avoided fights with trawlermen.

Wild cocker

Three decades later the memories remain strong and the next group of students are knocking on the same doors, flighting the same lochs and drinking in the same pubs. They have not done as well on the geese, although plenty of ducks have been put in the bag, and the boy has a wild cocker, rather than a perfectly trained springer.

Otherwise very little has changed, although the new generation has gone further than we dared back in the day and braved the local nightclub.

Tim recalls his perfectly trained spaniel that picked ducks and geese and hunted snipe in a bog

I have spent many happy weeks in the far north chasing wildfowl and latterly with more focus on fishing for wild trout. There is a sweet spot at the end of September and beginning of October when we have had great fishing, shot snipe and flighted ducks on the stubbles. Any would be worth the journey north, but all three together in the same few days is exceptional.

"We approached our first fowling trip on a wing and a prayer"

In the second lockdown summer I went north in June with one of the boys from that student picture taken 30 years ago. We had some spectacular fishing, with several 2lb wild browns topped by a 4lb monster from a flow country loch in the middle of a bog.

The point of all this, if there is one, is that despite dwindling salmon stocks, the increasingly expensive ritual of driven game shooting and the gloom around biodiversity decline, there are still adventures to be had for those who are willing to go looking.

Great sport is neither easy to reach nor guaranteed and can often end without much in the bag. I purposely did not write "end in failure" because the only failure would be not looking in the first place. I have had plenty of memorable flights that have ended without a shot being fired, and walked miles to lochs which I would swear did not even hold a fish — except that I had evidence to the contrary. None of those would I ever consider a failure and none attracted the gloom of a driven day that missed its bag by 25 birds.

I hope the boy will look back on his trips north in 30 years' time with not only happy memories but also an understanding of what great sport is and where to find it. In the meantime, he has stirred up urges in the older generation and there is talk of getting the band back together for a reunion in the north. Apart from anything else, we need to show those young whippersnappers how the job is done properly, and there is that nightclub.

Tim is the chief executive of the Countryside Alliance. He has hunted a pack of beagles, pursues wild trout and is a passionate wildfowler and rough shooter. To join the Countryside Alliance, visit: bit.ly/43pGZus

DAVID HUDSON

PRESENTED BY

FIELDSPORTS PRESS

The Great British Shooting Awards | 2024

Proudly supported by

PULSAR

A CELEBRATION *of* THE BRITISH SHOOTING INDUSTRY

SPONSORED BY

THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING SHOW

EUROPE ATN

BROWNING

The Great British Shooting Awards aims to give recognition to the products, organisations and people that make our industry tick. From cartridges to clothing, the awards will represent every bit of our market.

HAVE YOUR SAY! VOTE NOW!

WWW.SHOOTINGUK.CO.UK

Bamboozled by the noise and fury

When it's time to target the migratory woodcock, you work for every chance you get to take this wild harvest

WRITTEN BY MILES MALONE ◆ PHOTOGRAPHY BY CALLUM MCINERNEY-RILEY

The meeting point, set among the gently rolling, close-hedged fields of north Essex, was already busy on my arrival. There was the bustle of organisation and the tireless excitement of cocker spaniels, whose perpetual tail-wagging had already reached such a level that the motion was oscillating their entire bodies.

Walked-up shooting brings to me a similar sense of heightened expectation, mixed with a heady dose of nostalgia. This was how I made my first tentative steps into shooting, walking hedgerows as a child, eagerly gripping my ancient .410. Those were days when bagging a rabbit felt like a triumph, shooting an elusive wild cock pheasant cause for near hysteria.

Overlooked corners

It was with the same excitement that I joined this gathering, preparing for a day of rough shooting, to walk the boundaries and overlooked corners, away from the main drives, to shoot over hard-hunting spaniels and find what we may.

The countryside here had been waterlogged after the deluges of November and subsequently frozen solid. Now, with the thaw, the conditions were somewhere between the two, and it was hoped this would attract migrating woodcock. They might drop in for feed and shelter, now able to needle the softening ground with their long, elegant beaks. It was also hoped that the ongoing »

The Guns split into teams to walk-up the wild bird covers and hedgerows

Rough shooting

Shoot captain Mark Johnson uses his grandfather's damascus-barrelled hammergun from 1897

hard weather on the Continent would further encourage the movement of these beautiful birds on their westward migration.

The voluntary ban on shooting woodcock before 1 December – to protect the resident birds from over-shooting – is strictly adhered to on this shoot, and this was to be the first chance of the season. The emphasis, as always, was upon restraint and a small, sustainable harvest, with Guns only shooting what they would personally eat.

Scattered

Splitting into two teams, we first walked blocks of cover and thick hedgerows to each other. The wild bird covers remained thick with kale, quinoa and arched-over stems of dried sunflowers. They seemed to be doing their job, as fieldfares scattered as we pushed though, tiny wrens hopped from stem to stem and, in the distance, a kestrel hovered, seemingly motionless, save the intermittent twitch of steadying wings.

The outer covers proved sparse for game, with the zigzagging spaniels raising only a single woodcock and a crafty wild cock pheasant, both

"A pigeon made the wrong decision and was taken with a single shot"

of which evaded the Guns. Pigeon control is a constant battle to protect the arable crops on this farm. The disturbed flocks moved constantly between woodland blocks. A single bird made the uncharacteristic decision to cross the standing Gun

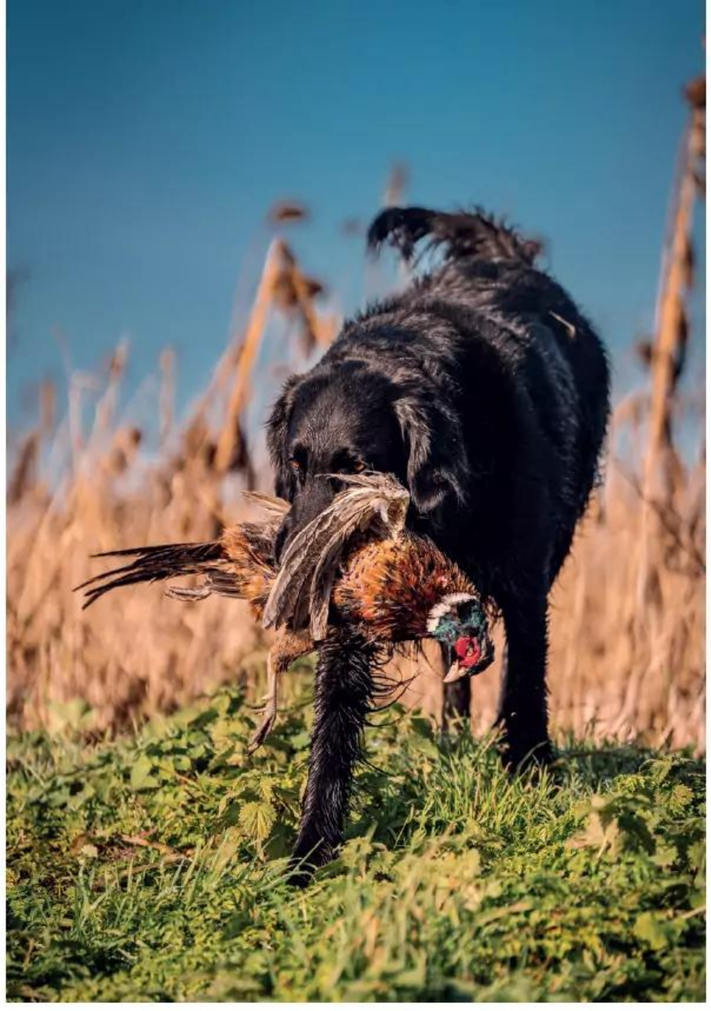
The outer cover is sparse – just a single woodcock and wild cock pheasant are flushed – so the Guns must be alert

One of the efficient picking-up team's dogs is sent for the retrieve

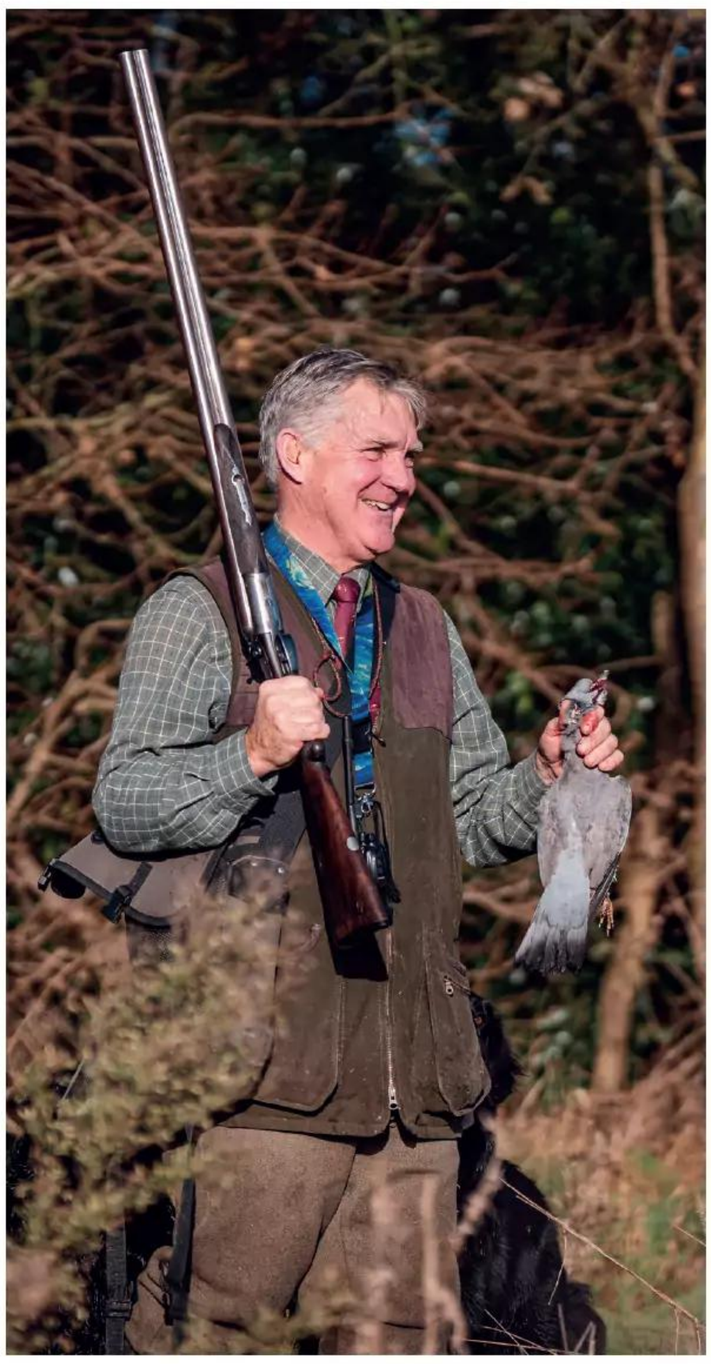
line and was taken with a single shot, spiralling downwards to be collected by flatcoat retriever Alfie.

We methodically worked through different areas, eventually finding pheasants in a long, thick cover strip adjacent to woodland. The driving noses of the spaniels pushed the birds reluctantly from cover, where they had hunched down in concealment. Once roused, wild and wily, they flew fast, low and curling to attempt to avoid the waiting Guns. The shoot captain, Mark Johnson, using his grandfather's damascus-barrelled hammergun, a stunning Charles Hollis from 1897, soon found his mark, dropping a hen bird.

Rough shooting provides a challenge that often bamboozles even the most competent of Shots. We have become so accustomed to standing upon our pegs, with birds flown to us by beaters, as if by order. On rough days things are quite different; a flushing cock pheasant, breaking cover at your feet, all noise and fury, comes inevitably when you are least prepared, halfway across a ditch or



Not all the wily pheasants manage to outwit the Guns and this one is brought to hand



With valuable crops on the farm, adding a pigeon to the bag is a part of the service

battling a particularly impenetrable stand of bramble.

A chance that looks unmissable can easily result in a pair of shots with nothing more than a red face to show for them. This was a different form of shooting, requiring an instinct for where game may be holding, a constant awareness of safe arcs of shot and innate understanding of the whereabouts of the working dogs. We were understandably reticent to engage low, departing shots and ground game is rarely permitted now on organised days.

Impressive

All these concerns came to me in a rush as a hare rose from its scrape, accelerating hard and making for the hedge line. As last Gun, there was nobody beyond and I waited for a clear window to shoot. Confident that no dog was hard behind, and with the hare now at full stretch, I pressed the gun through and fired. It rolled to the shot and came to rest, lying still upon the bank. Jim Collins's field trial champion labrador, Gus, impressively made little work of the retrieve and we were soon moving forward again.

Being our turn to stand, we spread out across a narrow belt of woodland, hugging the contour of the valley base. This sheltered strip forms a haven for woodcock; it's marshy from gushing springs and trickling field drains, with fallen trees holding back natural splashes, and intermittent beds of reed and stands of alder.

The walking team could be heard distantly approaching, their shots launching pigeons skywards from the length of the wood. A vixen slunk ahead of them, moving forward ↠

The Guns spread out across a narrow band of woodland, keeping a look out for woodcock

then abruptly changing direction on picking up our scent. More distant shots and, following them, a high pigeon crossed the canopy opening and, remarkably, fell to my shot. I had barely reloaded when a woodcock appeared unheralded between the poplars. The first shot connected and the second finished the job. Shortly, I could hear Jim retrieving behind.

Fast and strong

A double shot came from the far left of the wood but its source was hidden by a wall of cover between us. A cock bird noisily flushed ahead, followed by excited encouragement from the approaching line, finally appearing above the trees, flying fast and strong. It landed heavily behind, among the thick mass of brambles, but I could hear it marked and the dogs busily making progress to retrieve.

Another woodcock passed low, fast and silent. Never offering a safe chance, it flitted between straggling trees to leave the wood unsaluted. Another dropped in and landed in the clearing ahead, only to rise again suddenly, departing as had the first. A shot sounded again from the approaching team and another woodcock was seen dropping from above the canopy, soon to be collected by the dogs below. "Woodcock forward!" came the call, this time my neighbour's turn and a single barrel spoke from my left.

Our eyes strained to see into the woodland gloom now as we awaited the next silent appearance. Despite concentrated anticipation, the woodcock was almost upon me before I could react, momentarily only feet away before turning, wings outstretched and jinking, turning again and departing through the wood edge. The gun came up and I fired instinctively at the very moment the bird vanished from sight. I could not see it fall but felt the shot was good and marked the spot, ready for the assistance of the retrievers.

My last chance came from the left. Presented as if an oil on canvas, above the bramble and framed by leafless trees, a striking silhouetted woodcock. The bird fell close by and, soon after, the approaching line of walking Guns began to appear. The job of retrieving was busily under way, with Gus and Elsa working the ground for the marked birds.

The two closer woodcock were soon picked and only the last, the distant-departing bird that had passed from view, remained. The unrelentingly thick cover was challenging but shortly the bird was found and brought to hand, beauty in every detail, elegance in form. It was the perfect end to a memorable day, with every bird picked. We left the woods as a group, with dusk setting in, a pair of mallard already circling above, heading for the flightpond.

By the standards of driven days, the bag laid before us may seem meagre. Yet each bird was celebrated, each shot remembered. It was with contented tiredness that we examined the birds. We had made our own opportunities, worked for our chances and taken a wild harvest, only a fraction of what we had seen on the wing, yet enough and no more.

As I drove homeward, I thought of all I had experienced and that I may have missed on a driven day; of the tireless hunting spaniels, of the pursuit of wild birds and of great retrieves from deep cover. This day encompassed the meeting of both shooting and hunting. Awakening old instincts, something deep and primitive, that connect us to the land and the wildlife we share it with. I had truly returned to my roots.

The sheltered strip of woodland is a haven for woodcock but provides a challenge for the Guns

"The final woodcock was brought to hand, beauty in every detail, elegance in form"

The Guns leave the wood as dusk sets in, after a memorable day — the bag meagre by some standards but every shot remembered

J.P. SAUER & SOHN

ESTABLISHED 1751

NEW

DESIGNED TO BE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BOLT ACTION RIFLE IN THE WORLD. THE NEW SAUER 505.

Even the most passionate hunter will feel their heart skip a beat the first time they lay eyes on the new Sauer 505. Slender, beautiful and smooth, this rifle is a joy to hold and behold. An ergonomic rifle and stock design that perfectly combines elegance and dynamics. A feeling of pride whenever you see it, feel it, mount it, and shoot it.

Perfect technology, masterful design. No surprise that owners of a Sauer not only appreciate but truly cherish their rifles. Worldwide. Across generations. In every moment.

THE NEW SAUER 505.
A NEVER ENDING LOVE.

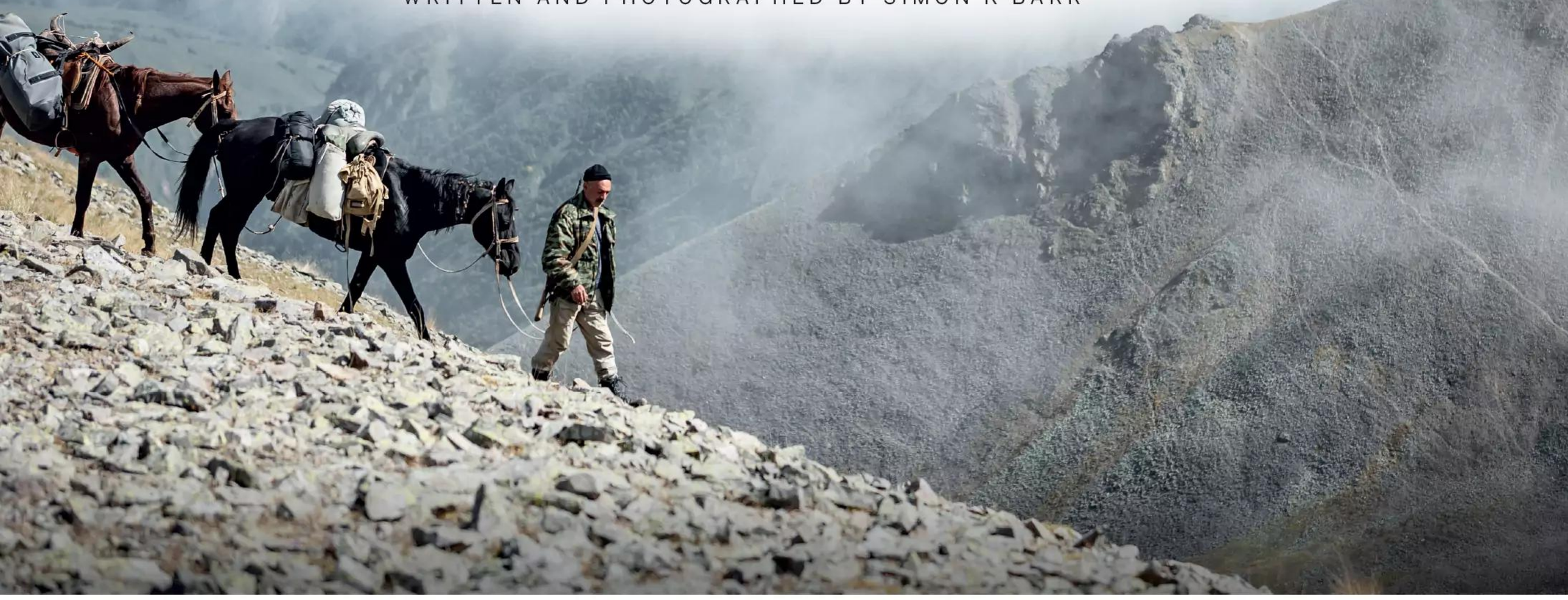
www.sauer.de

Firearms and ammunition can only be sold to permit holders. Please understand the legal regulations for the usage of silencers and clip-on devices in your area and note that not every country allows their use. BLASER GROUP | MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS © 2023

Where one good tur deserves another

High in the Caucasus, where the air is thin and the going treacherous, the goat-like tur provide a unique challenge

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY SIMON K BARR



A few years ago, Steve Hornady and I booked to hunt for mid-Caucasian tur in Russia. It had long been an ambition of mine to hunt with Steve. I'd known him for many years, but this would be my first trip with him, having to previously postpone. As Steve blithely put it: "I bought a new hip and had my orthopaedist fit it for me." Now with a new hip, Steve was keen to give it a mountain workout – remarkable given he would be turning 69 in a few short weeks.

We were eager to get going once we arrived to Mineralnye Vody, just north of Georgia. Six checks had been performed on my rifle from home to my final destination, with endless scrutiny and stamping of documents. Hoping to get some rest before what was sure to be a tough journey to camp, it was a relief to hear that we'd be spending a night in the town.

But there was a sudden change in plans. Herded into a vehicle, it wasn't entirely clear what was going on. We trundled away through the dark streets of the town, stopping once in a back alley to hand over our passports to a figure shrouded in darkness. It didn't fill us with confidence but, Steve reassured me, this was completely normal, having hunted in Russia many times before.

Through the night we drove south towards the Caucasus, finally stopping at 5am. The light was just beginning to show us what we'd be up against. Verdant hills surrounded us, with distant peaks glimpsed through the early morning cloud.

Promising

Finally, we were granted a few hours' sleep, before zeroing rifles, sorting gear and stripping our luggage to the minimum for the steep climb ahead. Next, we sat with the guides, poring over maps of the region, looking at promising areas and deciding where we'd set camp. Steve and I agreed to hunt together, despite being told we'd have more chance if we split – an experience shared is an experience doubled, after all.

Under the cover of darkness the following morning, we hoisted ourselves on to horses and set off. The soft curves of the hills that had seemed benevolent the previous day soon became steep, and the sheep's wool that covered the saddle failed to cushion its hard iron framework. As we made our way through the green pasture, passing a herd of yak, trees grew ever more scarce and it wasn't long before we were above the treeline, the misty morning thankfully hiding what lay before us.

All day we rode, covering some nine miles and gaining 5,000ft in elevation. The only respite from the hard saddle came at points too steep for the horses, when we'd get off and lead them. Finally, towards the end of the afternoon, we stopped, pitched our tents among the clouds at 9,500ft

and collapsed. It was becoming apparent that our guides weren't the sympathetic type – tough and inscrutable, the most common phrase we heard was "come, come, come!" I was in my sleeping bag by 5pm, exhausted – and besides, sitting at the campfire wasn't an option with the blisters brought on by those saddles, I could only lie or stand.

Determined

After a restless night under canvas, sleeping on rocks, the views of the mountains were refreshing and the chill in the air better than any morning coffee hit. We didn't hang about, our guides Omar and Sasha were determined to find us animals, as the weather was clear and on our side all day. As we climbed, I realised I wasn't prepared for this – neither physically nor mentally.

I hadn't been training as much as I normally would before a mountain hunt and, with work life extremely hectic, I was struggling to focus on the task at hand. As anyone who has experienced mountain hunting knows, focus is essential, for we were now on scree, climbing near-vertical slopes with our feet slipping and sliding beneath us.

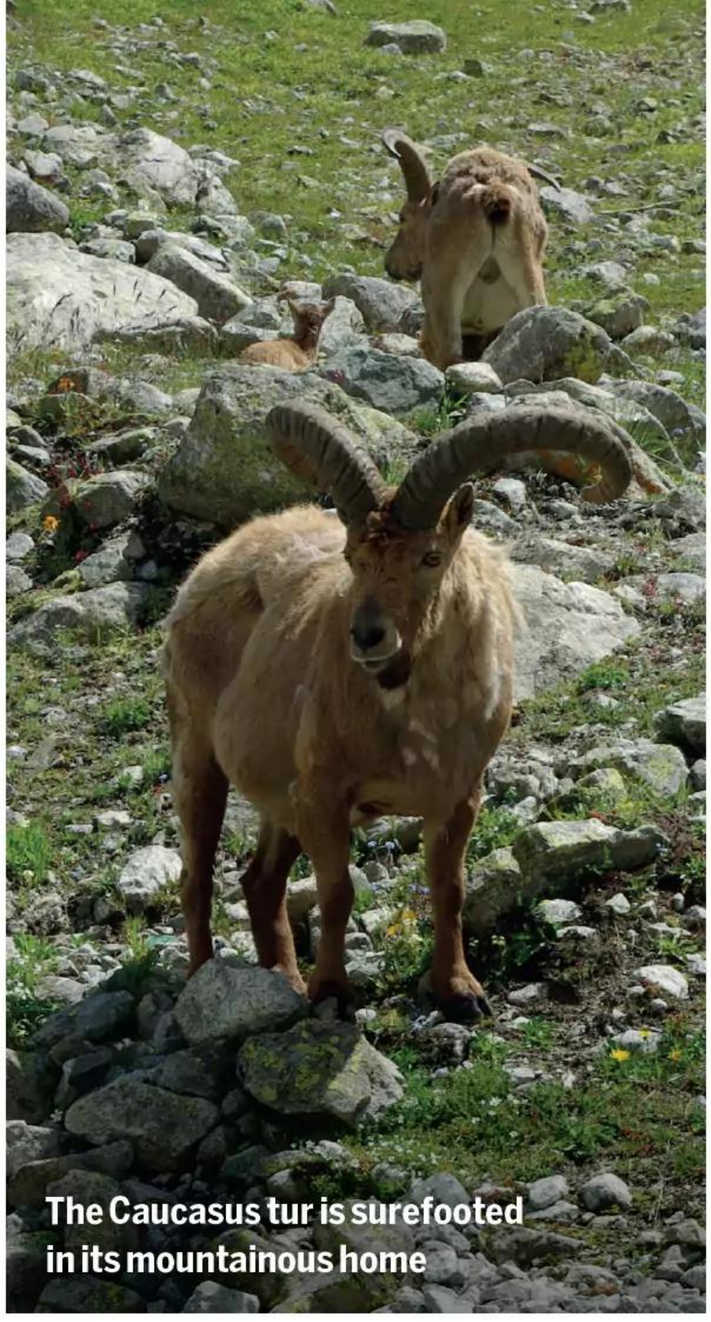
While I was struggling with my own demons, Steve developed crippling leg cramp, the pain clearly agonising. He soldiered on through

"Going down was terrifying; every step was a danger"

it and by lunch time we had gained another 1,500ft. We stopped briefly and the guides had a master plan of nimbly walking around the other side of the mountain to see if they could push some animals towards a bowl we were overlooking on our side. "This never works," I thought.

We were soon in position and set up, finding a good rest for the rifle and scouting the bowl. If this plan came off it would be ideal, as the furthest point was 220 yards. We waited and watched until finally a female tur and one of this year's youngsters ambled into sight, followed shortly after by our guides, who reappeared over the edge of the bowl.

There'd be no easy hunt today. A little disheartened, we headed



The Caucasus tur is surefooted in its mountainous home

back down the mountain desperate to make camp before nightfall, as steep scree slopes are all the more treacherous in the dark.

Steve's cramp returned in the night so, the next morning, he decided to take a day's rest in camp, leaving me to head out. The guides showed me little mercy, never stopping for a breather. After a rather punishing hour after leaving camp and having climbed 1,000ft, it was here that we spotted our first group. However, the scout had seen a more promising prospect in another group, so we decided to try to catch up to them.

The mountains loomed above us, their silence only broken by occasional birdsong and me panting in the thin air as I tried to keep up. Cliffs and boulders scattered the area, but underfoot we were still struggling with small, loose, sharp stones and shale, which required every ounce of concentration. It wasn't long before the scout confirmed what we had feared – the group had starburst and we were heading towards nothing.

It was decided that we would go back and pursue the first group, which we hoped would still be in the area. Keeping up with the guides had been hard going uphill, but it was terrifying going down, every step a danger, sending rocks skipping down to the cliffs below. We'd have to drop another 1,000ft to get into position, the guides told me.

As we started up again, a group of around 17 tur appeared not 80m away. They'd been in dead ground and we had startled them. They were mostly all young but a mature male had been spotted at the back. Amid the gesticulating and rushed words of the guides, I frantically scanned the hard, flat, rocky ground for a good rest, but we had hit a slope with not a single feature other than shale and there was nothing suitable. The tur were moving, and fast, we needed to decide before they disappeared over the ridge.

Milliseconds

We hunters are constantly faced with tricky decisions: whether or not to take a shot, whether the animal is the right age, or whether to wait for a better prospect. It's extraordinary what the brain can process in milliseconds. For those hunters who travel to far-flung destinations, the pressure is immense. It may be the only chance you get and the guide will be urging you on. I had trained up to a steady 400m shot with a dead rest and time to consider my bullet path. I had myriad conflicting thoughts and decisions.

I saw the male– a large, mature animal – running on a line slightly higher than the rest of the group. "It's good, it's good, shoot, shoot!" the ➔

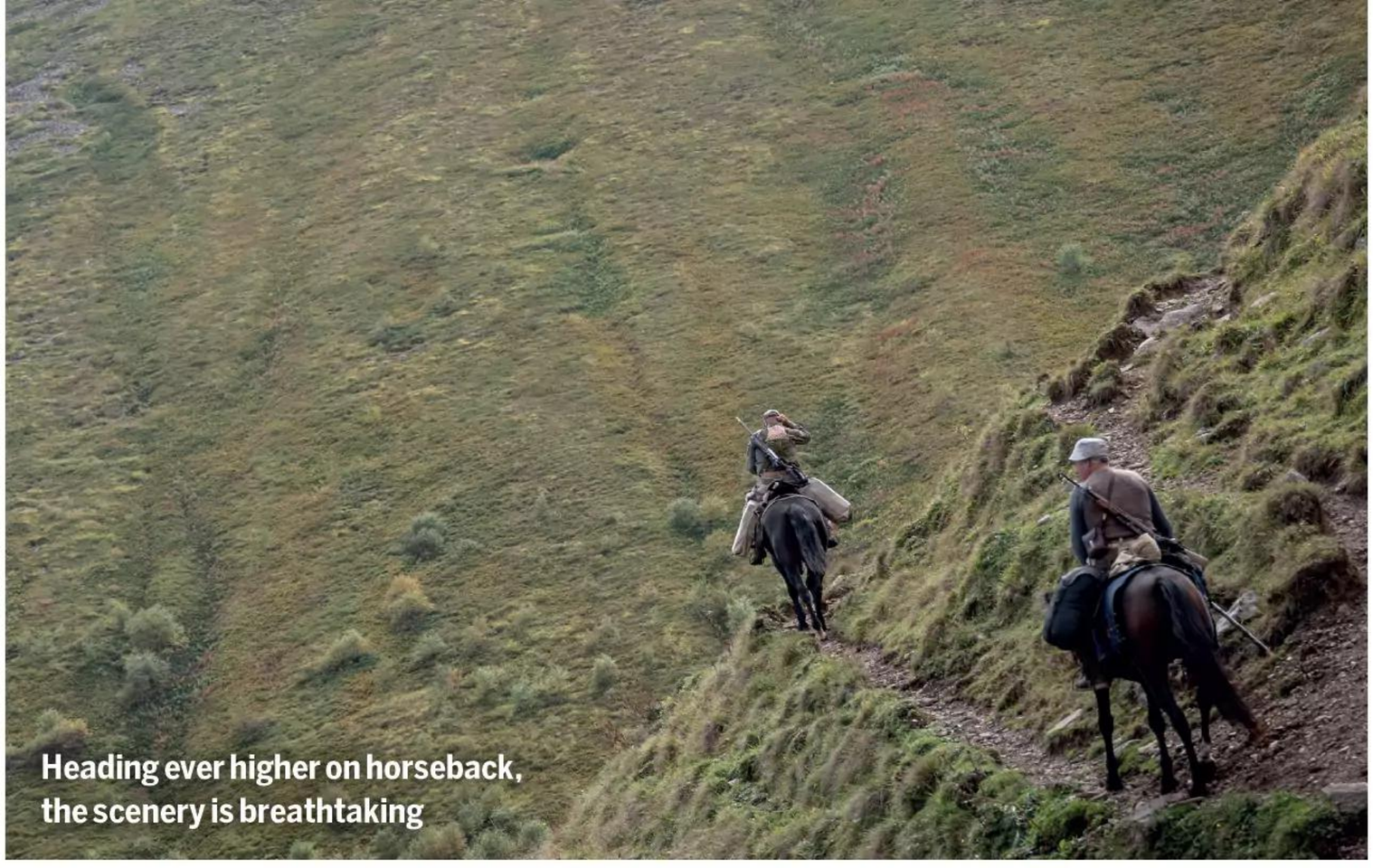
As the group heads higher, they stop briefly to search for signs of the elusive tur

The loose scree makes the going even harder and more dangerous

guide was saying as I took my rifle off my shoulder. "Shoot, shoot!" he urged again.

I had no time to range the shot myself so called for a distance. I knew that by now these animals were a good deal further away than 80m and I'd need to adjust my shot. Not only that, but even as I lowered myself I could feel the ground under me shift, my body sliding about on the scree. "Quick, backpack!" I pleaded to the guide. Precious seconds were lost, the guide too keen for me to take the shot to understand what I needed at first. I grabbed the pack, slid myself down, and found the animal in the scope. "Range, range!" I asked, trying to keep my breathing calm.

The answer wasn't forthcoming. "How far?" I asked again. The guides discussed in Russian, while I tracked the animal in my scope, using all my muscles to stop myself sliding down the slope. Finally they answered:



Heading ever higher on horseback, the scenery is breathtaking

"240m. No, 260m." I adjusted my aim to compensate for the distance, breathed, and fired.

Stones exploded above the momentarily static animal, then it continued on its path, speeding up after being showered with supersonic rock fragments. Textbook mountain shooting error. I overcompensated for distance, particularly with such an acute angle. I was zeroed dead on at 100m. But the angle and thus the horizontal travel of the bullet meant I needed little or no holdover, even with a 200-gr projectile. Using the integrated ballistic calculator of the Leica Geovid binoculars would have told me this, but time had not been on my side to dial nor even range the target myself.

Now or never

I kept tracking the now three-times-as-fast mature male tur, hoping he might stop, while the guide finally gave regular range updates: "270m... 280m... 290m". The animal slowed to tackle the ridge to leave our sight. It was now or never. It paused on the crest, as they do, for a split second, giving me the chance I needed. At 356m, I had no time to think, only to act, before he moved again and out of sight. I knew I aimed high at 260m, so taking this and the new angle and distance into account, I squeezed the trigger and the rifle boomed. The animal disappeared over the ridge and out of sight. Was it a hit or miss?

I was sure I'd hit it but, after the first missed shot and with no visual confirmation from the guide, I started to worry. The terrain where the tur had been was unbelievably steep and far too dangerous for all but the most experienced scout to get to. We had an agonising hour wait, watching the scout clamber up the cliff top to see if there was any sign. As he got to the point at which the tur had been standing, I held my breath. We could see him peering down over the rocks, straining this way and that. Finally, straightening his arm in the air, he gave a signal. Found.

Where the tur died was too precarious for me to get to, a sheer 300m drop below to the ledge he lay upon. The experienced guide caped off the 100kg animal and had to leave the carcass where it lay. It was simply too dangerous to bring it back to camp. However, this meat would not be wasted. This range was a stronghold for the threatened eastern imperial eagle. We had seen several circling the mountains as we hunted and this tur would make good feeding for many eagles for days to come.

Simon waits, ready to take the shot, as the guides scan the cliffs and ledges for signs of tur

"The dead tur would make good feeding for the threatened eastern imperial eagles"

An hour later the guide returned with the unusual-looking horns and cape on his back. This looked like it was from Mordor just beyond Middle Earth, not the Caucusus. Steve had spent the day recovering and making camp somewhat more cheerful, building stone seats around the fire. I could nearly sit again. He shared in my joy and we spent the evening in a more jolly frame of mind, spurred on by success. The deprivations and discomforts of the previous days were soon forgotten and sleep came more easily that night.

The next day dawned and we headed out early. Having rested, Steve was ready for his hunt. It wasn't that the terrain was easier, nor that we were suddenly fitter, but optimism goes a long way, which helps when you have to climb. There was no reappearance of the cramps for Steve and, after a long day's walking, we found a group that included a mature male. This time there was breathing space and a better rifle rest, and Steve took his shot. Unseen, however, was the steep cliff below a ridge and the animal tumbled down, out of view.

By this time, the light was starting to fade and, knowing we had a long descent, there was no option. The guides would have to return for Steve's tur because it was too dangerous to attempt that day.

Inspiration

It was several more days before Steve's tur was found, when we were back among the comforts of home, but I was relieved to hear Steve would have a permanent reminder of our adventure. Hunting with someone who has so much experience of mountain hunting is an inspiration for what I hope to achieve. With some 40 mountain hunts under his belt, Steve has hunted 20 goats and 26 sheep, most of which are from different species.

As he told me when he shared the news that his tur was recovered, he'd found our Russian trip hard. "I'd say this was the most challenging I've been on – my lungs were okay, but the treacherous terrain was tough. And going downhill was plain dangerous."

I think we both underestimated what a challenge this would be.

Simon's kit list

- **Sauer 404 XTC in .300 Win Mag**
  sauer.de
- **Leica Magnus i 1.8-12x50 riflescope**
  leica-camera.com
- **Leica Geovid 10x42 HD-B 3000 binoculars**
  leica-camera.com
- **Hornady 200-gr ELD-X**
  edgarbrothers.com
- **Swazi Tahr Ultralite smock**
  swazi.co.nz
- **Swazi Driback pants**
  swazi.co.nz

For more information about hunting mid-Caucasian tur, visit: ***profihunt.com***

Semi-automatic guns

The best wildfowling gun? It's personal...

The season is over but fowlers can enjoy shooting below the tideline for a little longer. Jonny Carter picks his top guns for such an outing

Wildfowling demands resilience from the shooter, and the guns and equipment they take have to measure up. From the windswept marshes to muddy estuaries, your gun needs to be a reliable partner in the pursuit of these elusive birds. But with a dizzying array of options available, choosing the perfect wildfowling gun can be a daunting task.

Before we go into the guns I have chosen, it's worth taking a minute to discuss other shotgun types. Pump-actions have their place on the marsh; their simple mechanisms are extremely reliable and almost jam-free. By nature they are slower to cycle than a semi-auto but with some practice and training they can be cycled fast enough for sure.

Side-by-sides and over-and-unders can also get the job done but are less weather- and corrosion-resistant than pumps and semis. They have the benefit of being usable in every shooting sport in the UK, but the smaller chambers and lower shot capacity make them a bit less popular.

Cleaning routine

As much as other actions are good, the semi-auto does reign supreme, offering fast follow-up shots, large chamber options and great reliability in the tough conditions they are subjected to. They are not without their downsides, such as having to use appropriate ammunition to guarantee cycling, and implementing a decent cleaning routine (on some models).

So let's look at the specifications of the perfect wildfowling gun to try to narrow down the vast selection of great guns out there. Chamber lengths vary between guns, but in order to take the largest of steel shot goose loads, a 3½in chamber is necessary; 3in chambered guns are fine for ducks and there are even goose-capable cartridges out there in 3in, but having one gun to do everything and take every shell is pretty handy.

Barrel length and chokes are the next consideration. Barrel length is a personal preference, and I have seen wildfowlers use all manner of lengths, but 26in or 28in seem to be the preference for quick handling and general compactness when moving around a marsh.

"Having one gun to do everything and take every cartridge is pretty handy"

In older guns with fixed chokes you really want them to be open to perform best with steel, but every new semi-auto comes as a multichoke so this isn't an issue. Instead, it is worth a good bit of consideration to what choke you put in, not only the constriction but the taper and profile. Each company uses different internal geometry in their chokes and these will perform rather differently in the field. Doing some pattern testing is wise to make sure you make the most of every opportunity nature presents to you.

Weight should be considered but again will be a personal preference, depending on the ground you hunt and your own physical capabilities. Remember also that a lighter gun may be nice to carry for long treks, but it can be harsher to shoot with heavy loads. Finding a balance that suits your shooting style and physique will require you to try a few, so see if you can borrow before you buy.

Tough

Durability should always be a priority over looks, whatever your personal preference. I am a sucker for wood furniture and old-fashioned bluing but wildfowling guns need to be tough. A great wildfowling gun should feature weatherproof finish, synthetic stock and corrosion-resistant internal components.

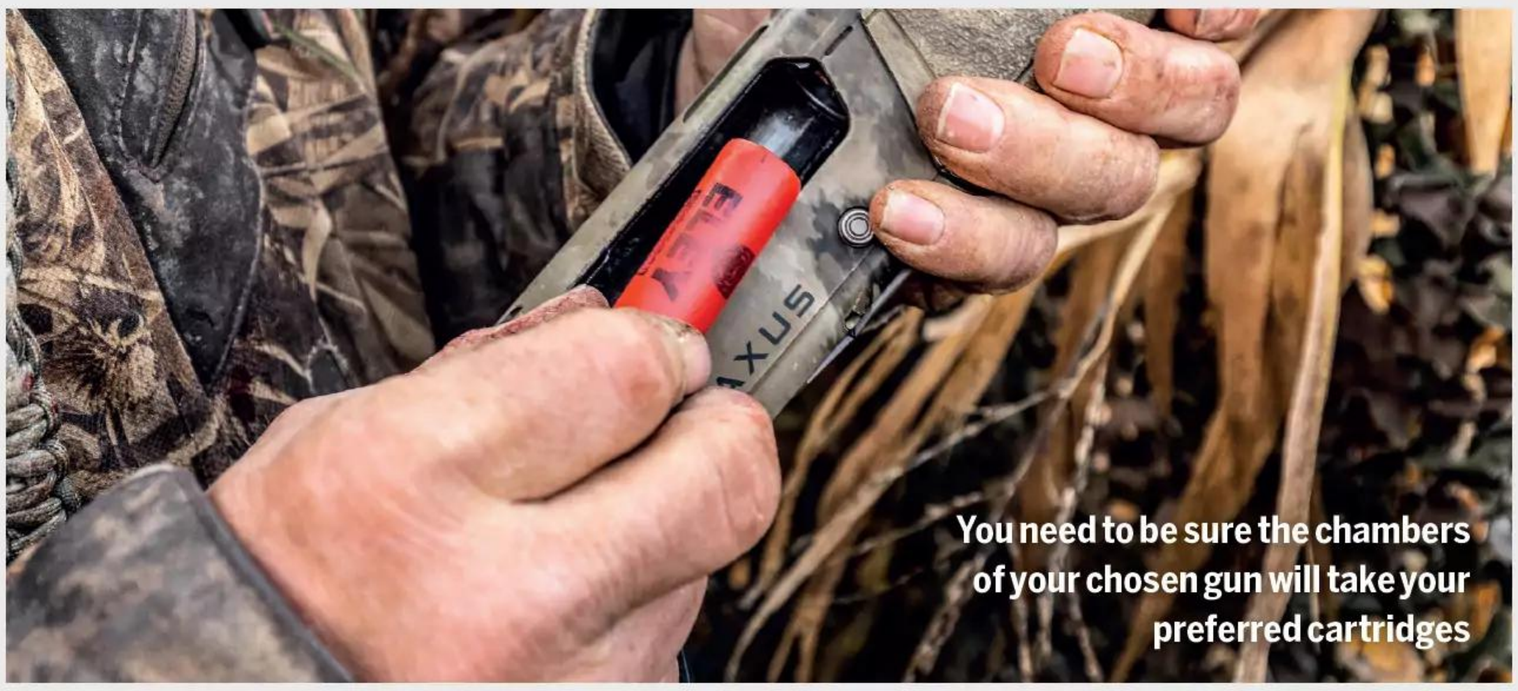
The finishing touch is the front bead sight. Hi-vis sights can be useful in low-light conditions, while fibre-optic sights offer a bright aiming point, but this is a personal preference too and may involve some trial and error to find the best thing for you.

Remember that ultimately the perfect wildfowling gun is the one that fits you best. Take into consideration your shooting style, preferred quarry and the environments you'll be hunting in. Don't hesitate to visit a reputable gun shop and try out different models before making your final decision. Here are five of my favourites.

Jonny's top five semi-autos

- **Beretta A400 Xtreme Plus**
  gmk.co.uk
- **Benelli Super Black Eagle 3**
  gmk.co.uk
- **Browning Maxus 2**
  browning.eu
- **EGE Arms EG 350**
  a-s-i.co.uk
- **Fabarm XLR Composite**
  Available second-hand

RICHARD FAULKS; ANDREW SYDENHAM; SARAH FARNSWORTH; DAN SCHULTZ PHOTO



You need to be sure the chambers of your chosen gun will take your preferred cartridges

BERETTA A400 XTREME PLUS

This gun features a 3½in chamber and gas-operated action. It's available in black synthetic, camouflage finish and, my favourite, green. All these guns feature a corrosion-resistant external finish, synthetic parts and clever corrosion-resistant parts on the inside. This means they do well in the wet, salty environment of the saltmarsh. The gas system on these guns is very well designed and the gun will reliably cycle 2¾in shells down to 28g, but you will have to clean it with some regularity.

The gun also features oversized controls for ease of use while wearing gloves and a Beretta Steelium Plus barrel that will optimise patterning and performance, especially with steel shot. I have shot one of these at pigeons and clays and really enjoy the way it shoots.

The corrosion-resistant finish, both inside and out, make the Beretta A400 the ideal gun for the harsh conditions of the saltmarsh

BENELLI SUPER BLACK EAGLE 3

The SBE 3 is renowned for its inertia-driven action, which runs much cleaner than a gas system. This gas-piston-free system cycles a wide range of loads reliably, from light target shells to hefty 3½in magnums.

This gun's claim to fame is its ComforTech 3 recoil-reduction system. This innovative design features a chevron-shaped gel pad within the stock that absorbs recoil and directs it away from your shoulder. Combined with the shock-absorbing CombTech cheek pad, the SBE 3 lets you fire magnum loads without a flinch.

The SBE 3 isn't only about launching big loads, it's also designed for comfort and control. The gun is lighter than its Beretta and Browning cousins and is a dream to carry and handle. It also comes with enlarged loading port and oversized controls, making it nice and easy to operate as well, which is an improvement on previous designs.

The SBE 3's 3½in chamber might suggest it's solely for big game, but it's true beauty lies in its versatility. With a little tuning of the springs, this gun can cycle small loads as well as the big boys, although if you're intending on shooting a lot of 2¾in ammo, it's probably a better idea to look at the M2.

BROWNING MAXUS 2

When it comes the best semi-automatic shotguns, the Browning Maxus 2 deserves a spot without question. This gun builds upon the success of its predecessor and its maker has refined and updated every aspect to deliver a smooth and reliable shooting experience.

The Maxus 2 has a self-regulating gas operating system that adapts to a wide range of loads, from light target shells to hefty 3½in magnums. Unlike some other gas systems, the Power Drive — as its called — is remarkably clean and efficient, which reduces maintenance.

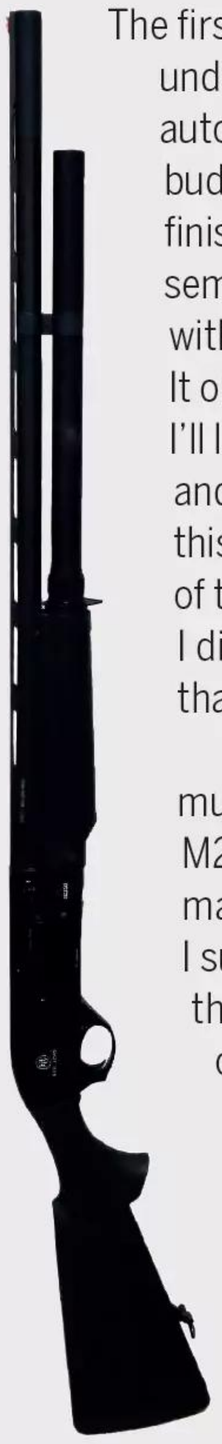
The Maxus 2 tackles recoil with a multi-pronged approach. The butt is finished in one of Browning's Inflex II recoil pads, which does a great job of cushioning your shoulder, while the SoftFlex cheekpiece conforms to your face, absorbing upward recoil.

This blend of features results in a shooting experience that's surprisingly gentle, even with the most vicious of 3½in bangers.

The Maxus 2 isn't just about function; it's a good-looking thing too and I do really like it in the Max 5 camouflage option. These guns are well designed both inside and out and, equally as importantly, they shoot superbly.

The EG 350 only has 3in chambers but is worth considering for its price and quality

EGE ARMS EG 350



The first three guns are undoubtedly premium semi-autos but this one is extremely budget friendly. It's a black-finished, inertia-operated semi-auto, made in Turkey with an RRP under £500. It only has a 3in chamber, but I'll look over that for the price and build quality of the gun in this selection. I have shot one of these in the black finish and I didn't get one jam in more than 300 shots.

Underneath, it's very much inspired by a Benelli M2 and, although it's not made to the same standard, I suspect you aren't buying this to hand down to your children. It's amazing what the autos coming out of Turkey represent on the value-for-money scale, and this gun is up there as one of the best value-for-money guns on the market.

If value for money is what you're looking for, look no further than EGE Arms EG 350

FABARM XLR COMPOSITE

A little bit of a wildcard, but this semi-auto really impressed me when I had a go with it last year. I have always enjoyed the XLR5 Velocity clay gun, and this one is just as nicely made. At 6.9lb in its base configuration, the XLR Composite is a featherweight compared with many other 12-bore shotguns. It also balances very nicely with the majority of weight between the hands.

The gun cycles up to 3½in shells and is a gas-operated design, one that is easy to strip down and clean. The Tribore HP barrels enhance performance by reducing friction in the bore, which helps to improve your shot patterns and should therefore result in cleaner kills.

This manufacturer might not have the following of some of the bigger names, but I have never been let down when shooting one, and have found it an extremely versatile semi-automatic that's worthy of note.

↠ Although the XLR Composite is no longer distributed in the UK, the XLR Columba Palumbus is a great alternative from Fabarm. Vist caesargueriniuk.com for details.

"The best gun is always the one you practise with frequently and are confident in handling"

CONCLUSION

While some of these are iconic semi-autos, the market is a big place for new guns, with hundreds of variations and options and thousands more in the second-hand market. Just make sure the gun feels good to you, has a track record for reliability, and that it can be made to fit you. Remember, the best gun is always the one you practise with and are confident in handling.

My final piece of advice is to invest in a good-quality gun case and cleaning kit to keep this important piece of equipment protected from the mud and performing at its peak everytime you head for wildfowl.

BETTWS HALL

AS ONE SEASON ENDS,

ANOTHER BEGINS...

THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING SHOW
BRITISH SHOOTING SHOW
FEB 23 - 25
STAND B3

Have you got your stock lined up for 2024 with Bettws Hall?

Our Team are ready to help you plan your
Pheasant & Partridge, Chick & Poult requirements.
We deliver to estates throughout the UK supplying
high-quality birds from our trusted family company.

Contact Joe to discuss:

01686 650 628 | joe@bettwshall.com

www.bettwshall.com

Bristol
INCUBATORS LTD

Book a service or pre-season check for your incubators with one of our experienced engineers

Check out our website for our full range of

Single-Stage - Multi-Stage - Trolley Loaded Machines

www.bristolincubators.com

Tel:01454 228730/228416 Freephone:0800 0854 856

Email: enquiries@bristolincubators.com

TAXIDERMY JUNGLE

Dealers in Fine Antique Taxidermy

ANTIQUE TAXIDERMY WANTED

Historical sporting items, cased birds, mammals & fish, glass domes & screens, museum dioramas, shield mounts, rugs & unusual objects of natural history, Victorian oddities, taxidermy-related ephemera and items in need of repair. All items carefully considered. Free valuations & advice.

Email: sales@taxidermyjungle.co.uk
Web: www.taxidermyjungle.co.uk
Tel: 07525 785854

Items Pre-1947 and/or CITES compliant

A well-trained gundog may only work for 10 days of the season

Choose enjoyment

Managing your expectations and being honest about your dog's ability is key to getting the most pleasure from them, says Ryan Kay

I HAVE SOME competitive customers, who take their training very seriously. Often they want to arrive at their end goal as quickly as possible, whether it's beating, picking-up, rough shooting or competing, or a combination of any of these working tasks. They see the vision clearly and they're certain they're going to get there, no matter what obstacles crop up.

I'm equally driven to help them and I admire their enthusiasm. However, without trying to quash their eagerness, I sometimes find it hard to explain that, although ambition and goals are a necessity, there are also many factors beyond their control, which may interrupt those dreams.

I understand this sounds a little "glass half-empty", but anyone who's trained a gundog to a good standard knows that the route may be far from straightforward. A new problem can pop up just when you think you've got all the bases covered and every aspect is sorted. Most issues for the mainstream breeds can be overcome.

Yet sometimes – despite everything else falling into line and all the required factors in place or moving along nicely – there's one component that's understandably hard to acknowledge or accept, and that's the possibility that their dog is simply not good enough for their aim.

"We arrive at a very difficult conversation that no dog owner really wants to hear"

What can be frustrating from a teaching point of view is when I can see all the ingredients are there for success. I see a handler with the skills and consistency when delivering methods, with access to a perfect training ground to aid progression at a quicker rate. I see an owner so intent on getting everything right that it becomes all-consuming.

Expectations

But when I also see that their dog simply doesn't have the natural ability needed to live up to the handler's expectations, we arrive at a very difficult conversation that no owner really wants to hear. And why would they? Surely there's no reason why their dog, that they train so hard with, that they love and adore, feed the best food to, provide the comfiest bed to, shouldn't make it all the way to achieving the goal they set out.

ANDY HOOK ANNA POZZI - ZOOPHOTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK; PETER CRIPPS/SHUTTERSTOCK

We're lucky here at FarlaVale, as we have some very talented dogs. But we also have the odd dog that is pretty untalented. I've often thought: "What if one of these was my only dog?" I'd be in the same situation as the enthusiastic customer whose aspirations are higher than the dog's capabilities.

So somewhere along the training journey, we'll have a conversation about trying to make the dog the best it can be, then be happy with that. Because if we try to go beyond that, the enjoyment starts to fade for everyone because the training successes become fewer. I try to help customers arrive at a decision when it comes to enjoying their dog by asking what's most important to them. I'm always advocating to those starting out or even to those who've been at it a few years, "enjoy the journey, It's often the best part".

Those people keen to have a well-trained dog have the right idea and I certainly think everyone should aspire to that. But to get things into perspective, many owners could be talking about enjoying 10 days a year through the shooting season on a small syndicate shoot, perhaps coupled with a bit of pigeon decoying in the spring or autumn months. What about the other 350-plus days? If a chunk of that is made up of regular training, great, but don't forget to enjoy that part too.

Switching off

I had a customer once who wanted a well-trained dog for his shoot days. This chap owned some land and loved his daily walks through his own fields and along the boundaries. It was all fenced in and, of course, it held a small population of local wildlife, such as rabbits, partridges and the odd pheasant. Here, he would switch off, push his hands in his pockets and let his spaniel run about, which usually ended with a chase or two. I presented him with the choice: 10 days of shooting or 355 days walking freely around his land?

He understood that for there to be any chance of a stress-free shoot day, when he could enjoy some nice in-control dog work, that the relaxing walks where the dog ran wild would have to stop. He chose the walks. It was his land and his prerogative. He simply chose what gave him the most enjoyment.

RYAN'S VIEWPOINT

HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY

The curious incident of the dog in the flight time

Cryptorchidism is when one or both testicles fail to drop into the scrotum. It's a fairly common hereditary congenital defect and it's something we often see in cocker spaniels. We have seen it more frequently in a particular line of cockers, a line that is also known for being quite closely bred. A retained testicle has a greater chance of occurring within that line because the faulty genes are present in both parents.

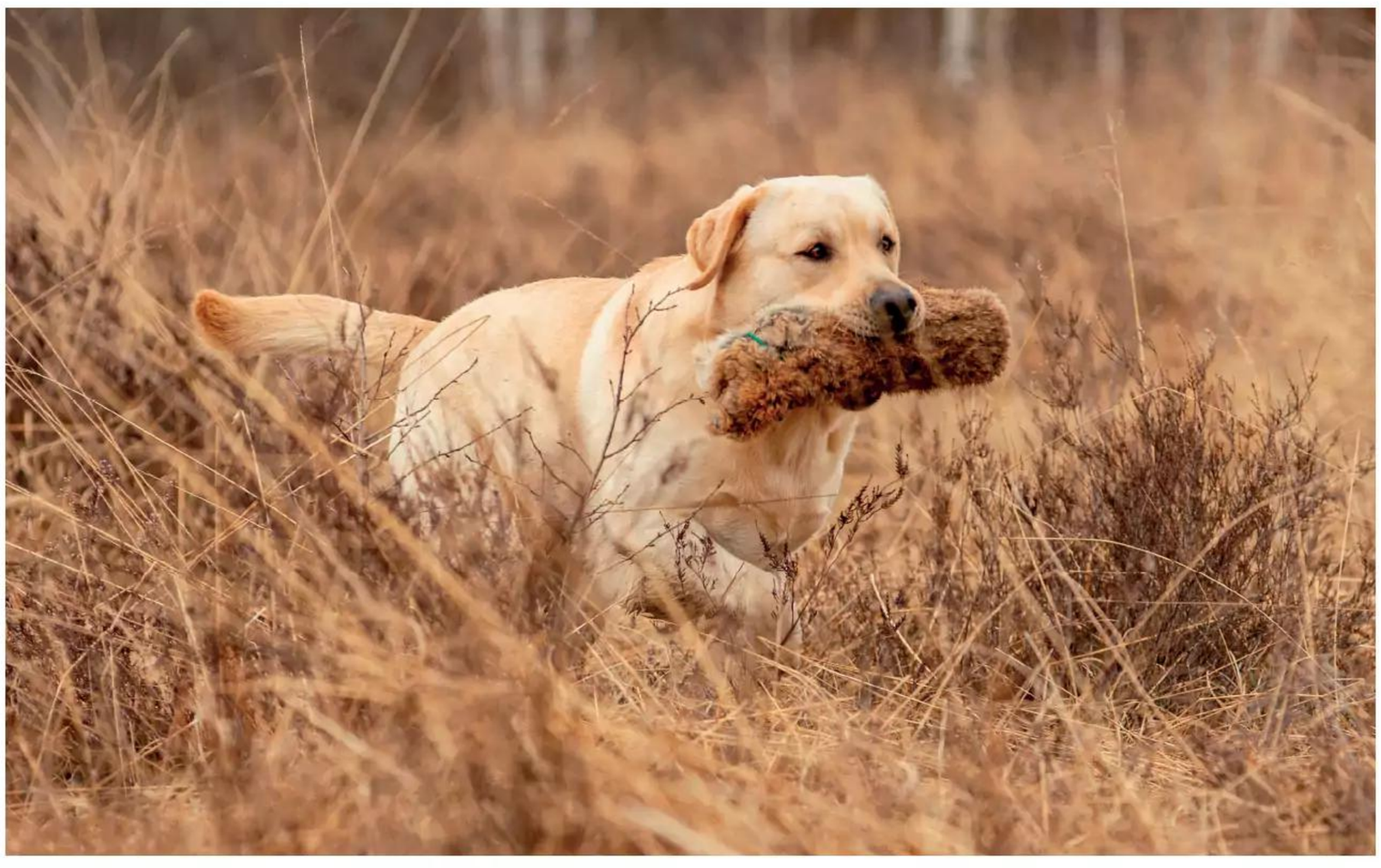
It's a sex-limited autosomal recessive gene. This basically means that if a copy is present in both sexes, and each passes their copy on, it'll be expressed, but only expressed in one sex. The male and female can both carry it, but the male, being a male, displays it — or, more accurately, he doesn't.

Unfortunately, there's no genetic test available to determine whether a dog is a carrier of the condition, so it's an example of breeding by using your eyes as the best tool. If there are no descended testicle(s), don't use the dog for breeding. The problem is that a retained testicle can become cancerous, so an operation ideally needs to happen when the dog is around a year old.

While it won't affect a dog's working ability, cryptorchidism is considered a defect

Some years ago I was chatting to a woman from the world of show dogs, who told me about a breeder who had sold an almost perfect example of their particular dog breed to a customer in the USA. "Almost perfect" because it had only one descended testicle. The breeder decided to opt for a prosthetic replacement to fill the gap, so to speak, but didn't tell the new owner. As the story goes, when the dog left on the plane it had two testicles, but when it landed in the US, it had three. The real missing one had decided to make an untimely late appearance — to the now damaged reputation of the breeder.

You can email Ryan at ryankay@farlavale.co.uk



Everyone wants to have a well-trained gundog in the shooting field but it doesn't suit every animal

Ryan Kay is a keen trialler, a Kennel Club Accredited Instructor for Working Gundogs. He and his wife Alison run FarlaVale Gundogs in North Yorkshire. ***farlavale.co.uk***

Soldier Palmer

Wild menagerie is stuff of nightmares

Taxidermy is an art form but it generally doesn't have a long shelf life and occasionally it can be downright ugly, says *Soldier Palmer*

There's a substantial black grouse lek in my office and new birds keep arriving to join it. They scramble over the bookcases and leer above my computer in every shape and pose; a pair of greyhens watch from the windowsill as if nothing could be less interesting. Unlike real birds, their glass eyes need to be wiped clear every month or two and the dust from my wood-burning stove needs to be brushed away from their delicate feathers. Over a process that has taken 10 or 15 years, I realise I have become a repository for unwanted taxidermy – and I'm not entirely sure how I feel about it.

A dear friend died before Christmas and, in the subsequent reorganisation of his sporting effects, a stuffed pair of black grouse was found in a cupboard under the stairs. The man's family isn't particularly interested in shooting and the birds had been shuffled out of view for a decade or more.

Many people dislike taxidermy and, after my friend's death, the obvious conclusion was that the black grouse should be thrown away. They were shot in the 1960s and stuffed birds only have a limited shelf life at the best of times. They gather cobwebs and as the skin dries over many years, it often starts to stretch and distort certain distinctive and important shapes until the birds become downright ugly.

I work with black grouse quite often and I'm likely to see a few birds here and there during the course of a usual week. I know what's normal and I know what's not. These mounted birds make me squirm to see how their eyes bulge and their puffy tails have wilted.

Distortion

When taxidermy was fashionable, there were many gifted amateurs who tried it. In moorland places where black grouse were sometimes common, it might have been possible for them to specialise in the birds and learn to mount them with realism and style. Even when a blackcock is killed these days, the body is almost always sent to the taxidermist. But notwithstanding the corrosive effects of time and distortion, it's also likely that many of these older birds were badly stuffed in the first place.

Given that black grouse can only be shot in the autumn, none are ever taken during the lekking season.

PHILIP MURPHY

You would be extremely lucky to see black grouse lekking these days, as the birds are very scarce

But that distinctive display posture is often how you'll see the birds presented; with tails flared-out and wattles ablaze like beacons.

It's hard to find photographs of black grouse as they actually look for most of the year. Having tried my hand at taxidermy, I can confirm it's extremely difficult – and I have found the "display" is particularly challenging. But if you shot the only black grouse you'd ever seen, you're unlikely to be too judgemental on the finer points of realism.

Outlandish

I've seen some terrible taxidermy and when faced with birds that are forever frozen in the most bizarre and unlikely expressions, I've worked hard to be polite. The same is true of mammals that are stuffed in all kinds of strange, outlandish poses. Otters are always snarling and badgers bare their teeth as if they were tigers. If you only understood nature through taxidermy, you could easily believe that stoats run around the world with their mouths wide open and sparrowhawks always have something in their claws.

Of all the black grouse I have in my office, it's hard to see how some of them were ever beautiful. I have one in particular that looks like he's screaming with horror as if he's just stepped into a freezing cold shower. Another is crouched in an impossibly awkward position, as if the taxidermist was unable to decide how the feet should be placed and therefore decided to hide them altogether. The overall effect is generally hideous.

But now that I have so many stuffed birds in one place, people think of me when the time comes to dispose of unwanted trophies. It's reached a snowball effect; the more I have, the more I get.

There's an odd sense of sentiment around taxidermy. I know it can be an art form in its own right, but it's not always easy to detach emotion from the final object. I received that blackcock and greyhen from my old friend's family because while they didn't want to keep the birds, they simply couldn't bring themselves to chuck them into a skip. These things mean a lot to us, but they don't often mean much to others.

I know about the birds I inherited at Christmas time. I remember being told about them and how they came high over the larches during a pheasant drive in 1967. I heard the story several times; how they folded in a perfect right-and-left. I loved my old friend so the birds have a sentimental value for me – but even if they had arrived on my doorstep without any context or explanation, I would have still felt an odd need to protect them.

Time passing

Whenever I see taxidermy offered for sale in junk shops, I wonder where it came from – and I remember that they must have meant something to somebody. But without knowing the context, I'm only drawn to a sense that time has passed and people come and go. Some of my black grouse are completely anonymous. I don't know where they came from or why they were stuffed in the first place. But I do know about others and, of course, that adds to their value. I have one very impressive blackcock that was shot on my neighbour's farm in the late 1980s. The Guns were walking in line on a late October day when nine birds rose up suddenly from the grass before them.

In taxidermy, badgers are often shown baring their teeth like tigers

Black grouse can be jumpy in the autumn and they were far out of range. But the birds have an odd, self-destructive habit of doubling back upon themselves; even of returning to the spot where they were flushed. I'm told that these birds flew out for half a mile, then turned in a grand circle and came back towards the waiting Guns, flying hard and fast at reasonable height. All nine were shot and all nine were stuffed.

It's quite a story, but it's also hard to look at the same hill now and realise there are no black grouse to be found there. The story was told as if it was a great moment and I don't disagree. But things certainly look different in retrospect.

Nowadays, the terrible scarcity of black grouse in Britain adds additional value to the strange menagerie that has gathered around me in my office. My specimens are special, even in their current state of breakdown and disorder. But if they were shot and preserved to record a particular experience of excitement and joy, it's hard to forget that those moments of excitement and joy are now more or less impossible.

I can't bring myself to throw my birds away or bury them, but I don't really want them either. It would be fair to say that they have no value, but wrong to call them worthless.

Browning Ultra XT Pro

With all the class and good looks you'd expect from Browning, this latest offering is an excellent clay smasher, says Jonny Carter

The Browning Ultra XT Pro's adjustable comb allows you to customise the point where the stock meets your cheek

The stock, made of beautiful, oil-finished Turkish walnut, features laser-cut chequering

The Ultra XT has a single selective trigger and top hanging sear

OUR VERDICT

For generations, Browning shotguns have stood as the benchmarks of reliability and elegance in the field. Among their esteemed line-up, the Ultra XT Pro is an over-and-under that is designed for serious shooters and, more specifically, serious trap shooters. I'm going to look at it as a multi-discipline gun with a focus on sporting clays.

The heart of the Ultra XT lies in its robust foundation. The forged steel receiver – boasting the strength and reliability that comes with every Browning 525 action – forms the unshakable core. The basic design of this action has been around for a century and brings a certain assurance to the owner.

For those not aware, the action design features a single large locking

Browning's latest clay gun, the Ultra XT Pro, is designed for serious trap shooters

JONNY CARTER

The action features small scrolling displays and a border of silver inlay

NEED TO KNOW

- **Make** Browning
- **Model** Ultra XT Pro
- **Weight** 8lb
- **Barrel length** 32in or 28in
- **Bore** 12
- **Chamber** 3in
- **Top rib** 13mm-10mm
- **Stock** Pistol grip
- **Finish** Blued gloss
- **Length of pull** 14 3/8in
- **Drop at comb** 27mm²-37mm²
- **Drop at heel** 37mm-47mm
- **Price** From £3,725

The tapered rib has engine turning and central tramlines, which look cool

The barrels are fitted for the Invector-Plus choke system

underbolt, an inertia changeover single selective trigger and top hanging sear. I have friends who have put well over 100,000 cartridges through this action and it has been flawless, other than standard servicing and rejointing.

The Ultra XT comes with simple engraving on the action, small displays of scroll and a border of silver inlay. It's not a flashy gun, but neither is it plain and Browning has done a good job of making it a gun that nobody could hate.

The test model has 32in barrels and most people looking at an XT would probably go for this length. The barrels are fitted for the Invector-Plus choke system and the gun is provided with eight extended chokes. This variety allows you to tailor the shotgun's spread to perfectly match you and your favourite cartridge

The forged steel retriever, boasting the strength and reliability that comes with every Browning 525 action, forms the unshakable core of the Ultra XT

preferences. The gun balances a little front heavy out of the box, but it's provided with a full set of balancing weights so you can set this up to your exact preferences.

The mid rib is vented, but it is the top rib that really makes this gun unique in the Browning range. It is a step-up rib that sits 10mm higher than the traditional flat-rib platform. This configuration allows for a more "head up" gun mount that aligns your vision more naturally with a target's trajectory, particularly beneficial for fast-moving clays or birds on the rise.

"The 'head up' mount aligns your vision more naturally with a target's trajectory"

This style of set-up is great for those with long necks and sloping shoulders. It is tapered, has an engine turning and centre tramlines and features a convex ramp up – which I think looks cool – and soaks up any light reflections.

At the end of the rib sits a HiViz Pro CompSight, a high-visibility bead sight that cuts through the shadows and low-light environments well. It's not too big, however, which means it can still sit in your peripheral vision – without your eye being distracted by it.

Customise

We all know the ideal gun for you is the one that fits the best, and the team behind the Ultra XT understands that philosophy well. The gun's adjustable comb allows you to customise the point where the stock meets your cheek and that – combined with the ability to get spare butt pads – means you can get this gun right for you without an expensive bill at the gunsmith.

The beautiful, oil-finished Turkish walnut stock has laser-cut chequering, which is a different direction from Browning's usually hand-cut stuff. The quality of this laser-cut is not a step down, though, it is deep and clean and doesn't feel over-coarse in the hands.

★★★★½

FIELD TEST

I have had a bit of a passion for step-up rib guns since I owned my first one more than a decade ago, so I was quite excited to take this clay bashing at Barbury. I had set up the gun's comb and balancing weights the day before to get the balance a little further back to the hinge pin. Adding these in took the overall weight of the gun to 8lb 9oz, which is fairly hefty by anyone's standards.

Getting into the first stand, I gave the gun a swing around and it felt very familiar. The feeling was similar to a lot of the top-end competition guns I have tested over the past few years and that's no bad thing. Tried and tested is the best course of product development more often than not, and companies that try radical new styles pitched at competitive clay sector rarely hit the nail on the head.

Target acquisition

First target out was a standard black clay quartering away at a shallow angle. This gun smoked it not long after it left the trap arm. The raised rib does move your eye up above the action, giving a great field of view. This can help improve reaction times and target acquisition, especially for targets below your gun — this is why they are so common in trap disciplines. Six balls of smoke later and I was happy that the gun and I worked well enough to move on.

I shot a few simple stands, happy with the outcome on the score card. What I found interesting was how repeatable it was; without much thought, my moves were way more consistent than usual.

I put this down to the weight and sight picture. When you have something that substantial in your hands, you know you're not going to be able to change the shot

"The rib moves your eye above the action, giving great field of vision"

at the last second and subliminally I was compensating for that. I also found the step-up rib less distracting than a normal rib for some shots, which allowed me to focus on the target that little bit more.

I always try to hunt down the biggest targets on a course to test guns but the truth is that you improve your score on sporting clays by straighting all the normal stands. For this reason I carried on shooting the course, putting in solid scores at every station.

One stood out to me as the best test. A low orange edge on crosser shot across at eye level in front of a bank, hitting the ground after 30m of flight. It was followed by a midi at 50 yards, looping right to left away over the bank. This pair required a lot of correct techniques to get right. The first target was a fast swing-through shot taken at the same place each time.

This required a solid-gold point, consistent gun acceleration and trust that the gun was in the right place. Any deviation and the clay would land before I pulled the trigger or I'd be out of line. This gun handled it well and, with the balance set up right, I could move it super-fast regardless of the weight.

After the first bird was broken, I had to transition into the second. The longer I left it, the harder and further it got. I transitioned up from the first shot into the line of the bird, locked on for a brief second and smoothly pushed off the front edge into what I saw as 5ft left and 1ft underneath. The pair of clays broke again and again, not a testament to my talents but to how this gun tames my bad habits. Perhaps a change to a high rib is in order.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Browning Ultra XT is a great choice for shooters who are looking for a high-performance clay gun. It is reliable, good looking and versatile, while being just different enough to be interesting. I see the Ultra XT as ideal for someone progressing from their first gun in the world of competitive clay shooting. It will truly handle anything you throw at it, and handle it well.

Jonny gets into his stride, smashing clays with the Browning Ultra XT

19 /20	18 /20	17 /20	18 /20	18 /20	90 /100
Action and barrels Solid track record with the B525 action	**Handling** Fantastic when you pay attention	**Trigger** A classic Browning trigger set-up	**Stock** Would be nice to see a few more pads	**Value** An heirloom gun for under £5,000	**Overall score** A gun to smash all clays you throw at it

Subscribe today

annual subscriptions now include shooting insurance

Scan
TO SUBSCRIBE ONLINE

- 52 jam packed issues delivered direct to your door
- £2million of public liability insurance covering the use of airguns, shotguns and rifles
- Downloadable shooting permission slips

SSA®
SPORTING SHOOTER ASSOCIATION

SHOOTING TIMES
& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

Shooting Times delivered weekly, with access to the digital archive

Digital editions available from

available at amazon appstore
Download on the App Store
GET IT ON Google Play
Available on Readly

SUBSCRIBE FROM £42

Save on cover prices and never miss an issue

go to **shootingtimesandcountry.com**

or call **01371 851890**

Order lines open Mon-Fri, 9am – 5.30pm

LAST CHANCE TO VOTE

The Great British Shooting Awards 2024

Proudly supported by PULSAR

Hundreds of nominations have been whittled down for the **Great British Shooting Awards 2024**

2024 SHORTLIST

With 16 categories open for public voting this year, take a look and pick your favourites

The shortlist is now in, so it's over to you, the voting public, to pick the winners for the Great British Shooting Awards 2024, which returns for its sixth year. The awards, supported by our headline sponsor Pulsar, aim to give recognition to the products, organisations and people that make our industry tick. From cartridges to clothing or scopes to shotguns, they represent excellence in every corner of the market.

We have received hundreds of nominations and, thanks to our dedicated judging panel, we have whittled the competition down to only five shortlisted entries per category (*Shooting Times*, 17 January). For 16 of the 17 categories the winner will by picked by you, the shooting public; this includes rifles, ammunition, optics, night vision and thermal, as well as the gamekeeper and stalker of the year.

Last year you selected Mat Manning for the Outstanding Contribution to Conservation Award. Stalker of the Year went to Chris Dalton for the fifth consecutive year, while Paul Childerley took Gamekeeper of the Year and Gundog Trainer of the Year went to Darren Kirk.

Voting is now open, so don't miss the chance to select your favourites. Once voting has closed on 5 February 2024, the independent judges will adjudicate, with the results announced at the British Shooting Show on 23 February 2024.

MORE INFORMATION

To cast your vote, or for further details, visit:

shootinguk.co.uk/great-british-shooting-awards

The Great British Shooting Awards 2024

2024 AWARD CATEGORIES

- SHOOTING APPAREL OF THE YEAR
- RIFLE AMMUNITION OF THE YEAR
- SHOTGUN AMMUNITION OF THE YEAR
- OPTIC PRODUCT OF THE YEAR (OVER £1,000)
- OPTIC PRODUCT OF THE YEAR (UNDER £1,000)
- NIGHT-VISION PRODUCT OF THE YEAR (OVER £1,500)
- NIGHT-VISION PRODUCT OF THE YEAR (UNDER £1,500)
- RIFLE OF THE YEAR
- AIRGUN OF THE YEAR
- SHOTGUN OF THE YEAR
- GAMEKEEPER OF THE YEAR
- PROFESSIONAL STALKER OF THE YEAR
- GUNDOG TRAINER OF THE YEAR
- OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO CONSERVATION
- RETAILER OF THE YEAR
- INNOVATIVE PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
- LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

THE SPONSORS

THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING SHOW · BROWNING · EUROPE ATN · PULSAR IMAGE.QUALITY

Ogden's Shooting Supplies

Manufacturers of Superior Quality Bespoke Luggage and Bags

At Ogdens we pride ourselves in producing high quality shooting bags and luggage made from materials that are mostly manufactured and sourced in the UK. All our products are made to a very high standard and carry a guarantee of quality and affordability.

T: 0161 620 2190 M: 07779 429085 **www.ogdensshootingsupplies.co.uk**

The shell seekers

Keeping pigeon numbers down is a year-round job, so you need the best cartridges

With the end of the game and wildfowling seasons, some may be putting away their guns. However, pigeons continue to feed voraciously on rape and early spring is the ideal time to get ahead with pest control. Choosing shotgun cartridges for this essential cull of agricultural pests is tough. Price is, of course, a factor, yet there's no point using a substandard load if meaningful impacts are to be made on pigeons; you will be shooting a good number of cartridges.

Here are five of our favourite ammo options to help you keep on top of rampaging woodies.

ELEY PIGEON SELECT

Launched to widespread acclaim, the Pigeon Select cartridge has been developed in conjunction with National Gamekeepers' Organisation vice-president and gamekeeper Geoff Garrod. It is designed to produce performance demanded by the modern pigeon shooter looking for the optimum cartridge for use during roosting, decoying and flighting at a competitive price. Since its launch, this cartridge has proved itself strong in the field time and time again, with clean and efficient kills over decoy patterns through roost shooting. Significantly, this cartridge is a full 30g load with true No 6 shot, which is ideal for pigeons.

eleyhawkltd.com

FIOCCHI PIGEON 32G NO 6 BIO WAD

This ground-breaking cartridge is a transformation of the renowned Pigeon Evo load. Fiocchi has reimagined it with a full-cupped wad crafted from 100% biodegradable material — the pre-cut Green Core wad delivers performance on par with traditional plastics. The technology guarantees optimal performance in all conditions and eliminates any concerns about wad degradation in wet environments. The Pigeon Evo ensures humane despatch, leaves no plastic wad residue and offers outstanding performance in any weather. Contact your local Fiocchi dealer for more details.

fiocchiuk.com

GAMEBORE CLEAR PIGEON

Clear Pigeon was designed and developed with pigeon shooter Andy Crow to provide high quality at a competitive price without sacrificing performance, patterns or knockdown. The load is available in both plastic or fibre-wad option and 30g and 32g loads, which have been and tested for use in semi-auto guns. The smaller shot load is particularly suitable for light guns, and those shooters of the side-by-side persuasion would also do well to consider this particularly well-made cartridge. The Clear Pigeon also cycles very comfortably in a semi-automatic and delivers excellent good patterns, ideal for shooting over decoys.

gamebore.com

CRAIG MCCANN-MCMILLAN; RICHARD FAULKS

“There’s no point using a substandard load if meaningful impacts are to be made”

HULL SUPERFAST

This one’s from a manufacturer renowned for its game loads for every purpose, and its pigeon cartridges are equally famous. A great addition for decoyers, this affordable and effective cartridge is semi-auto-friendly and offers moderate recoil. It’s a hard-hitting round with a residual velocity of 172mps at 50m. It’s also a “reacher”, with the 32g Long Range incredibly well suited to the flightline. Of course, speed isn’t everything but, combined with a quality shot, superb fibre wadding and a case produced to the highest standards, this is a real value-for-money pigeon cartridge.

hullcartridge.co.uk

JOCKER BIO ISO STEEL 27

Shooting Times contributor Richard Negus says these cartridges from Jocker are “the ace in pack” when it comes to pigeon control. These 2¾in cartridges boast a biodegradable paper wad and cup and will propel a load of No 4 steel out at just below high velocity. The loads patterned very tightly in half-choke at up to 40 yards and are lethal for birds shot at sensible ranges. The Bio ISO Steel’s environmental credentials are essential for Guns shooting in Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) woods or near wetland, and due to the steel load and biodegradable wad they are futureproof.

shootingstarcc.co.uk

Ace in the pack: the Jocker Bio ISO Steel cartridges offer lethal performance on pigeons and are highly futureproof

Gundog® JOURNAL

THE UK'S ONLY DEDICATED GUNDOG MAGAZINE

SUBSCRIBE TODAY FOR JUST £69.95 AND NEVER MISS A COPY

A dedicated publication for everyone who works, owns or simply has a love for gundogs. Each bi-monthly issue delivers a broad range of editorial features – from expert training instruction to thought-provoking opinion and comment. Presented in a clean and contemporary design with world-class photography, it is a beautiful celebration of man's best friend.

- The UK's only dedicated gundog magazine
- Expert advice from the best in the business
- Every issue delivered direct to your door
- Stunning imagery and cutting edge design
- A true celebration of all 38 gundog breeds

GUNDOG-JOURNAL.COM

@GUNDOGJOURNAL

STOP THE PIGEON

HULL CARTRIDGE
CONFIDENCE IN THE FIELD

SUPERFAST PIGEON
The essential kit for better bags

An affordable, effective defence for crop protection.
Hard hitting. Reliably cycles semi-autos.

29g, 6, Plastic & Fibre - Ideal for decoying.
32g, 5.5, Fibre - Long Range for the flightline.

www.hullcartridge.co.uk

From bliss to blizzard

A invitation to shoot on the Scottish Borders is too good to turn down but the weather doesn't make things easy, as Arthur Oglesby discovers

Christmas festivities were barely passed when my wife, Grace, and I were due to travel north to the Scottish Border country. We were to take up a long-standing invitation to shoot pheasants as a guest of Denis Renwick over two days of the Christmas week, but I had grave doubts about the wisdom of our journey.

The first fly in the metaphorical ointment came when heavy rain flooded part of our route north near Catterick. Undaunted, we set off on the A19 and, other than heavy and sustained rain, we encountered little hazard until reaching the river Coquet just north of Morpeth.

Landslides

Up through Coquetdale, the river was doing its best to overflow the banks and there were several landslides to negotiate before we made it to our destination. Further west it was reported to be snowing at Carter Bar, and the entire prospect began to look very unpromising.

Following a night of blissful sleep we woke to the sight of blinding snow alternating with bright periods. The entire countryside had taken on its mantle of winter. A gale-force wind tore at us from the east and I think it was with some reluctance that our host decided we would brave the elements for at least the odd drive.

It was a part of Northumberland I had not seen before and one that, on

ISTOCK

"The country and all services seem to grind to a halt when the real winter comes"

"Having got the birds airborne, there would be little the keeper could do about maintaining their intended course and altitude"

more pleasant days, must offer some of the most attractive scenery to be found anywhere in Britain.

In these conditions, of course, the keeper would have a tough task making the pheasants fly at all. Then having got them airborne, there would be little he could do about maintaining their intended course and altitude. The first pheasant to come to me was mercifully one that I had not seen until my wife shouted.

I frequently find that I am more accurate when I have to shoot quickly and thus it was that my gun came up and the bird quickly crumpled in a wedge of feathers as it flew right into my pattern of shot. It is very satisfying to kill the first bird of the day with the first shot and I hoped it would establish a pattern for my continued performance. Sadly, the birds did everything that was not intended at that drive and it was to be the only shot I got. Many birds simply flew straight into the wind and did not even come anywhere near the Guns, but they would be there again for another occasion.

Drive number two put me in the hot seat and, although I shot my share of those to come within range, there were one or two humiliating misses. Many of the birds were curling in the gale-force wind and these are targets I have never really come to terms with.

I often tend to shoot underneath at any crossing bird and this aggravates the problem, almost to the point that I do not really know what I am doing wrong anyway. My easiest bird, if there is such a thing, is one coming straight towards me and at an angle of about 45 degrees from me. Then, with a quick movement of the gun, I seem to be able to blot it out and kill it stone dead. With many other targets I tend to chip them and there are too many occasions when I have to rely on the second barrel to secure a firm kill.

"Many birds flew straight into the wind and did not come anywhere near the Guns"

Impossible

By lunchtime the weather was becoming impossible for both man and beast. Our host, rightly, called it a day and we spent a few happy hours with some more testing "pheasants" in the bar. Meanwhile, the weather was showing no signs of letting up. Reports from all over the north-east gave the same dismal tale. The A68 at Carter Bar quickly became blocked and there seemed a distinct prospect that we might ourselves be snowed in for some time.

The following morning brought fresh layers of snow and more blizzards on the bitter north-east winds. Reluctantly, again, our host decided to make a start and I managed to kill the only pheasant to come within shot at the first drive.

I felt more sorry for my host than I did for myself or for the other Guns. It was quite obvious that he has one of the best pheasant shoots it has ever been my privilege to visit, but he was frustrated at all points in his attempts to show us some of the splendid birds his keeper can produce. The last drive before lunch gave us a few superb birds but by this time it was almost impossible to see and once again we sadly gave it best.

By a strange stroke of coincidence we found that our second day's total equalled exactly that of the first ↠

Also in this issue

Gow of Dundee by Geoffrey Boothroyd

With sight of the old church of St Mary's in the centre of the town of Dundee is a gunshop, above the window of which is the name Gow. The church of St Mary's is one of the very few things left in Dundee to remind us of its antiquity and provide a link with the gunmakers of 16th-century Dundee, where craftsmanship was renowned throughout Europe, and the present day.

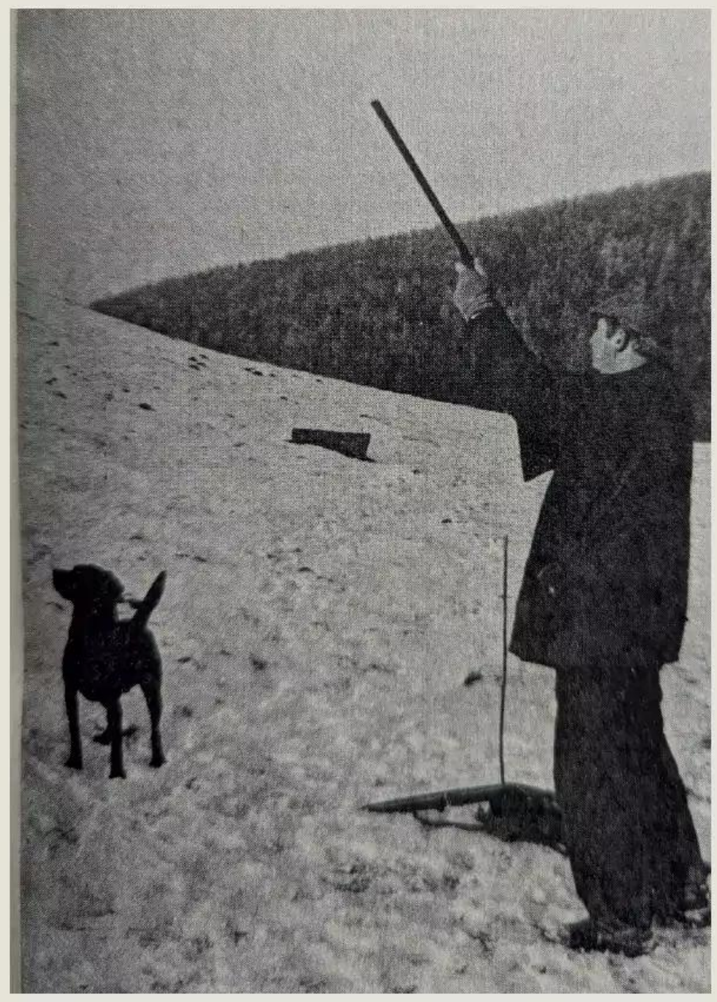
No guns have been made in Dundee for many a long year, and probably the last of those made would bear the name Gow. J R Gow, the founder of the firm, was born in 1812 and he died in 1895. The business he founded opened its doors to the public in 1860 in the Nethergate, and at that date it is likely that John R Gow made at least some of the parts of the guns he sold.

Gow had worked for the well-known firm of Paton & Walsh in Perth and tradition has it that he was a lockmaker before becoming manager. I have seen several percussion muzzle-loading Gow guns over the years and at least one is likely to have been made or at least finished by the man whose name was on the lockplate and rib. Other Gow guns of the percussion period were of Birmingham origin, but certainly after about 1880 the firm made neither gun parts nor guns themselves.

Although I have no evidence in the case of Gow, I know Birmingham makers were slowly being replaced by those from Liège who were making guns in (if the Scots will pardon the expression) the "English" style. Today, even the guns from Liège are no longer sold under the name of the British vendor; such guns made for this class of trade were manufactured under far sunnier skies.

What matters is, of course, the quality of the gun. The sidelock Gow is of undeniably good quality and with the name on the lockplate it is certain that one of the three sons of John R Gow — Robert, Peter and James — would stand by the gun that bore their name as though it had been made in their workshop.

This double 12-bore sidelock was made by Gow of Dundee and was of excellent quality



"In these conditions the keeper would have a tough task making the pheasants fly at all"

day – a count of 97 head for each of the two days. Had things been more normal, I have little doubt that we would have seen totals in excess of 200 per day, but such are the whims of nature.

I slept uneasily that night. Before me lay the prospect of a 130-mile road journey in conditions more appropriate to polar regions. I am appalled at how the country and all services seem to grind to a halt when real winter comes. It was impossible to raise the AA on the phone and there was little information of value in the recorded motoring news offered by the GPO.

The BBC – bless its little heart – gave us a mixture of choral and pop music. Does it not occur to it that of all the millions of road users there might be one or two who would value same detailed information on conditions?

For equally perverse reasons, we are not allowed the facility of the citizens' band radio as used in the US. This enables the motorist to have transmitting facilities in his car and to be able to call and hear many information services en route. Drivers can call other drivers and exchange information and opinion,

"We should have seen in excess of 200 birds per day"

but we are not allowed it because it might interrupt other emergency services and we are thrown technical jargon such as "harmonic radiation" and "excessive co-channel interference", simply because it might all make life more difficult for a few uncivil servants.

Suffice to say that after a diabolical journey we did make it home in one piece and, as I sit in the confines of my warm study, there is a distinct reluctance to move far until some less gruesome weather takes over. We seem set for a hard winter, but nature is too fickle for me to yet become fully convinced that we are going to have one.

This article was first published in the 18 January 1979 issue of Shooting Times.

Muntjac Trading

www.muntjactrading.co.uk
sales@muntjactrading.co.uk 01527 870906

Mixed game

Game Cookery

These puff pastry pies, also known as pithiviers, aren't as fussy as they look and, served with mash and gravy, make a great winter warmer

Pithivier is a French classic, with crisp, melt-in-the-mouth puff pastry encasing the filling, usually savoury but occasionally sweet. Traditionally made with two discs of pastry, the top of the pithivier is scored in a spiral pattern, which makes it look exquisite and very professional.

This version is much less complicated than it looks, though, so do give it a try. Whether eaten as a main meal or taken as a handy lunch on the hoof, this hearty mixed game pastry is ideal for those cold days in the field. The diced and chopped vegetables help to make the filling moist and the mix of pigeon, pheasant and partridge adds texture as well as flavour, but you can use whichever you have to hand and it's a good way of using up your leftovers at the end of the season.

You can buy cooked chestnuts in a vacuum-pack — it's handy to keep a pack in your kitchen cupboard because their sweetness goes so well with game.

"The mix of pigeon, pheasant and partridge adds texture as well as flavour"

GAME PUFF PIES

Ingredients

- 2 RED SKIN POTATOES
- 50G CARROT, DICED
- 50G ONION, DICED
- 20G CHESTNUTS, CHOPPED
- 25G PIGEON, DICED
- 25G PHEASANT, DICED
- 25G PARTRIDGE, CHOPPED
- READYMADE PASTRY
- FRESH THYME
- 1 EGG YOLK

ADOBESTOCK

For more tasty game recipe ideas from the team at Eat Wild, visit eatwild.co

THE METHOD

Serves 2

1 Bake the red skin potatoes in the oven until soft – approximately 35 minutes – scoop out the flesh from the skin and mash it up in a bowl. It doesn't need to be smooth; a lovely, chunky texture will help your pie.

2 Meanwhile, dice all the meat and remaining vegetables into 1cm cubes, then combine everything with the mashed potato. So long as you've chopped everything small enough, all the ingredients will cook through while the pie's in the oven. Season well with salt and pepper and sprinkle over some fresh thyme leaves.

3 Roll out the pastry until it's roughly the thickness of a £1 coin. Place a saucer on the rolled pastry and cut around it to make four circles. Spoon the game mixture into the centre of two of the pastry circles, making sure you leave a good 1in around the edge to seal the lids.

4 Brush the clear inch space with egg yolk and place a second pastry circle on top of each pie. Using a fork, press down around the sides of the pastry to seal. Use a knife to decorate the top of the pies with any pattern you like, then brush with the egg yolk.

5 Heat the oven to 170°C/gas mark 3 and bake for 25 minutes until golden brown. Remove from the baking tray and serve straight away.

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

SARAH FARNSWORTH; CALLUM MCINERNEY-RILEY; ANDREW SYDENHAM; DGWILDLIFE.COM; GETTY IMAGES

Contact the team

Email: ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

Long-toothed deer query

DEER

Q Do the Chinese water deer we have in England grow the longest teeth found in deer? And are the longest ones found in old or young animals?

A Although the Chinese water deer is the best-known non-antlered deer for most British stalkers, it shares its measurement formula with another long-toothed, antlerless deer – the musk deer.

There are several species and subspecies, of which the Siberian musk deer is probably best known and is sometimes sent in for measurement.

The current measurement method for both Chinese water and musk deer involves removing the teeth from the jaw and measuring along the outside curve. Musk have longer teeth than water deer, although the teeth are generally thinner. So in terms of longest teeth, it's definitely the winner.

As to the age question, Chinese water deer, as with most other mammals, grow their adult teeth once. So when they are fully erupted, undamaged and not chipped, that's probably as good as it gets. Remember that the adult teeth of young water deer bucks, even when fully erupted, will be hollow at the base, while those of mature specimens will be solid. ***IW***

Best way to freeze pigeon

COOKERY

Q I have a lot of pigeon breasts that I want to freeze. I have done this before and the whole lot got freezer burn, so I wondered if you had any advice to make it go a little better this time?

A There is one simple rule with freezer burn: no air. If there is air touching the surface of the meat, there is a real risk of freezer burn. The best way to store raw meat in the freezer is to vacuum-pack it. If you do not have the necessary equipment, you can simply wrap the pigeon breasts carefully in freezer bags.

You can even wrap them in oiled baking parchment first and then bag them or wrap them to be extra safe.

Further advice is to make sure you freeze them in batch sizes that are best for you and the most useful for your likely uses. Also, clearly label and date them. We all love a game of freezer-meat tombola, but it's not an everyday kind of fun. ***TM***

The most effective way to freeze pigeon breasts is by vacuum-packing or wrapping in freezer bags

Poser on peg numbering

SHOOT DAYS

Q Why do some shoots number from left to right and others right to left? No one I have asked has been able to give me a definitive answer.

A I am afraid I am unable to give you a definitive answer either. Right to left is more traditional and left to right was said to denote a shoot with a military connection, but I am unsure why. It might have been because going from right to left as opposed to left to right bothered them, but it is only a guess.

In reality, it matters little how the drives are pegged or how many numbers the Guns move up between drives. Whether it is up two on eight, or up three on 10, there is always someone who gets it wrong or forgets where they are supposed to be.

There are free apps in the App Store for those who have trouble remembering their numbers, although I don't really think it is a big deal if someone forgets and I view it as all part of the fun. ***LB***

There is no set rule on whether pegs should be numbered left to right or vice versa

When to use buck or stag

STALKING

Q What is the difference between a buck and a stag?

A It sometimes surprises those who are involved with deer on a daily basis that many country and shooting people do not understand the terminology associated with these animals. In particular, the terms "buck" and "stag" are often misused, especially by those who design pub signs.

In simple terms, a male fallow, roe, muntjac or Chinese water deer is called a buck, while any female of these species is called a doe. A male red or sika deer is called a stag and any female of these species is called a hind. If you stick to these rules, then you will not go far wrong.

More technical names exist for male deer at different stages of antler development. Thus, a young fallow may be described as a pricket, a three-year-old as a sorel and a four-year-old as a sore. Likewise, a young red deer may be described variously as a knobber, a spiker or a staggie. However, you may rely on calling any UK male deer either a buck or a stag, as appropriate to species, without any embarrassment. ***GD***

A male red deer is called a stag, but males of other species tend to be referred to as bucks

Subscribe today

Enjoy great subscriber benefits

Never miss an issue and get every issue delivered direct to your door.

See page 45 for subscription offer

Mastering the gralloch

STALKING

Q I am fairly new to stalking am and really interested in mastering the gralloch. While there are different methods, all would have you bleed the animal as the first step. Why is this?

A Bleeding starts the cooling process and when you lower the temperature of the carcass, it will slow down potentially harmful bacterial growth. Blood is an ideal medium for the growth of bacteria and removing as much blood as you can as quickly as possible prevents this bacteria from spreading.

This is why, when you read the various guides or training material available, you are advised to bleed immediately. This cooling process should be allowed to continue as you go through your preferred gralloching method, so you can get the shot deer back to the larder in a clean and hygienic condition. ***CD***

Bleeding the deer carcass as the first step of gralloching helps start the cooling process

Training a gun-shy dog

GUNDOGS

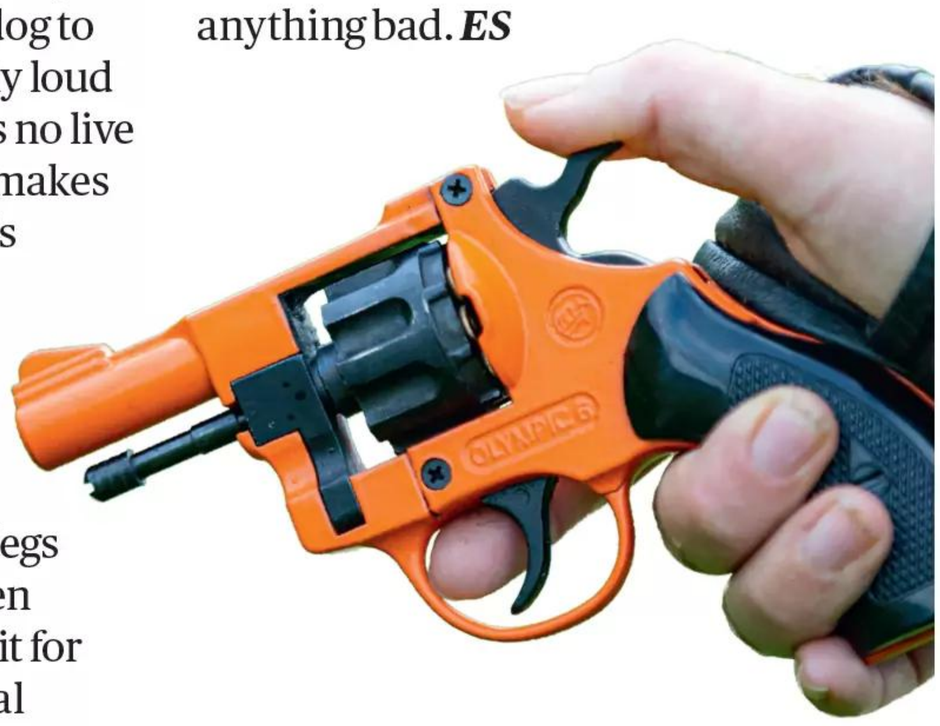
Q I have rehomed a gun-shy springer spaniel. He is nearly two years old and I only wanted him as a pet. On bonfire night, despite the fireworks, he simply slept through it. We were all prepared for a stressed dog and he simply didn't seem to care. He has so much obvious natural talent as a gundog and I would love him to reach his full potential. I was told to take him to a clay ground and allow him to sit and get used to the bangs over time. Is this the best way forward?

A Sadly, many offer this useless and damaging advice. Of all the hundreds of dogs I have worked with, not once have I needed to go to a clay ground to train or desensitise a dog to bangs. A clay ground is extremely loud and intense. Even worse, there is no live game and that is what normally makes for a great reward for the dog. It is essentially bangs for nothing.

You have made a good start and he obviously feels safe and secure enough in your home, which is wonderful. When he is eating his food or stretching his legs in the garden, every now and then simply clap. Don't freeze and wait for a reaction – carry on your normal routine. If he sees it means absolutely nothing (you don't react), it will become second nature for him not to panic as well. Then start to drop metal dinner bowls or pop crisp packets.

Once these noises do not worry him at all, start to introduce a starter pistol. The easiest way to do that is to have him a long way from it and have someone else using the starter pistol inside a bag or pocket. That way the bang is audible, but muffled. Every time a bang goes off, reward with a retrieve, food and continue playing or training as normal.

Ensure you spend plenty of time proofing this before you attempt to move any closer. I would fully expect this process to take 12 months or more, so do not rush. Make sure he is 100% comfortable at each stage before you move forward to the next step. Finally, when in the house, play YouTube videos of shoot days in the background so these noises are not associated with anything bad. ***ES***



Gradually introducing the sound of a starter pistol can help to desensitise a gun-shy dog

Calibres for rabbit control

RIFLES

Q I'm planning to buy a rifle for rabbit control on my farm and had every intention of buying a .22 rimfire until someone at the gunshop suggested applying for a .17 HMR. Which is better?

A The short answer is that both will do the job. There are, however, advantages and disadvantages to both.

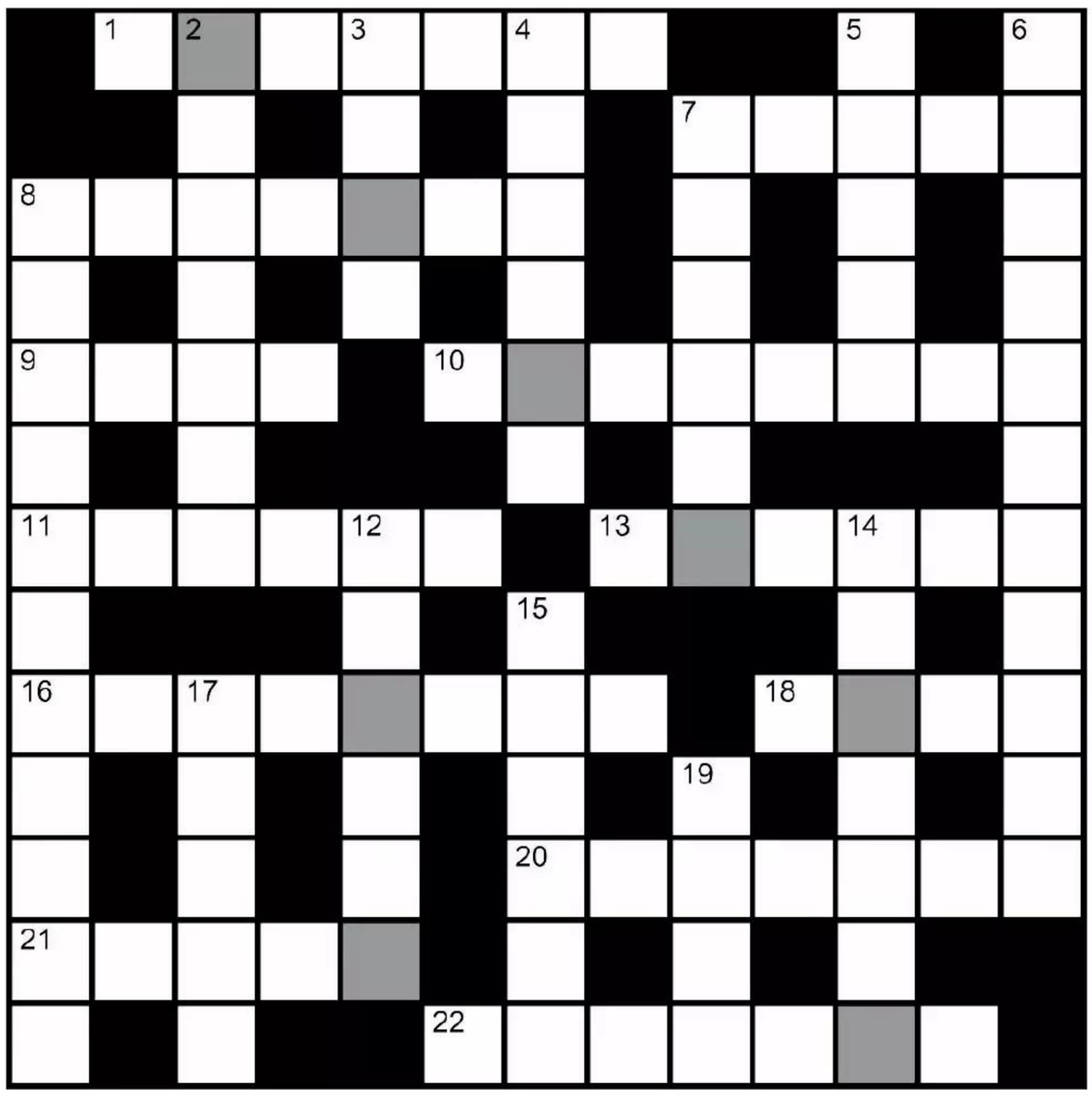
The .22 LR is good because it's quiet when using subsonic ammunition, but the round has a more curved trajectory. This can be accounted for while shooting within 100 yards and, if you opt for the noisier, high-velocity ammo, you can stretch out further.

Ammunition for the .22 is pretty cheap for 50 rounds. The drawback is that .22s have a tendency to ricochet off almost anything solid.

The .17 HMR is a feisty round, about half the weight of a .22 bullet. Smaller and lighter, it travels faster and on a flatter trajectory, making it more forgiving at different ranges, but it is more likely to be affected by the wind. If zeroed at 100 yards, it needs little hold-off from up close to 150 yards, which means it is effective on calm days.

The bullet is frangible and ricochets are rare, but it can cause meat damage. Another trade-off is a louder shot and higher cost, more than twice the .22. There have also been questions about the quality of some ammunition. ***MR***

Crossword / Compiled by Eric Linden / 1650



Across

1 When deactivated beside the street, vehicles have all-terrain capability (3-4)
7 Reach a settlement holding hounds that engage in sporting pursuits (5)
8 Sludge is level on the tidal tract (7)
9 An unwanted addition to the clay shooting scorecard comes to nothing (4)
10 Drill the train track as a reference for gun measurement (4,4)
11 Northern girl seen around the emergency room with modern-day gun engravers (6)
13 Air rifle technology and heating fuel hit head-on (3-3)
16 An essential bit of kit for the field, before all others, should help (5,3)
18 The target for clay shooters is a short skirt (4)
20 Rabbits see Annie go topless in the bus! (7)
21 In a strict sense, it's the tail of a hound (5)
22 Is the keeper's property cheesy? (7)

Down

2 France's leader adores changing hats (7)
3 Reign supreme over individual clay-shooting regulation (4)
4 Gun mechanism inspired by film genre? (6)
5 Heading west led to a big problem for BASC, once upon a time (5)
6 Canine carers are in the doghouse according to housekeeping staff (6,5)
7 A streaker in the night sky followed by a Spanish airgun maker (6)
8 A brief display of true shooting brilliance! (6,5)
12 Put caught fish back in the water — it's just the ticket! (6)
14 On horseback around America's capital, as marauding woodies are visiting crop fields (7)
15 Redhead caught in limbo switching to an airgun pellet brand (6)
17 The crow family member shows a bit of braveness, inside (5)
19 Bride and groom tie it to a wading bird (4)

Solution 1648 / 17 January 2024

Across: 6. Ear defenders 8. William 9. Misty 10. Nail 11. Snipes 14. Gundog 16. Home 19. Grain 20. Tunnels 21. Gone to ground ***Down:*** 1. Redwing 2. Drilling 3. Menil 4. Vermin control 5. Helice 7. Sits 12. Smoke out 13. Seaside 15. Unions 17. Crag 18. Snare ★ **HIDDEN: SWINGING**

Roosting magpies

CORVIDS

Q How common are mass roosts of magpies? I was astonished to count more than 100 birds assembling at dusk, with them arriving from all directions.

A Territorial pairs of magpies generally roost together within their territory throughout the year, but non-breeding birds will often gather to roost communally. Typical roosts are of 10 to 20 birds, while roosts of up to 100 are not unusual and assemblies of up to 150 individuals have been recorded, invariably in winter. Studies have shown that birds will fly up to a maximum of 4km to join a roost.

A feature of these roosts is the birds gathering well before sunset, often sitting quietly in trees together, but sometimes flying and chasing each other. They generally fly to the roost – typically in dense hawthorn bushes or conifers – when it is almost dark. ***DT***

It is common for magpies to roost in 10s or 20s but more can be seen

Long-distance purchases

SHOTGUNS

Q I am interested in buying a shotgun from a private seller, but the gun is on the other side of the country. Short of spending a couple of days driving there and back to the seller's house, is there any other way of concluding a purchase?

A I am assuming that you have first reassured yourself that the seller is who he says he is and that the gun is genuine. You must then accept that the law requires that all final firearm transactions must be conducted face-to-face. You cannot simply ask the seller to send the gun by courier.

The best way of conducting a transaction at long distance is by using the registered gun trade. However, since you are buying from a private person, not a dealer, you should first post your certificate, using signed-for mail, to the seller, so he can add the gun to table two of your certificate.

You can then nominate a registered gun dealer local to yourself. Your seller will take the gun to a dealer close to him, who will have the gun sent via a gun-trade carrier. You can then collect it from your local dealer in person. Naturally, a charge for this service can be expected. Don't forget to notify your local police about the purchase.

Remember that your local dealer will expect the gun to be on your certificate already when you collect it, as you are not buying it from him. He is not party to the sale and will not wish there to be any implied warranty if anything with the gun goes wrong. ***GD***

ON SALE NOW!

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THERMAL & NIGHT VISION SHOOTING!

DELIVERING EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS HIGH-TECH KIT IN ONE HIGH-QUALITY PUBLICATION

IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF THE LATEST THERMAL AND NIGHT VISION KIT

SCOPES, SPOTTERS, TORCHES AND MORE

EXPERT ADVICE ON MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR INVESTMENT

GET IT DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR BY SCANNING THIS QR CODE

£7.99

FROM THE PRODUCERS OF

Rifle Shooter

RIFLESHOOTERMAGAZINE.CO.UK

The Shooting Times

Almanac

3 FEBRUARY 2024

FEBRUARY MOON PHASE

Sunrise 07:36 Sunset 16:52 Moonrise 01:36 Moonset 10:21

TIMES SHOWN FOR LONDON

Snow Moon, 24 February

The full moon in February is named after the snow on the ground in the northern hemisphere. Some Natives American peoples named it the Hunger Moon due to scarcity of food and hard hunting conditions during midwinter. The other name, Storm Moon, perhaps better suits the windy conditions in the UK.

THOUGHTS FROM THE FIELD

Sharing a lifetime of experience in the countryside

We were sitting in the beaters' hut at Clandon Park in Surrey as headkeeper Bob Brewer was issuing invitations to next week's cock day. I was 15 and almost speechless when he asked: "Do you want to bring your gun?" I looked to Father and he nodded — what excitement!

Next Saturday I was in the middle of the line for Dencher's One, a lovely strip of old oak and hazel woodland. I could hear the walking team getting gradually closer, with calls of "cock forward!", and neighbours on both sides dropped a bird each.

Someone called another cock and a few moments later it sailed into view. To say I was chuffed that it fell to my first shot would be a serious understatement, for I had just shot my first ever pheasant.

A few moments later Bob called the "all out" and I unloaded and walked into the wood to collect my bird. Horror: it had turned into a melanistic hen and in those days the cocks-only rule was very strict. As I emerged, Bob appeared on the opposite side and declared: "Two hours digging in my garden for you, boy." **Mike Swan**

EDITOR'S PICKS: GAITERS

Sitka Stormfront gaiter

RRP £189

sitkagear.com

Ridgeline Defender gaiters

RRP £69.99

highlandoutdoors.co.uk

Härkila Pro GTX Gaiters

RRP £65.99

harkila.com

THE WEEK IN NUMBERS

900k

A shooting estate in East Yorkshire is hosting a two-day clay shoot in support of the Countryside Alliance on 16-17 May. The annual event at Warter Priory has helped raise more than £900,000 over the years, with some £135,000 donated to the GWCT in 2021 and £165,000 to Parkinson's UK last year. All the proceeds from this year's clay shoot – along with those from a fundraising ball for 350 guests on 18 May – will go to support the work of the Countryside Alliance.

100

Invasive mink could be eliminated from the UK after almost 100 years, following the success of a new "smart cage" trial. The four-year project has already eradicated the mink in East Anglia, with plans to expand the scheme across the UK. Volunteers are using the floating cages to trap and cull the animals and the Waterlife Recovery Trust says water voles and birds in the area are now bouncing back.

66

New data from the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) shows that of the 66 species recorded in Scotland, 32 increased, 30 declined and four remained stable. The biggest increases were chiffchaff (1,277%), blackcap (659%) and great spotted woodpecker (590%). The biggest decreased were capercaillie (-76%), greenfinch (-76%) and kestrel (-80%).

SHOOTING TIMES & COUNTRY MAGAZINE, ISSN 0037-4164, is published weekly, incorporating Shooting Magazine, Shooting Life, British Sportsman, The Angler's News & Sea Fisher's Journal, Field Sport and Sporting Rifle, by Fieldsports Press, MacNab House, 14 Belford Road, Edinburgh, EH4 3BL, United Kingdom. © 2024 Fieldsports Press. Printed by MRC Print Limited. Distributed by Seymour Distribution, East Poultry Avenue, London EC1A 9PT; 0207 396 8000; seymour.co.uk. We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. All contents © 2024 Fieldsports Press or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Fieldsports Press (company number 10204110) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Epsilon House, Enterprise Road, Southampton Science Park, Southampton, SO16 7NS, UK. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Fieldsports Press cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein. If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Fieldsports Press and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Fieldsports Press nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions. Subscription rates for 52 issues: UK — £131.99. Subscription records are maintained at Esco, Trinity House, Sculpins Lane, Wethersfield, Baintree, Essex, CM7 4AY, United Kingdom. MRC Print Ltd is acting as our mailing agent. All prices include postage and packing. Enquiries and subscription orders: subscriptions@fieldsportspress.com; 01371 851890

ISTOCK

Advertisement feature

Gunshop guide

A pick of some of the best brick-and-mortar retailers for fieldsports

Find out more about these retailers

See our full listings via the QR code

COUNTY DURHAM

• Kitt Pongo & The Hogman

A true Tardis of an airgun shop

Kitt Pongo and the Hogman has been in operation for a little over twenty years, originally selling Military goods and Army Surplus and a small range of airguns. However soon Air Gun demand outsold Military kit and surplus!
Therefore ten years ago we diversified into selling a more extensive range of Firearms and Airguns and associated equipment three years into airgun sales only.
The shop, though small from first impression, does offer four salerooms full of stock, furthermore the shop probably holds more Airguns than most other local dealers, plus a wide range of accessories, clothing and footwear.

Kitt Pongo's promise is to offer the best possible deal available or, if a deal can't be struck, information will be given to a customer where a better deal may be available. The shop is open five days a week running through from Tuesday to Saturday 10:00 until 17:30, there is also a website www.thehogman.co.uk
The range of guns is extensive dealing in FX, Daystate, Air Arms, Brocock, Kral, BSA, Webley, Hatsan, Walther, Weihrauch, Umarex, Diana, and many more.
Please feel free to call in, there is no demand or expectation for you to buy, browsing is fine, and you will find ample parking at rear of shop.

Tel: 01325 355366 • **Web:** thehogman.co.uk
Email: kitt2@thehogman.co.uk

HERTFORDSHIRE

• Carl Russell & Co Gunmakers

Carl Russell & Co Gunmakers have been established since 2014 and are situated on the picturesque Hatfield Park Estate in Hertfordshire. With over 60 years experience in the British gun trade the team at Carl Russell & Co can advise on all aspects of guns and shooting. Our attractive retail shop is well stocked with new and used shotguns, rifles and air rifles, country clothing and best leather goods. Alongside our retail shop we have full workshop facilities where our time served gunsmith carries out servicing, repairs and renovation work.

Tel: 01707 709372 • **Web:** carlrussellandco.com
Email: info@carlrussellandco.com

CUMBRIA

○ Cumbria Sporting Gun

Cumbria Sporting Gun was launched in 2009 by shooting enthusiast, Derek Gardner.
Located in Little Strickland, within easy access of the M6, A6 and A66, Cumbria Sporting Gun's established and loyal client base is testament to its professional, honest and friendly service. The shop offers a selection of new and secondhand shotgun's and rifles in it's Gun Room, with a good range of accessories ranging from rifle scopes to cleaning equipment. In response to demand, the evolving range of country clothing combines practicality and function with the latest styles and trends.

Tel: 07730898216 • **Web:** cumbriasportinggun.co.uk
Email: derekgardner123@gmail.com

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

• R&K Stockcraft

Your one stop shop in the market town of Stony Stratford. Our business has been serving the shooting community for over 30 years; with onsite parking we are in the perfect location for customers across local counties. Our team has extensive experience and knowledge in all aspects of countryside sports. With an onsite gunsmith, refurbished rifle and air rifle room and shotgun room, all laid out for easy browsing and all the major brands you would expect from a shop offering guns, clothing and footwear for all your sporting needs.

Tel: 01908 561298 • **Web:** www.rkstockcraft.co.uk
Email: info@rkstockcraft.co.uk

SELKIRKSHIRE

• Game & Country

Here at Game & Country we supply game equipment and accessories throughout the UK and beyond. Our gunroom can cater for all your ammunition, reloading & outdoor clothing requirements. Along with a vast array of thermal & night vision, rifles & shotguns.

Our guiding principle is that all goods we stock should be fully useable and functional for Gamekeepers & Estate staff to work with day in day out. With this in mind, all our products are tested by ourselves.

Tel: 01750 725225 • **Web:** gameandcountry.co.uk
Email: Info@gameandcountry.co.uk

GAMEKEEPERS WELFARE TRUST

Jamie's Helpline: 0300 1233 088

Being there for gamekeepers, stalkers, ghillies and their dependants, past & present.

The Gamekeeper's Welfare Trust exists to support those in, or who have been in, a *gamekeeping profession, and their families.

You don't have to be having a crisis to call - just pick up the phone and call free and in confidence

**gamekeepers, deerstalkers, ghillies, wildlife managers, riverkeepers, guides, gillies, boatmen.*

BOOKS BOOKS

OLD & MODERN

SHOOTING
WILDFOWLING
DOGS
STALKING
FALCONRY
FERRETS

CATALOGUES FREE
TEL 0116 2350025

E-MAIL:
SPORTINGBOOKS@NTLWORLD.COM

BOOKS BOOKS

Alasdair Mitchell

Sharpshooter

It is amazing what some people are prepared to pay for a bit of weight lifting, when they could be out in the fresh air with a dog and a gun

I recently discovered that the monthly fee for membership of a well-known gym network, favoured by 700,000 middle-class Brits, has reached £360 per couple. That's £4,320 per year. If you wish to add a child aged over three, that will be another £588 per year, thank you. Remember these figures next time you renew your subscription to *Shooting Times*. And yes, I do pay for my own.

I had no idea that people were paying these sorts of sums for access to a gym. If I want some exercise, I can whistle for the dogs, walk out my front door and hike up the fell. I am lucky. Or perhaps I have different priorities, because I choose not to live in a town. Anyway, the next time you face an internal quandary about the cost of your shooting, remember what some people pay for a bit of weight training.

Hill stalking, rough shooting, walked-up grouse and splodging across mudflats in pursuit of wildfowl are some of the most physically demanding forms of our sport. Which represents the best value depends on your personal choice and preferences. But compared with a gym membership, my yearly subscription to the Newcastle Wildfowler's Association, at £110 including full BASC membership, is a bargain.

The value you place on shooting is a highly personal matter. How can you put a price on memories? For many of us, that's an important part of the experience. A day spent stalking hinds on the hill in a blizzard, when you finally triumph against all the odds, or an epic goose flight over moonlit fields, or that incredible retrieve across the stream — these are heroic moments that live on in legend. They get told and retold, losing nothing in the retelling, to family and like-minded friends.

"Some of the most remarkable events are born of an inauspicious beginning"

Of course, not every outing will be remarkable. That would be a contradiction in terms. There is something to be said for outings that are routine but relaxing. Yet it is part of the essentially uncertain nature of hunting that you can never predict the precise outcome of a day in the field, any more than you can be certain of the weather prospects. Some of the most remarkable events are born of an inauspicious beginning.

Companionship is an important aspect of fieldsports. Whether it is meeting up with fellow fowlers in the pub after a spell on the foreshore, or the conviviality of the lunch break on a driven shoot, the sharing of values and enthusiasm is a reward in its own right. This is one of the reasons why it is so important to encourage a whole range of ages among the participants. When we get too old for the hardest physical effort, the next generation will pick up the baton and we will listen to their accounts. If this inspires them to continue rural traditions and healthy outdoor exercise with their own children, so much the better.

Being outdoors and enjoying the scenery, the rain on your face, the smell of the saltmarsh, the roaring of rutting stags... It all adds up to a better form of exercise than anything on offer within the stuffy confines of an overpriced gym.

Dog By Keith Reynolds

Shootinguk
www.shootinguk.co.uk
• News • Jobs • Stalking
• Advice • Reviews • Marketplace
• Guns • Gundogs • How-to videos
Get expert advice, join a thriving community, search premium gear, and explore shooting jobs

Into your hunting ground.
Anytime, from anywhere.
Thanks to our multi-network SIM card.

ZEISS

Seeing beyond

ZEISS Secacam 5 and 7 Trail Cameras

The ZEISS Secacam 5 & 7 trail cameras not only withstand the harshest weathers, but also difficult network conditions. The innovative LTE module can connect to a wide range of mobile networks from different providers and automatically selects the best signal where it is installed. The captured photos and videos from the trail camera are reliably transmitted wherever you are in Europe, giving you instant access to your hunting ground, with best-in-class image quality.

zeiss.ly/RSH-TC

Collins Nets

01308 485422
www.collinsnets.co.uk

Please contact us for a 2024 Catalogue!