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& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

14 FEBRUARY 2024

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EST. 1688
SKINNER'S
BORN TO BE OUTDOORS

DOG OF THE WEEK

Koa and Clay

Eighteen-month-old Koa and her mother Clay, five, are the most fantastic dogs in every respect and have an amazing working relationship together. They work so hard, whether picking-up, beating or on peg with their owner, then are more than happy to go home and have cuddles on the sofa.

Owned and photographed by India Luno

14.02.24
Issue 6,488

SHOOTING TIMES

Welcome aboard

I had a notification on social media last week reminding me that I was celebrating my third anniversary of working for *Shooting Times*. I reflected that was during the first lockdown when my previous title, *Sporting Rifle*, was integrated into this prestigious publication. I also remember a number of long-term readers and contributors getting in touch to say how much they enjoyed the new-look *ST*.

These conversations confirmed my belief that *Shooting Times* is a community rather than merely a magazine and from this issue, that community has grown. Earlier this month, we took on *The Countryman's Weekly*, which means we will have more of the content that you are all passionate about, as well as plenty of interesting new features from a range of fieldsports experts.

Even after 142 years, *Shooting Times* continues to grow and go from strength to strength. I look forward to discussing this exciting addition with new readers and subscribers at the British Shooting Show in a few weeks. Here's to a happy future together.

Ollie Harvey, Managing Editor

Contact Ollie at ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

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HSE concedes that target shooting with lead rifle ammunition should be allowed to continue at approved ranges

HSE requests more time for its review on lead ban

Although the Health and Safety Executive launched its consultation in 2022, it has now asked to extend the timeline for the proposed ban

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has requested that the timeline be extended for the final stage of its lead ammunition review in England, Wales and Scotland. The move comes following the HSE consultation in December on the socio-economic assessment of restriction proposals. More than 8,000 submissions were received, including at least 5,000 from BASC members.

The HSE has submitted a request to the Government asking for more time to sort through relevant information and evidence, before it can propose its recommendations to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. A new timeline is being drawn up and will be published following consultation with policy leads, such as Defra and the Scottish and Welsh.

Extending the timeline for further review may be beneficial for the shooting community. In recent months industry campaigners and expert evidence have often apparently been ignored on related public consultations. Quick verdicts have been seen in cases such as the Scottish government's decisions to press ahead with the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill in the face of strong conservational evidence of the damage it could do with minimal time for review.

The HSE launched its initial consultation on proposals to restrict the outdoor use of lead ammunition in 2022. The six-month consultation received robust evidence-based challenges from BASC and more than 2,000 further responses from stakeholders.

Terry Behan, BASC's east of England director, said: "Alongside the subsequent socio-economic assessment consultation, the HSE dropped plans to ban lead airgun pellets and conceded that target shooting with lead rifle ammunition should be allowed to continue at approved ranges. However, it continued to press for restrictions on nearly every other outdoor recreational use of lead ammunition in England, Wales and Scotland.

"BASC challenged each HSE proposal, with robust evidence"

"BASC challenged each proposal, with robust evidence. Our response considered every shooting discipline, both live quarry and target. We will provide an update as soon as we have the revised timeline from the HSE."

The latest public consultation, which ended at midnight on 10 December, focused on reducing the transition period away from lead shot and the potential inclusion of lead rifle ammunition for live quarry in the ban. The shooting community has been campaigning for a voluntary transition away from lead shot and single-use plastics for live quarry shooting over a five-year period. **FP**

ANDREW SYDENHAM; ISTOCK

Ireland hosts international waterfowl annual meeting

The Waterfowlers' Network runs the SOTKA-project, which aims to restore 400 hectares of habitat

The Waterfowlers' Network held its annual general meeting in Wexford in south-east Ireland earlier this week. The meeting, on 12-13 February, included representatives from the Finnish Wildlife Agency, Wetlands International and the European Federation for Hunting and Conservation.

The Waterfowlers' Network, founded in 2019, is a collaboration between scientists and hunters who aim to improve data collection and restore habitats. This week's gathering sought to address key gaps in current conservation efforts directed at waterbirds. Events around the meeting included tours of potential rewetting sights and seminars.

The Waterfowlers' Network runs several internationally recognised initiatives including the SOTKA-project, which aims to restore 400 hectares of prime brood habitat to help declining waterbird in areas of Finland and Scandinavia.

Mike Swan, senior adviser to the GWCT, told *ST*: "Scientific understanding and international cooperation are key to waterfowl conservation and to the future of wildfowling, so I very much endorse the aims of the Waterfowlers' Network. Bearing in mind unwarranted restrictions to its quarry list, it's wonderful that Ireland is hosting this AGM. What better place to meet than the internationally famous Wexford Slobs [nature reserve]?"

Police chief invests £460k to double FEO numbers

West Mercia Police and Crime commissioner (PCC) John Campion is investing almost £500,000 to tackle firearms licensing delays.

PCC Campion has highlighted the experiences of communities facing delays, scrutinised the performance of the Firearms Licensing Unit and moved to provide significant resources to deliver change by investing £460,000 of additional funding to the unit.

The PCC is backing plans to carry out a range of operational changes across West Mercia — which covers Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire — and include more than doubling the number of firearms enquiry officers (FEO). Nine additional officers have already been recruited.

New positions have also been created to ensure greater oversight of cases to speed up the process. Changes will include the rollout of bespoke training for new roles within the department, which will help to ensure recruits are best equipped to understand the latest guidance and systems.

BASC's head of firearms Martin Parker welcomed the investment and told *ST:* "The Force has struggled recently in the processing of both renewals and grants. We therefore hope that the money will be wisely targeted in order to reduce these waiting times. BASC is always ready to support licensing departments and would be delighted to assist in any training requirements that the Force may require."

PCC Campion's budget proposals were endorsed by the Police and Crime Panel on 8 February.

Weekend X poll

How many times a month do you eat game and venison?

- **37%** Once or fewer
- **35%** Three to five times
- **17%** Twice a week
- **11%** More than that

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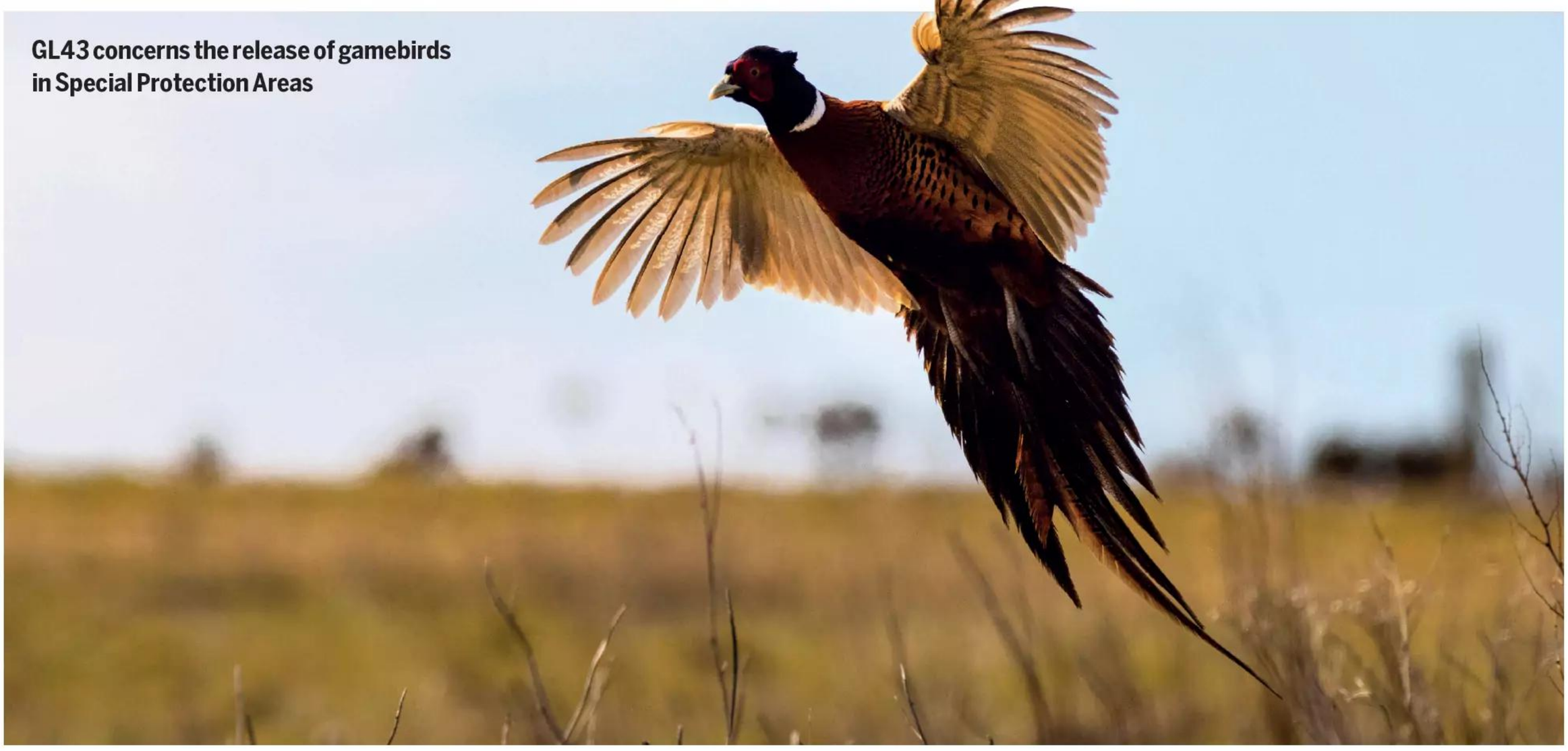
To do this week

CHECK You may be able to spot the earliest signs of spring in the air and before you know it the roebuck season will be upon us. The season opens at the beginning of April so it is worth starting your reconnaissance soon. Walk your stalking ground in the next few weeks to check all is well and look for signs of deer. Repairing high seats, clearing rides and spying carefully now will be repaid in the first week of the season.

FISHING Much like roebucks, trout fishing season is not far away. While you will probably start fishing nymphs, the mayflies will soon follow. There are some simple-to-tie and deadly mayfly patterns online (troutandsalmon.com), which you could tie in the next few weeks and use when hatches begin. Foam and CDC (cul de canard) may not be traditional, but they are easy and they work.



GL43 concerns the release of gamebirds in Special Protection Areas

Defra publishes 'facts' on gamebird release

There is some confusion as Defra publishes a 'fact sheet' regarding GL43, which covers release of gamebirds, but it's better than nothing

After the chaos caused by the delayed renewal of GL43 in 2023, Defra has published a fact sheet that lays out the process for gamebird release licensing for the next season in Special Protection Areas (SPAs) or within 500m of them. The fact sheet relates to pheasants and red-legged partridges, whose release is controlled by this general licence.

Shoots usually order their birds as the last season ends and thus long-term certainty about legislation is essential for planning purposes. This certainty has yet to be given by Defra, which states its final approach to 2024 gamebird release licensing in relation to SPAs will be confirmed before the end of February.

Defra says it is using the most up-to-date evidence available to make this final decision; evidence which is being provided by its chief scientific adviser, Professor Gideon Henderson. Defra advises that the avian influenza risk level will remain a key consideration for gamebird licensing on SPAs in 2024 and has emphasised certain points on the fact sheet that seem to fuel uncertainty for the coming season rather than ease it.

It highlights that "no shoot, whether a licence was granted or refused in the 2023 season, should assume that they will have the same outcome in the 2024 season".

Defra says shoots that wish to release gamebirds on or in the buffer of European SACs [Special Areas of Conservation] and SPAs in 2024 will "be subject to the maximum thresholds of 700 birds/ha in the site and 1,000 birds/ha in the buffer zone. Shoots should consider this when placing their orders to game farms if they choose to do so before a finalised policy decision is announced."

The Countryside Alliance and affiliate organisations have been actively engaged with Defra in stakeholder meetings regarding gamebird release licensing, and they suggest that some progress has been made.

Former chairman of the National Gamekeepers' Organisation, Lindsay Waddell told *ST*: "At long last the Secretary of State has gone at least some of the way to removing what was always an unnecessary burden on shoots. Giving the end of February as a date for the full details shows there is still no real understanding of how the game sector works. However, going part of the way is better than what we had before." **FP**

"The Secretary of State has gone some of the way to removing an unnecessary burden"

THEY SAID WHAT

"We could sink in the heavy swell if we head that way. Perhaps you'd like to see the whales?"

Who said it: Icelandic captain

Why: The captain's explanation on why the scheduled trip for journalists to see an open-net salmon farm in Iceland had been cancelled.

ISTOCK

Home Office stays silent on firearms consultation

In June 2023, Crime and Policing Minister Chris Philp launched an eight-week consultation after dismissing calls for gun law reform.

Prior to the public consultation, Mr Philp said the Government would not be taking on board a number of recommendations to tighten laws pertaining to shotgun licensing, claiming "shotguns are already subject to significant controls" and further changes to the Firearms Act were "unnecessary".

The consultation ended at the beginning of August and, in a recent update, the Home Office said it is still considering the matter and has announced further consultations.

BASC director of firearms Bill Harriman commented: "The much vaunted Home Office consultation into firearms licensing closed in August last year. Since then, absolutely nothing has been heard from the Home Office,which has even declined to say how many people responded to it – although we know that more than 50,000 members and others responded through the BASC web link. Clearly, there is a political blockage.

"The most likely explanation is that the Government has realised that the shooting community is deeply disenchanted by the chaos in firearms licensing, which could influence votes in an election year."

Over 50,000 BASC members responded to the consultation

Dismay as Royal Mail to ban all bladed items from April

All bladed items will be prohibited by Royal Mail for UK destinations from 22 April 2024. This change is linked to changes to the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, which set out "the offences of delivering bladed products to residential premises, or to persons under 18".

The prohibited list covers such things as "sporting equipment with a blade", which is likely to extend to articles such as ice skates. Other named items on Royal Mail's banned list include cutlery knives, scissors with sharp edges, cut-throat shaving razors and, of course, all hobby knives.

Phil Ellwood, managing director of knife and outdoor brand, Whitby & Co, told *ST*: "As a business that specialises in the sale of knives, we are concerned regarding the recent decision by Royal Mail to discontinue the carriage of blades throughout its mail network.

"We respectfully urge Royal Mail to reconsider this decision and explore options for accommodating businesses like ours that rely on the transportation of blades for legitimate commercial purposes. We are willing to collaborate with Royal Mail to develop solutions that uphold safety standards, while also supporting the continued operation of businesses within the knife industry."

From 22 April this year, Royal Mail will prohibit the sending of any bladed item in the post

NEWS IN BRIEF

Katrina Candy appointed head of Heather Trust

The Heather Trust has appointed Katrina Candy as director as the charity embarks on a range of initiatives aiming to raise the awareness of the importance of UK moorland. Ms Candy joins the Trust following eight years with Bidwells property consultants as head of communications (Scotland). Before that appointment she was head of PR and education with the GWCT for 13 years. She will support the Trust in Scotland and on all moorland matters across the UK.

Galloway bids for new national park

The Scottish government has pledged to establish at least one new national park by the end of this parliamentary session in 2026. Dumfries and Galloway councillors have given their support to creating a new national park in the county and the Council's economy committee chairman Ian Carruthers commented: "I am pleased that we have agreed to support the next steps and look forward to seeing the outcome." The closing date for nominations comes at the end of this month.

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Best school days ever

Conor O'Gorman looks at the work BASC is doing to introduce young people to shooting and conservation, not least via Scouts and Guides

Many readers will have grown up around fieldsports, but most British children will never get to experience that. Our world is as alien to them as *Minecraft* is to us. WAGBI (Wildfowlers' Association of Great Britain and Ireland) morphed into BASC and has long been introducing young people to shooting, through Young Shot events, with wildfowling clubs leading the way on this.

Over the past 20 years, BASC has tried many different approaches to introducing young people to shooting. There are still Young Shot events run by BASC staff and volunteers across the UK. They offer a range of experiences from general introduction to shooting and progression days to specialist themes including game, deer, pigeons, grey squirrels and, of course, wildfowling.

BASC's coaching presence at game fairs and other country shows has also continued to diversify and grow, offering opportunities for young people to try airgunning and clay pigeon shooting. We have also introduced thousands of youngsters to the sport by way of our shooting simulators.

There are lots of other interesting things going on, so let's take a look at some of those. My favourite is BASC coaching at the Scout and Guide Jamborees. When the idea was first mooted a decade ago, it seemed like pie in the sky.

However, in 2016 more than 5,000 Scouts and Girl Guides were introduced to clay shooting by BASC coaches at the week-long Essex International Scouts Jamboree and were taught basic shooting principles in what was BASC's largest ever shooting line. Suffice to say that the logistics of this were massive but it all went to plan. In fact, it was so successful that dozens of Scouts and Girl Guide groups were soon in touch, wanting advice on taking up shooting as a sport.

Since then, we have continued to attend international jamborees, coaching around 5,000 young people at each event. The coaching lines are very popular and were voted best onsite activity at the Lincolnshire Jamboree in 2022.

Most Scouts and Girl Guides will never take up shooting, but few will forget the positive experience they had of safely handing and firing a gun. That's a powerful thing and could not happen without our sponsors, dedicated training team and all the volunteer coaches.

Another amazing project is Let's Learn Moor, which has grown from small beginnings to become what we call "the UK's largest upland classroom". It was established by BASC with Regional Moorland Groups in 2017. Events take place in July in the North York Moors, Nidderdale, Calderdale, the Yorkshire Dales, the Peak District, North Pennines and the Forest of Bowland. They are coordinated by Countryside Learning and BASC, and are hosted by the Regional Moorland Groups, plus over 50 partner organisations.

More than 10,000 children from a wide range of schools have now learned about the importance of moorland management and the role of sustainable shooting in that. What a great result.

BASC continues to run events to introduce young people to shooting, wild food and conservation

Then there is the fantastic BASC to School, our latest initiative in which we get into schools and colleges and other educational settings to teach young people about the countryside, land management and the importance of shooting to rural life and conservation.

Face to face

We started in 2022 with a target of teaching 25,000 young people a year but reached 31,776. Last year we smashed it again with face-to-face engagement with 45,141 young people, and of this number 11,792 were treated to wild food, a key element in promoting sustainable shooting.

We are also doing residential events, offering scholarships and sponsoring student awards. There are myriad opportunities for us to introduce more young people to shooting and conservation, but we are limited by the resources available to us.

I guess this is where we can all help and it does not have to involve guns. It could be a conservation event inviting local families to your shoot, a free guided walk in your woods, or perhaps offering a talk to local schools and colleges.

"Few will forget the positive experience of safely handling and firing a gun"

Whatever it is you do, or plan to do, I would love to hear about it - email me at ***conor.ogorman@basc.org.uk***

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ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

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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

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FIELDSPORTS PRESS

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Saving the best till last – a sad farewell

The last ever meeting of the Keldy Syndicate, shooting in the Cropton Forest in North Yorkshire on a walk one, stand one and DIY basis, was held on 31 January. We formed 58 years ago and ran for the first 54 years under the command of the indominable Barry Smith.

Like many shoots across the country we fell foul of Forestry England's (FE) risk-averse concerns of shared recreation space and the perceived risk of one of the urbanite walkers making a complaint.

Our particular problem was Forestry England's decision some years ago to grant itself permission to build a Forest Holidays log cabin park on either side of the shoot — leading to occasional unfortunate meetings between designer clothing and muddy spaniels!

As usual for a January day, our bag was the best of the year, 48 pheasants, albeit way below the standard 100-plus we used to get on the same date a mere five years ago.

Tom Holdich, East Yorkshire

↠ *Forestry England has been contacted for comment*

The Keldy Syndicate ran for 58 years, 54 of them under the command of Barry Smith *(seventh from left)*

BACKGROUND TO 200-GR AMMO

Thank you very much indeed for publishing Simon Barr's truly excellent articles and columns regarding trophy hunting around the world, particularly his recent account of a hunt in Russia (*Where one good tur deserves another*, 31 January).

I thought you may be interested in the fact that I am a former Holland & Holland rifle regulator and instructor and am responsible for reintroducing the 235-gr ammunition for the world-renowned .375 H&H Magnum calibre – in conjunction with the now late *Shooting Times* contributor Major Bruce Kinloch MC, the only man in history to become chief game warden of three African countries. He was also the founder of the College of African Wildlife Management in Tanzania, where I studied.

I have personally used this ammunition is Europe, North America and Africa and it consistently achieves clean kills and a flat trajectory — even at 350m.

Steven Salmon, by email

Sport abroad

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

Simon Barr shot tur in Russia using a 200-gr bullet, as reported in our 31 January issue

WEIGHT AND EYE DOMINANCE

Sir Isaac Newton's laws of motion explains the relationship between

SHOOTING TIMES
21 February

A beaters' day in Wales, cooking mallard in the field and a keeper's day to raise funds for a charity

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ISTOCK

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WOWED BY THE WOODCOCK

My father was an avid twitcher — he could identify birds by their song and flight patterns — but I was never bitten by that particular bug. I thought some were pretty and I liked their song, but otherwise to me they were little feathered dinosaurs.

However, through the pages of your magazine, I have changed my mind. I have become better acquainted with species such as yellowhammer, lapwing, goshawk, hen harrier, curlew, capercaillie...

But of all of them, my favourite is the woodock; an enchanting little creature whose evading tactics mean he is held in high regard by your wonderful writers, whether they choose to shoot the migrant birds or not.

Sarah Marshall, Dorset

The woodcock is known for its jinking flight and evading tactics

The right-hand side-by-side shotgun can greatly aid left-eye domimance

a physical object and the forces acting upon it. Heavy load and a light gun equals felt recoil. The move from 30g to 28g (in clays) was based on health.

Have you ever considered brown ball syndrome? Watch a video of a shot taken, slow it down and see the head movement. Your brain is suspended as a jelly within its bony box. We know the dangers to footballers and boxers. Consider 100 rounds of sporting clays.

If you shoot clays, you know that 28g or a 24g is better than most men or women behind them. If you miss, it will be you that misses and not the cartridge. Thus, for a light side-by-side, and more, 24g or 28g will be plenty.

Now the merits of the side-by-side. The right-hand side-by-side can greatly aid left-eye dominance, especially when used with a barrel-guard. You can keep both eyes open, and the alignment of the barrels will deny the left-eye dominance. The side-by-side barrel break is shorter and far quicker to reload. Cleaning the side-by-side is quicker too.

Finally, on an a walked-up day, shooting is but one small part, weight and carriage another. What purpose a missed bird through fatigue?

While I won't say don't follow fashion, I will advise you not to be a slave to fashion. Put on your tweeds, enjoy nostalgia and remember that perhaps, just perhaps, our Edwardian forebears had a few things right. For future reading get a copy of one or all three of Gough Thomas's books.

He was a great sportsman, a former editor of the *Shooting Times*, and expert of the side-by-side shotgun.

Simon Mansell, by email

"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***

Bright Seeds

GAME CROP GUIDANCE

With February being a good time to assess the shooting season just past, Bright Seeds technical adviser Max Stuart suggests adopting a cash crop approach to your choices

Even a normal winter can dent expectations of a covercrop remaining intact come February, and this year has been more severe than most — thanks mainly to strong winds and untimely rains.

Yet some crops have withstood the elements remarkably well. This is not by chance: the common denominator is the adoption of a "cash crop" approach. And given that much of the cover grown in the UK attracts stewardship revenue, cash crop is entirely apt.

The days when game cover played second-fiddle, typically consigned to a far-flung corner of the field, have gone or at least are numbered. Game and conservation cropping should rank alongside fields of the best wheat and barley in importance, and be subject to the same diligence in terms of selection and all that follows.

The use of nitrogen, for example, as an answer for all will not do. A soil index is every bit as important when sowing a wild bird seed mixture or a crop of game maize as it is for a field of oilseed rape, and should be reflected in the balance of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium in the fertiliser used. Whatever the crop, attention to detail is the key to healthy and sturdy plants.

Achieving a crop rotation that reduces risk of disease, nourishes soil and allows at least a one in three-year spraying programme for weeds is important. A successful rotation can be game maize in the first year followed by stewardship-compliant brassica or sorghum-based mixtures — such as Bright Seeds' Pheasant & Finch and Broad Buster — in the second and third years respectively.

The central message is that if a crop is viewed and grown as one of high-value, it is far less likely to disappoint in its expectations.

Lindsay Waddell is a former chairman of the NGO and a retired gamekeeper

Upland keeper

Various agencies are spending a fortune to halt erosion in the North Pennines and beyond, but is it akin to Canute trying to stop the tide?

Work is ongoing in the North Pennines AONB to restore valuable peatland and stop or at least slow erosion, which is an enormous undertaking

If anyone other than farmers keep a weather eye open, it's keepers — especially those who work on the higher moors. Knowing what's coming on the weather front helps you plan your week to allow you to maximise your time on the higher ground — and get your waterproofs ready for the next day.

That said, our weather patterns are changing, with serious falls of rain in short periods, resulting in higher and more rapid water runoff. This leads to a loss of peat, which is simply carbon and is the must-management element on the planet now. Most of the man-made drains put in following World War II have long since been blocked up and, with a few exceptions, the concept and implementation has proved very successful.

Peat hags

There is now — and has been for a number of years — the notion that we can also repair nature's own drainage system on the higher and deeper peatlands of the Pennines called peat hags. This form of peatland erosion has been ongoing for hundreds, if not thousands, of years and results in deep rutting of the peat, in some cases 6ft or more deep. The North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) has, in conjunction with other partners, been working in Teesdale and nearby with a budget of £1.75millon in an attempt to halt or at least slow the erosion.

I presume someone did the sums, but the effort that has gone into this is enormous. There's machinery cutting hundreds of acres of moorland and bagging the cut vegetation. Then it is transported off the moor by tracked vehicles to a road or by helicopter. It is then moved to the recipient site and the whole procedure is repeated in reverse. The volume of time — many weeks — and fuel is, as you can, imagine considerable; vast, in fact. It all equates to carbon being burned, not to mention the carbon footprint of the manufacture of the specialised machinery in the first place.

The other rather irritating thing is that Natural England has allowed the cutting and removal of vegetation from some areas of moorland for this purpose when the keepers on that moor are forbidden to cut there for grouse management purposes. That should not surprise any of the shooting fraternity as, from foreshore to the high tops, Natural England has shown by its decisions an apparent bias against sporting use of land these days.

The point, though, is this. We have managed to halt the erosion caused by our own stupidity by blocking the drains. But rather like the monarch who tried to hold back the tide, can we really stop a natural process? The early indications are that it does help, but there is still ongoing erosion, and once the siltation tops the dams and man-made bunds that have been installed, will the natural process over time simply revert back?

It has cost millions of pounds of public funds, but to be fair has also employed a lot of people, but is it a lost cause? In 50 years' time, will the hags be any less diminished by our hand or will nature have won, and at what cost?

"From foreshore to the high tops, Natural England has an apparent bias"

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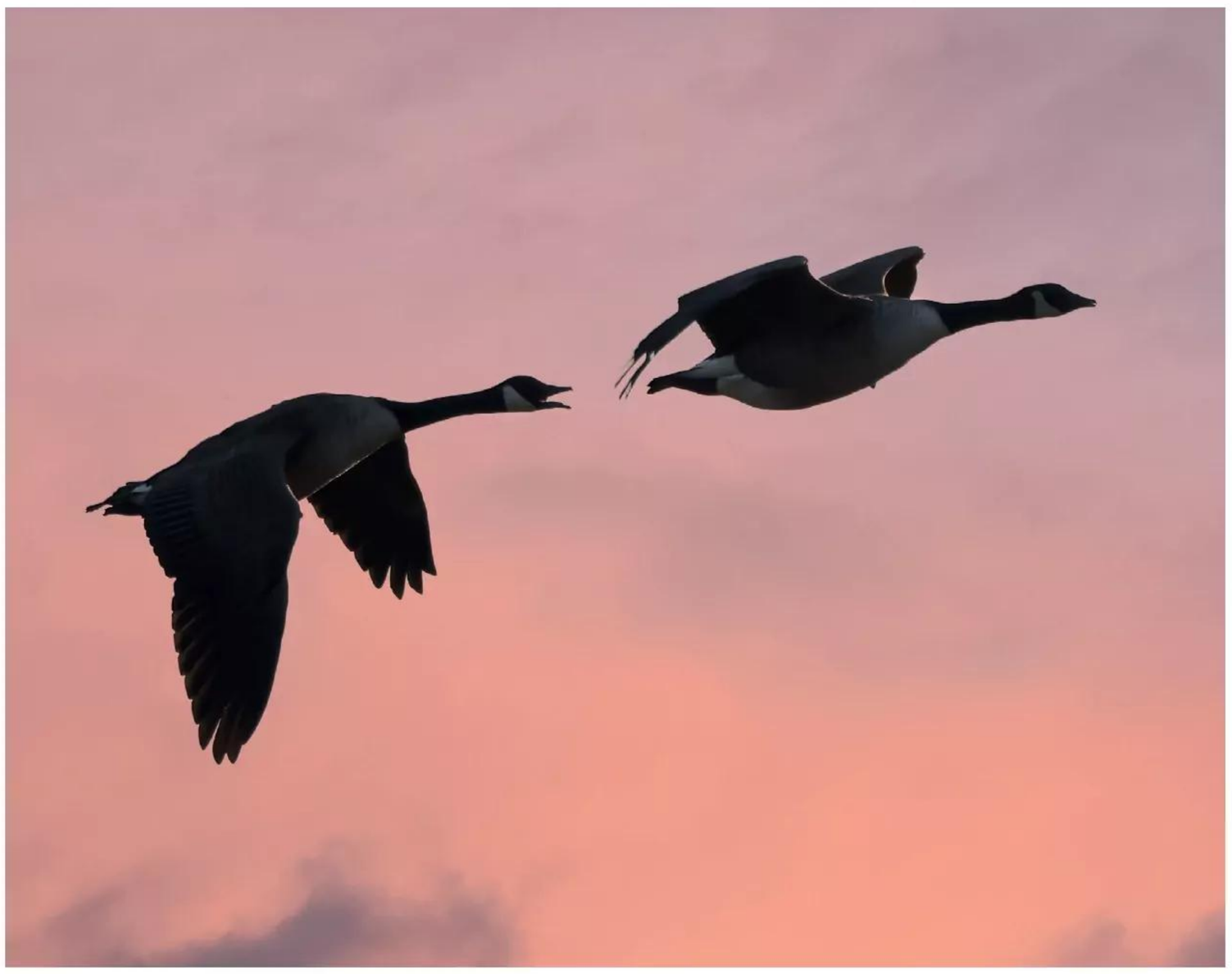
Gethin enjoys the extra 20 days wildfowlers are allowed after the game shooting season has finished and heads out for an evening flight



Gethin sneaks out for a cheeky evening flight after work, but will the Canada geese return?

I am convinced that some sort of natural justice is served by the fact that we wildfowlers, we happy few, are allowed an additional 20 days to practise our noble sport after the end of the game shooting season. Not only do we get to play extra time every year but February wildfowling can be some of the best sport we enjoy all season. It doesn't quite feel like spring despite a few snowdrops showing; the fishing season, at least for brown trout, is still a way over the horizon; the days are lengthening; and the wildfowl look resplendent, all wearing their Sunday-best breeding plumage.

Those of us who work nine to five, if we don't live too far from the coast, might just be able to squeeze in a cheeky evening flight after the end of the working day, something we haven't been able to do since the clocks went back in October.

Taking advantage of this sporting bonus is precisely what I did after downing tools yesterday evening. Sunset, according to my trusty weather app, was at 17:09, meaning I just about had enough time to take Chester and the gun to a nearby estuary and get below the tideline. Closing the front door at a couple of minutes past five, I was indeed surprised by how light the sky was, despite a strong south-westerly breeze whipping up some white horses out in the bay. Perfect conditions for a flight.

Three skeins

The last time I visited this particular channel, I waited in vain for mallard to show but only saw four flickering wine-bottle shapes heading upstream, way too high and out of range. However, as I was packing up, three big skeins of Canada geese appeared, flying line astern and almost silently out of the western sky. They circled the widest part of the channel and settled on the water. Despite me hitting the deck double quick, the Canadas stayed out of range and even sending Chester to put them up, a ruse that sometimes works, only made them slip into the darkening firmament without the remotest chance of a shot.

This evening things would be different. Instead of waiting for fickle mallard, I would load my gun with 3in steel No 1s and outsmart those crafty Canadas. I chose my spot with one eye on the widest part of the channel and the other on the wind direction. I sat on my gamebag and made sure Chester was as hidden as he could be beside some nearby reeds.

All we needed now were geese. Which, as any wildfowler reading this will have already suspected, was the cue for a stream of mallard to flight up the channel, all perfectly within shot. A pair even alighted on the water 40 yards off and swam towards me, quacking loudly as they did. They waddled on to a sandbank midstream and were promptly joined by another pair.

"The wildfowl look resplendent, all wearing their Sunday-best breeding plumage"

Chester, staring at the ducks and wound tight like a coiled spring, started whining, albeit quietly.

"Shush! The geese will soon be here," I told him. At my words, a noisy redshank alighted next to the mallard on the sandbank and, no sooner had his scarlet toes touched the sand, he spotted me and started emitting his characteristically loud alarm call. This was not going according to plan. The mallard, disturbed by their noisy neighbour, took flight one by one and vanished into the gloom.

Eventually, the redshank grew tired of yelling abuse at me and also departed, leaving Chester and me sitting in the dark, waiting for geese that never materialised. Thank goodness we have another 15 days of the season to go.

Gethin Jones is a keen wildfowler and rough shooter. He joined BASC (then WAGBI) at the age of 16, the day after he shot his first mallard.

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Patrick Leigh-Pemberton

Country Diary

For a self-confessed technophobe who ran over his own phone, using farming apps is a step into the 21st century – at least temporarily

I have a pretty poor relationship with technology, as most of my friends and family will attest. It is not that I do not understand it, nor that I cannot use it, but that my lackadaisical approach to belongings means anything in my possession will have its endurance tested savagely. Laptops, phones, watches, radios and toasters can all expect a pretty rough ride from me, being left in the rain, forgotten on trains, dropped from ladders or just generally thrown about.

As quite a lot of irascible people have done, I have turned this personal failing of mine into an irrational dislike of technology. I will often be found shouting abuse at my computer or phone, saying "why have you done this, you beastly thing?" when it is quite apparent that it has done it because I asked it to.

I will blame my phone for not working when the cracks in its screen (which I gave it) are preventing the touchscreen from achieving its full potential of being a decent screen or touchable.

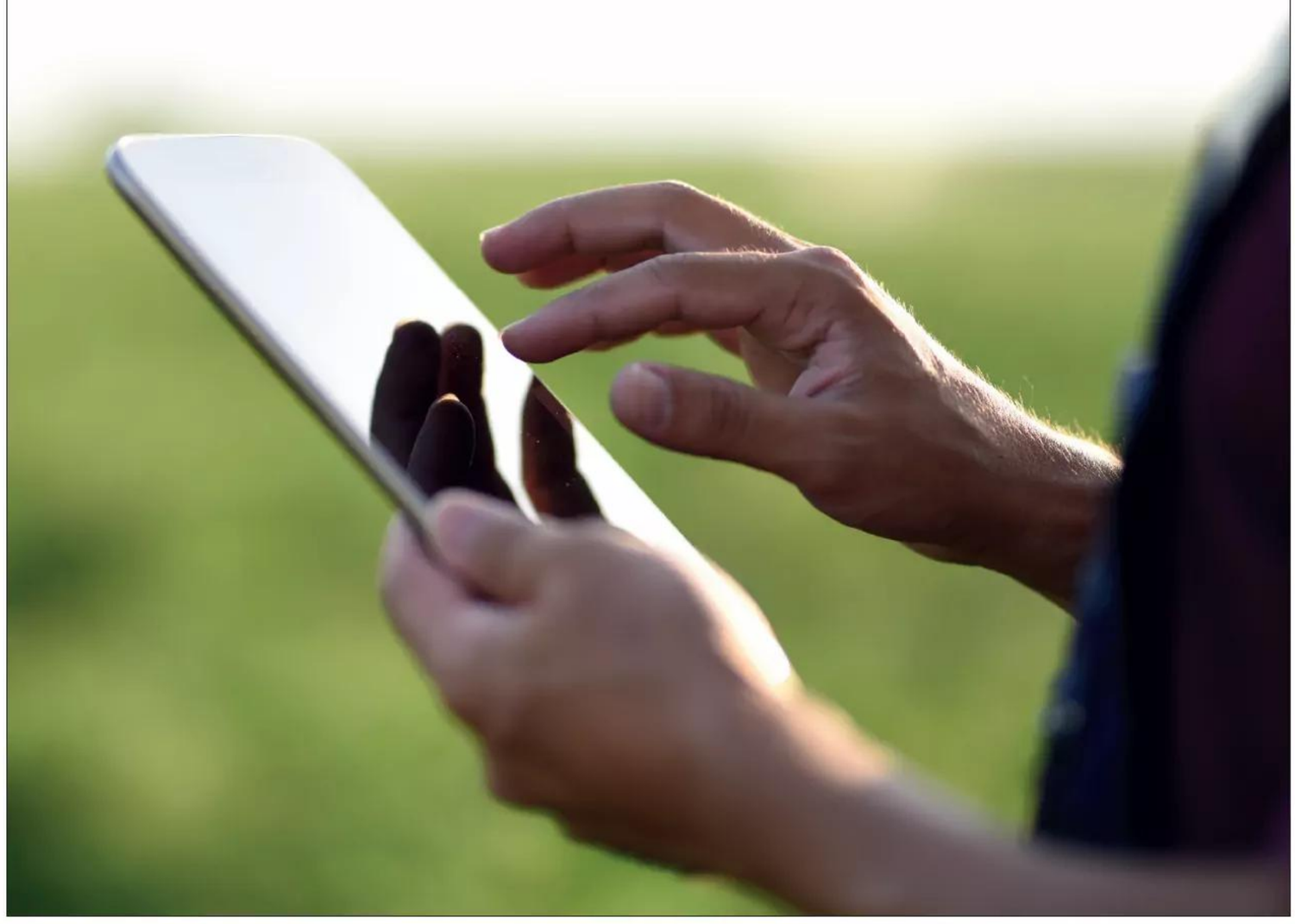
Fully automated

Given this difficult relationship, it is a bit of a shock to me that I have been scrolling the internet reading reviews of different farming apps. There are hundreds of these helpful little blighters. They promise to help me attain unbelievable levels of profit, to streamline my entire operation, to become a fully automated food producer. I don't think their advertising team necessarily had my farm in mind when they came up with their taglines and slogans, but I am completely convinced.

Given that I am not farming an arable operation the size of Montana, I probably do not need the luxury premium executive exclusive subscription offers, complete with personalised drone pilot, that some of these apps provide, so the budget cheapo offer is fine for my small patch of grass. And when I say budget cheapo, I mean entirely free. But even given this commercially minded constraint, it is remarkable what these apps can, or, more appropriately can't, do.

I trial each app for a few weeks, to get used to them and see what they can do for me. I must have used 12 or more at this point, but the answer is that they don't really do terribly much.

Mobile phone apps are a nice change from scrap-of-paper farming



Each of these apps is merely a carefully designed template for recording what has been done and what needs doing. The bells, whistles and clever graphic design are appealing and do make me feel like I am farming in the 21st century but they are disguise for the fact these apps are no more useful than a scrap of paper and a pencil.

The one thing that separates them from a scrap of paper and a pencil is that, for most people, they cannot be lost. They won't be put through the washing machine in a pair of jeans, causing the author and intended reader — for they are one and the same person — to peer at them with the hunger of a 19th-century Egyptologist seeking direction to sarcophagi glory and fame.

So, for most people, these apps are a brilliant invention, and one that genuinely will make recordkeeping slightly more straightforward and grazing plans clearer and easier to maintain. Unfortunately, because I am a technophobe who ran over his mobile phone only last week — luckily it was in soft mud, so it has survived — I am probably going to have stay stuck in the 19th century and scrap-of-paper farming.

"The clever graphics do make me feel like I am farming in the 21st century"

My phone is on borrowed time, but it is nice to know that the option is always there should I become a better and more organised person.

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

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

Stalking Diary

The mortality rate of red deer has fallen, which means the cull figure must be increased, and the summer heat left hinds in poor condition

Conditions on the hill affect the deer, but are they really down to climate change?

"Wet is fine, cold is fine. Wet and cold, not fine," a wise old shepherd told me. A simple expression, but he was absolutely right. The January storms have battered the west coast of Scotland relentlessly. A pheasant shoot I frequent an hour away lost a drive mid-season when the entire woodland was flattened in a single night. Here, tree guards I have built, with fence posts in the corners, have simply been torn from the ground. A nearby weather station recorded a gust recently at 168mph.

In the midst of all this are the wild red deer. Naturally, they will struggle, as eventually the older and weaker animals that managed to escape the winter cull will succumb. A sad end indeed. The hill fox and the eagle are the only things to benefit during years of high natural mortality. However, in years when the deer fare well, it is the predators that will struggle. That's how nature works.

Raised cull

It has been a few years now since we last saw a considerable mortality rate and we have therefore raised the cull figure to compensate. Last year, however, there was not much fat on the hinds as we entered winter. The incredibly hot weather we saw last year undoubtedly held back the growth in the grass, which did not allow the hinds to reach full condition by the time autumn came, explains the late rut last year

It is the hinds coming into season that dictates when the rut breaks, contrary to popular belief that it is the stags. The rut is definitely later nowadays. Climate change? Perhaps.

As I look out across the mountains that I call home, it is often difficult to comprehend they were only formed some 10,000 years ago, during the last Ice Age. This was around the same time that early man started to domesticate cattle and the city of Jericho was first formed.

The fact that we are still in the "warming phase" of the Ice Age really puts it all into perspective. Who do we think we are? In the grand scheme of things, we are nothing. If the history of the Earth were condensed into a 24-hour clock, humankind would only arrive around 77 seconds before midnight, yet we still wonder how the planet ever functioned without our intervention.

How much of climate change is down to us? Are we speeding up an inevitable process or is Mother Nature telling us that we are not really in control?

Swedish teenager

It bothers me greatly that climate change is used to scare people into making decisions; decisions that we simply must adhere to in order to guarantee the safety of generations to come. While in the background, it just so happens to be very good business for others. The rantings of a Swedish teenager cruising the world on a £3.4 million carbon-free yacht — sponsored by one of the largest car manufacturers on the planet — are testament to this.

Mother Nature is the undisputed boss in my opinion. So I would rather place my trust in the wise old shepherd than some vote-hungry "green" politician any day. It's not how it is, it's how it looks.

"The hinds coming into season dictates when the rut breaks, not the stags"

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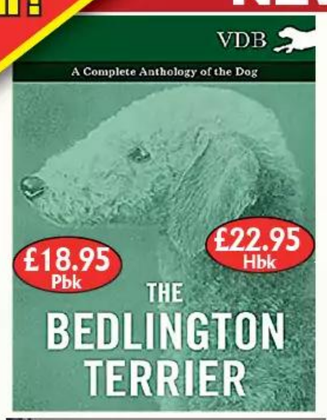

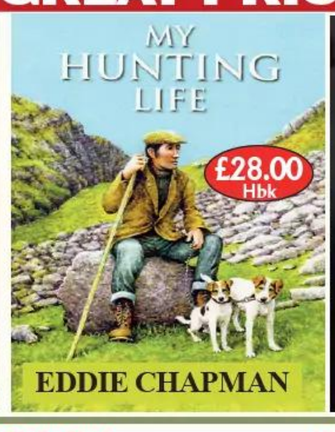

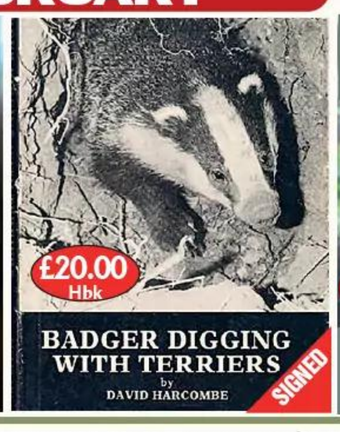

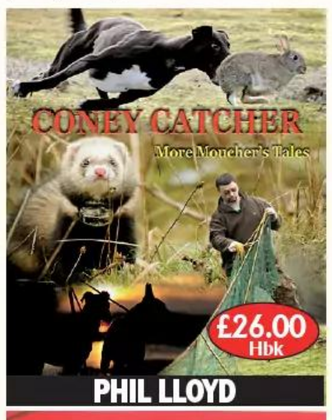

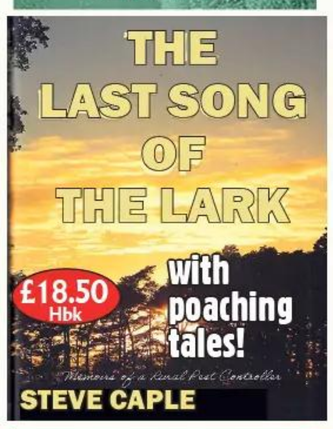

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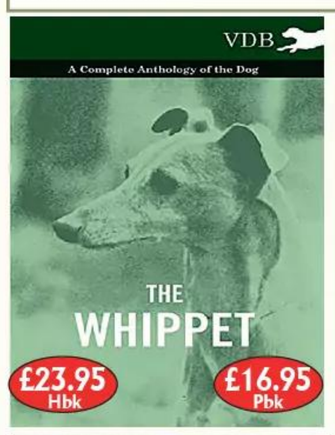

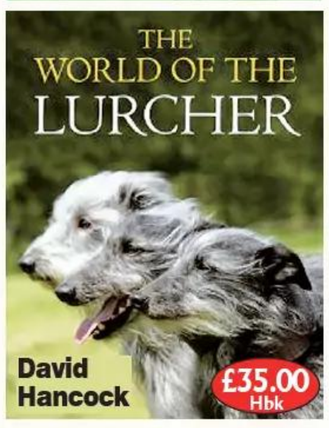

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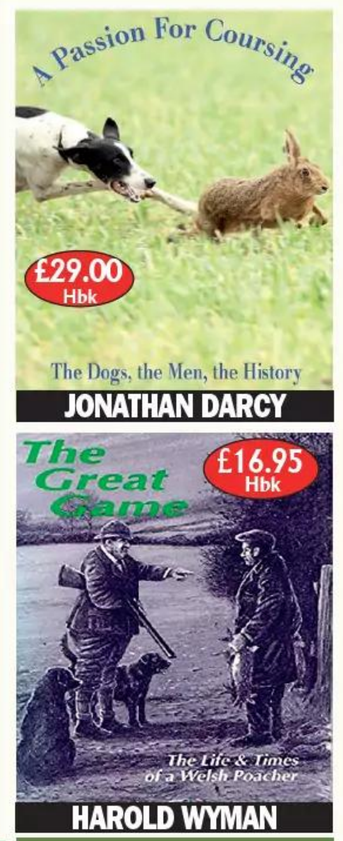

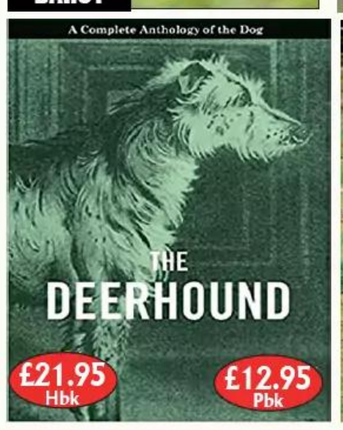

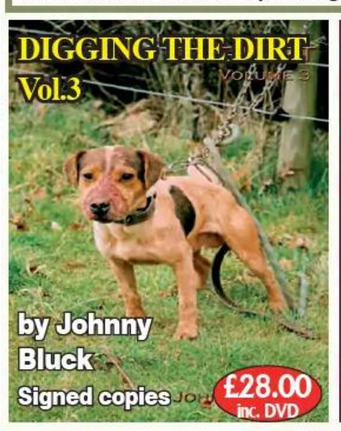

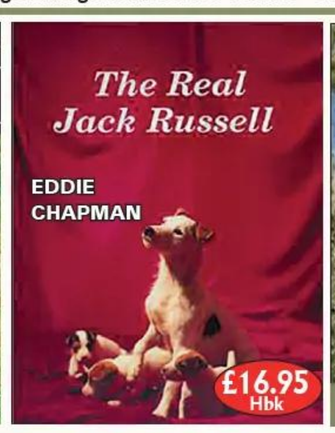

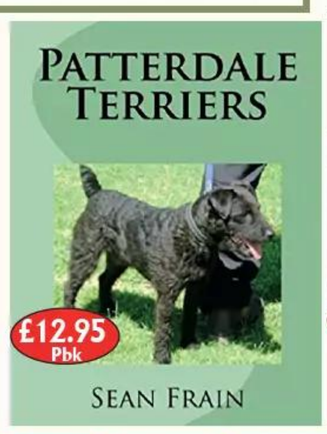

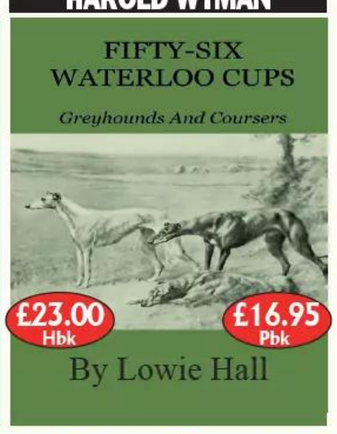

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New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

Jeremy Hobson is an experienced keeper, shoot host and fisherman

Sporting Life

February is the time for keepers to plan ahead and gamebirds to pick their mate

Today, 14 February, is traditionally the day for lovers and birds. Nowadays, we often do nothing more than send our Valentine a card but in years gone by men and women would put their names on slips of paper and draw lots as to who would be their "lover". The practice was said to originate from times when women's names would be chosen from a box to participate in Roman orgies. It certainly sounds the sort of party to which invites would be in great demand.

What bird you saw on the morning of St Valentine's Day was also supposed to foretell the type of person you would marry: if a woman saw a robin flying overhead, it meant she and a sailor would eventually get together. If she saw a sparrow, she would become the wife of a poor man but, despite that, very happy. Perhaps best of all, though, if she saw a goldfinch, she would marry a millionaire.

This February day was also believed to be the day when birds themselves chose their mates. However, in the game shooting and gamekeeping world, rather than find their own mate and subsequently reproduce in the wild, partridges and pheasants often have their partners selected for them — either via flock-mating or, in the case of grey partridges, in pairs. In the wild the latter can obviously choose their own mate and when penned in pairs by the keeper for breeding purposes, they occasionally don't approve of the choice made on their behalf and fertility is affected as a result.

Broody bantams

It's a long time now since I paired up English partridges and hatched their eggs under broody bantams. I don't recollect any fertility issues in any of the birds I paired as, once the eggs had been put under the broody hens, a good percentage always seemed to hatch off — after which, the actual rearing could be left to the foster mother.

Provided there were no tiny scrapes in the ground that prevented the coops and runs from sitting flat, and that the diameter of wire mesh was small enough, rearing them generally went well. Until you've had experience of them it's not always appreciated just how small a newly hatched partridge chick is — and how easily they can escape through the smallest hole.

When it came to the red-legged partridges things were simpler: they could be flock-mated — in netted-over pen sections — as could the pheasants we used to catch up just as the shooting season was finishing.

"Given a spell of wet weather, the laying pens quickly become a bit of a mud bath"

The only problem with this was that, given a spell of wet weather, the laying pens quickly had the potential to become a bit of a mud bath. So, from catching up until early March, I penned the pheasants in a wire-fronted barn where they could be kept dry and wouldn't therefore be able to paddle the laying pen grass into a soggy mess any sooner than was necessary.

Of course, doing so necessitated having to catch up the birds in the barn again and made double the work but, by constructing a pen section funnel through which they could be driven and captured, the operation didn't actually take very long at all.

There's no real love in the world of birds who, at this time of year, are simply preparing to do what comes naturally to them. Even without red roses and chocolates, provided your pheasants and partridges are fed correctly, kept clean and given adequate protection from the elements and predators, the up-coming season should be a fruitful one – and the pitter-patter of tiny feet should ensue.

The great thing about pheasants is that when it comes to mating they don't need much help

Jeremy Hobson *was a gamekeeper for over three decades and now regularly acts as shoot host. He's a lifelong follower of hounds and claims to be an enthusiastic, but somewhat incompetent fisherman.*

HENRY HUNT

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Taking on the trickster of the sky

Will a woodland wander with a little .410 and an ever-hopeful clumber bear fruit?

WRITTEN BY CHARLES HARTLEY ◆ PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN GARNETT

Charles sets off on a woodland ramble with a .410 and Bertie the clumber spaniel

Charles admires the long-beaked beauty that Bertie brought efficiently to hand (*inset above*)

Regular readers may have visited the grouse moor with me when I challenged myself on the king of gamebirds with a .410 in hand and half as many grams of shot than I normally need (*Every bit as glorious*, 13 December). Somehow, I came off the moor with a red grouse and a common snipe to plump my gamebag and fill my belly.

Many of us have a .410 hiding somewhere in our cabinets, bought to train a youngster or to fill the need for a "fun gun" to wander the fields. But with the impending pressure of the lead ban, I am starting to worry about the smallest of our shotgun calibres. Concerned questions have been answered by new technology in the bigger bores, but we are yet to see an answer for the smallest ones; less important yes, but still a gateway for many a young Shot.

But before I get bogged down in this well-trodden debate, I will be enjoying what time I have left with a .410 before the door closes.

After my success with the grouse and with my tail up, I got ahead of myself and raised the bar to the acrobat of the air, *Scolopax rusticola* – the woodcock. I typically leave this species alone until the end of the season, searching for them in woods that I know well. I know them to be bare of home broods, yet they fill each winter after a few full moons and a dash of frosty nights as the migrants arrive on our shores. With a mere 14g of shot at my disposal, the new fall of long-beaked beauties will have their best sporting chance.

Flash of brindle

Whenever I have shot these three plantations before, I have always approached them on the same route, but in the past the first wood was typically empty of opportunity. So I opted to cut across its base and head for the last wood first, hoping to warm up the dog on the way there. Reining in his quartering, only 30m into the broken terrain there came a flash of brindle as the grey ground exploded into life and a plump woodcock launched into the air.

I was caught completely on my heels and this bird was left – like so many I had seen this season – to fly on merrily in its jinking flight, with a Yorkshireman watching. Bertie drew long snorts of scent from the spot where it sprouted, gathering memories of birds from the past and knowledge of the game at hand.

We quickly made our way through the pasture between the plantations, with Bertie diving into the occasional patch of sedge for good measure – even at eight and a half he is still full of enthusiasm. Dropping over the gritstone wall, we landed on to a carpet of dry leaves, punctuated by dense trunks and broadleaf boughs crisscrossing our view.

Immediately Bertie began to dash about amid the leaves, tossing them up behind his paws as he zigzagged through the trees. With only 80m covered, the second woodcock of the day emerged from the leaf litter. Although my gun was up quickly this time, the path the bird picked through the trees was not only mesmerising, but almost impossible to follow. With a tiny window of opportunity, the mighty little Belgian .410 roared, but I was too late and was bested by the trickster of the air.

I fished out the spent cartridge as a column of smoke curled from the breech and Bertie dashed about the undergrowth in the direction the bird had fled. To my horror, with the gun broken over my arm, a stunning pair of woodcock burst from the ground,

"I will be enjoying what time I have left with a .410 before the door closes"

Charles mounts his gun but the artiful little acrobats get the better of him time and again

holding a nice straight line as I stood powerless to intervene.

Dropping down through this wood, our path was frequently blocked by huge fallen trees, felled during decades of storms. They were stacked in random crisscrossed piles that made an amazing maze filled with miniature lost worlds hidden from view. This ground was full of birds but little sport, because with the density of cover all I could do was listen as they flushed, leaving me lucky to see a mere shadow of their form playing across the bark, projected by the strong sun.

This was proving frustrating for the dog and climbing trunk after trunk was exhausting. So, taking a hard line out of the side of the wood, we popped into the second. This was once a stunning 10-acre plantation within a hilltop valley; tall mature trees to its top and a marshy tangle of silver birch at its base. But although the marshland still stands almost untouched, the rest of the wood had to be felled two years earlier, to stop the unceasing march of larch dieback.

So with little obvious cover, we headed straight into the marsh, where we felt certain to find some action. The low winter light played beautifully through this tangle of stunted trees; the beams that penetrated branches glistened across the crystal-clear streams that meandered through the roots.

The traditional 'fun gun' to roam the fields with, the .410 is also a gateway for many a young Shot

Perfection and peace

Like a piece of art, the world stood still here, with the perfection and peace being interrupted momentarily as my clumber rocketed about, still holding a strong pace. He frequently misjudged the depth of mossy pools, creating wonderfully ungainly spaniel-aided splashes of life to the scene and sending droplets into the air to catch the sun and light up the dark mossy corners.

We explored this ground well and it felt the perfect habitat for our wading game, but nothing but the occasional pipit lifted with Bertie's exertions.

Giving up on this visual paradise, we ventured into the huge area of clear-fell that, although a mere shadow of its former self, was showing signs of new life. With a rough clearance of the felled timber, there was still plenty of cover for our formidable quarry. Working through this terrain was exhausting as every step fell unsteadily on slick dead timber, or failed completely on bone-like stalks that snapped underfoot, revealing ankle-twisting deadfalls. ↠

This caused a new problem as although there was less aerial cover for a fleeing bird, three woodcock were able to flush unchallenged as I was either floundering on the ground after a fall or had unloaded to traverse a tricky obstacle.

But then came the moment. On solid ground Bertie rushed the sedge ahead of me and a woodcock zipped into the air like a rocket. The shotgun met my shoulder and, as the bead sight rose towards my target, a second bird took to the air, only for me to hesitate and change to the second bird. With this I missed my first true opportunity of the day.

Bertie could not believe it. He had been working his socks off within a landscape literally moving with game, yet our bag was empty. Suddenly my decision to bring the .410 was feeling silly as, although I had made the rookie error of changing targets, I felt sure that with a bit more lead in the air, my lacklustre effort might have borne fruit.

Time was ticking on and the poor old dog was starting to slow. But with one last effort, we entered our final wood and a complete change of scene. This wood was flatter than the others and, although it was "unmanaged" like the rest, was much more manageable. It was filled with patchy growths of rhododendron that had never failed to bring us action in the past. Sending Bertie into their midst, the stick-like branches trembled at his presence and he dived in and out of sight like a dolphin breaching the surface of the sea.

"Bertie dived in and out of sight like a dolphin breaching the surface of the sea"

The first two patches of rhodie came without action, but on the third Bertie's ferocity turned up a notch; he was on scent but somehow the secret within held fast. Then out of the green tangle two woodcock flushed, one out the back and quickly out of sight but the second straight at me, jinking left down the woodland ride and finding its form silhouetted at the muzzle of my gun. It fell lifeless into the cover below and Bertie uncharacteristically did not follow it in. The poor boy was becoming accustomed to failure. With a little direction he finally found his mark and brought a very reluctant retrieve to hand.

It had not been easy, but we had done it. Once again, this magnificent little bird had proved itself the master of the skies and more than a match for me with my .410. But after all, this was the point of the mission. It was never going to be simple and, unlike after my previous expedition, I am not lining up my next challenge just yet.

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Bertie frequently misjudges the depths of mossy pools, creating spaniel-aided splashes of life to the scene

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This is a forever cost

The Icelandic people are beginning to question the wisdom of hosting the salmon-farming industry in their waters, says Jim Coates, who goes to see for himself

Iceland represents roughly 40% of the remaining wilderness in Europe. Several hours of driving across the gravel roads of the Westfjords pass with barely another car. Then from the window I spot the first open-net salmon farm. It's an incongruous sight against the pristine backdrop.

I'm travelling with a group of international journalists from major titles, including heavyweights in the field of sustainability and the environment. We've been assembled by Patagonia – the outdoor clothing brand that now gives all profit to organisations fighting climate change – as part of its campaign to highlight the impacts of open-net salmon farms around the world. As we bounce along the dirt road, I'm fascinated to listen as the passengers piece together the challenges of the system, particularly the prevention of disease transmission to open water.

Parasites can be poisoned in the nets, but they can't be prevented from rapidly multiplying in the open water. Treatment of the faeces, waste food and industrial chemicals are also issues and, perhaps worst of all, escapes are inevitable. The week before this trip, the Arctic Fish company, owned by Mowi, admitted that an estimated 3,500 salmon had escaped from a farm in the Westfjords.

Despite assurances the industry had previously given – that the escaped fish would not be sexually mature and would be unlikely to stray far from their food – Icelandic news reports at the time suggested this was incorrect. In the seat behind me, Jón Kaldal, of the Icelandic Wildlife Fund, set out why the interbreeding of wild and farmed salmon is such a threat: "Think of it like a wolf breeding with a poodle... soon wolf genes would be lost."

Elvar Fridriksson heads the North Atlantic Salmon Fund (NASF), following his mentor Orri Vigfússon. Elvar says the escape of 3,500 fish "was very much an estimate. The true number may well have been higher – we simply don't know. What we do know is that they are appearing in rivers far from the escape site."

The look says it all: a shocked Brynjar Arnarsson holds a salmon speared on the river Langadalsá

JIM COATES/PATAGONIA

During my visit, more and more of the escapees begin to appear and the issue is making national news. We arrive at an old wooden house standing in isolation, dwarfed by the beautiful mountain behind and the long sandy beach below. It is the home

of Tomas Gudbjartsson, a prominent conservationist and heart surgeon. He's invited us for lunch to discuss the situation and meet the mayor of Patreksfjörður, the small town close to the recent escape, a charming lady named Sif SigurðardÓttir. The fact that the recent salmon escape has captured media attention puzzles her; the spotlight is unexpected.

Over lunch, Sif explains that the tiny communities of the Westfjords make up only 2% of Iceland's population. They have always looked to the sea for at least some of their living. As sea-fishing quotas have been reduced, jobs have been lost. "Some people were almost without hope," she says, "and so any new jobs are important and very welcome. We've seen a great lift in the community."

Implications

Looking around, it is immediately clear why the investment has been welcomed: it's a tough place to make a living. Sif is asked about the environmental implications. She pauses then says: "We are assured there is no issue and, of course, we hope that is the case."

After lunch, a boat is arranged for us to take a closer look at some of the open-net farms. I can see the journalists are understanding the issue, but I want them to see for themselves. As we board, I'm handed an Arnarlax life vest, on the back of which says "Sustainable Icelandic salmon". Elvar comments that Arnarlax – a brand of Norwegian giant SalMar – has been asked to stop using the term sustainable in some of its promotional material.

As we set out from the harbour, Graham (*New Scientist*) and I are distracted by the views and trying not to go overboard as we're tossed up and down in the swell. It soon becomes clear we're heading in the opposite direction to the salmon farm, which is clearly visible, albeit getting less so by the minute. The captain explains the angle of the wind is wrong: "We could sink in the heavy swell if we head that way. Perhaps you would like to see the whales?"

It doesn't take long before a large humpback surfaces next to the boat, before flicking its tail over in slow motion as it dives. It's an awesome sight and neatly breaks the tension.

An open-net farm in the remote Westfjords of Iceland, where sea lice have become a huge concern

This is the local wildlife that Tomas Gudbjartsson is so keen to protect. As we chug back to shore, the captain reveals some of his family members work on the salmon farm. I remark to Graham: "We were never going to the farm."

A storm gathers as we drove to Ísafjorður. On the bus, I take stock of the day, the people we have met; the similarities between the small communities of the fjords and those of Scotland's West Highlands. These communities need jobs and ways to make a good living. That's not up for debate, but what must be debated are the activities that are acceptable regarding the environment. In Scotland's case, the government has hitched its wagon to salmon farming as a major industry for growth.

It occurs to me that the salmon farmers need the consumer

"Any new jobs are important and very welcome. We've seen a great lift in the community"

perception of Iceland, Scotland, Norway and Canada every bit as much as the small communities need jobs. Without the consumers' positive mental association with these wild places where wild salmon live, in a clean, rugged environment, would the product have the same appeal? Tomas is sensitive to the economic and social needs of the Westfjords.

But he also points out that if the ecosystem is damaged, as fjords in Norway have been, then many other jobs will be lost, particularly in tourism. The salmon farmers aren't the only people who rely on Iceland's reputation for wild unspoilt nature.

Tomas also tells me some locals have concerns about the chemicals used to control sea lice. Sea lice are crustaceans, so do poisons that target them pose risks to shellfish and the wider ecosystem? Data obtained by the Global Alliance Against Industrial Aquaculture (GAAIA) suggests that 19.6 million litres of hydrogen peroxide were discharged into Scottish sea lochs in 2015 to kill sea lice. If that was the case, I wonder what the figure is for 2023?

Interbreeding

After breakfast, we meet Leó Guðmundsson, a scientist from the Marine and Freshwater Research Institute. Leó shows us data regarding the interbreeding between wild and escaped salmon in Iceland. It dawns on me that this is a forever cost, and the timescale is way beyond a human lifetime. Leó is precise with his language; most statements follow a long thoughtful pause.

He explains that a risk assessment has been conducted and it is estimated that no more than 4% of the breeding salmon population can be made up of escaped farmed salmon before serious genetic damage will be caused. He is clear that interbreeding is a very serious threat to biodiversity within the wild population. His institute can trace the origin of →

escaped farmed salmon. He is aware what this means and says: "The science is robust and the topic is now moving towards the political sphere, in terms of consequences."

This is where the work of the Icelandic Wildlife Fund and NASF are vital, as they battle to get this into the national dialogue. The views of the voting public are critical; prosecutions and legislation need political will.

In Scotland, we have seen single escapes close to the size of the entire wild Icelandic salmon population. In 2018 and 2019, Marine Scotland sampled 252 sites, to assess the level of interbreeding between wild and farmed salmon. Some 23% of sites showed evidence of interbreeding, 8.9% were classified as moderate with weak levels of genetic change, 8.4% of sites were found to have moderate genetic change, and 5.9% showed major genetic change.

Last year, more than 50,000 farmed salmon escaped in Scotland (aquaculture.scotland.gov.uk/data/fish_escapes.aspx). It's a shameful picture. This type of pollution can never be cleared up, yet you wouldn't need a very big piece of paper to document the consequences the industry faced.

Elvar has received word that suspected escaped salmon have run the river Langadalsá. It turns out that a major clean-up operation is under way; teams of divers have arrived from Norway. They'll attempt to spear suspected escapees from the river.

The Langadalsá looks superb, bank-high but clear. As we arrive at the lodge, it quickly becomes obvious things are far from perfect. A dozen or so salmon, which appear to be of farmed stock, have been caught and killed that morning. It's a solemn scene as Elvar and ace guide Brynjar Arnarsson – whom I've met previously in Iceland – dutifully explain what they believe caused the various injuries and deformities of the dead fish. The only positive I could find was that the journalists could see for themselves the terrible condition of some salmon and presumably the suffering the fish must have endured.

We needed to make tracks and get to Reykjavík. Patagonia is holding a public debate on salmon farming. Tomas Gudbjartsson will host a panel discussion with Jón Kaldal, Veiga Grétarsdóttir, a scientist from the Marine Institute, and Simen Saetre, author of *The New Fish*, which documents the rise and consequences of salmon farming around the world. A recent *New York Times* audio book of the week, it's attracting a lot of attention. It puts things into a helpful context and I would encourage you to read or listen to it. Things appear worse than I had realised.

I'm impressed by the turnout and the quality of the discussion. Salmon farming representatives were invited but to my knowledge none have come. Saetre gives a reading. Although I have read the book, it is powerful stuff when you hear it aloud. I'm fascinated to watch the audience reaction. The book makes shocking claims. It suggests there is now a $500 million industry focused on killing sea lice, or rather trying to kill them. Chapter 21 explores the challenges associated with salmon feed, often a combination of soy (sometimes associated with deforestation) and wild pelagic fish (sometimes taken from the world's poorest regions).

"Three million Scottish farmed salmon died prematurely in August 2023 alone"

Divers scour the river Langadalsá for the escaped salmon

Consumer perception

Word is still getting out in the UK. *The Times* recently reported that worldwide, about a quarter of all fish caught end up as fishmeal for farms. WildFish recently published the news that mortality rates on Scottish salmon farms average approximately 25%. If we accept these numbers, this suggests that one in four salmon will consume food someone or something else could have eaten, produce waste, require chemical treatments, but sadly perish before being harvested for human consumption.

It was recently reported that three million Scottish farmed salmon died prematurely in August 2023 alone. In 2022; 16.7 million farmed salmon died in Scotland before they could be harvested (Fish Health Inspectorate data). Should we factor these statistics into any sustainability calculations? Despite this, the Soil Association,

International journalists interview the local mayor about a recent escape from an Arctic Fish site

Divers with spear guns search for suspected escaped salmon in the waters surrounding Iceland's open-net farms

RSPCA and Aquaculture Stewardship Council provide certification for UK supermarket packaging, endorsing the organic, welfare and sustainability credentials of farmed salmon. Are UK consumers being misled?

At the time of writing, the Icelandic government has called a temporary halt to new salmon farming permits and Arctic Fish is facing possible legal action over the escape of sexually mature salmon. In Scotland, recently proposed legislation to protect wild salmon from sea lice will not initially apply to any of the 200-plus salmon farms currently operating. Would the Icelanders settle for that?

There's a fair chance the Icelandic people will reject open-net salmon farming. The chance exists because of public opinion and a deep pride in Icelandic nature. Tourism depends upon it. I also get the impression that sustainability really does matter. What the NASF and the Icelandic Wildlife Fund are doing is inspiring; they're writing the playbook, engaging the wider population and helping them question the cost of salmon farming and to weigh this against the financial benefit. A recent national poll suggested 63.5% of the Icelandic population are negative towards salmon farming and, of those who took a position, 57.5% want to ban the industry entirely. The NASF and IWF helped to coordinate the biggest protest Iceland has seen since the 2008 financial crisis as thousands gathered outside parliament.

Elvar Fridriksson with 13 suspected escapees that were removed from the river to prevent potential interbreeding with wild fish

Food chain

I'm left with two overriding thoughts from my trip to Iceland. There have been very few attempts to domesticate new animals in the past few hundred years. Typically, we don't farm animals as far up the food chain as a salmon. My understanding of this is that you may need to put more edible animals in than you get out. In which case the true cost of a packet of farmed salmon may be far greater than you think.

The topic is now in the Icelandic political sphere and that is where the views of the voting public are critical. If the people care, there will be consequences and change. The direct action of the NASF and IWF is inspiring. Salmon farming in Scotland continues, but it is surely now time for policymakers to acknowledge and confront its wider impacts. As Jón Kaldal put it: "The profits are sent to Norway and the bill is sent to nature."

Left: **Is the certification on this product misleading and does the consumer care?**

Grey squirrels

In pole position

Mat Manning reveals his favourite pieces of kit for a drey-poking day – which can be great fun as well as an important way of pest control

Now the game shooting season has finished, a lot of people will be turning their attention to pest control. In many cases, the pest at the top of the list will be the grey squirrel, and drey-poking is a great way to reduce numbers of this destructive rodent during the late winter and early spring months.

Like so many introduced species, grey squirrels cause some very serious problems, and their habit of chewing pheasant feeders and munching through valuable grain supplies are only the tip of the iceberg. The US invader's impact on our native red squirrel – through the spread of squirrel pox and through simply out-competing the smaller and less adaptable red – is well documented, but the harm they cause extends way beyond that.

Grey squirrels are known to prey on the eggs and chicks of songbirds, and their bullish behaviour and ability to digest nuts and berries before they are fully ripe means they monopolise natural food sources, compromising indigenous birds and small mammals' chances of surviving harsh winter conditions. The grey squirrels' bark-stripping habit kills and deforms trees on a huge scale. This has a massive financial impact on the forestry industry and reduces viable woodland habitat for native wildlife.

Back to the drey-poking. This form of culling entails poking out dreys with a long pole and shooting grey squirrels as they bolt. It's exciting stuff and a very effective means of pest control. Ideally, you want three or four Guns and someone on the poles – switching roles after every three or four dreys will prevent the "poker" from getting fatigued.

"Switching roles after every four dreys will prevent the 'poker' from getting fatigued"

More or less any shotgun will do for drey-poking, as long as you don't mind it getting knocked about a bit. There are a few items of kit that can make a real difference to your results and enjoyment of the day, though. The following roundup comprises what I believe to be the most important ones.

GREY SQUIRREL DREY POLES

- **Price** £310.80
- **Contact** agrigame.co.uk

A decent set of poles is the single most important item of kit for a day's drey-poking. I struggled along for years using flimsy lofting poles and didn't realise how much of a compromise they were until I finally stumped up for something more substantial.

These are not cheap, but will last for years and should prove to be a worthwhile investment if you plan to do a lot of drey-poking. On full extension, the six poles make for a total length of 36ft – the highest dreys are often the most productive.

Apart from their reach and build quality, these poles have a couple of useful features. Their hooked head section is excellent for gripping and breaking up dreys, and their push-lock fastening mechanism means they are unlikely to pull apart if the head gets jammed.

Switching roles between Guns and poker makes sure everyone has some fun

A helmet is an essential as some pretty hefty debris can rain down on you

Long poles are a mus because the highest dreys are often the most productive

MACWET CLIMATEC GLOVES

- **Price** £32.99
- **Contact** macwet.com

I like to wear gloves when drey-poking, and MacWets are great for both tasks. I used to cut the end off the trigger finger on my shooting gloves, but the level of feel you get through MacWets means I no longer have to. They are also extremely grippy, even when soaking wet, which makes for safe, secure handling of gun and poles.

Debris

MacWet gloves come in a huge range of sizes — state the width of your palm when ordering and you are ensured an excellent fit. I prefer the long-cuff version, especially for drey-poking as it helps to keep out the falling dust and debris when working the poles.

Apart from a choice of cuff lengths, MacWet gloves also come in a wide variety of colours, as well as Climatec and Micromesh options. Climatec has more insulation and is the one to go for in colder conditions, whereas Micromesh has improved airflow for comfortable shooting in warm weather.

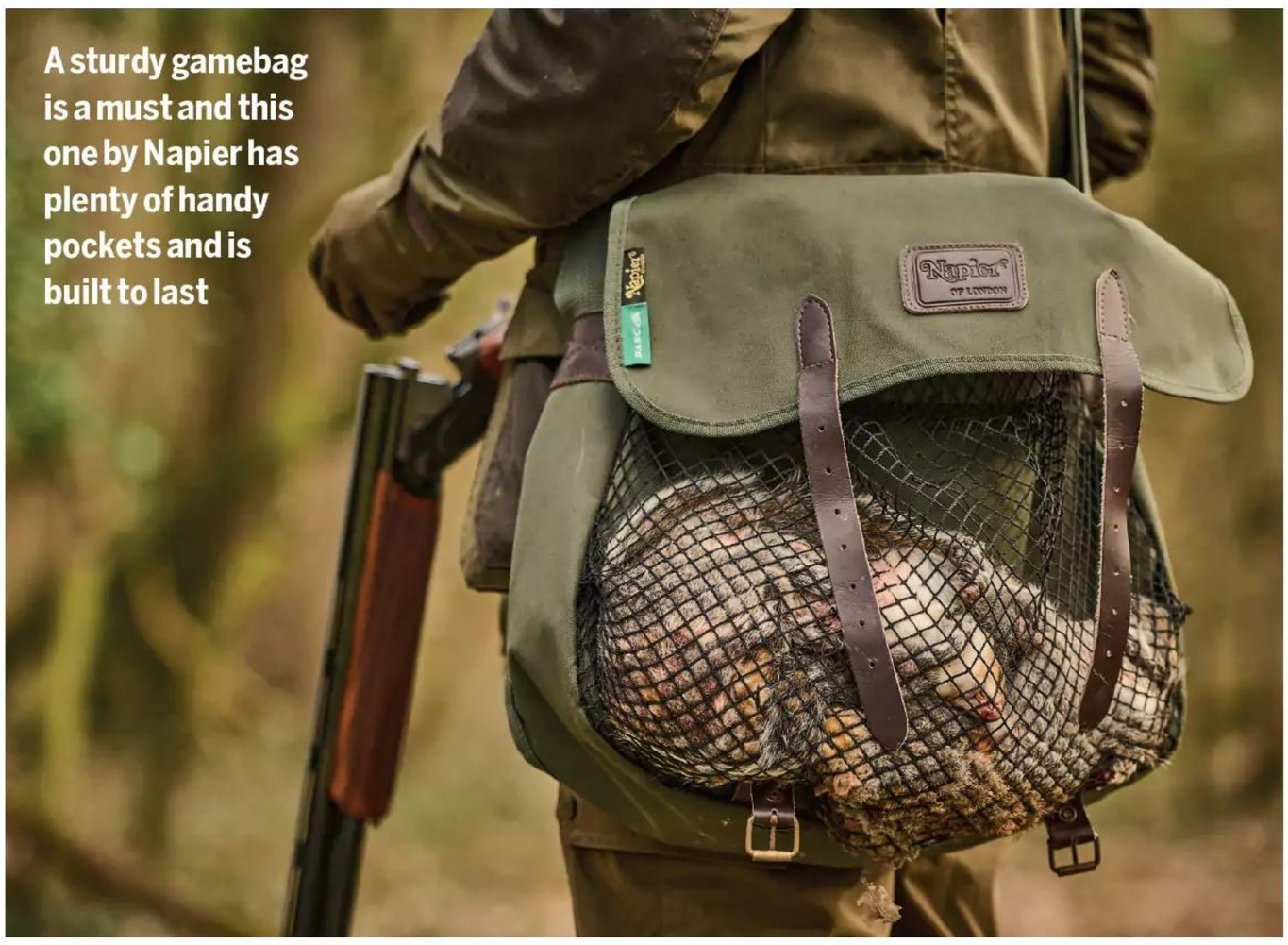
Mat favours MacWet gloves, which ensure plenty of grip whether you're on a gun or poles

NAPIER GAMEBAG DELUXE

- **Price** £125.95
- **Contact** napieruk.com

A gamebag is an absolute essential for a day on the dreys. It allows me to keep my hands free while carrying shot squirrels and means I have useful things such as ear defenders, spare ammo and snacks close to hand. The Napier Game Bag Deluxe is built to last. It has a comfortable adjustable shoulder strap, a spacious net pocket that can easily hold a dozen squirrels, and a large waterproof main compartment to keep my packed lunch clean and safe.

Although it's perfect for a drey day, this quality gamebag is stylish enough to take anywhere. It has been my do-anything, go-anywhere bag — for everything from pest control to walked-up game days — for more years than I can recall, and it is still going strong.



A sturdy gamebag is a must and this one by Napier has plenty of handy pockets and is built to last

HULL CARTRIDGE SUPERFAST PIGEON

- **Price** £10.50 (box of 25)
- **Contact** hullcartridge.co.uk

You want a cartridge with a some stopping power when targeting grey squirrels. They are tough little critters and this type of shooting means that shot will often need to punch through twigs before it connects with the target.

I have used a wide variety of cartridges on drey-poking outings,

The 32g No 5½ Hull Cartridge Superfast Pigeon does the job

SWATCOM ACTIVE8 ELECTRONIC EAR DEFENDERS

- **Price** £330
- **Contact** talkingheadsets.co.uk

Hearing protection is vital for any kind of shotgun shooting and, like most of the items featured here, I use these for much more than only drey-poking sessions.

I chose Swatcom Active8 ear defenders for several reasons, the main one being that they are very comfortable to wear. The gel seals are really soft and literally mould to your head — apart from enhancing comfort, that also assists with the all-important job of noise reduction.

Awareness

Being electronic, these ear defenders still enable me to hear everything that is going on around me, courtesy of twin speakers in each earcup. This ability to maintain full awareness of my surroundings is a real asset in terms of giving and receiving clear instructions; a key element of safe and effective shooting on drey-poking days.

Swatcom Active8 ear defenders have an IP67 waterproof rating and run on two AAA batteries, from which you can expect around 600 hours of service.

Above: **Good ear defenders are vital for every and any kind of shotgun shooting and the Swatcom Active8 are comfortable and versatile**

but Hull Cartridge Superfast Pigeon is my current choice. Apart from being great for its intended purpose when decoying pigeons and corvids from a hide, it has also proved to be an effective and sensibly priced option for cleanly despatching bolting squirrels.

My preference is for the 32g version in No 5½ shot size. This fibre-wad cartridge delivers more than enough wallop to ensure swift kills as fleeing squirrels attempt to beat a hasty retreat through the treetops.

OREGON YUKON CHAINSAW HELMET

- **Price** £24.49
- **Contact** amazon.co.uk

Most shoots have a chainsaw helmet knocking around somewhere, ready to be pressed into service when cutting posts or dealing with windblown trees. I use the Oregon Yukon but pretty much any brand will suffice.

The helmet is an essential piece of safety equipment for whoever is working the poles. Some pretty hefty debris can come tumbling down when you're breaking up a large drey. My nephew was glad to be wearing a helmet when a very surprised grey squirrel plummeted down from on high during a memorable outing last spring.

It is important that the helmet you choose for drey-poking incorporates ear protection as well as a substantial visor to shield the eyes from the inevitable shower of dry leaves, dust and twigs.

A chainsaw helmet will help to protect you from falling debris — or dead grey squirrels

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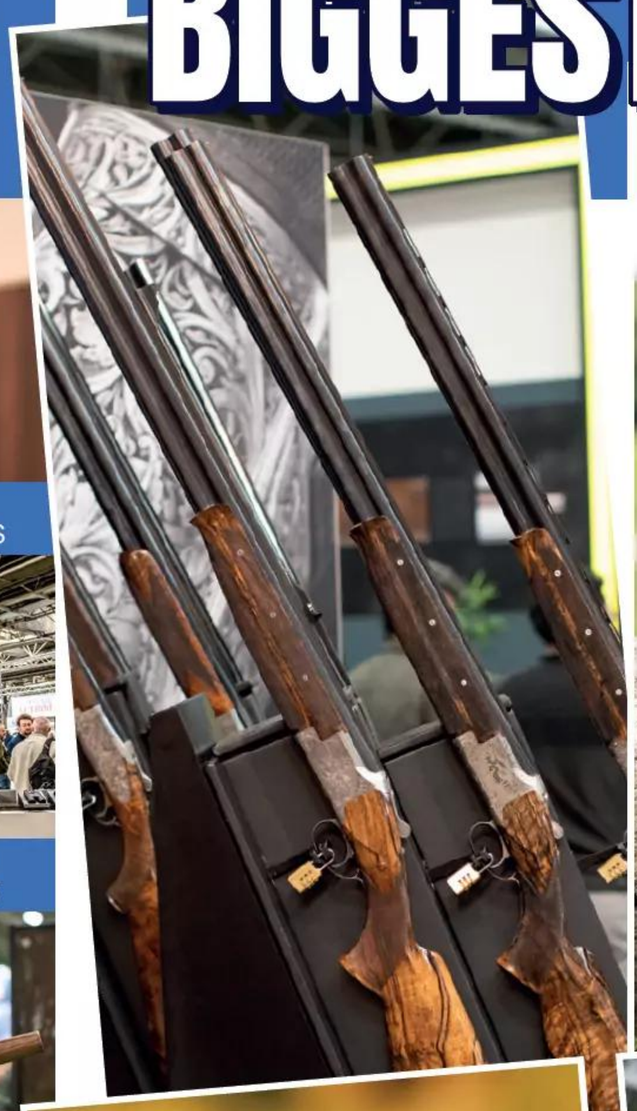

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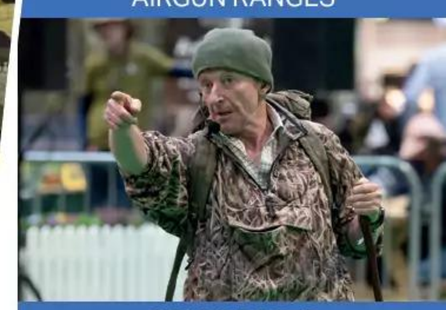

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Felix Petit

Serious matters

The downstairs loo is traditionally a refuge for moribund sporting paraphernalia

The downstairs loo in a sporting household is the glue that holds the family together and the very heart of the country home. Part library, part museum, part Zen garden, it's importance simply cannot be overstated. The lower latrine can serve as part of the historical record of the house, its walls plastered with old school sports photos, sepia renderings of how the place looked a century years ago and old regimental photos featuring the last official appearance of Prince Andrew.

Taxidermy and hunting paraphernalia are not everyone's idea of tasteful interior design and in many homes, like retreating glaciers, they have been exiled from the main living spaces. Sun-bleached brown trout in glass cases nestle among friendly stacks of old almanacs, both forced to seek sanctuary in the time capsule that is the ground-floor water closet, escaping pervading modernity like orangutans fleeing deforestation.

Frayed, retired gunslips will hang from a hook on the back of the door and a wicker basket full of broken umbrellas and old wooden hockey sticks leans against slabs of shotgun cartridges that were bought in a sale for a calibre you no longer own.

Twenty-five years ago my parents bought the crumbling house in Dumfries and Galloway in which I grew up from some well-to-do Norwegians. The cultural role of the khazi as a gallery for adventurous and marginalised pursuits seems to be international, as our far loo is still filled with socking great palmate moose racks and reindeer antlers from cervids shot by the house's previous occupants.

Our garden loo, at the other end of the house under the back stairs, is less formal and mostly contains boxes of leaky waders, terrier-sized torches that only take batteries which have long since been discontinued, and a variety of moth-eaten salmon nets.

Often, while sitting on the throne you will experience heavy snowfall, as even the slightest of toddlers using the stairs that form the roof of the room unleashes a maelstrom of cream paint flakes from the ceiling, giving the place a year-round festive feel.

A friend in Lincolnshire has a bottom floor bog that is up there with the very best of them. This chamber of delights is out of the way but not so far as to be inconvenient when shuttling back and forth from a convivial, largely liquid post-shoot lunch. It is accessed via a cloakroom that functions as a kind of ante-room, chock-full of outerwear. Gaining entry to the privy proper requires pushing through such a density of coats that you feel you might emerge on the other side to be questioned by Mr Tumnus as to your intentions.

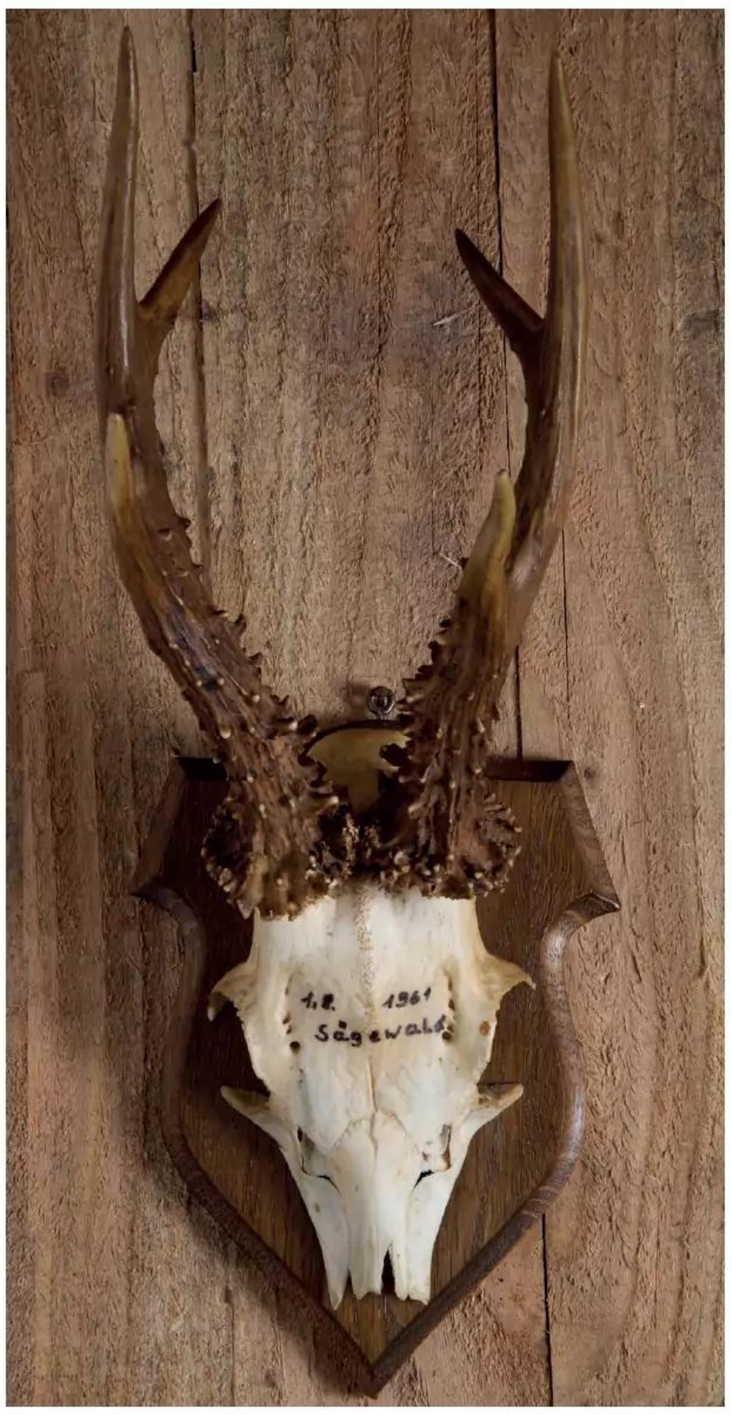
The eventual location is indeed a Narnia of sorts but, rather than sardines on toast, you are met with a restorative concoction of 19th-century racing prints, ancient back issues of every sporting publication you can think of and a variety of dated political cartoons. Over the years I've whiled away many an hour in this most pleasing pissoir.

Mainstream

Occasionally, I try and smuggle some evidence of my manly hunting prowess out of the downstairs dunny to populate a more mainstream part of our house. My internal narrative insists that it would be a shame to deprive visitors who do not use the facilities of the chance to gaze upon the evidence of my back catalogue of minor sporting triumphs. I started ambitiously and tried to secrete a moderate stag's head in the corner of the living room. This attempt was thwarted and back went the antlers to the downstairs deer park.

I lowered my sights and targeted a roe deer head that I had shot as a teenager. I propped it on a beam in the kitchen out of immediate eyeline. It was discovered and repatriated. My only successful liberation to date is the mounted pair of ears of my first rabbit, shot as an eight-year-old. These are now tolerated on the wall in the hall.

"The eventual location is a Narnia of sorts, though without sardines on toast"



A roe deer head is unsuccessfully propped on a beam out of eyeline — but sadly to no avail

Do you agree with Felix? Let him know via ***Felix.Petit@fieldsportspress.com***

Felix Petit *is a conservation and fieldsports enthusiast who grew up in the wilds of Galloway. He recently left The Household Cavalry*

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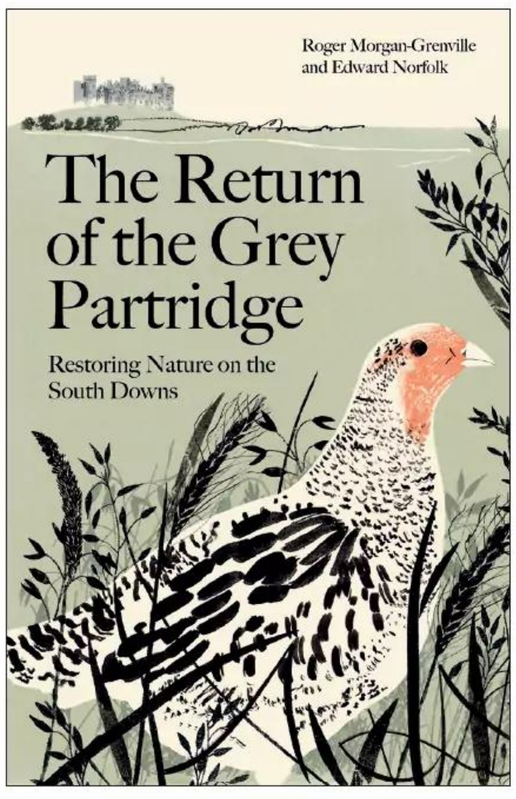


Return of the Grey Partridge

Restoring Nature on the South Downs

BOOKSHELF ROGER MORGAN-GRENVILLE & EDWARD NORFOLK

For those who present wild greys on their ground, the shoot is the culmination of the efforts of the whole team condensed into one day

SHOOT DAY: AUTUMN

For a man whose entire year's work could be said to be judged on the basis of the results of one day, it might seem strange that headkeeper Charlie Mellor's recurring nightmare, ahead of his annual grey partridge shoot day, is nothing more than that he might oversleep.

"I dream," he says, "that I have woken up at about 10 o'clock with 60 missed calls on my phone, and a sharp banging on the door."

ADAM HUTTLEY

The reality is that he is always up and about at least two hours before he needs to be. Generally he is able to organise two days out with the greys for the Duke and his guests each season, and on occasions as many as three, but in a year when the rains have fallen incessantly throughout June, as they have this year, the all-important shootable surplus is only ever going to allow for one day, and even that will be a short one.

There are some self-imposed rules in this kind of project that never get bent or broken and, in the face of plenty of temptation, this is one of them. Shooting may have driven the project, but it is always still subservient to nature.

In mid-September, when the harvest was in, Charlie, the Duke and the beatkeepers had done their painstakingly careful stubble counts, field by half-lit field, dawn by silent dawn. Morning after morning they were out there staring through night-vision scopes, with a hierarchy of hopes that began, maybe, with the frequent sighting of pairs with multiple young, and ended with a

few barren pairs flitting across the furrows in front of them.

Once done, Charlie put the recording of what amounted to every single covey on the estate on to a spreadsheet and divided the total number of young by the total number of hens, which would give him the first firm indication of what the surplus would be. It had been a tough season; not disastrous by any means, but tough.

Of the red grouse's six eggs, as many as five will normally survive to fledge, whereas with the grey partridge, 14 eggs will routinely reduce to only three adults. At the other end of the scale, ocean-going seabirds have a one-egg strategy that concentrates all the family resources over a quarter of the year into the new life on a rock ledge or down a burrow; generally, at least in the absence of foxes and rats, it works for them. Nature is like that: evolution has led species towards very different breeding strategies, but it is often man who enables them to work or not.

◈

The British weather is a good place to start the process of understanding. The rain that poured down during Ascot week kept on falling from the skies throughout the month of June, in a way that reduced the productivity of each breeding pair, almost by the hour. So Charlie can offer one day of shooting. Just one day in which the fruits of the skills and dedication of himself and his team will be there for all to see. One day when the efforts of the whole estate – the beatkeepers, the farm workers, the fence-menders and vermin-trappers, the hedge-layers and harvesters, the tractor drivers and scientists – will either prove to have worked or not.

One day that can be spoiled or ruined by heavy rain, thick fog, high wind, an impatient dog, a hungry fox or even the delaying effects of heavy traffic. One day to enjoy all that they have worked so hard to achieve, and to appreciate the biodiversity far beyond the gamebirds hurtling over the high hedges. One day that sticks a metaphorical flag in the soil and announces: "This is who we are, what we do and this is what we have achieved together."

In the wide sweep of the estate's combined efforts, there are countless other things that make up the year – the Castle, the farm, the cottages, the park, the cricket, the ongoing projects and the community relations, for example – but it is the wild shoot that has been the driver of all that has been done to allow the biodiversity to thrive alongside it.

Since those first days of fieldsports, when some Elizabethan man in a punt initially discharged his breech-loading gun into a flock of ducks a metre or so above the water, the pursuit of shooting a flying bird has amounted to far more than the sum of its parts. It often grew to be the principal function of a country estate; more recently it has become the entire commercial axle around which some of these estates have rotated – captives, as they then often become, to the requirement to bring in ever more reared birds than the land can sensibly hold, so as to cover the ever-increasing costs involved. If steps aren't taken to avoid it, a day can become a numbers game, the rural playing out of a high-value transaction between money and land, with nature a mere incidental backdrop, and often a declining one at that.

But here, it is not about numbers. Shooting is the owner's dividend from an ecosystem of a patch of land that has been invested in, trodden lightly upon and allowed to thrive to the beat of its natural rhythms. In principle, Charlie has about two months from when the exact date is selected to get all the details in place. Then, once he knows roughly from where the wind is likely to blow, he agrees with the Duke, in precise detail, the eight drives and the order in which they will be done, being roughly from upwind to downwind.

◈

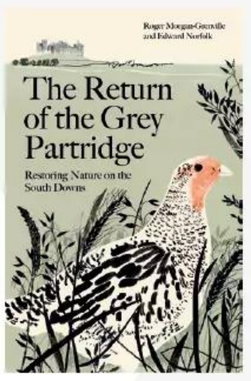
For some people, who themselves work with wild partridges, it presents the chance to see how it should be done on a significant scale, and against the beautiful backdrop of the South Downs and the river Arun flowing into the sea. For many of them, though, this will be a rare opportunity to see the kind of wild bird day that their grandfather might have seen, and it is more holiday than work. Not for Charlie and his beatkeepers, it isn't. The previous fortnight is a whirl of mowing strips and cutting holes in hedges for the beater to pass through, of flailing brushwood and valeting Land Rovers, of topping and scything, of filling water butts and strimming around feeders, of positioning and then repositioning pegs and always, always, of constantly looking at the most trusted of their long-range weather apps.

◈

A few days before, Charlie is out with his four beatkeepers, the ones who will supervise each of the beating teams, settling on the precise sequencing of who will be where when, where the flankers will stand, and who needs to be somewhere else before the first one can move on again. By the end of the session, you could draw a map if you wanted to, with the precise lines of advance and the timings of each beater, each flanker and each dog; but a beatkeeper's knowledge of his own patch is intimate, encyclopaedic even, and there is no need for a map.

Charlie looks up momentarily and sees a goshawk fly high over one of the stubble fields, as much a welcome sign of the remorseless returning of nature on to the farm as it is a relentless killer of gamebirds, both on the ground and in the air. Twenty years ago there were no goshawks. But then there were virtually no grey partridges either. Here, both are a welcome part of the circle of life and death.

As he returns home in the last rays of the autumn sun, Charlie has a number in his mind, but he is not telling anyone. This is not about numbers, though, so much as it is about a feeling that the year's work has worked out and borne fruit. Dawn, and silence. But it is a silence within which a thousand interconnected things are happening. Out there in the fields and hedges and skies around and above, and in this season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, the silence is always stirring to be heard.



The Return of the Grey Partridge *by Morgan-Grenville & Norfolk is published by Profile Editions at £20. Visit Profile editions.com*

Lithgow Arms Australia LA101 Crossover £1,074

Bruce Potts is impressed with the Australian manufacturer's robust rimfire which, he says, is a serious tool for vermin control

The ergonomics of the Crossover's stock offers great handling off sticks, bipod or free hand. It's good and tough too

OUR VERDICT

Lithgow Arms, based in New South Wales, holds on to the great Aussie tradition of no-nonsense design. Just make a rifle that works, mate. The Crossover range does, and it hails from an arms manufacturer with more than a century of experience, starting with the 1912 Lithgow used in Gallipoli. Today, its rifles are used more by hunters and target shooters and this Crossover 101 series is the rimfire version; the 102, which we tested last year, is the centrefire.

This mini bolt-action rifle is available in either .22 LR, .22 WMR or .17 HMR using Lithgow's renowned hammer-forged barrels and hardened steel actions for longevity and accuracy.

This model has an ergonomic and tough design, sitting between a Sporter and tactical stock, hence the Crossover name. Made from a tough polymer, it's not only very comfortable but beds into the action correctly for consistent and accurate shots time and time again. Add to this the all-weather and scratch-resistant Cerakote outer coating and you have a very formidable rimfire rifle. Priced at just over £1,000, you get a really premium rimfire that will last a lifetime. ➔

★★★★★

JAKE POTTS

The LA101 has a mount and matching two-piece Weaver rail (a Picatinny option is available) for a scope; Bruce uses a Pard DS35 day and night digital scope on test

NEED TO KNOW

- **Manufacturer** Lithgow Arms Australia
- **Model** LA101 Crossover
- **Overall Length** 38.5in-39.6in (with inserts)
- **Barrel Length** 21in, threaded ½ x 28 UNEF
- **Sights** Scope mount only, matching two-piece Weaver provided
- **Stock** Synthetic adjustable length of pull (wood and laminate available)
- **Weight** 6.8lb (3.1kg)
- **Finish** Cerakote black or titanium (on test)
- **Trigger** Single stage
- **Safety** Two position
- **Magazine** Detachable 5 rounds, 10-shot option (CZ455 compatible)
- **Calibre** .22 LR on test, 17 HMR and .22 WMR available
- **Price** £1,074
- **Contact** Highland Outdoors 08450 990252

The cold hammer-forged steel barrel has a typical 1-in-16in rifling twist

The straight bolt handle and rear locking legs ensure a smooth bolt travel and lock-up

Bruce tends to crawl a lot when stalking rabbits and you can rely on the Lithgow 101 Crossover in any weather conditions or shooting positions

The CZ compatible magazine makes a lot of sense and is cheap to replace

IN DEPTH

Let's look at that stock first. It's a blend or crossover design which can be shot correctly from the shoulder, bench or any position you might find yourself in. It's practical with its high-strength, reinforced polymer that contains nylon in its construction.

Zero flex and, crucially, a solid bedding area with a ribbed inner, twist-free fore-end, all add up to consistent performance when you need it. Extra strength comes from the moulded-in trigger-guard so it won't rattle loose and change your zero. And it won't rust when laid down in the wet grass or billabong.

The pistol grip is slim with a slight raised palm swell to both sides and the same stippled panels as the fore-end for grip. The whole stock has no cast so it's pretty ambidextrous. Its slab-sided butt section and hand grip/hook to the bottom of the stock are very military-esque but certainly save a bit of weight. The hook aids a steady hold when using a bipod. Length of pull can be altered with plastic spacers as you wish. The overall charcoal-black semi-textured finish compliments the titanium Cerakote coating to the metal work and two quick-detach swivel studs finish off the stock.

The metal work is all coated in either black or titanium (on test) coloured Cerakote, hard baked to the chromoly steel underneath. It is so much better than bluing with regards to abrasive resistance and weatherproofing a gun.

The barrel is a tad long for a .22 LR at 21in with a 0.985in diameter at the receiver, slowly tapering to 0.693in diameter at the muzzle. However, the ½in UNEF thread and 11-degree target muzzle crown aids with a consistent bullet exit.

The cold hammer-forged steel barrel has a 1-in-16in rifling twist and, even with its semi-match chamber dimensions, longer-nosed 45-gr bullets chambered correctly.

Ultra-smooth

The well-thought-out design continues with the action of hardened high-tensile steel and faceted sides to reduce weight. The bolt locks at the rear of the action by means of three large locking lugs that radiate around the bolt just in front of the bolt handle. This orientation ensures the rifle is ultra-smooth to operate with effortless and speedy engagement and disengagement of the bolt. There's also low lift from the 2in bolt handle, with a straight and small but comfortable nylon teardrop-shaped knob. Extraction is via two opposed large claws for positive case removal and is ejected via a protruding spur in the top of the magazine well.

The single-stage trigger — factory set at 1.25kg or 2.9lb — needs no fiddling with. The safety lever, silent if you apply downward pressure, has two positions; forward is fire with a red dot indicator and rear-most is safe — but the bolt can still be opened. Cleverly, Lithgow has opted for the CZ five- or 10-shot compatible detachable single-stack magazine system. It has a clear plastic body but CZ's are cheap with a proven track record for reliability, so buy spares of those.

FIELD TEST

I fitted an A-Tec Wave rimfire sound moderator and a new Pard DS35 and shot a variety of ammo over the chronograph at 50 yards. The Eley 38-gr subsonics shot 0.55in groups very consistently with a velocity of 920 fps for 71ft/lb energy, which is a tad low, but it was a bitter -4°C.

Norma subs shot superbly quietly at 925fps/76ft/lb with 0.75in groups, while the CCI segmented rounds with their 40-gr projectile shot the same-sized groups at a faster 1,058fps for 99ft/lb energy.

The CCI Suppressor rounds, at a heavier 45-gr hollowpoint bullet, shot stealthy 914fps velocities for 84ft/lb with consistent 0.85in groups. I did shoot some reduced loads, CCI CB Longs, that shot 1in groups at 20 yards for 705fps and 32ft/lb. The 29-gr bullet makes a nice quiet load for ferals.

I chose the Eley Subsonics which, with a zero at 50 yards, were 0.28in high at 20 yards and dropped -2.31in at 75 yards.

The Pard is a cost-effective day and night digital sight that accounted for six bunnies the first evening and 13 the next. The ruggedness and ease of operation of the Lithgow makes it a serious vermin tool and with the accuracy and cheap CZ mags, you get a lot for your money.

CONCLUSION

The Crossover LA101 is a great rimfire that deserves attention as a serious vermin tool. The reliability, accuracy with a variety of ammunition and cheap CZ mags, coupled with the weather-resistant stainless-steel finish and rugged polymer stock, makes the asking price very reasonable.

The LA101 Crossover makes a very effective vermin tool

Accuracy	Handling	Trigger	Stock	Value	Overall Score
18/20	18/20	17/20	18/20	17/20	88/100
It turned in some impressive 50-yard groups	A natural and ambidextrous feel with good grip	Light and reliable trigger that broke like glass	Tough, rigid and very comfortable to shoot	Good value even though rimfires tend to be pricey	Comfortable and easy to shoot, it's a great everyday gun

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For a spot of foxing

Make the most of your foxing opportunities with one of these five thermal spotters

Thermal spotters have come on leaps and bounds in the past couple of years. Where once thermal imagers were renowned for not giving a particularly sharp image, these days pest controllers are able to positively identify an animal such as a fox at distances of 300m or more. At closer ranges, images can be almost as detailed as night vision. With so many thermal spotters on the market, and plenty of opportunities for foxing in the next few months, we have selected five of the best on the market to suit all budgets.

HIKMICRO CONDOR PRO CQ35L

1 HikMicro's Condor thermal monocular exemplifies the advancements of these increasingly useful optics. It is comparatively affordable, very easy to use and produces a remarkably clear thermal image. It is also equipped with a laser rangefinder (LRF). That may not sound like a huge advancement, but being able to accurately range your target at the press of a button means there is no guesswork when calculating aim-off for shots over varying distances. The Condor is equipped with a powerful, high-sensitivity (NETD <20mK) thermal detector. Combined with HikMicro's Image Pro algorithm, which provides high-quality rendering of both target objects and background, and Zoom Pro feature, which smooths out pixelation at higher magnification, the result is extremely good image quality over a wide range of conditions and terrain. There's a reason it has been nominated for a Great British Shooting Award.

RRP £1,899.99
hikmicrotech.com

HikMicro's neat little monocular has excellent features at a decent price

INFIRAY FINDER FH35R V2

2 The new 640x512 sensor of the InfiRay Finder FH35R V2 provides serious improvement over the impressive performance of its predecessor. The 35mm lens also plays a part in poor thermal conditions and holds up better in damp weather. The most noticeable difference, however, is the detail; there's more texture across the board and that translates into a device that delivers better identification rather than merely detection. The LRF offers the same powerful pinger that can quickly and reliably reach out to 800m. *Rifle Shooter* editor Paul Austin says: "In its class, this is about as good as it gets."

RRP from £1,899.99
highlandoutdoors.co.uk

The compact InfiRay Finder V2 offers great performance in poor conditions

“Pest controllers are able to positively identify a fox at distances of 300m or more”

PIXFRA RANGER R625

3 Designed to offer performance without the price tag, the Pixfra Ranger R625 is a thermal-imaging monocular designed to detect even the smallest heat signature. With a highly sensitive thermal sensor and a powerful objective lens, this monocular achieves excellent thermal clarity, a detection range up to 1,300m, and a generous field of view. This last will open up the observation area and ensure outstanding detection opportunities — day or night, in almost any weather conditions. Plus, with an impressive Wi-Fi range and tripod mounting compatibility, the Ranger R625 is ideal for those instances in which a hands-off approach is required.

RRP from £1,369.95
thomasjacks.co.uk

The Pixfra has a detection range up to 1,300m and a generous field of view

The Zeiss DTI 4 range offers all the features you could want and holds a charge for up to seven hours

ZEISS DTI 4 RANGE

4 With its compact size, a high-resolution 640x512px sensor and ZEISS sharp programming (ZSIP) the ZEISS DTI 4 is a thermal-imaging camera that delivers high contrast, detailed image quality anywhere — even over long distances. Detect a fox’s heat source clearly at distances up to 2,635m and identify even the smallest details to make a difference when it counts. The DTI holds enough charge for up to seven hours of foxing and is available in DTI 4/35 and DTI 4/50 models.

RRP from £2,850
zeiss.co.uk

PULSAR TELOS XP50

5 Equipped with a highly sensitive 640×480, 17 µm, <18 mK NETD thermal sensor and a powerful 50mm aperture objective lens, the Pulsar Telos XP50 can achieve incredible levels of thermal sensitivity regardless of weather conditions — effortlessly detecting even the slightest temperature difference at a range of up to 1,800m in heavy rain, dense fog, snow, and high levels of humidity. Designed for user convenience and comfort, this thermal-imaging monocular features an ergonomic button arrangement, intuitive new focus and zoom rings located on the objective lens, and an adjustable hand strap that rotates for left- or right-handed use without needing to be removed.

RRP £3,099.95
scottcountry.co.uk

Pulsar’s Telos XP50 is designed for convenience whether you’re left or right-handed

How to nurture your dog's natural talents

The best working dogs have gun sense and game-finding ability and it is up to trainers to hone those instinctive traits, says Nick Ridley

Last week I was perusing dog adverts on social media and on many of the spaniel stud pages the phrases "natural gun sense" and "natural game-finder" kept coming up. Although I have heard both used by numerous gundog owners, I had never really given much thought as to what they meant.

Let's take the question of gun sense first. If your spaniel is used purely for beating or as part of a picking-up team, then I would suggest it has no need to develop "gun sense" as the dog will very rarely be in close contact with any shooting or guns. However, if you have a spaniel that you want to shoot over then teaching the dog "gun sense" can be a very useful skill. A well-bred young spaniel will be bursting with natural talent and it is down to us as trainers to develop and channel this ability.

Building blocks

I am sure there are many ways of nurturing gun sense but, as with all gundog training, there is a series of building blocks that link together to get the finished product. I spend quite a lot of time working on the handling skills of my dogs and, as a result, the dogs get used to watching my hands for direction.

As their hunting skills get better, I will put out a blind retrieve for them. Then I hunt them up, stop them on the whistle and fire a shot in the direction of the retrieve. They eventually learn that by watching the "gun" direction there may be something for them to retrieve. One trainer I know takes this method one step further. He would use a walking stick to mimic a shotgun then use a starting pistol to complete the picture.

The question is, why is gun sense useful? When a spaniel is hunting an area, game will be flushed what is termed as "loose"; that means the dog hasn't seen it or it has been flushed

NICK RIDLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

If you have a spaniel you want to shoot over, teaching the dog 'gun sense' can be a very useful skill

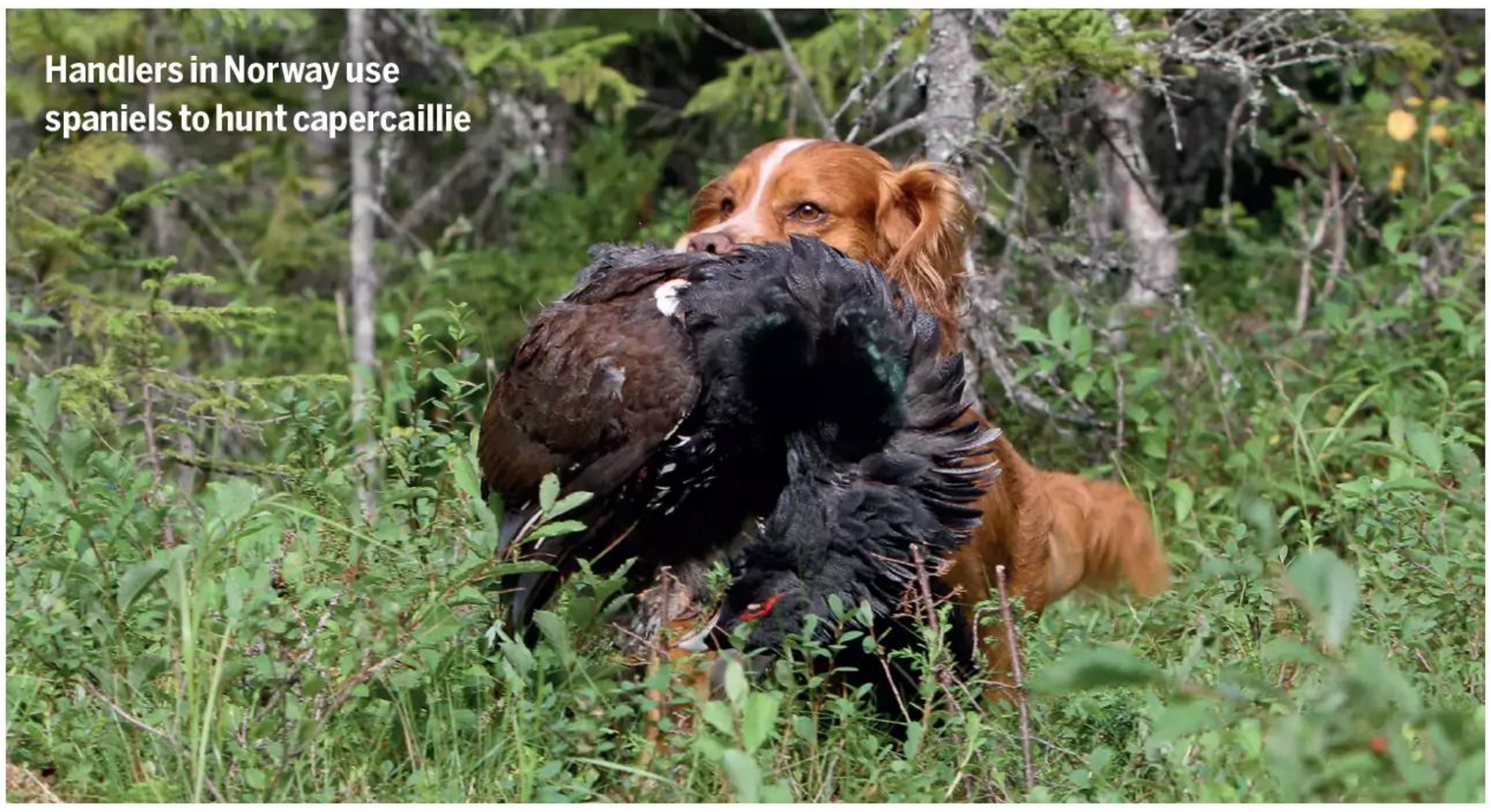
outside of the dog's beat. If you shoot it and the dog has learned to follow the line of the gun, it has a good chance of getting a mark and this will enable a quick retrieve.

Getting a mark

I have seen plenty of dogs that hear a shot from their handler end up looking in all directions and totally miss their mark. I train for this by running a couple of spaniels in a line, then I get the other handler to throw a dummy and I fire at it. Provided the dog has followed the direction that the gun is pointing and got a mark on it, it will get the retrieve.

I have found this technique doesn't detract from the dog watching away any real game that it has actually flushed, and it is a good way to instill steadiness in the dog as it has to sit and watch while another dog makes a retrieve quite close to it.

All these training sessions are obviously artificial, but they lead to getting a dog ready for the real thing.



Handlers in Norway use spaniels to hunt capercaillie

Game-finding ability is another thing all together. There is no doubt that some dogs have a better "nose" than others, I have witnessed it many times over the years. I would suggest that most spaniels in this country are used in the beating line on commercial shoots where game is normally plentiful, and a dog with no nose at all will still find something. Where it becomes a real attribute is when game is scarce on the ground and literally every bird counts.

I know of handlers in Norway who use spaniels to hunt capercaillie. They can be out for hours and, if they are lucky, they may find one or two birds. So you want dogs with good game- →

"The dog eventually learns that by watching the gun direction there may be something for them to retrieve"

finding ability to ensure that nothing is missed. A picking-up dog that has a natural ability to find injured game is a real benefit, especially if the dog has to work independently of the handler.

Understanding scent and scenting conditions can really make a difference when working gundogs. In truth what I should have said is "trying" to understand scent and scenting conditions can make a difference, because I don't think we can ever fully appreciate the power of a dog's nose. Over the years I have watched hundreds of gundogs work in all sorts of conditions and the question of scent is a subject that can confuse even the most experienced handlers.

It is generally accepted that on hot, dry days or very cold, frosty days the scenting conditions for any spaniel will be poor. By the same token, if it is pouring with rain, it can make conditions very difficult. As handlers we should take the conditions into consideration and make allowances for our dogs if they are having trouble picking up the scent of shot bird.

Endorphins

While on the subject of scent, an experienced spaniel will be able to distinguish between "hot" foot scent from uninjured birds and the scent from a shot bird that is either dead or injured. When you think about it, a dead bird will be giving off a blood scent but also there will be the gunpowder residue from the pellets, whereas an injured bird will also be emitting endorphins (a natural pain killer) and adrenalin.

I have noticed when a dog is on the line of a runner, it seems to increase its pace quite significantly. I think this is because the natural instincts of the dog kicks in and it reverts to the predator tracking an injured prey. Fortunately for most of us, when the dog finds a runner it doesn't kill and eat it, but it retrieves it back to the handler and this alone is quite remarkable.

It is interesting to watch how dogs use their noses and, of course, different gundog breeds work in slightly different ways. It is noticeable that on warm days, when the grass has a heavy covering of dew, spaniels that normally work with their noses to the ground may lift their heads slightly. That is because as the sun started to warm up the wet grass, the water molecules will start to evaporate along with the scent of the retrieve and as a consequence the dog may be picking up the line slightly above the ground.

"To be a really good game-finder, a dog has to experience different types of cover"

As humans, we will never fully understand scent and scenting conditions but by watching as many dogs work as possible, we can at least gain a bit of knowledge and experience to help us in our training.

Although you can train a dog to find game by way of association – for instance, as a young puppy every time the dog goes into some rough grass it finds a dummy and eventually it starts to associate hunting with finding something. This builds up to it learning that pheasants will hide in bramble or bracken and rabbits will hide in white grass, but this a taught process and we have to be careful that we end up producing dogs that are conditioned rather than having a natural ability to hunt and find game.

To be a really good game-finder a dog has to be given the opportunity to experience various types of cover and terrain, I know only too well how different it can be for a dog from the south to work "up north" on the white grass and stone walls, and how easy it is to miss game that they are not used to hunting.

A spaniel's scenting ability helps on small shoots and walked-up days when game is scarce on the ground and every bird counts

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New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

The Fisherman's Diary

Wild brownies are out of season but there are other fish to take the fly, says Jeremy Lucas

The weather gives us fly-fishers low expectations during winter, though there are surprises out there. Many fish species are active now, even during periods of low temperatures. Grayling forms the core of our sport while the season is closed for native brown trout. This species does not spawn until the early spring and they feed whenever possible to sustain themselves through the colder months. They are usually in supreme condition right now. I have caught many grayling when the air temperature was well below zero and ice fringed the rivers.

On lakes and reservoirs there are various species of fish willing to take a fly. Though brown trout remain out of season, rainbows have no close season and are now in superb condition. Fisheries stock only lightly through the winter, so we are fishing for overwintering, naturalised fish, which will have been in the lake for months.

There are several other in-season species that are certainly worth the challenge. Roach, for example, have been a favourite species of mine since boyhood, and they are a wonderful winter catch on the fly. I am savouring the fishing on Bewl Water in Kent where roach have been prevalent this year. On some days I have caught more roach than rainbows; quality fish in the region of half a pound in weight, with a few nudging 1lb. There are 2lb-plus specimens out there, though elusive.

Three nymphs

We do not have to alter our tackle or approach in any way in order to catch coarse fish species. Pike will require heavier tackle and the use of big lures, but the "silver fish" will require no more than a tweaking of the fly patterns we use for trout. For the roach on Bewl Water, I use the same outfit as for trout; a 5-weight with a floating line and team of three nymphs on a long leader.

I fish areas of the lake that are furthest from the stocking points to avoid any fresh rainbows. The roach and the resident trout have been found coexisting in these places.

Flies used for trout are all you need for coarse species, other than the big predators. The usual Pheasant Tail, Hare's Ear and Diawl Bach variants are equally successful with various species, including roach, rudd, perch and bream on all stillwater fisheries. My nymphs tend to be more imitative than flashy, and this helps, as it does with resident trout. In water coloured by wave action on windward shores, a touch of intense colour in the nymph can work wonders. I have a fluorescent orange or red head, for instance, on a Diawl Bach. You do not need a big, bright fly, which in my experience results in poor catches for these wild fish.

This winter the trout have nearly always been encountered close to the lake bed, in a depth of water greater than 6ft, while the roach have been higher in the water column, thus occupying a different niche.

"The retrieve has had to be dead slow, almost static, as expected in cold water"

Most of the trout I have caught have been on the point (leading) fly when it has been very close to the bottom, while the roach have come to one or other of the droppers. The retrieve has had to be dead slow, almost static, as expected in cold water.

Whether grayling fishing on the river, or rainbows and coarse fish on the lake, our common enemy is the cold. It is easy to protect yourself with multiple layers, but keeping your hands warm is more difficult, and if they are cold it simply ruins the day. It is not only a matter of having a good pair of waterproof gloves. Casting and retrieving are compromised when we wear gloves.

We rely on the sense of touch, but any retrieve in gloved hands is preferable to the pain in exposed, wet fingers. You will, at least, be able to fish. Prepare yourself and get out on our lakes and reservoirs during this last month of winter. The rewards, with coarse fish and resident rainbow trout, are worth the effort.

Roach are a wonderful winter catch on the fly and there are 2lb specimens out there, if elusive

Jeremy Lucas is a lifelong fly-fisher, multiple England Team member and author of the landmark Presentation Fly-Fishing. *Now he focuses on the conservation aspects of the sport and dry-fly.*

WITH LAURENCE CATLOW

LAURENCE CATLOW, A PASSIONATE SHOOTER AND ANGLER FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, HAS WRITTEN FIVE BOOKS ABOUT SPORT WITH ROD AND GUN.

Shouldering the burden of injury

Out of the whole season with an injured shoulder, at least some of the rituals are still possible...

GAVIN PREST

Ancient tradition demands that I spend the last day of the pheasant season roaming my ground in the company of a spaniel or two in search of the season's last pheasant or two. Tradition also demands that the solemnity of the occasion should be marked by the consumption of a small glass (or two) of port or sloe gin. This season it looked as though tradition would have to be abandoned.

In November a bad shoulder was making shooting impossible, so on pheasant days I was to be found with my dogs in the beating line, rather than standing at a peg ready for action with the gun. It was a situation of which my dogs most certainly approved. Root and Zac were far happier fighting their way through jungles of gorse or thickets of briar and bramble than sitting restlessly by my peg in the hope of a retrieve.

I missed my shooting but I was glad I could still play my part in a day's sport. I really enjoyed working the dogs and it was, of course, good to spend days in the company of friends. I did tell myself from time to time that £2,000 had been a lot to pay for the privilege of coming beating and watching others shoot.

I told this to my friends as well, and now and then I suggested to the shoot captain that next season I should be rewarded with a free gun in recognition of my tireless efforts as an unpaid beater. He seemed strangely unimpressed. I missed my shooting; there were occasions when I watched a pheasant fold up in the sky before plunging earthwards and wished that I had swung the gun that had brought the bird down. But the shoulder showed no real signs of improvement and the NHS didn't seem noticeably impatient to find out what was wrong with it or to suggest an appropriate treatment.

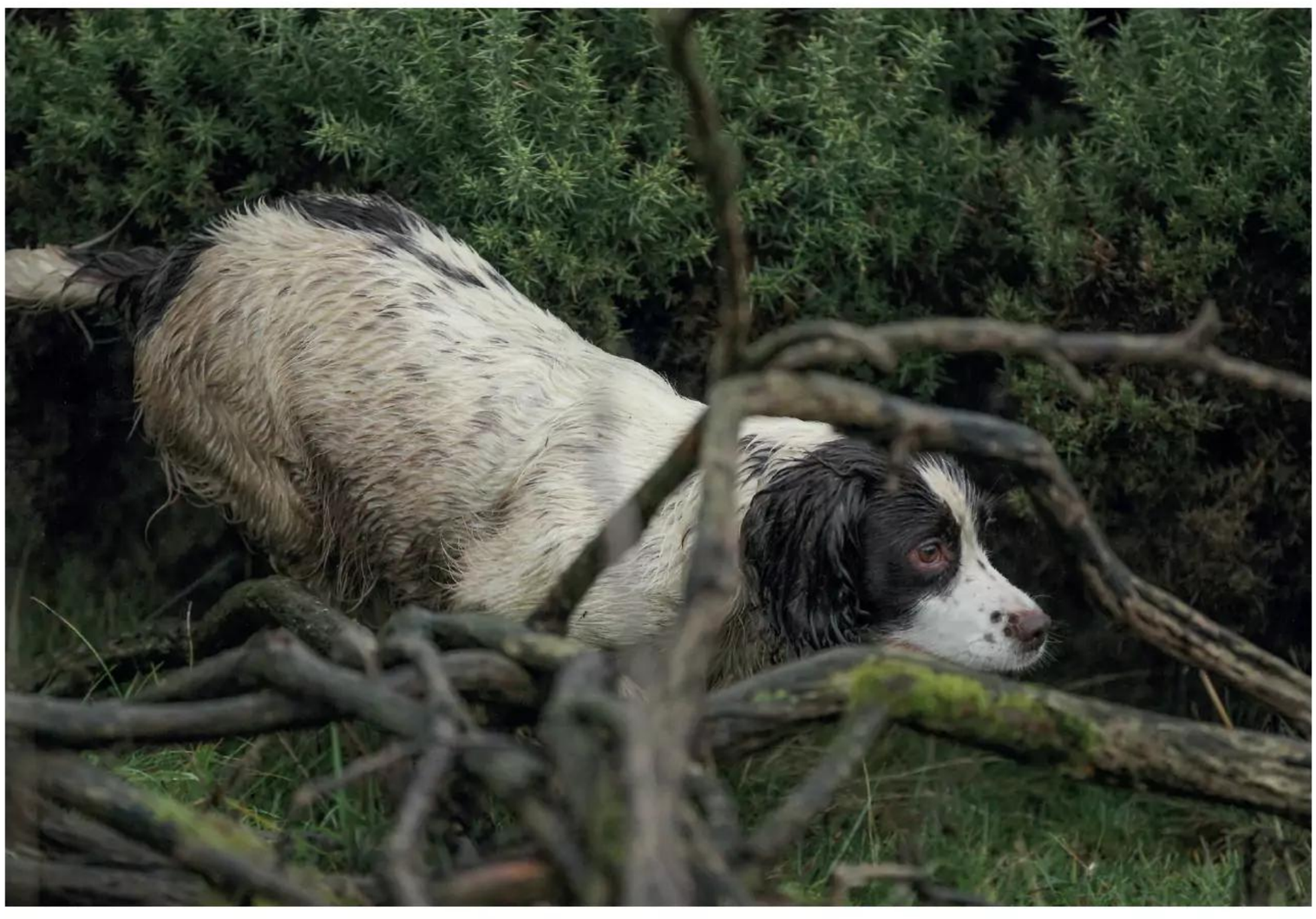
Yes, I missed my shooting; in particular, even more than driven days, I missed those few days that each season brought when, either alone or with a friend or two, I set out for a day of informal walked-up sport in search of a few pheasants or a few rabbits. There was also perhaps the prospect of a mallard and an odd woodcock and an occasional pigeon to add the spice of variety to the pleasures of the day.

Ritual

Accepting the condition of my right shoulder meant none of this was going to happen. For me, it was going to be a season without any shooting. I would not even be able, on the first day of February, to perform the season's closing ritual by shooting a last bird or two from the rough pastures of High Park, although I fancied I might preserve one feature of the ritual in the form of a glass or two of port or sloe gin.

It might just be worth saying that shooting clay pigeons was another aspect of our sport that I missed more than I had been expecting. It is a completely different business

The beaters work tirelessly in tricky conditions and Laurence is pleased to be involved in the action



Laurence's dogs seem to enjoy being in the beating line even more than sitting restlessly on peg

from shooting live quarry which, however enjoyable it might be, has to be taken seriously.

Shooting clays, on the other hand, is fun pure and simple, especially if, like me, you do not go shooting in pursuit of competition glory. It is a game rather than a sport, a splendid way to spend a Sunday morning or part of a Wednesday afternoon. Whatever it is, I missed it along with

"For months I had been taking out the 20-bore and trying to swing it"

all those other forms of shooting that were denied me because of a gammy shoulder. I had reluctantly admitted to myself that my trigger finger would do no pulling for whole weeks and months to come; it would have to wait for the spring or the summer or even for another autumn until it could hope to be busy again.

So it was that the last few days of the season came round. For several months I had from time to time been taking out the 20-bore and trying to swing it, wondering whether I might after all be able to go shooting. ↠

Laurence stops for a chat with a Gun on High Park — it's all part of the pleasure of a day's sport whether you're able to shoot or not

Despite some impressive driven sport at High Park, Laurence ended the season without shooting a single pheasant

The gloomy conclusion had always been that this was impossible and that patience would have to become one of my virtues.

But then, probably on the first of those last few days, I took out the gun and, instead of swinging it as for a driven bird, merely lifted it to my shoulder as you would for a walked-up target. It did not feel fluent but there was no pain, and repetition made the process slightly easier. It was then that the idea was born – that I might, after all, be able to perform the sacred ritual of February's first day and shoot what might perhaps be the first and at the same time the last pheasant of the season with a single shot. I might manage a brace of birds – perhaps even three or four of them – but one was all that mattered. One would be more than enough.

Almost perfect

The first day of February was an almost perfect day for walking-up a pheasant or two. There was a bright sky with drifting clouds, there was a westerly breeze with just the hint of an edge to it. There was a lively, nimble air and High Park looked very lovely in the pale sunshine. It was a perfect day for Root and Zac to put a bird or two on the wing and for me to mount my gun and pull the trigger and put them in the bag. Root and Zac were both there, eager for action; I was there with them, just as eager as they were.

The only problem was that I was there without a gun. I had lifted the 20-bore to my shoulder before putting it in its slip and promptly put it back in the cabinet before turning the key. There could be no question of shooting. The shoulder was too painful, too awkward, too stiff. There would be no first and last pheasant to end what I think has been the first season for something like 50 years when I have not brought a single pheasant tumbling from the sky.

"The sight of each bird stirred and frustated my hunter's heart"

Instead of trying to shoot a bird or two, I wandered round with a bucket of corn. I saw more pheasants than for many weeks and the sight of each one of them both stirred and frustrated my hunter's heart. Meanwhile, robins were telling me their thoughts were turning to the spring of the year and that so should mine. There was a dunnock somewhere in the gorse saying the same thing. On some of the hazels there were already long yellow catkins stirring in the breeze and, in a sheltered spot on North Bank, I even found a primrose with yellow petals half unfurled. The message was unequivocal: that I should put the past behind me and look forward to better times ahead.

So the season's closing ritual never happened although, when I got home for lunch, I did drink a small glass of sloe gin before eating my sandwich and then pouring myself a slightly larger glass of port. Between them, the sloe gin and the port encouraged me to hope that there were indeed better times ahead, that I would be smashing clays again before too long and swinging my gun with the best of them when November brought us all another pheasant-time.

They also reminded me that, long before pheasant-time arrived, there would be trout to catch throughout the spring and summer. In this way they brought me kind comfort and perhaps the best comfort of all was that they helped me to realise how, even if the worst came to the worst, I would be able to hold a rod and cast a fly with my left hand.

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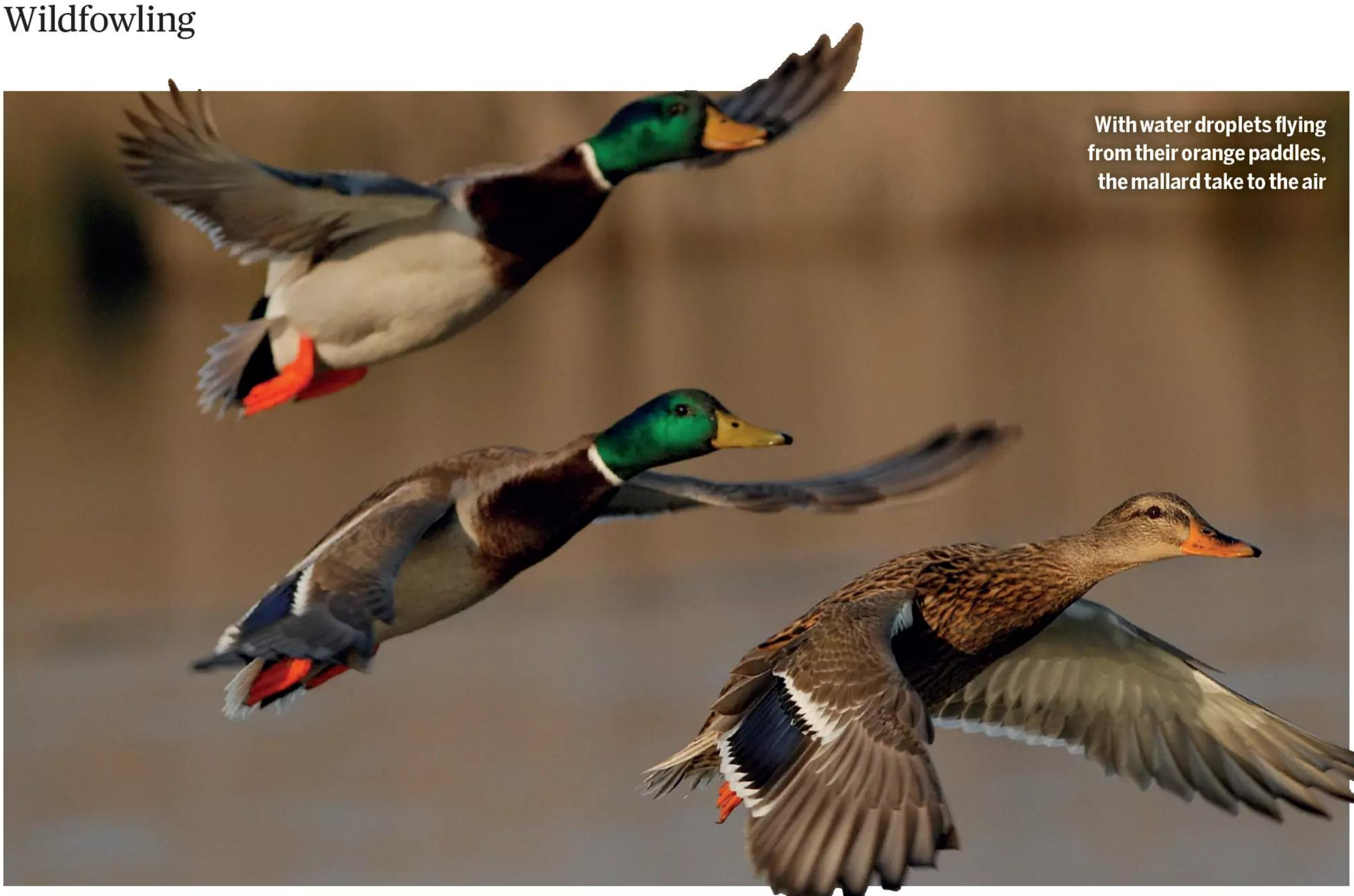

With water droplets flying from their orange paddles, the mallard take to the air

A finish on a fine flourish

The last day of January provides a halcyon afternoon with birds aplenty for Alan Jarrett

One of the foibles of wildfowling is that we have two final days of the season. Above the seawall the season closes on 31 January; below the seawall we get another 20 days taking us to 20 February. They are days to be cherished.

Much of the quality of sport depends on location and weather conditions. And although the weather is always beyond his control, the knowledgeable wildfowler will know the best location. This year I would be enjoying the final day of January on an inland wash.

So it was that the dog and I stood at the five-bar gate that led on to our wash. The cattle had long since been taken off to forestall any danger from flooding, which left the wash verdant with a lush spring bite already pushing through. Away towards the riverbank were eight dark shapes, each of which had a tall walking-stick-shaped head and neck. They were greylags, all now on high alert. Here was a poser: how to get around the geese without putting them to flight but at the same time getting to within range? Perhaps the best hope was that when they took off, they might do a helpful circuit to allow a shot.

If this turned out to be the case, any shot was likely to be at maximum range. With that in mind the gun was loaded with three 42g of No 3 shot. It is a load sufficient to lay low the tallest or widest of geese, and my usual choice when hunting geese on the coast.

With the dog tightly at heel, I needed to make my way along the edge of the wash as inconspicuously as possible. Helpfully, the first part of the boundary on to the foreshore was against tall hawthorn bushes and, by the time we were fully in the open, we were almost opposite the geese. Now thoroughly suspicious but not in full flight mode, the geese began to waddle off in the opposite direction.

It occurred to me that this unusual behaviour might be the result of the advance of spring, for it is difficult to imagine this during midwinter. Whatever the reason, by the time we were in position, the geese were nearly 150 yards away in the centre of the wash and as unattainable as ever.

Orange paddles

There was nothing for it but to continue along the river, before striking out across the wash to put the geese up and hope that by good fortune they might turn my way. However, fate intervened causing me to rapidly re-evaluate my intended plan of action. Within a few yards a pair of mallard swam out from the reeds. For a split second we both stared at each other then, with water droplets flying from orange paddles, they were airborne and rapidly heading away.

In such circumstances there is only a fraction of a second to decide what to do, but the adage of "a bird in ↠

ALAN JARRETT; ISTOCK

New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

the hand" quickly helped me triage my priorities. Shortly after my shot found its mark and the drake was sent splashing into the river.

Account opened

The series of events sent the geese on their way. They rose as one, accompanied by deep calls of alarm and headed for quieter parts. I held no regrets, as my attempt to get within range of the geese had been problematic from the off. Firing such powerful loads at a 30-yard duck was a bit overkill. Feathers came drifting back past me like confetti but no matter, my account was opened, and if nothing else showed up I had something for the pot.

The shot must have flushed a mallard from further down the river, for it flew well wide of me over the far side. Suitably emboldened by my heavy loads, I gave the bird a big lead which was sufficient to send it plummeting into the long grass.

Even though it looked like the dog had marked the fallen bird, once he was out of the river he set off to the right in the opposite direction to the where the duck had fallen. However, when he'd turned across the wind, he gained the scent and was soon swimming back with the prize.

We hunkered down on the edge of the water, for it was time to relax and await the evening flight. Below me the clear paddle marks of the geese were visible in the mud and along the bank lay the dark green droppings left by the birds. The flashing shape of a lone kingfisher bounced along the river and a few gulls passed overhead.

My knowledge of this place told me that it was unlikely we see anything further until the light began to fade, but if this sport teaches you anything it is to remain alert at all times. On four occasions over the next hour mallard passed by, each time catching me looking in the opposite direction.

It turned into one of those halcyon afternoons, with plenty of movement to keep me entertained. Soon four greylags came to land in the adjacent wash, which was in itself as rare as the sporadic passage of mallard. Then pairs began to head out to the distant fields, which also seemed to signal the imminent closure of the season.

There were Canada geese present as well as greylags and as they each took flight their passage was accompanied by insistent calling; the greylags provided a harsh base sounding call with the deeper moaning belonging to the larger Canadas. The fact that none came my way mattered not a jot, for my freezer was already adequately stocked from the preceding months.

In the deepening gloom a pair of mallard came low and softly, almost skimming the mirror-like surface of the river. I missed them in a manner that felt amateurish. Almost immediately I had a chance at redemption and one from another pair came splashing into the river.

Before the dog could head across in pursuit of the swimming bird another came, which I managed to drop close to the bank. This distracted my canine colleague and the first bird was temporarily forgotten. He tidily retrieved the closer bird and another that also dropped in not far from us, before I sent him back to tackle the sterner task of finding a lively bird against the far bank.

Even on the best days, wildfowling tends to include a fair amount of watching and waiting

Soon his indistinct shape could just be seen on the far bank. I visualised his furious shaking to divest himself of river water, before quartering this way and that in search of the bird that was almost certainly still in the river. Perhaps he was confused by residual scent from the earlier duck on the bank. Whatever the case, it was some while before I heard him again.

"Feathers drifted past like confetti but if nothing else I had something for the pot"

As the gloom gave way to night, a single bird appeared high overhead. With my confidence buoyed by my earlier successes on the mallard, he too was sent plummeting and landed on the wash behind me. With the dog now busily splashing in the river I hurried towards the fallen duck and was able to locate him, helped by the drake's pale, upturned breast shining like a beacon against the blackness of the grass.

This action was followed by a good deal of splashing and commotion. My dog was swimming back with a very lively mallard clutched in his jaws, another fine piece of retrieving in difficult conditions. The first final day was over, and a splendid one it had been too.

Despite the tantalising prospect of the geese, and the opportunities that had passed me by, it had been a fitting conclusion to the season above the seawall. More adventures lay ahead over the next three weeks, and it was with thoughts of such days that I turned the truck for home.

The geese arrive on the banks of the wash but the difficulty is getting close enough to take a shot

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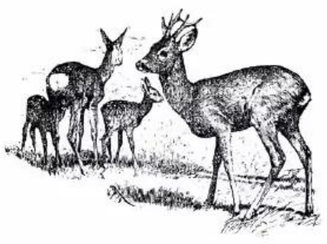


WITH RUDI VAN KETS

Sad search with only one ending

Tracking down animals that have been injured in a vehicle collision is a grim but necessary task – it is our moral duty to end their suffering, says Rudi van Kets

RUDI VAN KETS IS A BELGIAN GAME HUNTER WHO SPECIALISES IN DEER DOG TRAINING AND PREPARING HOUNDS FOR TRACKING TRIALS

A while ago, our hunting association reported a spike in deer movement and activity. The message mainly asked people to exercise caution around animals and urged us to keep an eye out for wildlife suddenly crossing the road.

In the region where I live, traffic signs have been in place for a long time warning of this danger. Reflective mirrors have been placed at well-known wildlife crossings to reduce the chance of automotive collisions with wildlife. A necessarily draconian speed restriction has also been introduced, although drivers rarely take it into account.

A few weeks ago, I received a phone call informing me that a roe deer had been hit by a car not far from my home. The person reporting the incident had obtained my details through the local police, shared because our association has special authorisation to search for injured animals under certain conditions.

This situation met those conditions so, following the call, it was my duty to contact the organisations responsible for the hunting area in which this roe might now be – the Agency For Nature and Forests and the province. In both cases I had to inform their foresters.

After productive conversations, both foresters granted me permission to act on their respective patches. I was also able count on their assistance if I got into hot water or needed an extra pair of hands. A forester from the province would accompany me on the task. As the accident had occurred only five minutes from my door, I was soon on the scene with my faithful canine colleague Jazz.

We started looking along the road for signs of the collision. Indications of the precise location of the impact could be tyre skid marks, debris from the car, glass, blood or hair from the injured animal.

Despite careful searching to the left and right of the location at which the collision had been reported, we found no sign of damage to animal or car. This was rather peculiar. Once again, I inquired with the representative of the Agency for Nature and Forests, who confirmed we had been scrutinising the correct spot. The forester of the province had also arrived on the scene, so we decided to search the edge of the forest over a length of 400m. We found nothing. The question of whether we were in the right place remained.

PHILIP MURPHY

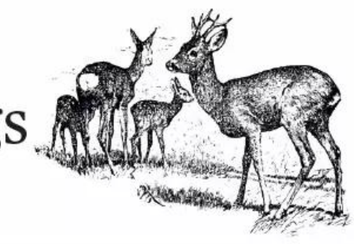
As the accident happened five minutes from Rudi's home, he and Jazz are quickly on the scene

Marking

There was little option but to expand our search area in the direction of a meadow on the edge of the forest. I have sometimes observed deer here so perhaps the collision had occurred closer to this location than first thought. We jumped on to a footpath that took us towards the meadow. Jazz was on a long leash and it paid off. Almost at the corner of the meadow there was a marking.

Just after we had spotted this first bit of promising evidence a car stopped. The driver said he had seen the collision happen. The driver involved had continued driving, but the vehicle behind had stopped to move the roe off the road, placing it on the hard shoulder. Having likely regathered some of its faculties, it had stumbled off into the forest.

With our first clue over 650m from the location of the accident, at last we had something to go on. I deployed Jazz who almost immediately took a trail. After another 150m, Jazz led us



Roe deer are often injured in vehicle collisions and even with a dog it's not always easy to find the injured animal

to the injured roe, alive but no longer able to move. A fine and efficient piece of tracking, although the primary information about the accident could have been clearer.

Although the initial lack of clarity was frustrating, giving accurate information and positioning from the start is often difficult. In this case, we have acted to end the suffering of a damaged animal that would only linger painfully if left. This sort of act is something that our moral and ethical codes mandate.

On the way to our car, the forester of the province received a call that another roe had been hit on the same road along which we had just conducted our search. The report came from a position 2km away. According to the person who called, the roe had been hit by a vehicle in front of him, and then walked to the left lane, disappearing into the woods. However, in his rear-view mirror, he had seen the roe return to the roadside. It was pleasing to see the conscientious aftermath of an unfortunate accident, a dutiful citizen taking the necessary action.

We knew approximately where the collision had occurred and were able to park our cars close by. When we arrived, as before, we searched for traces of the collision. This time we found some blood splatters and a small amount of hair on the roadway. At times this was a dicey operation. We had to pay close attention to oncoming traffic because drivers really don't expect to encounter people on the road.

"This sort of act is something that our moral and ethical codes mandate"

I decided to utilise Jazz on the cyclepath that runs along the road to give him a chance of catching the scent. After about 30m we identified some further blood spatters on the verge. On the other side of the road was a meadow, so we conducted a cursory check there as well.

This turned out to be a good idea. Once more Jazz found a few specks of blood. The forester had already checked the ditch for a good distance and found nothing. We concluded that the roe must have made its way across the meadow. This turned out to be the case. Jazz bounded straight across the meadow, penetrating a few metres into the forest on the far side. There it was, a beautiful roe.

Broken legs

The story continued the next day as I received yet another call for a collision on the same road. Here the roe deer lay only a few metres into the forest in a large blackberry bush. That same week another call, the same road, almost in the same place where we had found the roe alive. Both hind legs of the animal were broken and she had dragged herself another 60m into the forest.

We don't know the reason why so many deer are hit on this road, but it does cut through the middle of a public area where some people come to walk their dogs off leads. These are not pretty searches, but it is our moral duty to reduce the suffering of animals wherever we can. Let's hope that the next call is a bit different.

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A new subtle perfume

It's the perfect time to ambush woodies coming in to roost but even if nothing offers a shot, it's still a lovely way to spend an evening, says *BB*

A favourite end-of-season ambush for me is in Hieaway Wood. This small plantation crowns a hill on the edge of an escarpment and overlooks what might be termed the cream of the Pytchley hunt country. It is mostly composed of Scotch firs but there are some oaks at the lower western end and a few tall ash trees.

At the upper end there is very little undergrowth, only a few ragged elders, which seem to survive with very little top light. But at the lower western side there are thickets of privet and snowberry, which make a fine hide. As long as I can remember, this wood has remained unchanged.

The other evening when I visited it, entering by a little hunting gate at the top end, I was reminded of the time when, as a boy, I found a sparrowhawk's nest in one of the firs.

Needles

At this top end, the highest part of the wood, there are several nests of the wood ant, large mounds of needles. I found myself pondering on the subject of tree-nesting birds in a wood where these ants occur and the curious fact that the woodpigeon, carrion crow and other tree-nesting birds, including treecreepers and tits, seem, for the most part, to escape the attentions of the ants.

Now this is a strange fact of nature and one that has not been solved; one of those little mysteries that intrigued the great naturalist WH Hudson, who noted the same fact in the pine woods of the south country.

That ants do attack nestlings I have proved for myself. A few years back I found the nest of a little owl in the

"A single pigeon was teed up perfectly on a bare oak twig"

ISTOCK

"As I waited, a faint winnowing sound made me look up. The retriever beside me gave a subdued whine. He had heard the pigeon flocks before I had"

top of an ash stump and noticed a procession of ants up and down the tree. When I examined the young owlets – which were covered with white wool – I found to my horror that they were being eaten alive. One bird had a hole in its abdomen from which the ants were going in and out. But I have yet to find ants devouring young pigeons in an ant-infested pine wood.

All these thoughts passed through my mind as I lay under the privet bushes waiting hopefully for the pigeon flocks to come in to roost. In late February and March, I leave the 12-bore at home and take my trusty little Winchester with its telescopic sight. After the season is over and spring is so near, the 12-bore is too big a wildfowling piece and makes too much noise, apart from which I can reach those far outpigeons that come in early to the fringe trees.

"At this time of year there is a promise of what is to come"

At this time of year the evenings seem endless. There is a delightful promise of what is to come. The blackbirds can be heard warbling quietly to themselves, not the loud challenge we hear later, that staking-of-a-territory song, but a sort of soliloquy. As I lay under the privet I could hear the rich, wild carolling of a mistle thrush, whose song seems to me to closely resemble that of the ring ouzel, that spring migrant of the Fells. By peering through the oval leaves of my ambush I could see him high on the topmost twig of an ash tree outlined against the western sky.

It was one of those still evenings we get at this season, just at sundown. I could hear the frail thin bleat of lambs outside the wood and once, the "*caw*" of a carrion crow. Hieaway is a roost for these birds and every winter ↠

"At the highest part of the wood, there are several nests of the wood ant, large mounds of needles"

they flock to it. But they are too wary to come in while it is light enough to shoot, with a rifle at any rate.

The usual robin made his appearance as they always will in a wood, like a gamekeeper looking for trespassers. I missed the song thrushes that are now, alas, so rare in our midland countryside; in the old days they sang lustily in Hieaway on such an evening as this.

I looked at my watch, 5.15pm. It was time the pigeons were coming. They do not often let me down. When they arrive too late I cannot see them

"With the cross-threads on him, the pigeon looked as big as a hen"

through my scope and often wish I had the 12-bore beside me. A faint winnowing sound made me look up. The retriever beside me gave a subdued whine. He had heard the pigeon flocks before I had done so.

I glimpsed a fairly big party wheeling over the tops of the oaks. They made a circuit of my ambush three times and then I heard them clappering into the trees higher up the wood and out of sight. This was annoying, for just as wild geese will join their fellows on the ground, so will pigeon go to others in a wood.

Clappering

I waited on but no more came and all the time the light was going. At last I fired a shot into the air to put them up, quite a good thing to do under these circumstances. I have often done this with wild geese and had the whole lot over me. I heard the flock rise with that well-known explosive sound and they came rushing again overhead, round and round, then all came to a bustling, clappering rest on the oak tops within 50 yards or so of my ambush. Just the job!

I watched them crane their heads about, suspicious, lean and thin, then each bird settled down, appearing to double its size as it began to digest the evening meal. Despite the fact that I suppose there must have been some 60 birds all around me, most of them in range, it was surprising how few were offering twig-free shots. The tiniest twig will deflect the shot from a .22. But one bird was teed up perfectly on a bare oak twig and when I got the cross threads on him he looked as big as a hen.

Vicious crack

That second's pause, a holding of the breath, and then the vicious crack rings out. The pigeon heels and falls to thump into the dead oak leaves. Out goes the dog at a tremendous pace, scattering the leaves down the slope; back he comes with one grey, black-tipped wing shielding his left eye. He loves pigeon shooting but is not too keen on the fluffy white feathers that stick to his mouth.

I had three more shots before the light went and all were missed. But an hour in the woods at twilight with spring around the corner can be very pleasant, with new subtle perfume rising from the earth.

This article was first published in the 12 February 1972 issue of Shooting Times.

TOTO AND HARRY BY TOWN GUN

In the 10 years that I have been owned by a Jack Russell I have become convinced that no matter what happens, I can never again exist without a terrier in the household. In view of what my JR has done to me, and to others, this is no inconsiderable tribute to their charm and appeal.

Like several of the mistakes I have made in life, our terrier was due to the euphoria produced by alcohol. My wife and I went to a Christmas cocktail party, blundered into an upstairs room where the hostess's Jack Russell bitch was nursing a litter of puppies and immediately fell. The result of this fatal moment should perhaps have been christened "Gin and Tonic". This potion undoubtedly had some bearing on his purchase. In fact, he was subsequently launched on an unsuspecting neighbourhood as Toto. Toto, or rather M'Toto — being Swahili for any young animal, even a human one.

Toto quickly made his mark — on slippers, rats, a three-quarter grown fox cub, which he killed and my springer spaniel admiringly brought home for him. He also made a dent or two on the Kleeneze man, a nice postlady and a neighbour's au pair girl who inadvisedly struck him with her handbag. He gave the handbag a passing shake as well.

All in all he has a fairly criminal record, not, I believe, out of malice, because he has the nicest disposition when in the home. He simply cannot resist a moving target if it appears on what he considers to be the boundaries of his, or our, territory.

Continued on p79

"The JR should've been christened Gin and Tonic as the potion had bearing on his purchase"

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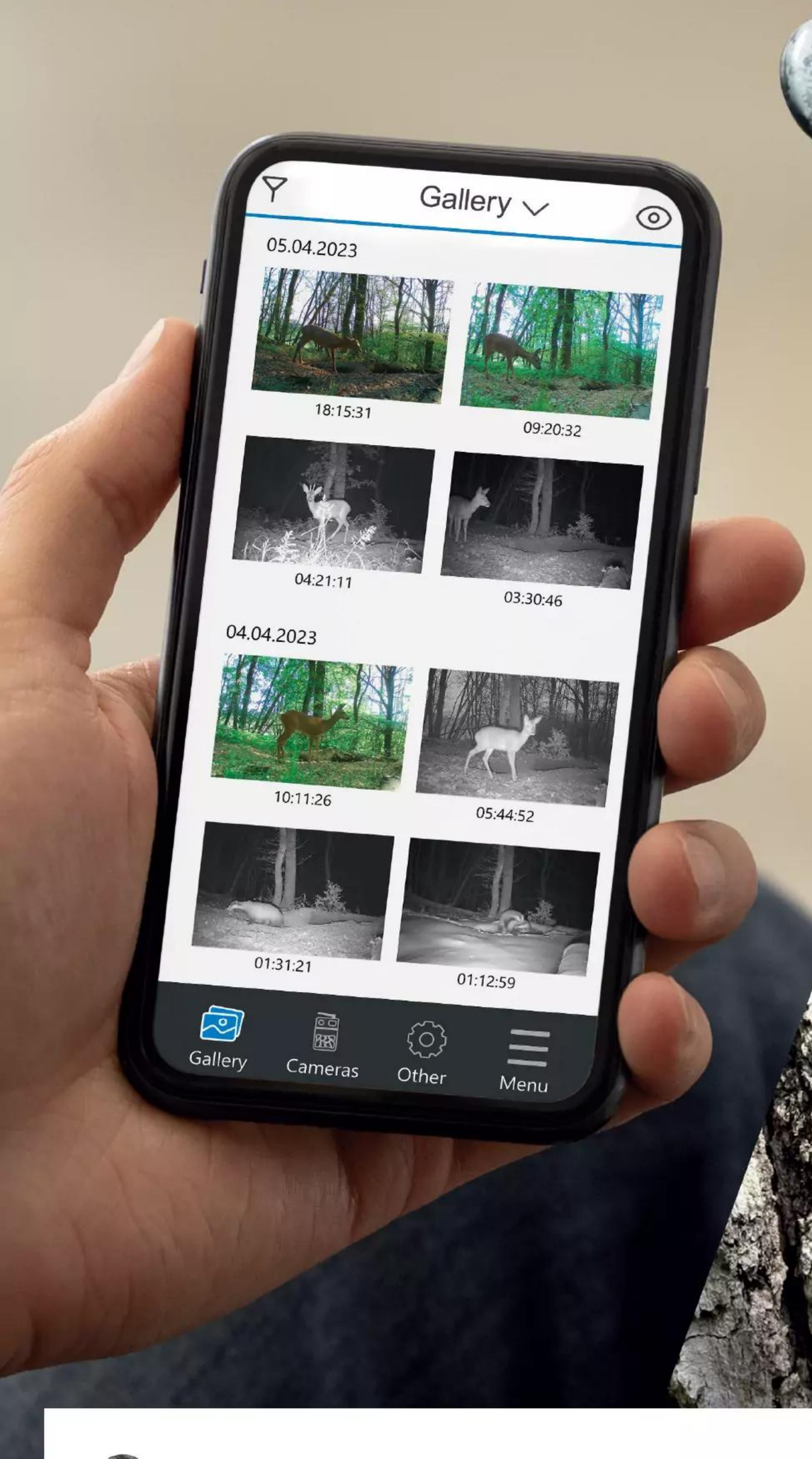

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Pheasant

Game Cookery

Mafé is a West African curry with a peanut sauce that's usually made with chicken, but this version from Wild and Game uses pheasant

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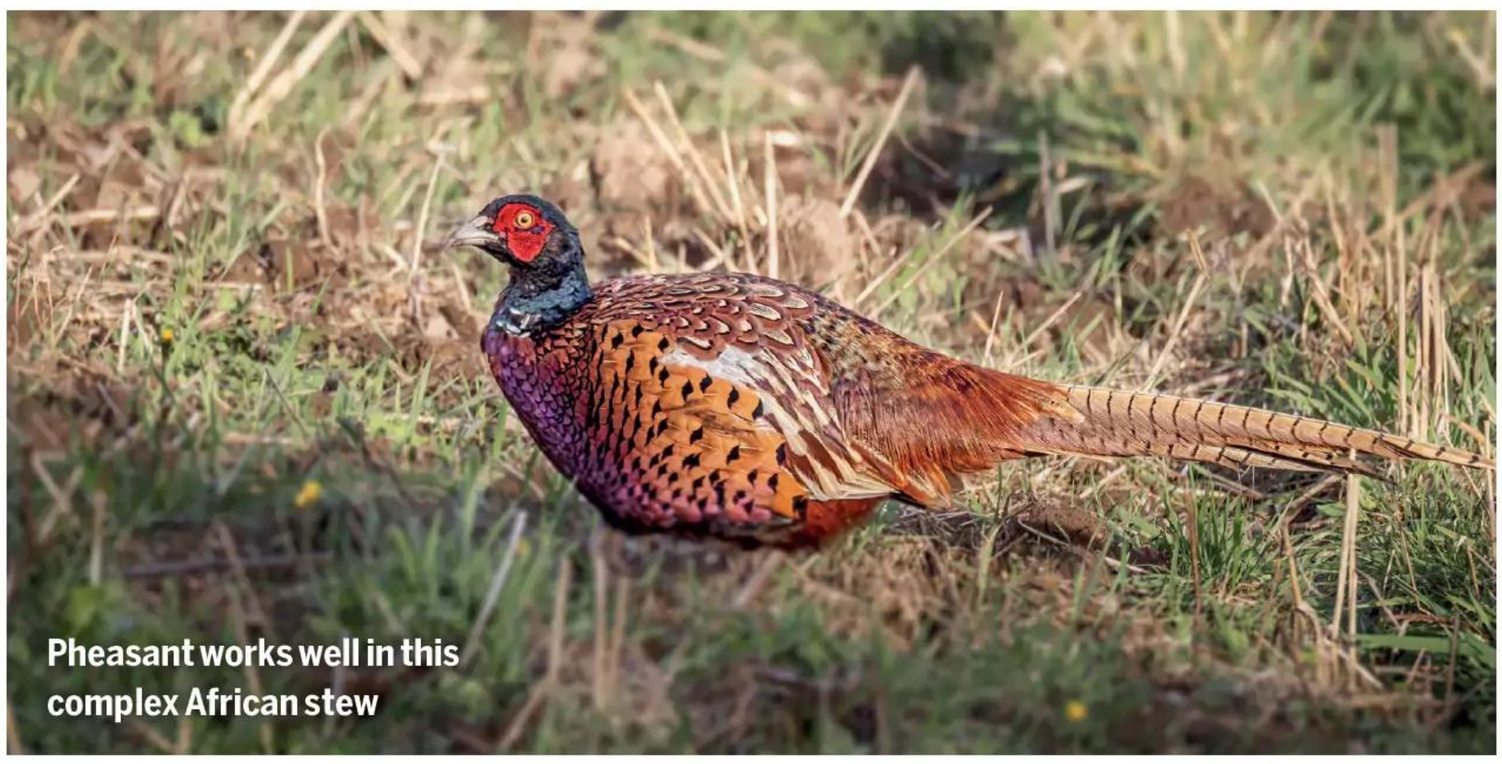
Wild and Game supplies frozen game products so you can enjoy delicious recipes all year round.

Mafé curry is said to be so delicious that you can never eat enough of it. Many variations of this peanut butter stew are eaten in different countries on the west coast of Africa, and it goes by different names. In Gambia, it is is made with squash or sweet potatoes and is known as *domoda*, while in Nigeria it is called groundnut soup and is usually eaten with fufu or rice.

It can be made with whatever meat you have, beef, lamb, chicken or, as here, pheasant. It would probably work just as well with venison, too. But the important ingredient is the peanut butter, which adds a silky richness to the bold and complex flavours of this delightful dish.



Pheasant works well in this complex African stew

Ingredients

- 700G OF PHEASANT BREASTS, CHOPPED INTO CHUNKS (OR 2 PACKS OF WILD AND GAME BREAST FILLETS)
- A GLUG OR TWO OF GOOD VEGETABLE OIL
- 1 MEDIUM ONION, FINELY DICED
- 1 BELL PEPPER, ANY COLOUR, DICED
- 1 RED CHILLI PEPPER, VERY FINELY CHOPPED (OPTIONAL, IF YOU LIKE IT SPICY)
- 1 GENEROUS TSP MINCED GARLIC
- 1 GENEROUS TSP MINCED GINGER
- 1 GENEROUS ½ TSP CAYENNE PEPPER
- 1 GENEROUS ½ TSP SMOKED PAPRIKA
- 300ML COCONUT MILK
- 400ML CHICKEN STOCK
- 70G TOMATO PUREE
- 70G SMOOTH PEANUT BUTTER
- SALT TO TASTE

FOR BRINING THE PHEASANT (OPTIONAL):

- 3 ROUNDED TBSP SUGAR
- 3 ROUNDED TBSP SALT
- 1 LITRE WATER

PHEASANT MAFÉ

THE METHOD *Serves 4*

1 If you want really tender pheasant, first brine the breasts by placing them in the water with the sugar and salt, and placing in a container in the fridge overnight.

2 Heat the vegetable oil in a large pan or wok, and fry the onions until soft. Then add the peppers and chilli (if using one), and cook for a few more minutes until soft.

3 Add the garlic and ginger, and cook for another minute or two until fragrant.

4 Add the cayenne and smoked paprika, and cook for another 30 seconds or so.

5 Next, pour in the stock and coconut milk. Then stir in the smooth peanut butter and tomato puree. Cook the mixture, stirring regularly, for a few minutes. Add salt to taste.

6 Finally, add the pheasant breasts and cook for 5-8 minutes until the pheasant is cooked through.

7 Serve with boiled rice. Alternatively, you can try it with some mashed sweet potato or squash.

ISTOCK

The experts

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DIGGORY HADOKE

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BRUCE POTTS

Shooting Times rifle reviewer and stalker

MIKE SWAN

Conservation expert and head of education for the GWCT

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Highly regarded writer and ornithologist

LIAM BELL

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TIM MADDAMS

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

SIMON WHITEHEAD

Author, professional ferreter and rabbit controller

IAIN WATSON

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CHRIS DALTON

Professional stalker and regular presenter on *The Shooting Show*

MARK RIPLEY

Well-known fox controller and long-range shooting expert

Contact the team

Email: ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

SARAH FARNSWORTH; HARRY LESSMAN; CRAIG MCCANN-MCMILLAN; DANIEL O 'FLAHERTY; ANDREW SYDENHAM; DAVID TOMLINSON; ANDY HOOK; ALAMY

Avoid all puppy parties

GUNDOGS

Q I am taking my 16-week-old labrador (and future gundog) to a puppy party soon to socialise. I am aware that they shouldn't overdo the physical exercise, so how long should they be allowed to play for? Is there anything I should avoid that might encourage bad habits in future?

A I am actually not a fan of puppy parties and advise all my clients to avoid them like the plague.

I appreciate it may not be the case with all of them, but the vast majority are run by well-meaning but clueless people. Essentially, the puppies turn up and are released to play. There is no structure, no matching puppies of suitable size and energy, and no understanding of dog behaviour.

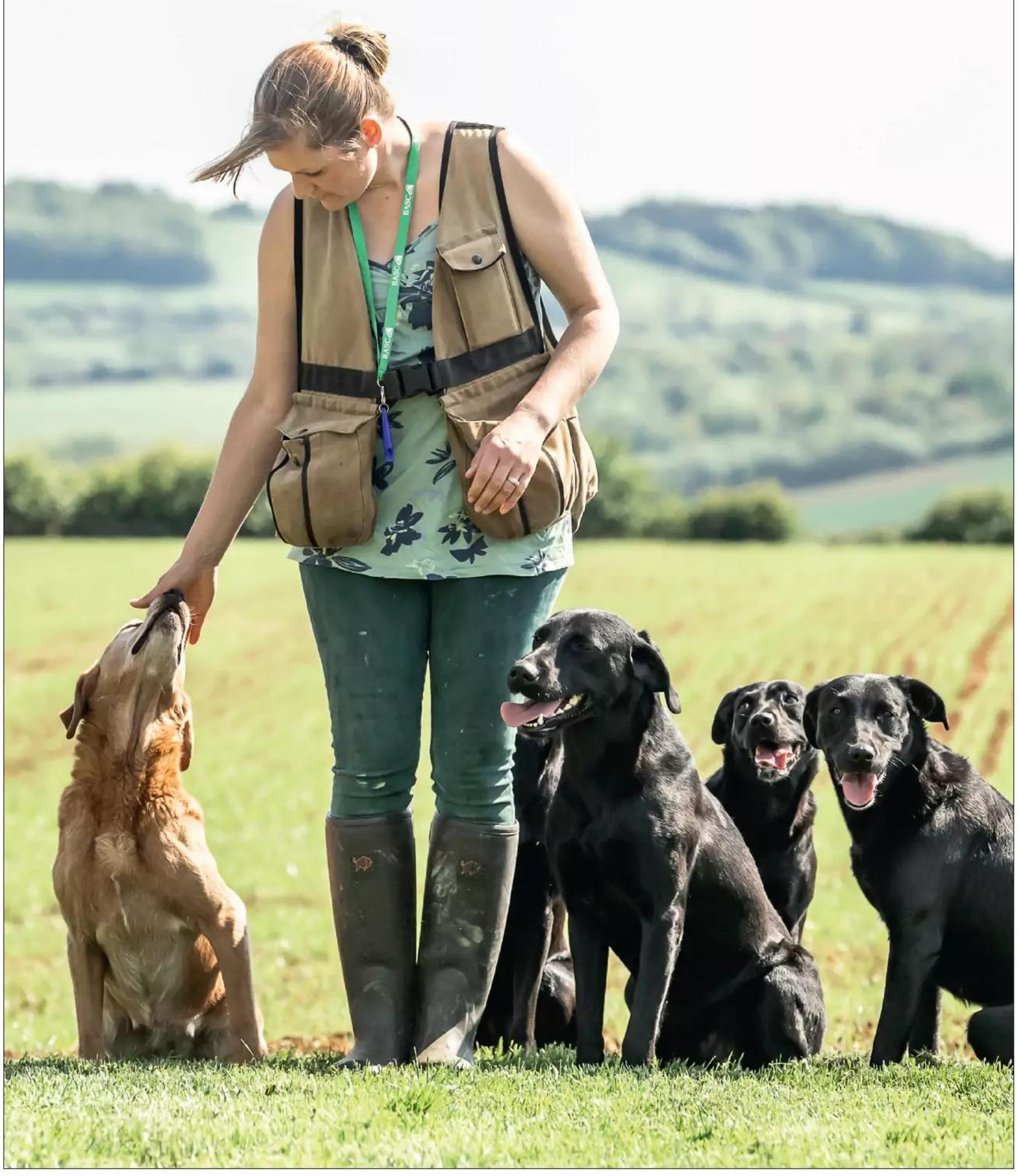
Not all play will have a positive effect on your puppy and, all too often, it can have the opposite.

As you intend to work this dog, it is advisable to be focusing more on teaching them to ignore other dogs right now and engage with you.

Socialising should be with one other puppy that does not overwhelm yours, or physically hurt them (and vice versa). Or use an older, calm, balanced dog to help teach manners and calm, polite play. Sessions should be kept short, about 15 minutes or so.

Finally, ensure the environment is safe – no slippery floors or dangerous obstacles to run into. ***ES***

It is best to socialise puppies in a controlled situation with calm dogs, rather than at a puppy party



Soil analysis: worth the cost?

ON YOUR SHOOT

Q I have been advised to get soil analysed from our cover crop sites, but it will add cost. Is it worthwhile or would it be better to spend the money on a fertilizer?

A Soil analysis is well worth the cost. Properly done, it will tell you about far more than just the basic nitrogen, phosphate and potash levels. While it is easy to add these with a simple granular fertilizer, many of the micro-nutrients, such as sulphur, magnesium and manganese, are not normally present, but can be in short supply and compromise plant health and growth.

Also, most soils get more acidic over time and this can hold back your crops, too. All this means that you might well be wasting money on the basic nutrients, hoping that a simple NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) fertilizer will boost growth, when something more fundamental is needed. ***MS***

Acorn shortage hits jays

MIGRANT BIRDS

Q I have seen far more jays than usual on my shoot in Northamptonshire in recent weeks. Are they likely to be local birds or migrants?

A Jays are largely sedentary, seldom moving far from where they hatched. However, northern populations do make periodic irruptions, usually when the acorn crop has failed. Some years the crop is almost non-existent in much of the UK and northern Europe and this triggered much more jay activity than is normal.

Quite how many of the birds are migrants is a mystery. Although we know that influxes of jays do occur from the Continent, we also know these birds are reluctant to cross open seas, so a mass movement from Scandinavia into mainland Europe doesn't mean that there will be a similar arrival in Britain. ***DT***

Shoots may see an influx of jays in the wake of a poor acorn crop

Bluish haze in dog's eyes

VETERINARY CARE

Q My nine-year-old labrador has developed a bluish haze in both eyes and he doesn't seem to mark as well as he did. I was wondering if there could be something wrong.

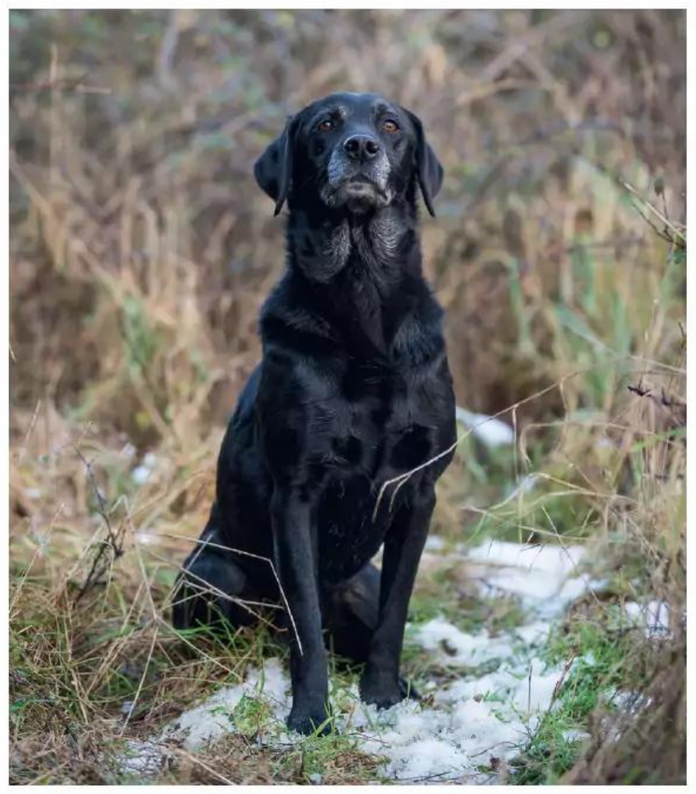
A Two of the most common eye problems seen in older dogs are cataracts and lenticular sclerosis. Lenticular sclerosis is much more common. It is a product of ageing and usually begins to appear in middle-aged to senior dogs.

The lens, though transparent, is made up of thousands of tiny fibres. Lens fibres are produced throughout life, but the lens does not become bigger. Consequently, as a dog ages, the old fibres in the lens become compacted, creating a cloudy appearance in the eye. This density is called lenticular or nuclear sclerosis.

The condition is painless and does not lead to blindness. It appears as an evenly grey, rounded opacity (cloudiness) in the centre of the lens, and is most easily observed when the pupil is dilated.

It is not to be confused with a cataract. Cataracts are white and opaque and represent a change in the ability of light to penetrate to the retina, causing diminished vision.

Both conditions are characterised by a cloudy appearance in the eye, so it can be difficult to tell the difference between nuclear sclerosis and cataracts. A vet can examine the eyes and confirm whether or not this is the problem. ***TB***



How to size up ferret boxes

FERRETING

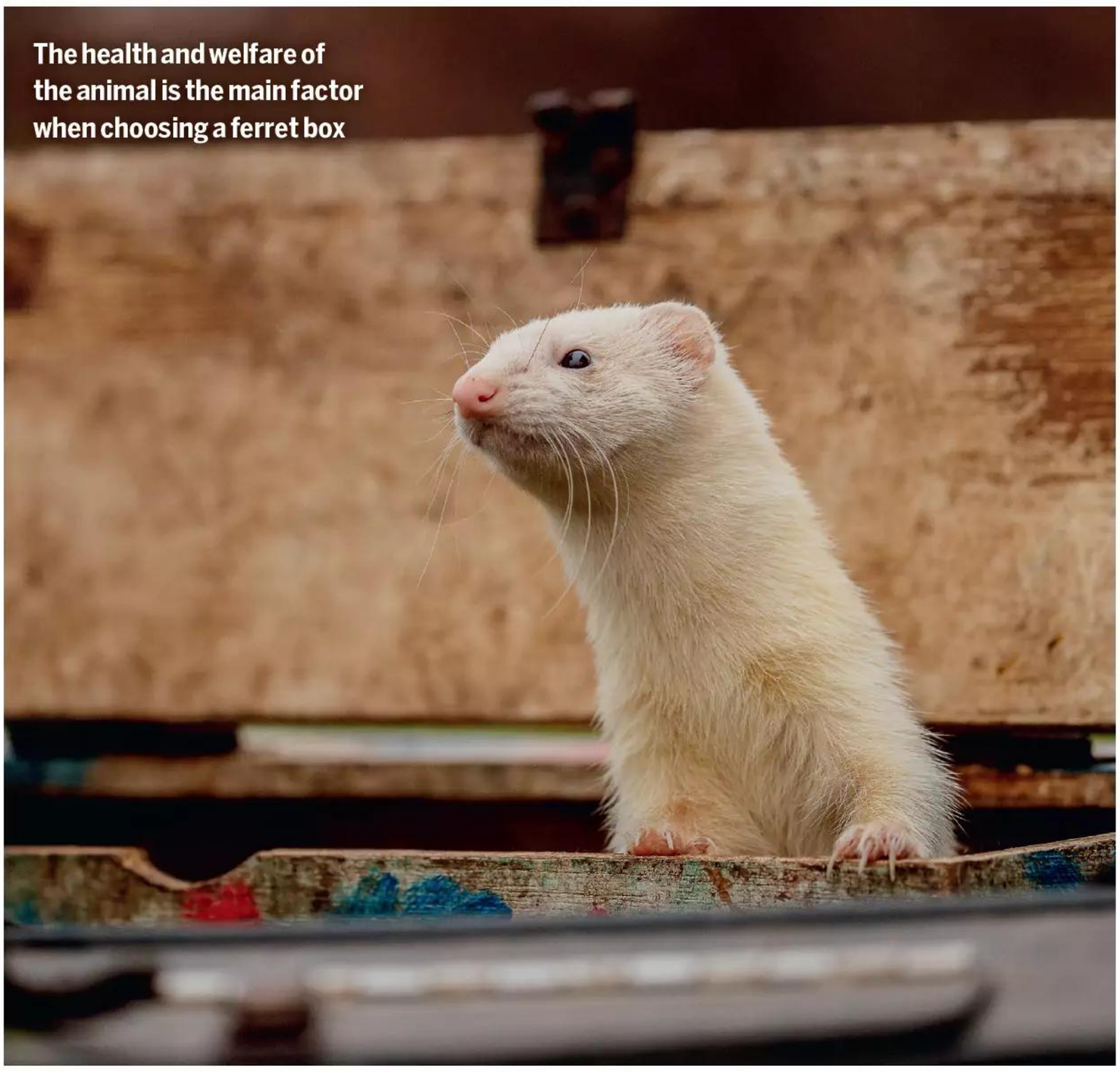
Q I was given a new ferret box for Christmas. Although it's well built, I think it may be a little small for my four ferrets. What size are your ferret boxes?

A I can remember a time when buying a ferret box was hard work whereas nowadays, especially with the internet, they are in vogue and everywhere.

Unfortunately, if you don't keep ferrets, you may miss the essential points of what makes not only a good box but also the right box. At the end of the day, the health and welfare of the ferrets is the major factor over fashion or convenience.

Any ferret box should be light but sturdy enough to sit on when you are having a break – and large enough for the ferrets to go to the toilet. It needs to be airy enough to keep them cool, but not so airy that they get a chill in the winter, or wet when out in the rain.

Among my array of boxes, the main ones I use are 40cm long, 23cm wide and the same height. I ensure that the lid fits snugly, with no gaps. The last thing I want is water dripping on top of my ferrets after they have worked. This size comfortably holds four jills and gives them everything they need to be warm, secure and ready for work. There are a lot of smaller ferret boxes on the market, but these are generally designed only for one or two ferrets. ***SW***



The health and welfare of the animal is the main factor when choosing a ferret box

Best round for sika stag

STALKING

Q I am due to stalk sika stags this year for the first time and have read that they are hard deer when shot, with recommendations to use larger calibres. Would you agree?

A Clearly, this depends on the calibre that you are using. Strangely enough, up to fairly recently I would have said accuracy was more important than calibre.

However, my last couple of excursions stalking sika have demonstrated that they are capable of running quite some way when hit well and in the right place – and this was with a 6.5x55, using 140gr ammunition.

I would be inclined to agree that moving to something like a .270 or .30-06 – or similar – may well be a sensible option, particularly for rutting stags. Sika also have the habit of not straying far from cover and often only moving at times of very low light. This adds into the mix the problem of a potential lengthy follow-up in cover at night.

So, if possible, go with the advice and use a hard-hitting bullet and ammunition combination. ***CD***

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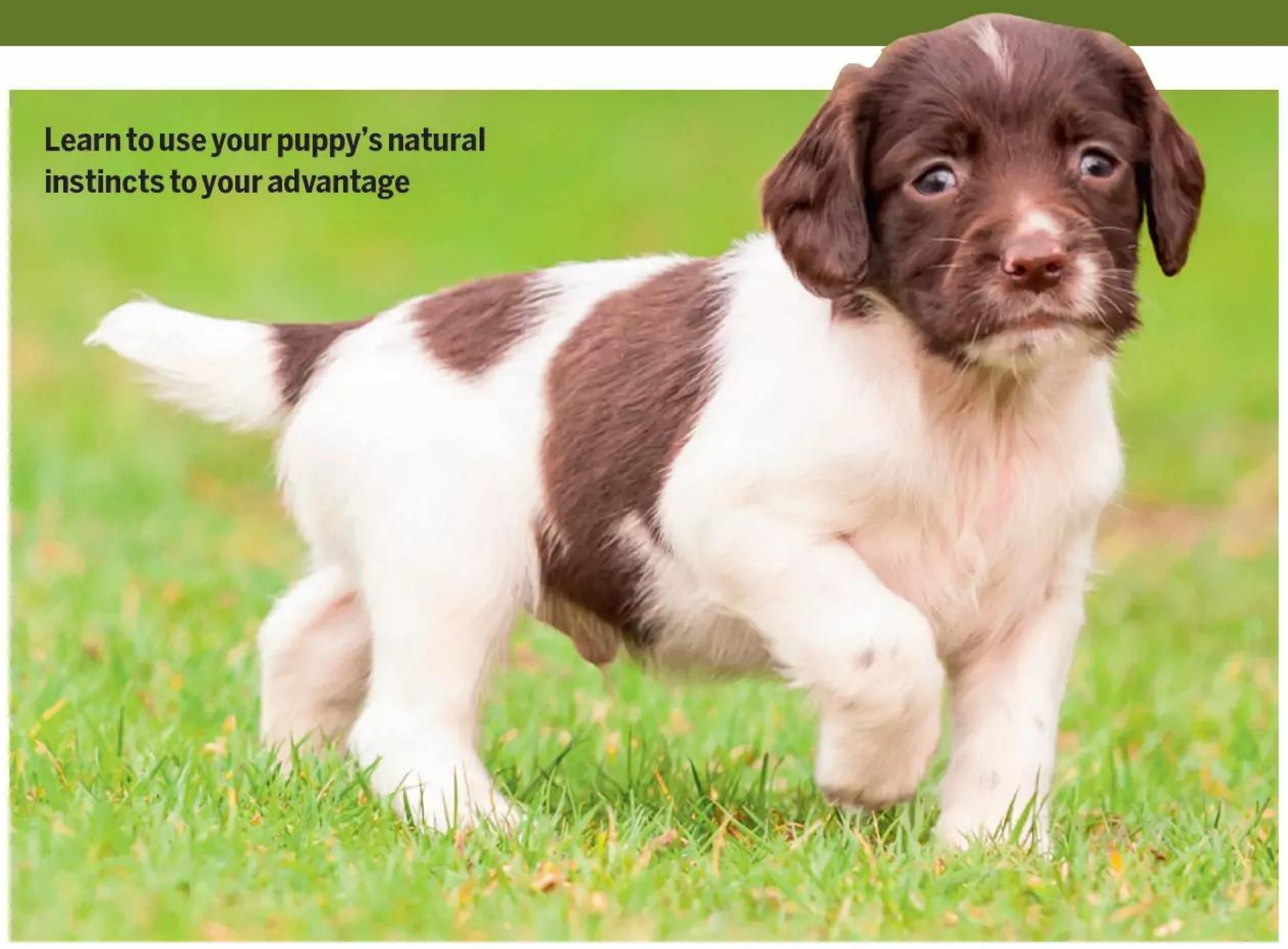


Learn to use your puppy's natural instincts to your advantage

Nurture nature's instincts

GUNDOGS

Q I am picking up my first springer puppy next week. I've had labradors in the past, so it'll be a shock to the system but I'm looking forward to doing some basic training. His parents are working dogs. He'll be a pet but I do want to engage his brain quite a bit. Any advice is most welcome.

A Spaniels do tend to be a little more lively at times than labradors, but in truth are often just as biddable and willing to train. His natural instinct as he grows will be to hunt, so it is much easier to work with that drive than against it.

No one has told your puppy he is not a working dog, so those instincts are most likely already there. My advice is to use them. Invest in gundog lessons so when out and about on a walk you can get him hunting for you as opposed to for himself.

Or alternatively look at scent work. Anything that engages the nose and brain he will love and help your bond and all-round obedience. ***ES***

Goshawk or 'sprawk'?

WILDLIFE

Q This photo of a hawk was taken on my shoot in West Sussex. Is it a goshawk or a sparrowhawk? My feeling when I saw it was the former, but I am not sure.

A Goshawks and sparrowhawks are similar in appearance, with the main difference being size. A large female sparrowhawk and a small male goshawk can appear to have similar proportions. However, the latter will weigh up to three times as much as the sparrowhawk and has a more powerful, deeper-chested appearance. There are other clues, too. A goshawk doesn't lose height when gliding, unlike a sparrowhawk, while the former has a longer neck and more bulging secondaries.

The shape of the bird in your picture confirms it is a goshawk, while there is another clue, too. Streaking on the breast is just visible, a feature of a first-year goshawk.

In contrast, a juvenile sparrowhawk has a barred breast. Though still a scarce breeding bird in the UK, breeding pairs of goshawks can be found in virtually every county, but they tend to be shy and difficult to see. ***DT***

Hanging by a fine thread

MODERATORS

Q What is the difference between the terms UNF and UNEF with regard to sound moderator thread fitment to my .22 rimfire rifle?

A A sound moderator fitment is a crucial aspect to any hunting rifle as you need to have the correct thread fitment cut and aligned to your rifle's calibre to ensure a safe and quiet shot.

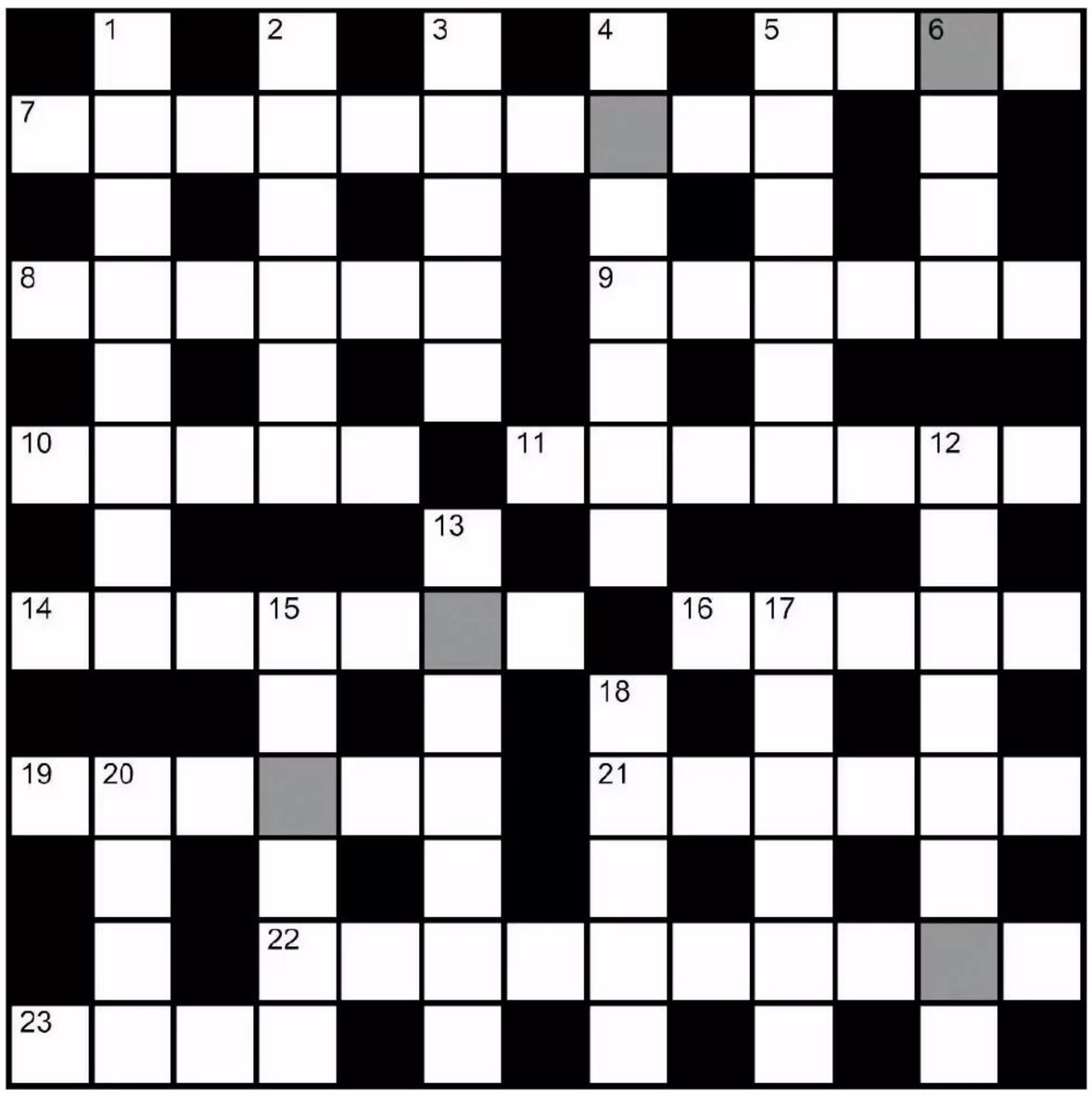
The UNEF (unified extra fine) is the same as the more common UNF (unified fine) except that the number of threads per inch (TPI) is even higher. In other words, it is a finer thread pitch that will take longer to screw on than an UNF thread.

A normal ½in UNF muzzle thread is 20TPI while the finer ½in UNEF is 28TPI. This makes the UNEF thread a little less likely to tip a sound moderator down under its own weight into the path of an exiting bullet if it comes loose when firing or out in the field, and cause a bullet to clip the baffles inside.

The threads still need to be cut precisely to the bore axis like any other muzzle thread, otherwise there is no benefit. Make sure your sound moderator fits the muzzle thread on your rifle as it's annoying when your older moderator with a ½in UNF won't fit some of the newer rifles that seem to like the UNEF thread. ***BP***

It is crucial to have the correct thread fitment

Crossword / *Compiled by Eric Linden / 1652*



Across

5 The head gamekeeper had lunch on a barrier between fields (4)
7 A resilient type of gun that may surface on the tennis court (3-7)
8 In the south, the dairy product brings a cry from vixens (6)
9 The safety switch is making our hair curl! (6)
10 In the orchestra section there's a cartridge case maker (5)
11 It weighs up steadiness of a gun's handling (7)
14 Cutter — one of a pair — found in the mole trap (7)
16 Cheat someone out of a gun fastener (5)
19 The garrison is missing a Highland pony (6)
21 The whole version includes cocking components (6)
22 Payment method found where boxers fight for a patterned gun finish (10)
23 Got out of bed with floral gun engraving (4)

Down

1 Vote for Eric to head off to the fence (8)
2 Classic country attire seen on the treetop beside unwanted garden plants (6)
3 Firearms lose the wrath of agricultural sites (5)
4 Imaging technology brings warm winter wear to mind (7)
5 The Eibar gunmaker looks at a grubby villa, from start to finish (6)
6 With a bit of pettiness, it makes its point on an antler (4)
12 Tidying up an open woodland area (8)
13 Is a gundog getting the needle? (7)
15 A well-groomed tree? (6)
17 Includes scope lens protectors (6)
18 A puffy type in the sky could be different (5)
20 Shooting supplies run short throughout Birmingham more often (4)

Solution 1650 / 31 January 2024

Across: 1. Off-road 7. Chase 8. Mudflat 9. Zero 10. Bore line 11. Lasers 13. Gas-ram 16. First aid 18. Mini 20. Bunnies 21. Stern 22. Cottage
Down: 2. Fedoras 3. Rule 4. Action 5. WAGBI 6. Kennel maids 7. Cometa 8. Muzzle flash 12. Return 14. Raiding 15. Milbro 17. Raven 19. Knot
★ **HIDDEN WORD: FLOATING**

How to push up returns

GAMEKEEPING

Q **What would be an average, respectable return for released pheasants and partridges on a mixed arable farm in the Midlands? We are only shooting between 25% and 30% of what we release. While some of our syndicate are perfectly happy with our returns, I feel it should be a little higher.**

A It is difficult to give a definitive answer as there are so many variables. Average returns for pheasants are somewhere between 35% and 40%. Partridge returns are usually a little lower. Your 25% to 30% isn't too far away, but you are right to want to improve it.

The tricky part is identifying what needs to be improved. Start by having a proper look at the pens. Make sure they are big enough and warm enough to hold the number of birds you want to put in them.

Have a look, too, at the winter holding cover. It needs to be thick enough to offer birds protection from the elements and sanctuary from predators and prying eyes.

Then examine roosting and review your predation control. Roosting should be warm, predation control timed and targeted. If you get all these nearly right, you will be more than halfway there. ***LB***

When looking to increase returns, a sensible first step is to review all aspects of the shoot

The Shooting Times Almanac

17 FEBRUARY 2024

FEBRUARY MOON PHASE

Sunrise 07:11 Sunset 17:18 Moonrise 10:07 Moonset 02:38

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 Native 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

» ***Continued from*** **p70** I took Toto shooting from an early age and he gave the impression of being willing to face any cover. But he is so small that he can pass under any obstacle that leaves a 3in clearance between itself and the ground, so he got a reputation for being intrepid.

He also, from time to time, put up a pheasant or two, for which he received quite undeserved good marks. I always thought he was entirely about his own business, which consisted of field mice, voles, rats and, of course, rabbits. A pheasant was simply a bonus. I once saw him retrieve a pigeon. There are a heck of a lot of feathers in a well-shaken pigeon. I had to be fast to beat him to any pheasant that fell in his vicinity. If he wasn't all that interested in the live article, he saw the dead one in much the same light as he saw post ladies and au pair girls: something to be seized and shaken.

Toto still comes out occasionally, though his feet are playing him up a bit now and he is apt to go on three legs after an hour or two in the thick stuff.

» ***Town Gun*****, 12 February 1972**

EDITOR'S PICKS: BINOCULARS FOR ALL BUDGETS

Bushnell Fusion X 10x42

RRP £838

edgarbrothers.com

Zeiss SFL 10x40

RRP £1,600

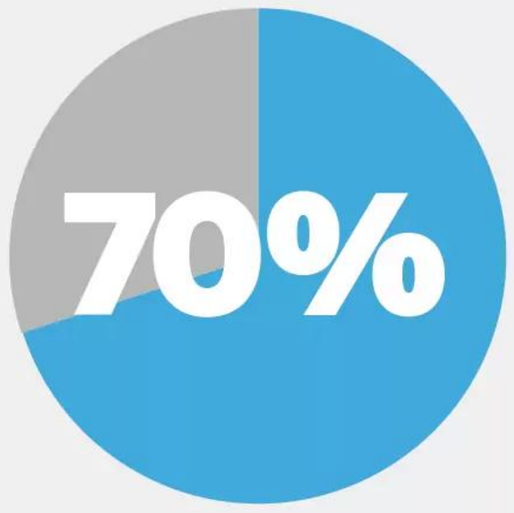
zeiss.co.uk

Swarovski EL Range 10x42

RRP £3,330

swarovskioptik.com

THE WEEK IN NUMBERS



Last month, a United Utilities Consultative Panel survey found that some 70% of Brits believe that grouse shooting should be allowed to continue on the water company's land. The survey of 1,000 adults also found that 85% of respondents believe United Utilities should have consulted with the local community before making major changes to its land management practices. And 76% of those aged 55 to 64 said the water company should continue to allow grouse shooting on its moors — rising to 81% among over-65s. In total, 66% said the UK Government should allow grouse shooting to continue at a national level, rising to 79% among those over 65.

£1,600

A donation of £1,600 has been made to the Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Rutland Air Ambulance, a year after they helped save Michael Elson's life. Mr Elson fell from his horse on 4 February 2023 while trail hunting with the Belvoir. The 74-year-old was airlifted to hospital with vertebrae fractures and spinal damage. Fortunately, he was able to walk with the use of a frame only three months later. A meet hosted by the Elson family on 2 December 2023 helped raise the funds and Mr Elson was able to stand among hounds to thank the people who "saved his life that day".

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

POWYS

• Wye Valley Guns

Wye Valley Guns is a family affair run by Team Wales & Team GB Shooter Annalise Evans and her Father Dorian (also a Team Wales Shooter). Situated just off the A470 between Brecon and Buith Wells, We offer a bespoke and personal service by combining our wealth of experience within the sport. Our shop is your one stop shop for shooting supplies, providing guns, ammunition, shooting accessories for Game & Clay Pigeon Shooting and also, just as importantly, a welcoming environment for everyone visiting our shop.

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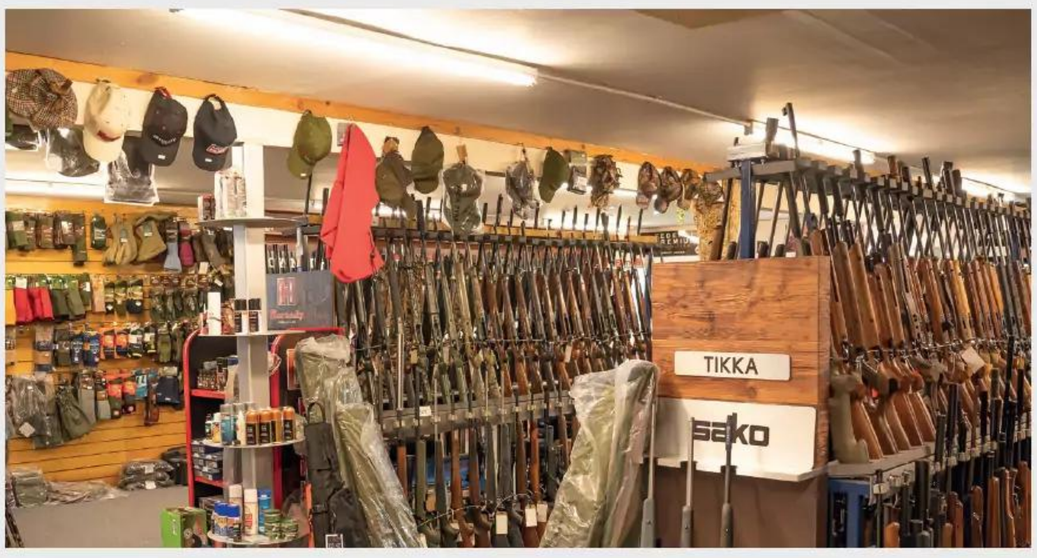
DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY

• Glenluce Gunroom



A paradise for any fieldsports enthusiast

Tell us a bit about the history of your business ?
We were established in 2009. I was originally a blacksmith – but packed that up about 15 years ago to start up the Gun shop. I'd always been into shooting and felt there was an opening for it in the area as there weren't really any other gun shops locally. I thought 'I'll give this a go' and it just snowballed from there! In the 15 years we've had the shop, we've gone from strength to strength.

Tell us about the company ethos
We just want to ensure we've got happy customers. If there's a problem, we'll always ensure we put it right, whether it's by us or a manufacturer. Simply put, we just treat people the way we like to be treated. It's served us very well as we've got plenty of customers who come back regularly and don't mind travelling to do so.

Who are the key people in the business?
I'm the owner, but other people in the team include Pam, who's looked after the clothing and accessories side of things for the last 12 years. A few years ago we also took on our own gunsmith, Danny, who works with us here in the shop doing all the repairs.

What can customers look forward to from your business over the next twelve months?
We're not going to be re-inventing the wheel! There'll be new products coming out all the time, and I think Thermal and Night vision will be the big new markets this year. We'll keep ticking along providing good service to our customers.

Tel: 01581 300308 • **Web:** glenlucegunroom.co.uk
Email: gunroom@mail.com

COUNTY LONDONDERRY

• Outdoor & Country Sports

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Email: keith@outdoorandcountrysports.co.uk

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WEST YORKSHIRE

○ Kirklees Guns

Located in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, Kirklees Guns has been established over 60 years, stocking a large variety of guns which includes modern and vintage air guns, pistols, sporting rifles and shot guns. The large range of new and secondhand fire arms we stock offers one of the most comprehensive selections in the area. We also stock a large variety of cartridges, ammunition, targets & other ancillaries. A friendly shop run by shooters for shooters, we are available for any advice.

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Alasdair Mitchell

Sharpshooter

Grouse fans might not like it, but the clear-eyed young can see where the future is going to be when it comes to long-term career prospects

Today's young people are perfectly capable of making hard-headed decisions about their future. Would you encourage your own child to go into gamekeeping as a profession? Even if you have an affinity for the countryside, there are plenty of competing career options.

I was reminded of this quandary when speaking to a young gamekeeping college student who was working as an intern on a Highland estate. He was acting as the stalker's gillie for a season and struck me as a bright, capable, hard-working young man. I asked him what branch of gamekeeping he wanted to go into and he said he felt deer offered the best long-term future.

His father was a low-ground keeper, but the youngster didn't find working with reared pheasants and partridges appealing. He thought grouse much more interesting, but a cool calculation of the prospects there gave him pause. "Frankly, I'm not sure proper driven grouse shooting will still be around in 10 years' time," he said.

So this left deer, animals he found fascinating in any case. You may instinctively want to disagree with the reason behind his decision. If you love driven grouse shooting, his apparent defeatism about it may rankle. But it's his life and he has thought about it very carefully. And I have to admit his reasoning is based on an objective appraisal.

Deer management is a hot topic. Foresters, stalkers, rewilders, farmers, contractors, conservation officials, landowners, legislators, biologists — they all have differing opinions about how many deer should be shot and when. But there is no real argument about whether deer should be shot. Chris Packham has long supported deer management with a rifle and been given stick by hardcore animal rights activists for saying so.

Humane

The rewilding movement is only just getting into its stride. And the gist of rewilding, as I far as I can tell, is planting lots and lots of trees. Those trees will need protection from deer. Relying too heavily on fences can be problematic — not least for other wildlife. We already have record numbers of deer in the UK and now we are creating even more ideal deer habitat. Shooting deer with rifles is widely accepted as a humane method of control. As such, it is not likely to be made redundant by the reintroduction of lynx or wolves, or the use of nasty chemicals to induce early abortion in deer, any time soon. So deerstalking — whether mostly recreational or not — will be with us for many years to come.

A young person looking to make their livelihood in deer management is entering the field at a time when there is a whole range of opportunities. They might end up working for a forward-looking sporting estate, or one of the burgeoning non-traditional landownership groups. Or they might be a self-employed contractor.

Change may be unsettling, but it is sometimes healthy. I was stalking red hinds recently on a big sporting estate I've been visiting for decades. The stalker told me the resident population of deer on his beat had been deliberately culled down over recent years, which undoubtedly made the stalking more onerous. At the same time, he had noticed the calves were generally bigger now. A lower density of deer, within reason, is not necessarily a bad thing for the future of stalking.

DOG BY KEITH REYNOLDS

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