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28 FEBRUARY 2024

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Fran_0123_Strata

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EST. 1688
SKINNER'S
BORN TO BE OUTDOORS

DOG OF THE WEEK

Bruce

Don't be fooled by his size and noble demeanour, the handsome Bruce is only 14 months old. Like most youngsters, this labrador has loads of energy, which will hopefully be funnelled into his training when he turns two.

Owned and photographed by David Bond

28.02.24
Issue 6,450

SHOOTING TIMES

Why *BB*'s the best

This magazine has hosted many fine writers but few can be compared with Denys Watkins-Pitchford. Writing as *BB* – the significance of those letters needs no explanation – he contributed to these pages for much of his adult life.

BB epitomised the sportsman-naturalist, delighting in rearing his beloved purple emperor butterflies, flighting the grey geese in Scotland, or fishing for an elusive carp. But what made him such a fine writer was his uncanny ability to capture a scene in only a few sentences. Unlike many modern nature writers, he never used purple prose, but chose his words with skill and eloquence.

BB not infrequently features in Vintage Times, but for those who want more, there is host of his books, from *The Sportsmen's Bedside Book* (1937) to *Confessions of a Coastal Gunner*. The latter was published in 2012, 21 years after his death, by the BB Society, which continues to celebrate the great man's work today. I met the man once and still treasure my signed copy of *The Best of 'BB'*.

David Tomlinson

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Ollie at ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

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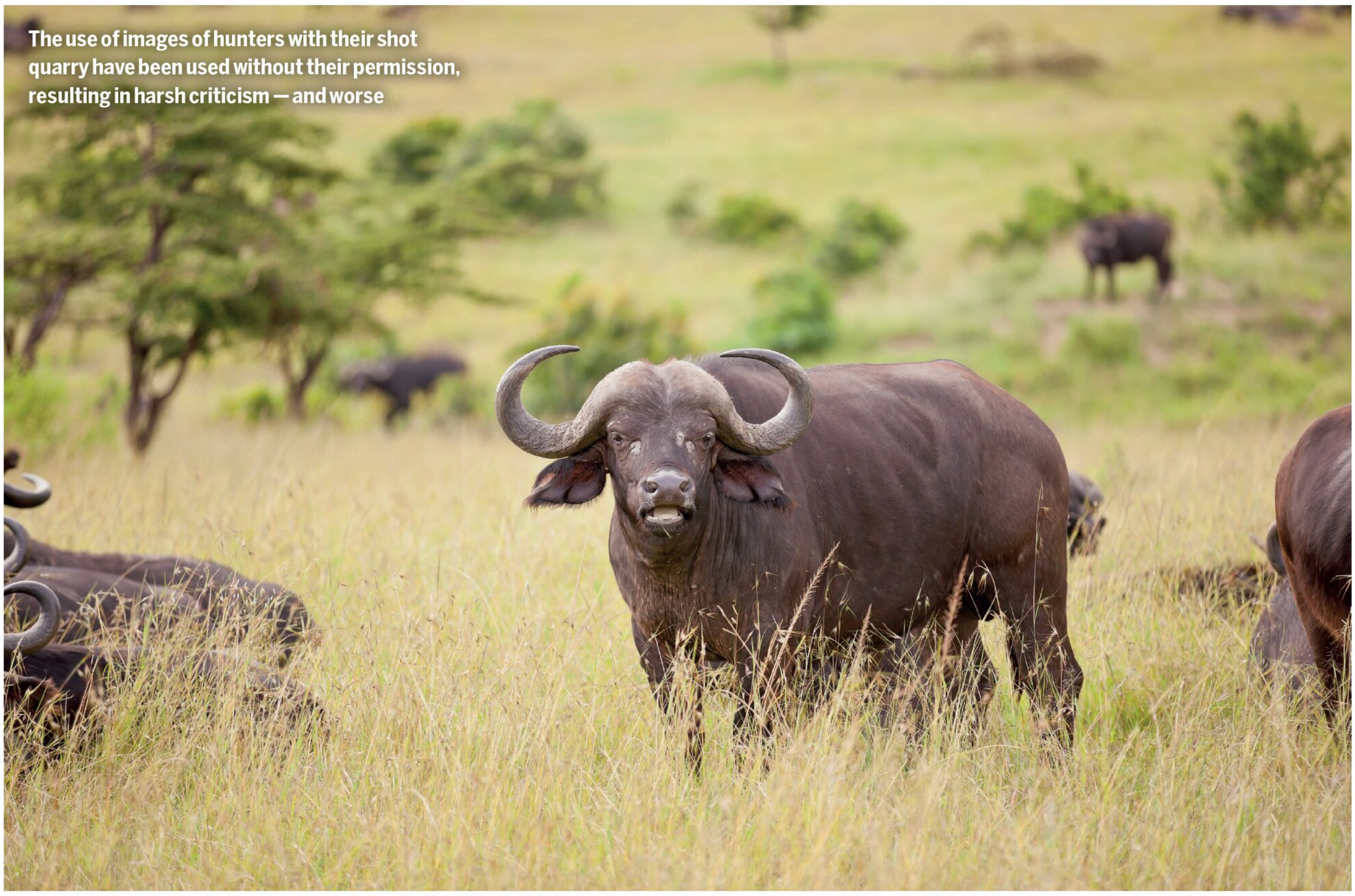

The use of images of hunters with their shot quarry have been used without their permission, resulting in harsh criticism — and worse

‘We can’t get them for hate but we can for copyright’

Newspapers and other platforms have been publishing photos of game hunters to drum up hate, but the images are used without permission

The Fieldsports Channel is taking the press to court for the non-payment of reproduction fees on a variety of trophy hunting photos. The images, which featured in several national newspapers, were allegedly reproduced without the proper payment to their creators, claims the channel’s editor Charlie Jacoby.

His campaign, which is supported by SCI Hunter Advocate Society, follows a similar initiative by trophy hunters last year when they threatened to sue a group of MPs for using photographs of them in an anti-hunting report. The 78 pictures of the hunters included in the report, which called for a ban on trophy imports, showed the hunters posing with their quarry.

The proposed trophy hunting ban bill was timed out of the House of Lords in September last year and was not mentioned in the subsequent King’s Speech. This was due in part to a consortium of African nations, whose economies and ecologies the bill would have affected, labelling the ban as a form of “neocolonialism”.

The Fieldsports Channel is urging anyone who has had their trophy hunting photographs misused by newspapers to come forward and join the campaign. It has already assisted hunter Syed Rizwan to achieve an out of court settlement with the *Daily Mirror*’s parent company Reach PLC rumoured to be worth £5,000.

Charlie Jacoby expects to have assembled the full case ready to be presented to individual newspapers by June. Mr Jacoby told *Shooting Times*: “The newspapers treat the hunting community like we’re an enemy to conquer. We can’t get them on their acts of hatred. The law allows them to be as vile to us as they like. Like getting Al Capone on tax not murder, we can have them on copyright.”

“African nations labelled the trophy ban as neocolonialism”

Author and firearms expert Diggory Hadoke said: “My photographs were stolen and used without authorisation by several newspapers. The *Mirror* paid up £500 to settle.

“The *Daily Mail* refused to acknowledge my right to ownership of the photos, and I had neither the means nor the time to chase it legally so, essentially, they got away with it, though they immediately removed all the photos from their online platforms.

“A quick scan of online images shows my photographs currently being shown without authorisation by *The Times*, ITVX, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*.” **FP**

CALLUM MCINERNEY-RILEY; ISTOCK

New laws on face coverings

Police already have the power to ask for face coverings to be removed, but seldom use it

Police are to be given extended powers to arrest protesters who wear face coverings to threaten others and avoid prosecution. The new rules will also ban flares and other pyrotechnics from public protests.

Police already have powers to ask individuals to remove face coverings at designated protests where they believe criminality is likely to occur. But this new offence will empower officers to arrest individuals who disregard their orders. Lawbreakers face fines of up to £1,000 and a month in jail.

In 2017, the Countryside Alliance successfully campaigned for amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill, which allowed a senior police officer to give oral authorisation for an order to be issued by a constable on the ground to remove face coverings. The Alliance says the police remain reluctant to use this power in relation to animal rights extremists, political demonstrators or football hooligans.

Anti-shooting and hunting demonstrators frequently hide their faces during protests and the Countryside Alliance argues the scope of the law is not the issue — but rather that the police fail to utilise their current powers.

Rules tightened on rodent poisons used in the open

From 4 July it will be illegal to buy second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs) for use in open areas. It is designed to reduce SGAR contamination in barn owls, the sentinel species — which provides advance warning for risks — for non-target wildlife and other animals.

From July, it will only be possible to buy SGARs — whose active ingredients are brodifacoum, bromadiolone, difenacoum, difethialone and flocoumafen — to treat a rodent infestation inside and around a building.

There is currently no regulatory definition of a "building", so the UK Rodenticide Stewardship annual report for the first time contains an explanation specific to rodent pest control of what constitutes a "building".

Barn owls are among the species threatened by contamination from SGARs

It defines a building as a permanent fixed structure that forms an enclosure, and provides protection from the elements, which can be used to exclude non-target animals and birds from taking baits placed inside. Such buildings are usually erected on foundations and constructed from wood, brick, concrete or metal.

From January 2026, all buyers and users of professional rodenticide products will have to hold an approved training certificate. This means farmers and gamekeepers will require the same qualifications as pest control technicians.

Weekend X poll

What did you start shooting with?

53% An over-and-under

47% A side-by-side

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To do this week

FISHING Be mobile and seek out fish. In spring, coarse fish can shift their ground very considerably. Don't plan to settle in for long sessions; instead travel light, watch the water and move on if there is no sign of your quarry. If you are interested in lure fishing, Callum McInerny-Riley gives his top tips on how to get started (*p38*).

CHECK Assess the ground flora in your release pens. Spend a bit of time around the pens and compare the ground flora with neighbouring areas. A significant lack of spring-flowering plants found nearby might suggest you are stocking your nets too densely.

Trail-hunting is a legal pastime that allows hunt followers to continue to ride to hounds

Labour Party's focus on hunting is 'bizarre'

The Hunting Act 2004 was seen as class war rather than an attempt to help animal welfare, but Labour continues its 'running attack'

The Labour Party have been accused of pursuing a toxic culture war in the countryside after it announced plans to "eliminate" hunting within its first term of Parliament. The party pledges to implement a "full ban on trail- and draghunting" within its first five years in power, claiming there is not a majority in "any part of the country" that wants to see it continue.

Steve Reed, shadow environment secretary, said the party would close "loopholes" in the existing ban that allow some types of hunting, such as drag and trail, to continue. Mr Reed claims that outlawing these currently legal activities would prevent hounds killing pets or livestock.

Country campaigners have warned the Labour Party to end its running attack on rural communities.

Introduced by Tony Blair's government, the Hunting Act 2004 was seen by many as an act of class war rather than an attempt to improve animal welfare. The current law makes it an offence to hunt wild animals with dogs. But it is still legal to lay trails for hounds to track using artificial scents, which critics claim serves as a smokescreen for illegal activity.

Tim Bonner, chief executive of the Countryside Alliance, said his organisation would oppose any new restrictions, stating: "Ultimately the countryside doesn't want to have a fight over hunting again. But it will not sit back and allow itself to be bullied and become victim to a toxic culture war.

"It's utterly bizarre that Labour is still making hunting its priority in the countryside."

Lord Mandelson, who was a leading adviser to Tony Blair when the Hunting Bill was passed, has said Labour should let rural people "live and let live" and that the government should not pick a fight with people who "live in rural areas on things which are part of their everyday life".

BASC's director of communications Christopher Graffius told *Shooting Times*:

"The countryside will not sit back and allow itself to be a victim of a toxic culture war"

"Significant amendments were made to the Hunting Bill by the then Labour government to honour their pledge that shooting would be left out of the legislation.

"These included measures to allow for humane despatch, scientific research and the protection of gamebirds. We must ensure that Labour does not resile from its commitment to keep shooting out of the legislation." **FP**

ISTOCK

THEY SAID WHAT

"I fear a combination of ignorance and disinformation is holding people back"

Who said it: Mike Swan | **Why**: The GWCT adviser looks at how the five-year phase-out of lead shot is faring with one year left to go

Walkers 'forced to trespass' over privately owned land

Walkers have no legal means to reach more than 2,500 landscapes and beauty spots where there is a right to roam — but no legal right to access them.

In England, 8% of land is designated "open country" but researchers found 2,700 hectares are surrounded by private land — such as farms or estates — with no public right of way. The only way to reach these "access islands" is to trespass.

The Government said it was considering how to deal with the problem and has given Natural England until 2025 to review the open access Countryside and Rights of Way maps issued in 2005.

Lewis Winks, who carried out the research, which covers a range of landscapes from Cumbrian moorland to Sussex downland, said: "The absurdity of access islands is a clear example of why our current system is broken. Often people don't know where they have a right to go in the countryside."

CLA president Victoria Vyvyan said: "Nobody is forced to trespass. It is a choice and millions of acres of land are publicly accessible without the need to do so."

So-called 'access islands' are in legally open country enclosed by private land with no right of way to cross it

NGO dinner drums up £2k for keepers in need

More than £2,000 was raised for the Gamekeepers' Welfare Trust and National Gamekeepers' Organisation Educational Trust at a well-attended event in Trearddur Bay, Anglesey on 17 February.

Fifty people enjoyed the evening in The Stores Italian restaurant, generously hosted by David and Liz Soutter along with Steve McGuigan of the NGO Educational Trust. One guest even made the six-and-a-half-hour trek south from Dundee, such was the level of support.

Guest speaker Sir Johnny Scott kept guests entertained all evening with his raconteuring and auctioneering skills, in the company of both the local and regional Members of Parliament and Welsh Assembly, Virginia Crosbie MP and Mark Isherwood AM. Other speakers included farmer and author Gareth Wyn Jones and NGO chairman David Pooler.

Sir Johnny Scott (*left*) **is guest speaker at the NGO fundraiser**

GWT's Helen Benson said: "The funds raised will help those who dedicate their lives to our wonderful rural landscapes, flora and fauna."

Simon Everett

NEWS IN BRIEF

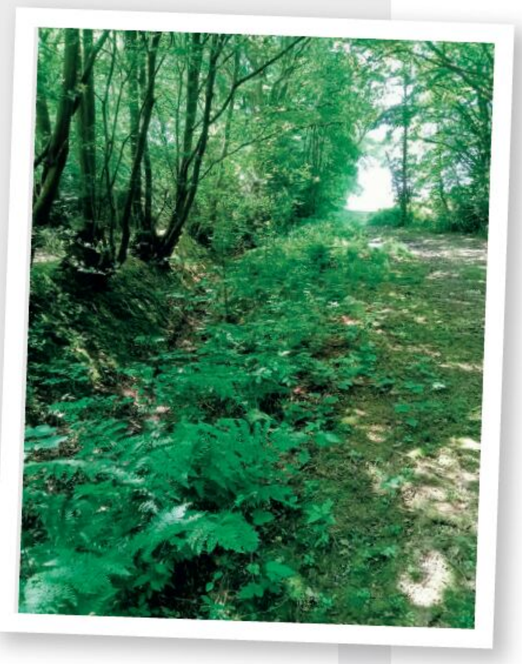
Man arrested after shooting death

A murder investigation has been launched after a young farmer was shot and killed in Derbyshire in January. The body of 23-year-old Charles Kinston was found in a field near Bretby on 29 January, but Derbyshire Police have only now released details of the incident. Police confirmed that a man in his 30s was arrested at the scene on suspicion of murder and has been released on bail as the investigation continues.

Kent wildfowlers buy woodland

The Kent Wildfowlers & Conservation Association (KWCA) has acquired two areas of woodland totaling 37 acres. The KWCA is Britain's largest wildfowling association and has more than 1,600 members. Club chairman Alan Jarrett said the land will service the "growing rough shooting and airgun rifle hunting sections of the club" and "demonstrates how importantly we take diversification."

One plot is a freehold purchase of £145,000, while the other is on a long-term lease. Further land acquisitions are expected in the years ahead.



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Grants to give three-legged stool a boost

New payments will cover deer, grey squirrel and mink management, which is a massive step in the right direction, says Conor O'Gorman

In January, Steve Barclay, Secretary of State for Defra, announced the latest suite of grants available to landowners and farmers in England. Much of it was familiar territory, with various habitat management options. But the inclusion of payments for deer, grey squirrel and mink control caught my eye.

For many years we have been lobbying for payments for wildlife management, underpinned by GWCT research. That has included consultation responses and ministerial briefings. Since Brexit, government agencies have been developing new subsidies to support farming right across the UK. In England payments are being rolled out via Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs).

Vulnerable

Last year there was a hint that some form of wildlife management payments would be included when Defra minister Trudy Harrison said: "The management of predators, such as foxes and carrion crows, plays an important role in supporting the recovery of some of our most vulnerable species, particularly ground-nesting birds including the curlew.

"We have recently published an update on Environmental Land Management schemes which confirms that we are exploring how actions to do with managing predatory species — when those species are impacting threatened species recovery — will be made available."

The news went down well in the shooting press, with talk of the return of fox bounties. While foxes are not listed in the new grant schemes, I understand that they, along with carrion crow control payments, are still in the pipeline and lobbying continues.

"While foxes are not listed in the scheme, they are still in the pipeline"

A 10-year grant scheme will pay £60 per hectare per annum to control grey squirrels

Meanwhile, payments have been secured for several species-specific payments of interest as follows:

Deer: a 10-year grant scheme paying £105 per hectare per annum, to assist with the costs of creating a deer management plan, assessing deer damage and undertaking control.

Grey squirrels: a 10-year grant scheme paying £60 per hectare per annum, to help with the costs of assessing damage from bark-stripping and controlling numbers.

Mink: a 10-year grant scheme paying £99 per 100m of watercourse per annum for control and management with more details to follow when it goes live later this year.

I spoke to Ian Danby, BASC's head of biodiversity, about the direction of travel and he said: "We worked with Defra last year on the species to include for grant payments and it is positive to see deer, grey squirrels and mink on the list for this year. There is a really strong case to include fox and corvid species, given that one of the priorities for the Environmental Land Management schemes is to ensure the recovery of vulnerable ground-nesting birds such as lowland breeding waders.

"After all, predator control is a vital part of the three-legged stool for successful nature conservation," he added.

Understorey

Also new on the list are payments for rhododendron control, over a five-year period at £256 per hectare per annum. This will be an excellent option for shoots wishing to improve their woods by reverting the understorey layer to native species.

Shoots will also be interested in the payments for pollen and nectar flower mix (£729 per hectare per annum), winter bird food on arable and horticultural land (£853 per hectare per annum), woodland edges on arable land (£428 per hectare per annum) and three-zone rides in woodlands (£197 per hectare per annum).

I have only scratched the surface of what is possible with the new grant schemes in England and there is far more information and sources of professional advice available on the BASC website.

Post-Brexit agri-environmental schemes are also being developed in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We want to see wildlife management grants included in these schemes too and continue to work to that aim.

For more details
Scan here to see the full list of ELMS grants on the BASC website

Case studies are really helpful to our cause, so if you successfully apply for any of the species management options in England, please email Conor at ***conor.ogorman@basc.org.uk***

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SHOOTING TIMES & COUNTRY MAGAZINE
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FIELDSPORTS PRESS

LETTER OF THE WEEK

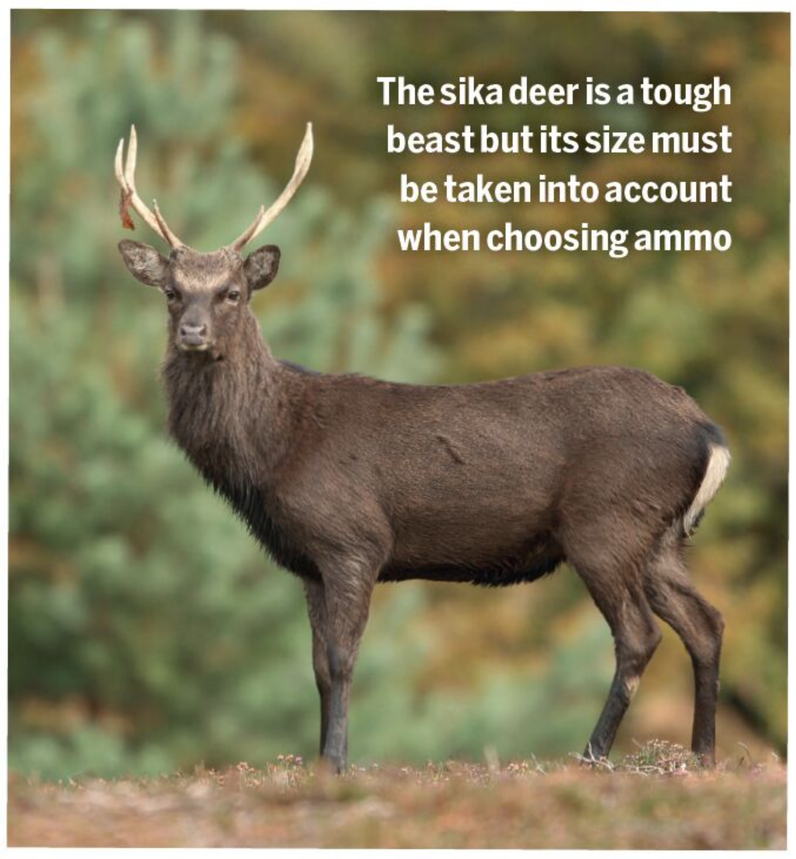
All due to the bullet

I found Chris Dalton's views on the 6.5 x 55 very interesting. I have taken hundreds of deer in this country from muntjac to woodland reds with the 6.5 Swede using the 140-gr Nosler Partition bullet and have never had a problem.

I have recommended the combination to friends in South Africa and they have been very impressed for the lighter plains game. My friend's 14-year-old daughter took a good eland — weighing well over 1,000lb — with a single shoulder shot, it went only a few feet.

I have seen a .30/06 blow up on a springbok, which is smaller than a sika, and fail to penetrate on an oryx, which can be up to 500lb in weight. Does that mean the 30/06 — which was Ernest Hemingway's favourite — was unsuitable? No, it is because of the bullet in question, which is no longer made as it was far too frangible. A heavier, tougher bullet could have been ideal in the circumstances.

The sika is a tough little beast but not very big. Some 6.5 x 55 ammunition, as loaded by Scandinavian ammunition companies, may be intended for European elk, which can be well over 1,000lb. A sika may be only 10% of that. What's good for one may not be good for the other.


The sika deer is a tough beast but its size must be taken into account when choosing ammo

It is not the calibre that matters, but bullet construction for all deerstalking in the UK. A bullet that expands immediately but holds together will work on everything. There are a number of good bullets, some old and some new, many are now bonded, that will do the job .

Savvas Toufexis, London

ORIGIN OF A LITTLE FIRST GUN

The article and picture about Charles Hartley's .410 (*Taking on the trickster of the sky*, 14 February) brought back a few happy memories.

In 1981 when I was 15, I successfully applied for my shotgun certificate. My first purchase was a 16-bore BLNE shotgun, which was visually identical to Charles's neat little .410, complete with side-clips and a semi pistol-grip stock.

I shot my first mallard, pochard, gadwall and hare with that gun the following season. Charles states his gun was of Belgian manufacture but the gunsmith who sold my 16-bore thought it was made in France; there was no maker's name but it certainly carried St Etienne proof marks.

M Lorne, by email

VAST SCALE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

I wholeheartedly agree with Davey's comments (*Stalking Diary*, 14 February). The climate change narrative has to be the biggest hoax of the century, and the world is being impoverished by it daily.

The obsession with CO^2 is utter nonsense, since without it there would be no vegetation, ergo no life on the planet. The climate has changed over millennia and will continue to do so — we humans are nothing in this vast universal scale.

Please continue — this is music to my ears and the more people who are made aware of it the better!

William Robinson, by email

SHOOTING TIMES
6 March

Roosting pigeons, fishing on the Okavango, the Great British Shooting Awards winners and even more from *The Countrymans' Weekly*

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STRONGER TOGETHER

It was with a great sense of disappointment that I learned of the demise of *The Countryman's Weekly* as a standalone publication. However, I can but thank Fieldsports Press for having the foresight to amalgamate this publication into the *Shooting Times*.

Having been an avid reader of *The Countryman's Weekly* for nigh on 40 years, I trust you will continue to publish the range of articles this publication had rightly been famed for and continue to utilise such writers as Penny Taylor, Sean Frain, Dave Sleight and Dave Platts to name but a few.

I read with much interest your editorial in which you spoke of a growing community (14 February) and I feel you now have a huge opportunity to bring together all fieldsports enthusiasts, be that the salmon fisherman of the great Scottish rivers or the driven grouse shooters alongside the Sunday morning ratters and the young lad out with a box of ferrets.

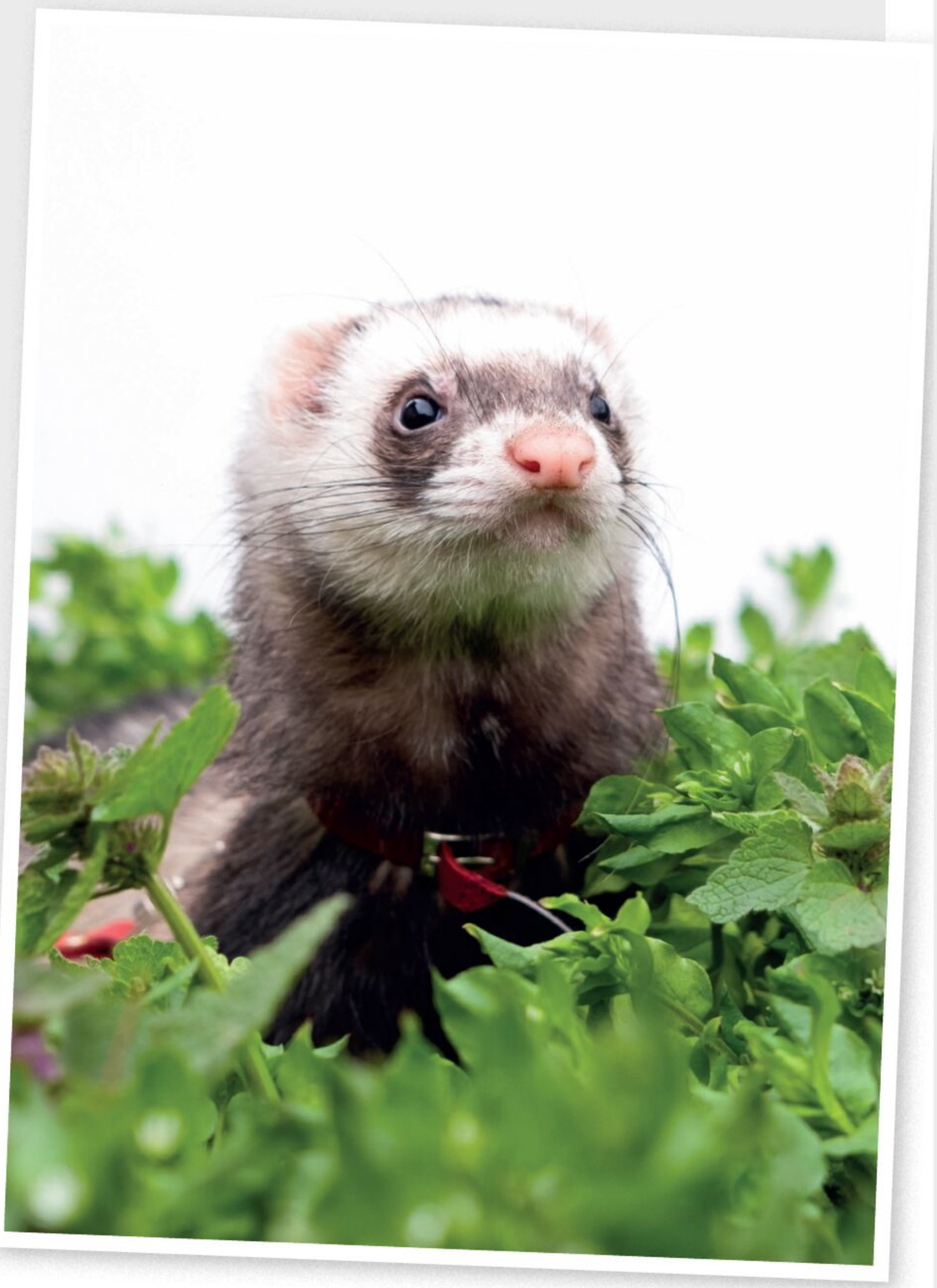
Writing this from Scotland where we are suffering huge legal change in the countryside and dealing with a government in the SNP/Green coalition that operates on ideology rather than pragmatism — which the Countryside Alliance, BASC and GWCT have found and are still finding out to their detriment — it is vital that the fieldsports community stand together. We must accept and respect each other's interests from the top down to the bottom up.

With a change in government likely in Westminster imminently, who knows what the future holds for any of us. But one thing is for sure, we are stronger together. So I think you have an opportunity to bring us all together under one "banner" and create that eclectic community which will hopefully be of benefit to all in the next 142 years. The ball, as they say, is in your court. Please don't drop it.

John Montgomery, by email

Editor responds: Thanks John. I have really enjoyed the discussions I have been having with The Countryman's Weekly*'s contributors, many of whom are keen as mustard to bring their range of articles into* Shooting Times*. Rachel Green has written her first column in this issue (*p47*) and we have introduced a new working dogs column too (*p55*). Regulars such as Ryan Lynch and Simon Everett are also involved in this issue. I am looking forward to working with other the contributors to bring you more of the hunting features that you love, united alongside the traditional* ST *content that has proved so popular for so long. Hopefully, as our community grows, we can show that we are as strong as ever.*

Writers from *The Countryman's Weekly* will cover everything from salmon fishing to the ferreting



NOT FASHIONABLE

What an excellent article by Davy Thomas (*Stalking Diary*, 14 February). Davy's opinion on climate change issues is one that is shared by many but never heard as it isn't media fashionable and certainly doesn't boost green politicians' votes or add to the "climate change" business bank balances and self-styled environmentalists' television careers.

Graham Jeffery, by email

» *Do you agree? Let us know*

"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***

GAMEBIRD GUIDANCE

This past season I have seen a few smaller shoots struggle a little in terms of keeping birds on site, mainly due to the abundance of natural food this year. The maize harvest was taken in later than usual, resulting in a plethora of feed in fields beyond the birds' woods. They take to this food source and, when they can't see home, continue to wander further away. On a larger shoot, with more resources, more structured feeding methods and full-time keepers, we don't see this happening as much.

Our vets are able to help mitigate this loss of birds by implementing changes to feeding systems, such as adding supplements that can make it more interesting to the birds. We also work to manage the transition from pellet to wheat consumption, which is integral to supporting the gut health of the birds and therefore improving mortality rates.

Pellet feed breaks down much more easily, so when they move to consuming wheat and corn, their guts will have to work harder and increase enzyme production to do so, adding stress and reducing their immunity to disease. By visiting multiple sites across the country, we are able to recognise trends and reduce the losses.

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

Mark Fitzer is the head gamekeeper on the famous Holkham estate in North Norfolk

Gamekeeper

Keepering is a trade like any other and it can only be learned and perfected by experience; by knowing what works and what doesn't

A grey partridge hen can lay up to 20 eggs — though usually she lays fewer — in a period spanning 20 days, a lengthy process of laying and incubation

There's an awful lot we take for granted in this job. Our workplaces are often in some of the most beautiful parts of the country; our houses are situated in locations a lot of people could only dream of and most of us enjoy going to work. It is something to be grateful for. But we must make sacrifices and doing this job is not always the bed of roses that people think.

Sometimes we take knowledge for granted and what we do as second nature, but occasionally it can seem difficult for people to grasp. A couple of days ago I was talking to a chap who has been around shooting for many years and is a great lover of country sports and the countryside in general. We were discussing grey partridges and the requirements they need to breed successfully in the wild.

By his own admission, this is a bird he has had little to do with and during the conversation he asked how many eggs a partridge would lay in the wild. I told him a grey hen can sometimes lay upwards of 20 eggs, though usually a little fewer. He paused then asked how many she lays a day. I explained it was usually one a day, with the odd day missed in between. He looked completely blank, as if I was talking in a foreign language. I recognised the look because it's the same one my young pointer gives me when I ask him to get in the back of the truck.

What was puzzling this man was why, if a bird lays, let's say, one egg a day for 20 days, there must be a 20-day gap between the first and the last egg that hatches. Now it was my turn to give the pointer's blank expression. The upshot of this was that my friend believed that once an egg was laid the incubation process started immediately. He struggled with the concept that an egg is like a seed and doesn't start to form life until warmth and moisture is continually applied.

Once I had explained the process in more detail, it was like a revelation to him. It reminded me that what I take for granted and presume everyone knows is not always the case. I guess when the boot is on the other foot, it's no different to me shouting for my son to come and sort my bloody phone when it is doing my head in. He just comes and taps a few keys and voilà, it's done — and I'm left wearing the pointer's blank expression again. I suppose it's every man to his trade.

That, of course, is what a keeper's job is — a trade. It's a trade you learn through experience, by time spent on the ground and analysing what works and what doesn't. A lot of what we do as gamekeepers is not rocket science and neither is it shrouded in mystery. In the conversation about grey partridges, we also spoke about creating a habitat for them. It's not some massive revolutionary change that is required, but we do need to show more sympathy to the needs of the birds. Food, insect life, nesting cover and winter cover — these are all provided by the right habitat.

Patchwork quilt

You can kill all the foxes you like but without the right habitat you will never support wild game. Years ago, the farmed environment didn't need specific habitat creation because it was already there. Weedy sugar beet, green stubbles, residual grass in the hedge bottoms formed a patchwork quilt of the farmed environment rather than a sterile monoculture. These days we must create the habitat.

Thankfully, once we have it in place, we have a foot on the ladder towards creating a favourable environment for wild game. But there will plenty more rungs on the ladder to climb.

"Years ago, the farmed environment didn't need specific habitat creation"

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Mike Swan

JOTTINGS FOR WILDFOWLERS

A CLASSIC SERIES REVISITED

The right to go fowling in February was hard fought, so it seems important to exercise that privilege, whatever the outcome

Looking back at my diaries, precious few ducks have fallen to my lot in February, but I still relish the opportunity to go to the tidal lands and celebrate the foreshore extension. My father's generation fought long and hard to defend February fowling, so it seems important to me to exercise that right.

One treasured memory from 20-odd years ago is sharing 14 February on the Medway with *Shooting Times* photographer Paul Quagliana. Our first two hours produced nothing and hardly a bird seen, and we were about to be flooded out of our mid-marsh hiding place. I toyed with packing up but decided it was unfair to bring Paul all that way just to help me tow the boat home for its summer refit, so I took off to a higher spot near the outer wall.

Soon after I settled, a shadow passed behind me and I spun round just in time to see a departing mallard and claw it down. The shot lifted some birds on the other side of the channel and moments later a cock wigeon approached. I hoped it might offer Paul a chance but it turned my way; there was nothing for it but to shoot.

While my dog Crumble was swimming after it, I spotted a hen pintail heading straight for Paul. As it climbed over the marsh edge, Paul rose and downed it in fine style. By the time the wigeon was retrieved, the pintail had drifted far out, so I decided to collect it by boat. Meanwhile, Paul dropped a second pintail, this time a cock.

When I handed him the cock bird an obviously jubilant Paul said: "My first ever pintail." I corrected him and said: "No, it's your second." As we settled again a mob of teal came through and a couple were added to the bag. By the time we headed for home, half an hour or so later, our joint total had risen to 14 birds — a fitting score for Valentine's Day.

This year's equivalent trip, with my regular fowling partner Robin Egerton, was on the 16th. Hiding in the same mid-marsh spot produced a similar lack of action, with hardly a bird moving. There were lots of brent and shelducks too, but nothing warrantable. The wigeon simply sat loafing on the tide edge and the few teal that moved joined them there.

"Later, our joint total had risen to 14 birds – a fitting score for Valentine's Day"

Consternation

"Never mind," thought I; there were lots of wigeon droppings on the salting tops, so I had high hopes of a shot or two at dusk, when they would surely come to feed. In the meantime, I played games with the curlew, whistling them in, then popping up out of my hide, much to their consternation. There was a more serious moment when five Canadas hoved into view, heading my way low over the marsh, but they all passed by well out of shot.

As the light faded, I decided to "stir the pot" and fired a shot in the direction of those teal and wigeon. It did not work. The wigeon merely lifted and dropped back and the teal split and went wide on either side of me. Then, a few moments later, a pair of mallard came straight at me and I missed them due to bad gun-mounting, bruising my biceps in the process.

A double miss at a teal finished my Medway season a few moments later and I still have a mildly sore arm to remind me of my incompetence. You can't win them all.

A Valentine's Day outing brings in the pintail and a cock and a hen bird are added to the bag

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

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Willie Athill

Country Diary

It's disrespectful to shoot woodcock if you are not going to eat them, but the best way to bring them down is with a beautiful little .410

There is a rule up here and that is if you want to shoot a woodcock you must want to take it home and eat it. You don't shoot a creature so beautiful and delicious as a woodcock then not eat it. That would be deeply disrespectful, wouldn't it?

Our woodcock are probably broken down into four tribes. The local stock that remains in England all year, Scandinavian, Baltic/Siberian and Ukrainian. They have slightly different plumage colour but eat the same worms, so all taste equally good. The only better table bird, of course, is a golden plover but that's another story.

In January there was a good build-up of woodcock throughout the land. It was not a "fall" as such which, as everyone knows, is brought on by either the bird's migratory urge or a freeze. When a freeze sets in that makes it impossible for the bird to get its beak into the ground, it can't feed and hence it flees south and west, to warmer, more generous woods and marshes.

You don't get a true fall of woodcock until migration begins or a freeze sets in so they can't feed

Unshot

The number of January birds this year had been building up over three moons and a hard winter in Scandinavia. Those birds were in top physical condition and pretty well unshot for two reasons. First, small local shoots don't shoot woodcock because they don't like eating them, they feel sorry for them, and why shoot a little wader when you can kill 100 fat low pheasants?

The other reason is that on the bigger estates the owners are generally very good, proper countrymen who know how to leave woodcock alone until they are really "in", then you get stuck in and get a feed. So we had a fine January of seeing good numbers of woodcock.

One thing that is really fun is the use of small calibres when shooting woodcock — .410 is the way to go. If you miss the bird, it's a miss. You don't take long shots, you can carry a day's ammunition in a couple of pockets or one small bag. You stand close to the wood, you hardly need ear defenders and the gun kills well. It's a beautiful little firearm.

I was brought up shooting woodcock using a single-barrel, hammer .410. My first woodcock was on Boxing Day, a few days before my ninth birthday and I was really excited. My ancient tweeded and craggy-nosed host, who smelled slightly of urine, sought me out at lunch and handed me the bird that I had shot, cradled in his great hands. He showed me how to find its pin feathers, two beautiful stiff little feathers that are to this day in my gamebook.

"I was so over the moon about shooting the woodcock that I longed for another"

I was so over the moon about this that I longed for another. On the first drive after lunch we were walking-up an old wood, hanging on the slope overlooking the sea. The bottom of the wood was warm and thick with bracken. We kept in line with commands from the middle.

"Hold up on the left, come up on the right! Steady. Keep a good line." Shots were fired forward and back and as we neared the standing Guns a whistle was blown for no more shooting. A woodcock got up and "*pop*" — I had a go at it.

"Who fired that shot?" was bellowed down the line.

"Me, Sir," I admitted.

"Put your gun up, boy, unload," roared my marvellous host. "You know the way home." Off I trudged, chastened, for an early tea with aunt Pam.

Willie Athill has lived on the North Norfolk coast all his life. He now farms oyster and seaweed beds.

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

Stalking Diary

As spring advances, it's time for the roe doe cull and this provides a chance to look over the bucks ready for the season to start on 1 April

There's been a slight change in the air throughout February. As the days begin to draw out and the weather remains mild, crops and vegetation are starting to put on a spring-like growth. Although winter can still have a sting in the tail, for the meantime, the deer are starting to make themselves obvious. The roe are certainly becoming more visible. This will help with the end-of-season doe cull as we target the older does to maintain a healthy number of early middle-aged and mature females.

The maize game covers will soon be cut, offering some guaranteed areas to watch over for all the deer, along with the other wildlife that will help to clear up the remaining cobs within a few days. As the roe become more active throughout the end of the winter, they will usually be grouped up with others from their locality.

The mothers will still have their kids with them. In addition to the family group will be the doe and buck kids from previous seasons and older bucks that group together for safety in numbers. They will gather on fields that offer good shelter, visibility to spot predators and, perhaps most importantly, a good food source.

When the roe come together in larger groups, they are easier to spot in East Anglia's big fields

Antlers

Although there are more eyes and ears to detect you, I find stalking easier when roe are in these larger groups, mainly because they are obvious to find in our big East Anglian fields. While culling does at this time of year, I also look over the bucks in the group. Their antlers, covered in velvet, still have some growing to do but very old individuals may be almost fully grown.

Although the velvet makes the antlers look bigger than they will be when clean, it's a good time to examine the males and make mental or physical notes on which ones to take once the buck season is open from 1 April.

The larger groups of roe can attract attention from landowners and farmers, who will be worried about the potential for crop damage from the higher numbers being located in one spot. While these roe will have an impact to some degree, unless in extremely high numbers most would accept that the roe do little measurable damage to crops compared with other animals such as hares, rabbits and pigeons. Considering all this, quite frequently on closer inspection a high percentage of the animals in these larger groups will be bucks and therefore off limits until the start of their season.

"The roe do little damage to crops compared to hares, rabbits and pigeons"

As our snowdrops finish flowering, the wild primroses are starting their display of yellow though the woods. We also have some wild daffodils that are already well up. When March comes along, dog's mercury will be starting to cover the woodland floor, which will make the muntjac more easily visible as their brown winter coat contrasts against all the greenery.

It's at this time of year that we have a final push on these little deer to try and get a few more into the larder. Before the muntjac go off to the game dealer, we are now having to grade them for shot placement and retaining anything the dealer won't take due to shoulder damage.

We clearly can't waste the high-quality meat that remains on the rest of the carcass so, like many others in the deerstalking community, we have found one of the ways to move these carcasses on is by selling them directly to the consumer via Facebook groups or to local people who are willing to skin and process the meat themselves.

While this may not be a practical long-term solution for the numbers of muntjac we cull, it at least gives us another option when the estate freezers are full. It also offers willing members of the public quality meat at an affordable price.

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

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Jeremy Hobson is an experienced keeper, shoot host and fisherman

Sporting Life

Badges on a cap or lapel show you belong to a club, whether you're an adult or child

Groucho Marx famously remarked: "I don't care to belong to any club that would accept me as a member."

That aside, there's no doubt that many involved in fieldsports or other rural activities are members of a club of some description, whether it is connected to game or clay shooting, gamekeeping, wildfowling, the local hunt or even the village gardening society. Belonging to any such organisation generally has very real value, even if it's something as simple as the benefits of cheaper insurance or expert advice from those with experience in a particular field.

Over the years, however, not all groups have been formed with practicality in mind. The infamous Hellfire Clubs of Dublin and Buckinghamshire reached their (most debauched) height in the 1700s and were, according to clergyman, poet and satirist Jonathan Swift, full of "monsters, blasphemers and bacchanalians".

Their members were not alone in being intent solely on pleasurable excess. There are at least two hunt clubs that never had any affiliation with a pack of hounds. One of them, as noted by Peter Holt in his book *The Keen Foxhunter's Miscellany*, was the Shrewsbury Hunt Club, founded in 1769. The nearest that particular club ever came to such association in those days was when, dressed in traditional hunt evening wear, they regularly organised a "hunt ball", the whole point of which was simply to eat, drink and have a riotously good time.

Enticing

Had I been around in 1827, it would have been impossible not to have been intrigued by the advertisement posted in a November issue of *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, which gave notice of pugilist and fight promoter Harry Holt's Bacchanalian Festival Club held at the Golden Cross every Thursday evening. Perhaps the prospect of that particular soirée might have been sufficiently enticing to have piqued Groucho Marx's interest and had him rushing to apply for membership.

There are various ways of showing that we belong to a particular club — and I'm not talking here of secret handshakes or using coded sentences in order to identify fellow members.

Unwilling to draw attention from those who might disapprove of our chosen sport, few nowadays display stickers appertaining to any fieldsports organisations in the windscreens of their vehicles. Many do, however, continue to wear a badge in the lapel of a jacket, or pinned on a cap or hat.

"The Hellfire Clubs were, according to Jonathan Swift, full of bacchanalians"

Those of us of a certain age might well own both a Wildfowlers' Association of Great Britain and Ireland (WAGBI) badge and one of that into which it morphed, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC). Similarly, I'm sure some still possess a British Field Sports Society (BFFS) badge from the days before the Countryside Alliance.

Some make a hobby of collecting badges and have done so since childhood. If my school playground was typical then enamelled metal examples of all kinds were frequently bartered and swapped.

When it comes to collating and displaying those badges associated with all aspects of sporting life, judging from the caps and lapels adorned with such things that I've seen at various country shows and game fairs, nothing much changes as children become adults.

Irrespective of whether or not we choose to wear a badge to show allegiance to any organisation, it is perhaps as well to bear in mind that being a member of a club or society is very far from a modern development. As far back as cave-dwelling days, our ancestors improved their chances of survival by forming groups and cooperating together in order to share skills in hunting, fishing and farming.

To mark the passing seasons and successful harvest, they too celebrated with dancing and bacchanalian excess in that they were then not much different from those attending meetings of the 18th-century Hellfire Clubs or even some modern-day hunt balls.

Some readers still hold the badge of WAGBI, formed by Stanley Duncan, the father of wildfowling

Jeremy Hobson *was a gamekeeper for more than 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.*

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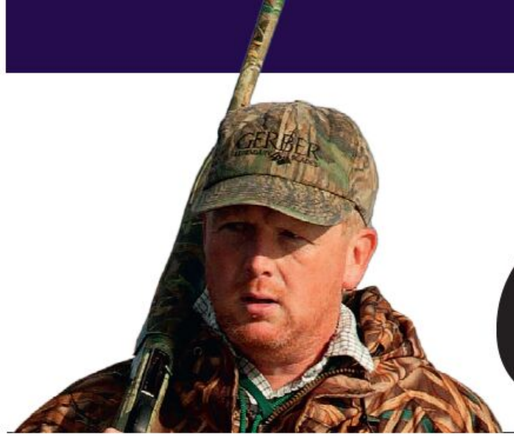

On the Campaign Trail

Tim Bonner

There is an illicit feeling about those days in February when you can shoot below the high-water mark – all you need is a dog and a gun

February is a challenging month, not only because a couple of decades ago I committed to dry February, which has become an annual event. As a month it is also seriously lacking in other distractions. A bit of rugby and racing perhaps, but the climax of the Six Nations and Cheltenham's epic festival are to come.

There is, however, a little-known secret that keeps some of us amused for the first three weeks of February. If you shoot below the high-water mark, there is an extension to the season for ducks and geese until the 20th. And while the sport can be tough, it does feel a bit like a surreptitious sick day or shooting on a Monday. A little bit naughty, but definitely very nice.

By February there are plenty of educated ducks on the Essex estuary where I mostly shoot. The wigeon in particular can be very decoy-shy. That can make putting a bag together challenging, but a late-season storm or hard frost can even the odds.

A free morning, a high tide due after sunrise and the right conditions for a very happy fowler

Sharp little springer

The first day I can honestly say I felt like a wildfowler came in the February of my second season shooting those marshes. I had come from North Devon where I had hunted woodcock, snipe and pheasants with a sharp little springer and a 16-bore. The vast muddy expanses of the Essex estuaries could not have been more different and soon there was a semi-automatic in the gun cabinet and the dog was wrapped in a neoprene coat.

I spent 18 months as an apprentice to two great and generous fowlers who taught me the marshes and the tides, and crucial lessons such as how to rig decoys and not to drown. Gradually I was signed off on the club's marshes and allowed out by myself. The results were not great, but I learned and put a few duck in the bag.

One of the great frustrations of wildfowling for those of us with the unfortunate necessity of a job and the additional demands of a family are that the best conditions very rarely align around commutes, meetings or a five-year-old's birthday party.

In that February, however, the stars and more importantly the tides and weather did align. I had a free morning, a high tide was due after sunrise and the forecast was for a gale from the west. One of my mentors had shown me a creek on a small triangular marsh that seemed like the ideal spot and he advised me to go light on the decoys and rely on the fact that ducks would be heading in for shelter.

It was one of those classic mornings when you have to brace yourself as you cross the seawall and the force of the wind hits you. I put my three pairs of decoys into the flooding tide and settled down with my back to the creek edge with a net hide in front, confident that the morning tide would not push us out.

Light came from the east and with it wigeon. The larger groups pushed on up the estuary or braved the waves in the main channel. Single birds and pairs, however, hugged the tide edge and soon a cock came perfectly down the creek and dropped dead to a single shot. Almost before the spaniel had time to deal with that one, another came on exactly the same line and again dropped among the decoys.

There was an unfortunate incident with a pair that evaded three shots from the semi-auto, but two more singles came in on the same tack and were added to the bag.

Four wigeon were a bonanza but there was more as teal started to drop into the creek after the turn of the tide, as often happens on this marsh. The shooting was not quite a clinical as earlier, but the spaniel had three more ducks to pick and it was a very happy wildfowler who crossed back over the seawall after a fine morning of February sport.

"Four wigeon were a bonanza but there was more as teal started to drop in"

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

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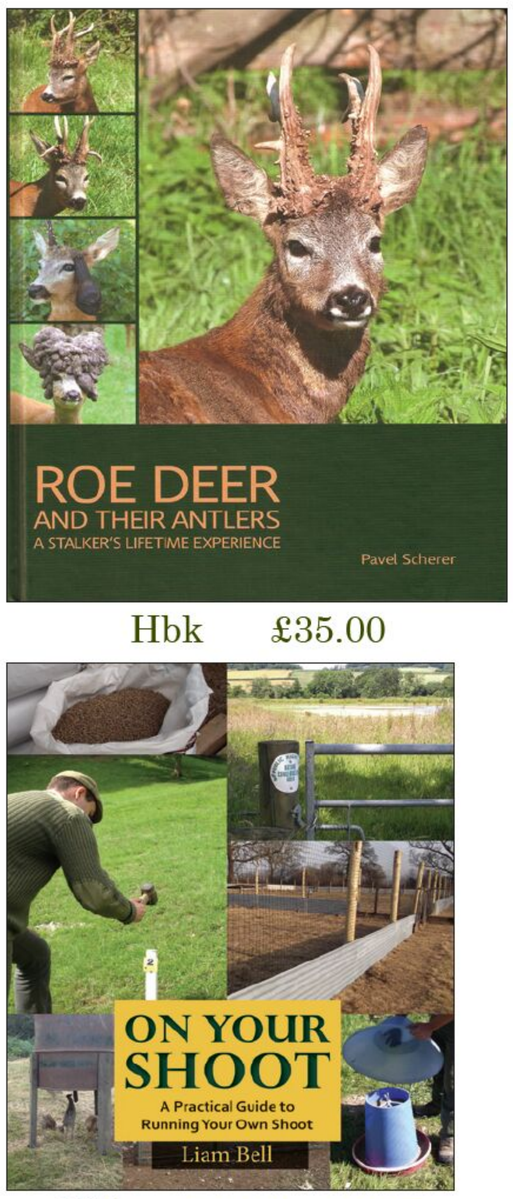

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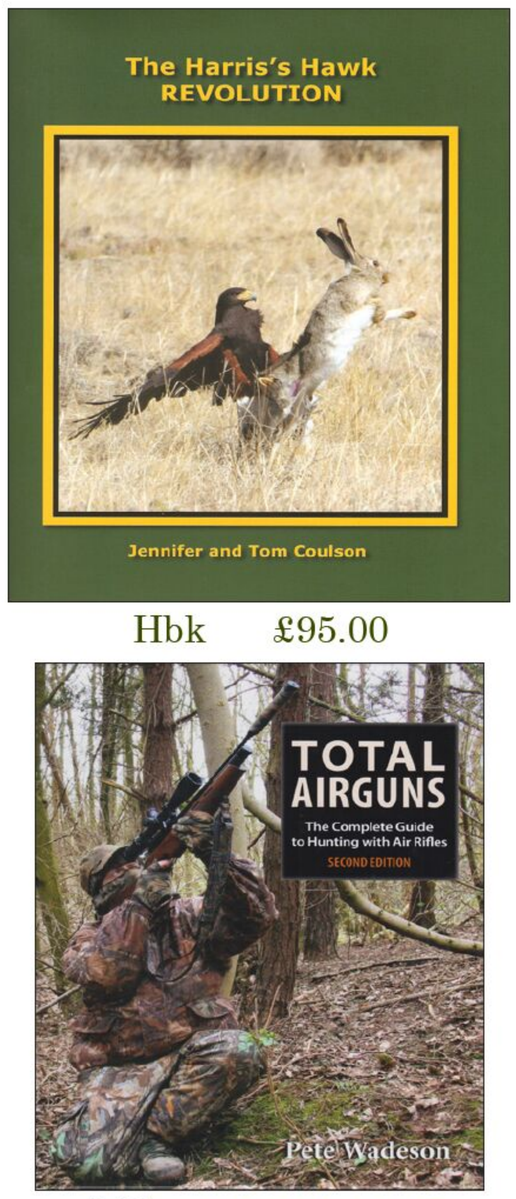

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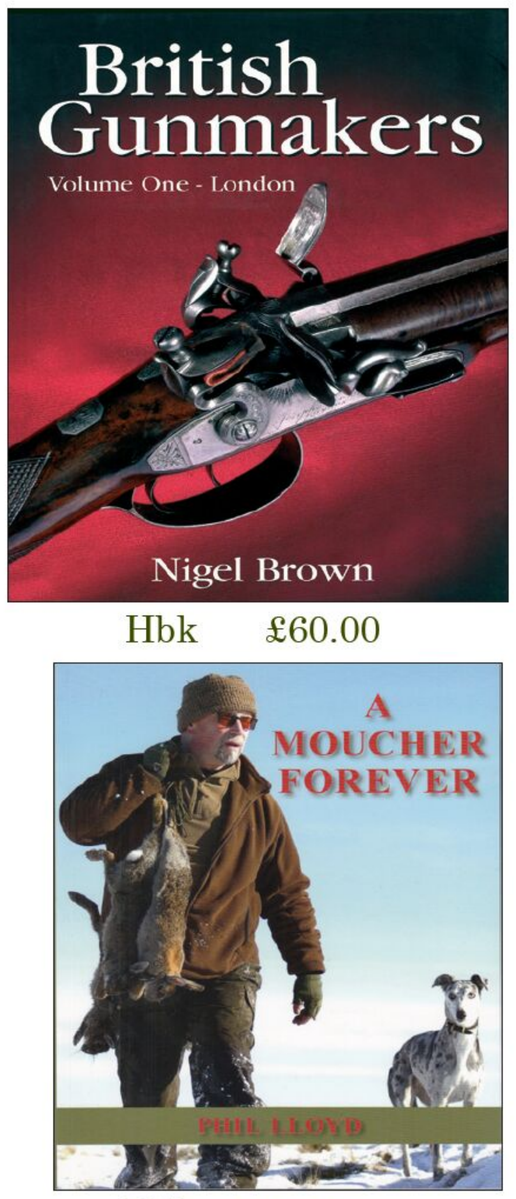

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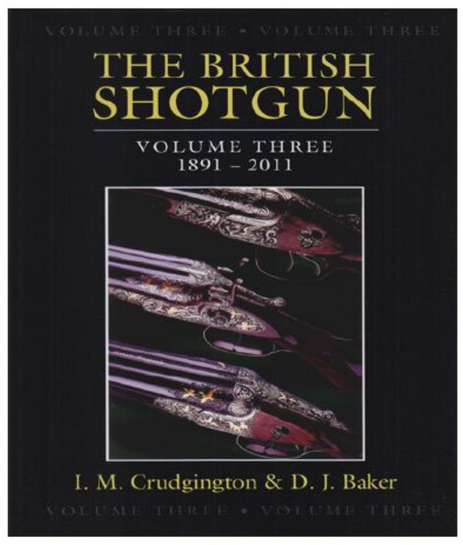

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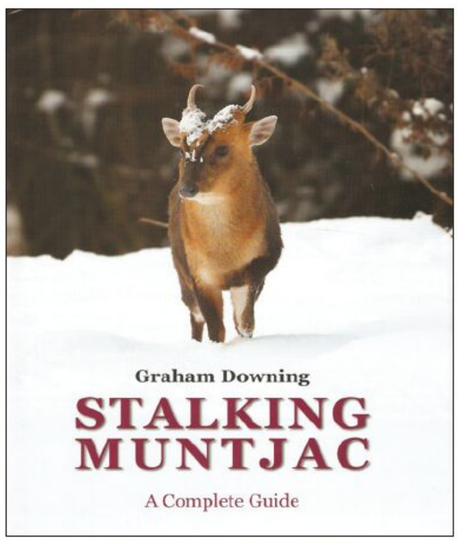

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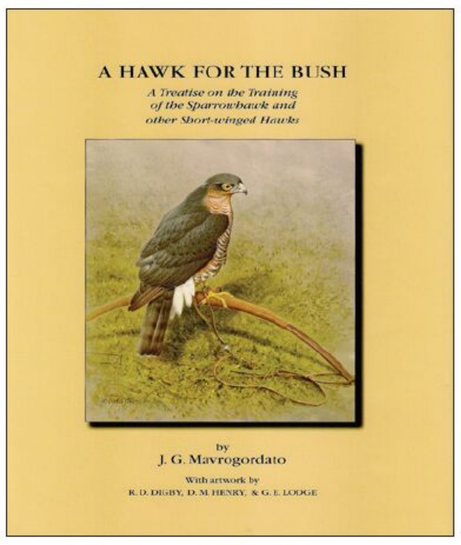

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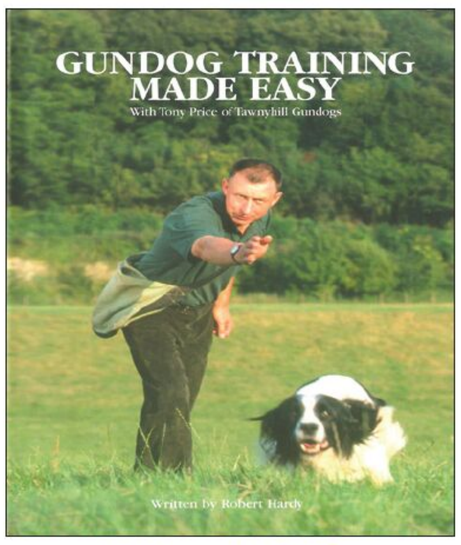

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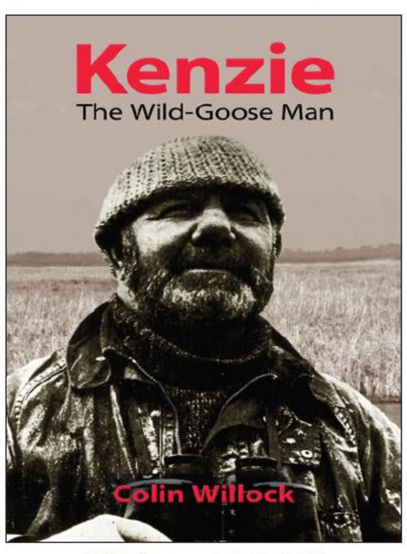

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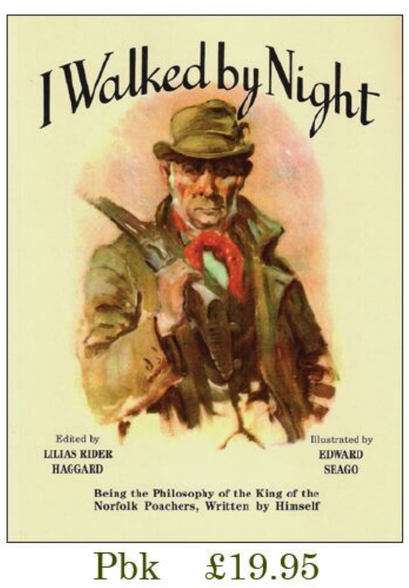

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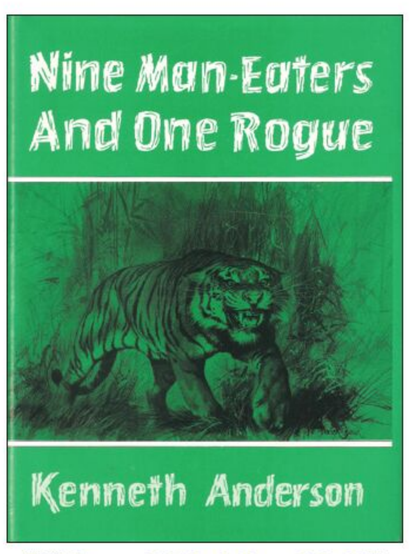

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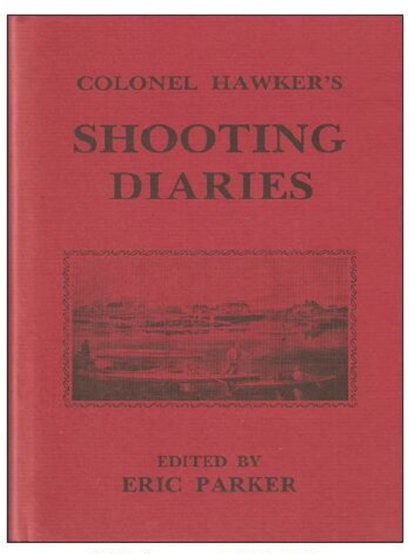

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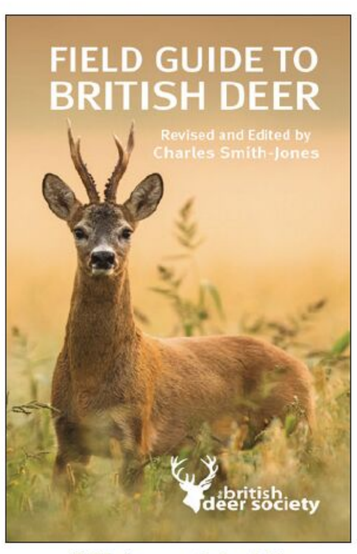

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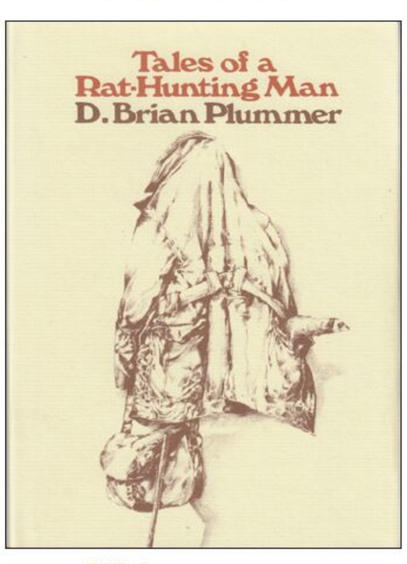

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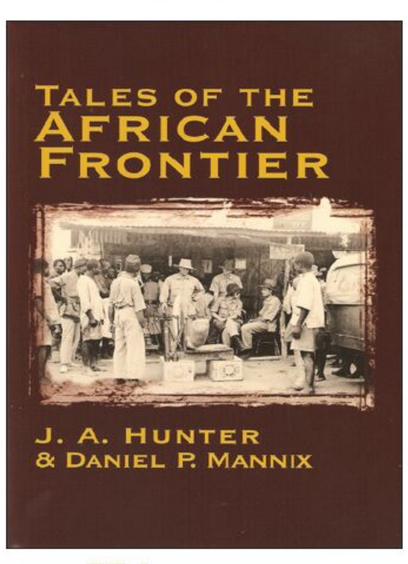

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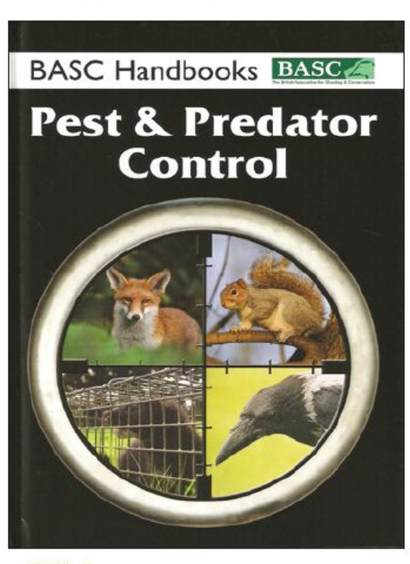

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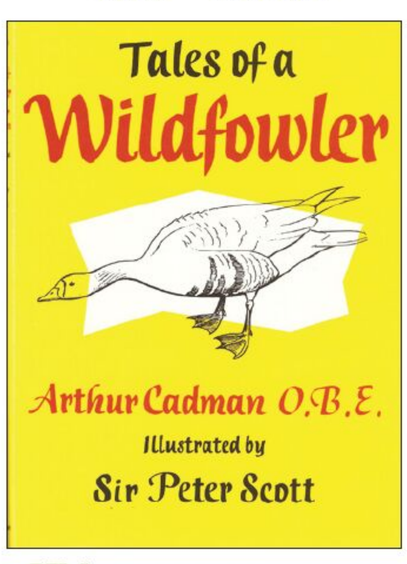

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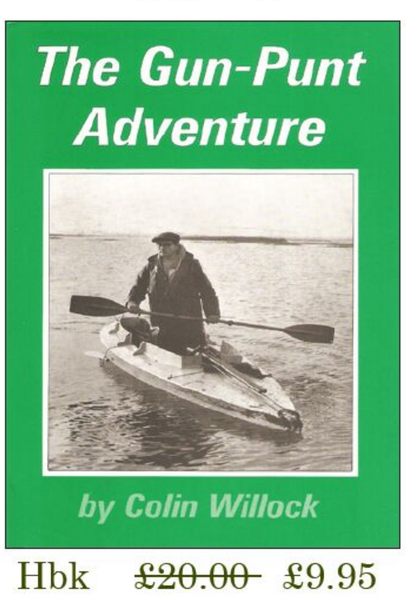

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It’s a win-win for all birds

At Audley End, the emphasis is on doing everything right, which includes the habitats for all kinds of creatures, not only game

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY RICHARD FAULKS

Host Nick Herbert sits on a shooting stick as guest John Stevenson takes on a bird

18+

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Driven shooting

Getting warmed up on one of Audley End Shoot's 30 drives

Audley End House and Estate sits in north-west Essex's gently rolling countryside close to the town of Saffron Walden. The 17th-century Jacobean house could not be more perfectly positioned in the River Cam valley and it makes the perfect backdrop for a real gem of a shoot. It's a "proper shoot" for Guns who understand the dedication that goes into putting on a full day's entertainment in a relaxed and efficient manner, while presenting challenging, sporting birds.

The Guns will also appreciate the efforts made to enhance the countryside for all manner of species of bird, including a growing population of grey partridges. The shoot covers roughly 4,000 acres, of which 350 are mature woodland. Headkeeper Geoff Garrod has 30 drives to choose from, including 12 dedicated partridge drives.

He says he can easily put on four shoot days in a row without having to visit any of the drives twice, although this shoot is not under such pressure. The estate runs roughly 30 days per season – a mixture of syndicate, family and let days – and the bags aren't excessive. A 200-bird day is fairly standard but smaller days can be catered for, especially towards the end of the season.

Andrew Stevenson takes a breather

"At the end of the day, the Guns are all given packs of oven-ready fresh game"

The shoot's ethos is to provide great sport, aim for quality over quantity and keep a good balance on the estate for shooting, wildlife and farming. They want the shoot to enhance the landscape's flora and fauna rather than dominate it.

A good example of this can be seen in the 30 acres of coverstrips. Geoff has experimented with most options when it comes to the covers, but has decided that maize works best for the shooting. Alongside it the estate drills a similar amount of annual wild bird mix, which is in one of the farm's schemes. These plots encourage and feed all manner of hedgerow and songbirds plus the grey partridges. The plots are then ploughed in and redrilled in May for the next season. It's a win-win for both the gamebirds and smaller bird species.

Each shoot day starts with the Guns arriving at the comfortable shoot-room on the farm at 8.45am for coffee and biscuits. They then draw pegs and take the shoot day briefing from Geoff and Tom White. They aim to get everybody on the Gun bus by 9.20am for the first drive. Typically, they will shoot three drives in the morning then stop for drinks and lunch – provided by Audley End's chef Trevor Barwood – in the field.

The Guns will have two more drives after the break. Geoff likes to have these completed for roughly 2.30pm in the unlikely event that an extra drive is needed to make the bag. Then it's back to the shoot-room for a two- or three-course meal that the Guns will have ordered when they booked the shoot day.

"Encouragingly, we've been serving more and more game for these meals, mostly partridge or pheasant crowns," said Geoff, and this is a good sign. All the shot game

John Preece was shooting well with his 28-bore

The Guns wait on the peg for the birds to come over

gets processed by Geoff and his team on-site and, at the end of the day, the Guns are given packs of oven-ready fresh game. The remainder goes to local restaurants, butchers and pubs, which is the way it should be.

I visited on a 100-bird day, when it was bright and frosty with a strengthening wind from the south-west. It also happened to be the penultimate day of the season for the estate. It had been taken by Nick Herbert to repay invitations he'd been lucky enough to receive throughout the season, and to give his son Charlie a day on the peg. Nick has been taking days at Audley End for the past 10 years or more. "It's tricky to get a day here," he noted. "When you get a regular day, you make sure you keep it." That statement tells you a great deal about the shoot.

White pheasants

Although this was a 100-bird day, there were still the usual five drives planned to make sure the guests were given a full day's sport. Geoff knew this was an experienced team who would be selective about the birds they shot. At the earlier shoot briefing the Guns were warned about white pheasants. Whoever shot one would not have to pay a £10 fine – but the rest of the team would.

The money raised would go to Cure Parkinson's (cureparkinsons.org.uk), a charity that is close to the heart of estate owner Louise Newman. The Guns privately decided they'd have a little fun at Geoff's expense with this proposition. They all agreed to pretend not to see any white pheasants and would all pay the fine anyway at the end of the day.

The first drive was Gravel Pit, which showed some nice birds, but it's a drive that has to be done to load up the second drive, Brands Hill. More interestingly, though, we were able to see three white pheasants walking up a hedgerow into the upcoming drive. Geoff was at the top of the hill for round two, flagging birds and directing the beating line. He had a very clear view of all the birds leaving the wood and it wasn't hard for him to spot the three white pheasants as they lifted and flew over the high numbers in the line. Not a single shot was fired at them.

After the drive when the pickers-up had done their work, questions were asked of the Guns – in a lighthearted manner – about whether anybody had spotted the three white birds. The Guns remained tight-lipped.

Fighting fit

Railway Cover was a short drive away in the Gun bus and it's one of the estate's dedicated partridge drives. By now the wind had picked up and the clearly visible cover on top ↠

All the drives present some challenging, sporting birds

of the hill was a great contrast to the previous two woodland drives. It was clear the partridges would be coming downwind towards the Guns and at that time of year they are fighting fit. They didn't disappoint, which left the Guns in good spirits for their delicious field lunch.

Fantastic finale

After lunch was Charles's, another woodland drive that loads up possibly one of the best pheasant drives on the entire the estate– Henry Seymour Drive, which is named in honour of the late 9th Baron Braybrooke. This cherry plantation, which was planted 30 years ago, is on top of a hill with a belt of mature trees that run down the hill from it. The drive was a fantastic finale, with a good number of fit and hard-flying pheasants put over the Guns.

I stood with host Nick and his guest John Preece, who was shooting with his long-barrelled 28-bore. We witnessed him shooting the bird of the day – a high, sliding hen hit centre pattern. I remember watching John shoulder his gun when he saw the bird coming and I thought, good luck with that with a 28-bore… I'm happy to say I stand corrected. I later learned that John has shot clays for England and was an open winner, which explains his deadly accuracy.

We were soon back to the shoot-room for dinner and to sort out the sweepstakes. The bag for the day was 113 – 81 pheasants and 32 partridges – and 356 shots in total. All winnings from the sweep were generously donated to the National Gamekeepers' Organisation. There were more questions asked about the three white pheasants that had crossed the line, but the matter was swiftly settled before the meal when the money was handed over.

Afterwards, Geoff told me it has been a strong sporting season for him and underkeeper Will Webb. "Will joined me nine months ago and has hit the ground running and I can't praise him highly enough," he summarised. "It was a slightly slow start and it took a while to sell a couple of early days in September, but it came back strong and it was pretty easy to get the bag from then on.

"The birds have flown exceptionally well and there have only been a couple of days when the wind and weather have made life difficult. But that's the same for every shoot. I'd say that 2023-24 has been very good for us."

Geoff loves the shooting season and says if you've put in the hard work over the summer and autumn it will pay dividends. He finds it immensely rewarding and loves entertaining guests. "We pride ourselves on giving full value to the teams of Guns who come to shoot here," he confirmed.

Nick Herbert backed up Geoff's thoughts and added: "It's been a brilliant day. When you come here it does exactly what it says on the box – they provide a really good day, good hospitality, good banter, great birds and everyone enjoys it."

Attention to detail

He also praised Geoff for what he did so well. "It's his attention to detail. It's the little things – the lunch bag, not having to walk far and not having to wait too long, he just knows what we want. If you're looking for an all-round shoot where everything is done properly – you can shoot more birds, you can shoot cheaper birds, you can shoot higher, lower birds, more expensive birds, but you get a good mix of everything here."

I'd agree strongly with the comments from Nick. There's nothing wrong with this shoot and there is a great deal that is right.

For more information about the shoot visit: ***audleyendestate.co.uk***

A picking-up dog collects one of the 113 birds in the final bag — 81 pheasants and 32 partridges

"You can shoot higher or lower birds or cheaper birds but here you get a good mix"

Headkeeper Geoff Garrod keeps an expert eye on proceedings

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All the gear but sadly no deer

There are deer aplenty and an experienced team on their trail but sometimes things don't go to plan, says Charles Hartley

Driving to Richard's farm, my mind played through the snapshots of a summer evening spent at the same spot. I had enjoyed a wonderful few hours in a high seat admiring herds of mighty fallow, my first muntjac and huge temptation from the bounty of finely crowned roebucks. Now I was returning for more.

A roads funnelled into country lanes and as I pulled up, the other Guns were already there. I had never stalked as a group before and I recalled Henry Tegner's book *The Roe Deer*, written when blocks of woodland were beaten to riflemen like a pheasant drive.

I moved to a nearby field margin as the rest of the team swung around the farm, nestling a kilometre above me behind an abandoned World War II bunker, which crumbled slowly into the landscape after decades of machinegun-like rain. The squadron decanted into wood-lined fields, while Richard, acting as tank commander, scoped the ground ahead to direct his team – Gary, Max and Martin with his lad.

Suddenly my phone sprang to life, with Richard's familiar voice and a message of hope: "Charlie, there's a group of roe just below you."

The ground ahead of me held no cover and fell away on a constant curve, so with every step more field rolled into view. As I pressed binoculars to my eyes, a biting wind swept across my position, carrying icy raindrops. The lenses filled with water and, with my obscured view, I missed the telltale ear tops. As I made one step too many, a set of eyes noted my movement and sent the group of three trotting urgently to my left, in the hope of getting my wind.

Dropping to a crouch, I backtracked and quickly pushed to the far boundary of the field, out of view and downwind of the worried group. Creeping down this margin I worked towards a small spinney, freezing after catching movement

PHILIP MURPHY

between the grey trunks. I slowly readied my sticks and waited for the deer to show. With only does in season and bucks missing their crowns, a good view would be needed before taking a shot.

Strange malformation

As the beast stepped into full view, no tush was needed to sex this buck. On his head sat a strange mounded malformation, like a ball of kneaded dough slapped between his ears. I stood for a moment wondering what to do. Other than his strange uncast head, he looked perfectly healthy so I let him go. Since then, I have come to think this was likely a mild example of perruque head, a rare growth and one to keep an eye on as the months roll by.

He trotted on to join the group I had wished to flank, which were

Some beasts are easier to sex than others; Charles soon spots a fine fallow buck in the next field

Charles Hartley scans for deer but the biting wind means they soon catch his scent

now calm and feeding within the centre of the field. With all four deer in view I went prone to try to pick a doe from their midst. And there she was, elegant as roe always are. I watched for some time, but she never presented a shot, hiding within her friends while showing me nothing but her back. Eventually the group moved off, just as a call came in from the commander on the ridge: "Two more in the long grass at the field top."

Now working my way up the field to the long grass, I stopped every few metres to glass the mass of waving yellow stalks, but struggled to pick out the deer from my low position. Finally at its edge, I leaned against the wood fence and looked hard through the grass, but still saw nothing.

Deciding they must have gone I climbed atop the fence and froze, with my legs dangling awkwardly

"I climbed atop the fence and froze, with my legs dangling awkwardly on each side"

One roe buck steps into view sporting a strange mounded malformation on his head, most likely an example of a perruque growth

on each side, as there was a pair of ears and eyes pointing directly at me. By some miracle the animal had not recognised my form, but I was starting to shake as the standoff lengthened.

Just as I felt I would have to give up, a flipper-flap of feet came down a nearby lane as a morning jogger disturbed the scene. The deer turned for a moment, but just as I was about to drop, the head fixed on me once again. Holding this new position felt worse than the last, until a thunderous crash of a rifle blasted from the other side of the hill, taking all attention and allowing me to drop into the thick grass.

Crawling on my belly another 15 yards to gain a better firing ↠

position, I slowly rose on to my sticks. I could see the couched deer, but still needed a clear identification of sex.

A 40-minute standoff ensued and, as the minutes ticked by, I started making sounds to try to get the deer to stand. At first, they were natural sounds, leading to imitations of disgruntled deer and ending in a rendition of *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* because Christmas had just passed and I was desperate.

"The buck proudly held a huge set of fingered paddles"

The deer stood with an expression of utter disgust and, after all that, she was a he. As I waved him off, out of nowhere came a train of three fallow. A large buck led the group holding proudly above his head a huge set of fingered paddles and sending a rush of adrenalin surging as I hoped for a momentary stop. Their pace never ceased and they were gone as quickly as they arrived.

Our group met up once again. Although there were plenty of deer and a shot had been fired, but the bag remained empty. But there was still excitement in the air and the group talked through the morning gone by and what the afternoon may hold.

With another wood to explore the group split into four, Max and Martin heading for the high seats, while Gary began a long stalk through the wood. As this began, Richard and I drove to the very tip of the wood where Gary's mission would end. Anything he saw he could stalk, but anything that saw him first might just break cover and end up in front of another Gun.

Excited chatter

Full of excited chatter, Richard and I did not enter the field as quietly as we might hvae done and quickly shifted three young roe. He aimed me towards a high seat that lay half a mile away and warned I would see more deer on my way there.

Stopping, I glassed the roe vanishing into a thicket then swung the binos further through the patchwork of hedgerows to see fallow, with their barcode-like rears, squeezing through a hedge. Then my heart skipped as one field away stood a fine fallow buck with a doe,

completely oblivious to my existence. I clung to the hedge line that joined the field where they stood only 30 yards from the margin.

In a squatted run I squelched through a waterlogged field to close the gap, watching with stifled breath as the branch-like antlers dipped out of view. Once at the hedge, my mind worked overtime, knowing they were on the other side. Readying my rifle, I peered through only to see my deer 150 yards up the field, still unaware of my presence but feeding and moving at such a rate that I was losing ground.

Pushing through the hedge I made a hasty stalk up the field, knowing if they made it to the wood beyond my chance was gone. When I got within range, I needed to flank them to make sure of a safe backstop. With this the doe made me and both deer set off in a full gallop. This last image of my first stalked fallow remains at the back of my mind, resurfacing like a whale.

Muntjac

I sat alone in my high seat, listening to distant shots from the rest of the team. Soon Gary emerged from the wood, kindly offering to guide me into the trees for a last-chance muntjac. He was a seasoned stalker, with all the gear and the experience to match. I followed him through the leaf litter, pausing to glass the trees and thickets as he used his thermal spotter.

"There's a heat signature in the brambles below," he murmured.

We slowly picked our way closer to a stout little muntjac, hidden almost completely within the tangle of brambles. Starting to run out of time, we peeped a call to try to bring him into the open and just as he started to move, a beautiful roe doe ghosted between us and him. She had no idea we were there, stopping and standing broadside, presenting the easiest of shots.

But my safety remained on, as although I had worked hard for a roe doe earlier without success, it did not feel right after she had simply stumbled into danger. Content, we watched her leave. Soon, after a clumsy step too far from me, she was followed by the fleeing tail of the muntjac.

The day felt over, but we still worked quietly through the trees until Gary stopped. With a wild look in his eyes, he whispered: "There's a good buck behind this beech." He was right, but the cheeky West Countryman was referring to the wonderful old muntjac he had shot an hour earlier, having left it here to pick on his return. The day ended with Gary's old boy and Max felling a fine fallow doe.

And although I was empty-handed, it still felt like a red-letter day with my first fallow stalk and a roe doe left for another day.

Charles's stalking kit

- **Rifle: Bergara B14**
  artemisoutdoorsuk.co.uk
- **Scope: Schmidt & Bender Klassik 8x56**
  schmidtundbender.de/en/
- **Binos: Minox HG 8x43**
  minox.com/uk/hunting/
- **Ammo: Federal Fusion 150-gr .308 Win**
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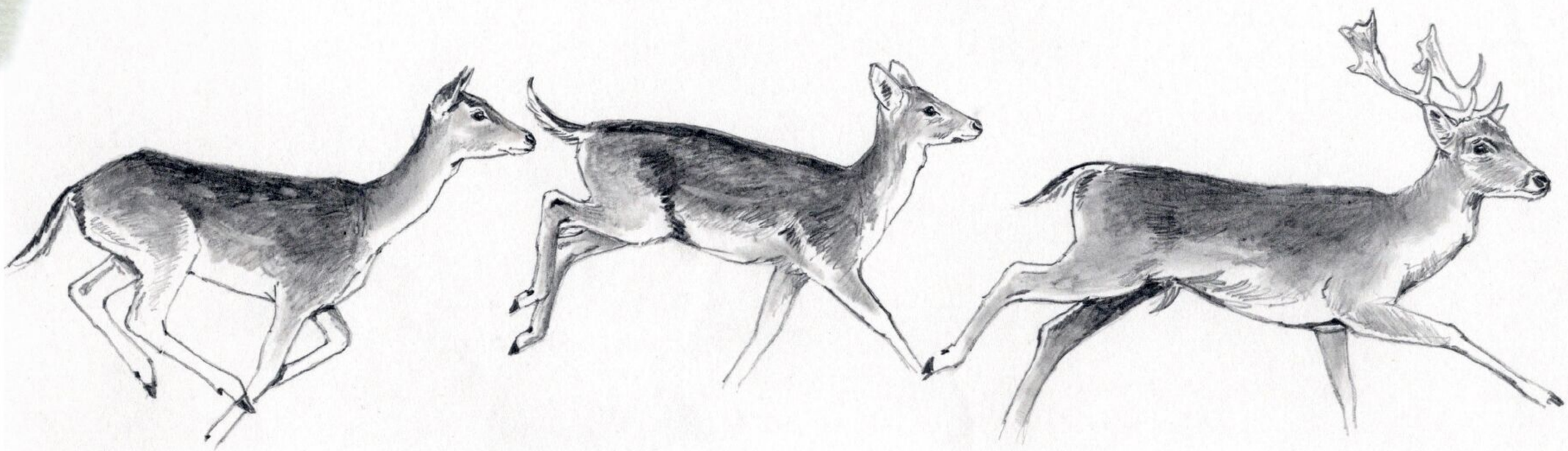

Out of nowhere comes a train of three fallow, led by a large buck carrying impressive headgear

Alone in the high seat, Charles can hear shots coming from within the forest, but no deer come into range

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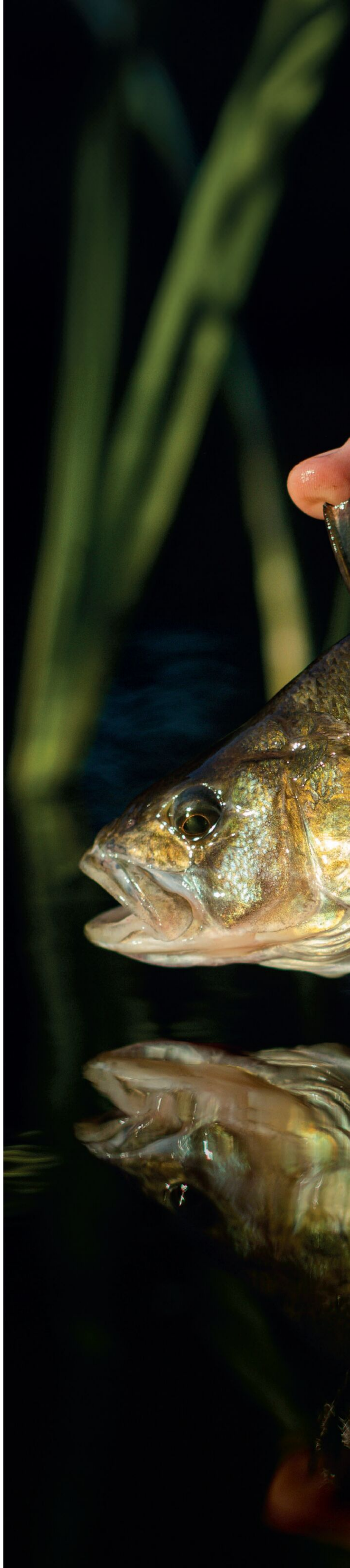
Callum often takes his young son, Xavier, fishing with him

Cast it out then reel it back in

March is a phenomenal month for light lure fishing so find a canal or lake, cast out your line and wait for the big perch to come

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY CALLUM MCINERNY-RILEY



ISTOCK

Now is the perfect time to go in search of big perch in lakes, pools and canals

You will often find me walking my young son, Xavier, and unruly spaniel along the river Lea in Hertfordshire or the Stort in Essex. I keep a watchful eye on the water and wait patiently for that change to favourable conditions. These rivers have been flushed out by heavy rains and have really woken up. It's prime time to get out there and get fishing for the last of the season – especially for big perch.

On UK rivers there is a close season that runs from 15 March until 15 June inclusive. However, many canals will be free from the close season and many lakes can be fished all year round too.

March is a phenomenal month for big perch. They spend all winter gorging themselves on tightly packed shoals of silver fish and they are getting fatter and fatter in readiness for spawning in the coming month. You will find this is the time of year when these fish are at their most aggressive and they will readily slip up to an artificial lure.

Early morning and late evening is the best kind of time and it isn't too troublesome at this time of year. Lure fishing is easy for any beginner and perfect for getting children outdoors.

"Perch spend all winter gorging themselves on shoals of fish"

All you need to do is cast it out, reel it in and see what happens. If you get bored with the spot you're fishing, move on. That's the beauty of it all.

Once you have found a river or canal you would like to fish, look for an area with features that are likely to hold the bait fish and, in turn, the predator fish too. Weir pools are a favourite but anything such bridges, locks, boat moorings, marinas and backstreams are perch magnets. Make your cast, let the lure sink and work the lure back to you.

Try out slowly reeling and twitching the lure, lifting off the bottom and reeling up the slack line, and twitching and pausing the lure. All of these will work on their given day so give it a try. Here is some of the kit you need to get started.

There are plenty of different lures to try; Callum favours yellow or green

You will need a decent-sized landing net — hopefully

The Okuma Ceymar 1000 spinning reel is lightweight and good value for money

Major Craft Benkei BIS-682ML

Perch bites can be so subtle, you will swear you dreamed it. This is why you need to keep everything as lightweight and as sensitive as possible. Out of the numerous light lure rods I own, the Major Craft Benkei is the most versatile of them all. When a perch plucks at a lure, I can feel it down the blank of the rod. I find that pausing the lure at this point often persuades a fish to come back and hit the lure again.

At 6ft 8in long, the rod is compact too. I keep this one in the boot of the car for impromptu fishing situations. With a high modulus Toray carbon blank, Fuji reel seat and Fuji K Guides, this rod has got premium build quality all over it. Having used mine for more than five years for lure fishing, carp and chub fishing too, I can confirm it's solidly built.

Okuma Ceymar 1000 spinning reel

The 1000 reel is so small, most will fit in the palm of your hand. For light lure fishing, the most important factor is being lightweight and balanced with your rod. I don't think you can get a reel with more bang for your buck than the Okuma Ceymar 1000. It's durable and light, allowing you cast the distances you need and play fish cautiously on the smooth clutch control system.

Using a small 1000-sized reel also has the benefit of slower lure retrieved versus the rotations of the reel handle. This means I can turn the reel handle and ensure I'm not going to be cranking in the lure too fast for the perch. While a fast retrieve is often good in summer, in the colder months the perch are far more likely to take a slowly retrieved lure.

Fox Rage UV Micro Fry Pack

We fishermen get very excited by little rubber lures, such as the Fox Rage UV Micro Fry pack. These lures are designed to mimic the small fry that perch feed on. The UV enhancement increases visibility in murky waters, attracting perch from a distance.

With a large paddle tail, it holds its position in the water for longer than most lures, while pumping out enticing vibrations that perch simply cannot resist. Whenever I take somebody out on their first session, I go for these lures. They are the top choice more often than not.

Fishing for big perch in March is a great way of getting children outside — Xavier is starting young

There are also models with curly tails, longer body versions and spiky ones too. In murky water or early morning/late evening I have the most confidence in the bright yellow or green one. If I haven't had any luck, I will switch to one of the other colours.

Fox Rage jig heads

Jig heads are the easiest way to rig your lures up. There are single hooks with the weight loaded at the head of the hook. I usually tie on 6ft of 6lb breaking-strain fluorocarbon or monofilament on to my braided mainline and tie a jig head on the end. And that's it. Anything from 2g to 6g will be perfect for small lures. You want a hook size that is around half the size of the lure. To measure, simply offer up the hook to the lure and ensure the point of the hook comes out halfway to and two-thirds of the way down the lure.

Three grams is usually my favourite jig head weight, as it takes a while to reach the bottom, meaning perch have a chance to nab it anywhere from the surface to the bottom. Also, when you lift the lure up off the riverbed, the weight sends the paddle tail into overdrive as it sinks back down.

Daiwa J-Braid X8 dark green

Standard monofilament lines have a lot of stretch in them, which means those subtle bites are almost impossible to feel. For that reason, I always use a braided mainline when light lure fishing. This allows me to feel when a perch has grabbed the lure. Also, if I leave the lure static, I can see the line get pulled on the surface on the water.

Hopefully, if you try lure fishing, you will catch a few. Please make sure you have all the appropriate kit for dealing with the fish you catch safely and effectively. A decent-sized landing net, an unhooking mat and long-nosed forceps are essential, especially if pike are present. Consider your own safety too. The banks are steep, unstable and slippery this time of year so be careful.

If you do decide to try light lure fishing, make sure you have the right kit and keep yourself safe

Aguirre y Aranzabal Nº4 in .410

With chunky barrels, neat hand-chequering, great bluing and superb trigger-pulls, this side-by-side is a delight to shoot, says Jonny Carter

JONNY CARTER

NEED TO KNOW

- **Make** AYA (Aguirre y Aranzabal)
- **Model** Nº4
- **Weight** 6lb 10oz
- **Barrel Length** 27in
- **Gauge** .410
- **Trigger** double, optional selective or non-selective
- **Stock** straight hand oil-finished walnut
- **Price** second hand from approx £750 or get a new Nº4/53 from £10,690
- **Supplier** a-s-i.co.uk 01728 688555

OUR VERDICT

Since 1915, AYA has worked hard to build a reputation for quality, elegance and reliability. Its shotguns have become staples of gun cabinets in the UK and across the world, with the Nº2 sidelock and Nº4 boxlock being the favourite choices.

But potentially my favourite gun in AYA's line-up, and one from my personal cabinet, is the Nº4 in .410. This model was first introduced in the 1950s and is a side-by-side boxlock with ejectors. It quickly gained popularity when new, due to its exceptional value for a well-built and good-looking gun. It still represents good value in the new hand-built side-by-side market. But it is worth remembering that there are nearly 70 years' worth of used guns out there. These were built to last, so this is a great way to dabble in the side-by-side market.

The boxlock action is characterised by having the mainsprings, hammers, firing pins, cocking dogs and trigger-sears inside the bar of the action. The design dates back nearly 150 years and is as robust as a gun design can be. The downside is that the gun will never be as low profile as some of the sidelock designs, but it is still an incredibly sleek-looking thing.

Virile

The Nº4 model is an ejector and anyone who has owned one knows how virile the ejectors on these Spanish guns are. There are plenty Nº3 non-ejector models out there, which are identical to the Nº4 but

without the ejectors, and they can be had for a little less money.

My .410 has 27in barrels, which is the standard for these miniature guns. I have seen longer barrels on modern guns but the vast majority will be in 27in. The barrels are quite chunky, though, so 27in doesn't feel as whippy as you might expect.

The barrels are fixed choke at half and full, which I have found more effective than anything more open. With the limited capacity for shot in the .410 cartridge, you do need a bit of choke in order for the patterns not to be too sparse to be effective. The barrels are blued, although the finish is a little worn on my gun and the top rib is scalloped a little, with a single nickel bead sight at the front.

The barrels are good quality and well regulated with great internal bores, but the outside of the barrels aren't as smooth as top-end UK makes. This has no bearing on the general quality, but is partly why the overall weight is high and price is a little lower.

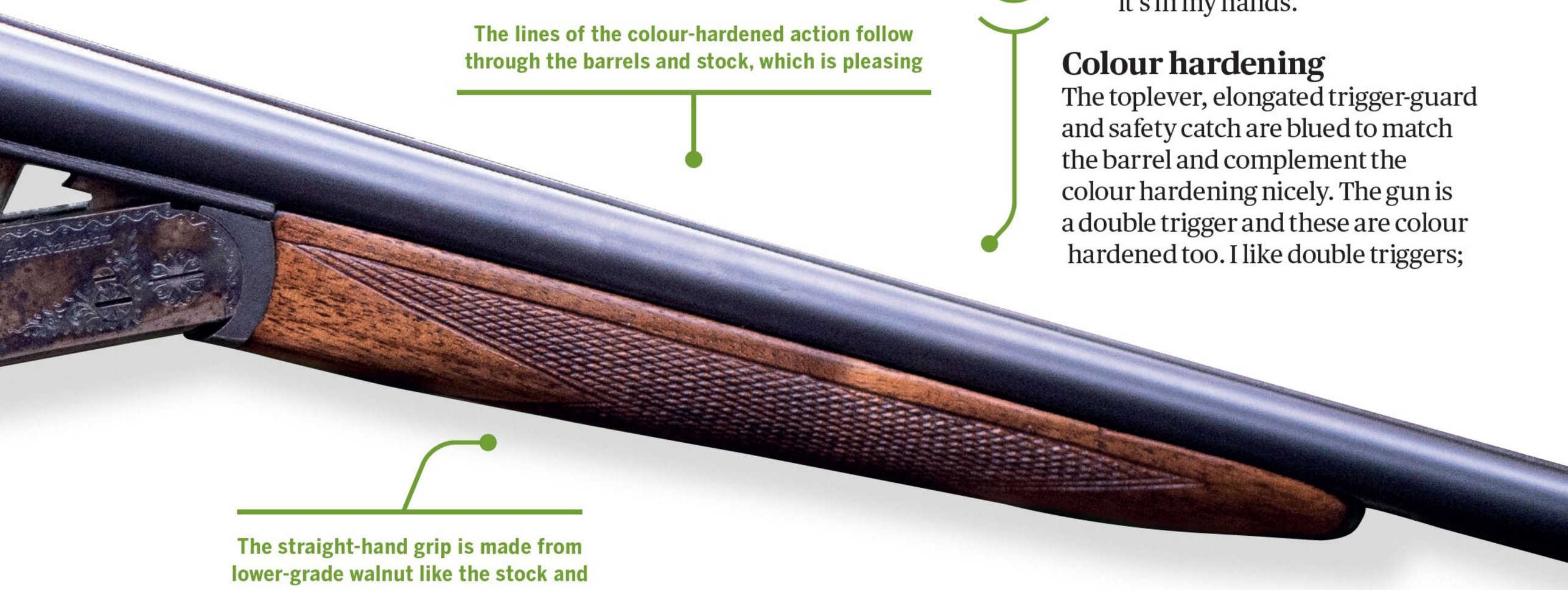
The action features quaint border engraving, which is hidden under case colour hardening. This isn't done in the traditional bone charcoal way, but is achieved by using sodium cyanide, which is faster and more consistent than traditional methods. The result is a beautiful pattern of blues and purples.

Some of the finish on this gun is worn, but most of it is there.

Being a scaled .410 this action is very small and sweet, and the lines of it follow through the barrels and stock, which brings me a lot of joy when it's in my hands.

While the barrels are not as smooth as those by top-end makers, they are of good quality and quite chunky, so not as whippy as you might expect 27in barrels to be

The lines of the colour-hardened action follow through the barrels and stock, which is pleasing



The straight-hand grip is made from lower-grade walnut like the stock and hand-chequered

Colour hardening

The toplever, elongated trigger-guard and safety catch are blued to match the barrel and complement the colour hardening nicely. The gun is a double trigger and these are colour hardened too. I like double triggers; they are super-reliable and give you instantaneous choke selection – although I have never been fast enough to change my mind on the fly. These guns are all regulated by hand, which shines though in the trigger-pulls – they are up there with the best of the boxlocks.

The stock is made is made from lower-grade walnut in the classic English style with a straight grip. The finish is oil but doesn't pop the wood as well as a proper London finish. I have seen these stocks refinished a few times and they really make the guns look a million dollars. The straight-hand grip and splinter fore-end is hand-chequered with a flat point finish. The back of the stock is finished with chequering alone. It's nicely finished, even though one day I'd like to have an extension done to make it fit well.

Gentle hands will have the fast .410 moving smoothly through the line of the bird

★★★★½

FIELD TEST

As it is my own, I have shot this a gun a few times and have enjoyed it every time. There is something about a .410 double-barrel shotgun that puts a smile on every shooter's face. I'd go as far as to say that if a gun like this doesn't bring you joy, you're in the wrong sport.

As much as I was saying this 27in .410 has heavy barrels, this gun is still super-nimble. This might be viewed as bad for the first few shots, after swinging a 32in 12-bore over-and-under about, but you soon start using the speed to your advantage. The best way to do this is to handle this gun with the delicacy that it demands; nice gentle hands will have the fast gun moving smoothly through the line of the bird. Hard, lifeless hands will have you missing. There is lessons to be taken from shooting a .410 that can really help your big gun game, and I guess the reverse may be true for those who shoot .410 day in day out. But who can find and afford the shells for that?

The last time I had this gun out was for a walked-up day in the woods. Many will say the .410 isn't powerful enough for this game and they might be right. To use a .410 in a humane and effective way, you need to be choosing the right ammunition (Hull High Pheasant 18g No 5s) and understanding your range limits. The .410 isn't as potent as a 12-bore, not in speed but in payload capacity — you have considerably fewer balls in the air.

Reassuring pop

With these things in mind, the hunt began. Birds started flushing, but most were out of range. After a mile or so a brace of pheasants took up 15 yards ahead, flying from left to right across us. I raised my gun and with a reassuring pop and a handful of feathers, the bird fell to the floor. The Gun to my left was shooting an identical firearm and followed suit, putting a team right-and-left in the gamebag. The day continued with some great flushes, misses and laughter, our little .410s sitting lightweight and beautiful in our hands as we went.

My highlight of the day will stay with me for ever. We crossed a ride from mature oak woodland into a thick conifer plantation. There were a few trees down and brash all over the floor. If woodcock had a smell, it would have reeked of them. I closed my gun with the authoritative slap that only an AYA has and we continued into the trees. One ghostly bird flighted up to my right and was out of sight before I had even turned to raise the gun.

Twenty yards later I walked tight on to a fallen tree. It had looked like the perfect place but, as the dog burst noisily through the cover, nothing flushed.

My attention on the next likely looking spot I started to drag myself across the log when I almost stepped on a woodcock, which jumped up and darted away down a row of the pines. This is where the speed of these Nº4s comes into play. I was back on my feet with the gun in my shoulder before the bird had gone 20 yards, my eye pulling the nickel bead up through its right-hand side before I squeezed the first trigger.

I will remember that moment, that bird, this gun and the people I was with always — and I'm not sure I could have said the same with a cheap modern thing. I ate the bird that night after cleaning my .410 thinking, "Why did it take me so long to get one of these?"

CONCLUSION

What can you expect to pay for one of these guns? A rough example of a second-hand Nº4 in .410 will be £750, with tidy examples at £3,000. More normally £1,000-£1,500 is the ball-park figure. They might cost more than a Turkish over-and-under but these are in a different league altogether. It's interesting to note that the 12-bore variants sell for around £150-£500, such is the desirability and rarity of the tiny guns. Meanwhile the Nº4/53 can be bought new for £10,690. They may not be super-cheap, but neither are they expensive for what they are – if you want to dabble in the world of .410s, there's no better place to start than with an AYA.

If a gun like the AYA Nº4 .410 doesn't bring you joy, you're in the wrong sport, says Jonny

16 /20	17 /20	19 /20	17 /20	20 /20	89 /100
Action and barrels Bombproof but not too refined	**Handling** Fantastic when you pay attention	**Trigger** Great trigger-breaks every time	**Stock** Mine could do with a refinish	**Value** Find a better gun for the money	**Overall score** These guns are superb side-by-sides

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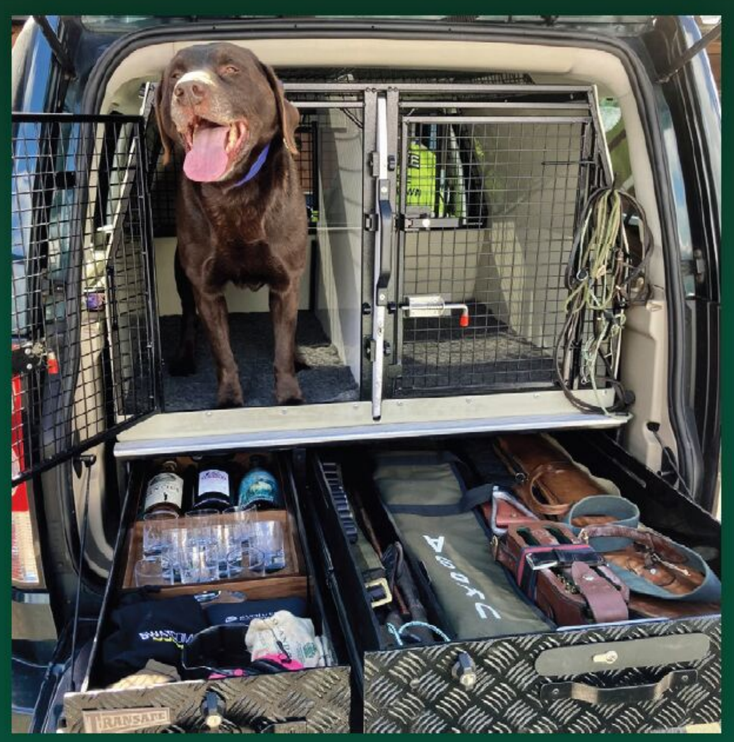

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New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

Hunting

On the hunt

Rachel Green is lucky enough to follow packs around the country during the trail-hunting season

Another day, another pack. Water, water everywhere, but apparently little in the Panama Canal. We would gladly give them some. Today it's the Croome and West Warwickshire. The Croome can claim exceedingly early roots; as far back as 1600 there are records of their existence, and from 1843 until 1926 they were in the hands of Lord Coventry his family.

The West Warwickshire were formed in 1947 when the West Warwickshire Farmers Hunt joined with the Croome to hunt their country and some loaned from the Warwickshire and the North Warwickshire in the season 1973-74. They were kennelled at Windmill Hill near Stratford-upon-Avon.

I first visited the Croome on 2 March 1959. From a meet at Leigh Sinton in the Malvern Hills, my diary records "about 18 couple looking well, hounds have 'tick' marks and pottered about in hop yards, hounds have a chatty cry, didn't account for any foxes, scent lousy".

The packs were amalgamated in the 1973-74 season and remain in the Croome kennels at Kinnersley. The current joint-masters are Fenella Stevens, Bryony Wilson, Kim Bowness and huntsman James Davis. James hunted the Monmouthshire foxhounds for seven seasons, taking them on after Matthew Hickmott left the pack. James hunted the Cotswold Vale Farmers intermittently and is in his first season at Croome and West Warwickshire.

Followers of the Croome and West Warwickshire hack to the next draw

James was preceded by John Smith, and prior to that an old-school legend of the chase, John Day from 1972 to 1992. Looking after the hounds in kennels is Gary Wingar and Pippa Wilkinson is the hard-working honourable secretary.

When I visited recently, the day was cloudy with intermittent sun and the meet was at some fishponds by kind invitation of the angling club. James was running a lively, mixed pack of 17½ couple. He had already been out and about, opening up some new country, which today is no easy task. There were 22 riders, many mounted on quality hunters, though I fancied a dun cob. The hunt supporters put on a lovely feast of moreish mulled wine, and all sorts of delightful edibles.

By 11.30am the ramp of the hunt lorry was dropped, two horn toots and away we went. There were about 12 cars following and some true foot-followers, including octogenarian Les Bailey, who always turns out and keeps marching along.

The country was mainly low-lying grassland and over several trails of varying length we covered quite a lot of ground. The earth was sodden, so the riders had to proceed with great caution in deference to the farmers. James had a second horse a little before 2pm and I left soon after, just as they hit another trail.

Outstanding

The Monmouthshire invited another pack to visit their country, once more into the mountains. It was a chilly but dry, dull day and Bridge Farm at Llanvihangel Crucorney put on a great meet. Visiting Heythrop joint-master and huntsman Charlie Frampton had on a pack of 15½ couple. They were looking outstanding, very fit, no surplus flesh with great backs and lovely skins.

Off on a longish hack up into the mountains, there were about 20 riders, several from the Heythrop country, surely lured here by the landscape. It must have been cold up there, as even down in the valley we were stamping our feet to keep warm. The pack took some time to hit their first trail, but for us there was good hound music and they working hard in the freezing wind, providing quite the spectacle.

Alas the next trail was round the other side of the mountain so poor viewing. Staunch foot-follower Richard Thomas was somewhere up there for sure.

With some hunt countries hit by frost, meets have been in the balance due to the hard ground. Commiserations to the one pack not far from the Croome, as not only have they had difficulty in finding ground that is not under water, but their hounds have come down with kennel cough.

The Croome and West Warwickshire have been in existence since 1973 and are still going strong

RACHEL GREEN

Rachel Green is a photo-journalist who spent 18 years in hunt service and has followed, by horse or car, 235 packs

The pigeon's drug of choice

Woodies love oilseed rape and will feed on it whenever they get the chance, presenting a number of way to shoot them, says Tom Payne

Through the winter months we can employ all four types of pigeon management – decoying, flighting, roosting and pigeon towers. Throughout the driven shooting season, many keepers and shoot owners understandably do not appreciate you shooting pigeons on their patch. So we wait with eager anticipation for 2 February and, if we have managed our permissions and relationships with keepers and landowners alike, we are let loose for a cornucopia of thrilling sport.

I have always found flailed maize to be a stunning crop over which to shoot good numbers of pigeons on farms and estates that have game cover, but also suffer from severe damage to their winter crops. Shooting pigeons over flailed maize can divide opinion. There is a train of thought that suggests you are not really protecting an agricultural crop.

SARAH FARNSWORTH

I hold the position that if the birds have temporarily ceased to ravage a winter crop such as oilseed rape in favour of nibbling the maize, they will quickly exhaust that supply and return to the rape. Consequently, I try to make the most of the time when they are more tightly gathered on the gamecrop to thin their numbers.

When pigeons have been dealing with bird scarers, rockets, flags and the persistent shooter on the winter crop, they can be very tricky to pin down. This makes it nigh on impossible to get a handle on the numbers doing the damage unless you take full advantage of every opportunity. This dynamic can make the couple of weeks of flailed maize productive ones.

"Pigeons leave the country in winter when there is no longer a sufficient food source"

Game cover has become increasingly important for other wildlife too. A variety of wild birds and mammals benefit considerably from the maize. In a time of high feed costs, game cover is more essential than ever to the smooth running of a profitable shoot. If there is a bumper maize crop, I have even seen farmers supplementing farmed animal feed with the extra maize.

The past few years have produced wholesale change in our winter arable cropping. From when winter oilseed rape production really took off in the 1970s, it has been a staple beside winter wheat, but there have been some changes.

Winter rape has historically been an expensive crop to establish and

a number of factors now look like they may reduce its popularity. The ban on neonicotinoids to control flea beetle, the increasing cost of fertilizer, seasonal desiccation issues and greater interest in wildlife and habitat enrichment look to be gently phasing out oilseed rape.

Flea beetle

From an arable farmer's point of view, I completely understand. If it is more financially viable to take advantage of governmental schemes and diversify cropping plans, why would you struggle trying to establish a crop of oilseed rape for little or no return? If it isn't being drowned by wet weather, eaten by flea beetles or devoured by slugs, then the rape is being hammered by pigeons. Even as a pigeon shooter I'm in the camp of the arable farmer.

There was a huge decline in the amount of rape being grown, but there has been a bit of a comeback. Largely as a result of the shortages caused by the war in Ukraine, the price per tonne of oilseed rape

»

Shooting from a pallet hide is a fun way to pick off the pests, as is shooting from a pigeon tower (*inset*)

If you are decoying, use flappers and cradles to make your pattern look as realistic as possible

rose sharply, which encouraged farmers to try the crop again.

In recent years with heavy wild harvests, the winter populations of woodpigeons have been hard to predict. The birds seem to be doing incredibly well through the main breeding months, achieving at least three broods, and fledging numbers have also been high. Average bag sizes from spring through to the harvest have been very healthy.

Since the beginning of the period of volatility of rape prices and the crop's varying arable coverage, I have seen a lower density of pigeons through the core winter months. I haven't observed big flocks and have noted that pigeon populations tend to become highly localised as they remain near good food sources but in relatively meagre numbers.

I also believe that because there is no longer such an abundant winter staple to support the high population that results from successful breeding, we lose large numbers of birds to Europe. They escape south to the vast acorn forests of France and the cork oaks in Spain. Has migration been misunderstood for years? Are we the feeder country? Increasingly I believe that the pigeons leave us in winter when there is no longer a sufficient food source to support the population. They return in more fruitful times.

This is a conversation I've had with many an old countryman who believes this pattern was apparent prior to the rape boom. This would be a tidy explanation as to why populations seem so low in the winter.

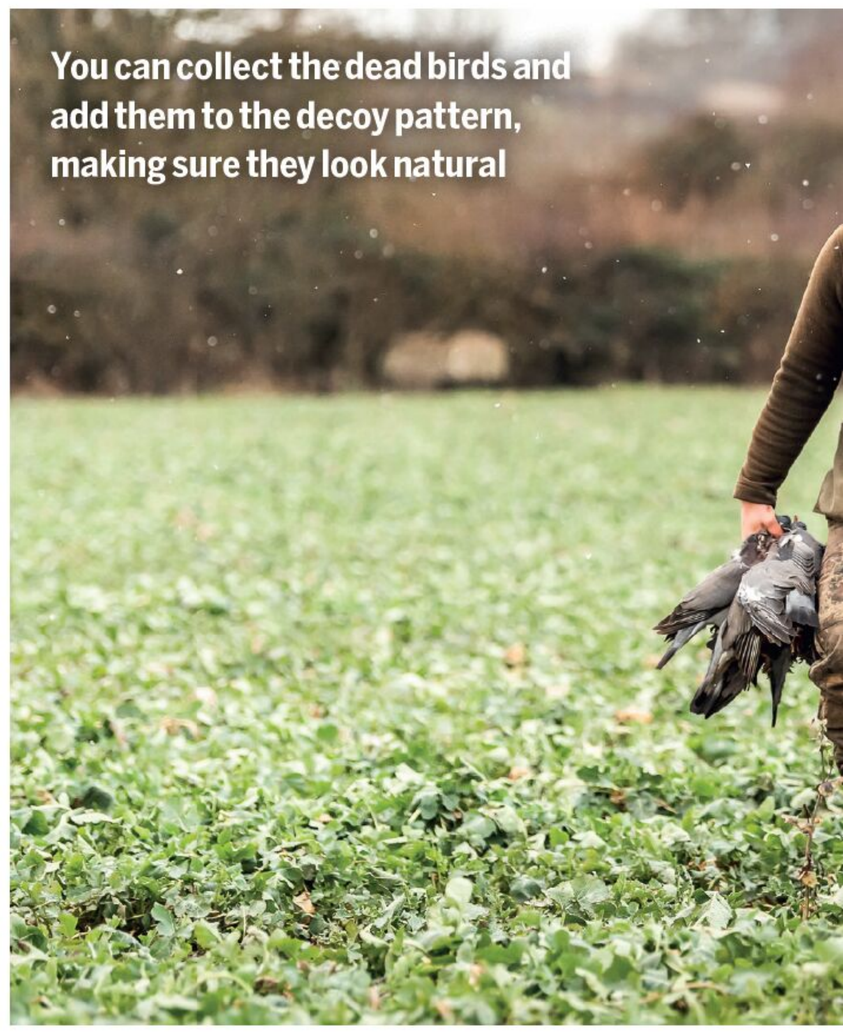
Woodpigeons do still devour rape if they can find it, but the abundance of wild food will determine how quickly they will tuck into this green crop. Cold weather has a part to play but, in my experience, if a population starts on the rape they'll be hooked and will stay on it.

Roosting

It would be fair to say that roosting pigeons is the easiest of the techniques for knocking over a few woodies. You don't need detailed knowledge of flightlines, good fieldcraft or to develop decoying abilities. All you really need is a good wood with plenty of pigeons coming home to roost. It can be as simple as that. Roosting is a very effective way of managing numbers to minimise winter crop damage, especially as the birds grow jumpy over winter rape where they are often pestered by both farmer and pigeon shooter.

Although a newish development in comparison to the other pigeon techniques, shooting pigeons from towers is seriously exciting and enormously effective. When you are at altitude and level with the tops of the trees, positioned in what feels like an elevated grouse butt, the thrill is extraordinary. As sport, I don't think it can be beaten. Sitting hidden and

"If pigeons start to feed on oilseed rape, they'll be hooked and will stay on it"



You can collect the dead birds and add them to the decoy pattern, making sure they look natural

Above: **If there is a rape crop on your permissions you are likely to be able to shoot a good number of birds that feed on it**

alert above the forest, you really are in the last place the woodpigeon is expecting to see you.

There are two main types of tower: a wooden frame usually made from telegraph poles topped with a wooden box platform, or a scaffold tower also with a wooden platform and scaffold rails around you for safety. You are limited on height with the length of the telegraph poles but they offer a very good platform from which to shoot. These kinds of towers are best suited to short woods.

Cherry picker

Locating a tower can take a while. It is important to remember that this is a permanent structure which takes time and effort to build, so you don't want to site it in the wrong place. Three years of reconnaissance on a new roosting wood would be advised so you can determine the productivity of the roosting woods across several crop rotations and different winter crops in the area. If you can get a cherry picker into the wood it can be helpful in testing possible locations.

Ideally, you are looking for woodland composed of mixed or hardwood. Woodlands with hardwoods such as oaks, ash and beech on the outside with lovely warm firs at the centre are the optimum. These types of woods are often favoured by woodies for roosting. Oak and beech also offer a valuable wild food source in acorns and beechmast, both of which pigeons rely on in the late autumn and early winter months.

I shoot from various towers but my favourite is a wooden version where I have managed to get a pigeon magnet into the treetops. I installed a pigeon magnet right up in the canopy and it performs phenomenally well. The movement of the magnet focuses the pigeons' flightline and draws the birds straight over you. I supplement the position with dead birds wired on to single cradles with broken wings, gently moving in the wind. I find this set-up very effective and I sometimes put flappers on lifting poles.

Shooting from the tower takes a bit of getting used to. Initially you are very aware that you are in high up. It can a little discombobulating, but it does allow you to maximise your shooting angles. Unlike regular roosting, you have clear sky all around so it's easier to lock on to a bird, which means you tend to shoot more. Be aware that it can take a moment to get your distances right. When you pick-up at the end it is surprising how far away dead birds are from the tower base.

Tower shooting makes for exciting, challenging and addictive sport, but if you do put a tower in make sure you shoot from it in the right conditions, ideally afternoons with strong winds. And don't be tempted to overshoot it; once every two weeks maximum is a good guide. That way you can ensure that the quality of shooting remains second to none.

Roost shooting is a simple but effective way of managing pigeon numbers, especially when feasting birds are bothered. *Left:* **Decoying over winter oilseed rape can build good numbers in the bag**

Four years in, how far have we come?

A five-year plan to phase out lead for live quarry shooting seemed fair until the double whammy of Covid and bird flu, says Mike Swan

Four years ago, when our various organisations announced a joint plan to phase out the use of lead in live quarry shooting, no one could possibly have known about the glitches that would get in the way. Five years seemed like a sensible target, but no one was thinking about the effects of a pandemic. As if Covid-19 and its lockdowns were not enough, we then had avian influenza (bird flu) and its impact on supplies of birds for releasing.

Many shoots will have lost two complete seasons and many more will have been significantly disrupted, so most shooters have probably fired significantly fewer cartridges than they would usually over the past five years. I am certainly one of them and I confess straight away that I am still burning up supplies of lead loads.

However, I made myself a promise when the voluntary phase-out was announced that I would no longer buy lead cartridges if I did not need to. I have stuck to that and only bought steel. My little caveat, which I have not had to invoke, was that I would still buy lead if there was not a lead-free cartridge to suit my needs for a particular situation.

Meanwhile, despite genuine difficulties over world trade during the pandemic impinging on the development of new non-lead loads, there are now more than 120 different steel cartridges on the market in a whole range of bore sizes. There may still be some way to go, but the manufacturers are to be congratulated for that.

Encouraging

One of the features of this season for me has been hearing about shoots that are going lead-free. The first came from Arthur Leigh-Pemberton of Torry Hill in Kent, when we were wildfowling together in the autumn. Arthur said he was actively encouraging people to go lead-free on the home shoot, and it will become the rule for 2024-25.

The following day I received an invitation for what turned out to be a delightful driven day at Bisterne, south of Ringwood in the Avon Valley. In his instruction, my host Hallam Mills said the shoot is now lead-free and everyone seemed happy about it.

On the other hand, when I contacted a shoot where the keeper had been positive about changing to steel when I visited almost four years ago, I heard this had gone no further. "My Guns say they will give up shooting rather than buy a new gun for the heavy steel loads," said the owner. Sadly, it seems there are still lots of people who do not realise that the guns they already own are perfectly compatible with normal steel loads. I fear a combination of ignorance and disinformation is holding them back.

As the gun trade has been at pains to point out from the beginning of the voluntary phase-out, if you are concerned that steel is not safe in your gun, you should question whether it is safe with lead too. Anything sound and in proof should be fine with a suitable steel load, so long as the chokes are not excessively tight.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, I am quite sure this even applies to damascus barrel, a view corroborated by no less an expert than Bill Harriman, BASC's director of firearms. Doubters should read his article *Against received wisdom* in the

CALLUM MCINERNEY-RILEY; ISTOCK

November/December 2023 issue of the *BASC Shooting and Conservation* magazine, about experiments using steel in a damascus-barrelled muzzle-loader, with no cup wad and no damage to the gun.

Interestingly, Hallam Mills said changing from lead made his Guns think about their barrels and chambers, and what that meant ballistically. That is something I have been doing myself during the past week, alongside pulling cartridges apart to see what they contain. In some senses I am amazed at how few people ever do this. We are mostly happy to fire shots at a pattern plate to see how our cartridge performs, but pulling a squib apart without firing it seems anathema.

"If you are concerned that steel is not safe in your gun, question if it is safe with lead"

Pellet counts

Getting a bit technical, I have found out that all is not as it might seem, and that shot sizes and pellet counts can be well away from what you expect. Take, for example, Eley eco-wad 32g steel No 5. It is a cartridge with which I have had great success at pheasants, red-legged partridges, pigeons, and ducks from mallard to teal. The couple I opened held 275 and 276 pellets respectively, as against 338 according to my Eley shooter's diary. However, for my money that makes them an excellent equivalent of my standard choice game load of 30g lead No 6s, which the diary says should contain about 285.

This little bit of research led me to the view that the standard advice to go up two sizes when changing to steel is a mistake, and that one size bigger is probably all that is needed. There is another issue that compounds this. UK, EU and US shot sides are not the same. So a French cartridge with No 4 shot contains No 3s on our scale. Thus, a Jocker 32g steel No 4, which I pulled apart, had just over 200 pellets, compared with 305 in the equivalent of lead No 6s, so the pattern will be much thinner.

And here is where I get a little critical of the cartridge trade. Rather than doing their best to advise us about what we need in this brave new world, I fear they are, to some extent, pandering to ignorance, compounded by the disinformation I keep hearing.

In a recent email exchange with a manufacturer, I was asking about a smaller-shot non-lead load for my old 2½in chambered damascus-barrelled 20-bore. The reply was that what I was after – which was the equivalent of a 23g load of No 6s or 7s – would not sell in today's market, because everyone was after larger shot sizes for better lethality.

OK, but those bigger pellets are only lethal when they hit a vital spot. As I have long maintained, instant collapse only happens when a pellet hits the brain, neck or upper spine. Heart shots will kill too, of course, but the bird usually flies on a couple of hundred metres before it collapses, perhaps never to be recovered. Meanwhile, for every bird killed at long range with large shot, there will be several wounded ones with shots to the body.

Interestingly, this was echoed by the gentleman whom I was drawn next to at Bisterne. He was clearly a good Shot and was doing well with his English side-by-side, but he did say that he felt the wounding rate was higher when he tackled the highest birds. "Too many runners," he said. That, for me, is a symptom of pattern failing before pellet lethality. I did not think to ask what shot size he was using, but I'm willing to bet it was bigger than he needed.

THREE NON-LEAD ALTERNATIVES

Here are three steel loads that have worked for Mike in his standard proof 30-year-old Beretta 686 12-bore.

ELEY VIP PRO ECO WAD STEEL NO 5

I have burned several hundred of these over the past couple of years and have found them very effective on everything from high pheasants to wigeon and teal on the foreshore. I like the fact that the eco wad dissolves in a day in water.

▶ **Contact** eleyhawkltd.com

HULL STEEL GAME NO 5 WITH HYDRO WAD

I used these for a day at driven pheasants and redlegs last season and concluded they worked well.

▶ **Contact** hullcartridge.co.uk

GAMEBORE DARK STORM NO 4

I was given a box of these and have used them at evening flight for a mix of mallard and wigeon. I have no complaints.

▶ **Contact** gamebore.com

Steel shot works well for wildfowl so why not other live quarry? It's a question of getting the load right

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Scott Allan is a photographer with a passion for hunting dogs

New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

Working Dogs

If you want to see the gladiators of the working dog world, head to Ireland for a thrilling coursing final

The best dogs come to Clonmel for the BoyleSports coursing derby

This time of year is considered to be the end of the season in the working dog world. Spring approaches, hares are beginning to group up, foxes are calling and pairing, pretty soon the ferreter will struggle to avoid milky rabbits — the does feeding their young. We call it a day through choice; there's no sense taking young quarry, no sense risking dog health on harder ground and in warmer weather.

February is a time to look forward to, for my group of friends and me, because the first weekend of the month means our annual end-of-season foray across the Irish Sea to the most prestigious coursing event on the Irish calendar, the National Meeting. Three days of coursing and three nights of greyhound racing all in the same town perfectly coincide with the end of the pheasant season and the working dog season. Eight of us from England, Scotland and Wales meet up and let our hair down.

The National Meeting, or BoyleSports Clonmel Derby, is an incredible event worthy of the attendance by any sporting dog man. Throughout the autumn and winter dogs and their owners take part in various stakes around the country with one common goal, to reach then to win Clonmel. Winning a stake at one of the regional meetings qualifies your dog or bitch for a tilt at a €40,000 purse, and the prestige of being able to say that you won the Derby (dogs) or Oaks (bitches). Your name will be written permanently into sporting dog history.

On the first day, 64 dogs and 64 bitches run-off against each other in the Derby and Oaks before a separate stake takes place for the losing bitches. There's a grand total of 80 courses on that first day alone. The following day features a similar amount of runs, with the second and third round of the Derby and Oaks taking place among various other stakes. The crowd grows, the noise builds. You start to get an idea of which dogs stand out.

"The crowd grows, the noise builds, you get an idea of which dogs stand out"

The third day is the highlight of the event and the crowd increases drastically. The day begins with the less important runs, so to speak, before breaking for an interval at around 1pm. After that, the crowd falls silent for a rendition of the national anthem sung by a different person each year — it's a beautiful moment. When the anthem finishes, the crowd releases an almighty roar that to me means "it's time for the finals!" If the anthem itself doesn't raise the hairs on the back of your neck, that roar will surely do it.

Screaming

One by one, the finals of the various stakes are then run. The crowds go wild, owners screaming for their dogs, punters screaming for the one they fancy. The day eventually culminates in the big two, the Oaks followed by the Derby. The atmosphere for both is unlike anything else you will experience in the working dog world. The animals have strived so hard, not only during the season but over those three days.

It was incredible to be in attendance this year to witness a moment in history. Liam Dowling not only won the Derby, but he also won the Oaks and the Kevin Smith Champion Stakes, the first time anyone has won the three stakes at the National Meeting. It's a feat that undoubtedly took an incredible amount of work behind the scenes, I wouldn't like to bet against him doing again.

Coursing is illegal in England and Wales under the Hunting Act 2004 and in Scotland under the Wild Mammals Act 2002.

To find out more about Irish coursing, visit: ***irishcoursingclub.ie***

SCOTT ALLAN: ADOBE STOCK

Our pick of the rimfires

The Editor lines up a selection of five of the best rimfire rifles for pest control duties

With the season at an end, many gamekeepers are turning their attention to essential pest control. Whether you are after a problem fox, marauding rabbits or grain-guzzling pigeons and corvids, a rimfire rifle is a lightweight and effective way to keep on top of your quarry. You can get a fantastic set-up for around the £1,000 mark – in many cases much less – so we have chosen five of the best rimfires on the market.

SAVAGE B17 PRECISION LITE

Savage's B Series of rifles are specifically designed to accommodate rimfire rounds. The Precision Lite .17 HMR features a stable chassis and a short varmint-type barrel, which offers good handling. This rifle is designed for the competition market but in .17 HMR it makes a stable shooting platform for corvids and foxes. Our rifle reviewer, Bruce Potts, claims the bolt action is considerably better than previous models and reported no feeding issues. It's certainly worth a look at its price — £860 for the steel and £1,200 for the carbon-fibre barrel model regardless of the calibre.

vikingshoot.com

CZ 512

When it comes to rimfires, CZ has designed, built and supplied pretty much every conceivable bolt-action model available. The 512 model combines CZ's legendary accuracy with its reliable repeating action design. This makes it a real contender for those wanting a fast second or third shot when lamping rabbits or grey squirrel drey shooting. Accuracy is good for a semi-automatic rifle, as is the trigger, and the magazines are extremely affordable too. Prices start from around £650; you couldn't ask for a more reliable rimfire in this price bracket.

sportsmanguncentre.co.uk

BRUCE POTTS

TIKKA T1X UPR

Since its launch, the rimfire version of Tikka's T3x, the T1x, has been a huge success. This is partly due to the price point but, more importantly, due to its consistent accuracy and dependability. The UPR (ultimate precision rifle) version utilises the UPR stock from its big brother, which improves the T1x's handling, weight and rigidity. This rimfire is capable of extended ranges and well suited as a hybrid vermin/target rifle. Owners of the T1x will appreciate the familiar smooth bolt action, reliable action and Tikka's famous build quality.

gmk.co.uk

The Tikka T3x's neat 'little brother' is as smooth and handy as you'd expect

With the Bergara B14R rimfire you get a lot of rifle for your money

“A rimfire is an effective way to keep on top of your quarry”

BERGARA B14R

Bergara’s initial foray into the world of rimfires proved so successful that it has expanded its business with further models. The B14R is designed as a scaled-down version of the maker’s centrefire rifles; this means you have the same handling characteristics and layout as your stalking rifle but for smaller rounds.

Bergara combines the Remington Model 700 action with an excellent HMR stock, which allows adjustment of the cheekpiece and length of pull, and has a sturdy and durable construction. You also have the option of steel barrels or a lighter carbon-fibre wrap version.

artemisoutdoors.co.uk

The Bergara B14R rimfire is like a scaled-down version of a stalking rifle with smaller rounds

LITHGOW ARMS LA101 CROSSOVER

This mini bolt-action rifle is available in .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 stock, sitting between a Sporter and tactical stock, hence the Crossover name. Made from a tough polymer, it’s extremely comfortable, and the all-weather scratch-resistant Cerakote outer coating makes this a formidable rimfire. At just over £1,000, the LA101 is a premium rimfire that should last a lifetime.

highlandoutdoors.co.uk

With its hardened steel action, the Lithgow LA101 is a formidable tool for knocking down rabbits

An element of danger

There are many aspects that make an evening flight on a flood tide so bewitching, says Ryan Lynch

New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

Wildfowling is the purest form of shotgun sport to my mind. It is, in essence, the pursuit of truly wild birds in truly wild places. You will have already guessed I am not referring to shooting reared mallard from a fed inland pond. No, my quarry are in many cases migratory visitors that overwinter in the UK and have fled their frozen native lands in search of a temperate climate in which to eke out a living.

Fowling is, probably more so than any form of our sport, the one that draws the most attention from the poetic among us. This is due, in my case anyway, to its direct correlation to the landscapes. The saltmarshes where I pursue my quarry really need to be seen to be appreciated and no amount of descriptive wordsmithing, no matter how illustrative, can even begin to paint the picture.

A visit to the wild saltmarshes is always magical. The sights, sounds and smells, coupled with the anticipation, an element of danger and the solitary nature of fowling never grows old. On every visit, I'm transported back to my childhood days and my long apprenticeship on the wild saltmarshes.

Unforgiving

For those of you who have never tried fowling, it needs to be said that it isn't for everyone. Your bags, so often empty or meagre at best, are very hard won. The environment is harsh and unforgiving on you, your dog – a necessity for wildfowling – and your equipment. Do not even consider

Heading to the marsh with a vintage Midland hammergun makes for a memorable outing

fowling if you are not prepared to be wet, cold, uncomfortable and filthy. But despite all the hardship, the rewards are immeasurable. At least I think so.

"On every visit I'm transported back to my childhood"

I have alluded to the bags being hard won but a visit to the saltmarshes is rarely wasted. There is always something to learn for those who take the time to interpret the signs. Keen to make the most of the final few weeks of the season, I had chosen to visit a marsh close to home for an evening flight. I arrived at the marina in good time, well before dark. The weather was good, with a stiff north-easterly blowing. The plan was to walk out on to the marshes while it was still light, set a few decoys in the flooding tide and await the flight.

I hadn't visited the marsh for a few weeks so didn't know what to expect. But with the conditions favourable, and despite the wigeon numbers dropping in our area, this marsh always has a few mallard and teal that often present a shot or two. I soon parked up and pulled on my waders. Chester, my Chesapeake Bay retriever, was ready as ever.

The wind was howling through the boats' halyards, causing them to slap rhythmically against the aluminium masts. A short walk along the seawall left the marina behind us and we were now able to drop down on to the saltmarshes proper.

Tuning in

Descending the steep grassy bank, the inland landscape soon gave way to the wild marshes, the grass of the seawall gradually being interspersed with rough cord grass, sea purslane and sea aster. The scent of the marshes filled my nostrils and I felt at ease as the pressures of the working day were blown away by the wind. My senses were tuning into the marsh once again.

The walk out to my chosen spot meant I had to cross only two gullies – at this point in the flooding tide they were yet to be submerged and had just a splash of water in their base. It was, however, enough water to attract ducks and I have frequently shot both teal and mallard as they jump out of these gullies. ↠

RYAN LYNCH; ISTOCK

Redshank on the marsh give their loud, panicky and persistently shrill alarm calls

New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

The shots from the old fowling piece stir the marshes into life and more ducks soon take to the air

My approach to them is always with a loaded gun and the dog at heel. I stopped well short of the first gully and unsleeved my old Midland hammergun. Using this vintage fowling piece on the marsh fills me with nostalgia. It's a 12-bore, 3in magnum chambered gun with 32in full and extra full chokes. If only it could tell me the stories of its past visits to the wild saltmarshes.

Homeloaded

Because of its heavy choked barrels, I homeload and shoot bismuth which is superb at taking ducks and geese. I unsleeved the gun and dropped two of my own 36g fibre-wad bismuth No 4s into the chambers and closed it. With Chester at heel I made my way towards the small gully as stealthily as I could in size 11 chest waders. When we drew closer to the edge of the gully, I pulled my hammers back as two wigeon jumped.

Rising up out of the gully their wings caught the strong wind and my old gun was lifted to my shoulder in a well-rehearsed mount. Pulling up through the first bird, I shot it and watched it fold in front of me. Dropping back on to my second trigger, I made the same contact with the second wigeon and both ducks fell to the marsh.

Instinctively I hurried to the edge of the gully and got down into it. Kneeling in the mud I told Chester to lie down and he melted into the sea purslane at the top of the gully.

From experience I knew my shots would have stirred the marshes and more ducks were likely to take to the air. Sure enough, from my low position, I could see teal and wigeon whirring among the many waders also now airborne. I pressed myself into the side of the gully in the hope that something would fly within range – but alas not this time.

I continued to watch from my position until the ducks were out of sight. Chester was sent for the retrieves and he made short work of crossing the gully to retrieve the wigeon from the marsh. With two birds in the bag it was a good start and I was enthused by the number of teal I had seen. I was hopeful for a good evening flight.

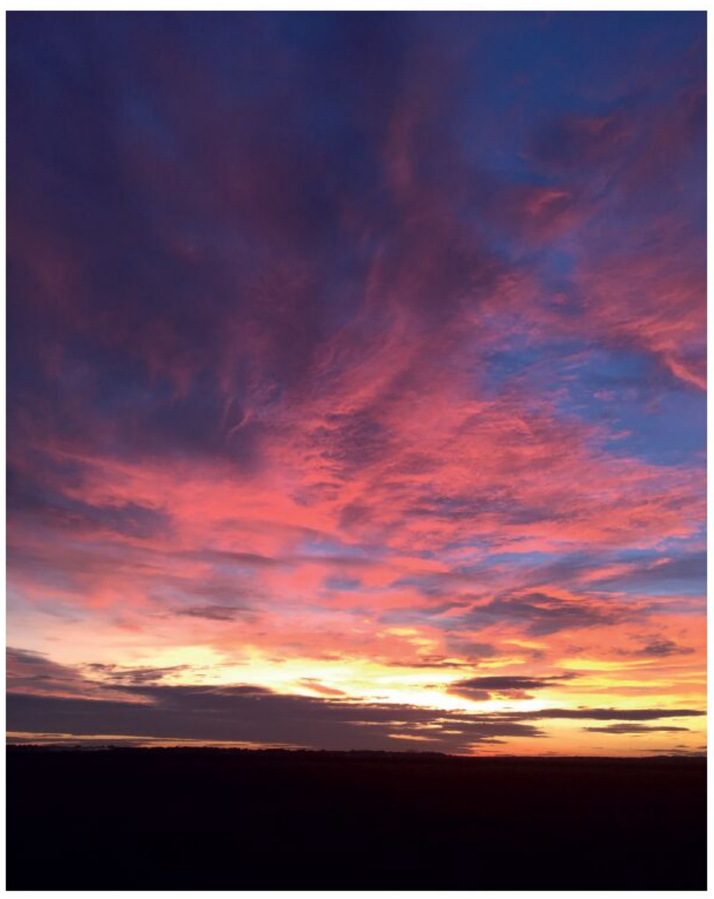
We pressed on to our chosen spot. I laid the gun down and set about putting out a few decoys into the flooding tide. It was then time to settle down and await the flight. We sat watching the light in the sky fade and were treated to a spectacular sunset, the dropping sun turning the clouds into hues of pink, orange and purple. Then a whirr of wings startled us as a small bunch of waders flashed down the flooding gully and quickly disappeared.

Listening to the marshes I could hear the odd "*whee-ooo*" of wigeon and peeping teal mixed in with the haunting cry of curlew and the alarm calls of redshank. Unusually, the wind was dropping with the flooding tide and, as the sun dropped too, the evening was a very different one to the howling winds we arrived in.

We stayed on into the darkness but, despite seeing a few ducks, we didn't have any more chances. It was time to retrieve the decoys, unload and slip the gun and start our walk back from the marshes to the car and a welcome cup of coffee from the flask.

Chester the Chesapeake Bay retriever is just as eager as Ryan for the evening flight to start

"A small bunch of waders flashed down the flooding gully and quickly disappeared"



The dropping sun turns the clouds over the marsh into hues of pink, orange and purple

Ryan Lynch was born and raised on the Essex marshes. He loves salty, muddy adventures from netting gullies for mullet and bass to wildfowling and working his dogs

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Patience and a dog like a unicorn

Airgun shooting is no poor relation, it takes special skills – and a special dog, says Simon Everett

SIMON EVERETT

Airgun hunting has, until recent years, been looked down upon as the poor end of the shooting spectrum. This is snobbish and divisive. I can see how it is misunderstood, though, with people viewing air rifles as mere toys, without realising a good air rifle set-up can involve an investment of several thousand pounds.

It may come as a surprise to some of you that, after several decades of using medium- and large-calibre sporting rifles all around the world, my main enjoyment now consists of shooting small game, both feathered and furred, with the humble air rifle. The challenge, and tranquillity, is every bit the match of stalking pronghorn antelope on the plains of New Mexico, or waiting at dusk for a white-tailed buck in Mississippi.

I rate the challenge of roosting woodpigeons or getting good numbers of grey squirrels hunting through a woodland every bit as highly as crawling through a peat bog for a stag on the hill.

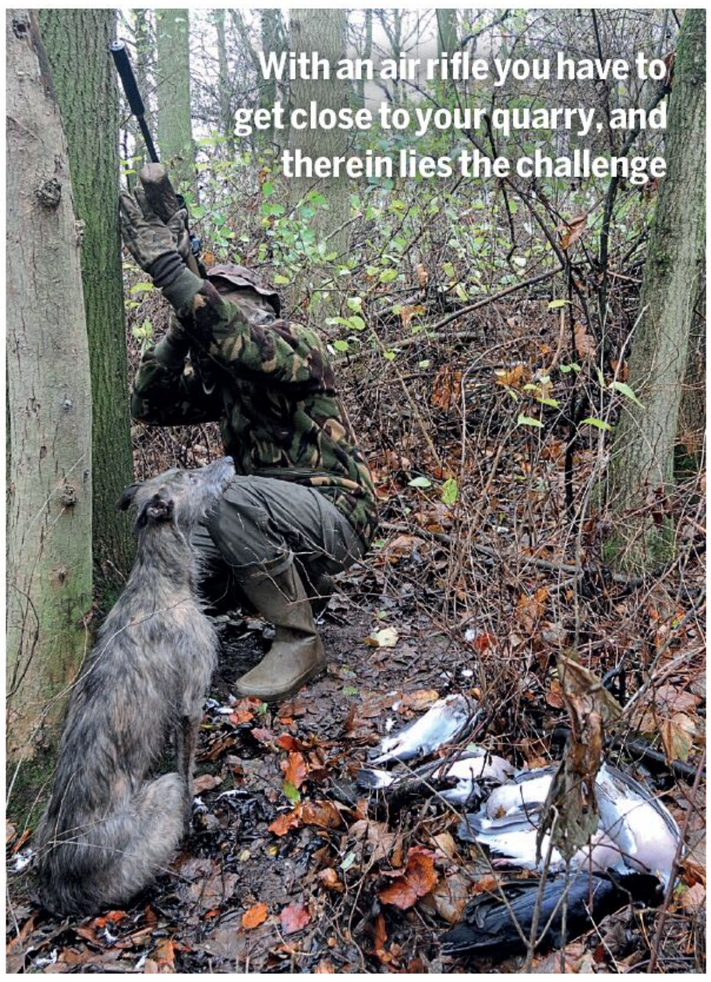
The beauty of airgun hunting is the lack of disturbance taking a shot makes – the loudest part of the process being the pellet striking home on its target. To ensure a humane shot the level of concentration, skill at arms and fieldcraft elevate the process way beyond that of being able to take an animal at 400 yards with a high-velocity rifle – or even 120 yards for that matter.

"To get a humane shot requires patience, excellent fieldcraft and a sixth sense"

You have to get within close range and therein lies the enjoyment. It is not a process that comes easily to many; it requires patience, excellent fieldcraft and a sixth sense. This is where having a well-trained, clever dog beside you can pay dividends.

Of course, making a well-trained, clever dog also takes time and understanding. Often people involved in airgun hunting are not prepared to tolerate the early mistakes a young dog can make through enthusiasm, but the rewards of putting in the time and relinquishing a few shots will be paid back tenfold in future seasons.

They say in life we get one exceptional dog, an animal that stands out like a beacon among the others that share our lives. I was



With an air rifle you have to get close to your quarry, and therein lies the challenge

fortunate that my last dog, Tigs – short for Tigger due to his bright orange coat and tiger stripes when he was a youngster – was that unicorn of a dog.

He was exceptional and would go to the ends of the earth to retrieve for me, but he was also my early warning system. He knew what the game was, shotgun or air rifle, and behaved differently according to the type of shooting we were engaged in. If we were flighting ducks he would tuck into a tuft of reeds, make himself a bed and keep his eyes and ears on the sky. He could hear the whistle of the wings long before I could see the silhouettes against the failing light and would sharpen up and look in the direction the ducks were coming from – pointing, in his own way.

If we were stalking on the hill, he would crawl beside me or wait where I dropped my rucksack and stick to crawl in another 30 yards to look over the brow of a hill or crag. He would stay there until I fetched him too.

When we were airgun hunting he came into his own. His retrieving was exceptional and that gave me more leeway on the shots that I could take on – not in an irresponsible way, but where the quarry would fall. On one farm was a wood with a deep, clay-sided ravine overlooked by a grove of tall ash trees that the woodpigeons loved to settle into. If I hadn't got Tigs to retrieve those that fell into the abyss, I wouldn't have been able to take 75% of the shots that I did.

He would mark the shot and the fall and, when sent, would gallop off and make his way down the almost sheer clay bank, finding footing where I would have simply slithered to the bottom. Unerringly, he would find his way back to my ambush point carrying the prize.

Formative years

He was such an asset. Over the first few years he learned patience and to sit quietly and listen for woodpigeons landing in the trees. He would indicate to me by lifting his ears and looking in the direction the pigeon had settled. With his help I put so many more in the gamebag, but I had to have patience with him in the formative years. I gradually taught him the difference between the quarry. He knew the words "squirrel" and "pigeon" and his approach altered accordingly.

My favourite way of going about squirrelling is in the autumn, when they are busy stashing supplies for the winter and feeding to create fat reserves to see them through the lean months. If we were out for a mooch, *sans fusil*, he knew he had free rein ↠

Tigs was a one in a million dog, who knew the game better than most shooters, airgun or otherwise

New with THE COUNTRYMAN'S WEEKLY

As a Bedlington-whippet lurcher, Tigs was exceptionally intelligent

to explode into action if a squirrel was on the ground. But if I had a gun with me, after 30 or 40 yards going into the wood he knew to stay beside me. If he spotted, or heard, a grey squirrel, he would freeze, giving me an early warning to look and listen harder.

His gaze was always in the direction of the squirrel and his eyesight must have been telescopic, because he could spot the slightest sign of a squirrel. I then had to search hard, dissecting the branches to spot the face peering round a bough, or the fluff of a tail alerting me to the whereabouts of the potential target. He knew not to rush in and frighten the squirrel if we were shooting.

Tigs knew the difference between types of shooting and his exceptional eyesight and sixth sense were invaluable in the woods

His uncanny understanding, companionship and usefulness accompanying me far outweighed any early mistakes and overexuberance he might have displayed. That is how they learn and a lurcher, especially a Bedlington-whippet cross, is an exceptionally intelligent animal, well able to tell the difference between approaches and adapt accordingly.

River retrieves

I said earlier that Tigs was a unicorn of a dog. His mother was very good, but he outshone her because she taught him so well. There aren't many lurchers that will perform water retrieves, but Tigs made three long river retrieves for me on the Trent, where it is 50 yards wide and there is a good pull of current. Three times he went back in to fetch ducks that were floating downstream and had been carried into the trees on the far side.

His loyalty knew no bounds and his willingness to perform his duty made more than a decade of fantastic shooting memories, mostly with the air rifle, but also with a shotgun and a rifle.

It was his input into my airgun hunting that absolutely elevated it to the realms of "proper shooting". I knew I could take a shot and, regardless of where the quarry fell, he would retrieve it for me. That opened up so many more possibilities, and having him as an extra pair of eyes, ears and his nose to call on gave me so many more shooting opportunities that his contribution was far greater than mine.

I would thoroughly recommend the companionship of a useful dog to anyone who goes hunting with an airgun in the woods or cover. It will take patience and understanding, on both sides, but the rewards are well worth the input and the few lost shooting opportunities that you will have to invest in the beginning. Take the time to build your relationship – it was four or five years before Tigs was properly steady – but with maturity comes wisdom. With experience that wisdom grows and every trip out provides new learning or reinforces things already learned.

Tigs had his last outing just before Christmas and typically he excelled in his tasks of the day. I know his student will never match his ability, but the pleasure of having a steady dog with me will be every bit as worthwhile. The tutor is gone but the pupil is already putting into practice those early lessons.

Jet is only a puppy still, but he had a good grounding in those months he accompanied Tigs and he will build on that and give me what input he can. He is already a good squirrel dog and has made his first retrieve. So the circle is complete.

Simon Everett has travelled all over the world with both camera and notebook, and his broad canon of work has appeared in a range of sporting titles

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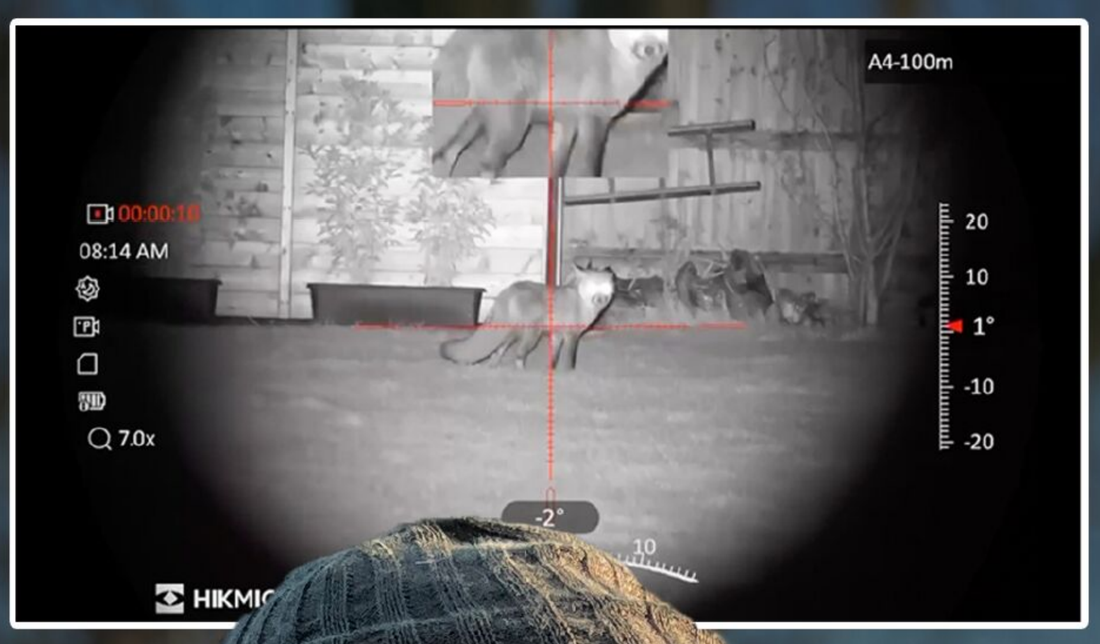

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Felix Petit

Serious matters

Stylish or abomination; what does your choice of sporting hat say about you?

It's one thing to judge a book by its cover, but it is entirely possible to make some uncannily accurate assumptions about a sportsman's character based on what they use to keep their head warm. This brand of analysis can be extended to include the selection of headdress they keep in their hall or on their hatstand. I am yet to meet someone who has a marble bust in their porch wearing a fez who doesn't have a sense of humour. And if you stroll into a house on the morning of a shoot to say "what ho" and spy a prep-school cricket cap wonkily perched on a pricket head, you know they probably don't take themselves too seriously.

The flat cap, which is said to have been popularised in the 16th century thanks to some rules relating to compulsory woollen head wear, is rather a broad church of a titfer, worn in different ways by a variety of keen sportsmen and women. At one end you have the regulation hat, the ancient moth-eaten houndstooth tweed, sported by the shepherding sort who goes rough shooting a few times a year. And at the other, the baker-boy affair made famous by Tommy Shelby in *Peaky Blinders* and now worn by David Beckham or Guy Ritchie when they're in the Cotswolds.

You can't go wrong with a flat cap but there is a place on the Gun line for a gently novel hat

Crocodile Dundee

The Akubra hat is generally worn by the likes of Crocodile Dundee, but when seen in the field it is almost exclusively sported by the larger gentleman who never goes out without his shooting stick. It is a fair assumption that he will be wearing unzipped extra-wide wellies, shoot low birds and try to avoid gathering his spent cartridges at the horn. His chunky golden labrador will pick nearby birds that he has not shot which he will then carry triumphantly back to the game wagon with murmurs of a 2:1 ratio.

There is plenty of room in the Gun line for the gently novel hat. I have mates who, on a driven day, have sported the Afghan pakol to keep the rain of their bonce. This particular hat looks a bit like a cottage loaf and is worn specifically to entice fellow Guns to ask about its origins, allowing the wearer to spin exotic yarns of travel or military service between drives.

"Even worse was one of my mother's mauve herringbone train driver caps"

In my 20 or so years making up the numbers on shoots around the country, I have often sported a fore'n'aft cap, now rather upsettingly and almost exclusively referred to as a Sherlock hat. Sadly, I lack the craggy intellectual look needed to pull one off and end up resembling an octogenarian on a day trip instead of the weathered deerstalker of my dreams.

I have lecherous friends married to fiery Argentines who now shoot in Che Guevara-style berets as a nod to their family life. And I know wild hinterland keepers and lairds who beat in Glengarry bonnet as an external homage to their beloved Scotland.

When I was a teenager my parents generously allowed me a boys' shoot at home. If any of my fellow spotty, hoarse-voiced pals arrived naked from the eyebrows up, my mother pounced on them with fearsome maternal efficiency, insisting that she provide them with a hat.

This was a fate worse than death and would mean following her to the hall with the feeling of someone heading for the gallows. She would then rootle around among the coats, deciding on the poor fellow's fate, eventually emerging with a grim smile and a tweed cloche — or, even worse, one of her mauve herringbone train driver caps that she went through a phase of wearing.

She would robustly fit whatever abomination she had looked out on to the head of my dejected chum. He would mutely shuffle away, waiting until he was out of sight before swiftly shoving the hat into his cartridge pocket.

Do you agree with Felix? Let him know at ***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*

ISTOCK

There's a game bird!

A determined outing to bag a snipe flushes a rather different kind of creature, but our unknown lady Shot will not be put off her quest

Although snipe is the smallest bird that attracts the lover of sport, it affords more discussion than any other. Woman as I am, the prospect of getting one of the swiftly flying fowl, here in beech-tree country, allured me. Attired in rational costume, with a light fowling piece under my arm, I braved marsh and heavily ploughed fields.

It was a speculative quest, for in this part of Buckinghamshire would-be snipe shooters are likely to meet with about as much sport as did the visitors to that French landowner who kept a hare on his preserves for the accommodation of his friends.

We considered ourselves fortunate when a farmer with whom we had scraped a speaking acquaintance informed us that he had seen a snipe, only one, down in the bottom; and we were welcome to bag it, if we could.

On toast

There was no time to be lost if we – my brother Alick and I – intended to avail ourselves of the opportunity; for the speedy long-billed little wader, that can scarcely be made sure of until he figures on toast, is proverbially uncertain in his movements. There was a snaw, and a blaw, with a suspicion of thaw; and when the weather is variable, Jack Snipe is seldom found in the same locality for two days together.

ISTOCK

"The first barrel missed but the second was more fortunate. The snipe fell — shot by a woman"

Our route took us past Waller's Oak and, early though it was, and with a few snowflakes falling, a Corydon and Phyllis were love-making beneath the venerable tree. The man was as clownish as any old-time Puritan, while the "damsel" appeared of the type of modern servant-girlism, in her tawdry jacket and imitation fur boa. As we walked briskly past, the man stooped to whisper something in the maiden's ear, at which she laughed immoderately.

He may have called attention to my dress, as my feminine instinct suggested he did; or perhaps the spirit of Edmund Waller prompted him to repeat the poet's lines to Sacharissa: "In heaven itself thou sure wert drest, With that angelic-like disguise."

The farmer considerately provided us with a boy and a dog, one of which proved as useless as the other. The urchin did not know a snipe from a thrush, while the cur evidently imagined that the object of our excursion was rats. Before the end of half an hour we wished them both back at the farmstead.

The boy conducted us to the bottom – a boggy marsh, with a stream half hidden by briars, alders, and osiers running through it. It was weary work plodding through the ice-covered slough and spongy snow, but neither the boy nor the dog minded this. The one had his small mind occupied with thoughts of rats, while the other was gleeful because of a few hours respite from the turnip cutter.

"Tom, you are certain there is a bird in there?" we asked dubiously.

"Yes, sir – ma'rm, I means – lots of 'em. Falfits (fieldfares), spinks (chaffinches), and once I seed a water-hen, but that was a month

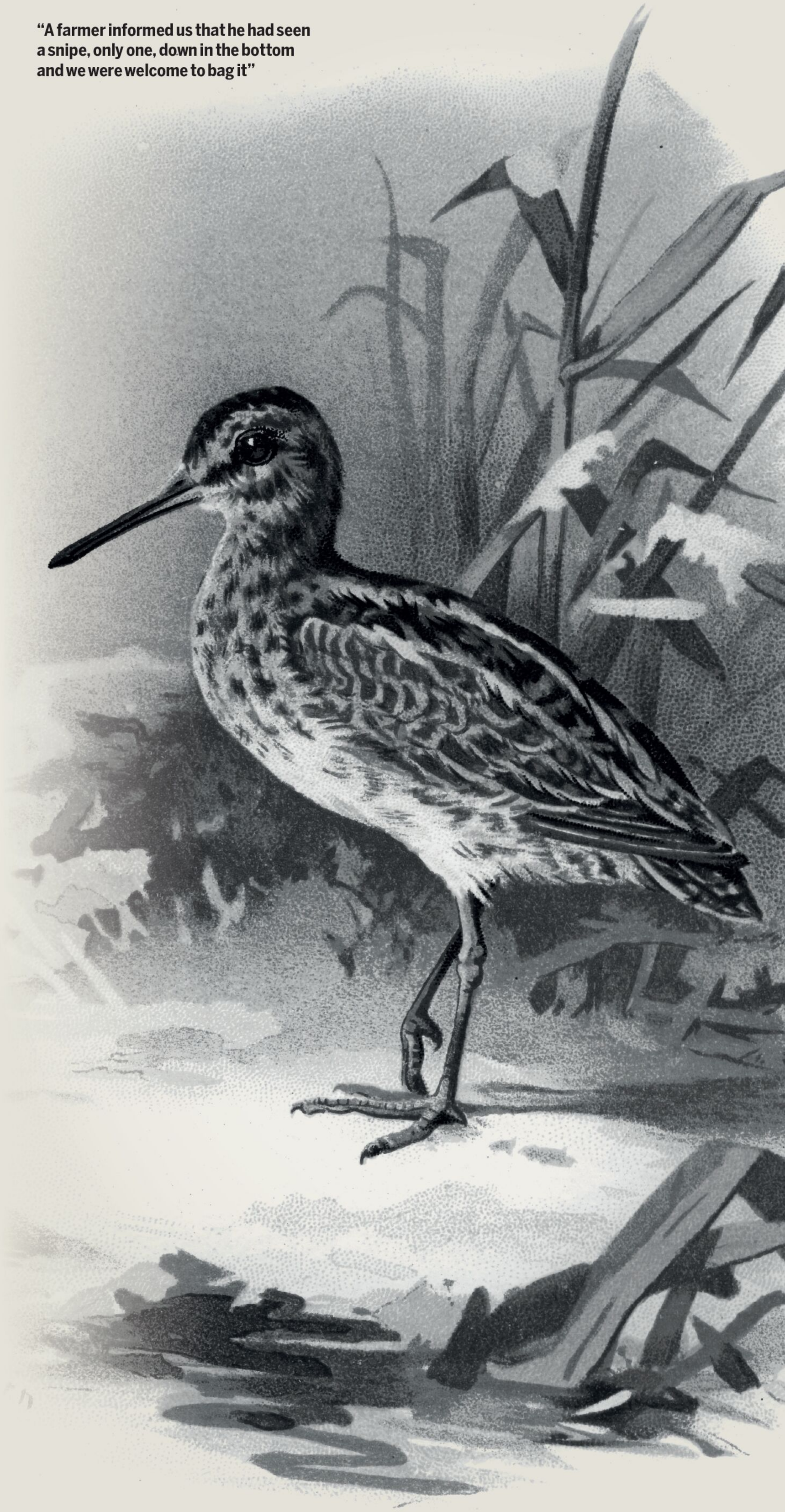
"The urchin did not know a snipe from a thrush"

ago," the lad replied, with a fatuous grin on his face.

Clearly no assistance was to be obtained from our ornithologically inexpert guide. So, determined to get down to business, we set to work and our trials began. The dog discovered a hole which, to all appearances, had not been occupied for a twelvemonth, and scratched thereat with so much persistence that we turned our backs upon him with disgust.

We ploughed our way up and down that bottom, now on one side of the stream, now on the other, occasionally making dives into the marsh. But all was to no purpose. Not a snipe was discoverable. The only feathered fowl in evidence was a robin which, disconsolately perched on a spray of hornbeam, strove to raise a winter song.

"A farmer informed us that he had seen a snipe, only one, down in the bottom and we were welcome to bag it"



Beastly

Tom was beginning to cry with the cold and as for us... I have been warmer in a blinding blizzard in Norwegian glens than I was in this beastly bottom. We were turning for the 10th time when, half a mile ↠

THE FUNNIEST THINGS SEEN

"Our friend rubbed the dogs' noses with oil of aniseed, utterly depriving them of scent"

It struck me that it would be interesting to read the funniest things known and seen, relating to sport, by your numerous readers. When I was a very young chap, my brother, who was 12 years older than I, one day was very annoyed at our father asking a friend — a legal luminary — to shoot partridges, so he withdrew the shot from the guest's cartridges the night before and filled them with sand. Next day the friend came home with an empty bag, having missed, as he thought, every shot. He was so disgusted with his breechloader (pinfire) that he made a present of it to our steward.

when he was about a quarter of a mile on his way, the hounds were let out. They went full cry after him, being well used to drags with oil of aniseed, and it was highly amusing to see the "peeler" swarming up a tree.

A gentleman, long deceased, after a ball went with others to shoot ducks in the early morning on the islands on Lough Derravaragh. He was "half seas over" and armed with a heavy single-bore muzzle-loading duck gun. On being left on the island he proceeded to load the gun and, being semi-intoxicated, either forgot to put the cap on the nipple or dropped it. Ducks came over.

"He withdrew the shot from the guest's cartridges and filled them with sand"

On another occasion a fellow praised his dogs so much that my brother and a friend got fairly sick of it. One day, when out shooting, our friend rubbed the noses of the bragger's dogs with oil of aniseed, which utterly deprived them of scent, so that they put up bird after bird. A policeman visited our kennels one day to take down the number of harriers (for taxing) of which my brother was master. My brother got the kennelman to anoint the boots of the policeman with oil of aniseed, and

Taking aim, he pulled, but a click was the only result.

Thereupon he loaded the gun again and went through the process of putting the cap on the nipple. A brave lot of ducks came over; he pulled, but, lo! another click. Again he charged the gun. This time the cap was on the nipple. One duck alighted on the shore of the island and he pulled — earthquake! Over went the gun into the lake and he sprawled about till found by his friends.

"Tom the urchin was beginning to cry with the cold, but a shilling dried his tears and sent him on his way rejoicing"

downstream and not a dozen yards from the place where the ratting dog was still carrying on his profitless pursuit, a snipe rose with that indescribable flight which has only to be seen once to be remembered for a lifetime.

Roadside hostelry

It was useless to try further and Alick suggested that we should send the boy and his useless companion home, and adjourn to the roadside hostelry. A shilling dried Tom's tears and sent him on his way rejoicing; while we were soon absorbed in the mysteries of bread and cheese and beer so small and weak that, as Alick pithily remarked, a syphon was needed to lift it out of the pewter.

By this time the wind had risen and snow was falling heavily. But, disregarding the discomfort of drenched garments, soaked feet and benumbed fingers, we resolved to make one more bid for fortune. So we turned back into the marsh. It was in a nick of time. Alick had scarcely begun to poke in the bushes when up rose our long-sought-for bird. *Bang, bang*! The first barrel missed; the second was more fortunate. The snipe fell – shot by a woman.

This article was first published in an 1897 issue of Shooting Times.

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Game Cookery

With fall-apart venison, tomatoes and peppers in a creamy, rich stew, our slow-cooker goulash recipe couldn't be easier or more comforting

If any meat is suited to the slow-cooker treatment, it's venison. With its robust flavour, it can take the fire provided by the paprika, which also adds a lovely smoky sweetness.

Make this the day before you are intending to eat it because — like many a casserole — it's often better left to cool then reheated the next day to allow the flavours to blend and mellow.

Caraway seeds are traditional in goulash but don't worry if you don't have any or don't like the taste, it's fine without.

"The paprika provides some fire and adds a lovely smoky sweetness to the meat"

Ingredients

- ⚠ **PREP TIME:** 25 MINS
- ⚠ **COOKING TIME:** 7 HRS
- 3 TBSP OLIVE OIL
- 2KG HAUCH OF VENISON, CUT INTO CHUNKS
- 2 LARGE ONIONS, FINELY CHOPPED
- 4 MIXED PEPPERS, CUT INTO 4CM CHUNKS
- 3 GARLIC CLOVES, CRUSHED
- 2 TBSP FLOUR
- 2 TSP CARAWAY SEEDS (OPTIONAL)
- 2 TSP HOT SMOKED PAPRIKA
- 1 TBSP SWEET SMOKED PAPRIKA, PLUS EXTRA TO SERVE
- 4 TBSP TOMATO PUREE
- 4 LARGE TOMATOES CUT INTO SMALL CHUNKS
- 400ML-500ML BEEF STOCK
- 300ML SOURED CREAM
- SMALL BUNCH OF PARSLEY, CHOPPED

OLI KEESL USTICJ

SLOW COOKER VENISON GOULASH

Venison from any species of deer works well in this dish

THE METHOD *Serves 8*

1 Set the slow cooker to low then heat 2 tbsp oil in a deep frying pan over a medium heat. Season and sear the venison in batches until brown on all sides. Transfer to a plate.

2 Put the remaining oil in the pan and fry the onions for 10 mins until lightly golden. Add the peppers and garlic, and fry for another 5-10 mins, then stir in the flour and all of the spices. Cook for 2 mins more, then stir in the tomato purée, tomatoes and 400ml beef stock. Season well.

3 Bring the mixture to a simmer, then tip into the slow cooker with the seared venison. Add the remaining stock, if needed, to cover the meat completely. Cover and cook for 6-7 hours until the venison is tender and the sauce has thickened slightly.

4 Season to taste, then swirl the soured cream and most of the parsley through the stew. Scatter over the remaining parsley and some sweet smoked paprika, then serve with small roasted potatoes or brown rice, if you like.

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A Kahles scope is a great option for long-range shots

Quality vermin control

OPTICS

Q Could you recommend a scope for my .223 Sako Varmint rifle? I use it to control crows and foxes on my farm but ranges can be quite long due to the open terrain.

A Sometimes, if there is no cover and you need to control vermin, you have to take that longer shot. Your .223 is certainly capable of accurate bullet placement, so you need a scope to complement its ability.

With small targets such as crows downrange, you cannot skimp on quality, as crystal-clear lenses and a precise aiming point/reticle are necessary. I have tested scopes from all the main manufacturers and the Kahles K 10-50 x 56mm has everything you need. It is made in Austria by one of the best in the business. It combines superb optics, low light-gathering lenses with a good magnification range and a precise aiming and focus system.

The objective lens is 56mm, so lets plenty of light through the scope, with a magnification range of 10x to 50x power. The 10x power is fine for hunting, while the maximum of 50x allows a precise and clear image.

It has precise click adjustments – each click is worth ⅛ MOA – and both the elevation and windage adjustments are large, tactile turrets. The Kahles comes with either a fine crosshair reticle or double-dot reticle for a precise aiming point. The incredible quality of lenses, both sharp and bright, allow you to spot each shot. ***BP***

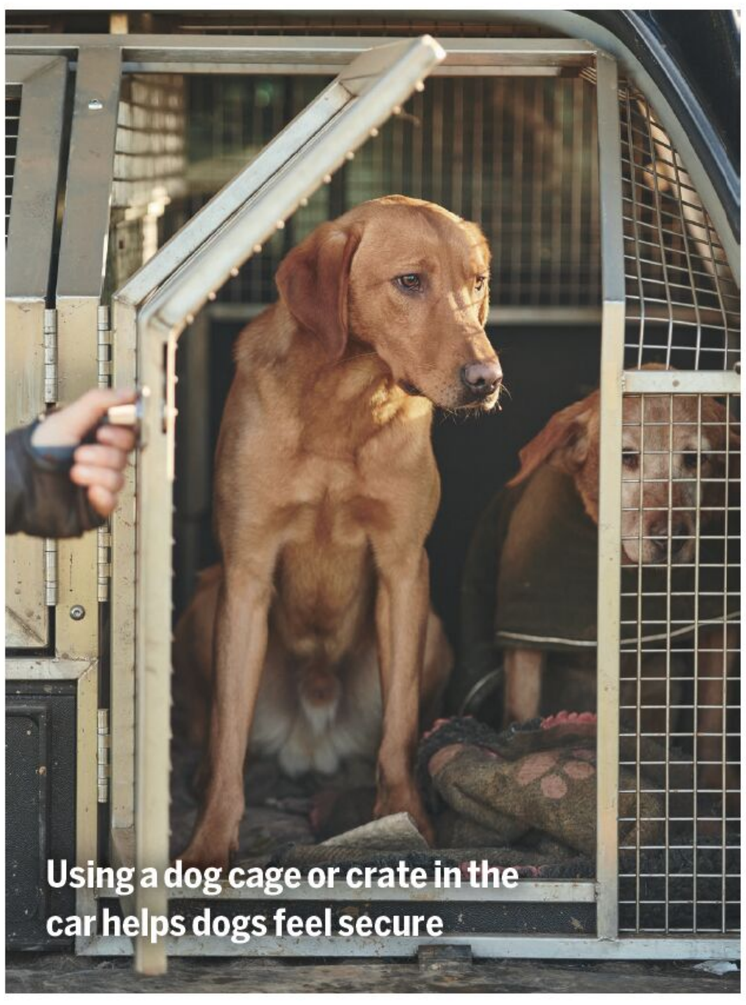
Happy to be left alone

GUNDOGS

Q I have two labradors, aged 12 months and 10 months. The days of their training classes have changed and are now on the same day, half an hour apart. I travel 45 minutes to the trainer, so will have to take both, but this means I will have to leave them alone in the car (caged in the boot) for about an hour. They've been alone at home, but never in the car. I'm worried they will freak out. Any ideas what I can do so they won't be too bad?

A Although they have not remained alone in the car before, there is no reason why this should worry them now, so long as it's not too hot or cold. The fact that they have been left successfully before is a great start. Using a secure dog cage or crate in the car will help them feel secure. Start practising at home first. Leave one for short periods of time then go back and reward. Swap them over and repeat the exercise for slightly longer periods.

If necessary, when you start, you could leave some form of chew with them to help them realise being left isn't a negative experience. ***ES***



Using a dog cage or crate in the car helps dogs feel secure

Most cartridge manufacturers agree that non-toxic loads are pointless without a biodegradable wad

Are biodegradable wads the best way forward?

CARTRIDGES

Q The wads from steel cartridges make more of a mess than the fibre wads we use with lead. Surely this is an own goal. Are there any moves afoot to improve things?

A I understand your concerns and agree that some of the wads look a little out of place, but can assure you that all the new ones are fully biodegradable. The paper ones start to degrade as soon as they get wet, the wads made from vegetable starch do likewise. Even the more robust ones made from photo-degradable material do eventually disappear.

The development of steel loads and wadding is coming along (*see Mike Swan's report, p52*), and there is a huge amount of time and effort being spent on it by the cartridge manufacturers. They all agree that developing a non-lead load with a nondegradable wad would be pretty pointless. ***LB***

TO CATCH A FISH

Holo Butcher

This modern variant of a famous wet fly was originally called Moon's Fly after a butcher called Moon whose favourite pattern it was. The butcher trout fly works really well early and late in the season, brilliant for trout in all lakes and rivers. Tied on the bigger hooks, the butcher trout fly is also good for sea trout when they're running. On overcast days, try on the middle dropper; the butcher fly looks like a fry fish and tempts the trout to bite. ***AS***

Digging in sand dunes can be dangerous; ensure your ferrets are safe at all times

Bunnies on the beach

FERRETING

Q I have just started to ferret among the sand dunes on a beach. The warrens aren't huge, but the ferrets disappear for anything up to an hour. A few rabbits bolt, but we don't appear to catch what we see going in. Why is this?

A Ferreting among the dunes can be great fun, but I have also found it can be extremely dangerous if you're not careful. Sand is easy to dig in for humans – and extremely easy for the rabbits.

Sandy warrens are constructed of larger-circumference pipes due to the constant erosion every time the resident rabbits pass through them. This creates a labyrinth of huge pipes and alters the rules of ferreting.

Within small pipes the rabbits cannot run past a ferret as they can in a sandy pipe. Larger pipes mean that larger ferrets, such as hobs, are required. You should also allow for extra time and perhaps a few more ferrets than usual.

As with a lot in ferreting, what looks straightforward isn't necessarily so. Some of the hardest warrens I have ferreted are on beaches where the rabbits can move around and digging is treacherous. It's easy to cause a cave-in and you must ensure your ferrets are safe at all times.

Sometimes it pays to wait that little bit longer, give the ferrets more time to try to persuade the occupants to bolt before getting the ferret-finder out and having to risk a cave-in while digging your ferret out. ***SW***

Chris Dalton reveals the contents of his stalking bag

Carry what you need

STALKING

Q As a follower of *The Shooting Show*, I am curious as to what Chris has in his stalking bag. Would it be possible to show the contents in a future episode?

A I am sure we can arrange that at some point. To answer your question briefly here, I am a great believer in only carrying what you actually need. Over the years, I have refined this. First, I use an Apex predator roe sack. It folds around my waist and will open up to carry deer up to the size of a roe.

Other than that, I carry a bone saw, a couple of drag ropes, tracking harness and bell, a spare knife, S-hooks for the suspended gralloch, nitrile gloves and a first-aid kit. Sometimes I will include the Apex Auto Lift, which allows me to hoist some of the larger deer species to conduct a suspended gralloch. ***CD***

Multi-coloured moleskins

WILDLIFE

Q How common are piebald moles? In the past year, I have caught two in my garden.

A The answer, it seems, is surprisingly common. According to *The Handbook of British Mammals*, "abnormal coat colour, including albino, cream, apricot, rust-coloured, piebald and grey or silver grey, more frequent than in other British mammals". However, it adds that no figures for frequencies of unusual colours are available, probably because no serious research has ever been done into the subject.

It does seem that abnormal colours are more common in some areas than others, suggesting the condition is inherited, and some populations are more prone to variation. I have heard an amusing story of a Victorian mole-catcher who was inordinately proud of his moleskin waistcoat, made entirely from the pelts of oddly coloured moles. ***DT***

Mystery of doe's head

STALKING

Q Is it possible for a female roe deer to develop a perruque head and grow a mass on top of its skull? In the past month, I have seen an animal with an obvious velvet mass on its head on two occasions, but both times I have not been able to identify it firmly as a female so have left it.

A Roe does do, from time to time, develop growths on the top of their heads, in the area where you might expect to find antlers in the male.

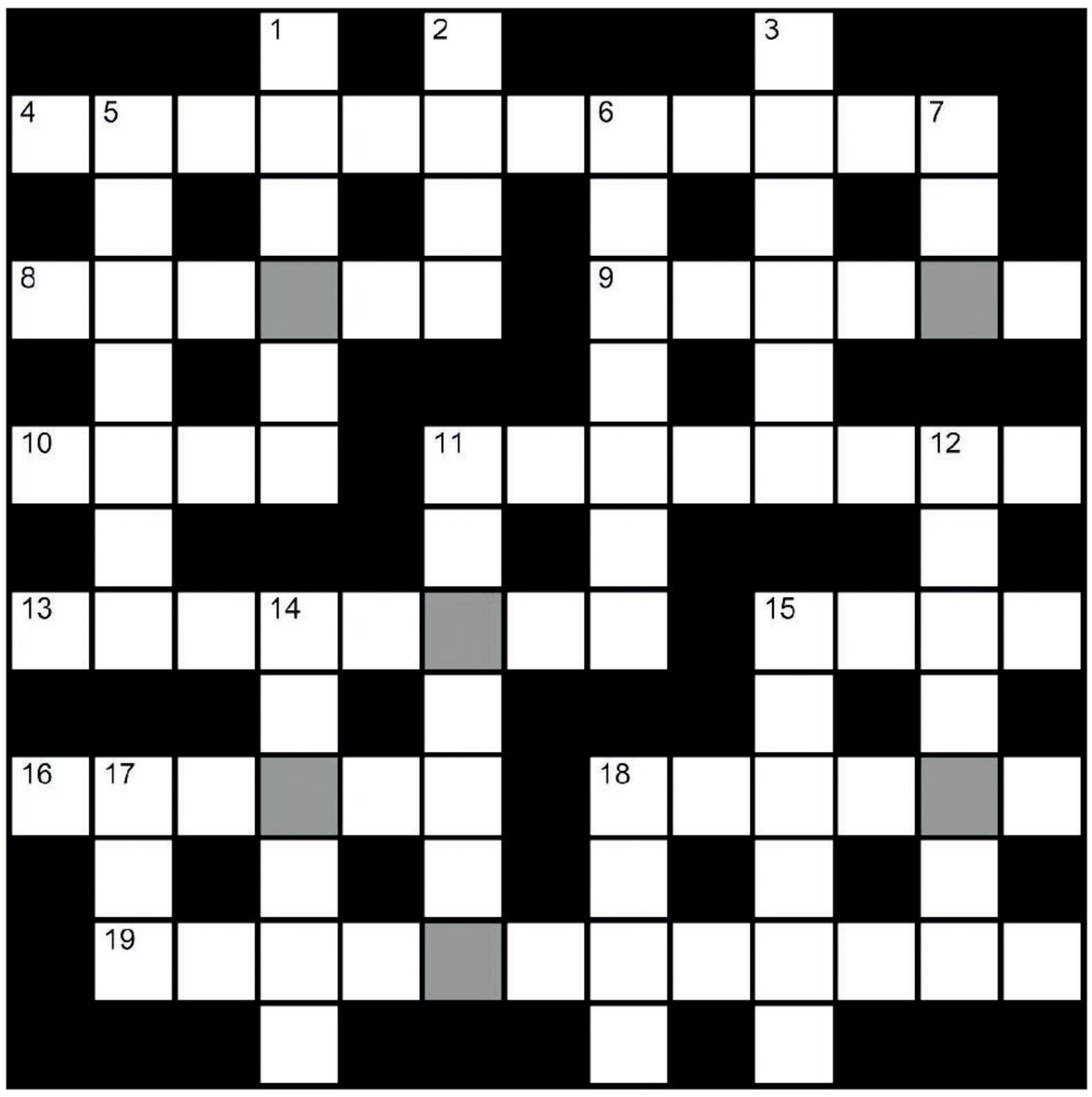
Old does sometimes develop velvet-covered knobbles and spikes, while a few have been observed to grow antlers, which eventually clean of velvet and colour up.

The explanations for these phenomena are varied, depending on the physiology of the individual. There have been a few examples of animals that developed a significant perruque-type growth. One such deer was shot in Caithness several years ago. The few I have seen have not had a discernible antler underneath the velvet; rather it has been an irregular tissue mass, as can be found in male perruques. Explanations have ranged from hormonal imbalances, development of tumours or, in the case of those with fully developed antlers, to the animal being intersex.

Any roe with a velvet mass on the top of its head, regardless of its sex, must be seen as abnormal and the medium to long-term outcome for it is not likely to be good. Its culling can be justified. If this happens, it is of more use to try to get an explanation for its condition and, if possible, an X-ray to see what lies below the surface, rather than simply disposing of it. ***IW***

A female roe with a velvet mass on top of its head

Crossword / *Compiled by Eric Linden / 1654*



Across

4 Provide food and structural supports for wormlike insects (12)
8 If rifle accessories are small, one manages (6)
9 Is rust repellent for the shooting enthusiast a crude commodity? (3,3)
10 A steak and kidney recipe served right at the seaside fishing spot (4)
11 Young stags go sort of bonkers around Birkenhead! (8)
13 Like a pen surrounded by fences, it's nearby in the end (8)
15 A fixture in the kitchen at a watery geographical feature (4)
16 The seaduck sector is reviewed (6)
18 As vacuous as a possible nest site in a tree (6)
19 Lag behind searching for a non-lethal sporting pursuit (5-7)

Down

1 A defensive position for the estate manager (6)
2 Initially, gundogs have reduced hours around Portugal's capital (4)
3 The Scottish take on a sporting achievement (6)
5 A marketplace for guns — lots of them! (7)
6 Go out on a limb to handle the trap (3-4)
7 Old cartridge brand initially carried by gunsmiths? (3)
11 Look in on the weakest relative of a bird of prey (7)
12 Gun oil sourced from a former Burmese city (7)
14 Allow a calendar segment to bring sporting offering (3,3)
15 Damage to wooden gun stocks causes divide (6)
17 Reduce an injury sustained in deep cover or brambles (3)
18 A hunter's catch defines air travel — long or short (4)

Solution 1652 / 14 February 2024

Across: 5. Gate 7. All-weather 8. Scream 9. Roller 10. Brass 11. Balance 14. Scissor 16. Screw 19. Garron 21. Levers 22. Chequering 23. Rose ***Down:*** 1. Electric 2. Tweeds 3. Farms 4. Thermal 5. Grulla 6. Tine 12. Clearing 13. Pointer 15. Spruce 17. Covers 18. Cloud 20. Ammo ★ **HIDDEN WORD: THORN**

A few tweaks can make a big difference to your accuracy

Matching old with new

AIRGUNNING

Q I am planning to reacquaint myself with my old Weihrauch HW25E spring-powered air rifle so I can use it for close-range pest control. This airgun dates from the early 1980s and is fitted with a budget 4x32 telescopic sight of the same era. Would fitting a modern, higher-specification scope help me to shoot more accurately with it?

A As somebody who witnessed the deterioration of his own airgun shooting after switching from open sights to a cheap 4x32 scope, I can confidently say a modern scope will help to improve your accuracy. You don't have to spend a fortune and the Hawke Vantage 2-7x32 or 3-9x40 AO, which retails for less than £90, would be a great match for your gun.

Your old Weihrauch would also benefit from a service, along with a new mainspring. And try experimenting with two or three different brands of roundhead pellets, as it is likely that your gun will shoot more accurately with one than the others. ***MM***

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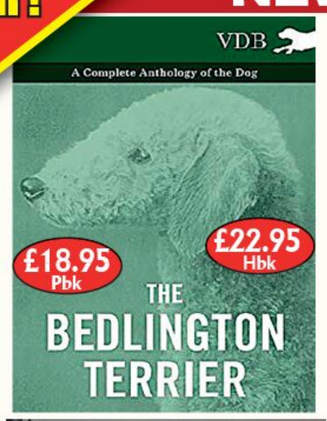

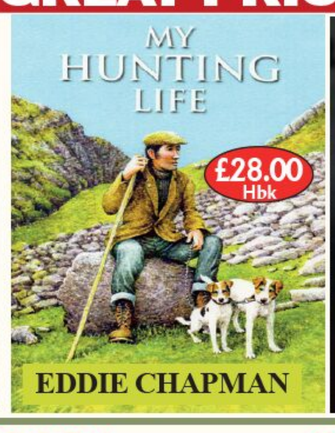

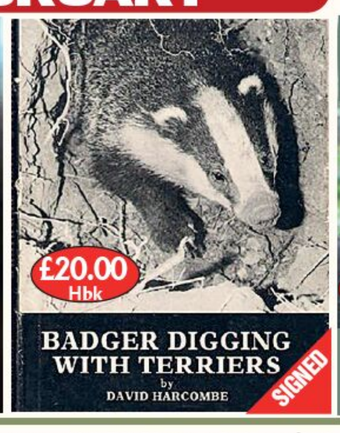

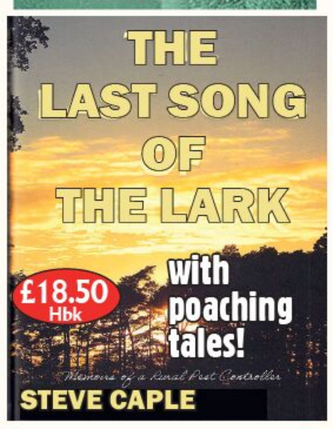

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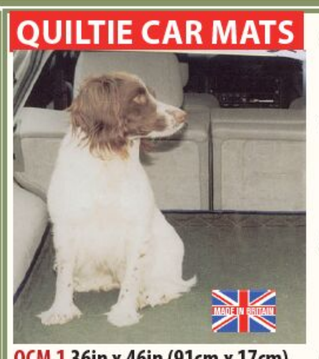

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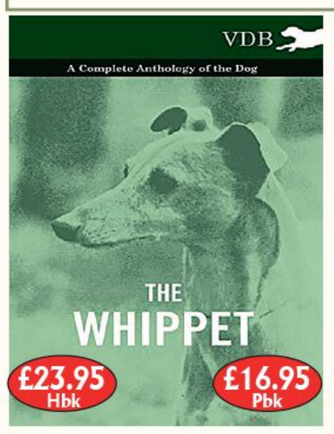

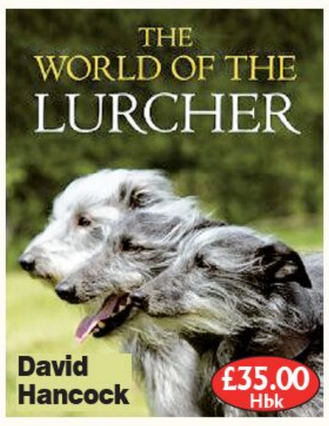

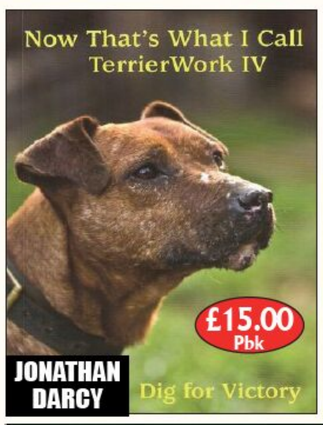

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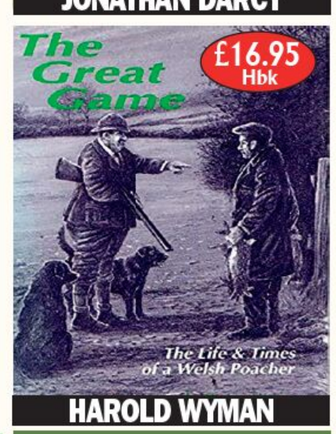

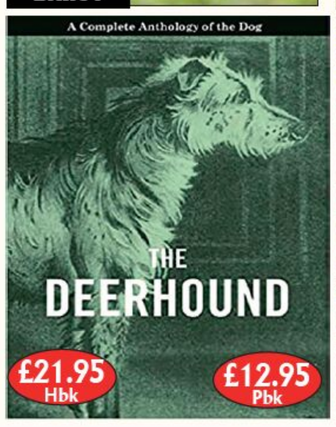

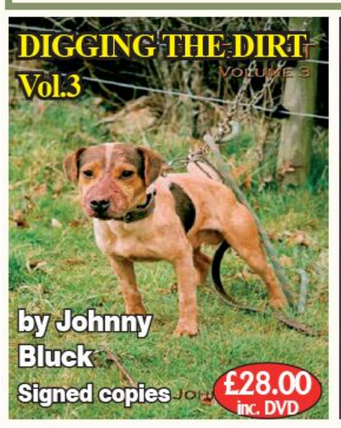

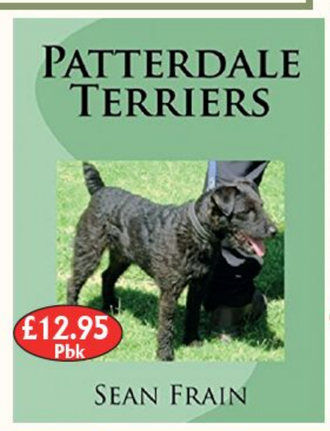

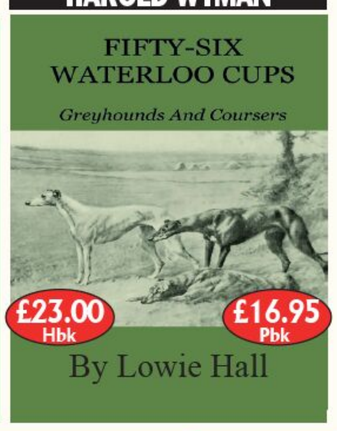

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The Shooting Times

Almanac

2 MARCH 2024

MARCH MOON PHASE

Sunrise 06:42 Sunset 17:43 Moonrise 00:38 Moonset 08:45

TIMES SHOWN FOR LONDON

Worm Moon, 25 March

The Worm Moon takes its name from the earthworms that emerge as the soil starts to warm up and provide food for birds and other wildlife. The Anglo-Saxons called this month's full moon the Lenten Moon, which gives its name to the period leading up to Easter, and the Celts called it the Wind Moon or Plough Moon as they prepared the fields for the growing season.

THOUGHTS FROM THE FIELD

Sharing a lifetime of experience in the countryside

One of the most cheering sights of early spring is blackthorn blossom, when whole hedges are turned a wonderful frothy white. It marks the change from winter to spring, along with the first brimstone butterfly and singing chiffchaff. But beware the blackthorn winter, the apt term for that sudden return to freezing days that reminds you winter has yet to lose its grip.

I once hunted with the Exmoor Foxhounds at the end of March, when the blossom of the blackthorn was matched by the snowflakes at the meet. My hireling was white, too, a big, old-fashioned hunter nicknamed Dessie due to his resemblance to the celebrated chaser Desert Orchid.

That's where the resemblance ended, for he had an uncomfortable jog and it was relief to get off him after five hours of enduring the worst of Exmoor's blackthorn winter. A few days later the wind swung south and spring returned, just as the blackthorn started to shed its blossom.

David Tomlinson

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THE WEEK IN NUMBERS

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& five ounces

Angler Lloyd Watson has broken a 32-year record by landing a new British record pike weighing 47lb 5oz. The fish was captured on 13 February on Woodford Bank in the Chew Valley, Somerset. The monster pike beats the existing Chew Valley best of 44lb 7oz and should be verified by the British Record Fish Committee to overtake the 46lb 13oz record-holder landed by Ray Lewis in the Llandegfedd Reservoir in 1992.

108

Nine races took place at the Countryside Alliance point-to-point at Badbury Rings on 18 February with a total of 108 horses declared on the day. William Biddick, the current men's point-to-point champion, claimed a treble, while James King, who is currently top of the leaderboard for the 2023-24 season, rode a double.

1959

In our new On the hunt series from *The Countryman's Weekly*, Rachel Green returns to the Croome and West Warwickshire after first visiting the pack 65 years ago in 1959. You can find Rachel's new monthly column on *p47*. Don't miss our new Working Dogs column either; this week Scott Allan reports from the BoyleSports Clonmel Derby in Ireland (*p55*).

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Alasdair Mitchell

Sharpshooter

Badly stuffed fish aside, how is any new legislation against importing trophies going to cope with exceptionally accurate replica 3D scans?

A young woman I know recently inherited a mink coat. I asked her whether she would wear it in public. "But of course," she said. "Nowadays, everybody will simply assume it is faux fur." She has a point. The anti-fur lobby has been defanged by presumptions and public attitudes shaped by new technology. How poetic is that?

In the porch of my farmhouse, there hangs a mighty set of red stag antlers, attached to a skull mount. Yet the skull is white-painted wood and the antlers were cast a few years ago by my tame stag. In other words, no animals were harmed in the making of this traditional trophy display. Yet unless you were within a few inches of it, you would be unable to tell that you were looking at a fake skull.

I have piles of cast antlers. I pick them up from my deer enclosure every April, before the hinds get a chance to nibble at them. The Americans, who are big into "shed" antler collecting, produce an array of replica skulls for mounting them. But they did not suit my antlers, although some elk skulls came close. I found a supplier who makes wooden replicas for the European trophy market. They come ready painted. You simply have to drill into the base of each antler and insert a steel dowel, which is bolted through the pedicle of the wooden skull. Painted wood has the advantage that it will never discolour nor turn slimy.

For years, replica fish have graced the walls of rural pubs. With fish mounts, the real artistry is in the painting. Some of the work turned out in the form of ceramic sculptures is amazingly lifelike. And they don't deteriorate with age, nor do they need an expensive glass case.

"It looked like a rugby sock stuffed with newspaper and cardboard fins glued on"

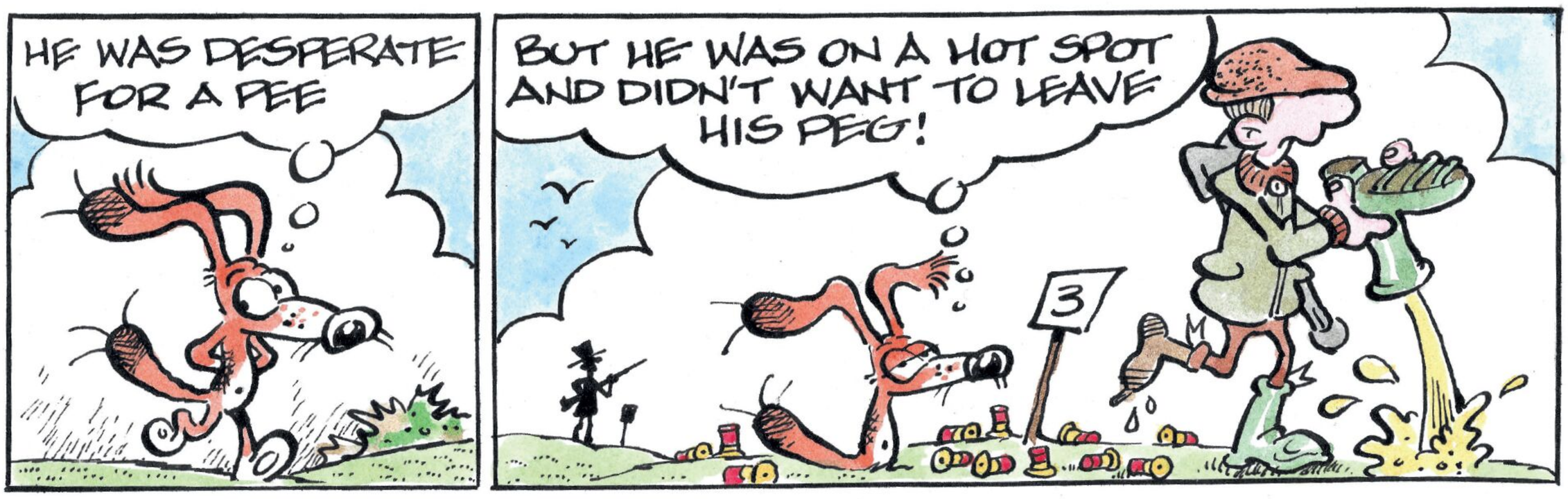
An inexpertly stuffed real fish can be absolutely hideous. Such was the fate of the first salmon caught by a friend. When he got his prize back from the so-called taxidermist, it looked like something made from a rugby sock stuffed with balls of newspaper and covered with foil, with what appeared to be cardboard fins glued on.

The trick, I suppose, is to replicate the real animal, scars and all. Many taxidermists are true artists. But the world of artificial mounts is moving on apace, with the advent of 3D printing proving a game-changer.

It is now feasible, if you have enough money, to get a big game animal scanned out in the field and later reproduced in every detail back in a studio. Synthetic materials can be used for bone, skin and fur, in the same way that eyes have long been made from glass. I am told that the best 3D prints will soon be almost indistinguishable from the real thing.

And that, in itself, could be the downfall of the antis. A proliferation of really good replicas would make a mockery of any big game trophy ban, surely? You can hardly start legislating against private displays of synthetic animals — I mean, what about cuddly toys for children? And all talk of import restrictions becomes absurd in an age when 3D scan data can be transferred digitally.

Dog By Keith Reynolds



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