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SHOOTING TIMES

17 APRIL 2024

& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

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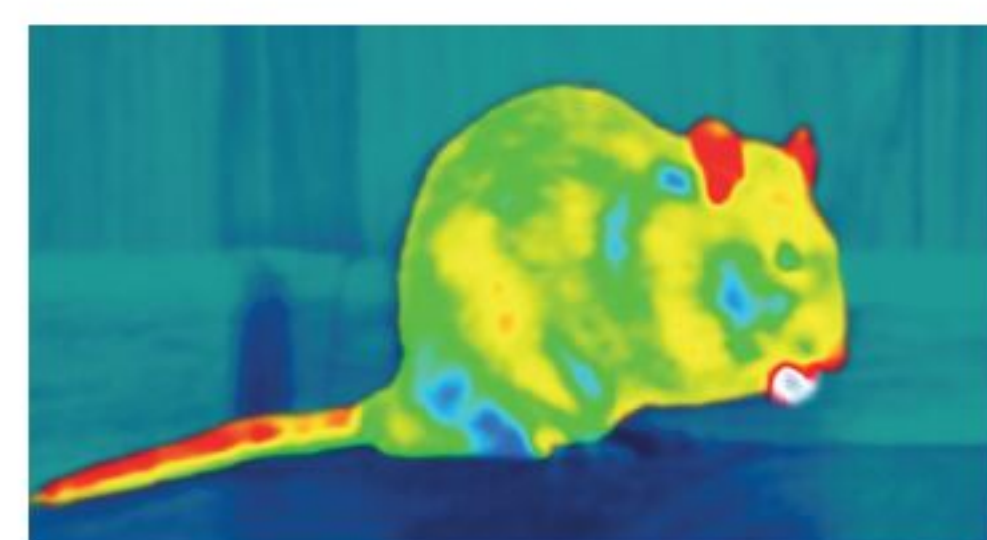


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SHOOTING TIMES

& COUNTRY MAGAZINE



SKINNER'S

BORN TO BE OUTDOORS

DOG OF THE WEEK



Axel

Now 11 months old, Axel was picking-up game almost as soon as he was introduced to it and he has focus, enthusiasm and an attention span far beyond his years. He will be competing this summer before the new season.

Owned and photographed by Euan Halifax

17.04.24
Issue 6,457

SHOOTING TIMES

Saving the curlew



When it was proposed that the curlew should be protected, there was a strong lobby from wildfowlers to retain it on the quarry list. Not many serious fowlers ever lifted their gun to the curlew, but it had long been a traditional quarry species, and its protection was regarded as the thin end of the wedge. If the curlew was to be protected – at the time there was no strong conservation reason for doing so – what next?

After fierce arguments, and even debates in Parliament, the curlew was granted protection under the ground-breaking Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. With it off the quarry list, it seemed likely shooters and fowlers would lose interest in it. But this hasn't been the case. Today the curlew is a bird of considerable conservation concern in the UK, but it would be far more imperilled were it not for the help it receives from landowners and gamekeepers. The GWCT is appealing for funds to expand its research into what it calls the battle to save the curlew. It will never become a quarry species again, but it's a bird every true countryman cares passionately about.

David Tomlinson



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

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featured STORY



Contents 17 April 2024



This week's cover image was supplied by Andrew Sydenham

22 The ultimate reward for a stalker

Having grassed a doe, Cai ap Bryn cooks the meat in the field **FEATURED STORY**

28 It comes down to time or money

Do you buy in birds or rear your own? We look at the pros and cons

36 A rural business measures up

A female tailor proves she's cut out for a role in shooting and gamekeeping

38 In praise of the clumber spaniel

The 40th anniversary of the Working Clumber Spaniel Society

42 There's no escape for garden rats

Using the new HikMicro Lynx 2.0 thermal monocular on rat patrol

46 If it ain't broke don't fix it

Sometimes shooting a drive a different way can make all the difference...

News & Opinion 06 News 10 BASC column 12 Letters **Features** 22 Stalking 28 Gamekeeping 36 Rural lives 38 Clumber spaniels 42 Optics test 46 Game shooting 50 Working dogs **Regulars** 14 Gamekeeper 16 Country Diary 18 Stalking Diary 20 Sporting Life 32 Gundogs 49 Working Dogs 56 Cookery 58 Sporting Answers 61 Crossword 63 Almanac 66 Sharpshooter

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The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) urges all bird keepers to continue to practise good biosecurity



Keepers are urged to stay vigilant on avian influenza

UK has zonal freedom from bird flu but this ‘dreadful and frightening disease’ hasn’t gone away and good biosecurity is vital to keep it at bay

Gamekeepers are being advised to practise stringent biosecurity as the UK has self-declared zonal freedom from bird flu. The decision is in line with the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) rules and came into effect across Great Britain on 29 March.

The UK does not have any high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) outbreaks in poultry or other captive birds, but the disease is still found in wild birds across the country, where the risk remains at medium. As a result, keepers of poultry and other kept birds, including game prior to release, are being encouraged

to practise stringent biosecurity to protect their health and welfare. Defra has published biosecurity guidance and a self-assessment checklist to assist keepers in maintaining high standards.

“A hop, skip and a jump will see bird flu spreading to humans”

Gamekeeper David Whitby told *Shooting Times*: “With over 3,000 full-time gamekeepers and thousands more part-time, the onus is now upon us all to be vigilant and declare any outbreak found. Bird flu is a dreadful and frightening disease, not just for the avian world, but a hop, skip

and jump will see it spreading to humans, with the possible devastating consequences of the 1918 Spanish flu. That pandemic killed millions worldwide and started life as bird flu.

“Self-declaration of any outbreak is essential and having several thousand keepers monitoring the situation is good. This disease is far more important than the loss of shooting — or the revenue from shooting — and keepers must follow the published Defra guidelines.”

The update follows the UK’s declaration on behalf of Northern Ireland that the province was free from bird flu on 31 March 2023.

GWCT senior adviser Mike Swan added: “This is good news, but the government advice to be ever vigilant and practise stringent biosecurity is apposite. Gamebirds face many other health threats too, and top-grade biosecurity should be routine for everyone involved in gamebird management.”

WOAH is constantly reviewing the situation and publishing updates regarding HPAI. Visit bit.ly/birdflu24 for more information. **OH**

Hunt followers join clear up

Hunting and rural communities have united to take part in a cleaning-up initiative, clearing rubbish from hedgerows, roadside verges, footpaths, riverbanks and fields across the UK. The Countryside Alliance's annual Countryside Clean-Up took place between 16 March and 1 April with representatives including hunt staff, farmers and landowners.

The Warwickshire Hunt enlisted the help of children wearing hi-viz clothing on ponies at their dedicated clean-up operations. The Albrighton and Woodland Hunt collected a total of 51 bags of roadside litter including "wheel hubs, tyres and other unmentionables".

Polly Portwin, director of the Campaign for Hunting,



Coffee cups and other less savoury items are a 'terrible blight'

thanked supporters and said the initiative would help to protect wildlife "by removing potentially harmful items out of their way".

She added: "Discarded rubbish is a terrible blight on the countryside and those who drop litter have very little regard for the potential consequences of their actions."

The Alliance has a long campaigned against fly-tipping and littering and supporters were also asked to record and identify the items they retrieved. The CA hopes to raise the issue with Westminster and is encouraging MPs to debate the problem and discourage littering associated with takeaway chains.

Purdey celebrates 210 years

James Purdey has released 10 limited edition trigger-plate 28-bore game guns to celebrate the brand's 210th anniversary. Purdey has forged a reputation as one of Britain's finest gunmakers since 1814 and the trigger-plate shotguns are among its most covetable designs.

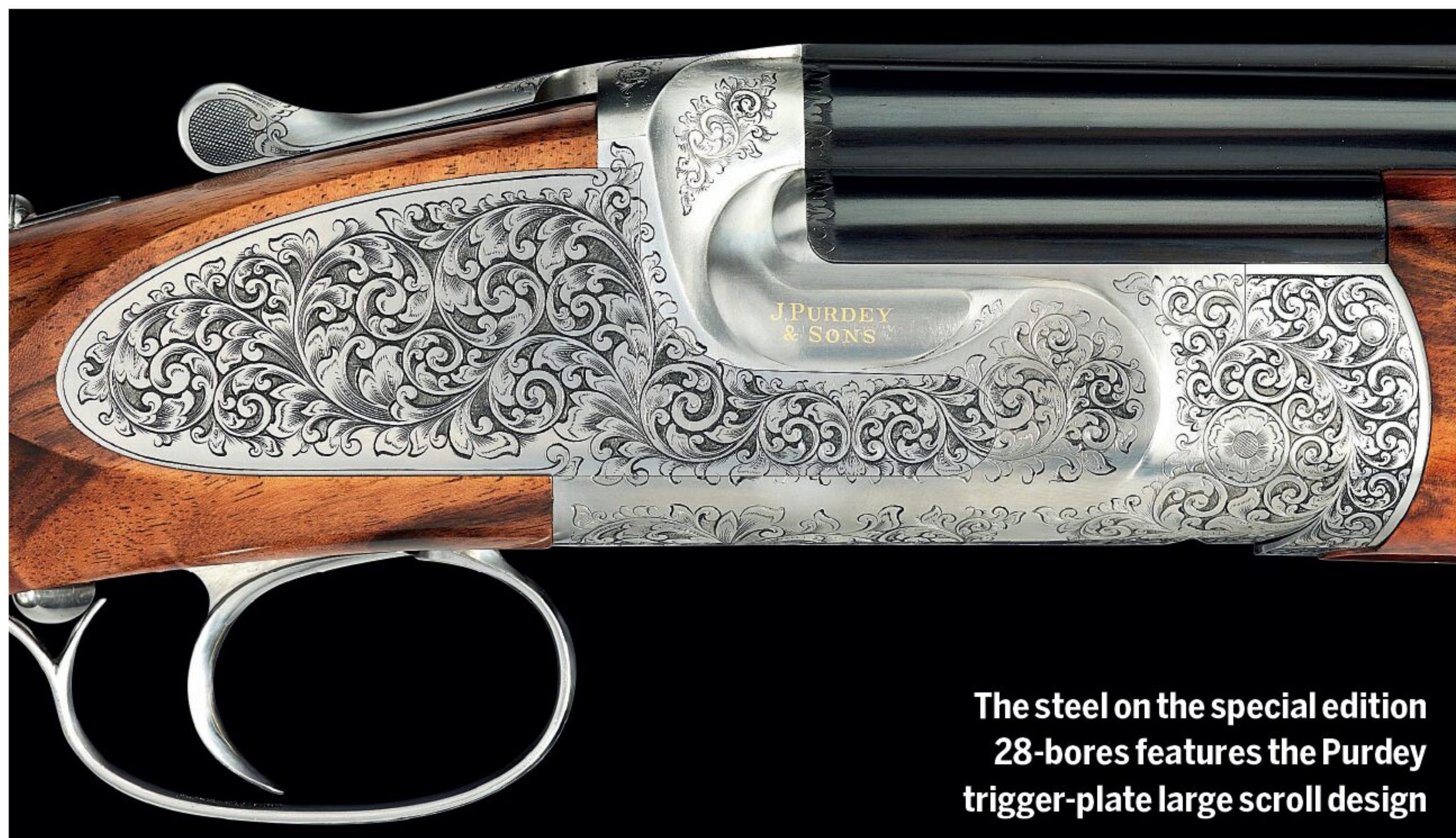
Each of the 10 exclusive versions are built from exhibition-grade stock, with full pistol grip and solid

game rib, made bespoke to the client's measurements. The steel is engraved with the Purdey trigger-plate large scroll, with the owner's choice of bird on the base of the action. They will also be engraved around the grip cap with "1814" and "2024".

"Details are understated and subtle, which is as it should be," said director of gun sales Andrew Ambrose, who anticipates the 28-bore

will suit to those who shoot in the US, as it's designed for smaller birds such as quail.

The package also includes a limited-edition embossed burgundy cartridge bag and gun slip, a leather case with essential gun-cleaning kit, and a limited-edition Purdey hunting knife made from damascus steel and high-quality walnut. The package price starts from £115,000 excluding VAT.



The steel on the special edition 28-bores features the Purdey trigger-plate large scroll design



Weekend X poll

What makes the best all-round gundog?

43% Labrador retriever

38% English springer spaniel

6% Hungarian vizsla

13% Other

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To do this week



FIX

Use any opportunities when the weather

breaks to your advantage. Make the most of any dry conditions to catch up on the maintenance tasks in the more difficult-to-access spots on your shoot. This could be an ideal chance to fix fences or get light machinery to the hard-to-reach areas, especially if rain continues to wreak havoc during the busy rearing season.



BOAR

Book a British boar hunt. Long

a staple of the continental shooting scene, boar hunting is relatively new in the UK (You still can't call in boaring, 20 March) but a range of British outfitters now offer this exhilarating year-round hunting experience.



Gwent Police, which brought in Project Titanium, are now questioning other family members, not only partners



Partners of applicants are part of the vetting

Five police forces in England and Wales are questioning the partners of those applying for firearms certificates as a layer of ‘safeguarding’

Partners and spouses of all gun licence applicants are being asked questions for the first time, as five police forces seek to strengthen licensing processes.

The Metropolitan Police, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Gwent forces are testing a questionnaire designed to build a more detailed picture of those wishing to own any sort of gun.

The initiative, known as Project Titanium, was developed by Gwent Police and has already resulted in some applications being refused or existing licences being revoked. This additional layer of safeguarding follows the introduction in late 2021 of medical forms to be filled out by the licence applicant’s GP.

The Project Titanium questionnaire is not a legal requirement, but applicants who refuse to engage or share their partner’s details could face an automatic refusal. More than 5,000 applications have been subject to the additional questions since the trial began last year. Gwent Police said its firearms licensing officers were trained to risk-assess scenarios that may raise red flags about an applicant. It said partners were interviewed alone — either

in person or in vision remotely — to make sure their answers were as truthful as possible.

When there was a risk that someone may not be able to be honest due to their domestic circumstances, the force said it opened an avenue of communication with police that they may feel able to use in the future. Gwent Police has now extended use of the questionnaire to other family members, not only partners.

The National Police Chiefs’ Council said extensive checks were carried out before someone was issued with a gun licence and statutory guidance had been updated,

“Departments must assess the evidence properly, rather than being risk-averse”

including around domestic abuse and “family turmoil”. A spokesman said three forces were testing more focused questioning as part of the licensing process to “proactively identify additional concerns around an applicant’s domestic home life and circumstances which may provide additional information as part of the overall assessment process”.

The spokesman added the results of the trial are being assessed but feedback received had been positive. “With new national licensing training due to be rolled out later this year by the College of Policing, we are working closely with them to consider how this process can be effectively implemented across all forces.”

Bill Harriman, BASC’s director of firearms, said: “BASC works for a licensing system that protects public safety. It is not in the public interest or the interest of those who shoot for unsuitable people to be licensed to own firearms. But it’s also important to make sure

safeguards are in place against malicious accusations of abuse — departments must make sure they assess the evidence properly, rather than being risk-averse and denying certificates on the basis of groundless allegations. BASC is always ready to work with the police to help achieve consistency of practice across police forces.”

**THEY
SAID
WHAT**

“You can travel the globe for the best meal but consuming fresh meat from your hunt is unparalleled”

Who said it:
Cai ap Bryn

Why: After an early-morning stalk in the South Downs, Cai cooks venison kebabs over an open fire (p22)

Gamebird release impact views are ‘groupthink’

Land managers may ignore evidence of gamebird impact depending on their job, a new paper by RSPB suggests.

The scientific paper highlights the perception divide on the impact of gamebird release between land managers employed by conservation NGOs and government, and those from farming and game shooting estates. The former were more likely to perceive the negative aspects of gamebird release such as detrimental changes to vegetation and soil. But the latter saw the positive ones, such as the extra food available for wild bird species.

In many cases stakeholder perceptions of impacts did not match the underlying scientific evidence base, indicating areas where raising awareness and better evidence may be required.



Perceptions of stakeholders relating to the impact of gamebird release sometimes did not match the scientific evidence

In general, keepers’ and farmers’ evaluations were more closely based on first-hand experience than those employed by NGOs.

Tim Bonner, chief executive of Countryside Alliance, said: “Negative assumptions, often shared in the echo chamber of social media, have generated a false

truth that has been adopted even by organisations which claim to be neutral and led by the evidence.

“These findings support the contention that there is an element of groupthink attached to the attitude of those working for NGOs, government and agencies about activities like shooting.”

Hen harriers in recovery

The population of hen harriers is showing signs of recovery throughout Great Britain, according to the RSPB’s 2023 survey.

The UK and Isle of Man population is estimated to be 691 territorial pairs. This is a 20% increase from the 545 pairs recorded in the last

survey in 2016 and arrests the trend of decline shown since the 2004 survey, when 749 pairs were recorded.

However, the RSPB has highlighted the “shocking” disappearance of 32 satellite-tagged hen harriers last year and cites illegal persecution as a major factor hampering

hen harrier recovery. The RSPB also says the raptors remain absent from large parts of England, such as the North York Moors, that are ideally suited habitats.

Lindsay Waddell, former chairman of the National Gamekeepers’ Organisation, told *Shooting Times*: “It’s all very well stating there is illegal killing, but transmitters fail as has been shown before, and no gamekeeper south of the border has been charged with any offence relating to persecution.

“It would have been good if for once the RSPB had highlighted the pluses, rather than once again trying to discredit the good work done by the gamekeeping community in managing these areas for all the birds which use them.”



The RSPB survey shows an increase in hen harriers in England

NEWS IN BRIEF

Balmoral now open for private tours

Balmoral announced new private tours that will allow visitors to explore the HM The King’s Scottish residence, including the estate’s vast grounds, for the first time. In recent years, similar decisions have been made to open castles and properties, including Inverness Castle — which is being renovated and will open next year — Middleton Castle in Norfolk and Hay Castle in Powys. The Countryside Alliance said: “As the right to access land in the UK continues to be a hot topic of conversation, landowners and policymakers should look to Balmoral’s initiative as an example of responsible access.”

Grey squirrel culled to protect reds

A grey squirrel that threatened Wales’s red squirrel population has been caught. The animal was first spotted in Anglesey in February and was reported to the Red Squirrels Trust Wales, amid concerns that it could have killed off the local species. The Trust’s Dr Craig Shuttleworth said greys are finding “*Mission Impossible*-style” ways of getting to the island, including riding trains and swimming the Menai Strait. After weeks of setting up trail cameras and traps, the grey squirrel was eventually captured and killed on 4 April. As a non-native species, it is illegal to release the animals back into the wild.



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Knife posting policy that cuts both ways

Proposals by Royal Mail to ban sending knives by post have been watered down but BASC is still on the case, says Conor O'Gorman

In February, Royal Mail announced that it would be banning the carriage of knives and other bladed items across its delivery network (News, 10 April and 14 February).

In March, I wrote to several senior people at Royal Mail raising BASC's concerns about the planned ban and the impact it would have on hundreds of small businesses across the UK which rely on online orders for knives via Royal Mail. I also wrote to Kemi Badenoch, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, about the announcement, requesting an intervention.

A response was received by email from the office of the chairman and chief executive office of Royal Mail Group Ltd, stating that this was a "Royal Mail business decision" that was "not open to discussion".

The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 took effect in 2022 as regards to the sale and delivery of knives and blades, and the age-verification system operated by Royal Mail is legally compliant with the Act.

Why was Royal Mail gold-plating UK law in trying to ban the delivery of knives and blades? After all, it had stated it would continue to carry other age-restricted items, including alcohol. I discussed this

with several BASC trade members, some of whom had also contacted Royal Mail and not received any explanation for the decision.

There seemed no logic to this from a business perspective. The delivery of small, light items as parcels are profitable for delivery providers and age-restriction checks upon delivery at the doorstep are a straightforward process for postal staff, not least when other age restricted items will continue to be delivered.

Delivery cost

Royal Mail is the preferred option for customers buying knives online. There were concerns that the loss of that option would impact on online sales, because people buying relatively low-cost bladed items, such as hobby knives, would be dissuaded from purchases via Parcelforce due to the relatively higher delivery cost against the value of the item.

There were also concerns about the risk of Royal Mail's unexplained decision triggering reviews by other delivery companies currently delivering knives, including Parcelforce, DPD and UPS.

We went back to Royal Mail with feedback, requesting postponement

of its decision. There was then some email ping-pong which culminated in an announcement that the ban would be replaced with more targeted restrictions.

So, as things stand, the revised Royal Mail policy, due to take effect on 7 May, is that it will continue to carry "any knife or knife blade, including cutlery knives, bread knives, knives that can be used for hobbies and trades (for instance, utility knives and snap-off cutters, gardening, camping, lock knives, bushcraft and farming tools with a blade or any other trade tool that could commonly be described as a knife), butcher knives (including meat cleavers), felling axes and razor blades".

Prohibited items will be "hunting/ combat/survival type knives, daggers, movie knives (such as *Rambo* or *Crocodile Dundee* style knives), replica fighting knives (such as Bowie knives), throwing knives, machetes, swords, fantasy knives, knives with images or words that suggest use for violence, stiletto knives, battle axes, open razors/ folding razors and any similar items".

Initial feedback from retailers on the restrictions are that the definitions are vague and leave them open to their deliveries being randomly stopped by postal staff with little training, resulting in unfair penalties. A key issue is what is meant by "hunting" knife.

We will continue to try to discuss these issues with Royal Mail as the revised policy takes effect. 🐦

➡ If you encounter issues with your knife orders via Royal Mail after 7 May please email conor.ogorman@basc.org.uk and it will be used in improving policy implementation.

🔗 Dr Conor O'Gorman is BASC's head of policy and campaigns. He has over 25 years of experience in conservation and land management and a keen interest in wild grey partridges. Contact him at: conor.ogorman@basc.org.uk



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XP50 LRF XP50	PUL-77493 PUL-77492	£3,099.95 Inc. VAT £3,399.95 Inc. VAT					



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FIELDSPORTS
— PRESS —

SHOOTING TIMES
24 April

Following Ireland's
extended stalking season,
gun care done properly,
pigeon shooting and testing
the new Browning B525
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LETTER OF THE WEEK

Does the heart
rule the head?

There are widely differing
opinions on the subject of shot
placement — heart and lung
or head and neck, which is
preferable? Game dealers like
head/neck shots — indeed,
they may insist on them — and
it's easy to see their point of
view. There is no wastage.

Most of us are taught
to place a shot in the engine
box; a certain kill with a much
wider margin for error. My
contention is that a head or
neck shot does not fully bleed
an animal. Without arguing
about the mechanics, simply
judge the relatively small pool
of dark blood from a head shot
compared with the copious
quantities from a heart/lung
shot in the chest cavity. It is
at least twice the quantity. A
head/neck shot deer carcass
retains more blood.

Does all this really matter?
Perhaps not much. The meat

will not last as long as the
bacteria in the blood will spoil
it more quickly. Does it look
different? Yes, it is obviously
darker. Does it taste different?
I personally think so. Opinions
vary from "metallic" to
"sweet" but I suspect most
punters probably don't notice.

The small market for
venison has existed for many
years. A large proportion
of that will have been head
shot, but the world does not
seem to have noticed. But I
have heard savvy continental
dealers refuse to accept head/
neck shot animals.

Finally, I would like to
comment on a letter in
Shooting Times in which
the writer refers to a "large
bleed" (a heart shot) as
being responsible for a
"gamier, unpalatable taste"
(1 November 2023). I couldn't
agree less but I imagine a
head/neck shot animal might
give him what he's looking for.
"Chacun a son gout" — each
to their own taste.

Richard Ahern, by email

➔ Do you favour heart/lung or
head/neck? Let us know at the
email address above.



WITHAM GROUP LETTER OF THE WEEK

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fieldsportspress.com to claim your prize.

Win!

PUBLISH AND
BE DELIGHTED

I have just read Lindsay
Waddell's latest article
(*Upland keeper*, 3 April)
regarding gamekeepers
and political indifference.
He mentions having a file of
scientific papers relating to land



**It is easy to accumulate all sorts of
papers that 'might be useful' one day**

management but does not name
them. I was wondering if Mr
Waddell would be willing to share
the titles of the papers
he has filed so that we can
all search for and familiarise
ourselves with them?
I would be keen to read them
myself and learn from them
as well as spread the word and

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Do stalkers carry far too much paraphernalia when they go out to shoot?

A MACHINEGUN FOR A BATTLE TANK?

I have only recently started to take *Shooting Times* again and was quite surprised to see the amount of paraphernalia that stalkers are using. Tripods that would not look out of place attached to an MG-42 machinegun, telescopic sights that feature built-in laser rangefinders, and ballistic targeting that would not be out of place on a main battle tank.

When I learned to shoot, albeit 50 years ago, we had to undertake exercises to assist in holding a rifle

steady, learn to estimate range, angle, wind drift and all those conditions required to take a shot and getting yourself into a good position, using the natural environment.

I still go out stalking, foxing and rabbit shooting but the thought of carrying around all that ironmongery makes me smile. All that is needed is an accurate rifle, a sharp knife and a few other items in a small daysack.

Have we now moved too far away from the principles of sporting rifle shooting, or is it now only about shooting something?

Leonard Gant, by email

get them more widely publicised. I am only aware of the Upland Predation Experiment at Otterburn and a similar study that was undertaken on Langholm Moor (the exact paper for which I have not yet found).

Erin Platt, by email

The Editor responds: You can read about Langholm at langholmproject.com and we will ask Lindsay to look out any gems he may still have on file.

BANNING CATS IS BIZARRE

The letter headed "Is it time to ban cats to save birds" is so ludicrous it sounds like a joke (*Letters*, 27 March).

The idea that cats should be — or even could be — banned is idiotic beyond belief. The whole world ecosystem and food chain is pretty well self-regulating, and taking out any species will simply upset the balance.

You might as well try to ban lions because they eat antelopes.

Cats have had their place since ancient history and were revered in many civilisations, such as the Ancient Egyptians, and they still exist as wonderful pets for some. Songbirds will continue to exist with or without cats, and even with or without many other predators that attack them.

William Robinson, Somerset

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ALFIE & BISCUIT

Jack Russell terrier dogs
Missing from Brocksbushes Farm, near Stocksfield, Northumberland since 10.03.24 White with brown and black markings
DogLost ID: 190959



JUDO

Jack Russell terrier cross dog
Missing from Hundred House near Llandrindod Wells, Powys since 25.02.24 Black and white
DogLost ID: 190760



NED

Jack Russell terrier cross dog
Missing from Bishton near Newport, South Wales since 20.02.24 Tan and black
DogLost ID: 190616



REMY

Border collie dog
Missing from Welburn near Malton, North Yorkshire since 18.03.24 Blue merle/grey
DogLost ID: 191090



SCOUT

Portuguese pointer dog
Missing from Greenlaw, Scottish Borders since 11.03.24 Yellow with white on face, chest and toes
DogLost ID: 190962



WINNIE

Cocker spaniel bitch
Missing from Bulkington west of Devizes, Wiltshire since 02.02.24 Black with white chest, docked tail and dew caws removed
DogLost ID: 190211



NAME WITHHELD

English springer spaniel bitch
Missing from Minterne Magna north of Dorchester, Dorset since 22.12.23 White and liver
DogLost ID: 189390



NAME WITHHELD

English springer spaniel bitch
Stolen from Winterborne Whitechurch, near Blandford Forum, Dorset on 09.10.23 Black and white Dorset
Police crime reference number: 55230168167
DogLost ID: 187677

“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

Rob Barnard is a headkeeper across two estates on the edge of the North York Moors



Gamekeeper



The season might be over, but there is plenty to be getting on with, from vermin control and cleaning kit to enjoying time with the family



With the sheep about to return to Rob's patch, his main jobs before their arrival include collecting up all the pegs and the feeders and drinkers

The Yorkshire Wolds are an incredibly special place for shooting and photos don't do them justice. With their deep glacier-formed dales it almost feels like the landscape was designed with shooting in mind. This is in sharp contrast with the Belgian landscape where I worked for a number of years as a junior keeper. There we bought poults in, which made for a pleasant change, but the language barrier made every interaction so much harder. I eventually picked up the lingo with a bit of a Yorkshire twang and things got easier.

In my current role as headkeeper for two large estates on the edge of the North York Moors, we are blessed with some

journey from the hatchery to the rearing field is minutes instead of hours. This massively reduces the stress to the chicks, which gives them a great start in life.

Buying chicks is a more expensive way of doing things than hatching eggs but it gives us cover in case of any problems in the hatchery. Poults tend to be expensive so we try to keep the numbers we buy in relatively low.

For now, there is tidying up to do. We start by gathering up the Guns' pegs as the sheep will soon be returning to our dales. If we don't get all the pegs in the sheep seem to take pleasure in trying to break as many as possible. Next we bring in the remaining manola feeders and drinkers. We do leave

washed and once before it is used next. This process is mundane, but essential to ward off bird flu.

At this time of year we must keep a close eye on pests. It doesn't take long to miss a litter of cubs and they quickly get away from you. For rat control my personal preference is using terriers, as it is a highly effective method and a great excuse to get a few friends together for a morning out.

Diversity

The moment the season ends I start organising and implementing plans for next one. As on many estates, there is a hard-fought balance between profitable farming and improving the shoot. This year we have plans to replace some old fencing, which is a great reason to move it slightly and at the same time extend the existing game cover. We are also looking into experimenting with different covercrops for diversity and to see what holds up better come December when our maize crop breaks down.

Although we're still busy, it has been lovely catching up on family time. From taking my partner's eldest to riding lessons, to spending a moment with our twins and keeping our 12 dogs out of trouble. There is even time for the family to come and support me as I make a rare appearance on the rugby field. 🐦

“There is a balance between profitable farming and improving the shoot”

precipitous topography that allows us to present some truly lovely birds. We put down roughly 50:50 pheasants to partridges and buy in half the numbers in eggs, along with some day-old chicks and a few poults to finish off. This spreads the risk and buying eggs makes things a little less expensive initially.

A major benefit to hatching (besides the cost) is that once they hatch off, the

a few tough metal feeders out to look after the elusive survivors of the season, and this helps promote some wild broods.

With all the equipment back in, it's time to reacquaint ourselves with the steam cleaner. As you can imagine, this isn't one of the most exciting jobs to do, despite the strange satisfaction it offers, but it is certainly one of the most vital. We disinfect everything twice, once as soon as it is



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Patrick Laurie

Country Diary

Ravens may cause problems in Galloway but they are certainly not the only predator impacting wader numbers right across the region

Displaying ravens are often the first sign of the turning year and there's little else to mark the dark days of January beyond the bark and roll of heavy black birds in the snow. It's always impressive to see them turning at high altitude and it's a smart trick for any bird to fly upside down in the height of its hormones.

Ravens have always been present in Galloway, but it's certainly true that protection from human disturbance has led to an explosion of their numbers here. In the old days, they were confined to the high and distant corries of the tallest hills, and you'd always call them moorland birds — but for the past 20 years they've been pouring down the glens to rougher farms on the edge of the sea. I can remember the first ravens that bred on my farm in 2001, choosing a stand of tall larch trees to build their vast, unwieldy nest.

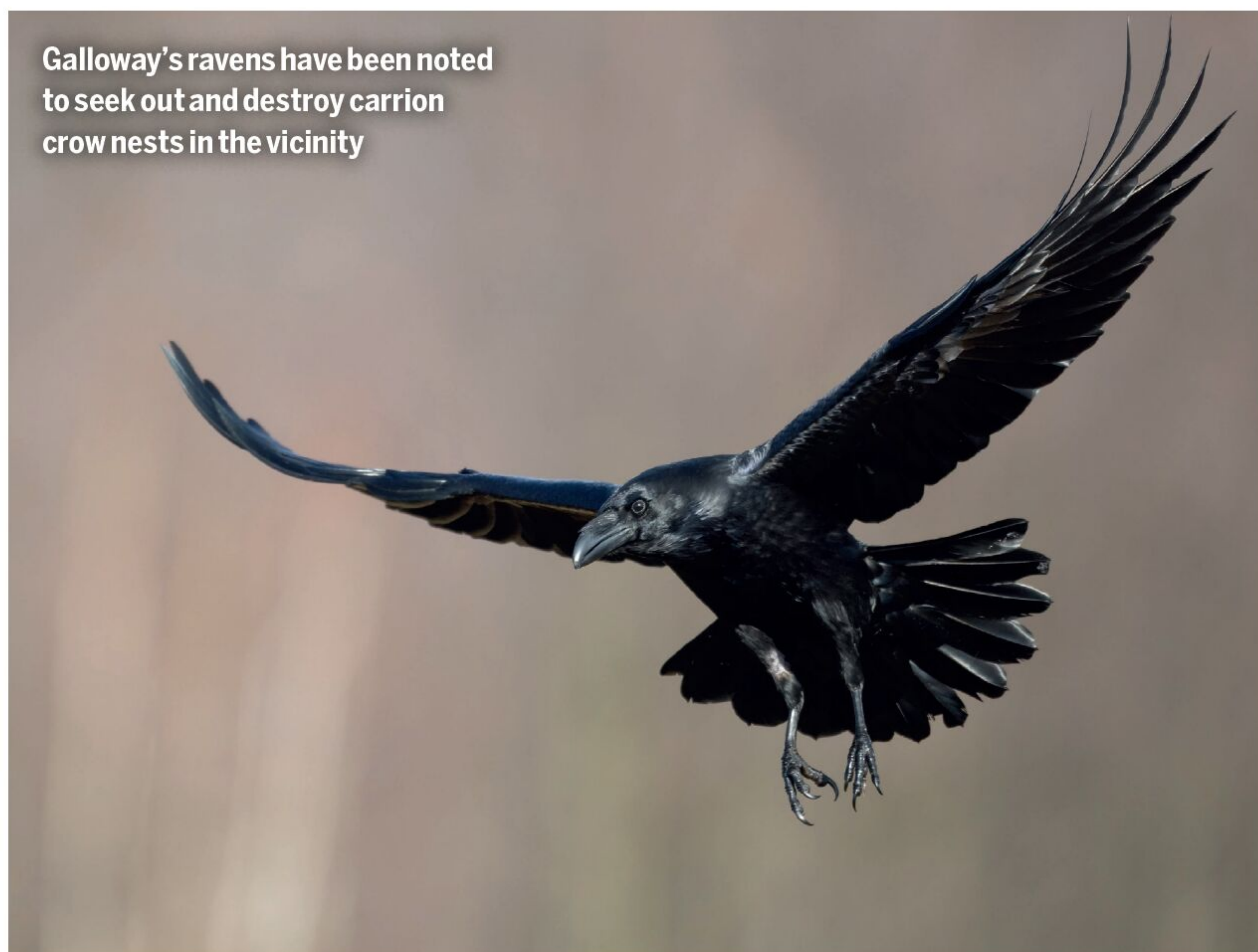
They were exciting birds back then, fresh with novelty and intrigue. As they've become more familiar, some of that initial excitement has worn off, but it's still good to see the birds in early spring and listen for their strange, conflicted calls.

Controversy

Of course, it's fair to say that ravens carry a degree of controversy wherever they go. As a farmer and conservationist, it certainly sets my teeth on edge to watch ravens prowling around my lambing fields and curlew nests. I've never had a problem bad enough to warrant the legal process of applying for a licence to shoot a bird or two, but I have lost lambs now and again. It's hard to know if the ravens target lambs that might have failed anyway, and by the time I find the remains of fallen stock all pulled apart by corvids, the cause of death is never clear. I know they do kill lambs, but they also eat lambs that are already dead, so I watch and learn — and if the time comes to intervene with a rifle, I will certainly take steps to act.

From the conservationist's perspective, I hear that most harm that ravens cause to waders such as curlew and lapwings is delivered by large gangs of non-breeding birds that sweep in and hunt across large

Galloway's ravens have been noted to seek out and destroy carrion crow nests in the vicinity



areas over the course of several weeks. From what I've heard, these flocks can make a terrible mess of wader chicks and I can easily believe they're a major issue in many parts of Scotland. For my part, I never see these big flocks in Galloway and I'm not entirely sure what threat they pose to ground-nesting birds.

I have monitored dozens of curlew nests over many years in south-west

of crows for two pairs of ravens is a net improvement — or whether I'm really only faced with the same problem from a completely new angle.

There are sometimes debates about raven control which seem to suggest that if only ravens could be culled, waders would surely rebound. I'm not trying to play down the significance of ravens as nest raiders and chick killers, but I'm not sure

“For the most part, ravens simply push crows out and take their territories”

Scotland. While I've gathered a mass of damning evidence to prove the significance of badgers, foxes and carrion crows as predators here, I'm yet to see a single sign of ravens causing harm. In fact, I've even noticed that where ravens are well established at the nest, they'll actively seek out and destroy all carrion crow nests in the surrounding area.

For the most part, ravens simply push crows out and take their territories, but I have also seen ravens raiding crow nests and eating both chicks and eggs, which has sometimes saved me a job. However, it remains to be seen if swapping 10 pairs

the situation is quite so simple in Galloway. Badgers are a far bigger issue here, but I also acknowledge there are many parts of Scotland where waders are declining that don't have any badgers either.

If we're serious about wader conservation, we should probably acknowledge that there's no one-size-fits-all solution. 🐦

Patrick Laurie manages a programme to promote farming and conservation, with a particular focus on wading birds and black grouse, and runs a farm in Galloway.

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Stalking Diary

A love for deerstalking and the rewards of bringing new people into the sport trump the inconsistencies that still plague the FAC system



Deerstalking demands a high calibre of participant but those signing off FACs need to be similarly qualified

It has been an enjoyable but hectic week at Garryloop, running a DSC Level 1 course over the weekend with three candidates adding some stalking, butchery and advanced range training around the assessment. All were inexperienced; two had stayed with us at the back end of last year on an introductory package and were returning to take the DSC1 prior to joining stalking syndicates.

I enjoy the training aspect of the job; I am indeed fortunate that I can walk out of my door with hound and rifle, but I confess to getting the most satisfaction from introducing new people to stalking. To be guiding guests on those early forays into the field, pointing out deer for the first time, harvesting an animal and then taking them through the complete field-to-fork experience is extremely rewarding.

Completion

After a few decades of doing this, I have yet to meet anyone who has not thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience. The vast majority continue the journey through to obtaining an firearms certificate and getting out on their own. Consequently, I often assist with the application process and have regular dealing with firearms enquiry officers (FEO), from across the UK. Until recently, I have always found these officers to be fair and professional, but it would seem that things are changing. I am picking up some disquiet from applicants, which is

usually centred around the length of time the paperwork is taking to process and a lack of expertise among the enquiry officers themselves.

I suppose we should not be surprised about the lack of timely completion. It seems to me that delays and mistakes are an accepted fact these days — probably down to money and what I would describe as a general lack of work ethic in many cases. But what concerns me around the issue of an FAC is the potential consequences of mistakes. Surely we cannot have police staff employed in this

on several occasions prior to this with professional stalking guides. The officer at interview had advised him to apply for a .308 and, after a period of six months, he could then submit a variation for his preferred 6.5 x 55.

A day later, I took a call from a chap enquiring about coming along for range training and an introduction to stalking course. During the conversation I learned he had no experience of firearms, had never been stalking or shooting but wanted to learn anyway. At the end of this call, just as a throwaway comment, he said he had

“I am indeed fortunate that I can walk out of my door with hound and rifle”

role who are not properly experienced or trained in what is a specialist field?

I am an advocate of the FAC system in the UK; it is robust (and it needs to be) and it is fair. None of us want firearm certificates to be issued to the wrong people. The implications of that do not bear thinking about. I have direct experience of dealing with officers who are being tasked with processing FAC applications who are beat constables picking it up as part of a shift tasking. My worries were not eased either after recent conversations, the first with one of my guests.

The guest had passed his DSC1, had access to stalking ground and been out

just been issued with an FAC and would be bringing his newly purchased .243 along with him. Blimey.

However, there is also room for optimism as the following day I received a call from a newly formed police firearms unit. “Could you run a familiarisation day for the officers to explain the DMQ system along with subjects covered and run a range session to give them an understanding of deer legal rifles?” they asked. I am only too happy to oblige. 🦋

🦋 Chris Dalton is the founder of South Ayrshire Stalking. Visit ayrstalk.co.uk

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Sporting Life

Our head wear protects us, aids us and often says a lot about our personality

The practicalities of headwear appropriate to the countryside and fieldsports are manifold: they can protect horse riders from injury in the event of a fall or an overhanging branch; prevent the rain from going down your neck or, conversely, screen the eyes from blinding sun. When out pigeon shooting, the shadow of a peak helps shield the face of the decoyer from the astute eyes of their quarry and, as with a collar and tie, a hat of some description is often considered correct form in the shooting field.

Although in many cases of traditional design, some seen out in the field undoubtedly indicate the individuality and idiosyncrasies of the wearer — as Sir John Astley noted when, in 1847, he was invited to join a Germanic shooting party and observed a particularly diverse array.

“Every hat or cap was bedecked with some trophy of the chase — pig’s tails, ears, and bristles were de rigueur, and titbits of the wolf, badger, fox and roe deer were, together with selections from peacocks’ and pheasants’ tails, evidently much prized,” wrote Sir John.

During the Edwardian period, Charles Harbord, 5th Baron Suffield, was apparently well known for his bizarre choice of hats and one which he wore in the presence of the

King on a shooting day at Sandringham was described by a contemporary as “looking as if it had been fashioned by a pickaxe and shovel and run over by a dozen omnibuses”.

It seems though, that it’s possible to wear almost any form of hat while fishing — but that perhaps depends on who is wearing it. It is no coincidence that, since the arrival of BBC Two’s *Mortimer & Whitehouse: Gone Fishing*, the sales of the style of headwear as worn by its co-star Bob Mortimer have increased.

Crooner

Celebrity endorsement has long been thus. Bing Crosby, arguably one of the most iconic singers and actors of all time, was, as many know, a keen fisherman. In 2012, “a group of seven hats” owned by the US crooner was sold by Bonhams via its Los Angeles offices — and included a “turquoise fishing hat with striped grosgrain ribbon band”.

Sometimes a hat is part of a person’s personality. I know of one Gun who, despite the passing years, seems ever handsome and youthful. Alighting from his car at the start of the day, he greets everyone enthusiastically as he dons a very old and battered baker boy cap before removing it with debonair old-age charm

in order to kiss all the ladies of the group. Like peahens faced with the attention of a peacock, they are smitten and giggle coquettishly while we male onlookers stand watching enviously with a fixed grin.

Whether because of attracting the ladies or not, the baker boy type of flat cap seems to have become more popular in the shooting field in recent years, but no matter what the style, most hats are worn without comment from fellow Guns.

There are, of course, exceptions, such as when the cap very obviously doesn’t fit the wearer — in which case, when among long-time friends, a new purchase invariably creates ridicule and may even, as I’ve once witnessed, cause the owner to throw it into the air and a fellow Gun to shoot it down in the manner of a clay pigeon.

But no matter what your chosen sport, while you might throw your favourite titfer in the air in exhilaration after bringing down the high bird that everyone else has missed, or to the ground in frustration when a played fish is lost, you should recall the wise words of American writer EB White: “Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope... for tomorrow is another day!” 🐦

➡ *What choice of headgear do you favour in the field? Let us know at ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com*



Many pigeon shooters swear by a peaked cap when in the hide, not least for their functionality

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



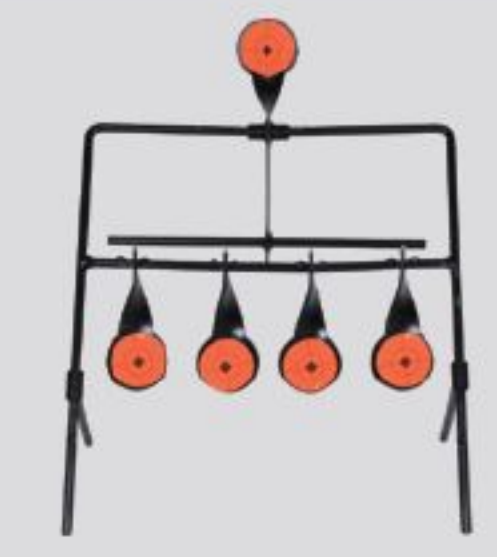
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Field to fork for a fallow

Is there any better way to celebrate a
successful stalk than to cook the culled
beast's meat over an open fire?

WRITTEN BY CAI AP BRYN ♦ PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW SYDENHAM

Cai ap Bryn parks the Polaris and scans the East Sussex countryside for signs of fallow



Fallow stalk



Cai settles his rifle into the sticks so he can be sure of taking an accurate shot



Cai favours Norma Whitetail ammunition that suits his Bergara Wilderness rifle

The day began at 5am with the scent of freshly brewed coffee filling the air. After a light breakfast, I carefully gathered my gear: the reliable Bergara Wilderness rifle in .308, a supply of Norma ammunition and let's not forget the necessary modern tool for professional deer management, the thermal spotter.

By 5.30am, I had left my home for Heathfield in East Sussex. My destination was one of the farms where I have permission to hunt, a beautiful part of the country. The farm itself sits high, offering

spectacular views over the South Downs and beyond. It is mainly arable, a mix of wild bird seed, crops and grazing, with multiple areas of ancient and coppiced woodland. And in this particular area, there has been a significant rise in deer numbers over the past decade.

In East Sussex, we have large pockets of woodland and small fields bordered by many spinneys, creating perfect deer corridors for them to move around unseen. The climate in the UK, particularly in the south, provides ideal conditions for deer. It rarely gets too cold and being warm

for most of the year has improved survival rates and increased food options, helping the deer thrive. Over the past five years, the increase in deer numbers here has been further boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prolific

Fallow deer are particularly prolific in this region. And at this time of year, both males and females are in season, so our chances are strengthened. I began to walk, scanning various fields and woodland blocks. Some of the fields had been freshly turned over and, with the added rainfall, it made for a bit of a challenging hike.

During the first hour after sunrise, I spotted different groups of deer; some were not on my permission, some were spooked and some were the wrong species – roe. We don't shoot the roe deer as we are actively trying to increase their numbers slightly because the heavy population of fallow has pushed them out.

After covering a few miles of ground over two hours, I spotted a group of about 10 fallow across the valley. A closer inspection revealed a mix of mature does, yearlings and a young male nestled in the middle. The deer were a good 500m away and this wasn't going to be an easy stalk.



Cai stops frequently to scan the various woodland blocks where fallow deer might be sheltering



After identifying an old fallow doe, Cai follows up with a successful shot

Many factors were in the way before I could get in position to deliver the shot. From my vantage point, I moved across the valley, staying out of sight and downwind from the deer.

While 500m doesn't sound too far, it's an awful long way to navigate through undergrowth, bushes and unfavourable terrain, and through all of it to remain unseen on the journey to our quarry. As I got closer, I came around the deer, slowly coming in over the top, working painstakingly slow to break the distance and get within shooting range.

“The shot rang out and the deer lunged forward; it was clean, ethical and precise”

As I was positioning myself to shoot down towards them, peering over the brow and spotting the deer, I noticed a farmhouse directly behind them, making it an unsafe shot. I crept back up and moved sideways until I had a clear shot. I readied my rifle and chambered a round as quietly as I could.

By then, the deer had started to move. This really wasn't ideal. I knew they weren't spooked; they were slowly ambling along into open ground heading towards a woodland block on the other side of the field.

Where at first they would have been around 100m away, they were now pushing 180m. This was validated by a quick glance through the Vortex Fury binoculars, which have a built-in rangefinder.

Old doe

Instinctively, with my Bergara placed snugly in my Viper-Flex sticks, I made a loud “meeeeh” noise, a sound I have always used to stop moving deer in their tracks. This worked beautifully and presented a safe shot out to the doe at the rear. I could tell she was an old doe but still in good condition.

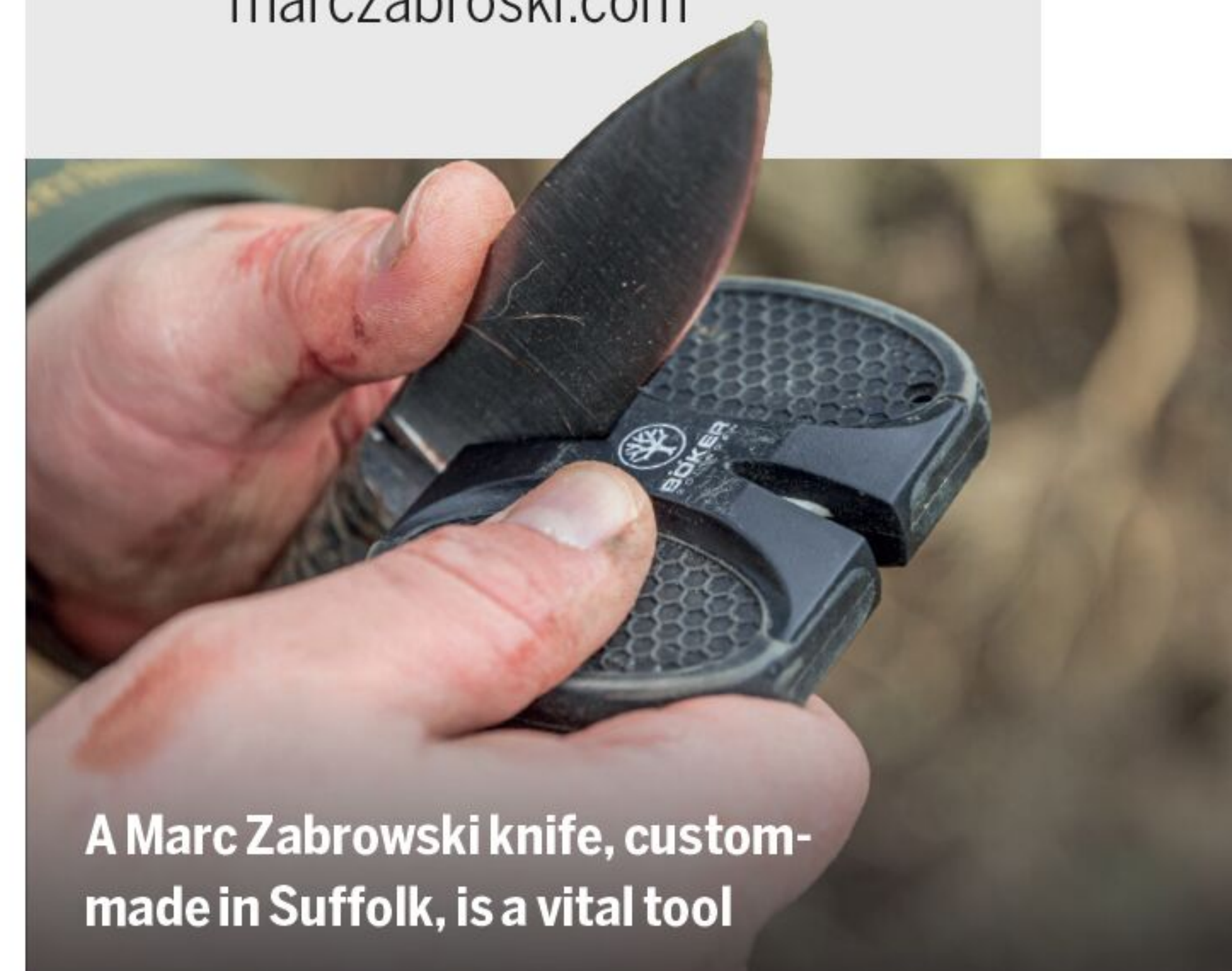
I took off my safety and placed my finger square on the trigger. I took

a deep breath and aimed just behind the front shoulder. The rifle was zeroed at 100m. I raised the crosshairs around 1½in and gently squeezed the trigger. The shot rang out, I instantly heard the hollow thud and the deer's front end lunged forward.

I knew in a split second the shot was good; all the signs indicated the bullet had found its mark. But I watched the doe as she took her last steps and dropped, legs twitching, and soon she lay still. It was clean, ethical and precise. I couldn't have asked for more. ➔

Cai's stalking kit

- 🔗 **Rifle** Bergara B14 Wilderness in .308
artemisoutdoorsuk.co.uk
- 🔗 **Riflescope** Meopta Optika 63-18x56
meopta.com
- 🔗 **Binoculars** Vortex Fury rangefinder binoculars
vortexoptics.com
- 🔗 **Ammunition** Norma Whitetail 150-gr .308
norma-ammunition.com/en-gb
- 🔗 **Thermal spotter** Pulsar XQ38F monocular
scottcountry.co.uk
- 🔗 **Stalking boots** Treksta Winchester 10in
newforestclothing.co.uk
- 🔗 **Stalking jacket** Deerhunter Game Pro Light Jacket
deerhunter.eu
- 🔗 **Knife** Marc Zabroski custom
marczabroski.com



A Marc Zabrowski knife, custom-made in Suffolk, is a vital tool

Fallow stalk

As I approached the doe, I readied my rifle and had my sticks on hand to test the reaction on her eye to validate her passing. A gentle prod indicated she had died. The field itself was large and sloping, which was not ideal for carcass extraction. She was a big doe and an old one too, perhaps pushing 11 years old.

I headed back to the road where I left the Polaris and drove it down for extraction. From here, I took her to a nearby tree and performed a suspended gralloch. For me, this is the easiest and cleanest way to perform a gralloch, both outside or indoors. I hung her up using the

“The field was large and sloping, which was not ideal for carcass extraction”

pulley, which makes light work of shifting large deer. After the inspection, the carcass was clean and ready for the larder. Before taking the deer down, I removed the inside fillets and placed them in a clean container. I had some tasty plans for these.

By this time, it was late morning. I decided to make some delicious venison kebabs in the nearby woodland, using my homemade rub. Luckily for me, where the farm is situated lies the most wonderful and friendly village shop. We are so privileged because sadly it seems more and more of these wonderful independent stores no longer survive.



Having built a fire and whittled branches to make skewers, Cai cooks his venison over the flames

I was lucky to be able to pick up some supplies, ideal for a lunchtime treat.

I drove the Polaris to the woodland and found a beautiful, tranquil little spot. I quickly set up a little camp and started to make a fire. Recently, the weather has been so wet, so the ground was rather damp. I had some logs and kindling with me that was nice and dry and created a nice warming fire. Once the fire was lit, I then foraged for some V-shaped sticks, four in total, and set them in the ground at either end of the fire. These would be my support for my kebab skewers.

Staple rub

Once I had set up my fire, I then picked out two long green branches and whittled them down to make skewers. Setting them aside, I started

to dice the fillets into 2in pieces and coated them with my blend of paprika, black pepper, salt, lime juice and garlic – a staple rub that we use all the time at my company Game and Flames. I followed by adding the courgette, onion and red pepper before impaling them systematically to the skewers. I could hardly wait, I was starving from the morning’s pursuits. I placed the kebabs over the fire, resting on wooden frames I had constructed.

I turned them continually to create an even colour because I didn’t want these kebabs to be well done. I simply took them off when they were nice and textured, but deliciously pink in the middle.

Ten minutes later, I savoured the most exquisite snack in the Sussex countryside, a perfect culmination to the day using fresh meat from the morning’s harvest. To me, this is the ultimate reward for a stalker. You can splurge on fine dining or travel the globe for the best meal but, I assure you, the feeling of satisfaction and gratitude from consuming fresh meat from your morning’s hunt is unparalleled. It’s an almost indescribable sensation.

I couldn’t help but sit there amid the ancient oak, ash and chestnut trees and imagine our great hunting ancestors doing the same, feasting on the spoils of a successful hunt around the warmth of an open fire. 🦋



Cai uses a pulley system to lift the doe’s carcass into a nearby tree for the suspended gralloch



➡️ **Fallow kebabs**
For the full recipe,
go to p54



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Eggs, poults or day-olds?

The choice is yours, but do make sure you have taken expert advice, urges Felix Petit

Depending on the set-up, poults are probably the largest single outlay that shoots face each year. This means it is of the utmost importance to buy well and limit further costs later in the season. It sounds simple enough but buying quality stock then introducing it effectively to its new environment comes with all manner of potential pitfalls. Navigating the labyrinthine route to a healthy flock of gamebirds that endure through the season, and fly well over your specific topography, is no mean feat.

To give your birds the best chance, you must foster a close relationship with your game farmer, recognise good value – not only low cost – listen to expert advice and not overstock nor cut corners with your own set-up. These are just the superficial challenges. Climate, disease and politics can all throw a spanner in the works of the best-laid plans.

Why buy poults at all? This is a valid question. It is possible, as our keeper used to do on our small shoot in Dumfries and Galloway, to catch-up wild eggs or keep a number of laying hens to provide your own eggs for incubation. In theory, this is very low cost and reduces the risk of disease being brought in from elsewhere. However, it requires a hefty amount of kit from incubators to transfer machines, rearing units to heat lamps, and if any of this equipment malfunctions or is misused, you risk losing large numbers of chicks, which can be heartbreaking as well as costly.

Labour-intensive

On top of the necessity for equipment is the extra workload. Hatching and rearing is extremely labour-intensive. In the current sporting climate many concessions to cost must be made, so plenty of shoots are syndicated or divide labour in other ways, so do not



employ a full-time keeper to shoulder this burden. If there is a permanent keeper, they will likely have a broad range of duties from maintenance to vermin control.

Will Walker of MG Walker & Sons game farm in Hertfordshire, when asked about the wisdom of hatching, said: “Maybe for shoots that employ full-time keepers it is more cost-effective for them to rear or hatch their own, but it is virtually a 24/7 job. Unless you are experienced it can easily go wrong and that saving has soon gone, especially with the rising costs we have faced over the past few years. The margins are tight.”

James Chiltern of Chiltern Game Birds in Buckinghamshire struggled with supplies of day-old chicks for his shoot. Like many shoots in the home counties, he sourced his chicks from France. Eventually, the logistics chain became too uncertain and he started his own game farm, which is still thriving years later. He now has



ANDY HOOK: ALAN WARD; HENRY HUNT: SHUTTERSTOCK

The success of a shoot rests on the quality of its birds so do not be tempted to cut any corners

Of course the price of poults must be a consideration but any savings you make must be offset against other factors



The game industry has worked hard to cut down on antibiotic use but it's ongoing, so make sure you know and trust your supplier

a regular supply of birds for his shoot and has reduced the risk of disease brought in from the Continent.

When trying to decide on where to source your poults, it is likely that the first thing you will look at is their price. Every expert I spoke to in the gamebird farming industry has stressed that price should not be your main concern and, despite their vested interest, their reasoning is

but highlights that it does impact the bottom line: "As a sector, we have worked very hard to limit antibiotic usage, and have received recognition for doing so, but we have got further to go. The only way forward is to employ good management advice and quality staff, use quality equipment and reduce stocking levels.

"All this comes at a cost and the sector as a whole needs to support

"He has a regular supply of birds for his shoot and has reduced the risk of disease"

compelling. Everyone is feeling the pinch in the industry but this should not cause you to make savings that impact the final product or risk the health and success of your adult birds.

George Davis, chairman of the Game Farmers' Association, draws attention to the excellent work that has been done to reduce the industry's reliance on antibiotics,

that. You get what you pay for and if some are prepared to cut corners to produce cheap birds the car crash will happen sooner rather than later," he warned.

When asked about what you should prioritise in poult buying, Marc Brown, marketing and shoot sales manager at Bettws Hall in Wales, said: "Quality. Quality. Quality. Not

all poults are hatched and reared equally and it is so important that you know and trust your supplier to be rearing your stock to the best standards of assurance and welfare."

Standards

This mantra echoes throughout the industry. Marc continued: "Many suppliers and customers have a strong relationship, like in any business, but if you are trying out a new supplier for whatever reason, be prepared to visit the facility or at the very least ask about their standards, biosecurity, where they get their eggs and/or chicks from and what procedures are in place to rear the birds."

Visiting your supplier has been recommended by every game farmer I have spoken to. Far from a mysterious world that raises birds in secrecy away from prying eyes, employing questionable practices, they are all encouraging oversight and collaboration. ➔

Gamekeeping

James Chiltern explained that visiting your supplier has manifold benefits. You can confirm that the poults you are buying are being raised ethically with due care and attention, and you can try to match your own set-up to the one that they were born in, thus reducing the stresses they experience when they reach their new destination.

Cannibalism

Visiting your game farmer allows you to reassure yourself that stocking densities are appropriate, with low anxiety levels for the birds and no incidences of cannibalism. It also allows you to assess the quality of a larger sample size than the one you receive. A visit to the origin of birds affords all customers the chance to ask detailed questions about feed type and breed-specific behaviour, which can inform any future strategies regarding nutrition and release.

Michael Wood, owner and managing director of Westfield

“The label may say 20% protein, but there’s 30% protein in a leather shoe”

Farms in North Yorkshire, says the value of identifying what feed your poults have been raised on cannot be overstated. It gives an indication of what works best for them and continuing to feed them on something similar will make the transition to their new home as smooth as possible, building on the growth that they have already achieved.

Michael explained: “The main thing to focus on, and the biggest cost after the birds, is the food you feed them on. When buying pheasant or partridge poults, discuss with the rearer what diet the birds should be fed on when they arrive. We all want to give our poults the best chance to thrive and stay healthy. It is desperately important that the digestible energy in the food you choose to feed to young birds fresh into the release pen is high.”

With regards to the nutritional value of feed, Michael said: “Even though the label says 20% protein, it’s worth remembering there is 30% protein in a leather shoe, but it’s



The biggest outlay after the birds themselves will be their food, so ask what they’ve been reared on

definitely not available to a bird even if it tried to eat it.”

It should go without saying that on viewing or receiving poults you should check over a good sample to make sure that they are not suffering from any serious ailments. When looking over the birds it is worth checking that they are not overly thin, do not have any lice, raised scales on their legs (a sign of mites), watery eyes, significant feather pecking damage or suffer from any apparent respiratory condition.

Appropriate strain

James Chiltern urged customers to use their game farmer’s knowledge in any way they can when buying poults. He suggested explaining to your supplier the sort of shoot you have so they can recommend the most appropriate strain of pheasant.

For instance, the Kansas pheasant is well suited to lowland shoots with less-than-ideal topography because it is flighty and flies well from covercrops. Equally, if your shoot is

surrounded by land that is not shot, or you have unscrupulous neighbours who feed your birds away on the margins, your supplier might recommend an English blackneck, which is well known for staying put.

The holistic and oft-repeated advice when buying poults is to find a supplier you trust. If like Westfield Farms your provider has been running since 1953, it is more than likely it is satisfying customers and has a good product.

Will Walker agrees: “Origin of the stock is probably the most important element to consider; how long has the game farm been established, does the game farm operate a closed flock with strict disease control, or do they produce from caught-up hens or imported eggs or chicks?”

Marc Brown has a similar outlook: “Your stock is your success. Our journey with you does not stop at delivery of the poults, but instead continues to the end of your season. Find a supplier who wants to be part of your journey.” 🐦

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Are rewards enough?

Harsh training is out, reward-based training is in, but does that always mean that a dog will fulfil its potential, wonders Ryan Kay



THERE ARE SECTIONS of the gundog world that seem to carry a tag of having a heavy-handed style of training, and this has been the case for as long as I can remember. The link is definitely still there, gripped and entangled, like the burdocks that attach to a dog's coat. It's perhaps an unspoken perception.

Even if you knew nothing about gundog training or gundogs, you'd somehow suspect that somewhere along the line there might be an element that involves being, shall we say, firm. Men with dogs – being firm with dogs. That was the picture back then. It was often the norm and deemed perfectly acceptable when I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s that when a dog did something wrong in the eyes of its handler, a firm response would usually ensue. I'm actually being unjust to the word "firm" here, as I'm using it to summarise the full scale of what actions were considered acceptable at the time.

The good news is that the approach to gundog training, and indeed the approach to general dog training, has evolved a lot over the past decade or so. Books have been published by trainers based on different thinking accompanied by newly devised

methods. Positive reinforcement training is the ethos of much of the newer styles – based on rewarding the dog with anything from treats to toys for desired behaviour.

The rise of the canine behaviourist has complemented such techniques, armed with a greater understanding of our dogs' actions. Even with this added insight and knowledge, available for those who want to learn it, there are still those that stick with

consider, such as the chosen breed, the dog's individual breeding and characteristics, available resources and its temperament. You can also add in the skills and dogmanship of the handler – how well they read their dog and whether they respond proactively or reactively.

I'm not convinced that only one training style will get the same result with every dog that sits in front of you. But as a believer in reward-based

"I'm not convinced that one training style will get the same result with every dog"

a more aversive approach to their training, perhaps based on the "if it isn't broken don't fix it" theory.

Some trainers are now marketing themselves according to what type of trainer they are, with labels such as "positive only", "reward based" or even "balanced". Of course, nobody promotes themselves as "aversive" but we all know it's there. So why wouldn't you train using a reward-based ethos from the very start?

I know what effort it takes and exactly what is involved in order to get a working dog up to the highest level, but within that training process are so many variables and elements to

methodology myself, I was keen to know how other trainers who promote this kinder way of training get on and what their results were.

Highest standards

As part of my research, I posted a message in a reward-based spaniel training Facebook group, asking members who worked their dogs to post videos of them hunting. I also asked them to describe the reward-based training process or methods they used in order to get their dogs to that standard. Just to clarify: the highest standard in my eyes is a spaniel that hunts with

purpose, flushes, sits immediately, is steady to a shot bird or rabbit, then retrieves swiftly on command. Or perhaps a retriever that sits patiently at the peg during a drive, marks everything down, and then collects on command, before delivering efficiently and gently to hand – perhaps after being smartly directed for the odd bird). As this exercise was in a spaniel group, though, we'll stay with the spaniels.

Engaging

Group members did post some really engaging methods and processes, both on the page and directly to me. I really wasn't expecting to see videos of the high standard I describe above, but there were some really nice demonstrations of instilled control brought about by using engaging games or treats, or both. The best video was posted by vet Vicky Payne.

Vicky's video showed her springer hunting into the wind while covering a nice beat, before eventually flushing a rabbit. Her dog was steady and sat to the rabbit as it ran away. Vicky then listed the reward-based training methods she'd used to get her dog to that stage. I was impressed. Many other videos showed hunting and flushing but with less evidence of connection and working in unison with the handler, perhaps with less steadiness or control. I

n all, I was sent some engrossing training descriptions and great techniques that would be really useful to any gundog



Who doesn't want a retriever that waits by its peg until called upon?

RYAN'S VIEWPOINT

WEIGHING UP THE PROBLEM

Training a Sussex spaniel calls for creative thinking

A couple of years ago, I had a one-to-one lesson with a lady and her lovely Sussex spaniel. We do enjoy seeing some of the less common breeds here at Farlavale and, for me personally, I like the challenge of seeing what's possible with breeds that aren't your everyday spaniels and labs.

Generally speaking, we do see many breeds from the HPR group, such as Hungarian vizslas and German shorthaired pointers, but we currently also see breeds like *Bracco Italianos*, munsterlanders, weimaraners, Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers and clumber spaniels.

A Sussex spaniel though, is a rare thing. With many of these breeds, there has to be a different approach. Once I've established what an owner ideally wants, it's then about seeing what's "in" the dog and what's doable. Carrying this out often presents behaviours that may differ to what we trainers see from the mainstream breeds. It's then a case of taking a step back and looking how to advance from there. Like I say, I enjoy the challenge of something different and then finding a solution. With this particular Sussex spaniel, though, I was stumped.

Throwing a ball out to test retrieving instinct would see the dog run out but



While Ryan usually encounters a variety of breeds, Sussex spaniels are a rare sight

repeatedly pick it up and put it down, over and over again. The dog was happy and willing, and the desire was there, but figuring out why the dog continued to drop yet constantly pick the ball up was baffling. Some soft rolled-up gloves worked a little better, and this gave me a clue to the problem.

As the dog stood there with the gloves in its mouth, I got a glimpse of the predicament. This lovely soft-natured dog had an excessive amount of jowls around its mouth, so when it closed its jaw the jowls would get trapped between the teeth and the retrieving item, clearly making it uncomfortable and difficult enough for him to carry anything other than lightweight, soft material items. Sadly, despite its enthusiasm, retrieving was taken off the training list.

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

owner looking to establish a solid relationship with their young dog, with all the practices kept positive and kind. Why would you not want to train in this way?

Connectivity

There really is no reason why games and treats shouldn't be used to create connectivity and to shape behaviour, especially in the early stages of a gundog's life. I always consider the first year as the most important, and progress can be quite linear in this early period, providing you're keeping things achievable and fun.

A customer recently told me he'd never used treats in his training but that he would be happy to introduce them. It was gratifying, then, when

he returned and said he felt that by doing so it had really accelerated his dog's learning and progress.

The next element is often where the struggle comes, and it can be the real decider and divider among the reward-based and even the aversive-style of trainers. It's how your initial training in achievable environments then translates and transfers to the real world, where we encounter the element of game. As a handler, you're only as important as the most important thing in the room and if, for example, that room had rabbits in it, what are you going to do?

A rabbit is often the top temptation for most high-drive spaniels. While many pet dog reward-based trainers might want their dog to focus ➡

Fumbling around with a clicker can be confusing for the dog, while reward-based training methods (inset) may be effective if started early



its attention back on them (the handler), in the working world, we actually want the dog's focus to stay on the rabbit while maintaining a connection to us. Game is the ultimate high-value item that can potentially cause a handler applying any training ethos to come unstuck.

temperament." I understand what he meant, but what do you do with a male dog that has got a typical male temperament? A dog so driven and hard-headed that even a more aversive or heavy-handed approach would fail to result in steadiness in the most testing of moments.

"To do well with a male cocker, you ideally want a dog with a bitch temperament"

In my research, I was also sent a couple of examples by professional reward-based trainers of their spaniels flushing pheasants, then instantly looking to their handler for a toy reward for not chasing the bird. They were then thrown either a ball or a toy to quickly chase and get. It was impressive work.

But there was a catch – neither dog was used to retrieving game; one of the dogs had never even been sent for a retrieve. Not one pheasant had ever been in its mouth, so there was no connection or association for the dog whatsoever.

A high-drive spaniel that has experienced the delights of a pheasant in its mouth, whether they were picking-up, out rough shooting or even from an accidental pegging of a random bird while in the beating line, only has one thing on its mind and this makes the whole exercise a different proposition altogether.

A well-known cocker man once said: "To do well with a male cocker, you ideally want a dog with a bitch

Perhaps these types are the ones that would actually benefit the most from early reward-based training, where a real connected relationship can be built on trust. It's perhaps no coincidence though that out of more than 30 spaniels running in the 2023 Cocker Championship, only eight were dogs and the rest bitches.

Desired results

I am completely in favour of a more reward-based ethos in the gundog training world, and why wouldn't anyone be, especially if it gets the desired results in initial training, but there does appear to still be a great void between that culture and some of the top achievers. Perhaps that's because they have been achieving for such a long time, with their own proven ways.

It's not enough for reward-based trainers to achieve away from the



Faced with the myriad training styles being taught today, owners often arrive with Ryan confused and completely overwhelmed

greatest exciting environment of the shooting field. For a greater change to happen, I feel more of these trainers need to prove themselves at the pinnacle of gundog work, while advocating and demonstrating their philosophy. It needs to be seen working in practice at the higher end of the gundog world.

There is, though, one rather off-putting side effect that I do sometimes find pushed into the face of a new handler with a new puppy, often from these very academic modern trainers. They can overcomplicate explanations and use unnecessarily convoluted methods.

New owners don't necessarily need to know all the theory the teacher knows, including the newly invented phrase for every action or behaviour. I have clients arrive here with more words in their head than are ever needed to train a dog. Sometimes they've been given several words for the same command. Add to that a "marker" word, plus they may be fumbling around with a clicker for some reason, as they wrestle with the lead and search for a treat.

We're talking about gundogs here. One of the most trainable group of dogs out there with built-in biddability. Let's aim to simplify it, please. Let's not make it look like hard work; it will only put people off converting in the long run. 🐾

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

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Country life suits her, sir!

Shooting may still be a man's preserve but a female tailor has found her niche among the sporting estates, says Christopher Goulding

Michele Shield is a rare creature in the man's world of shooting. After 10 years as a fieldsports tailor, she has become well known on rural Britain's shooting estates.

Though the number of women interested in the sport is steadily increasing, the game shooting world remains a very masculine one. Many women become involved as the wives and partners of keepers, who help with picking-up, or catering, but only around 5% of shotgun certificate holders in the UK are female. On the professional side – those behind the scenes who keep the sport going, mostly gamekeepers – ladies, Michele notes, “are rather thin on the ground”.

From her desk at the back of a tweed-filled shop in Newcastle

upon Tyne, Michele runs a tailoring business that dresses sporting estate workers “from Hampshire to the Highlands of Scotland, as well as occasional forays into Denmark and France”. The sign above the door, Isaac Walton & Co, is reminiscent of the grandfather of angling rather than a famous Shot, but it actually names the long-established north country tailoring business (est 1887) that Michele took over a decade ago.

There is an old-world traditional charm to her premises, which would not be out of place in London's St

James's, with shelves of bowler hats and deerstalkers; rails of green and brown jackets, waistcoats and breeks; and tables bearing bolts of tweed in the distinctive livery patterns of the aristocratic shooting estates that are her main customers.

On the noticeboard by her desk is a calendar of shooting seasons for different species of gamebird. It is the life cycles of grouse, partridge, and pheasant which determine the shape of Michele's tailoring year. By the board, there hangs a large vintage map of the UK, which bears witness to a key aspect of her life as a sporting tailor: in the first instance, her estate customers don't come to her door “I go out to the moor,” she says.

Tape measure

As most estates provide their gamekeepers with a new suit either annually or biennially, Michele spends a lot of time on the road, touring remote groups of neighbouring estates in regions such as the Scottish Borders, Yorkshire, Cumbria and all points north and south. Armed with her tape measure and notebook, Michele will turn up

Right: Michele Shield acquired and took over Isaac Walton in Newcastle upon Tyne around 10 years ago



DUNCAN IRELAND; MICHELE SHIELD/ISAAC WALTON



From left: tweed gilets in Isaac Walton & Co; keepers kitted out in matching suits; Michele herself on the moor, where she loves to watch the ‘cool burn’

on a given day to take measurements of the estate staff and very often the landlord, too.

“It’s a wonderful world of experiences for someone who loves the outdoor life,” she says. Out in the masculine world of the moors, she finds the men of the shooting community to be “good folk; very level-headed”. As might be expected, there is much in the way of hearty banter out in the field, but Michele is no shrinking violet. In any case, “most of them mind their manners” while she’s at work.

A typical tweed keeper’s suit has a number of features that distinguish it from its city cousin. The material must be hardwearing and warm enough to withstand the demands of a working life spent largely on exposed moorland. Like any made-to-measure garment, it must be a good fit for its wearer, but at the same time allow plenty of freedom of movement for the very physical work and miles of walking over uneven ground that are part of a gamekeeper’s job.

Key features of such a suit include deceptively voluminous pockets to carry all of the paraphernalia needed by the resourceful countryman who works in remote areas. Paradoxically, a hallmark of any gamekeeper’s jacket is a so-called “poacher’s pocket”, situated internally near the waistline, deep and wide enough to stow anything from a packed lunch to brace of grouse. These pockets require an internal strap to hang down from just below the armpit to fasten the top of the pocket to prevent its contents from overflowing and spilling out. A waistcoat with plentiful deep pockets completes the costume above the waist.

A traditional tweed gamekeeper’s suit will have shooting breeks, rather than trousers, as legwear. The leg bottoms of these fasten at the garter just below the knee – via a buckle, Velcro, or cuffing – with the cut of the material above usually generous enough to allow an overhang of 2in to 4in below the knee – the plus-twos and plus-fours beloved of golfers and the Prince of Wales in the 1920s.

Plus-twelves

Michele finds, however, that her clients today prefer a much longer overhang of material that completely covers the calf down to the tops of their boots: strictly speaking, these would be referred to in tailoring terms as anything between plus-sixes to plus-twelves.

Michele started working in the garment industry across the Tyne at the huge MetroCentre shopping

Though born and brought up in urban Tyneside, Michele now feels quite at home in more rural surroundings and relaxes by spending some time in a remote, off-grid cottage with running water but no electricity. She doesn’t shoot game herself, though she is an occasional clay shooter. But she’s often to be found working on game shooting days as a flanker with beating teams.

Her favourite experience during the shooting year is to see the heather-burning: a vital part of the life cycle on any shooting estate, where the older undergrowth is burned off to enable new shoots to quickly emerge as feed for a new season’s birds. The smell, sight and sound of a “cool burn” on a frosty winter morning is a particular love of hers.

Back in Newcastle, her presence on Westgate Road in the city centre has started to attract the attention

“A poacher’s pocket in a suit can be ideal for concealing a newspaper or an iPad”

mall in her native Gateshead. Here, she worked in a high-end fashion boutique, many of whose customers were local TV celebrities or professional footballers. It was something of a change, she says, moving from that world of “new money” and celebrity to her current clientele and the “old money” of the aristocracy and landed gentry.

She also has a select number of individual clients who are serious Shots and come to her shop to be kitted out. But one thing that hasn’t changed over the years is the expectation of good service and a high-quality product.

of urban professionals in search of something distinctive. While tweed may not be a traditional fashion choice for city workwear, a poacher’s pocket can be ideal for concealing a newspaper or an iPad. But to cater for this market, there are rolls of dark pinstripe jostling for position among the bolts of plaid.

But Michele’s heart and soul is very much with the majority of her clients out in the country. “Being a gamekeeper isn’t so much a job as a way of life in a beautiful, authentic world,” she points out. Perhaps the same can be said for the life of a country tailor. 🐦



Clumber party by royal invitation

Charles Hartley celebrates the rescue
of the clumber spaniel and his own Bertie
steps up to the plate at Gatcombe Park

DAISY MAY DEFINED



The WCSS was set up in 1984 to improve the working aspect of clumber spaniels

Over the years writing for *Shooting Times*, I have weathered biting sleet shooting driven birds, waded the deep mud of marshland after flighted duck, and laid still for hours in a cold drainage ditch, my face crawling with Scottish midges, waiting for a buck to stand, all in the pursuit of inspiration for these pages.

So as I donned my shirt and tie, and a striking pair of pink chinos, I was genuinely excited for a change of pace and the wondrous day that lay ahead. For on this fine spring morning, I had the honour of an invitation to witness the 40th anniversary of the creation of the excellent Working Clumber Spaniel Society (WCSS). An event held with great and gracious esteem at Gatcombe Park in Gloucestershire, the home of HRH The Princess Royal, president of the society.

Antiquated

Many of you will have read the adventures that my clumber, Bertie, and I have had over our almost nine years together. He is the apple of my eye, an intrinsic part of my family, and a hard worker in the field. He has made many an old Gun rethink an antiquated idea of clumbers, with every covey flushed, hidden bird retrieved and day saved by his undying enthusiasm for the sport. Simply put, he would not be the dog he has proved himself to be – nor even be here at all – without the WCSS and all the hard work it has put in over the last four decades.

Bertie snoozed happily in the boot of my Subaru as we chugged our way to the event, silent for a good 50

minutes of Cotswold country lanes. But as I waited my turn to pull up into the field and park, his proud head appeared in my rearview mirror, his inquisitive brow shuddered with

what inspired a man to essentially begin the rescue of this wonderful and historic breed.

Standing with his hazel cane in hand, the carved head of a clumber

“A group of like minds drawn together by an ambition to improve the breed”

excitement and his gaze fixed on a field filled with beautiful white-and-lemon clumbers just like him. Met with warm smiles at the gate, I was soon introduced to an excellent chap and fellow writer, James Darley.

Not only did James literally write the book on the breed (*Rebirth of the Royal Spaniel: The Clumber in the Field*), but he was one of the founders of the society. Standing with him it would have been remiss of me not to ask the simple question “why?” –

to its top, his reply was honest: he owned clumbers for 10 years before the WCSS was founded, and had been a member of the breed club until he attempted to set up a working section. In this he found opposition and the need for a change of tack.

His cane rose and, as he enthusiastically planted it back into the ground, he painted the picture of a meeting of like minds in a church hall in 1984, a group drawn together ➤



HRH The Princess Royal is president of the WCSS and held the 40th anniversary event at her home

Clumber spaniels



Clumbers at the event in Gatcombe Park are put through their paces in a classic scurry, with dummies to retrieve under timed conditions

by an ambition to improve the breed and make it fit for purpose. It was a blueprint inspired by antique artwork and literature of the early breed when it first landed on our shores and took up residence at Clumber Park.

All these years on, we could only marvel at what had been achieved as 64 clumbers bounded across the pastures of Gatcombe, competing in events and looking in magnificent form. I said “well done” to a man obviously filled with pride, not only in the society, but his own dogs. His cane was testament to this, as it was decorated with 11 silver medallions remembering his 11 working dogs – 10 of which were clumbers – who all achieved awards in their lifetimes.

Serious

The event itself was not only a celebration of the past but also building for the future, with four areas on the estate for training dogs, honing skills and having a great laugh with like-minded people. First, I went to the scurry, a classic with two bale hurdles and two dummies to retrieve under timed conditions. I have seen these at game fairs and fancied having a go, but they always seem quite serious and, for a man who works his

dog almost entirely alone, this has always left me too nervous to try.

So standing at the periphery I watched two wonderful dogs and handlers perform the event to perfection, followed by two younger dogs who had a brilliant stab at it. The first stopped to relieve itself on both trips and the second brought a great first retrieve to hand, only to stop for a mid-event cuddle before going for the second – delightful, but not great when a stopwatch is ticking.

But no owners looked frustrated, there was only joy and compassion from them and the fellow members. So with a gulp of nerves, I stepped up, and to my amazement Bertie performed, perhaps not the fastest of retrieves, but both to hand, leaving me brimming with joy and pride.

Trotting over to the split retrieve with my ears still ringing from the compliments at the first event, I was feeling oddly confident after watching the dog before me perform flawlessly.



Some of the goodies on offer for the participants at the clumber celebration in Gloucestershire

An eager spaniel races back to its handler to deliver the retrieve



But with the smiling encouragement of Barbara Brown and Daisy Nixon, I had nothing to lose.

Great pace

Here, Bertie was expected to retrieve a dummy from a pile of branches, followed by another inside a boxed-off area that the dogs would leap into. The dummies appeared “marked”, so I sent him. He hared off at great pace to the first, only to veer around the branches and vanish over the horizon. Luckily, Daisy – who was photographing the event – had her long lens on and no doubt documented the whole performance. But I didn’t feel the need to shrink with embarrassment as the group encouraged us and (eventually) both dummies lay at my feet. It was a positive experience for me and the dog.

Mani Nixon (chairman) and Gary Barstow (field trial secretary) were running the training section, with dummy launchers and one-on-one tuition, to help newcomers and professionals alike hone their skills and iron out any kinks. The final area was the woodland hunting section, run by Ian Wagstaff to see how dogs and handlers worked and

quartered areas thick with cover. It was an amazing opportunity to learn something new from those who have seen it all and hold endless patience.

If anyone is thinking about plunging into the world of clumber spaniel ownership, after witnessing the help with training and the warm enthusiasm seen at the scurries, I really could not recommend being part of this society more. This was a place for all the family, epitomised no better than by watching Chris

of two clumbers and, while being lucky enough to meet her on the day, I learned of her great passion for working her bull terriers on shoot days. This is something I can oddly relate to after working my British bulldog Gloria on many sorties chasing walked-up pheasant during my formative years.

With great enthusiasm, Princess Anne handed out prizes for the events, with Amina Cleal winning the scurry with Maude, and Kevan

“Bertie hared off – only to veer around the branches and vanish over the horizon”

Thomas on the split scurry, his wife and two lovely young daughters with him, one on his back in a carrier as his whistle pipped away to their dog Elsa. Of course, with two daughters under nine years old, the dog had to be named after the Disney princess from *Frozen*.

The highlight of the day for all came before the award ceremony when Princess Anne honoured us with an appearance. She has been a champion for much in our world and is a great figurehead for so many country sports. She is an owner

Hawkes the split retrieve with Ziggy. Her Royal Highness was presented with a gift basket, containing all manner of items including – and I am sure the Editor will be pleased – a copy of *Shooting Times*.

The day closed as it opened, with a good-humoured speech from Mani. Alongside him was Sarah Watters-Carver (honorary secretary), who had worked so hard to make this day what it was. As did all the team behind this fantastic society, which has brought this beloved breed back on to the main stage. 🐾

OPTICS TEST



All that power in your pocket

Mat Manning puts the new HikMicro Lynx 2.0 thermal monocular through its paces during a garden rat shoot – and he is impressed

NEED TO KNOW

- **Manufacturer** HikMicro
- **Model** Lynx LH25 2.0
- **Length** 170mm
- **Weight** 300g
- **Magnification** 2.4-19.2x
- **Detection range** 1,200m
- **Features** Sub-20 mK NETD detector, 25mm F1.0 lens, video and audio recording, Wi-Fi connectivity, four colour palettes, hot tracking, supplied with batteries and charger
- **Price** £1,149.99
- **Importer** hikmicrotech.com



My views on thermal spotters have changed quite significantly over the past couple of years. What I once regarded as an expensive luxury has now become part of my everyday shooting kit. In fact, I would now feel at a serious disadvantage if I had to head out on my nocturnal pest control rounds without one.

The shift in my opinion has been brought about by several factors. Being able to spot your quarry's heat signature – even when it is partially obscured by cover – is the big one, but thermal spotters have also become far easier to use and much

more affordable. All those important elements apply to the HikMicro Lynx 2.0 thermal monocular.

I have spent the past couple of months putting the LH25 model through its paces and have been thoroughly impressed by it. This version's £1,149.99 RRP still represents a significant outlay but that compares favourably with its rivals (*see panel, right*) and you get a lot of performance for your money. The Lynx 2.0 has been built to stand up to proper field use and boasts a highly sensitive sub-20 mK (millikelvin) NETD (noise equivalent temperature difference, which measures its



Even with gloves on, Mat finds the Lynx easy to operate, though a neck strap would have been a bonus

sensitivity) thermal detector. This makes for remarkably clear, layered viewing with plenty of detail of the landscape around your target.

Another great feature of this spotter is that it is very compact. It weighs about 300g, is less than 17cm long and has been designed to sit very comfortably in the palm of your hand. Those proportions also mean it can easily be stowed in a jacket pocket.

Extra detail

The LH25 has a 25mm F1.0 lens and a detection range of up to 1,200m. Magnification shifts from 2.4x to 19.2x at the press of a button. That gives you the option of zooming right in for extra detail, though I tend to use spotters on their lowest magnification to achieve the widest possible field of view.

Battery performance is an important consideration when you are out in the wild, and the Lynx 2.0

has a stated continuous runtime of 6½ hours – although that will diminish if you use the more advanced features such as Wi-Fi connectivity.

Runtime is improved by a very clever auto screen-off feature, activated by a sensor, that detects the angle of the Lynx – or you can put it into sleep mode manually. Either way, it kicks back into action in less than three seconds. The power source is a replaceable rechargeable battery, which can easily be swapped out in the field. There are two supplied and you can either charge them on board or with the supplied charger.

Features include cool and warm tone adjustment, picture in picture and hot tracking. The Lynx 2.0 has a 0.39in OLED display and gives you a choice of white hot, black hot, red hot and fusion colour palettes. It can record photo and video directly to its 16GB integral memory and has connectivity to the HikMicro Sight



At around 17cm and weighing about 300g, the Lynx 2.0 fits neatly into a pocket

ALSO CONSIDER

PULSAR TELOS XQ35

This monocular is 224mm long and has a <25 NETD thermal sensor and 35mm F1.0 lens. It boasts 1,300m detection range and an 8½-hour runtime from its LPS 7i rechargeable battery pack. Other features include wireless connectivity and recording direct to 64GB integral memory.

► Price £1,929.95
► Contact thomasjacks.co.uk

PARD TA32-35

A competitively priced thermal monocular from the award-winning Pard brand, this has a <25 NETD sensor and detection range of up to 2,000m. Features include Wi-Fi connectivity, six colour palettes and video and photo capture.

► Price £1,164.99
► Contact sportsmanguncentre.co.uk

INFIRAY EYE II V2.0 E3

This compact monocular is 180mm long and weighs 420g. Its <40 NETD sensor gives clear viewing with a detection range out to 1,300m. It boasts 2.5-10x magnification, Wi-Fi connectivity and recording direct to 16GB integral memory and seven-hour runtime.

► Price £1,899.99
► Contact highlandoutdoors.co.uk

app for watching back and sharing captured moments and also for quick, easy firmware updates.

Infestation

Having such a raft of features is all very well, but the only way to find out if they actually make a difference to your shooting is to get out and put them to the test. My opportunity to do this came in the shape of a rat infestation in a friend’s garden. With the rodents offering a comparatively small target, and often hiding among cover, some after-dark ratting seemed a great way to get the measure of the Lynx 2.0’s potential.

I always like to get on site before nightfall so I can have a proper look round before the light goes. Snooping around my friend’s garden just as dusk was setting in, I saw several ratty excavations and some busy-looking runs passing through ➡

Right: Thanks in large part to the HikMicro thermal, six greedy rodents are taken out of commission



Mat uses an FX Dreamline Classic air rifle in .177, with a HikMicro Alpex LRF 4K scope to great effect

the flowerbeds. Expecting the rats to be reluctant to venture too far from cover, I placed small heaps of fine white breadcrumbs along the more exposed sections of the routes in the hope of persuading them to pause and feed where I could get clear shots.

There appeared to be two main areas of activity and I was able to cover them from the shelter of a log store and an old stone shed. With the chance of one or two rain showers through the evening, I was glad to be

“The first rat of the night was soon rolled over by a pellet to the head”

able to shoot from sheltered spots. I set up my stool and tripod in the log store before loading the magazine of my FX Dreamline Classic .177 in readiness for the arrival of the rats.

My first scan revealed two rats scuttling among the cover of a large flowerbed. Even with vegetation in the way, the Lynx 2.0 gave me a remarkably clear view of them and a quick turn of the front focusing dial brought the picture into sharp relief.

Rather than risking a miss by attempting to take a shot at a partially

obscured target, I sat tight and waited for the rats to gain confidence. The lure of the breadcrumbs soon proved irresistible and the view through the Lynx revealed a greedy rodent munching on one of my bait spots.

Switching over to the infrared night vision of the HikMicro Alpex LRF 4K digital gunsight, I soon had the rat framed in the crosshairs. At 15m the shot was a mere formality,



The HikMicro clearly shows the heat signature of a deer (top) which isn't on the agenda, but the rat (above) certainly is

and the first rat of the night was soon rolled over by a pellet to the head.

Even with gloves on, I found the Lynx 2.0's control buttons very easy to operate. The device comes with a wrist strap but I have to say that I would have preferred a neck strap to save me from having to keep slipping it in and out of my pocket. That small quibble aside, it is an excellent spotter and it certainly enabled me to clock rats that I would never have noticed with infrared night vision.

Clearing up

My night ended with a tally of six rats and I am convinced that the Lynx 2.0 played a big part in helping me to spot the skittish rodents. By enabling me to spot the heat signatures of dead rats a couple of hours after shooting them, it also proved a great help when clearing up at the end of the session.

Aside from another visit to my friend's garden, I have also used the Lynx 2.0 for rabbit and grey squirrel control. I don't do any deer shooting but the device made easy work of spotting these secretive animals among the undergrowth when I have been in the woods on my squirrel control rounds. It is a compact, versatile and extremely effective thermal spotter that works as well by day as it does at night. 🐭

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Definition of insanity?

As shoots stock up on their birds and make plans for next season, David Hudson recalls a few strategies that might come in handy

I was a guest at a local shoot a year or two ago – a walk one, stand one set-up – and we were preparing to shoot a field of kale. Half the Guns stood at one end of the field while the other half walked down the lane to the other end and lined out across the headland prior to walking it up towards where we were standing. The beaters were carrying guns and the plan was for them to shoot any pheasants that curled back, while those that came forward would be dealt with by the standing Guns.

So far so good, but as the beating team filed into the left-hand corner of the field I saw at least 15 pheasants run out of the opposite corner and trot away out of danger. The beaters brought the field up and only two hen birds rose and sailed away unharmed.

At lunch I told my neighbour about the errant pheasants and he said: “Yes. They did the same thing the last two times we shot here.”

Albert Einstein is usually (and probably wrongly) credited with saying: “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” It struck me that this was exactly the type of situation to which he was referring – or would have been if he actually said it. A single beater sent ahead to the other corner of the field as a stop would have been enough to keep all those pheasants in the drive. But, being a guest, I thought it best to hold my counsel.

Wisdom

Generally attributed to the American forces over here in the 1940s are some other words of wisdom that apply to lots of shooting situations. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” is a maxim that I tend to stick with when things are going well. A long time ago a friend and I had started running another little walk-and-stand shoot just north

of the border with England. The estate had a lot of cover – almost too much at times and we only released a few hundred pheasants – so every drive was a bit of a lottery at first until we worked out the best way to organise each day’s shooting.

It was the final drive of the day and my team were beating, bringing down a long, narrow strip of trees with the shooting team standing across the end of the wood. There were a couple of Guns on either side for birds that broke out.

The exact numbers escape me, but I know that out of the total bag for the day of 40-odd head, just over half came from that one drive. My pal came up to me as the drive ended and said: “That was great. Next time we’ll try doing it the other way round.” Now, I am all for experimenting with drives when there is reason to suppose that things could be improved, but when a drive has

DAVID HUDSON





When the birds are being pressured by the dogs in the beating line, they're more likely to take off

worked really well, it seems a little silly to change it just for the sake of change. And we didn't. Apart from anything else it was my team's turn to stand next time.

Mind you, there are times when standing things on their head can work. During my keeping days there was a drive that always held

lots of birds, but only provided shooting for a few of the Guns. It was another long, narrow wood a few hundred yards from our main release pen and we beat it from the end furthest from the pen.

The pheasants tended to run towards their "home" ahead of the beaters until they heard the tapping

of the stops at the end of the wood, then take to their wings as the line and the dogs began to pressure them. It meant the Guns who drew pegs one to four were guaranteed plenty of shooting, while number five might get a shot or two but numbers six to nine were almost certain to end the drive with clean barrels.

Gamble

It struck me that we could try taking it the other way, pushing the pheasants away from the release pen and hoping they would get up at the other end of the wood, but still fly back to the pen when they were flushed. If they did, there should be shooting for all the line instead of only the Guns who drew low-numbered pegs.

It was a bit of a gamble because the birds might have all gone out of the top end of the wood and headed straight



In an ideal world all the Guns, whatever peg they've drawn, will get some decent shooting

"The first birds began getting up and heading for the Guns"





On a shoot with lots of pheasants, plenty of beaters and stops make it surprisingly easy to manoeuvre the birds

for a big block of commercial forestry just over our border so my heart was in my mouth the first time we tried it.

Bonus

I needn't have worried, though, because it went pretty much to plan and there was an even spread of shooting all along the line. With further to fly, the birds were mostly higher when they went over the Guns and there was another bonus, because quite a few pheasants flew across the valley to the drive we did after lunch. Those proved to be much better birds because they flew also higher than when they had been going back to the pen, so they provided some cracking shots for the afternoon drive.

It is much easier to try new things with drives in small shooting

syndicates because everyone is a part of the shoot and generally happy to risk the odd drive going wrong in order to try to get a potential overall improvement for all.

It would be a lot harder on a commercial shoot where a team of paying Guns might be a tad less sympathetic if they stood and watched a stream of birds flying over spaces where Guns were not placed. That said, where you have large numbers of pheasants and a full complement of beaters and stops, it is surprising how easy it is to manoeuvre birds.

The first time I was beating on a big commercial shoot provides a good example and another set of wise words for the shoot organiser. It was Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke who said something along the lines

moved the beaters on one side back, then brought those on the opposite side forward and slowly marshalled all the pheasants 100 yards or so to the right. Then he tightened up the ring of beaters again and started flushing the birds a few at a time – now all the Guns were getting some shooting.

Fraternal

It was an eye-opening demonstration of how well pheasants can be moved provided you have enough of them. I suppose it is a feeling of safety in numbers but I suspect such a manoeuvre would only work well when you have a lot of pheasants together. On the typical small shoots where I usually beat, the pheasants are much less fraternal and generally have to be flushed as and where you find them.

“The shoot captain said all the pheasants were going over one end of the Gun line”

of “no battle plan ever survived first contact with the enemy”. It was a new drive for the shoot and we had blanked-in several fields and a game crop to a flushing point in a wood overlooking a valley where the Guns were lined out. We had a big heap of pheasants gathered in front of us and the first birds began getting up and heading for the Guns.

All seemed to be going OK, but then the shoot captain got on the radio to say all the pheasants were going over one end of the line. The headkeeper simply paused the drive,

It also probably helped that the pheasants on the commercial shoot were hand-fed and seeing a keeper every day, rather than being hopper-fed and only seeing anyone every week or two – apart from shoot days.

Some of those old words of wisdom are extremely relevant to anyone running a shoot, even if the person who first said them had something else in mind altogether. Most of all, I think it pays to keep an open mind: just because “we’ve always done it this way”, it doesn’t follow that “this way” is the best way to do it. 🐦



When a drive routinely brings in a decent head of birds, it is pointless to change it



Working Dogs



Farmers searching for dual-purpose dogs for a wide variety of tasks may not have to look far to find one

Once again, I have found myself in a position where I feel I need a dog for a specific task. I have been in this situation many times before, so before I make a considerable monetary outlay with a lifetime of associated costs, I must fully convince myself that this purchase is absolutely necessary. This process takes a bit of time and some umming and ahing over a general set of criteria I try to hold myself to. Recently, I have been struggling to locate and round up our sheep on the nature reserve, which is the scenario that started this pondering.

As the children are growing up and spending more time away from home on their own adventures, my pool of immediately available labour is diminishing. I'm getting a bit old to be sprinting and slipping around fields trying to catch individual sheep for treatment, and as shaking a bucket full of nuts is not always as seductive as I would like, even moving them into adjacent pastures for fresh grazing as a solo act can be tricky. Knowing full well that collies have been used in lurcher breeding over the years, and having seen the top-end speed of pure collies working the fells, I wondered if it would be possible to train a dual-purpose collie; part-sheep dog, part-pest control dog.

Highly intelligent

I had already seen a working collie catching rats alongside our dog Ellie in her early days more than 20 years ago, and even read about collies being used on the lamp. The more thought I gave it, the surer I was that these highly intelligent dogs would be capable of distinguishing between one task



Collies aren't only able to round up sheep, they can also make very effective pest control dogs

they often leave themselves open to all sorts of ridicule which tends to follow such interactions.

With this in mind, I steeled myself for a hostile response. But all the same, one day I asked on a working sheepdog site if anyone used their dogs for pest control. The response was overwhelmingly positive and informative. I was amazed that I received 100% positive reactions and it threw up all sorts of interesting tales of dual-use collies. Stories of farm collies from all over the country were coming in, both historical and from the present day.

guarding them while also filling the pot for the travelling shepherd. They had to be fast enough to catch hares and foxes, but skilled in the movements of their charges. Apparently, these dogs were leggier than modern-day collies and were more of a shaggy-coated greyhound type.

My own collie pup, Meg, comes from good lines of moorland dogs, and if her mother is anything to go by, her lineage might contain a dash or more of kelpie blood. She is now four months old and visits the sheep daily, showing a keen interest. The early signs suggest that training should not be too much of a challenge. Meg has also been out watching the ferrets but has little interest in the rabbits as they hit the long-net. There is plenty of time for that. 🐾

“I’m getting a bit too old to be sprinting around fields trying to catch sheep”

and another and switching back and forth from pest mode to sheep mode.

I often look at social media and think there are some rather pointless questions asked on forums. The people who ask these seemingly obvious questions must be brave to stick their head above the parapet, as

It seems there are many shepherds who utilise their dogs to control vermin around the farm and as rabbit catchers. One gentleman went into detail about the history and development of old Irish sheepdogs, which were once required to travel with their flocks, herding and

Matthew Arnold carries out conservation and pest control contracts in Yorkshire and also looks after a small mixed shoot and seven miles of chalk stream. His passions are working dogs, native game birds and river restoration.

Go for the otter face

What makes a good tracking dog – as opposed to a stalking dog – and how do you breed and train one? Keith Edmunds investigates

When it comes to terriers, retrievers, spaniels and setters, our nation can be proud of its history, however, in the blood-tracking arena we have been a bit slow off the mark. The reason for this is that we didn't have a need for such a dog until woodland stalking became a serious sport. During the 1980s we started paying close attention to what our cousins on the Continent were doing and we have been emulating their methods since.

In the following 40 years, not only did we learn a great deal when it came to training methods, we also imported some fine working breeds such as the Bavarian mountain hound, the Hanoverian hound, the working dachshund or teckel and the Alpine dachsbracke. Some parties have fastidiously stuck with the traditions of the mainland and gone to great lengths to ensure that both training and breeding have been done in accordance with the regimes from across the sea. But others have done their own thing and been frowned upon for doing so.

Progress

I find the sociology as fascinating as the cynology (scientific study of dogs). All that bluff and bluster raises tension, causes rifts but rarely promotes constructive progress. I follow a simple path but one I believe holds water. We must breed for the here and now; for relevant roles that sit within current cultures, laws and landscapes. There is no logic in breeding for historical tasks nor to suit a foreign land, with completely different geography and sporting traditions. By all means take the best the global gene pool has to offer but tweak it to suit local situations.

When you think of the primary task of the deerstalker's dog, the first thing that naturally springs to mind is blood tracking, to ensure the recovery of wounded big game. The creation of a first-class tracking dog does not come easy – it takes a great deal of



George Paynter with his sporting Lucas terriers, which will creep up on deer but stop on command

effort from both dog and handler. To the uninitiated, it might appear that, for a hunting breed, the tracking of a wounded deer would be the most natural thing in the world and all the dog must do is follow its nose. If only things were that simple.

If the wounded deer happened to have been shot very recently and the tracking dog was immediately at hand, in those circumstances I would agree that the task is quite easy and almost any dog, of any breed, would be able to follow such a fresh, hot trail. Likewise, if the wound was fatal with a high likelihood of finding the deer stone dead in less than 200

yards, again, most dogs would be able to achieve that objective. But things don't always happen like that.

First, let's look at the possibility of the dog being immediately at hand. Anyone who has done any amount of stalking will be aware of all those pitfalls stacked up against you in your quest to bag a deer. Stealth is the name of the game, taking the greatest care not to snap a twig or spook some other member of the woodland fauna that seem to delight in sounding the alarm call that all is not safe. It isn't easy. Indeed, the enjoyment obtained from woodland stalking comes about because it isn't easy and success is

achieved, not only from an accurate shot, but also from a great degree of fieldcraft. Now throw your four-legged, bouncy bundle of fun into the mix. Yes, it could limit your chances.

I have read and heard of wonderful stalking dogs – as opposed to tracking dogs – but I have seen very few. Dogs that walk off-lead, to heel and avoid the temptation to chase the countless creatures – squirrels, hares, rabbits – that tease and tantalise on the woodland floor. Dogs that resist the urge to whinge and whine. Such dogs are rare and anyone who has trained a dog to those standards deserves a pat on the back. Interestingly and perhaps ironically, many of the steadiest dogs are not continental breeds but our own traditional gundog breeds and terriers.

Delightful little dogs

Those breeds have been bred to work in relatively close proximity to the handler and are required to be under control at all times. When it comes to the border terrier, this wiry little otter-faced tyke has always been regarded as the “sensible” terrier. Another terrier option that fits that brief is the sporting Lucas. My good friend and ambassador for the breed, George Paynter, owns two of these delightful little dogs and frequently sends me videos of them calmly creeping up on a group of fallow deer or the dogs flushing a muntjac while on a walk, and immediately stopping and returning on command.

To a certain extent, deerstalking dogs in Britain have almost split into two camps. First, we have the type mentioned above, the companion dog

“Out-and-out tracker dogs are as keen as mustard”

that accompanies his owner on every stalking session. He is well mannered, doesn’t cause trouble and every now and then he might be required to find a wounded deer that has made a 100-yard death-run into cover too dense for the thermal imager to detect.

The other type is the out-and-out tracker. These dogs are as keen as mustard and ready for action. They are likely to be a little too pumped to walk calmly to heel off-lead and might not be trusted to sit quietly below ➔



Tim Howarth and *Tawnyhill Maple*, a teckel who is shaping up to be an excellent deer tracking dog



Hazelglade Cristina, another tough little teckel who recently tracked and held a wounded sika stag

Working dogs

the high seat for a couple of hours. But when the going gets tough, these tough hounds get going. Having the mental resilience to have endured a couple of years of tough, boot-camp-style training, they are capable of following a 1,000m trail 20 hours old or more. These are the dogs that get called up when all else has failed.

My wife and I endeavoured to breed capable stalking dogs from the global wire-haired dachshund gene pool. Having imported five 100% working-bred wirehairs, two from Germany, two from Italy and one from Poland, we found some of these lines were too independent and highly driven for the more subtle requirements needed to fit the stalking dog mould. I often joke that GPS collar sales in the UK have risen in direct correlation with the numbers of imported teckels.

To tone things down a little, in four of the eight litters that we bred – we have stopped our breeding enterprise – we added a carefully selected drop of show blood. These show lines not only boasted excellent conformation, but many of the dogs had also passed their national tracking tests and one is a Swedish tracking champion.



Specialised tracking dogs are trained to find wounded deer

We found that adding 25% to 35% show blood had the desired effect and the resulting progeny are certainly more tractable than some of the death-or-glory, working-bred dogs we own that – given half the chance – would hunt anything with a pulse.

The offspring haven't lost anything in the way of olfactory senses – all have proven to have excellent scenting ability. These show-work blends are also agile and very physically capable, and many are fulfilling stalking companion roles to a high standard. Care must be taken that

the pendulum doesn't swing too far in the other direction and what we gain in even-tempered biddability, we lose in tireless tenacity, dogged determination and boldness.

Static

However, as the risk of wounding big game is much less likely with our UK method of only shooting static deer, the recreational British deerstalker must consider how often his dog would need the drive required to follow very complex, arduous trails. The truth is, for somebody stalking two or three times a month who is a competent Shot, I would predict that

FIND A TRACKER

If you need to locate a beast near a shot site, you can call UK Deer Track & Recovery (ukdtr.co.uk) or Deer Tracking Services (deertrackingservices.co.uk). They can provide experienced dogs for that kind of work.

the likelihood of losing a deer might be as infrequent as once per year. With the aid of thermal imagers and some experienced friends at hand, possibly even less than that.

With this in mind, we must think long and hard about what character traits are required from a canine stalking companion. Is obedience and steadiness more important than prey drive and independence? Both types have their uses but much will depend on the frequency that you hunt, the terrain you hunt over and, to a certain degree, the deer species you are most likely to encounter.

We must also take into consideration the fact that, in most cases, the dog will only be working for a fraction of its waking hours – the rest of the time it will have to fit in with the family. Talk of tough dogs dragging down disgruntled deer might generate more kudos than tales of charming canine chums that rarely put a foot wrong, but what is it that you really need? 🐾

“Many of the steadiest breeds are our own traditional gundogs and terriers”





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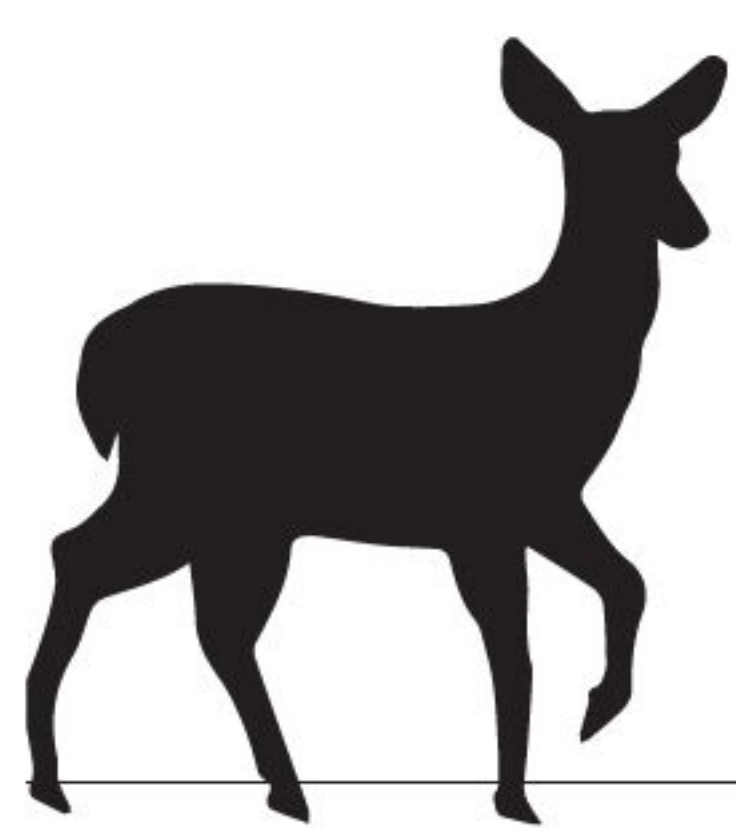


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Game Cookery

Can there be anything more satisfying than cooking fresh venison from a beast you've shot over an open flame? Cai ap Bryn urges you to try it

After a thoroughly enjoyable morning stalking fallow deer on a farm in East Sussex (p22) I decided to use some of the freshly harvested venison to create a quick and easy snack, in the form of kebabs.

I started by setting up a small fire then foraged for some V-shaped sticks, four in total, and set them in the ground at either end of the fire. These would be the support for my kebab sticks. I then picked out two long green branches and whittled them

down into skewers. Setting them aside, I started to prepare the venison – a couple of succulent fillets I had taken from that morning's stag – as well as a staple rub that we use all the time for my company, Game and Flames.

I followed suit by adding the veg from a local farm shop, skewering them

systematically. I couldn't wait any more. I was starving from the morning's pursuits. I placed the kebabs over the fire, resting on wooden frames, and turned them constantly to create an even colour.

I was soon enjoying the spoils of a fantastic day; the epitome of field-to-fork dining. Why not try it? 🦌

“I was soon enjoying the spoils of a fantastic day; the epitome of field-to-fork dining”

Ingredients

- 🍷 2 FALLOW DEER FILLETS (INSIDE FILLETS)
- 🍷 1 COURGETTE
- 🍷 1 WHITE ONION
- 🍷 1 RED PEPPER
- 🍷 1 TBSP PAPRIKA
- 🍷 2 TSP GARLIC PUREE
- 🍷 ¼ TSP SALT
- 🍷 ¼ TSP BLACK PEPPER
- 🍷 2 TBSP LIME JUICE
- 🍷 2 TBSP OLIVE OIL

FALLOW KEBABS

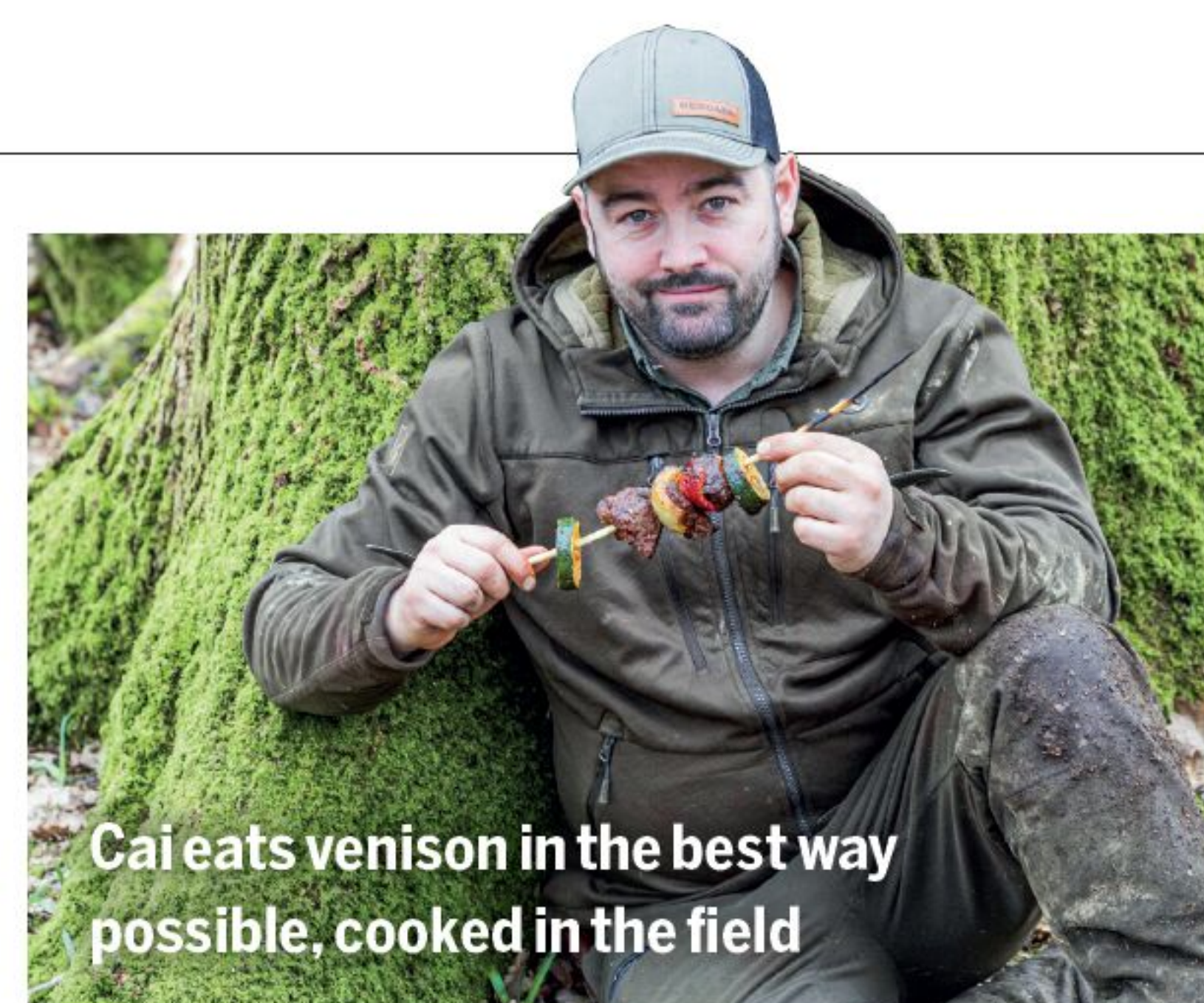
THE METHOD

Serves 1 hungry stalker

1 First, dice the venison fillets into 2in pieces. Then slice the courgette, white onion and red pepper into roughly 2in sections.

2 Next, prepare the marinade by mixing the paprika, garlic, salt, pepper, lime juice and olive oil. Evenly coat the meat and vegetables and set aside for 30 minutes. At this stage, if you are using wooden skewers, you can place them in water for the duration too. This helps to prevent them from burning.

3 If you are cooking wild, use this time to build your fire. Otherwise heat your barbecue until you have a good base of charcoal. Start small with kindling and add thicker or



Cai eats venison in the best way possible, cooked in the field

larger pieces of wood. Be careful not to smother the fire.

4 Thread the meat and vegetables on two skewers and place over the grill or open fire. Rotate them until they are nice and textured on the outside and pink in the middle. Ten minutes or so should be plenty.

5 You can serve with flatbread, salad and a nice tzatziki – or as I did on page 22 – enjoy them in nature, just as they are.



Cover the meat and vegetables with all the flavourings and a generous glug of olive oil



The outside of the meat should have texture but still be pink in the middle



A rook and branch job

Modern rook shooting is a cull rather than extermination and DJ Baker makes sure he only shoots branchers, but he does appreciate a rook pie

Rook pie! You're not serious? You really eat that? This is the reaction to the idea of rook pie from most of my friends and acquaintances. Our village butcher claims "today's housewife can only cook steak or chops, at least that's all they buy from me". Of course, there are exceptions.

One of my pigeon customers, to whom I give a bundle of rooks most years, served rook pie to guests at a dinner party. After the meal she asked them what they thought they had eaten. A whole range of suggestions were made, including pheasant. I, too, enjoy my annual rook pie but I would not class it as game.

I look forward to the rook shoot, largely because it is a once-a-year event. I often wonder why rook shooting is now so neglected, for a century ago it was keenly sought and quite high rents paid for the privilege. Why is it that today, with such a great demand for all forms of the sport, rook shooting should be neglected? Probably there is no one simple explanation; perhaps the rook is not now considered fit to eat and, of course, the rook has declined in numbers in recent years.

It is fair to say that the modern fieldsportsman is not as keen a rifleman as was his predecessor 100 or so years ago. There was then no Firearms Act to hinder his ownership of a rifle but, more important still, was

the effect of the volunteer movement. Various "French invasion scares" had produced a revival of this, the Home Guard of the Napoleonic war period, and with it came a great upsurge of interest in rifle shooting.

Specialist

What would have been more natural for this skill at arms than to be put to use in the field? Today's small-bore rifleman is so often hampered by restrictions that he can only use his firearm on approved ranges. Also, I



"A century ago rook shooting was keenly sought and high rents paid for the privilege"

suspect he has come to be a specialist in this particular branch of shooting.

Rook shooting is a rifle sport, for shooting a stationary target with a shotgun can hardly be called sport. In the heyday of rook shooting gunmakers built light rifles specifically for use against rooks, their calibres varying between about .250 and .380. They were, in fact, blackpowder, which explains the weak ballistics. However, they should not be despised on this ground. They were specialist firearms, effective within their limits and intended for use within populated countryside.

Another type of gun used in the rookery was the air rifle, usually the large-calibre multi-shot affairs you occasionally see being sold today as collectors' items. My own firearm for rooks is an air rifle, albeit a modern .22 that has proved itself to be perfectly adequate. At the same time, it is acceptable when the rookery is situated near houses.

Obviously, difficulties are encountered today when it comes to disposing of the slain. So imposing a "bag limit" of birds to shoot for the sake of shooting, knowing they will end up on the compost heap, is surely only wanton destruction. In any event, the exercise is one of culling not extermination. To this end I only shoot on one day, so the natural spread of the hatch limits those that can be shot. I shoot only branchers –

“The next time I see the rook, it is under a crust with some steak – and jolly good it is”



“Knowing the birds will end up on the compost heap is surely only wanton destruction”



“I shoot only branchers – those that have left the nest and are hopping about in the trees”

those that have left the nest and are hopping about in the trees. Indeed, with my modest rifle skill, they are the only ones I can hope to hit. In addition, I make a point of not wiping out an individual nest.

Late brood

Common sense, as well as the accepted ethics of rook shooting, dictate that birds perched on the edge of their nests should not be shot at, for if hit and only wounded they will topple back into the nests to die slowly. Old birds should be left strictly

underbrush, it can prove difficult and, at times, impossible.

Another problem, though not peculiar to rook shooting, is the correct treatment of the bag. This business of allowing the slain birds to cool properly is one that does not receive the attention it should. There is naturally no problem in winter but on a humid day in mid-May it has to be considered. Blowflies, too, are a menace, as every summer pigeon shooter knows, and cooling the birds and keeping off the flies can present difficulties. Exactly how this problem

“I wonder how our ancestors made such large bags without acute discomfort”

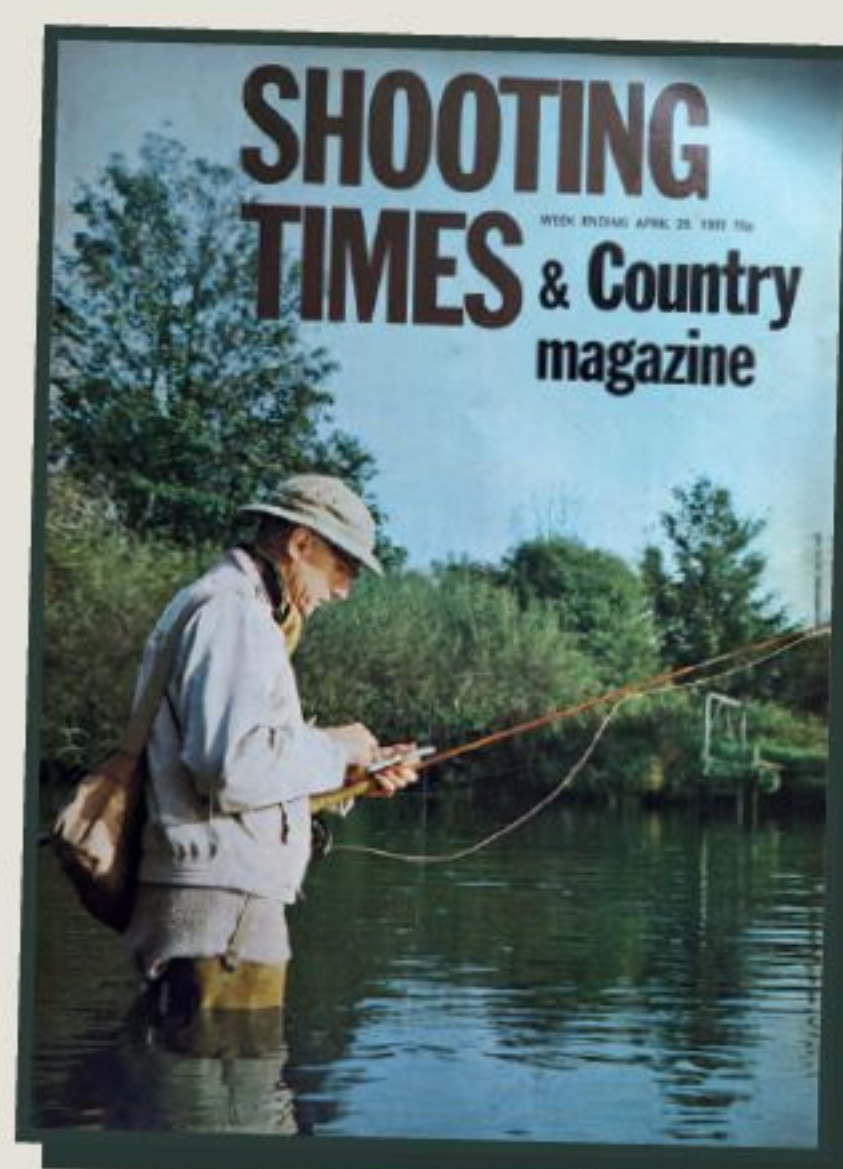
alone. I imagine they would hardly improve the pie, and they might well have a late brood that would then starve to death.

Even with my modest bag I end up with a crick in my neck, and I wonder how our ancestors made such large bags without acute discomfort. I suspect that they took along a gamekeeper or servant as a spotter. Then the sportsman would have a chance to rest between shots. The problem is not only to find a rook to shoot at, but to find a clear path for the bullet or pellet. If there is any

is solved depends on the layout of the rookery and means of transport available. In such warm conditions, I dispose of my bag as rapidly as I can.

As to the actual preparation for cooking, this falls to my lot. I treat the rooks as I do a pigeon. I pluck only the breast and cut this off the bone. I have never succeeded in removing the feather by skinning the breast, as is sometimes advised. The birds then pass from my care and the next I see of them is under a crust with some steak. And jolly good they are too. 🐦

➡ This article was first published in the 29 April 1972 issue of Shooting Times.



The experts

THE ULTIMATE SHOOTING QUIZ TEAM



➡ BILL HARRIMAN

BASC's head of firearms and global authority on guns



➡ MAT MANNING

Airgunner and journalist from the West Country



➡ DIGGORY HADOKE

Vintage gun expert, firearms dealer, author and journalist



➡ BRUCE POTTS

Shooting Times rifle reviewer and stalker



➡ MIKE SWAN

Conservation expert and head of education for the GWCT



➡ DAVID TOMLINSON

Highly regarded writer and ornithologist



➡ LIAM BELL

Shropshire gamekeeper, keen wildfowler and amateur naturalist



➡ GRAHAM DOWNING

Shooting consultant and sporting author



➡ TONY BUCKWELL

Veterinary surgeon with a special interest in Gundogs



➡ TOM PAYNE

Professional shooting instructor and avid pigeon shooter



➡ ELLENA SWIFT

Award-winning gundog trainer and canine behaviour specialist



➡ TIM MADDAMS

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



➡ SIMON WHITEHEAD

Author, professional ferreter and rabbit controller



➡ IAIN WATSON

Keen stalker and senior CIC international trophy judge



➡ CHRIS DALTON

Professional stalker and regular presenter on *The Shooting Show*



➡ MARK RIPLEY

Well-known fox controller and long-range shooting expert

Contact the team

Email: ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com

Flat antlers on muntjac

➡ STALKING

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

A When muntjac grow their first set of antlers, apart from being small, they can appear oddly developed when compared with mature animals.

Mature animals would normally have a four-point head, with each antler having a main beam and a brow tine. First heads are mostly single spikes, with no coronet present.

This form might continue into a second head, only a bit longer. If the animal lives long enough, the mature antler – in shape and form – will grow.

First heads will also grow as two little flat palms that look nothing like muntjac antlers and, again, this might carry on into a second head. Overall, these juvenile antlers will be short, say 20mm to 25mm in length.

Little flattened antlers like this are not unusual. If, however, you are coming across animals that are obviously mature in terms of body structure, teeth wear and so on, but have palmated antlers, that would be unusual. It would be interesting if you could let *Shooting Times* see some pictures of them. **IW**

Where are the goslings?

➡ WILDFOWL

Q For several years, we have had a noisy pair of Egyptian geese on our farm, but they rarely rear any goslings. Is this unusual?

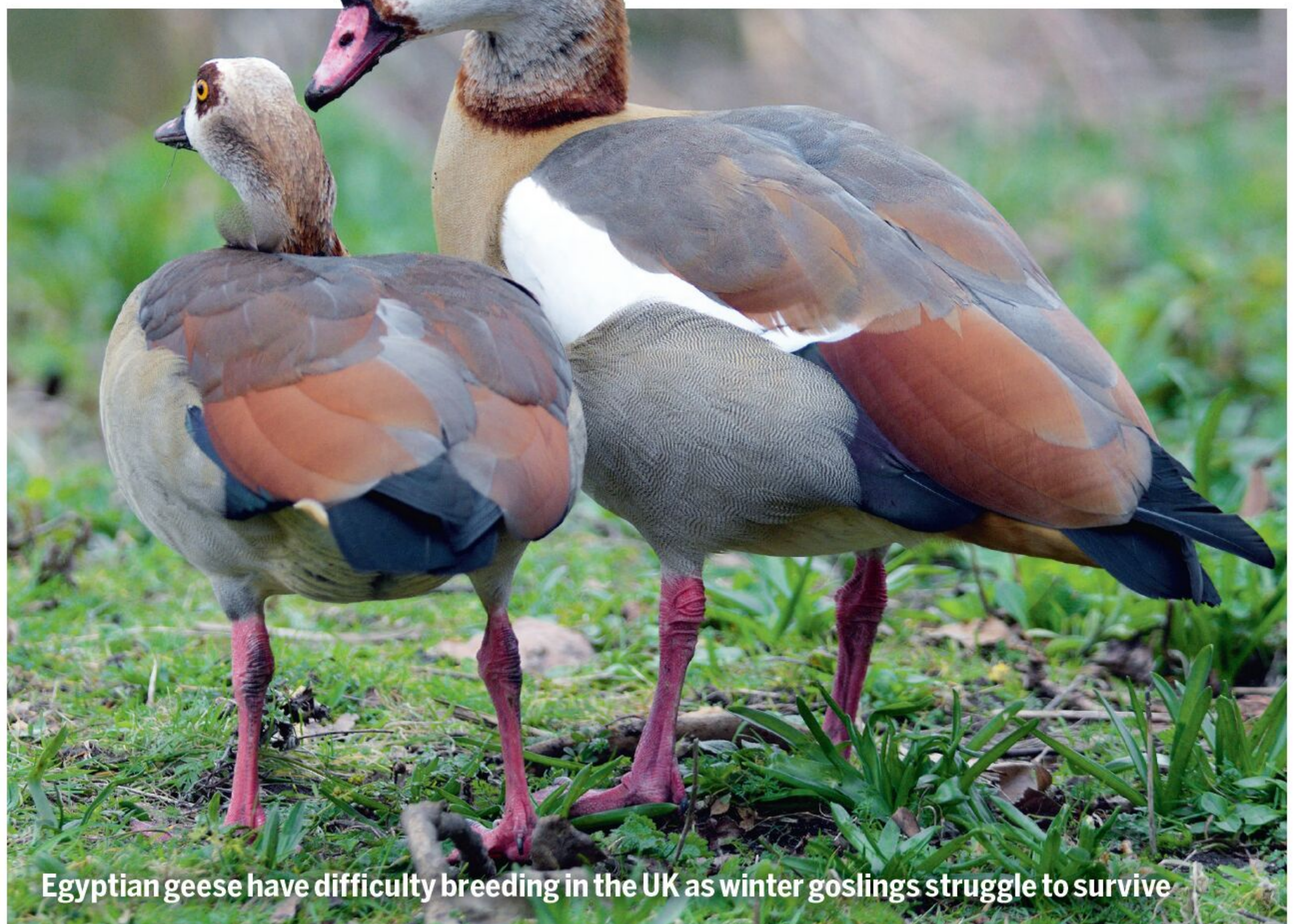
A Though Egyptian geese have been living in a feral state in the UK for 200 years, their population remains centred on East Anglia. In recent years, new populations have been established in new areas, such as Greater London.

One of the reasons why they have been slow to increase in

numbers, especially compared with greylag geese, is their poor breeding success. Despite being naturalised here for many years, they often attempt to nest early in the year.

Goslings hatched in January or February usually struggle to survive. One study found their breeding success to be only 1.06 young per pair per year, which explains why the population has been so slow to expand. The recent increase in numbers is probably due to a series of mild winters.

Unlike greylags and Canadas, they don't nest in colonies, as they are aggressively territorial. **DT**



Egyptian geese have difficulty breeding in the UK as winter goslings struggle to survive

Making the right pellet choice is more important than cleaning and weighing airgun ammunition



How to spice up a pigeon

GAMECOOKING

Q I keep shooting pigeons, but I am getting bored with eating them. Can you recommend some good recipes to make them a little more exciting to eat?

A Rather than offer cookery advice, here's an alternative idea you may like to consider. There will be people near you who would dearly love to get their hands on some tasty pigeon, so why not prepare a load and give them away? You may find this results in return gifts of different foodstuffs, if the warm inner glow isn't quite enough on its own.

Failing that – or if you feel so inspired you end up setting up a little stall and cooking them to give away – I highly recommend this. Mince the meat, stir-fry with a little chopped ginger, garlic and chilli and red curry paste to taste. Season with soy and fish sauce, serve with jasmine rice and top with shredded vegetables, dressed in lime juice and a little sugar. Lovely. *TM*



A glut of pigeons is easily solved by preparing the birds and giving them to friends and neighbours

Preparing airgun pellets

AIRGUNNING

Q I use an airgun to control pests including rabbits and grey squirrels and wonder if I'm doing enough to ensure my ammunition has been properly prepared. I have read several articles about the weighing, cleaning, lubricating and even sizing of airgun pellets. Should I be doing this with the pellets I use for pest control?

A High-level target shooters go to extreme lengths to prepare airgun ammunition. It only brings a small gain,

but it can still make the difference between winning a medal and being an also-ran.

Though live quarry shooters have a duty to ensure accurate shot placement, I don't think you need to worry too much about pellet preparation for pest control.

Shooting pellets taken straight from the tin, I still expect my airguns to be capable of grouping pellets comfortably within a 20mm circle at a range of 30m.

The important thing is to experiment with different brands of ammunition until you find one that gives good results with your airgun. *MM*

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Detachable mounts

SCOPES

Q I want to mount a scope as low to the receiver as I can, but still with a quick detachable option so I can change scope easily, such as when running boar then sitting in a high seat. What would you recommend?

A There are quite a few quick detachable (QD) mounts on the market, but most will have a separate base and then ring mount for the actual scope. This places the scope higher or away from the rifle's receiver, so your head position on the stock is more upright when it should be nestled into the cheekpiece.

Tier-One, Leupold and Redfield have QD mounts that can be quickly lifted out on the bases or swivelled free. Warne has QD all-in-one mounts that can fit directly to a rifle's dovetail receiver, lowering the scope.

Apel offers QD mounts that are superbly made, but most have separate rings and bases, so the scope can be mounted higher than you may like. I would look at fitting claw mounts that sit much lower to the rifle's receiver. The Ziegler, available from Alan Rhone, would solve your problem in an instant. **BP**



There are many quick detachable mounts on offer, but they can leave the scope too high

Dealing with car sickness

VETERINARY CARE

Q How can I get a dog used to travelling in a car? While my two older dogs have always been fine travelling in the back, my new puppy is unable to travel in a car without drooling and being sick.

A Motion sickness is much more common in puppies and young dogs because the balance mechanism in their ears is not fully developed. It can also be stressful and, since stress itself causes dogs to be nauseous, dogs that suffer motion sickness should be treated as soon as possible, otherwise the problem is likely to perpetuate.

Start by simply putting the dog in the back of a stationary vehicle. As it has already developed motion sickness, stay with and reassure your puppy.

Try to ensure that it associates the car with pleasant experiences. Let it play with or chew a favourite toy in the back of the car or feed a few tasty treats and give plenty of praise for sitting in the vehicle. Later, start the engine and, if all is well, move off.

Try to ensure that your dog associates the car with short journeys to places that will provide especially pleasant, positive experiences where it will enjoy itself.

If the dog seems to have problems maintaining its balance in the back of your car, try sitting it on the back seat wearing a harness. Dogs experience fewer nauseating visual cues facing forwards while travelling, rather than looking out the side windows.

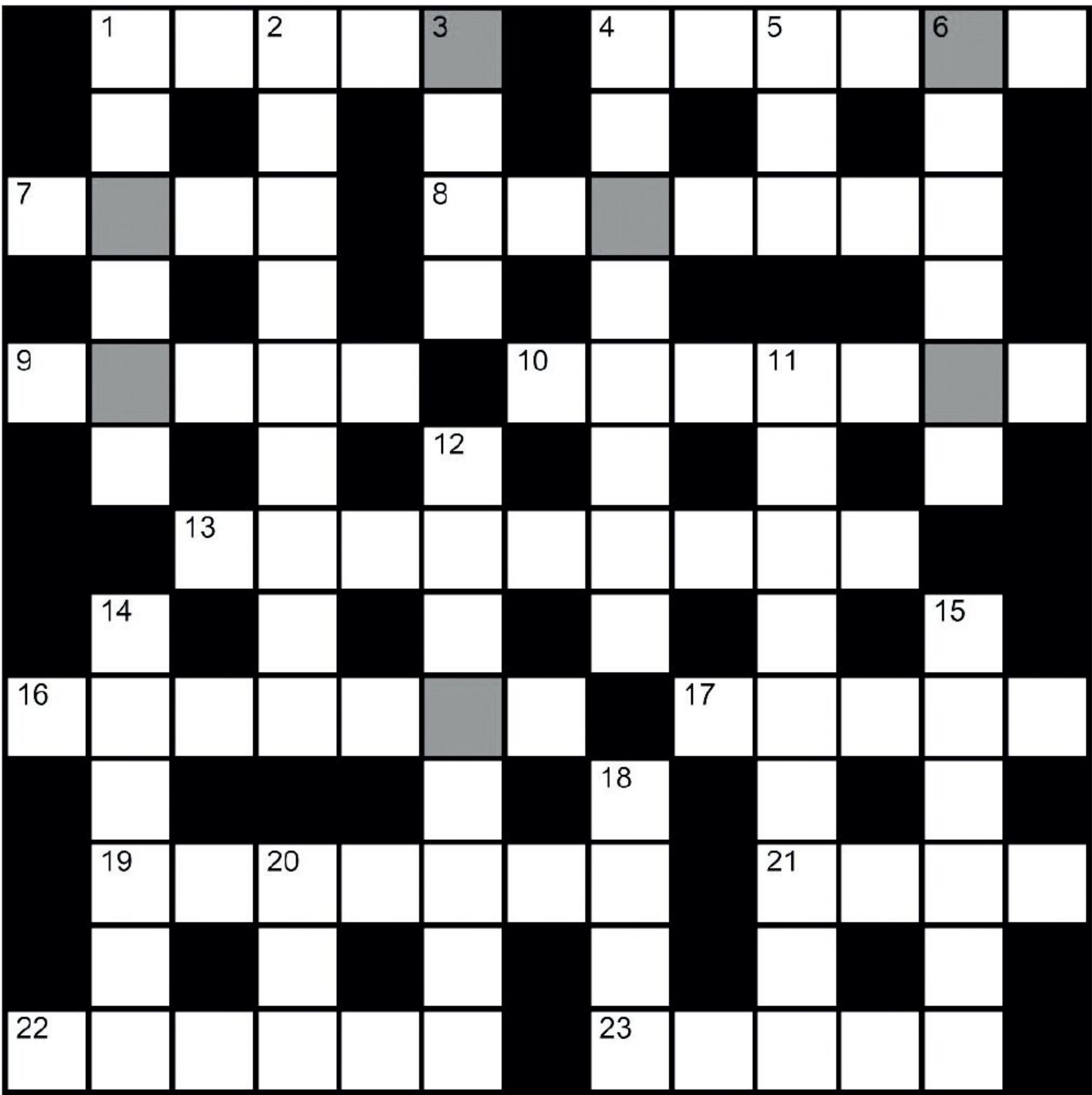
If it is restless and won't settle during the journey, try using a DAP – dog appeasing pheromone – collar and consider investing in a collapsible dog crate or a purpose-made dog transit box to provide somewhere for it to snuggle down into while travelling.

Finally, if your dog is unfortunate and has developed a secondary fear of travelling in the car, your vet will be able to prescribe travel-sickness tablets. In the past, we usually had to resort to sedatives, but more recently anti-emetics – drugs that prevent vomiting – have become available for use in dogs and this medication has less tendency to cause drowsiness. **TB**



Help to cure travel-sick dogs by getting them to associate the vehicle with a pleasant experience

Crossword / Compiled by Eric Linden / 1661



Across

- 1 Chicks come out of their shell through a small door (5)
4 With an American coin, guns are finished (6)
7 Zesty gun part! (4)
8 Taking a knife to shot game means destroying the insides of buildings (7)
9 It gives the ermine its colour — that's the spirit! (5)
10 An example of gun engraving brings fragrant aroma to mind (7)
13 A type of air rifle — know the drill? (9)
16 Those discovering ferret locators (7)
17 Hear some mosquitoes while shooting (5)
19 A water deer that makes a tasty takeaway (7)
21 UK river seen from the outskirts of Avignon? (4)
22 Gives things the all-clear as one reactivates a trap (6)
23 Identification is integral to an endless tale about the creek (5)

Down

- 1 Warms up around hospital on tracts of open land (6)
2 Secured gun screws — definitely no slacking! (9)
3 & 18 down A sight he adjusts — it keeps stalkers on top of their game (4,4)
4 Bisley's Shooting Centre gets much more than just local coverage (8)
5 Branded ammunition is accidentally hidden inside (3)
6 Negotiated the sale, eg, of birds of prey (6)
11 Be fast to rub down wood where wildfowlers might land themselves in a sticky spot (9)
12 Splits it four ways as a hound hunts (8)
14 Birds fly round and round beside the Arctic (6)
15 One of the repercussions of shooting makes us cringe (6)
18 See 3 down
20 Get your skates on if it forms on the surface of flight ponds in winter! (3)

Kindly supplied by



Please email the solution with the crossword number in the subject line and giving your name, address and mystery word answer to:
ollie.harvey@fieldsportspress.com
All prizes will be despatched as soon as possible.

How to enter: Identify the word in the shaded squares and you could win an eight-round Dark Havana leather bullet pouch worth £95

Rules: Entries must be received by 24 April 2024 and correct answers will be added to our monthly prize draw. All usual conditions apply. The April winner will appear in the 1 May 2024 issue.



Solution 1659/3 April 2024

Across: 4. Duckling 7. Rope 9. Doll's 10. Leven 11. Arms 12. Greylags 13. Brittany 15. Wind 16. Worms 17. Hedge 18. Chew 19. Seagrass

Down: 1. Skulls 2. Hiss 3. Gravel 5. Undergrowth 6. Gallery 8. Punt-gunners 12. Glasses 14. Thrown 15. Waders 17. Head

★ **PRIZE WORD: RELEASE**

Powder charge dangers

➡ RIFLES

Q I want to load reduced powder charge cartridges for humanely despatching deer if I come across an injured animal or accidentally wound one. I have heard it is dangerous to put a full powder charge in a rifle cartridge. Do you have any suggestions for a lighter load?

A It is dangerous to fire a full charge rifle cartridge point-blank at a wounded animal as this can create a phenomenon known as a splashback.

Fragments of bone, the bullet jacket, soil and stone chips may be blown back towards the firer, causing injury. There is no way of knowing what the ground is like under an injured animal and the impact of a large bullet at high velocity could be dangerous to the shooter.

Loading reduced charge cartridges needs to be done with care, too. There is a phenomenon known as detonation that can theoretically occur with a reduced powder charge. This can be

prevented by filling up the cartridge case above the powder with an inert substance, such as semolina. This keeps the powder charge against the primer on firing.

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



Great care must be used when preparing or firing reduced loads, whatever their purpose

TO CATCH A FISH

Stimulator fly

Originally developed by Randall Kaufmann to imitate an adult stonefly, this effective trout pattern can also imitate a grasshopper, caddis or even large male mayflies. Stoneflies need to dry their wings upon hatching and often fall from bushes and trees into the water to be eaten by trout. Later in the life cycle, female stoneflies distribute eggs by skating across the surface, which is also a particularly good time to use this pattern. **AS**



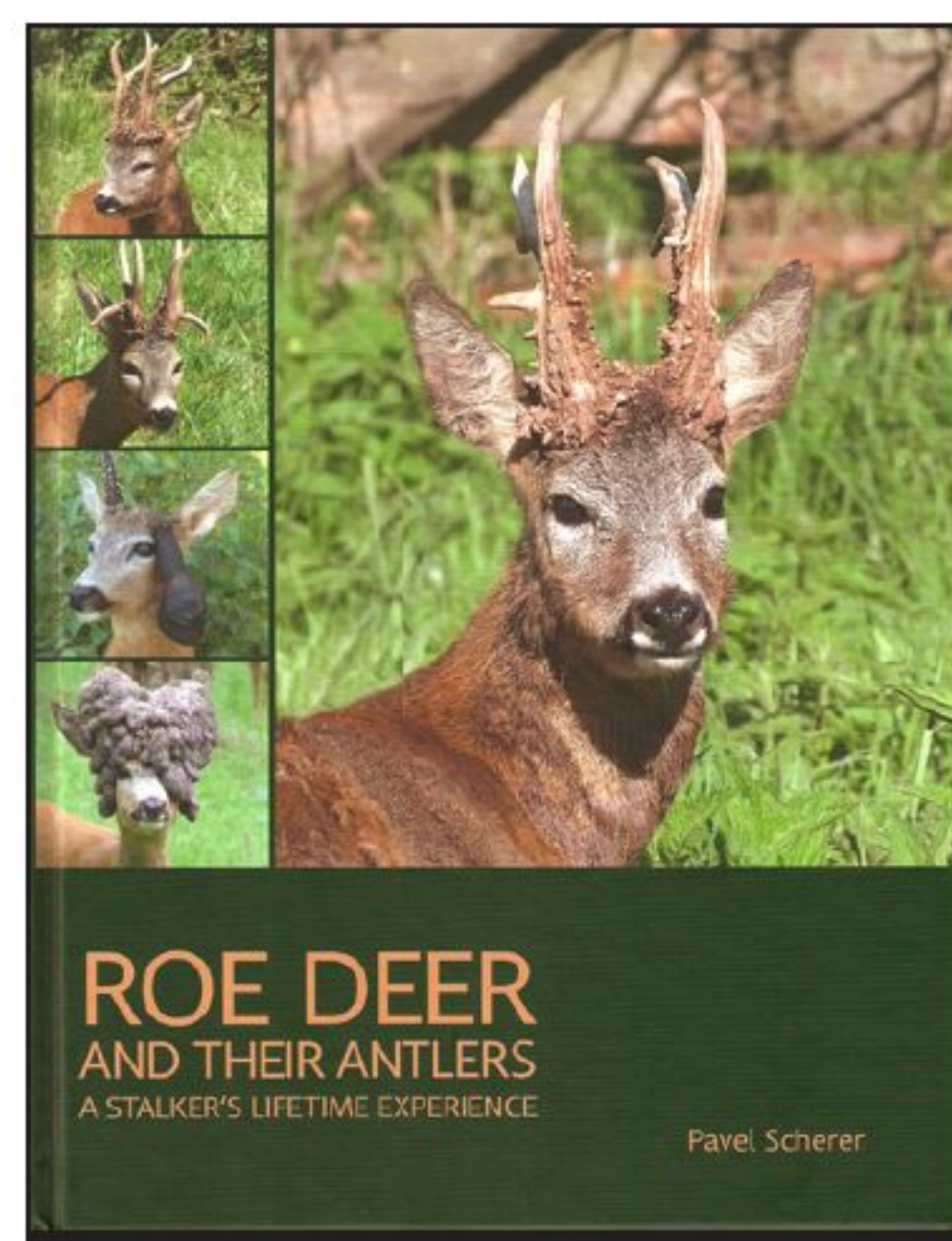
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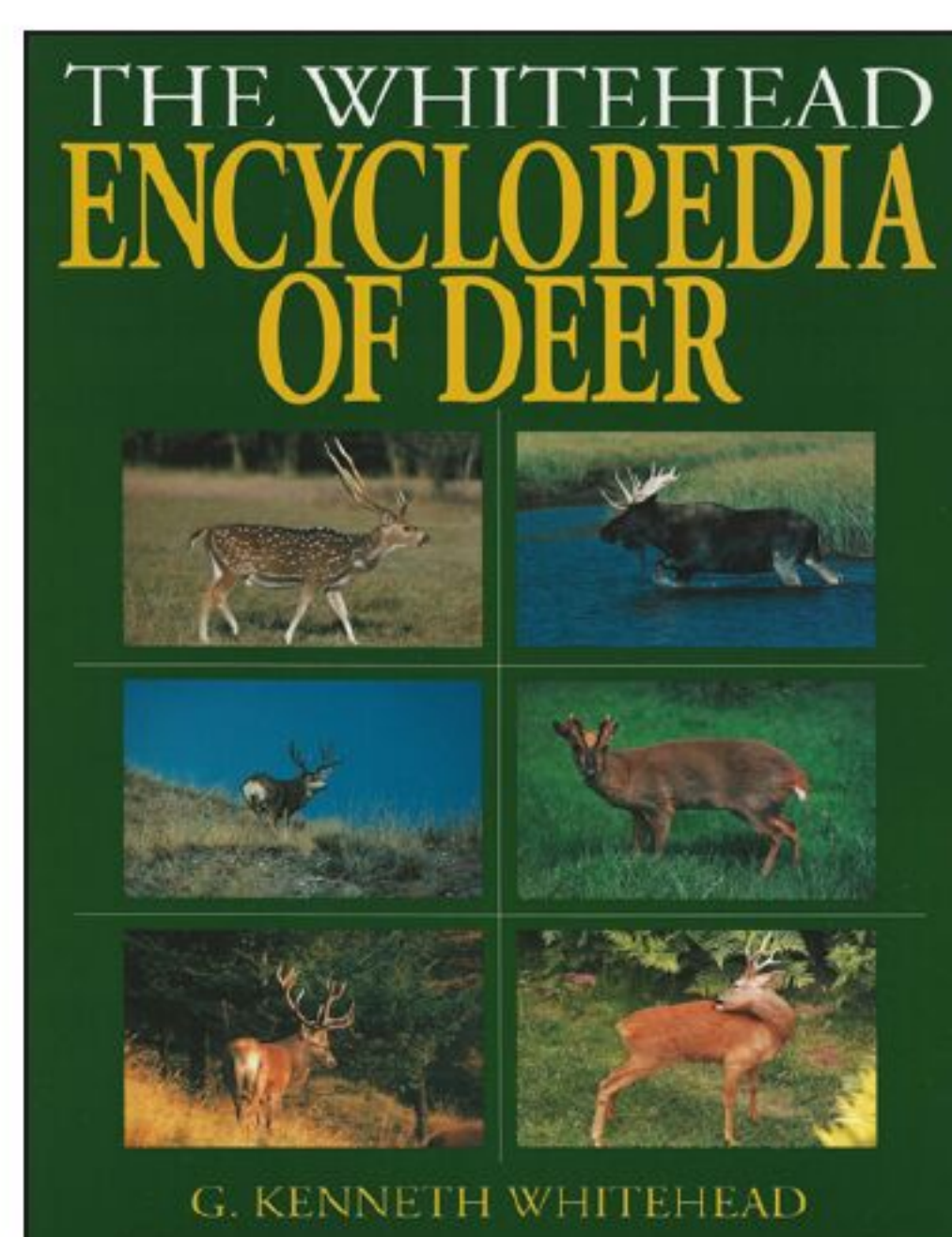
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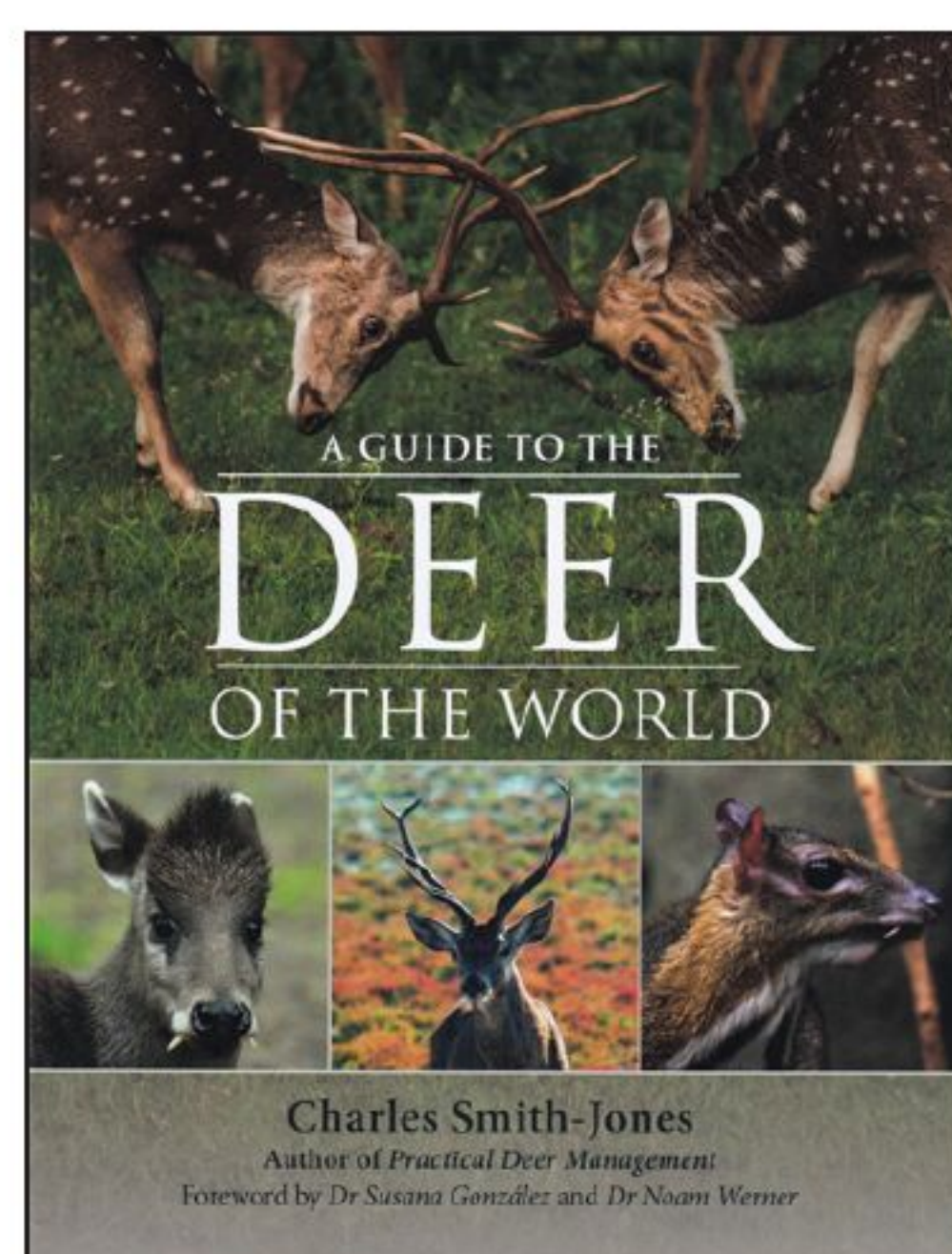
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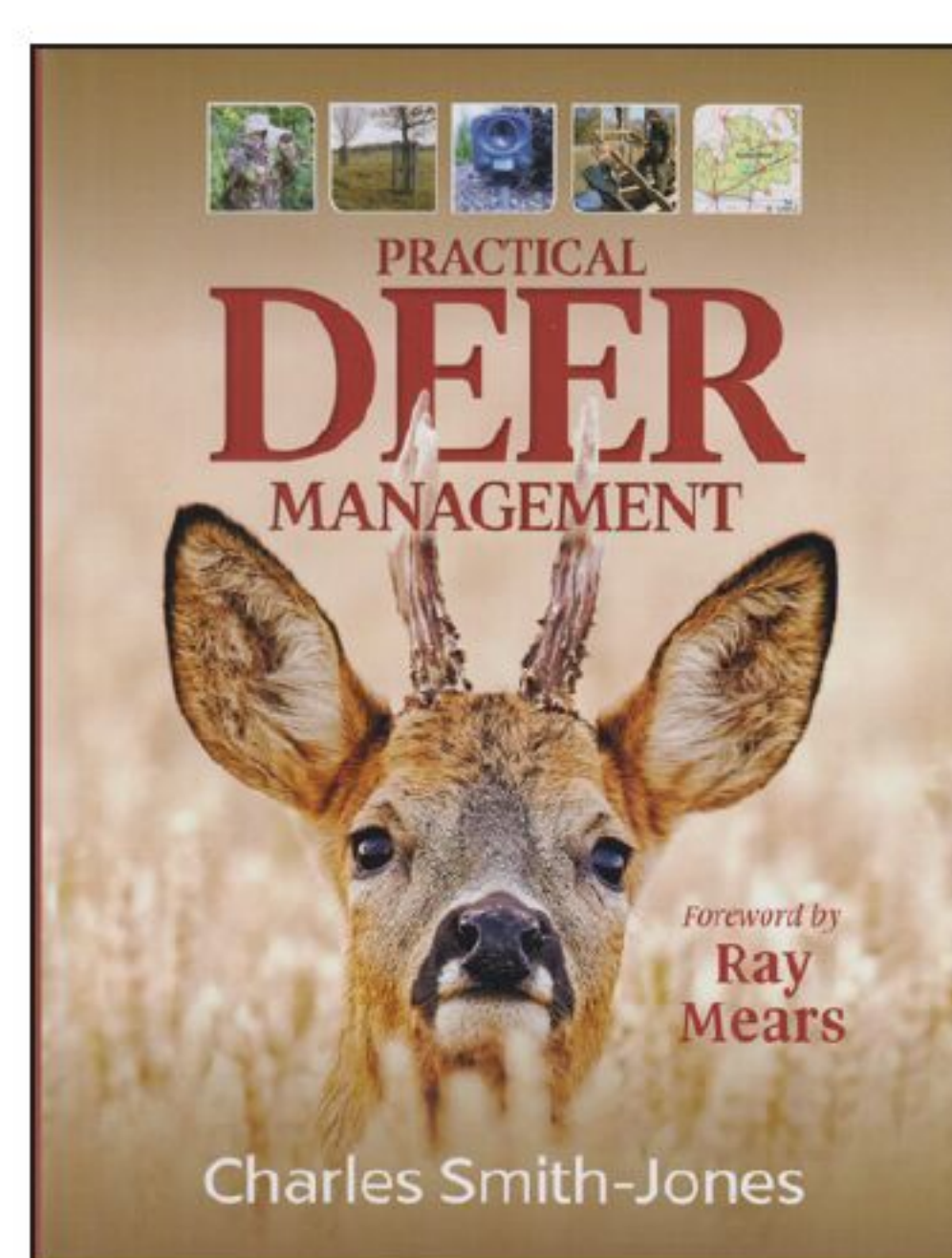
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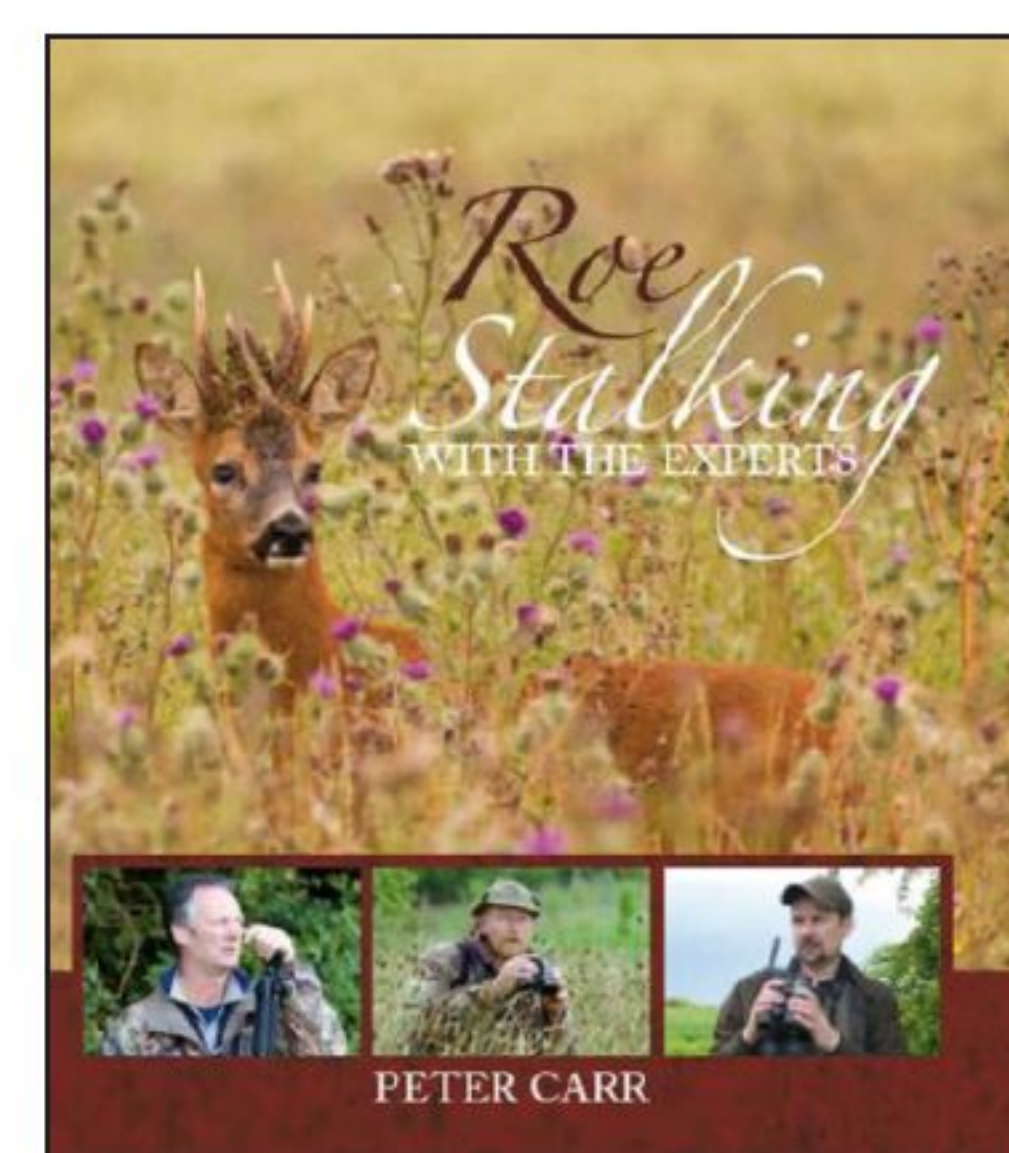
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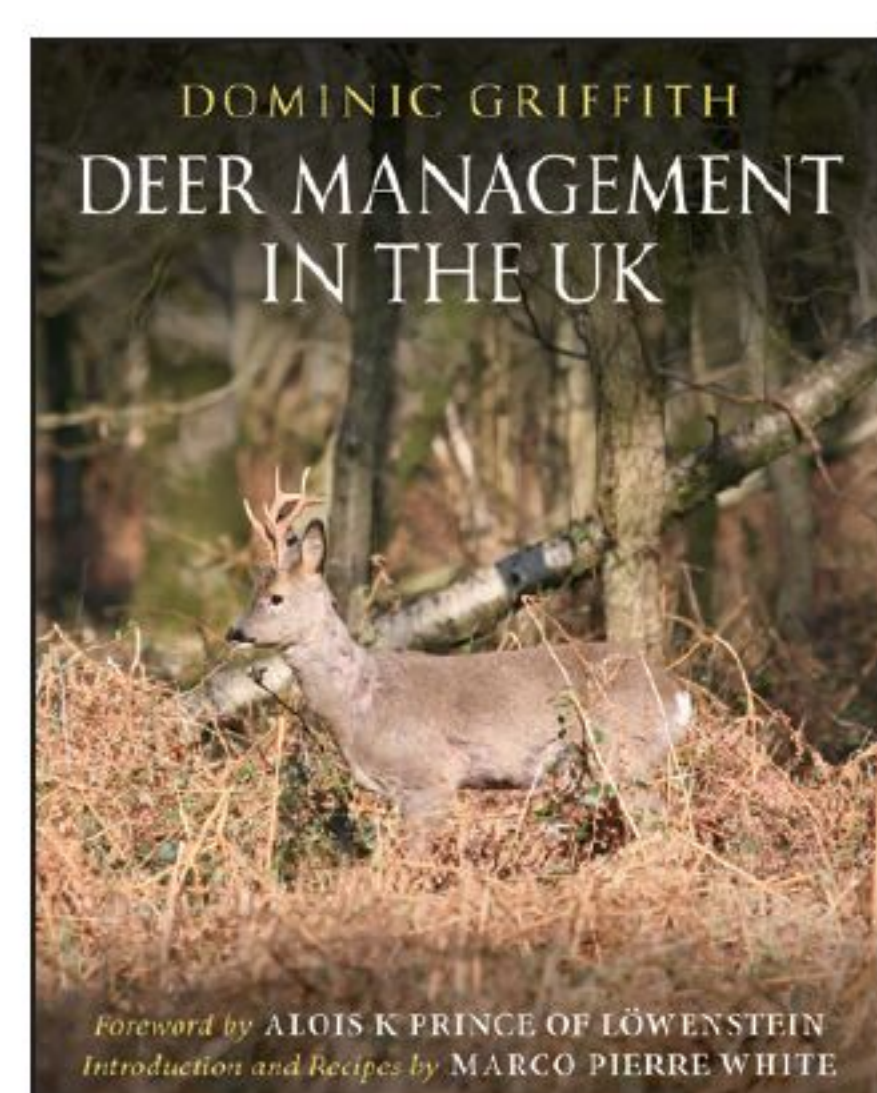
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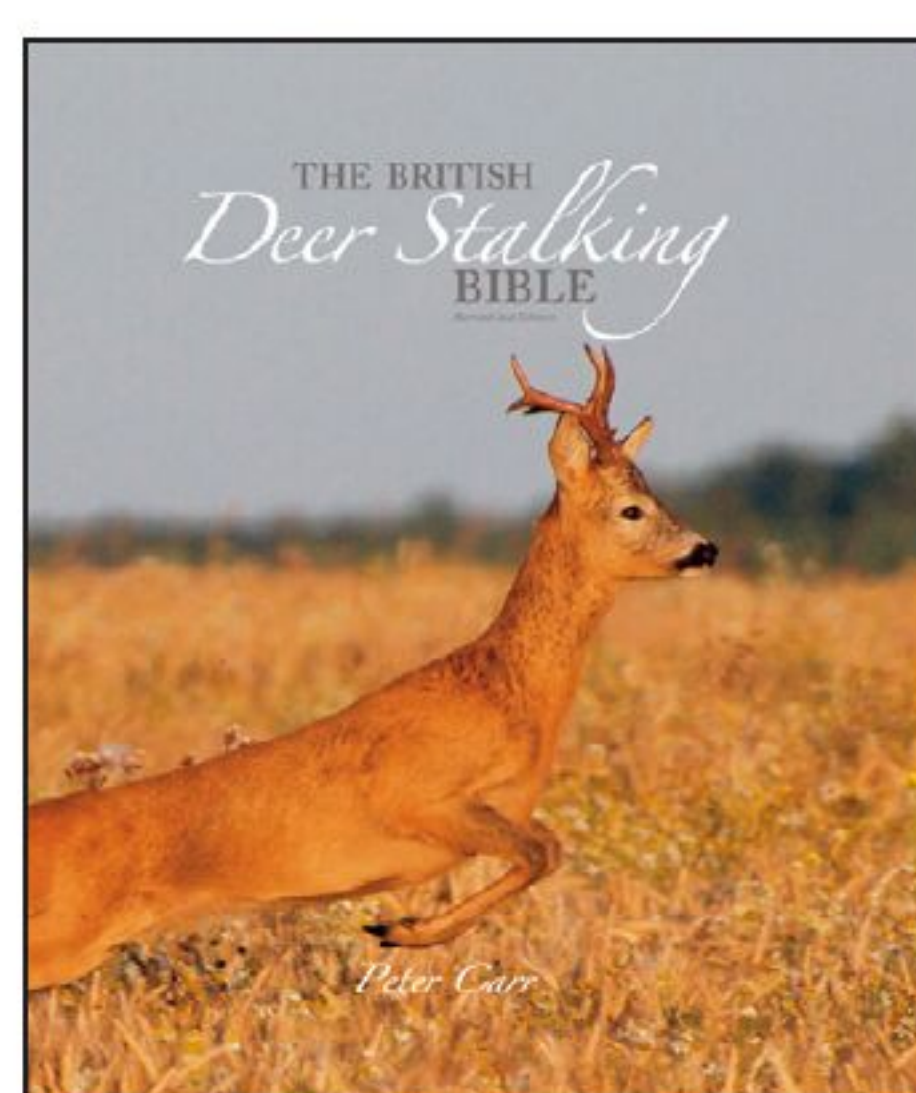
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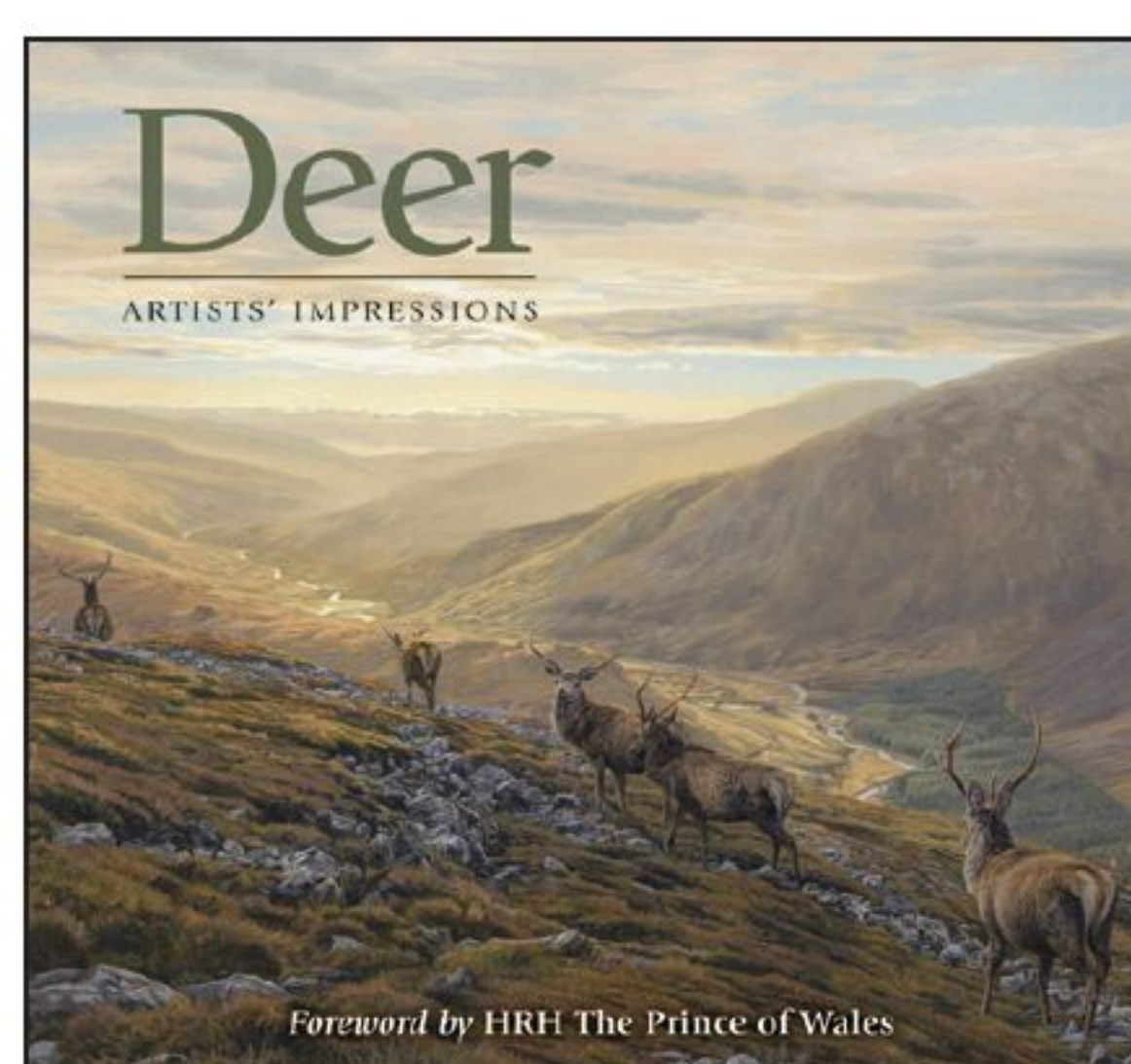
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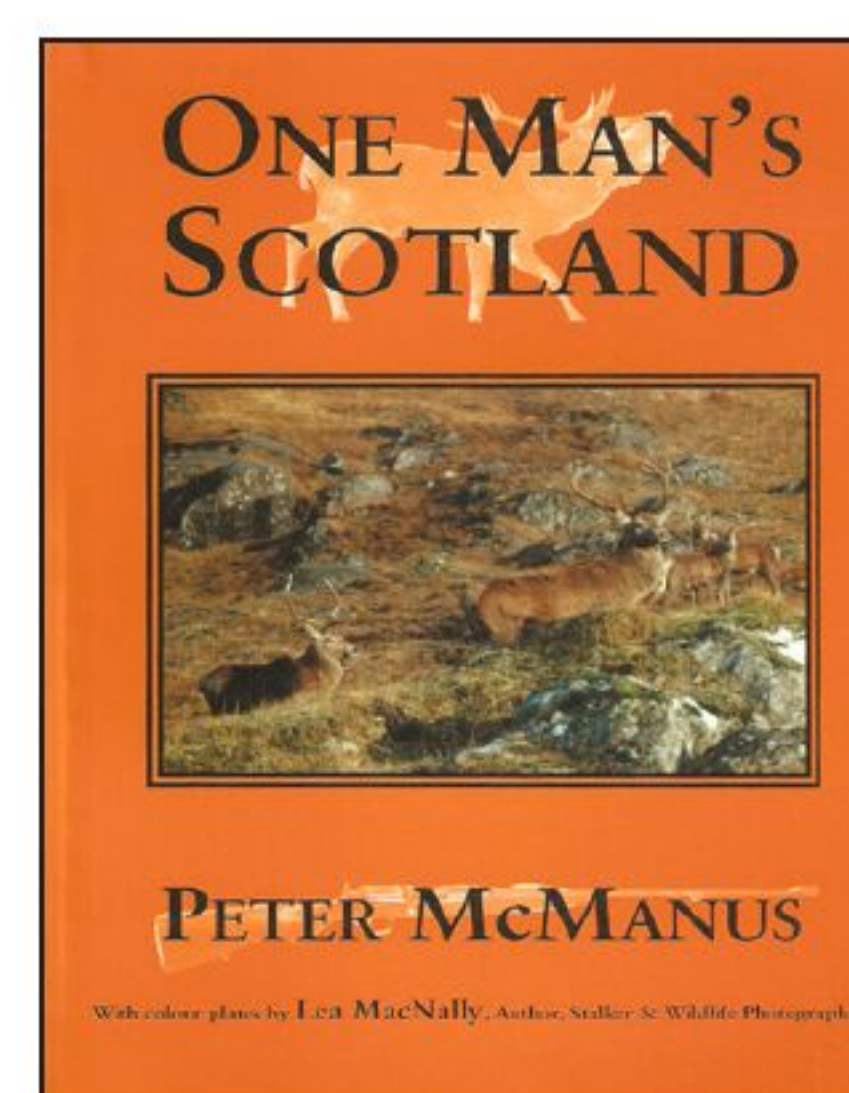
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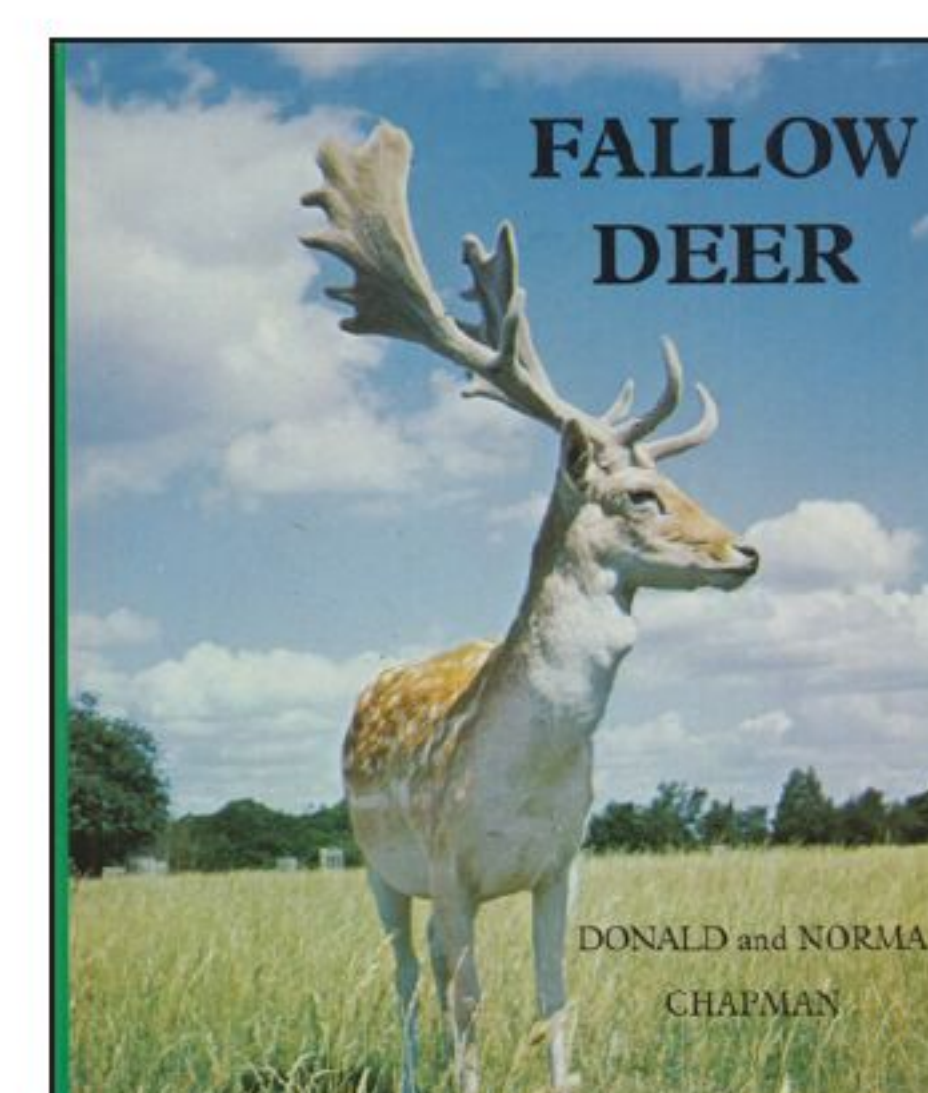
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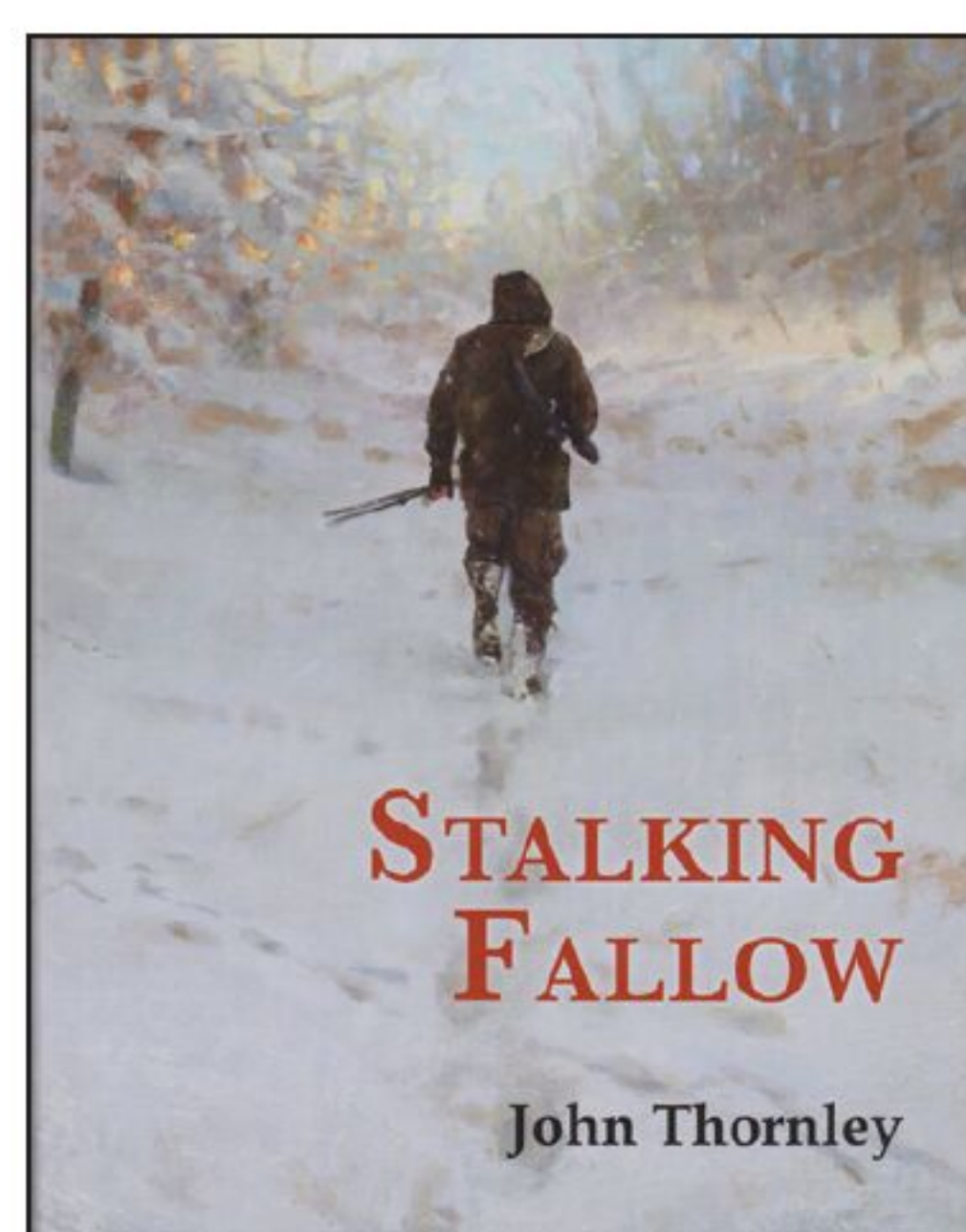
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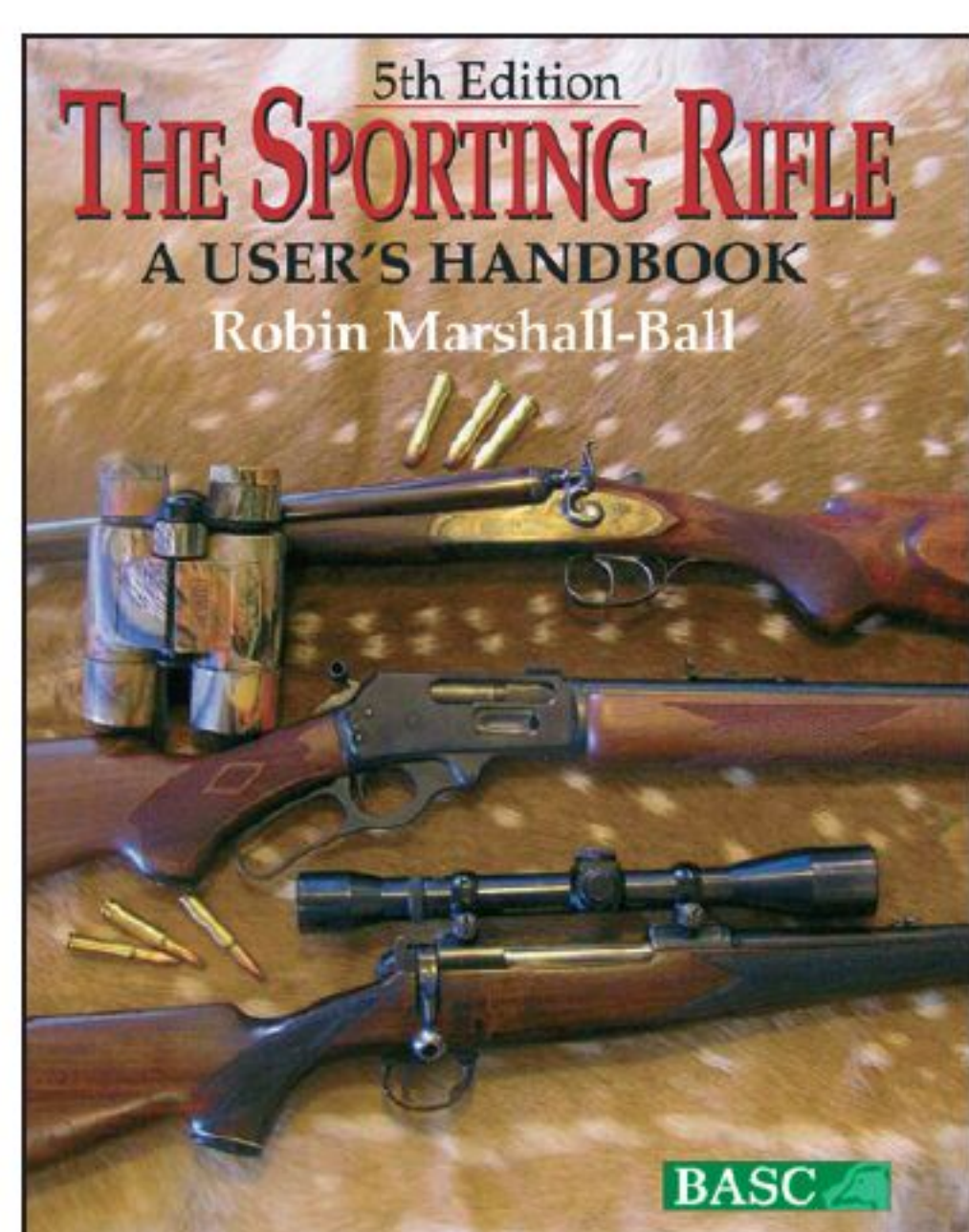
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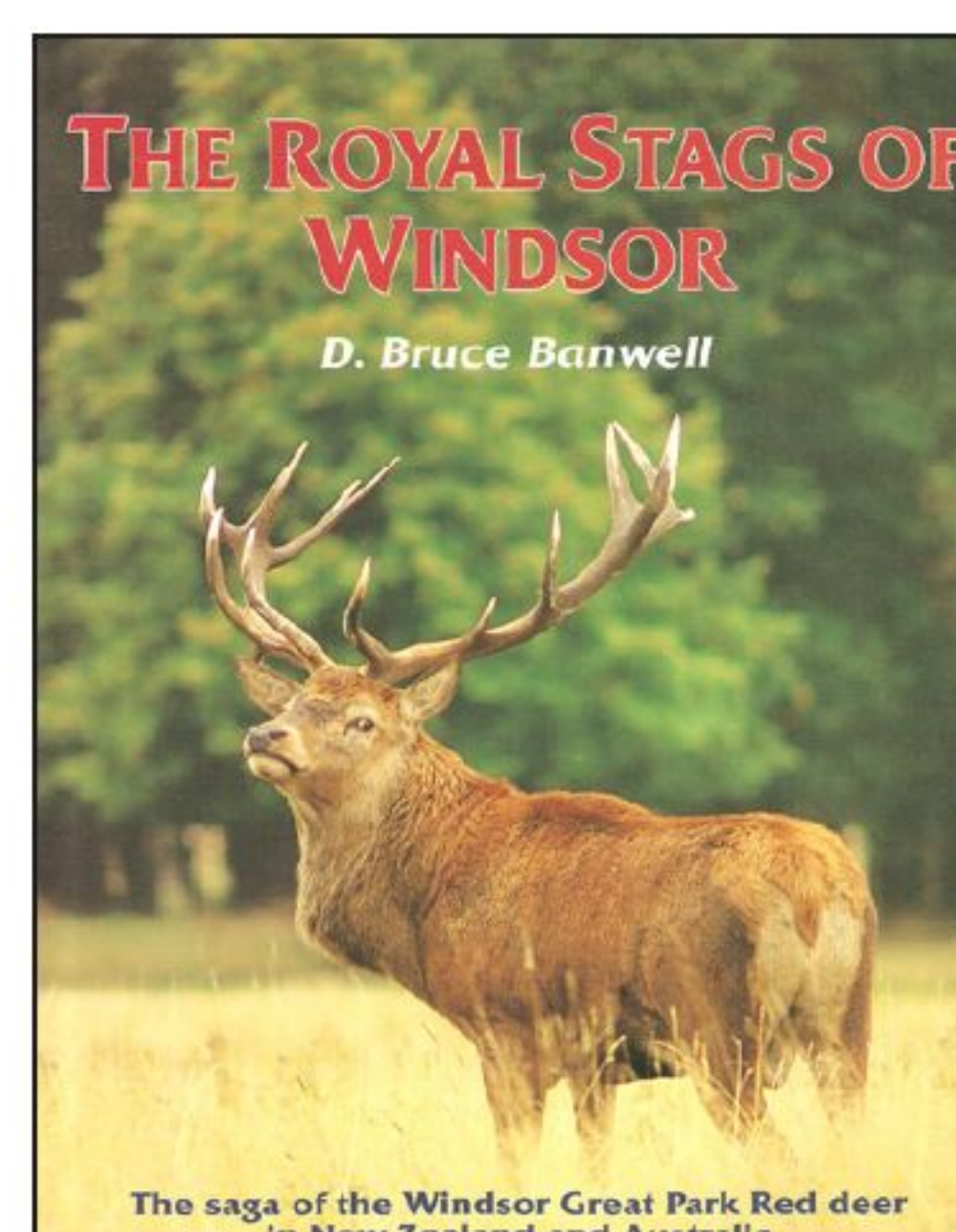
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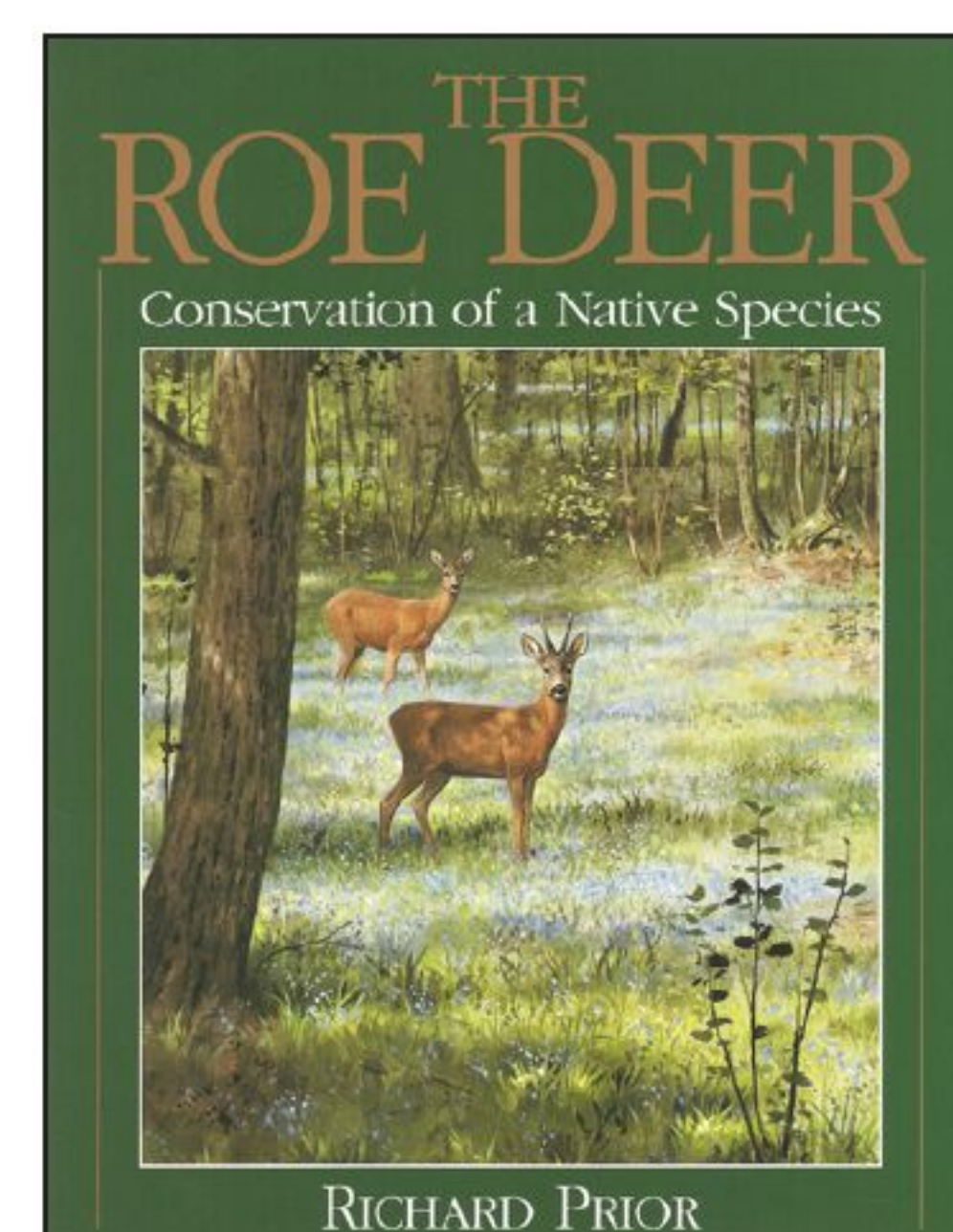
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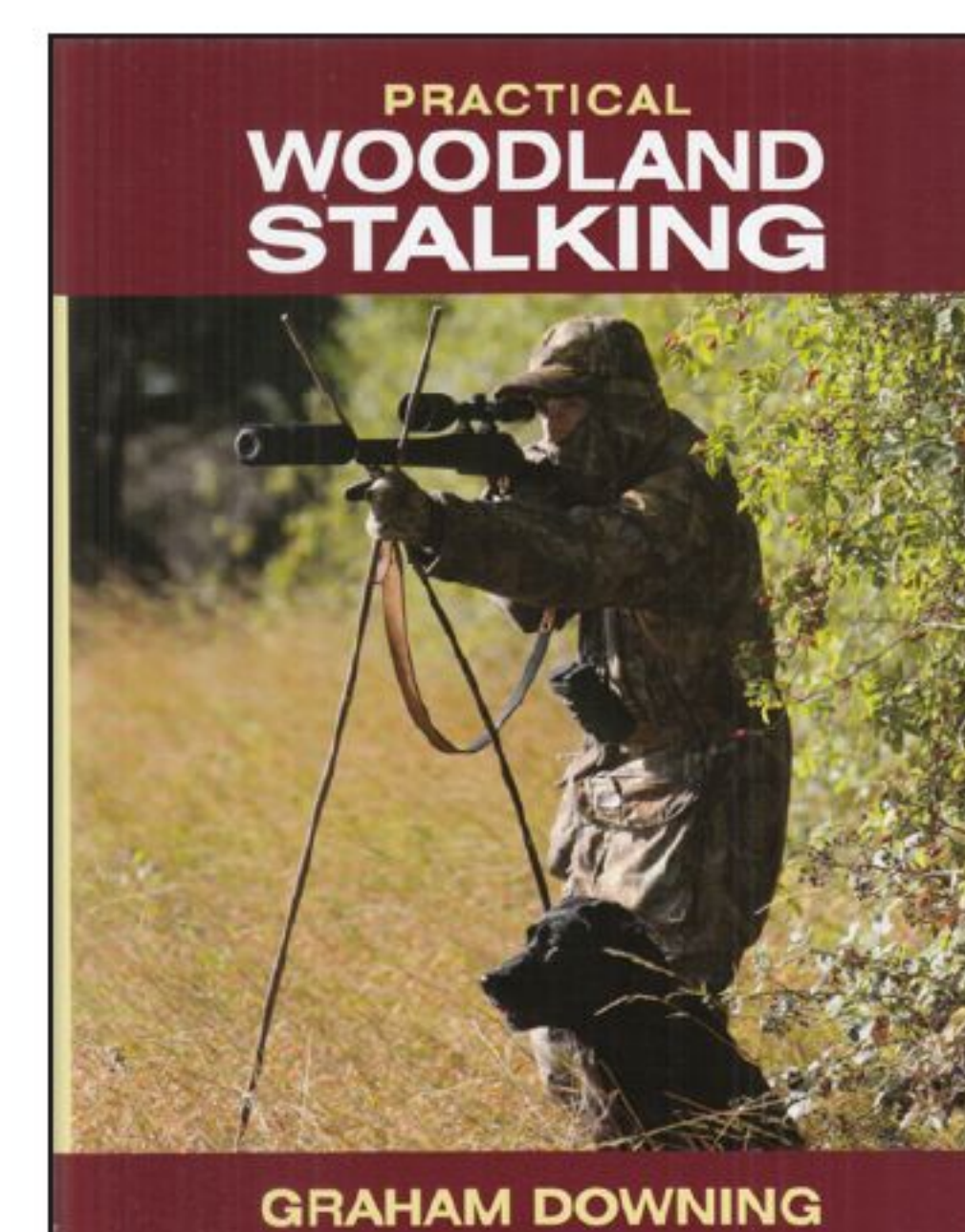
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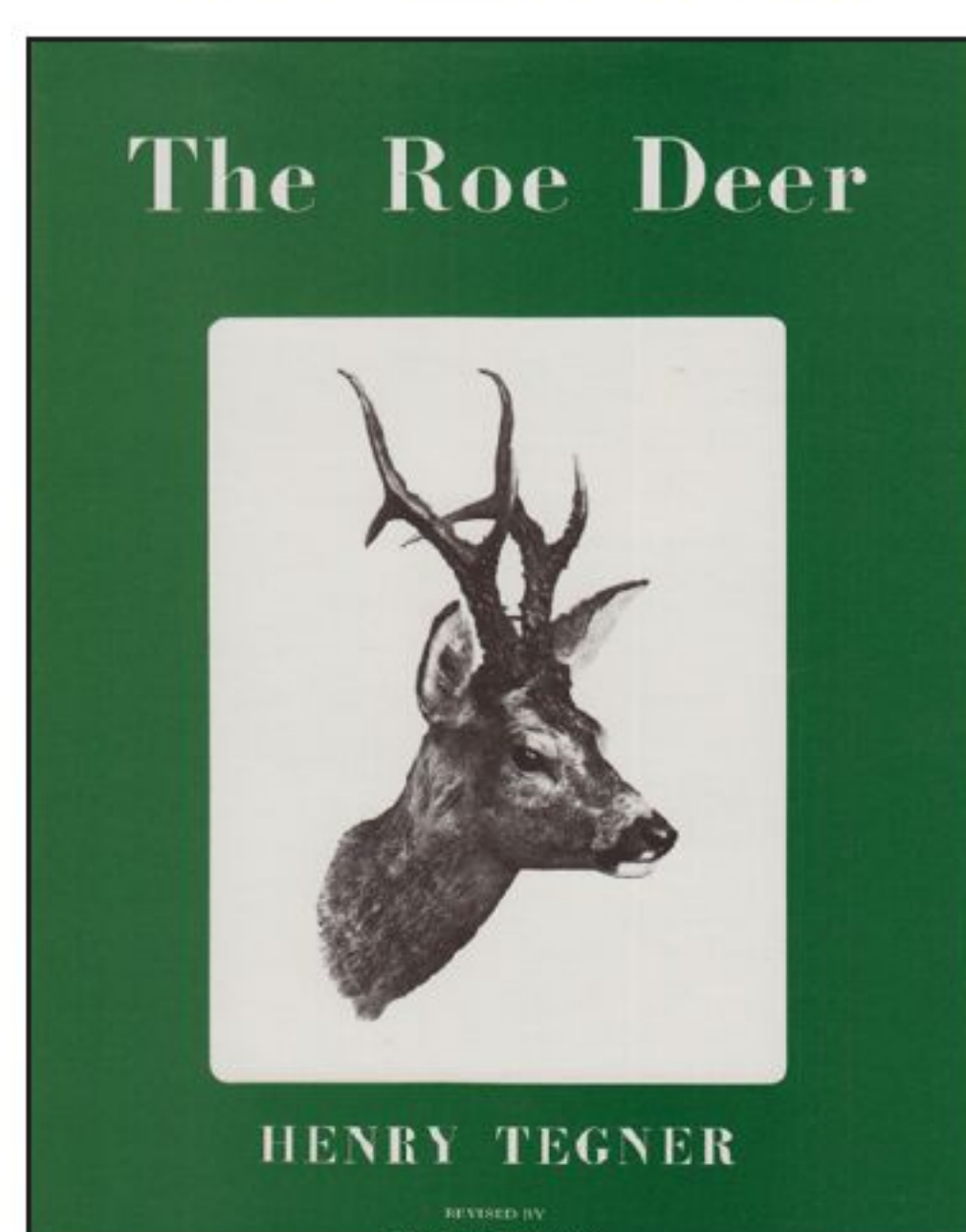
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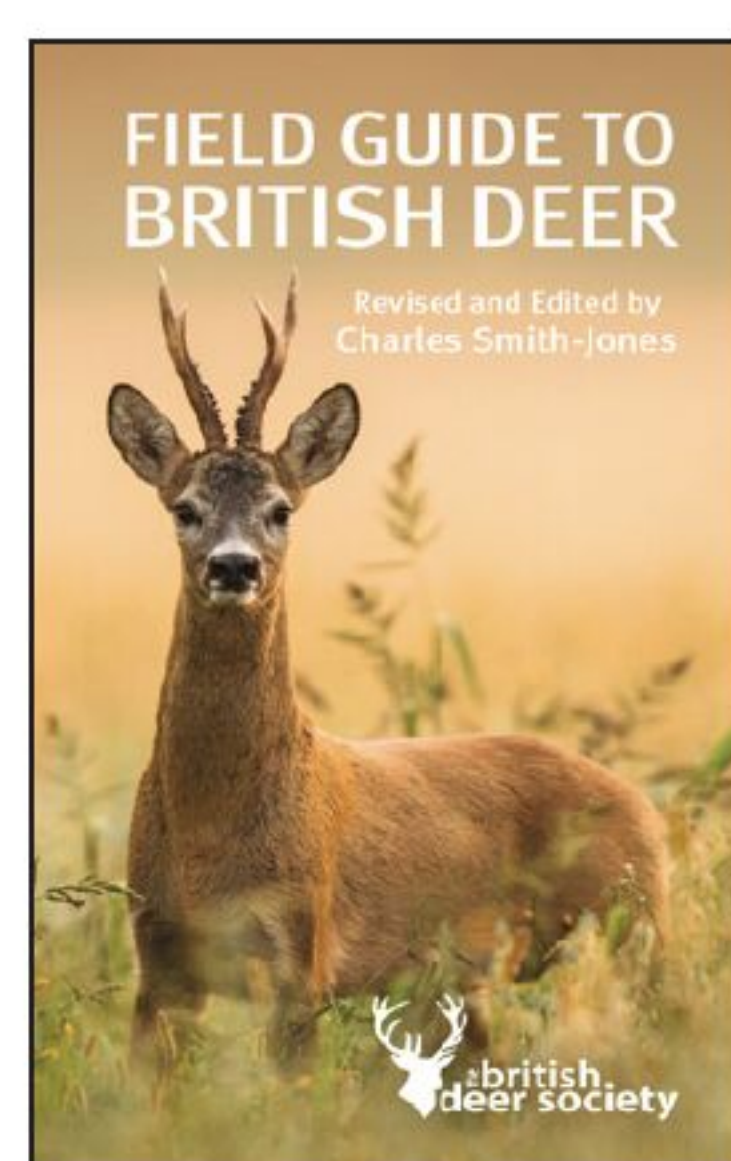
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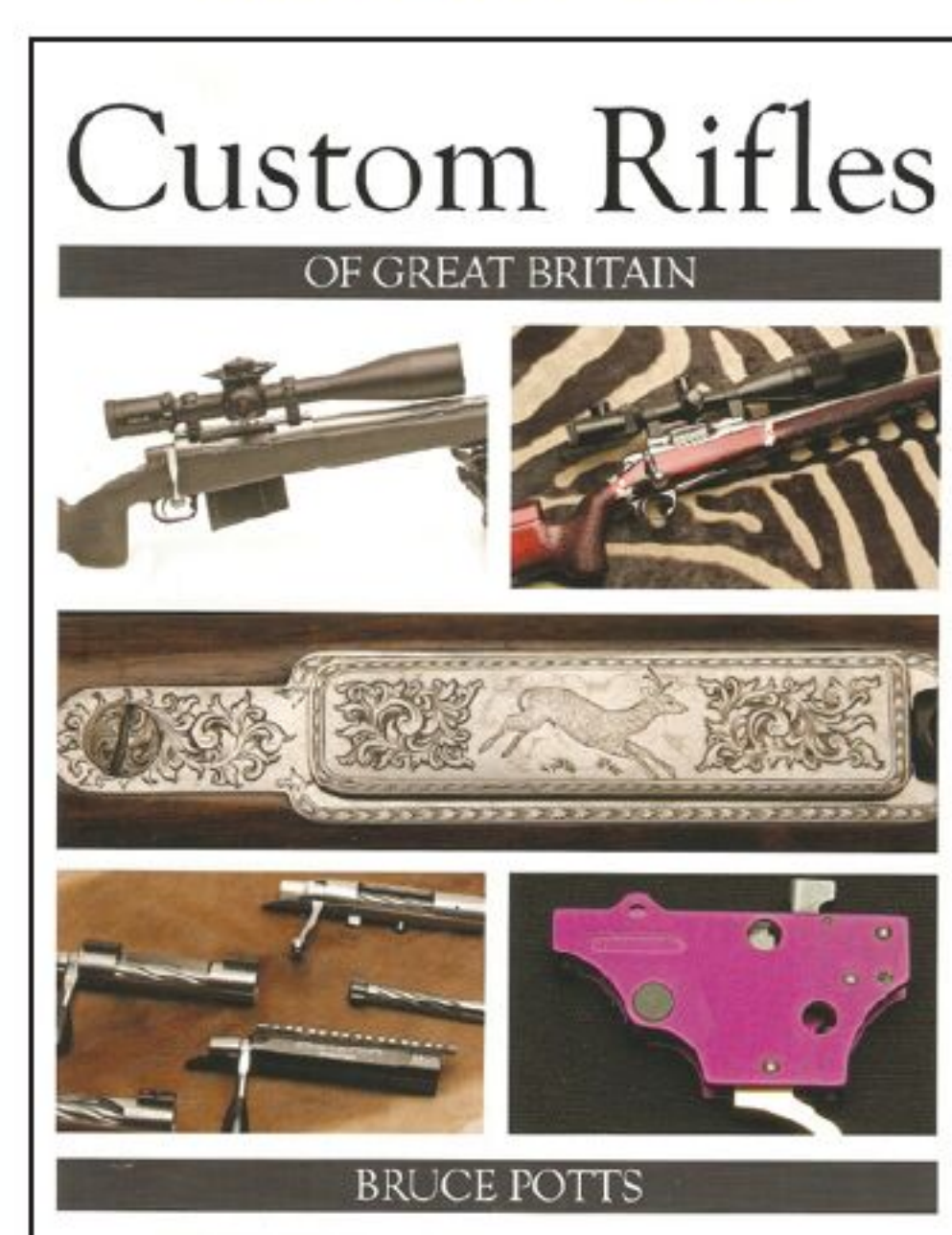
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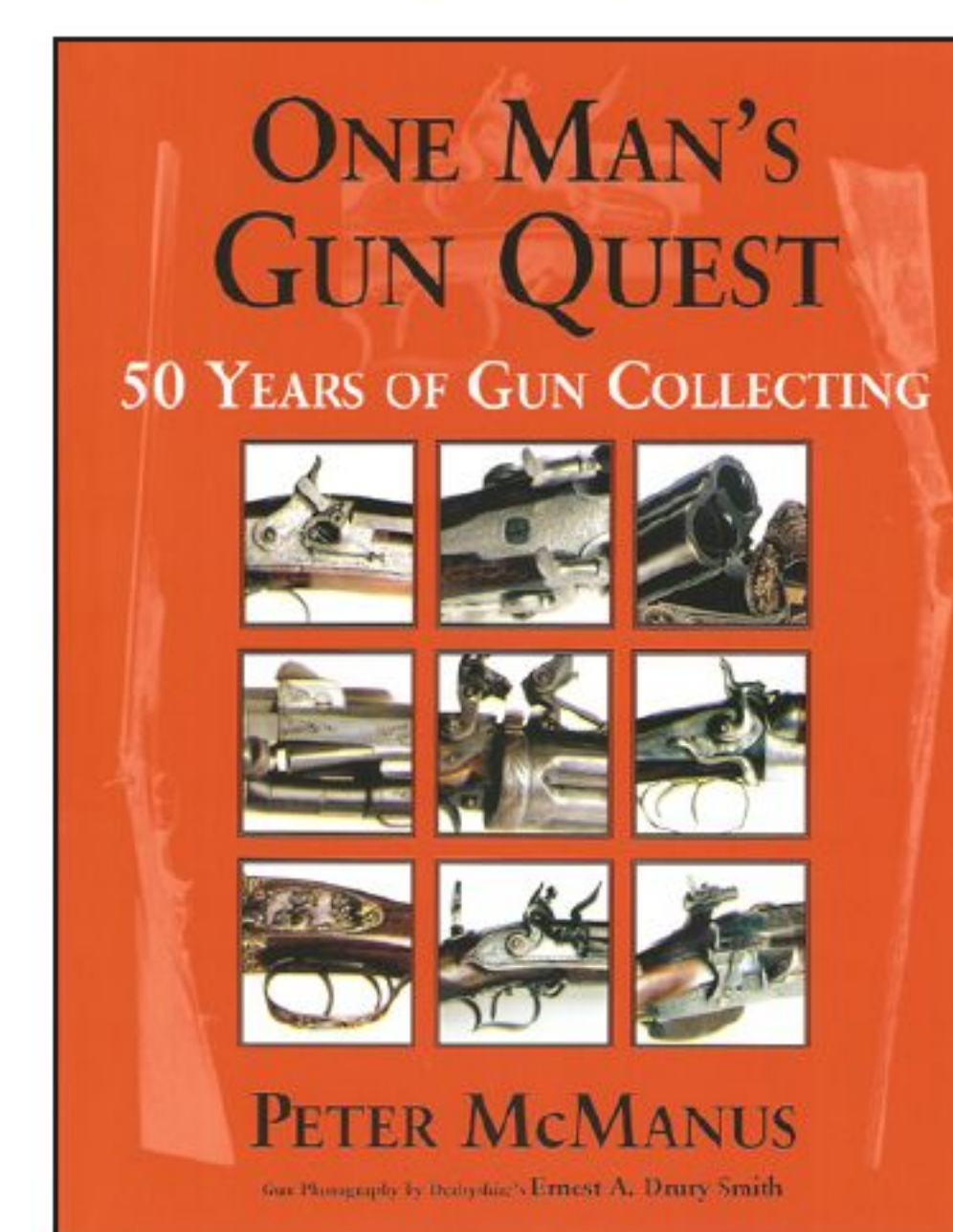
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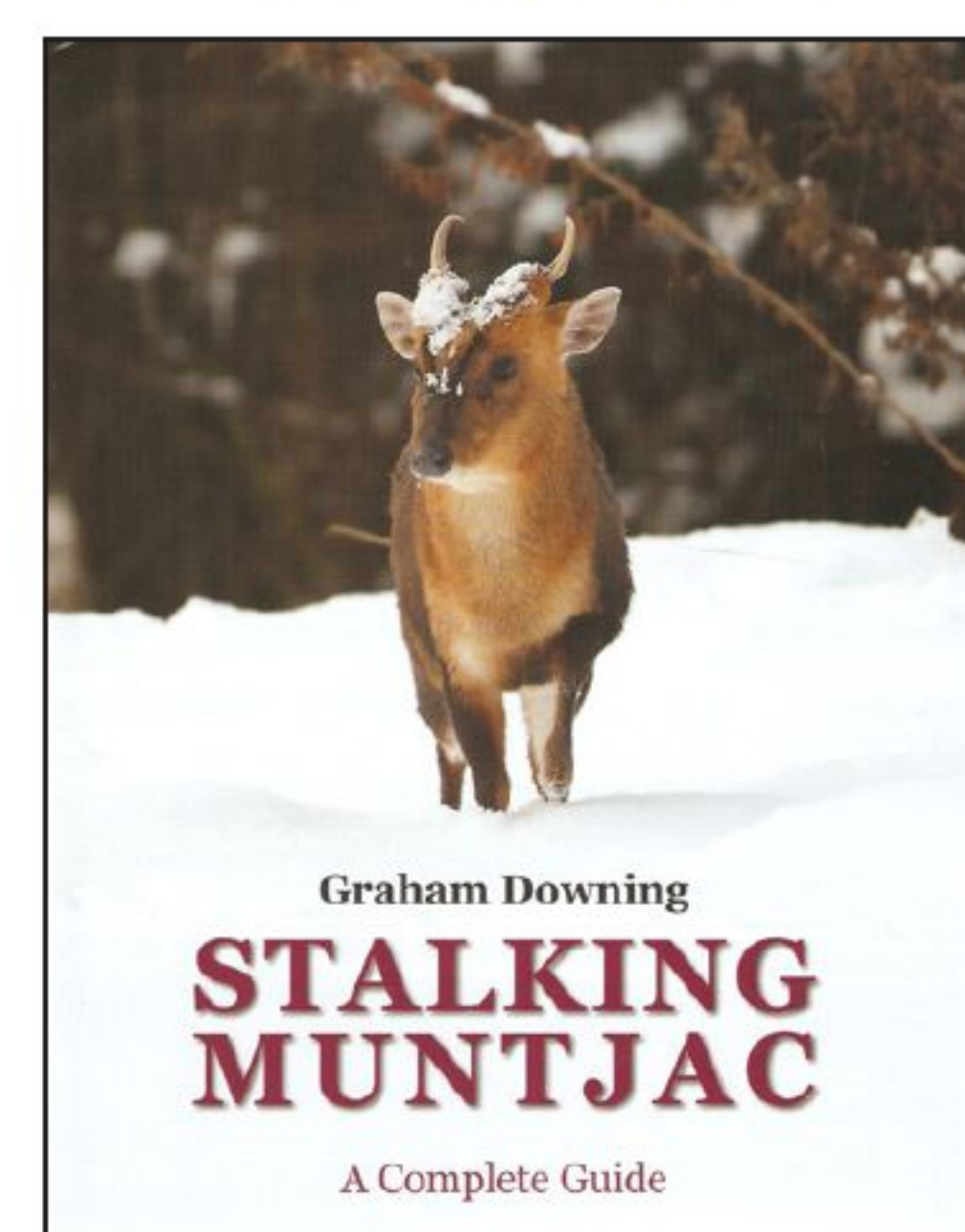
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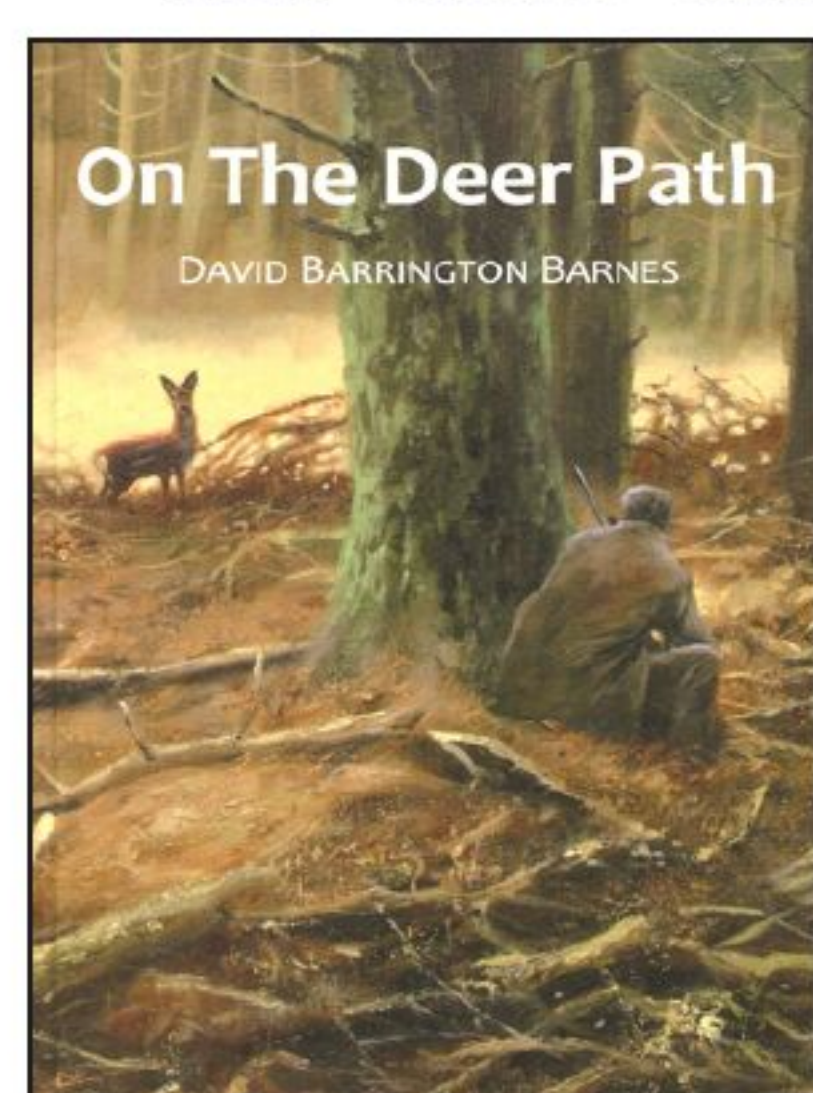
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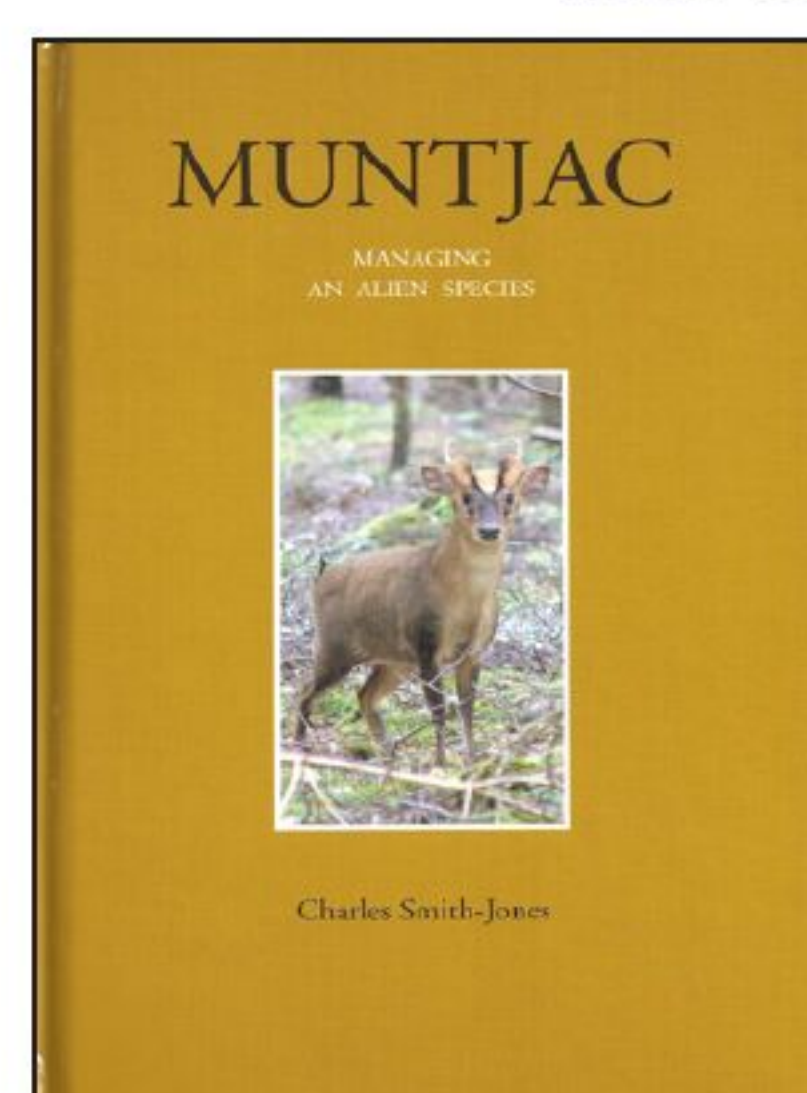
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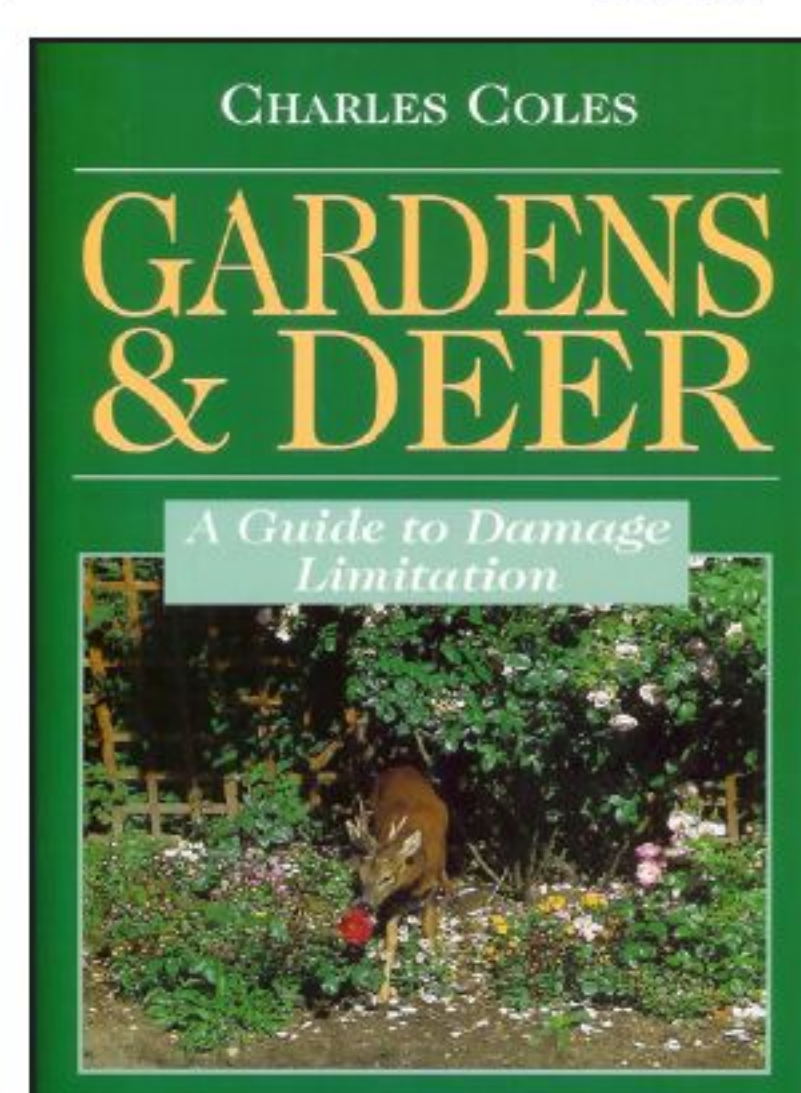
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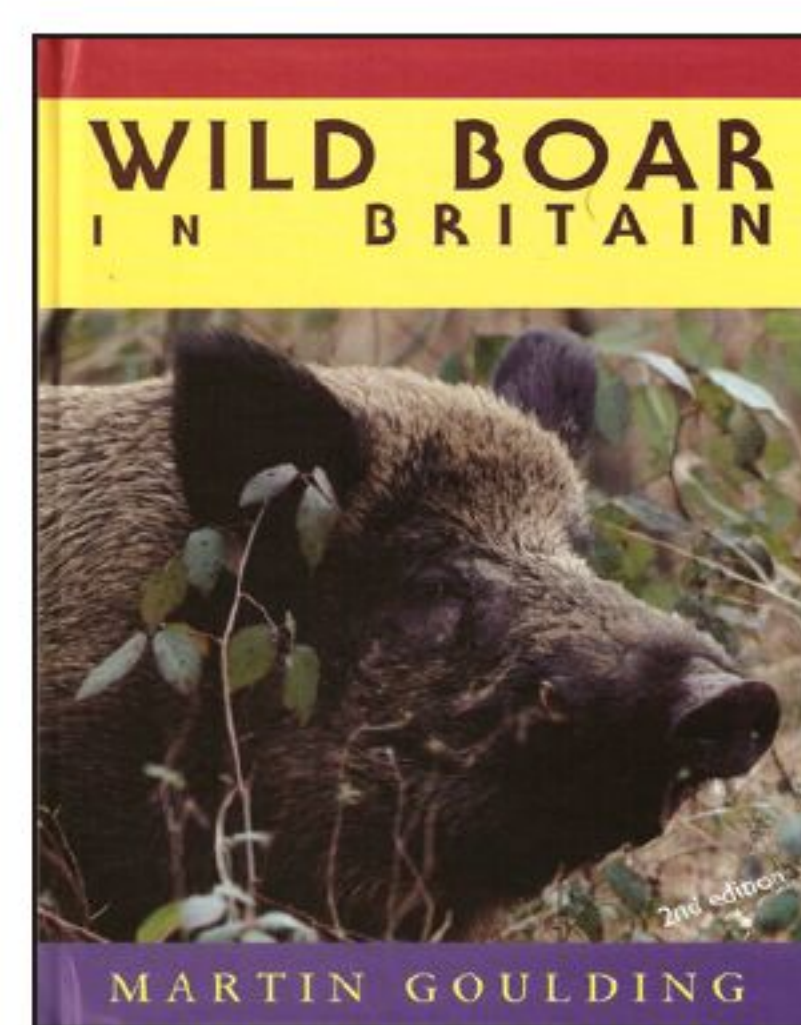
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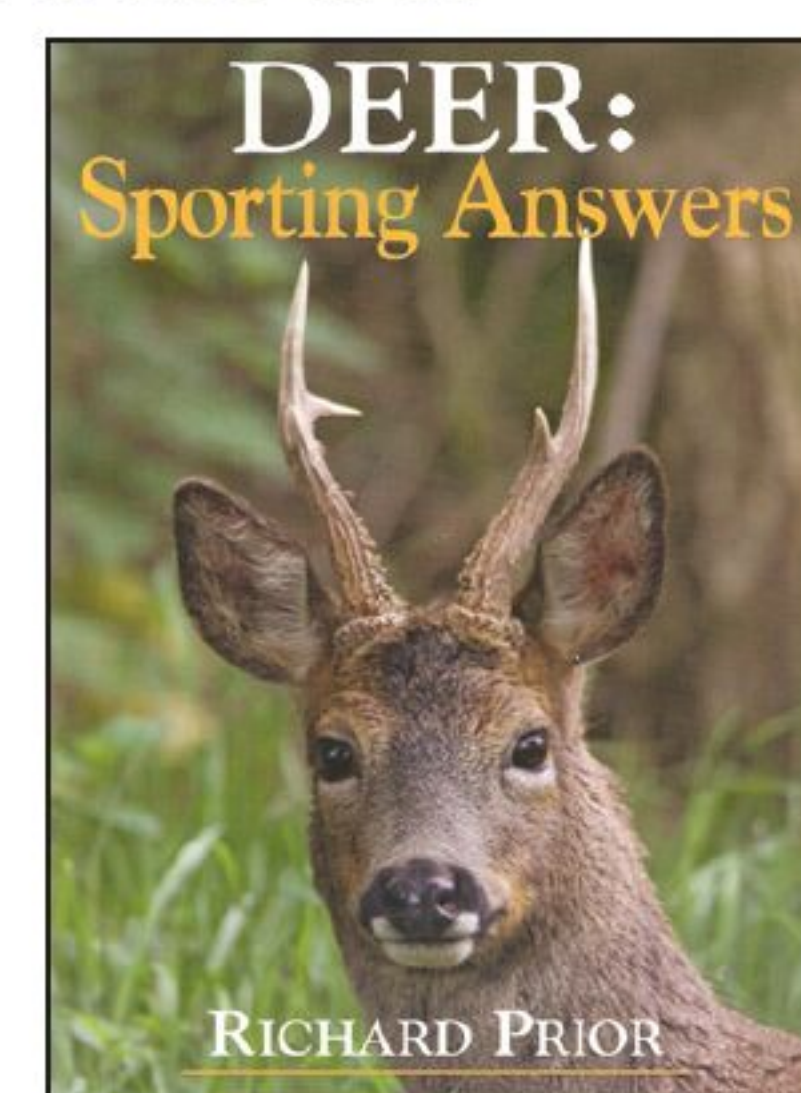
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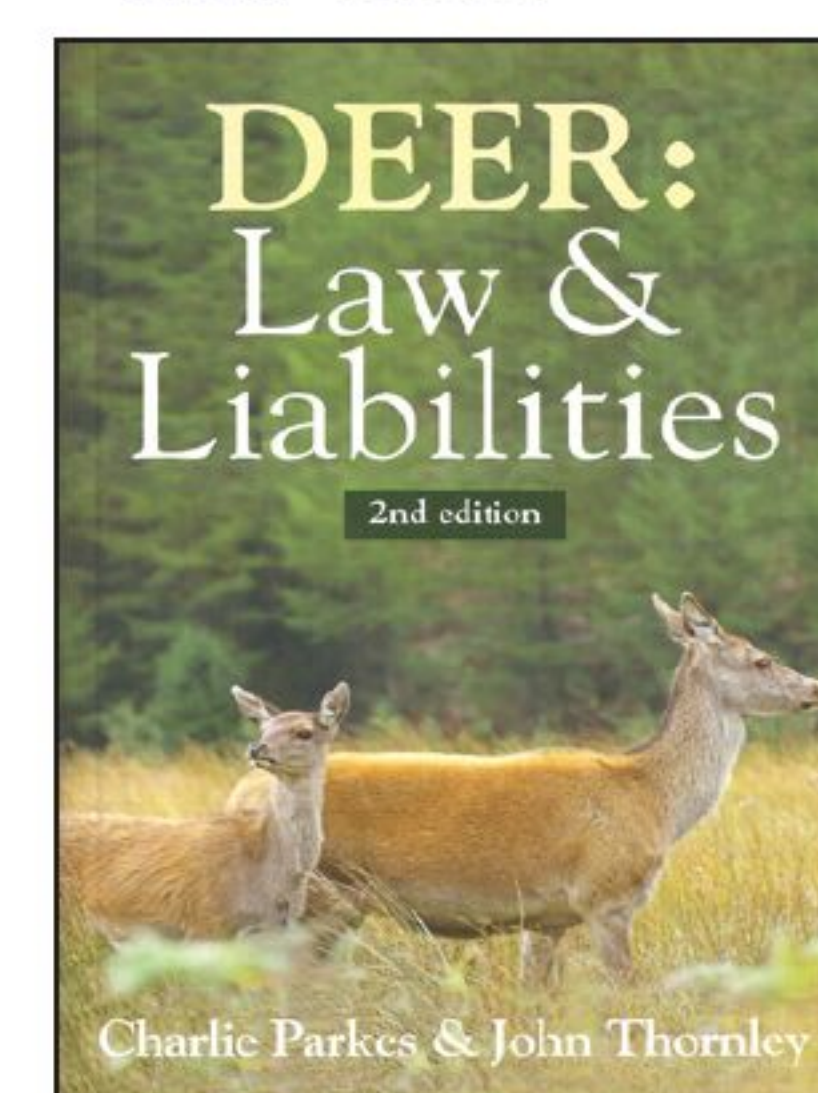
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The Shooting Times Almanac

20 APRIL 2024

APRIL MOON PHASE



Pink Moon, 24 April

The Pink Moon gets its name from the wildflowers that bloom in early spring. Common names in Europe also refer to spring with grass sprouting, birds laying



Sunrise 05:53



Sunset 20:06



Moonrise 16:25



Moonset 05:00

TIMES SHOWN FOR LONDON

eggs and people sowing seeds. The Celts had names such as Budding Moon, New Shoots Moon, Seed Moon and Growing Moon, while the Anglo-Saxons called it the Egg Moon.

THOUGHTS FROM THE FIELD

Sharing a lifetime of experience in the countryside

Every year around 200 species of birds are recorded at Minsmere, the RSPB's flagship reserve on the Suffolk coast. I've been visiting Minsmere for over 50 years and in that time I have seen it undergo many changes. Visitor numbers have escalated from a few dozen a week to many hundreds a day, yet thanks to careful management it remains a magnificent site for wildlife.

Twenty years ago I was depressed to find Minsmere's woodland full of grey squirrels and muntjac, the latter so tame they barely

moved out of my way. It prompted me to write to the RSPB, suggesting that it was high time that something was done about the numbers of alien animals over-running the reserve. The reply I received was disappointing, for the RSPB then had a non-vertebrate control policy. On a recent visit I was delighted to see neither a grey squirrel or a muntjac, suggesting the RSPB is controlling these animals. Perhaps local venison could be served in the café?

David Tomlinson

EDITOR'S PICKS: PHEASANT FEEDERS



King Indoor Feeder (25kg)

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THE WEEK IN NUMBERS

£40.2m

Higher grain costs are driving up profits for the UK's largest grain merchant. Frontier Agriculture has a 22% share of the market and trades around 5m tonnes of grain a year. In the last financial year the business posted profits of £40.2m and turnover increased by £520m to £2.36bn, despite "exceptional volatility and unusual trade flows".

10%

Quill Productions has launched Eco-flec, a 100% recycled version of its well-known feeders. The feeder bin kits and Midi feeders are the first products to be made using Eco-flec. Quill is now offering 10% off both products with code ECOFLEC10. See Editor's Picks or call 01258 818239.

40

Charles Hartley joined the Working Clumber Spaniel Society to cover its 40th anniversary training day at Gatcombe Park. The event, hosted by HRH The Princess Royal, drew around 70 competitors, and celebrated the breed and how far it has come since it was essentially extinct.

➔ Read the full report on p38

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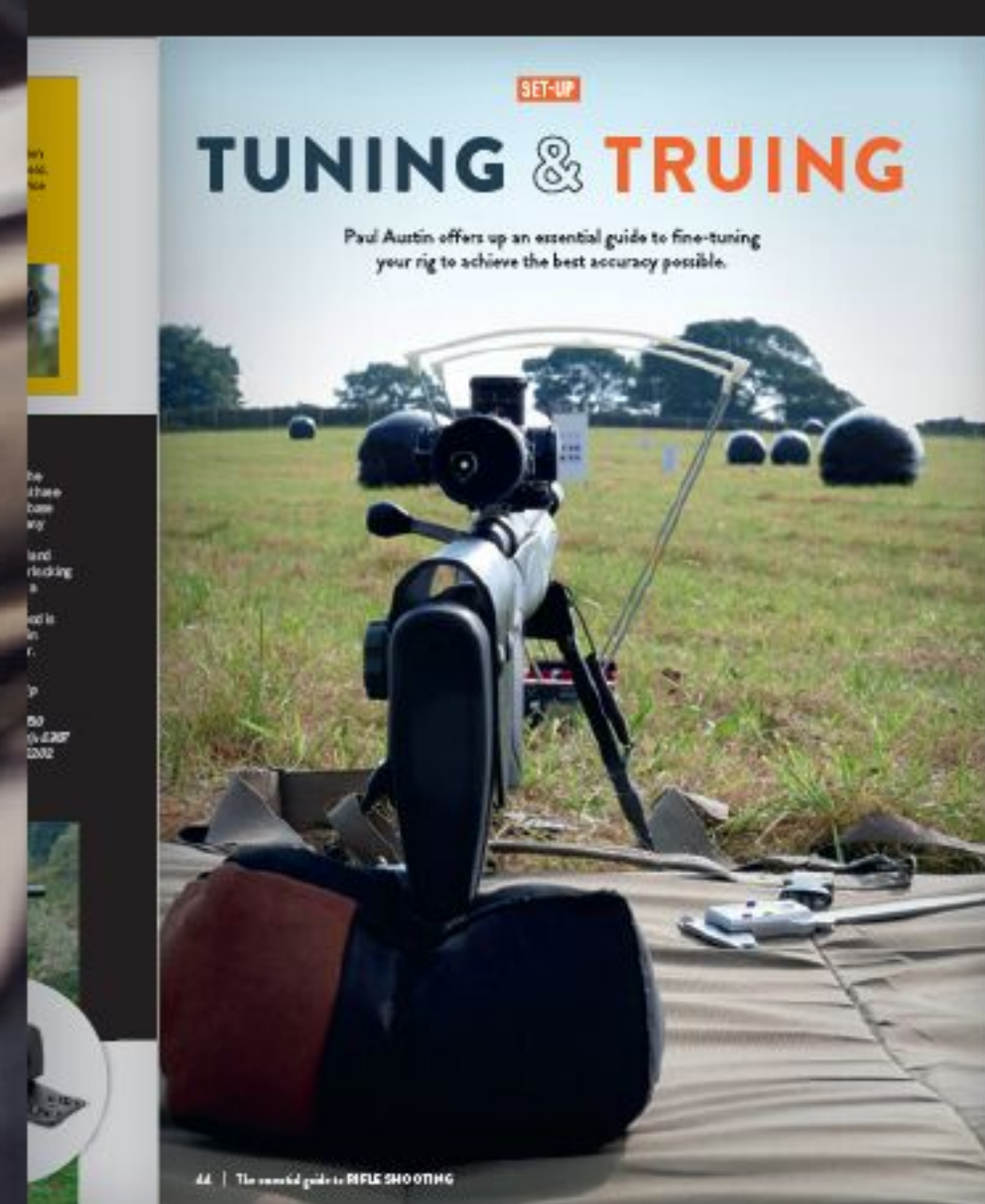
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Sharpshooter



Good management by private owners has preserved some of our most cherished places, but the state seems determined to ruin what's left

A penchant for fieldsports entails getting out in the field. This is in itself part of the attraction for many of us. I enjoy hiking in remote places, but when I am stalking, I get a walk and much more. On occasion, I like to participate in nature, as opposed to merely observing it from afar.

One of the reasons I am so keen on hill stalking is the opportunity to carry a firearm with intent while among big country, often in big weather. Being humbled by the sheer scale of mountains is good for the soul. This is especially so in an age when so much of our countryside is tamed and overcrowded.

Flat landscapes, too, can evince strong feelings among the fieldsports community. In 1934, fowler James Wentworth Day, who frequented the land bordering the Wash, put it like this: "If one were to live in this wide and open country of great fields and great seascapes, where the horizons are as wide as the sea itself, where the wind sweeps and roars, where the snows come straight from the Arctic, and the geese last saw land beneath the midnight sun, one might walk like a hero, live like a fighting cock and die at a hundred".

The absence of too many people is one of the magic ingredients. Perhaps I am antisocial, but I simply do not wish to be jostling shoulders with hordes of strangers in deep countryside — especially when I have a fly-rod or gun in hand.

A professional hill stalker once told me genuine hill walkers seldom caused problems — they often have an appreciation of the stalker's task. No, it is the casual, car-borne day-trippers who are more likely

trout fisheries in the world. They somehow manage to maintain a sense of tranquillity despite being within easy reach of major transport links. The truth is that careful management under private ownership has acted as a bulwark against despoliation, with benefits for a variety of wildlife.

Some of the main destroyers of rural tranquillity — apart from number-driven tourism initiatives — are the brutal manifestations of state-funded

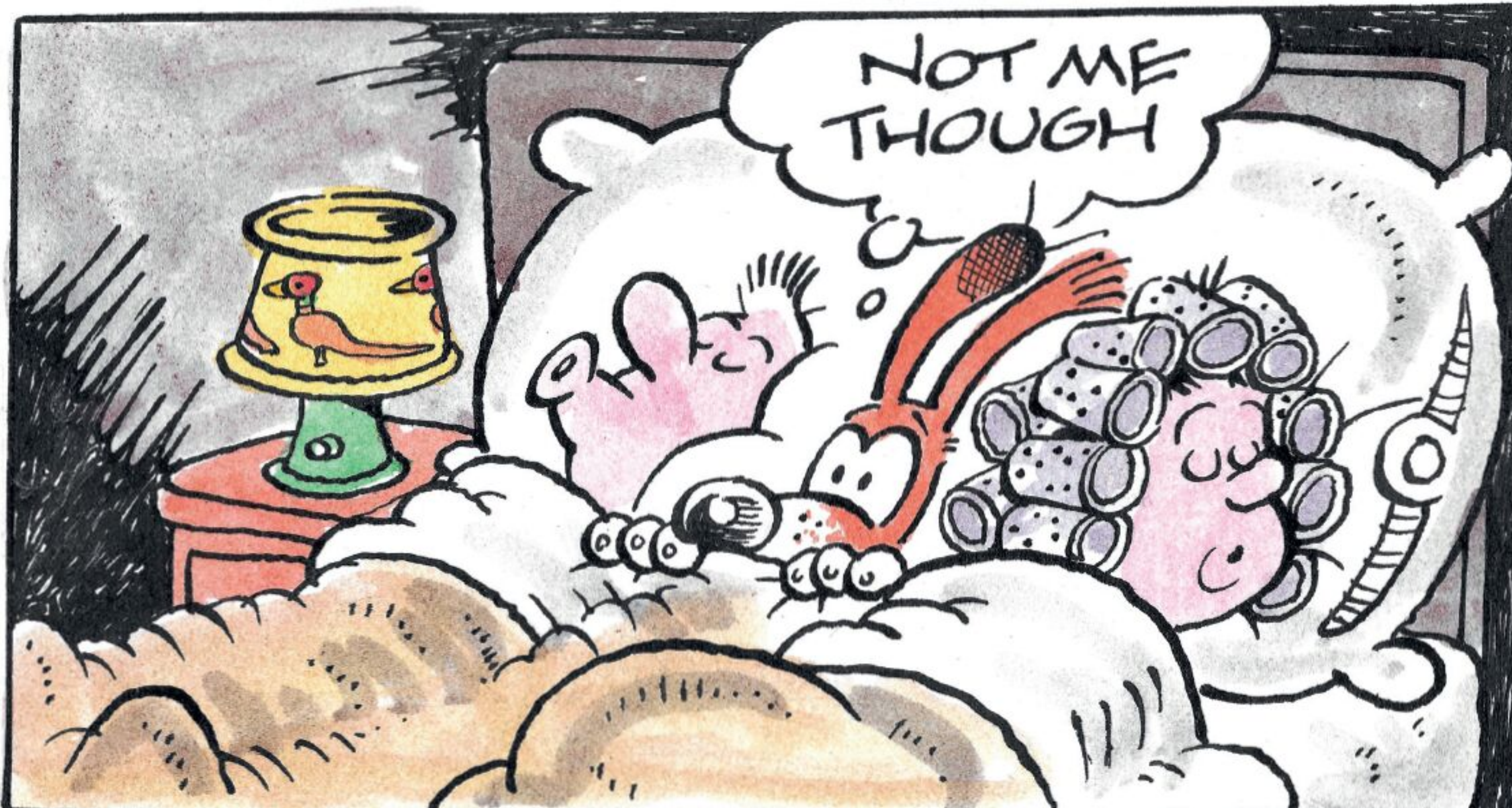
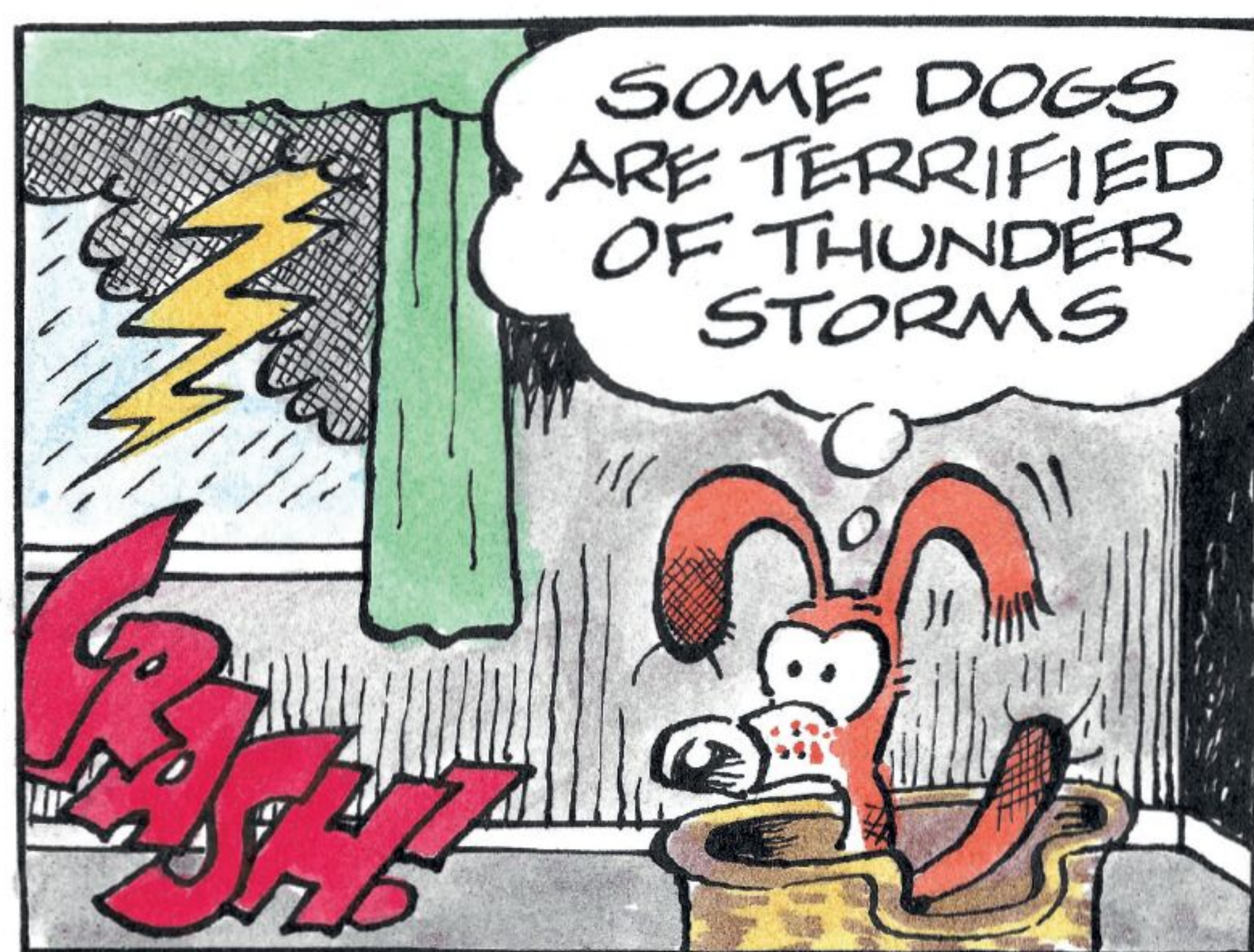
“High-voltage pylons and massed ranks of wind turbines have wrecked the scenery”

to be oblivious of the way they spoil things for everyone else. This is one reason why a Scottish-style right to roam would be a disaster if imposed on densely populated lowland England.

One asset that parts of the English countryside do have, however, is the aquifer-fed chalkstream. Often situated amid lush water meadows in some of the most expensive farmland in existence, these rare and very English types of waterway are among the most coveted

infrastructure and the incessant demand for housing. Hunting with hounds became untenable in parts of England long before spiteful legislation, due to urban sprawl and fast roads. More recently, huge high-voltage pylons and massed ranks of wind turbines, dominating the skyline for miles, have wrecked the scenery. Add vast plantations of alien conifers into the equation, and you may wonder why the greenies don't focus more on public land and policies, rather than private landowners. 🐾

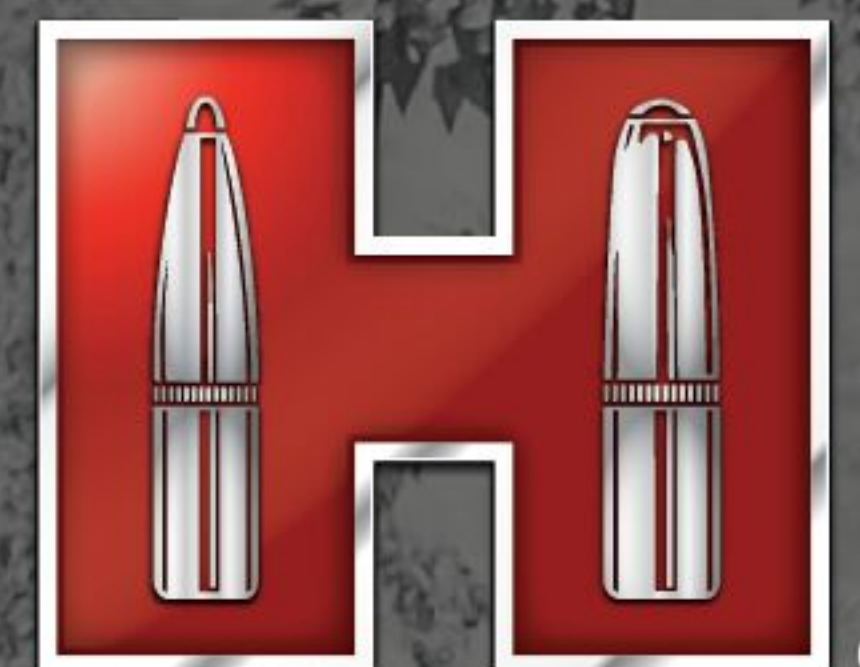
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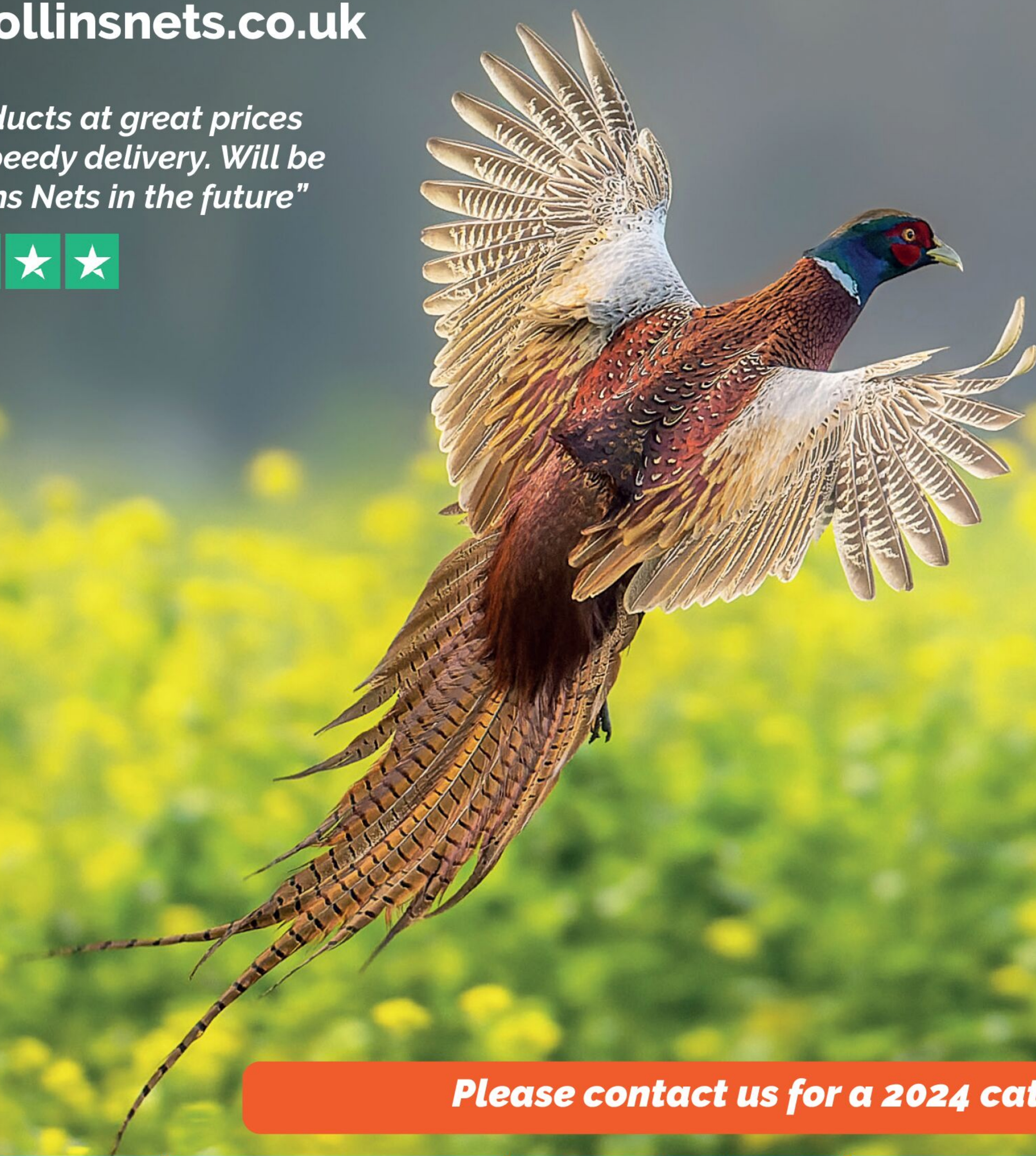


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