

YOUNG GUNS: ARE WE DOING ENOUGH TO GET THEM INTO STALKING?

SHOOTING TIMES

12 FEBRUARY 2025

& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

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DOG OF THE WEEK



Ozark

Two-year-old Ozark was bred to do the job and now works with his father, Dexter, as a picker-up. His owner says on shoot days the son follows the father around like he owes him money!

Owned by Marcus Healey • Photographed by Chris Paul

SHOOTING TIMES

Any good news?



About this time last year I predicted that Labour would win the election and get money moving through the economy. I don't mind admitting when I'm wrong but I'm sure very few could have anticipated such a direct attack on rural communities so early into Starmer's tenure.

Despite the taxes imposed on farmers to pay for "vital" infrastructure such as an extra runway at Heathrow – which no doubt will destroy more countryside – rural communities continue to feel resilient. The British Shooting Show is a good indicator of the health of the fieldsports industry and I hope to hear more good news this weekend.

The show always provides a great opportunity to catch up with old friends and reaffirm working relationships. I'm looking forward to meeting with the various winners at the Great British Shooting Awards and, because *Shooting Times* is among the nominees, there's more at stake than usual.

And, of course, I hope to catch up with you, the readers, to hear your predictions for the year ahead. They can't be any worse than mine.

Ollie Harvey, Managing editor



Contact Ollie at ollie.harvey@twsgroup.com

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featured STORY



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It will cost £126 to renew a shotgun certificate — up from £49 — while a shotgun grant will rise from £79.50 to £194



Exorbitant firearm licence fees add ‘insult to injury’

The Shadow Home Secretary blasts Labour’s inflation-busting licence fee rises, as they will affect ‘hardworking people in rural communities’

More than 50 MPs and peers have criticised the Government’s plans to increase fees for gun licences, calling them an “attack” on rural communities. The group of politicians wrote to Labour Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, urging her to water down the plans to increase firearm licensing costs by up to 157% (News, 22 January).

The Shadow Home Secretary Chris Philp, who was among the signatories on the letter, said the increases “will put pressure on hundreds of thousands of people in rural communities who have already suffered under this Government’s choices”.

“Inflation since 2015 has been 35%, so these increases are up to a disproportionate

4.5 times inflation. This is wholly unjustified and only adds insult to injury for the hardworking people in rural communities whose livelihoods the Labour Government has already threatened,” he said.

Renewal of a shotgun certificate will jump from £49 to £126, while a shotgun grant will rise from £79.50 to £194.

“This isn’t just a slight adjustment — it’s a massive blow to those who already abide by strict regulations,” said Alastair Redman, independent councillor for Kintyre and the Islands. “Farmers and land managers use firearms to protect crops, control pests and manage wildlife. Hitting them with these outrageous fees, while they’re already struggling with rising fuel and feed prices,

is a disgrace. These fees aren’t targeting criminals — they’re punishing farmers, crofters and responsible shooters who ensure safety and land management,” he added.

Members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on shooting and conservation have also spoken out over a lack of

the Government without any consultation are completely unacceptable. Following on from the family farm tax, this is yet another attack on the rural communities.”

A Government justification for the full-cost recovery of licensing costs has been a pledge to improve the ailing

“Hitting farmers with these outrageous fees is a disgrace”

consultation on the increases, and have asked the Home Secretary to attend the group’s next meeting on 11 March.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, MP for North Cotswolds and co-chairman of the APPG, said: “These extortionate fee increases imposed by

service offered by police forces which have struggled to grant licences in a timely manner over recent years. However, it may be impossible for police forces to ring-fence these extra funds to improve the service.

The new fees came into effect on 5 February. **FP**

Human contracts bird flu on West Midlands farm



Scrupulous biosecurity measures are vital in ensuring avian influenza doesn't spread further

A person in the West Midlands has contracted bird flu after "close and prolonged contact with a large number of infected birds", said the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA).

The case is one of only seven seen in the UK since 2021 and human-to-human transmission of bird flu has never been documented in Europe or the UK. The person, who had symptoms, was admitted to a high

consequence infectious disease (HCID) unit, as is routine in these cases. Everyone in contact with the individual and those at highest risk of exposure "have been offered antiviral treatment", said the UKHSA.

Christine Middlemiss, UK chief veterinary officer, said: "While avian influenza is highly contagious in birds, this is a very rare event and is very specific to the circumstances on this

premises. We took swift action to limit the spread of the disease at the site in question, all infected birds are being humanely culled, and cleansing and disinfection of the premises will be undertaken all to strict biosecure standards.

"Implementing scrupulous biosecurity measures will help protect the health and welfare of your birds from avian flu and other diseases," she added.

New guide to promote safety and mental health

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) has launched a guide to support firearms certificate holders with poor mental health.

The guide, developed in partnership with charity Change Mental Health, aims to dispel concerns for firearms owners around seeking help, as well as providing details for mental health services. It promotes open conversation within the shooting community and encourages certificate holders that seeking

support will be handled with understanding, not automatic revocation of their licences.

Firearms licensing teams have also used the guide to illustrate that they are adopting a compassionate approach, prioritising safety while recognising the social and recreational value of gun ownership.

Chief executive of the Gamekeepers' Welfare Trust Helen Benson said: "This leaflet is a positive step in reassuring licence

holders that there are options available other than removing firearms for those struggling with their mental health. It is essential in building trust with firearms officers because shotguns and firearms are essential tools for professional gamekeepers, gillies and stalkers. We know many individuals are reluctant to seek help where removal is a risk. At the end of the day, though, health — whether it be physical or mental health — is paramount."

NEWS IN BRIEF



National park to release sea eagles

Exmoor National Park is to release more white-tailed eagles as part of ongoing conservation efforts for the species. The Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation (RDWF) and Forestry England have been reintroducing the birds into southern England since 2019, with 37 eagles released on the Isle of Wight. Exmoor has recorded seven different eagles visiting the area in recent years. The aim is to release up to 20 birds over three years and to establish between six and eight pairs.

Hungarian fallow beats world record

A potential world record fallow buck has been shot in Hungary. On 22 January, three senior CIC judges convened to evaluate the buck, which was shot near Veszprémvarsány on 18 October 2024. The buck scored 242.7 CIC points, surpassing the previous record set in 2002. The dry skull weight measured an unprecedented 6.43kg, the heaviest recorded for a free-range fallow buck. The world record will need to be ratified.

CAST YOUR VOTE

Are you attending the British Shooting Show this year?

28% Yes, see you there

26% No, not this year

20% I haven't decided yet



1-2 February poll

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Radical nature bill needs ‘urgent rethink’

The Scottish government’s proposed Natural Environment Bill could lead to fines or custodial sentences if deer cull quotas are not met



Industry insiders warn that the Bill could have unintended consequences on deer management taking place in Scotland

Experts say the Scottish government’s controversial new nature bill “must not” include forcing landowners to meet quotas for culling deer or face a £40,000 fine or three months in prison.

As the Natural Environment Bill progresses to the pre-legislative scrutiny phase — a period of detailed examination of the Bill in draft form — industry insiders say that in its current state it could “disrupt” the deer management already taking place in Scotland. One of the most contested proposals in the Bill is the suggested introduction of deer management nature restoration orders (DMNROs). The purpose of a DMNRO is allegedly to enable all necessary deer management actions needed to secure nature restoration, as prescribed by NatureScot, “under a single legally enforceable direction”.

Failure to comply with an order could result in landowners and deer managers

being handed a hefty fine or even a custodial sentence. The government has yet to publish detailed guidance on how these powers would function, leaving questions from the deer management sector on where and when they would be used, what the evidential threshold for their invocation would be and how the appeals process would work.

is, to quote NatureScot, ‘misleading and unhelpful’. The focus should be on local and regional impacts instead.

“Proposals to compel deer culls on the basis of nature recovery alone are likely to be legally and practically flawed. We would appeal to the Scottish government to work with those who understand the realities of

“Disproportionate regulatory powers may disrupt management already taking place”

Ross Ewing, director of moorland at Scottish Land & Estates, told ST: “Disproportionate regulatory powers expected to feature in the Natural Environment Bill may disrupt deer management already taking place, as well as putting at risk other land management practices and employment in the rural economy. Fixating on reducing a contested national population figure of one million deer

deer management rather than impose ill-conceived top-down policies.”

James Scott, British Deer Society (BDS) policy and external affairs officer for Scotland, said: “As the Bill is yet to be introduced to Parliament, it is possibly unhelpful to speculate too much as to what it may contain. We will continue to monitor the Bill as it progresses and work to ensure deer welfare is not compromised.” **FP**

Land use consultation must recognise shooting

BASC is urging policymakers to fully recognise the needs of the shooting sector in a recently launched land use consultation.

The 12-week Defra consultation aims to equip policymakers with data to protect agricultural land, enhance food security and guide planning for housing and renewable energy infrastructure. Views will be gathered from landowners, businesses and nature groups, with the final Land Use Framework planned for publication in the summer of 2025.

BASC has emphasised the need to ensure that shooting is fully considered in shaping future policy. BASC's executive

director of conservation, Caroline Bedell, said: "The Government's Land Use Framework represents a pivotal moment for the future of our countryside. While we recognise the need to protect agricultural land and drive economic growth, we must ensure shooting and conservation efforts are integrated into these discussions.

"Shooting provides vital funding for conservation projects, sustains thousands of rural jobs and plays a critical role in maintaining balanced and healthy ecosystems. BASC will be actively engaging with the consultation process to highlight the importance of these contributions."



The Wild Fisheries Fund is part of a wider £1.5m investment that aims to address Scotland's declining wild salmon numbers

Conservation fund to save Scotland's wild salmon

The Wild Fisheries Fund, from Salmon Scotland, the trade body for farmed fish, will invest an additional £230,000 over the next year to address declining fish numbers by restoring habitats, protecting against predators and supporting river restocking.

Wild salmon and sea trout numbers have been declining across the UK for decades, attributed by Salmon Scotland to habitat loss and rising river and sea temperatures. The Scottish government has also identified other pressures, including non-native plants, predation and barriers to fish passage such as dams and weirs.

The 2025 fund is part of a five-year £1.5m investment and will be coordinated

by Jon Gibb, a fisheries manager based in Fort William. Mr Gibb commented: "This keystone species faces serious threats, and projects aimed at better understanding and mitigating these are urgently needed."

Salmon Scotland chief executive Tavish Scott said: "Scotland's salmon farmers want to continue playing their part in finding solutions, working constructively with the wild fish sector and taking meaningful action to save wild salmon."

The fund closes on 31 March, with grants available to all river catchment organisations across Scotland, particularly in areas where aquaculture and wild salmon fisheries overlap.

THEY SAID WHAT

"A locomotive driver broke his leg after stepping back into a rabbit hole in the dark"

Who said it: Derek J Robinson

Why: bunnies could wreak havoc in a railway yard and the only way to catch them was with nets and a well-aimed stone or two (p44)

NEWS IN BRIEF

Brown trout could be extinct by 2080

A study conducted by the Environment Agency predicts that water temperatures across the British Isles will be too warm to support native brown trout in only 55 years. Using data collected from 641 sites over 60 months, the study predicts the average summer daytime water temperature will climb above 19.5°C, the temperature at which brown trout stop feeding and growing, by 2080. The study also predicts that winter water temperatures will rise above the 12°C threshold needed for overwinter egg survival by 2080. The study aims to "help understand where water quality and ecosystems may be affected and provide more robust evidence of where to target measures to adapt to these changes".



Brown trout could be gone from the British Isles within 55 years, a study has reported

To do this week



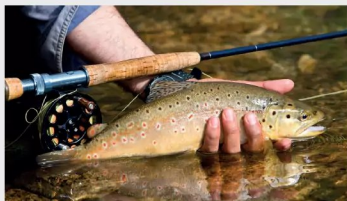
CHECK

You may be able to spot the earliest signs of spring in the air and before you know it the roebuck season will be upon us. The season opens at the start of April, so it is worth starting your recon soon. Walk your stalking grounds in the next few weeks to search for signs of deer. Repairing high seats, clearing rides and spying carefully now will be repaid in the early weeks of the season.



FISHING

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



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Amnesty begins on Turkish top-venting blank-firing guns

An amnesty on top-venting blank-firing (TVBF) guns is running through February following a spike in guns being converted to fire live ammunition.

In 2024 the National Crime Agency (NCA) found that a number of Turkish TBVFs were being converted for use in criminal activity. However, TVBFs are legal to buy in the UK without a licence by over-18s unless they are deemed readily convertible. Many blank-

firing guns, such as dummy launchers used by gundog trainers, are not readily convertible so are still legal.

Four types of TVBF were found to be readily convertible so their possession has been deemed unlawful under the Firearms Act 1982. The types identified as readily convertible are: Ekol, Retay, Ceonic ISSC and Blow. If you live in England or Wales and possess one of these types of TVBF, you should

surrender it under the upcoming amnesty at a suitable police station.

BASC's head of firearms Martin Parker said: "Should you be unsure as to the type of TVBF you possess and you are a member of BASC, our firearms team may be able to help. The more detail you can provide, including photographs, the easier it will be to identify the manufacturer and type."

The amnesty will run until 28 February.



Blank-firing guns are often used by gundog trainers in dummy launchers, which is not unlawful

Village 'taken over by idiots' loses faith in rural police

Fenland farmers say they have lost faith in rural policing following a spate of hare coursing incidents across Cambridgeshire.

Matthew Latta, a farmer in Manea, told a public meeting that he counted 70 people on his land on Saturday 25 January, adding that gates were broken by those gaining access. Some 25 4x4 vehicles, reportedly driven by men in balaclavas, drove across farmland and fields in the area.

Mr Latta told the meeting: "It was like the Wild West, chasing hares, tearing up crops, killing deer, killing hares." He said he received "zero response" from the police and added "it's destroyed my confidence in any policing of anything".

District councillor Charlie Marks said: "We saw the village taken over by idiots. We need action from police, we need quick, rapid response."

A statement from local policing commander Supt Ben Martin apologised that the force was unable to do more, saying "due to the scale of the incident and the multiple locations where offences took place... we didn't have the resources to deal with every report we received".

Meeting chairman, Conservative North East Cambridgeshire MP Steve Barclay, said "lessons needed to be learned" from the incident and said the meeting revealed "wider concerns around rural policing".



At last, a government follows the science

In what must have come a surprise to many, the Labour Government recognises the value of grouse shooting, ecologically and economically

The Government's recent endorsement of sustainable grouse shooting (News, 29 January) marks a significant moment for both conservation and rural economies. In an era of polarised environmental debates, this stance recognises a more nuanced reality: sustainable grouse moor management benefits biodiversity, habitat preservation and upland communities.

For many upland regions, grouse shooting is more than a seasonal activity — it is a key economic driver. Employment extends beyond gamekeepers to land managers, conservationists, hospitality workers and local businesses. Visitors during the shooting season inject much-needed capital into rural economies.

Small villages and family-run businesses rely on grouse shooting to remain viable. The Government's recognition of the economic significance of grouse shooting ensures these communities can continue to thrive.

Critics argue that grouse shooting harms conservation, but this overlooks the role that managed moorlands play in preserving biodiversity. Our uplands provide critical habitats for species such as curlew, lapwings and golden plovers. Keepers

and land managers are essential to this ecosystem. Predator control and vegetation management create diverse habitats. The rotational cool burning of heather promotes regeneration, reduces wildfire risks and maintains open landscapes required by ground-nesting birds.

Concerns over wildlife crime, particularly the illegal killing of birds of prey, have been used to justify banning grouse shooting. Any instance of wildlife crime is unacceptable and the overwhelming majority of those involved in grouse moor management operate within the law.

The Government's investment in enforcement measures, such as the National Wildlife Crime Unit and the Hen Harrier Task Force, ensures illegal activities are addressed without undermining the benefits of responsible shooting practices. BASC has consistently maintained a zero-tolerance approach to wildlife crime.

Calls to ban driven grouse shooting ignore the unintended consequences. Without active management, vast moorlands would become overgrown, leading to increased wildfire risks and habitat loss. The economic impact would be severe.

Moreover, conservation efforts would suffer as landowners lose incentives to

maintain and protect these areas. The Government's current stance ensures land management remains a priority while avoiding the pitfalls of over-regulation or outright prohibition.

Complex

The Government's handling of the grouse shooting debate sets an example for policymakers navigating complex environmental and economic issues. Rather than yielding to anti-shooting campaigns from a vocal minority, this decision supports sustainable moorland management, guided by scientific evidence and sustainability.

This policy is about balance. Tradition and conservation are not mutually exclusive — they complement each other. Through targeted enforcement, investment in habitat restoration and economic support for rural communities, this approach represents a pragmatic way forward.

With increasing environmental challenges, policies fostering coexistence between economic activity and conservation are more essential than ever. And with this approach, the Government has ensured upland regions remain vibrant, both ecologically and economically.

This decision paves the way for collaboration — where conservationists, policymakers and rural workers can work towards sustainability. Sustainable grouse shooting is not an outdated relic but a vital component of modern conservation. It is proof that tradition, economy and ecology can thrive together, showing that the best solutions lie in balance, not bans. 🦅

➔ Do you agree with Alex? Let us know at shootingtimes@twsgroup.com

∞ Alex Farrell is BASC's head of uplands. He has a keen interest in all types of shooting, especially pest control and rough shooting. Email him at: alex.farrell@basc.org.uk



Far from being an outdated relic, grouse shooting plays an important role in boosting rural business

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SHOOTING TIMES 19 February

The last chance for
walked-up sport, a
blackpowder shoot, and
why thermal optics are now
crucial for deerstalkers

... **AND MUCH MORE!**

LETTER OF THE WEEK

The only answer to avian predation

No management can succeed
without clear objectives.
All plans involve a degree
of intervention, sometimes
drastic, sometimes a mere
tweak. But for the object of
desire to be advantaged,
other organisms must be
disadvantaged — and that
sometimes means competing
animals and birds being killed.

This is an inescapable
truism, yet it is a matter
of constant wonder to me
that people connected with
conservation are so reluctant
to accept it. Instead, their
mindless reluctance and
snowflake sensibilities permit
unfathomable predation
among our most cherished,
rarest and vulnerable wild
species. Avian predators
have increased exponentially,

chiefly from roadkill
availability. But what happens
come the day when no roadkill
is available? Corvids revert to
raiding relentlessly the nests
of all other bird species for
their eggs and fledglings.

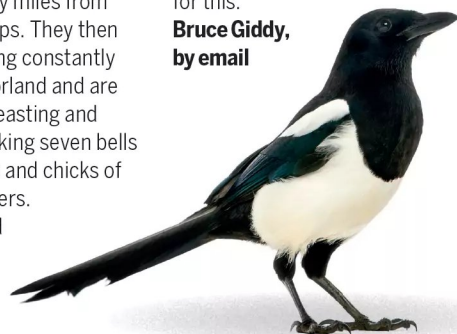
With gulls it's the
proliferation of our vast
rubbish tips. But come early
spring, clouds of gulls return
to their gulleries on remote
moorland many miles from
their rubbish tips. They then
revert to ranging constantly
over open moorland and are
notorious for feasting and
generally knocking seven bells
out of the eggs and chicks of
our rarest waders.

Corvids and
gulls gorge as
opportunistic
feeders and

cause unimaginable harm
annually to the rarest of our
resident bird species, which is
now reaching the point
of unsustainability.

All the while, our
sanctimonious anti-kill
conservationist lies feet up
without a care in the world,
except to spare the thieving
magpie (pictured). It is he
or she who must be vilified
for this.

**Bruce Giddy,
by email**



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CONSERVATION AND SHOOTING

I am a conservationist but I
also shoot and fish. I rear newts
— great crested, smooth and

palmer — and have done for 50
years or more. I have had ponds
dug wherever I live and have
had some success, but success
is usually short-lived. This is

because the natural ponds
I have placed young newts
in have, over the years,
either been drained,
polluted with builders' waste
such as asbestos, or had fish
put in. When I tell friends that I
am a conservationist, they say
“you can't be because you shoot
and fish”.

Although I'm 78 and most of
my shooting now is pest control,
magpies, rats and squirrels and
so on, my friends still don't believe
that shooting and conservation
can go together.

**Norman Berry,
by email**

TIME TO LOOK AT THE SUPPLY OF LOCAL VENISON

I read with interest the article
by David Whitby regarding deer
management (*Action must be
taken, and fast*, 22 January). He is
certainly not alone in his concern
over the low prices paid by game
dealers. Mr Whitby mentions
£1.50 per kilo — in our area, right
now, we are looking at 50p per kilo
for body-shot deer — regardless
of the level of meat damage.

It seems unbelievable that
I was receiving £1 per pound
(£2.20 per kilo) in the 1990s. One
of the problems is often said to be
an oversupply of venison, but is
that really the case? We currently
import around 1,000 tonnes of
venison per year and a simplistic

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Left: Editor Ollie Harvey's comments in the issue dated 22 January have certainly struck a chord

little comeback. This opinion is then just amplified through their cronies and followers. The majority would now rather be fed what they are supposed to believe with no thought or questioning. If their favourite celebrity has said it, then it

must be true, no?

Everything these days, from broadcast TV to political direction to police action, is merely directed by popular opinion, not backed up by evidence or science.

Gavin Meerwald,
by email

PREDATORS MUST BE CONTROLLED

Well said, Ollie — I am one of the silent majority. I seem to recall even Sir David Attenborough recognised the need for predator control, albeit in Africa. But I think that was

some time ago — I doubt he'd dare raise the subject now. Keep up the good work.
Andrew Sayer, by email

IS THIS 'WOKE AMMO' NEEDED?

How about using your voice to support shooting and be vocal in denouncing any lead ban whatsoever and help us do our job with the most effective and human ammunition possible, not just some woke ammunition that's deemed to have what's described as acceptable performance.

Darrell Griffiths, by email

USING THE RIGHT TERMINOLOGY

I fundamentally agree with the point of your comment. However, it would win over more sceptics if, regarding predator control, you refrained from saying "killing" and used "control" instead. Ultimately the same thing but winning the argument against the loud antis is more likely if scientific logical language is used versus blunt instrument "killing".

Alastair Gossage, by email

WE HAVE A MEDIA ECHO CHAMBER

You make an interesting point in your comments about the silent majority (Editor's letter, 22 January) but I fear that this is no longer the case. In Richard Nixon's time the general population were either very well informed or illiterate. This was due to newspapers and television broadcasters being far more scrupulous about maintaining a balanced opinion, or at least thoroughly arguing their point of view.

Now, anyone can voice their opinion as fact with very

view might be that one of the answers is to simply stop that venison coming in from abroad and supply it domestically.

I appreciate all businesses are facing tough times and game dealers are no different, but it often feels like the game dealer is the bottleneck, the regulator, the controller. They can turn the tap on and off as it suits them. Should the general public really be paying the current retail price for local venison? Would they be eating more venison if the price to the consumer wasn't so massively inflated when

compared with the price that deerstalkers are being paid for the deer in skin?

There is an answer for sure, we just have to find it, but it will mean a change in the way that we do things. One thing is certain — if we keep doing things the same way, we will continue to get the same results.

Keith Edmunds, Shooting Times contributor

Right: game dealers are offering shockingly low prices for body-shot deer while we import venison from abroad



With so many growers now growing wild bird mixtures, Arthur Barraclough, director at Bright Seeds, looks at how to optimise the options with an emphasis on weed control



Winter bird food plots offer an array of options within Countryside Stewardship and the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI). Each of the qualifying components grow well across the UK except for sorghum, which is ideally suited to southern England.

Designed to bridge the hungry gap, SFI criteria demand that, in addition to supplying grain, winter bird mixtures flower throughout the summer to help pollinators. In this respect linseed, mustard and fodder radish all bloom before setting seed for the winter.

The tendency to grow wild bird mixtures on the same plot for many years can make weeds a problem. Fortunately, the eligible species can be designed for selective herbicide use.

Broad spectrum mixtures are generally not suited to herbicide application, so a mix containing species from the same crop family will work far better. If grass weeds are the main concern, a brassica-based mix, along with linseed, sunflowers, gold of pleasure and chicory should be grown. Such a combination can be sprayed with a graminicide post-emergent.

Similarly, if broadleaf weeds like fat hen and redshank are the issue, a grain-producing mix offers a better herbicide perspective. Crops such as sorghum, millet and cereals are great starting points.

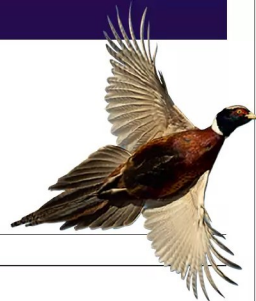
Preparing the seedbed to encourage weed seeds to germinate before spraying them off with glyphosate can also be effective. Or the ground can be lightly cultivated again to kill the young weed plants — an option for organic growers.

Most winter bird food mixtures work best when drilled between mid-May and mid-June; and Bright Seeds can supply even later options if required.

"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



Gamekeeper



When it comes to bolstering our resident ground-nesting birds, the control of predators must be considered alongside habitat and food

The population of certain predators, including buzzards, is artificially high because our way of life suits them



I watched a television programme recently featuring Kate Humble's farm in Wales. There was a brief section highlighting the 60% reduction in curlew numbers since 1970, with Kate explaining how she hoped to attract breeding birds with habitat improvement. I wish her well.

What was refreshing is that Kate did not only blame farming, habitat destruction, climate change and lack of food but also mentioned increased predation. This major cause of decline in so many of our species, particularly ground-nesting birds, is often denied, omitted, ignored or, at the very least, played down. The decline in resident curlew is even more startling because they are a long-lived bird, with a lifespan of around 20 years. What this means is that a pair only has to successfully rear two chicks in their lifetime to maintain the population, yet it continues to fall.

“The millions of gamebirds released each year provide a fully stocked larder”

Both of my sons are ecologists — one specialising in bats, the other in wildflowers and birds. Both have a broad knowledge of amphibians, insects and our wildlife in general, which gives me a widely varied reference library to rely upon. They are what I call sensible ecologists; we do not agree on everything, but as sons of a gamekeeper and deerstalker, they are not

sandal-wearing antis blaming our wildlife's demise on anything but predation.

There is a school of thought within many wildlife groups that if everything is left alone, a natural balance in population will be achieved. That as predators adversely affect their prey, a shortage of food will naturally regulate their numbers. When it comes to evidence of both this “balance of nature” and the successful reintroduction of predator species, they often cite Yellowstone National Park and the reintroduction of the wolf.

Doubtless, this is a standard teaching example for all aspiring ecologists, zoologists or any other university “ists” who wish to work with, manage and eventually advise on our wildlife and its policy. But what has this example got to do with Britain? Yellowstone spans 2.2 million acres, and though summer visitations number in the millions, it is

mostly unpopulated in winter. There is no hunting and no domestic livestock. Except for sightseers, the area has changed little for thousands of years and is as close to a natural balance of nature as you may find — in America.

Here in Britain, nothing of the like can exist, even in the remotest parts of Scotland. What we have instead is the

balance according to man. We directly or indirectly influence every part of our islands. Of course, ecologists are correct in blaming farming, the encroachment of roads, rail and buildings, all causing a loss of habitat for many endangered species. But how can any sane person refuse to acknowledge the part played by predation?

Unnatural populations

Our way of life is just as responsible for the overpopulation of certain predators as it is for the loss of habitat and food. I do not only mean the 10 million cats wreaking havoc, but the unnatural populations of corvids, foxes, badgers, mink, grey squirrels and some birds of prey. Yes, I dared to say it — birds of prey — and for those such as the buzzard, we only have ourselves to blame.

The millions of gamebirds released each year provide a fully stocked larder exactly when it is required, just as our wasteful society and urban sprawl provide food and safe haven for foxes, crows, magpies and badgers. The populations of many predators are artificially high because our way of life suits them, quite the opposite of course for the prey species in decline, if not freefall. Where we provide for one group, we take away from another.

Increasing wetland areas to provide habitat and food for curlew, lapwings and snipe is of little use unless their chicks successfully fledge. To do this, they require a further and equally essential helping hand: the control of predators. 🦅



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



Stalking Diary

It is only right that we give youngsters who want to make a living in our industry a helping hand, or the way of the hill could be lost forever



Though some things have rightly changed over the years, it remains a love for the hill and this way of life that draws the next generation of stalkers

As another hind season draws to a close, it is traditionally a time when a stalker might look for a move, or when employers start considering staffing for the coming season. Sadly, though, there are people seeking a way into the industry who may struggle to do so in the coming years. It's not their fault; it is entirely ours.

The health and safety movement, while of paramount importance, is in danger of eventually stifling common sense in some respects, without actually removing risk. Ever-increasing liability is beginning to remove the motivation for employers to offer entry-level opportunities. Not for one moment am I suggesting that safety should be compromised — quite the opposite, in fact — but everyone deserves the right to be given a chance.

Stalemate

However, are we developing a potential stalemate situation here, in which we risk failing the next generation through overcaution? I hear that some of the gamekeeping courses run by colleges

are being cancelled, seemingly due to a lack of applicants.

No matter how inconvenient the people of the land may seem to an urban government, in my part of the world, many of the younger generation are still keen to enter agriculture and gamekeeping, and we must help them. Times have changed, though; in some respects, they really needed to. Traditionally, starting out as a

“Ever-increasing liability is beginning to remove the motivation for employers”

trainee or seasonal gillie meant being given a bothy and a modest wage. Rarely were we offered any kind of contract, and you took the job simply to get a start.

Sometimes the accommodation was awful, though. On taking one position, I was told that accommodation would be provided upon arrival. I was then housed in a child's Wendy house at the bottom of a garden. Another abode consisted of a ladder that led to an uninsulated wooden attic, with an old military bed

and a single chair in the corner. All my worldly possessions were balanced on the chair to avoid being chewed by the mice that scuttled around all night long. As dawn broke, I would wince as I pulled on yesterday's wet tweeds. Eventually, that cottage burned to the ground, when the old generator wiring simply couldn't handle the connection to mains electricity. Thankfully, there were no casualties.

Now, quite rightly, such issues are addressed and must prove to be compliant. There were employers I worked under that had advertised a trainee position, but upon starting the job you quickly realised that there was no patience to teach. In fact, what they were looking for was a fully fledged stalker, for a fraction of the money. This was entirely wrong, but if you got through these hardships and continued, at least no one could deny that you were keen.

Unrelenting passion

Not so long ago, the sporting lairds did not purchase an estate for any other reason than an unrelenting passion for the hill. Similarly, the stalkers they employed were not money-orientated people but instead were motivated by something far deeper. Together, they were united by a passion for the hill. I feel truly sorry for those who fail to grasp this concept, for they may never understand what it means to be connected to something so great that no words can describe — a “calling”, you might say, that only a few can fathom.

Nevertheless, I see an up-and-coming generation of youngsters now who share that same passion. They are old heads on young shoulders, and that should be nurtured. They might not be academics, and many I know are dyslexic, but the risk remains that they may become feathers on the breeze if we are not careful, and this is all happening on our watch. We would do well to tread upon the path of common sense with great caution, or the way of the hill will be lost. 🐾



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Country Diary

The end of the pheasant season proves to be a happy time, with two busy outings, one wonderful pheasant and a drop – or two – of port

Those of you who have followed these pieces over the years will know that I am fond of a drop or two. It is, however, rare to find me drinking port in the middle of the afternoon, although this is something that happened twice in the last week of the pheasant season. I don't think it marks a new trend; it will almost certainly remain a rare indulgence and, if and when it happens again, you can be pretty sure that it will have something to do with shooting.

The first of these port-guzzling incidents occurred on the Monday of the week in question. Five friends had joined me at High Park for a final fling. The weather forecast had been terrible, with wind and rain predicted throughout the day – a prospect that had dampened my enthusiasm.

In the event it rained for half an hour, then the weather gods relented, chasing away the rain and even sending us periods of sunshine to smile down on our sport. There weren't squadrons of pheasants pouring over the Guns, but there were enough and they flew beautifully. It was a fine sight to see them rising defiantly over the line, and an even better sight to see them throw back their heads and plummet to the ground.

My friends shot well – all five of them got a bird or two – the weather was unexpectedly kind, we enjoyed each other's company and our dogs enjoyed themselves enormously. When the last shot had rung out there were 12 pheasants in the bag, joined by a woodcock and a rabbit.

A last dribble

There had been a dribble or two of port after our second little drive and another dribble with lunch. We were now gathered around one of our vehicles drinking tea or coffee while talking of this and that. I thought there was probably enough port left in the bottle for a last dribble for us all. There was and, while sipping my small portion, I silently thanked heaven for all the joy of another season at High Park and elsewhere, for pheasants and friends and dogs and sunshine and, yes indeed, for port.

Three days later, I was at it again. It was the forecast that tempted me, for Thursday



The glorious weather tempts Laurence out for a second time, with his springer spaniel Zac in tow

was promised to be a glorious day, which made me wonder whether, with the help of painkillers for my shoulder, I just might be able to shoot myself a pheasant – the first for only a couple of days short of two whole seasons. I swallowed two pills on Wednesday evening and again in the morning. The weather was most certainly

the sky above me. Again my mount was laboured but I swung the gun and, glory be, the bird fell. Root soon found her and brought her in and I found, metaphorically at least, that my cup was overflowing.

I gave Zac half an hour; he flushed a pheasant or two without the chance of a shot and before too long I was back home

“My mount was laboured but I swung the gun and, glory be, the bird fell”

glorious. I did a thing or two, took lunch early in the form of a sandwich and two more pills, then set off round High Park with Root, Zac and the Beretta 20-bore.

Root is quick, too quick for a shooter in his seventies with a gammy shoulder. The first bird he flushed was long but in range. I mounted the gun without pain, but stiffly and too slowly, leaving no time for a second shot: a chance missed.

Perhaps five minutes later Root dived into a spread of gorse; there followed the unmistakable sounds of a pheasant concluding that immediate action was of the essence and then there was a hen in

with a small glass full of port, almost but not quite overflowing. Soon it was empty. I lingered over the second glass and my iron self-control refused me a third.

And now, alas, the season is over. It has brought me enormous pleasure, one wonderful pheasant and, among several others, two wonderful and surely richly deserved glasses of port. Cheers. 🍷

🍷 Laurence Catlow has been a passionate shooter and angler for more than 40 years and has written five books about sport with rod and gun.



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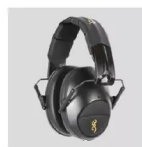
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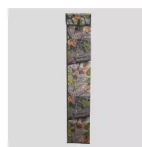
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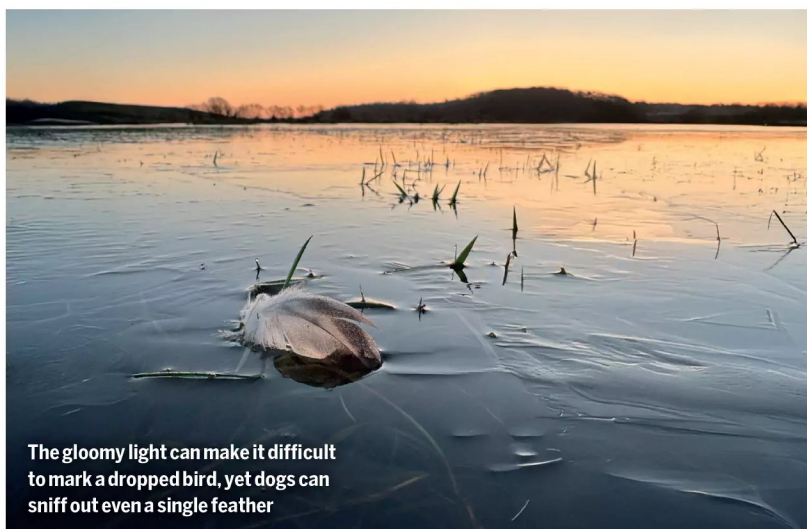
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Dogs can often see or scent what humans can't, and it's a lesson in trust – and humility – when they prove their handler wrong



The gloomy light can make it difficult to mark a dropped bird, yet dogs can sniff out even a single feather

I remember being out with Den, an old-school fowler on the Somerset Levels. I had my dog working a hedge line for a downed mallard. I'd marked it well, but my dog was being defiant and refused to work the area, simply veering off down the hedge. Den whispered, "Let him work, trust your dog."

I learned a valuable lesson that day as the dog ran down the hedge and returned with a lively mallard — a bird I'd have sworn was dead and going nowhere. It was a lesson I'd have done well to remember on a recent trip out on the Levels.

It was an impromptu trip; I was passing on my way back from working up north and swung in to have a look at a bit of splash. It looked great and the widgeon agreed — fresh feathers and droppings marked their nocturnal activities. Lacking decoys, I resorted to kitchen towel folded into triangles and secured with twigs. The makeshift set-up fluttered nicely in the wind, mimicking the white flashes of a widgeon's rump. I was still getting settled when a pair of teal rushed overhead. As I was unprepared, they went unsaluted, but I now knew to keep an eye out.

The next pair wasn't so lucky. One fell cleanly and the second came down on the far side of the field. A tidy retrieve from the

young dog, and we were off to a promising start. Another teal followed in what proved to be a hectic five minutes before the distant calls of widgeon could be heard. A pack appeared, wings cupped, paddles down, set in on my improvised decoys. Two shots and a cracking pair of widgeon was soon retrieved to hand.

At this time of year, they're in fantastic condition, with a fine layer of fat ensuring they make for great eating. In full breeding plumage, they also provide feathers for my summer fly-tying sessions.

"The bird had tried to tuck in under some rushes, but Tilly sniffed it out"

Some tidy shooting added a couple more birds to the bag before a simple crossing widgeon presented an easy chance. Despite feeling good about it, there was no splash. In the dim light, I caught a glimpse of the bird vanishing into the black, signalling a miss. Tilly ran in, and I called her back, but she ignored me. I had to shout to stop

her, "Grumble, grumble, rhubarb dog." In hindsight, I should have trusted her.

The next chance and two birds dropped to the same shot. As the dog was sent, the second bird took to the air and vanished low into the black. I took a line from a tree on a distant hill, and we set off in search. We found it 200 yards away. It had tried to tuck in under some rushes, but Tilly sniffed it out. I was chuffed to bits, as I wasn't really expecting to find it. On the return, we bumped into another bird lying in the middle of the field — it must have been the single I thought I'd missed. Tilly clearly knew.

Instincts

The experience reinforced the importance of trusting your dog. Over the years, my dogs have proven their worth and proven me wrong on countless occasions. Years ago, I shot a teal that landed on a nearby mudbank, no more than 20 yards away. I sent my old dog, Rhys, who left the hide, veered off in the wrong direction, and ignored my recall whistle. While I stomped out to retrieve the bird myself, Rhys reappeared with another teal. Where it came from, I will never know. As far as I was concerned, I fired at a single bird and it dropped dead on the mud. It goes to show, sometimes you need to trust your dog. They often see or scent what we don't.

The recent flight on the Somerset Levels was the best for several years — not only because of the bag, but for the circumstances. The plan, made in haste, worked perfectly, the old-school tactics were effective, the shooting was tidy and the dog work was quality. It's often the impromptu trips that are the best. 🐾

🐾 James Green is a conservationist and head of wildfowling at BASC. The son of the Cornish Countryman, Chris Green, you could certainly say that shooting sports are in his DNA.



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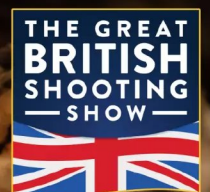
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Sporting Life

If your ground has a 'ghost' pond, it's quite easy to restore – to the benefit of wildlife

The health of rural ponds often leaves a lot to be desired. Not even the quintessential village duck pond has escaped pollution: water testing at some of them has found a lack of vital oxygenating plants, and, in addition, residue from tiny particles of rubber from car tyres, miniscule amounts of spent fuel and exhausts as a result of run-off from the roads.

In the more isolated parts of the countryside — in the fields and woodlands — it seems that some relatively small pockets of rural-based water are, however, faring better. This is not least due to the fact that those directly concerned with farming and all manner of fieldsports are doing what they can to restore and improve those that have long been neglected.

As an example, Richard Daniel, environment reporter for *BBC Look East*, recently informed his online readers that: "A project involving farmers and nature conservationists is celebrating the restoration of 400 'lost' farmland ponds in Essex."

Essex is not alone. Throughout Britain, there are many such lost ponds — sometimes referred to as ghost ponds — the original purpose of which are manifold. As well as being used for irrigation, or to provide water for farm livestock, some were initially dug as pits from which calcareous marl could be extracted and spread on areas where the soil was too acidic. When the practice stopped, these spaces naturally filled with water.

Hindrance

Sadly, as more pastureland was ploughed for cereal crops, these ponds proved a hindrance to the ever-developing farm machinery so were filled in. They are, in many cases, only nowadays identifiable by old maps or, when looking over an area visually, depressions and/or isolated damp areas in a field. Another indication might be a different soil type occurring as a result of materials from elsewhere being used to fill in the old water source.

Today, while the restoration of ghost ponds could well involve major work, many of the others — neglected yet still evident — can often be brought back into

dual use as a wildlife haven and potential duck flightpond. This might not take much more effort than the clearing of inlets and outlets and perhaps the removal of a degree of sediment.

It might also be necessary to open up the water surface area by the judicious cutting back some of the surrounding trees, branches and scrub.

"Creating a new pond from scratch is likely to cost between £3,000 and £7,000"

None of this is an especially onerous task, particularly if carried out by a working party of enthusiastic DIY shoot members. The benefits are immediate and even restoring the pond's long-term equilibrium can be relatively rapid.

Apart from anything else, it's so much cheaper — and far more satisfying — to renovate an existing piece of water that has fallen into disrepair than it is to make a new one. In their guide as to the average costs of building a pond, Checkatrade suggests that, depending on size, shape, specification and likely materials and labour, creating even a small one on the

farm from scratch is likely to cost anywhere between £3,000 and £7,000 — far too great an outlay for the average DIY shooting syndicate or would-be conservationist lucky enough to have land suitable enough to include an aquatic wildlife habitat.

As to when a pond becomes a lake, it's an oft-asked question. A gov.uk blog — bit.ly/defraponds — has it that ponds "are

usually smaller than two hectares in area" and can either "hold water all year or dry out for a period in the summer". Lakes, on the other hand, are, according to the same blog, "larger than two hectares and are deep enough to have areas where sunlight cannot reach the bottom".

Several years ago, as a result of his then newly created stretch of water, a shooting friend and I were discussing the above conundrum. As far as we could tell, his area of water didn't quite fit either definition, so we decided that it should henceforth be known as a "plake" — and a plake it has remained ever since. 🐾



With a little effort, restoring can result in a haven for wildlife as well as a flightpond for the shoot

∞ Jeremy Hobson has had more than 30 books commissioned and published covering topics such as gamekeeping, smallholding, poultry, country customs and cookery



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Don't write off February

The game season may be finished and wildfowling below the high-water mark soon over, but there is still great sport to be had

WRITTEN BY SIMON GARNHAM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CALLUM MCINERNEY-RILEY

It's tempting to feel a bit glum at the end of the season. We will miss the teamwork so integral to being part of a beating line, a syndicate or a farm shoot. There may be sadness that we have to wait months to enjoy glorious high driven pheasants or wild partridges exploding over the line again. But I would argue that February has sport to rival any month. And now is the

time to reward the hound for a season well spent with an old-fashioned dog-and-gun adventure.

Wildfowl is seriously on the move here in Essex. Great skeins of geese clamour for attention on fields of winter drill and along the tideline. Wigeon and teal are gathering again in awe-inspiring numbers ready to make their long trek back to the Baltic and Siberia.

Meg the cocker shows her worth as she staunchly retrieves the shot teal



“I hunched, peering over the barrels, keeping down as far as possible, the gun at the high-port position”

The legions of fieldfares and redwing that turned the orchard black for several days have completed their gleaning and continue their roving. At dusk, woodcock are arriving in large quantities and pigeons are feeding with urgency. Spring may be imminent but, with heavy frosts and freshwater freezing overnight, it's not here yet.

As the tail-end of another storm blew itself out, I set aside an evening for an armed patrol with Meg the cocker spaniel. A pocket full of cartridges, dog and gun was all that seemed necessary as a watery sun fought with heavy clouds. Spray scudded over slop on the estuary – a dropping tide leaving creeks available for sheltering ducks. I clapped off a handful of pigeons from the kale then slotted steel shells into the chambers and crested the sea wall, the dog on high alert.

Adrenaline

Walking-up springing teal is one of my happiest and earliest sporting memories. Whether it's on freshwater splashes or from the creeks of the backwaters, they provide the most adrenaline-fuelled and challenging of shots.

A dark heron lifted like some prehistoric reptile from the borrow pit reminding me of *BB*'s scraper-board illustrations – all black and white in perfect silhouette. A snipe also sprung, rasping its alarm as it zigzagged away. The calendar meant the snipe was off limits and I flicked out a hand to show the dog I needed her to keep looking. She hunted busily. Here the freshwater outlet breaches the sea wall and forms a sinuous steeply cut tidal creek with shallows much loved by wild duck.

Steadily we worked through the tangle of sea grasses and sucking mud. Meg's tail was like some maniacal metronome. I hunched, peering over the barrels, keeping down as far as possible, the gun at the high-port position. Something scuttled into the thick sea purslane that lines the bank. Perhaps mink? It might be time to dig out a raft – I do hope not. Whatever it was moved too quickly to properly identify; I'll have to come back.

We followed a maze-like path, Meg dropping out of sight and re-emerging damp and dirty. Just as it seemed that there were no hidden surprises, ➔



Following the maze-like path in the marsh, Meg drops out of sight before re-emerging wet and dirty

three teal sprung with the power and speed that is synonymous with their species. A singleton broke left and two split to the right. My natural swing as a left-handed Gun is from port to starboard. So without really thinking about it I focused first on the left-hand bird, mounting as fast as I possibly could and pulling the trigger as soon as the gun was in the shoulder.

The bird somersaulted forwards and dropped, allowing a second chance at the other departing ducks. This time, the swing brought the gun naturally on to the escaping teal and again a bird faltered and dropped at the report. It tumbled out of sight into the tangled mass of the saltmarsh. Joy! A left and right at springing teal. An occasion to be celebrated.

Meg is naturally hesitant; she's my wife's dog really and I will be challenged on this statement with a correction: "She's just well-trained." Either way, whereas labrador Scout

We paused. I rewarded the excited cocker with a fuss and an ancient bit of kibble found in a pocket. A short-eared owl hunted along the water's edge, caught in a beam of sunset. Long shadows spread over the saltings. The jackdaws, rooks and pigeons that make the woods their home were circling over West Grove. I tucked the little teal into my game pocket and we turned towards the woods for February's other great sport: a bit of pigeon roosting.

Ambush

The wind was in our faces and I scanned the woods to work out what this meant for positioning in the trees. As well as the chance of an adventure, there is good practical reason for an ambush at dusk. The crop of kale we're growing for seed is proving to be a magnet for around 200 pigeons, which need regular dissuading in the form of scarers, bangers, clapping off

"The bird faltered, dropped and tumbled into the tangled mass of saltmarsh. Joy!"

would have been away – probably without bidding – the little cocker turned, looking for direction. She received her reassurance and a hand signal: "Get over."

Plunging across the muddy creek, into the water and on to hunt out the matted saltings, she completed her first retrieve. I wasn't sure whether the second bird might have been injured but she found both were dead and proudly returned with each beautiful duck and minimal delay. Mrs G would have been proud of her.

and shooting. I'd like them right off the farm at this time of year because they foul the wild garlic that we will shortly be picking.

In the shelter of the trees there hung the tang of damp leaf litter. A great tit kept up a busy *tsink-tsink* hidden in the branches of an ancient chestnut. A mob of long-tailed tits exhibited no such shyness, whipping around me like riflemen completing room-clearance drills. A grey squirrel scurried for cover and I paused under the ash tree into which it had fled.



The roosting wood provides plenty of chances and sport to rival shooting high pheasants or jinking woodcock





Some good retrieves help Simon to build a decent bag of five woodies (inset above)

Walked-up sport

There are telltale signs of pigeons that confirm to Simon he's found their roosting wood

Almost immediately my attention was drawn elsewhere. Half-a-dozen woodpigeons were settling in to roost on the woodland edge. The setting sun silhouetted their dark shapes in the chestnut coppice. Meg kept to heel as we approached, moving stealthily and trying to keep the trunks of larger trees between me and the birds.

My experience with shooting sitting pigeons is that it isn't as straightforward as it appears. First, branches can ruin the best-laid plans. Secondly, a bird at roost has its strongest feathers wrapped around its vital areas so shooting from the side or from behind can often lead to pricked birds and long retrieves. Unless I can see an unimpeded shot straight at the chest, I won't shoot sitting birds.

My principles weren't tested. Before we could get into range the wary woodies clattered away. By late January birds are wise to the risks.

Nevertheless, the early pigeons had led us to a patch that was obviously being well used as a roosting site; the ground was spotted with evidence of contented pigeons digesting their day's delicacies. The dog and I settled in and we didn't have long to wait.

Fast swing

In a swirling, whirling mass, a huge flock began to land without any sign of caution. One made a beeline for a branch straight overhead and dropped with a satisfying clatter and thump, 30g of Gamebore's Black Gold making light work of it. A second, curling across from left to right was more tricky, needing a fast swing, generous lead and a decent retrieve from Meg.

Although it felt sheltered in the wood, above the treetops the weather was obviously wilder. Feathers were being whipped away and birds were jinking and dropping with some urgency. I was surprised to find that one woody had crept in under the radar and was tucked up for the night a mere 6ft off the ground in an elder. I'm not proud to admit that I saw this as an exercise in building a bag and, being a safe shot, that too provided Meg with a respectable retrieve.

Misses followed and a couple more decent hits before we called it a day with five birds in the bag. A noisy cock pheasant rang in our ears: *korrr kokk kor kokk*, as we headed for home. I guess we all sometimes muse on which shots are most satisfying: the pheasant that folds overhead 40 yards up; a curling grouse; a jinking woodcock. Those chances are behind us for another year.

But there are still a few days left for two opportunities that surely rank alongside the finest of sport; a springing teal and a roosting pigeon. Enjoy February while it lasts. 🐦

Simon's walked-up shooting kit

- 🔗 **Deerhunter Mallard Jacket**
deerhunter.eu
- 🔗 **Peltor ear defenders**
3m.co.uk
- 🔗 **Aigle boots**
aigle.com
- 🔗 **Game Technical Apparel trousers**
game-clothing.co.uk
- 🔗 **Eley Pro-Eco wad**
eleyhawk.co.uk
- 🔗 **Gamebore Black Gold cartridges**
gamebore.com
- 🔗 **Beretta Silver Pigeon**
gmk.co.uk

GAME-CHANGING

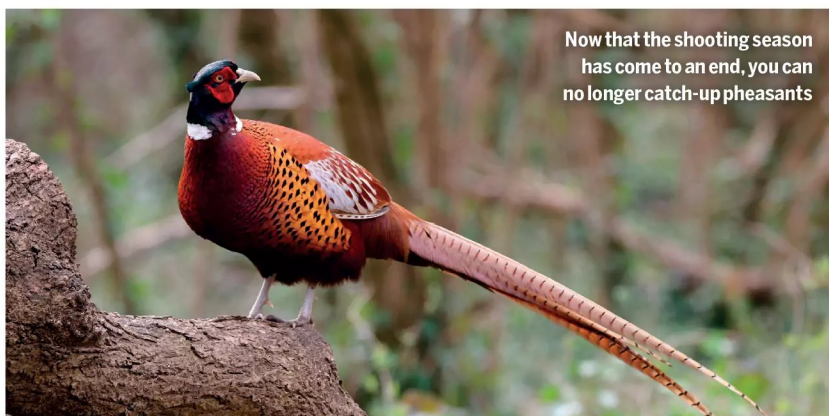
It's testament to gamekeepers, shoot managers and attendees that avian influenza has been kept at bay this season, says John Clarke

And so, as February arrives and the spring shoots begin to poke their green fingers out of the ground, we reach the end of the gamebird shooting season. We hope everyone has had a great season; that your birds flew high, your dogs perfected their long retrieves, and your Guns, beaters, pickers-up and everyone else who makes a shoot day run smoothly had many memorable and successful days.

Fortunately, the 2024-25 shoot season passed without too much trouble from avian influenza (AI), despite the current situation being classed as high risk. Bird flu is, of course, still lurking in the wild bird population, and many of you will have seen the details of recent outbreaks through the regular updates sent from the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), which we also update on the NGO website. These have, however, largely been in commercial poultry farms, and the game sector has, for the most part, remained free from AI outbreaks.

The fact we have had so little trouble with AI is testament to gamekeepers, shoot managers and shoot attendees adhering to General Licence (GL) 43 and GL45 when releasing pheasants and partridge on Special Conservation Areas and Special Protection Areas, ensuring that biosecurity standards are high and adhering to stocking densities.

Now, with spring on the horizon, the NGO is working closely with Defra and Natural



Now that the shooting season has come to an end, you can no longer catch-up pheasants

England on the General Licences for the 2025-26 season. We will be keeping our members fully informed of release dates and any further relevant details or changes that might be added to the new licences.

Positive work

We will keep on fighting for the positives that game shooting and responsible land management provides, and we will continue to work with the police to train officers in the role of gamekeepers and shoot operators. On the training days we run with police forces, we show them the positive work we do, explain why gamekeepers trap pests to help conserve red- and amber-listed species, and talk about the laws that we have to adhere to carry out this process.

One concern of ours — particularly in upland areas, but also nationwide — is the effect that restrictions on vegetation management are having on gamekeepers' ability to fight and prevent wildfires. In the aftermath of the deadly wildfires in Los Angeles, we wrote to the Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, outlining the issues we are facing with prescribed burning, and explaining how the ability to control fuel loads would hopefully prevent incidents like the LA fires from happening here in the UK.

With February now upon us, it is important to remember that it is illegal to catch-up gamebirds during the close season,

which means that in England and Wales, you cannot catch-up pheasants after 1 February. On this point it is worth remembering that if you have already caught-up and plan to move pheasants or partridges to a different site, under the current regulations you cannot move kept birds in or out of AI surveillance or protection zones.

While on the topic of the law, one thing we are often asked about is "novelty" birds such as Reeves's pheasants. The answer is that because they are non-native, the release of these is illegal. And other species such as wild turkeys and guinea fowl also fall into this category.

Finally, as the gamebird season ends, show season begins for many of us at the NGO. Come and talk to us over a brew at the British Shooting Show at the NEC in Birmingham this weekend (14-16 February), the Stalking Show at Staffordshire County Showground on 12 to 13 April, and at other local shows throughout the summer. We will be more than happy to answer any questions and talk about what we are up to — so do come for a chat at a show, visit our website or give us a call. 🐦

➡ NGO membership offers excellent value for money, at only £55 per year. This includes £10m third-party liability cover, a dedicated firearms licensing team, free legal advice, a quarterly magazine and much more. Syndicate, junior and family membership options are also available.



John Clarke, the NGO's northern development manager, is a wildlife artist and a former headkeeper on a prestigious estate



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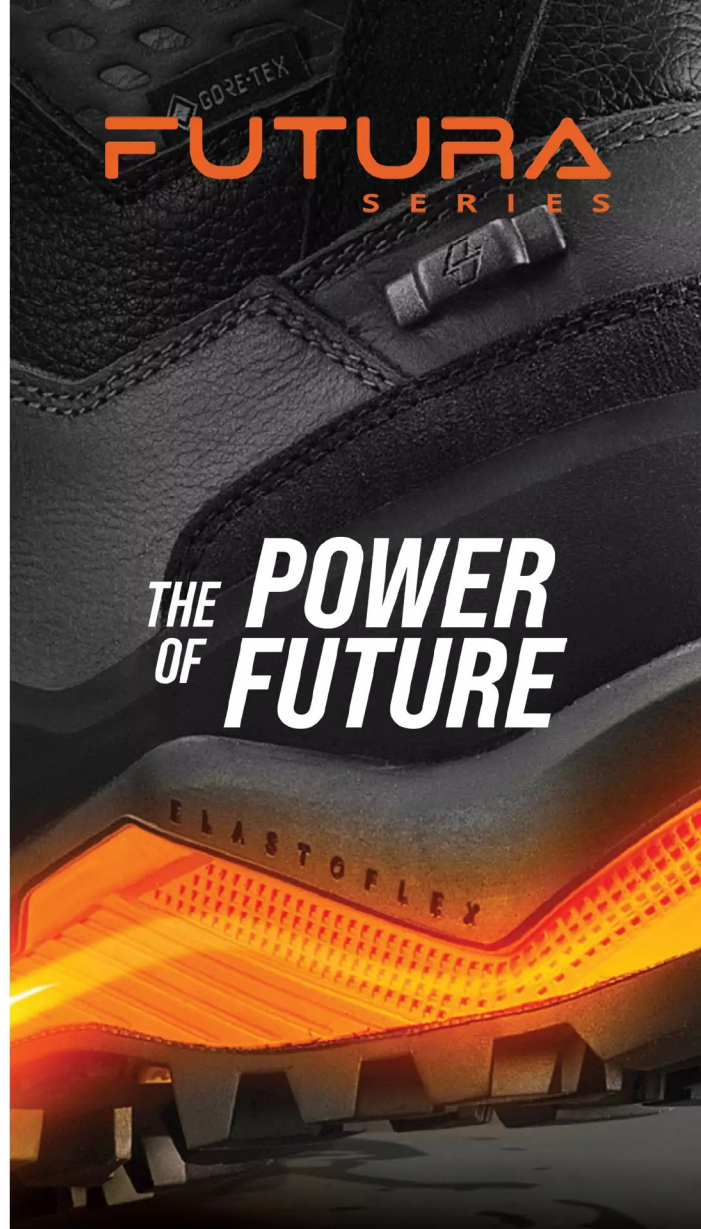
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DEER MATTERS



With any new scheme or legislation, the welfare of our deer species is paramount; that's what it's all about, says Charles Smith-Jones

In November 2024, representatives from Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary (HIOWC) met with 17 other UK police forces as part of a national rollout of their newly developed Humane Animal Dispatch (HAD) volunteer scheme. Although HIOWC has been using HAD volunteers for many years, they recognised that the scheme required development if it was to continue to meet police operational requirements and be suitable for adoption by other UK forces.

The scheme is underpinned by specialised training provided by the new Deer Management Qualification HAD Award, developed under careful collaboration between the police and industry experts to meet their specific needs. Several DMQ assessment centres, including the BDS, are gearing up to deliver this qualification across the country in anticipation of other constabularies choosing to adopt the new scheme and seeking to recruit HAD volunteers. The BDS is already planning to assist with the purchase of safety equipment to support them.

Being a HAD volunteer may not suit everyone. Much social media discussion has centred on what people get in return, but this misses the point. HAD is all about deer welfare and being available to despatch a seriously injured animal quickly to prevent further suffering. Volunteers get the satisfaction of using their skills and knowledge to do a vital job, but it's perhaps not one for someone who is looking for a material return.

Many existing volunteers don't even claim the mileage allowance. The benefit is ultimately to the deer, and many of us who have derived much pleasure from our involvement with them welcome the opportunity to put something back. As the scheme expands, the BDS is proud to pledge support for its success. We will continue to work closely with HIOWC and others to support the national rollout.

Welfare issues

We are delighted to see that the Scottish government has concluded that cull levels required to meet their climate

The Humane Animal Dispatch (HAD) volunteer scheme is being rolled out across the UK to improve deer welfare



and nature objectives can be achieved without extending existing open seasons for female deer (News, 5 February). This decision also recognises the welfare issues involved and reflects a more balanced approach to deer management.

While this is certainly a positive and reassuring decision, we are still mindful that further proposed changes to Scotland's deer management sector remain on the table and could be confirmed in the near future.

Private

Deer can have a significant effect on the environment if left uncontrolled, and there have already been demands from government for increased management measures to protect both biodiversity and the establishment of newly planted trees. Most of this culling, so essential to land management across the UK, is financed and conducted by private individuals using their own licensed firearms.

Against such a background we are now told that firearms licensing fees are to more than double to achieve full-cost recovery for the police. Firearms licensing across the UK is currently administered by individual police forces. It is disappointing that before taking this step, the benefits of a centralised national system — which would enhance cost-effectiveness while providing a more efficient and

standardised approach — do not appear to have been fully considered. Equally, there are concerns about a lack of consultation with stakeholders and an absence of transparency regarding how the new fees were calculated.

The BDS recognises the need for deer to be culled to maintain balance with the habitat that supports them. But at a time when it is increasingly important to maintain or even extend efforts, we are deeply concerned by any measure that might instead discourage them. We would consider steps that reimburse countryside managers for the considerable time, effort and expense demanded by such vital activities to be more appropriate.

The BDS will continue to work with government bodies and landowners, but we would welcome more support, rather than financial penalties, for stalkers tackling the high habitat impacts caused by rising deer numbers. 🦌

🔗 Join the BDS to support their vital national work. You'll receive quarterly journal *Deer* and regular e-newsletter *DeerBytes* with the latest news, events and updates. Their 16 regional branches provide further opportunities to meet like-minded enthusiasts and take part in range days, social events and other activities. Find out more at bds.org.uk



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EXPLORING HOW DIFFERENT COUNTRIES HAVE SHAPED OUR SPORT **BY FELIX PETIT**

Around the world

United Kingdom



The legacy of quality British craftsmanship is still seen in today's guns and apparel, where tradition meets innovation, says Felix Petit



Technological advances in airguns and other firearms have kept British brands at the forefront of the market

Britain has a reputation for craftsmanship and engineering that is almost unmatched worldwide. In English-speaking countries, describing something as the Rolls-Royce of its class immediately identifies it as an item of superlative quality.

As the first country to undergo the Industrial Revolution, Britain was also the first to experience a backlash against mass production in the form of the Arts and Crafts movement. This 19th-century response to the perceived impoverishment of the decorative arts and the conditions under which they were produced led to an environment in the UK that has appreciated and venerated traditional crafts. This has helped maintain the international reputation of Wedgwood pottery, Savile Row suits, Holland & Holland guns, and many others.

It is not only a deep desire to protect British artisanal skills from being swallowed up by the production line that has led to the high quality of outdoor equipment still produced in this country. Many of the handmade garments and shooting apparatus that thrive today do so because of the testing conditions under which they were first forged.

Climatic extremes

Britain has a tricky climate to dress for, as it is both quite cold and fairly wet. The challenges of the terrain and weather, combined with the demands of each particular outdoor pastime, have led to the development over decades of clothing and equipment that allow us to enjoy these activities in comfort. British outdoor clothing has developed to cope with these climatic extremes, and brands such as Mackintosh, Harris Tweed, Cordings, Farlows, Johnstons

of Elgin — which once made estate tweeds — and Barbour have provided clothes for internationally renowned mountaineers, the military, sportsmen and women, royalty and ordinary people who simply like to get out and about.

Although the history of the British Empire is fraught with elements that are remembered with increasing clarity and shame, colonialism has also influenced British design in numerous ways. Without trade from the colonies, we would never have had the benefit of paisley or floral motifs influenced by the Persians and Indians, or the influx of exotic materials such as silk or the mahogany used in the era-defining Chippendale furniture, which still enjoys acclaim both domestically and abroad.

In the shooting world, British guns are still revered above those from any other country. This is at least in part a byproduct of the nation's long and

Alan Paine is known for its top-quality knitwear and tweed clothing worldwide



bellicose history. Purdey, which made sniper rifles and gunnery sights for the military in World War I, is still among the very best, as is the relative newcomer Longthorne. Although, for the most part, the Best British guns club is one that requires some serious heritage to get past the bouncer, Longthorne has managed to do exactly that. And it has gone from strength to strength since its founding in 2010.

Pursuit of quality

Longthorne has made a name for itself like so many British manufacturers through its relentless pursuit of quality, carving out a niche in the market with shotgun aficionados through innovation. The majority of gun barrels are constructed from two barrel tubes soldered together. At Longthorne, however, they take a single piece of steel weighing 27kg and machine a pair of barrels from it. The finished pair weighs 1.3kg, so the resulting barrels are not only very strong but also light.

Gallyon gun and rifle maker is a perfect example of a British company that has not only stood the test of time but also thrived and evolved to maintain its place at the top. Established in 1784, Gallyon now builds handmade performance shotguns that combine state-of-the-art, newly patented barrel and coating technology with precision engineering, and the heritage expertise of a master gunmaker.

Adam Anthony, co-director of Gallyon, believes that buying a British gun from Gallyon is a decision that recognises the intergenerational value

“A shotgun’s more than just a firearm; it is an heirloom”

of the company and products. Adam says: “A shotgun is more than just a firearm; it is an heirloom. Its enduring quality and timeless appeal mean that it can be passed down through generations, making it a cherished family possession.”

Adam continues: “The meticulous craftsmanship involved in creating the Best British shotguns is unparalleled. Each piece is handmade by skilled artisans, ensuring a level of quality



and attention to detail that mass-produced firearms simply cannot match. The hand time that goes into a Best gun is upwards of 400 hours, with some taking over 1,000 hours."

Due to the expense of manufacturing in the UK, it is very difficult to compete on price with products made elsewhere. This has had the wonderful effect of pushing British brands to produce the best possible products they can for the luxury market and enthusiasts.

Adam concludes: "Our guns offer a sense of mystery and prestige. The craftsmanship tells a story that adds to their allure, making them fascinating conversation pieces and symbols of status among enthusiasts. In summary, a British shotgun is not just a tool for shooting; it represents a blend of history, artistry and performance."

Timeless styles

Alan Paine has been producing top-quality knitwear and an assortment of tweed clothing since 1907. Throughout their history, they have clothed sportsmen and women, eminent explorers and even a pope. Alan Paine's marketing manager, Sarah Lloyd, says they continue to draw inspiration from their extensive archives of timeless styles and aim to appeal to consumers who value authenticity and tradition.

"Tweed is not just a choice but a mark of respect for the host and the quarry"

Sarah says: "Brits have a distinctive approach to fieldsports and outdoor clothing, shaped by tradition, climate and cultural norms. British fieldsports, particularly driven shoots, often involve a level of formality in dress, where tweed is not just a choice but a mark of respect for both the host and the quarry."

As with other historic UK manufacturers, Alan Paine's global customer base recognises the brand as a symbol of quality, legacy and tradition, while still drawing inspiration from contemporary design to ensure its products remain functional and relevant in today's market. The iconic Combrook tweed



Established in 1784, Gallyon now builds handmade shotguns that combine precision engineering with heritage expertise

range has cultivated a loyal following since its introduction.

Sarah refers to tweed as the original performance fabric, which is water-resistant, durable and provides suitably earthy tones that are perfect for the UK's unpredictable weather. Sarah also credits the ever-changing British climate for shaping Alan Paine's designs, as it has promoted a culture of layering that has heavily influenced its range.

Finally, Sarah believes the company's rich British heritage helps drive sales by facilitating compelling storytelling on social media, featuring archive photography that further reinforces Alan Paine's historic associations, engaging audiences with its enduring image.

Sportsmatch, the British manufacturer of top-quality high-tensile scope mounts, was established 50 years ago and has grown to become the market leader

for scope mounts and scope rings for all types of sporting, target and centrefire rifle shooting. Now sold in more than 40 countries, it is another example of the prestige held by UK shooting brands.



Sportsmatch scope mounts are checked by hand for defects prior to assembly

Sportsmatch managing director Matthew Ford says that, thanks to the popularity of shooting in the UK, they have access to some of the best shooters in the world to test their products during development. Because they have kept production in Britain, once each part has been produced, they have the capacity to check it by hand for defects prior to assembly, maintaining an impeccable reputation in a specialist industry.

Innovation

The UK's premier producer of air rifles, Daystate, is further proof that British manufacture stands as a hallmark of quality. Daystate was the first British company to manufacture pre-charged pneumatic airguns and has sustained that level of innovation for almost 50 years.

Daystate business development manager Tony Belas comments: "We are able to prosper in a performance sector despite the high shipping and labour costs that we face compared with our competitors in China and Eastern Europe. By being a British company, we already have an aura of quality and sophistication in the eyes of our customers."

Tony adds that putting the Union Flag on products boosts sales in the Commonwealth and further afield, emphasising the reputation British products still enjoy abroad.

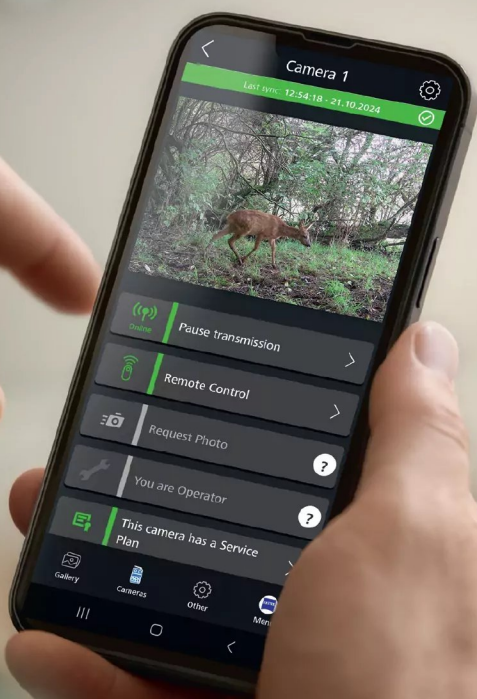
Although Britain is no longer an economic giant, with the pits closed and the final steel furnaces cooling, we still enjoy a reputation for small-to-medium-scale craftsmanship of exquisite talent. Traditional skills in both historic and highly technical industries survive and thrive, passed down in oily workshops, while "produced in the UK" remains a byword for premium quality. 🇬🇧

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How can we breed the perfect labrador?

It is a contentious question with few right answers – but there are some clear things that we should try to breed out, says Ellena Swift

The labrador retriever was first recognised by the Kennel Club as a breed in 1903. It was originally known as the St John's dog or lesser Newfoundland dog. The breed was in Newfoundland in the 1700s and imported to England in the 1800s.

When I was researching its origins, I came across the same old photograph over and over. There are clear similarities between my own *Swiftlands Briar* and one of the original St John's dogs in the photograph that I found.

The dog in the image is Nell, pictured in 1867. She belonged to the Earl of Home and is an example of the type of early St John's dogs that were imported to England from Newfoundland. Though Nell has white toes, you can still very much see the origins of the modern labrador in her face, the set of her ears and in her neat body and short coat.

In addition to white markings on feet and often on the face too, St John's dogs typically had a white chest patch that we still see in labradors today. The patch is listed in the Kennel Club's breed standard, as is a small fleck of white on the pasterns of the feet. This trait can be traced back to *Banchory Bolo*, the first dog to earn a dual championship, winning the

bench title as well as becoming a field trial champion in England. Many dogs today can be seen carrying this trait and it is referred to as "Bolo pads".

Though white markings tend not to be favoured by show dog enthusiasts, they are tolerated in the working community, especially in yellow labs where they are not so obvious.

Dual purpose

Looking at these early photographs and paintings, it is clear to see that originally more breeders and trainers were motivated towards producing dual-purpose dog. It is pretty difficult

Over time, the breed has separated more and you could be forgiven for mistaking the two types of labradors as different breeds. The show type has become heavier and shorter-legged, with larger heads, as the breed standards were taken to the extreme. The working/trialling labrador has become somewhat finer, leaner and faster in a bid to produce a more athletic and agile dog.

It is easy for either side to stand back and criticise. The working world often comments on the show dog's inability to chase down a wounded bird running full tilt in thick cover

"It is difficult to find a successful trialling dog that would hold its own in a show ring"

today to find a successful trialling dog that would hold its own in the show ring and vice versa.

Breeding a good line of labradors takes time, commitment and money, with many hurdles to overcome on both sides, so it is not surprising that most breeders dedicate their lines to one discipline or the other.

or to maintain the stamina needed for a full day's work. The showing world, in response, often looks at the working labrador as totally unrecognisable from its origins and not to breed standard, referring to them as more lurcher types.

As with anything, beauty tends to be in the eye of the beholder.

I have written before about the working ability in relation to colours of dogs, which is another topic hotly debated, with examples of good and bad in all colours. The logical conclusion is that a good dog cannot be a bad colour. This rings true for the looks and types of labradors.

Physical attributes

Those who have met my dogs will know that one of mine, in particular, has little resemblance to the traditional heavyset and larger-headed show dog. Her ears stick out, rather than folding neatly and being set correctly on her head. She is smaller, sligher and much quicker than most labradors. Her



Above: Nell, one of the original St John's dogs, in 1867, when she was aged about 12



Left: The origins of the labrador breed can be found in the lesser Newfoundland dog

ancestors were not like her in their physical attributes.

When I decided to compete, I was met with some hostile opinions due to her unpopular looks. However, as competition dogs go, I couldn't have asked for more. She has proven herself time and time again in the shooting field, showing fearlessness in cover, the heart of a lion retrieving everything from Canada geese to squirrels and all in between. She has been placed and

won Guns' choice at open standard trials, along with numerous wins in all-aged and novice trials, and is consistently placed in working tests.

She is not alone with her odd looks. More and more of these smaller types can be seen working. While I am incredibly proud of her and wouldn't change her for the world, it is vital that as a community we attempt to hold the breed together. The more we criticise and shun the other side, the more it separates. The breed standard was created to ensure the lab was fit for purpose. Dogs being bred for extremes of these physical characteristics have lost the ability to be fit for the job they were meant for. ➔

Gundog trainer Ellena
Swift works labradors
and competed at the IGL
Championships in 2024

Labrador perfection, according to the the Kennel Club

General appearance: Strongly built, short coupled, very active; broad in skull; broad and deep through chest and ribs; broad and strong over loins and hindquarters.

Characteristics: Good tempered, very agile (which precludes excessive body weight or excessive substance). Excellent nose, soft mouth; keen love of water. Adaptable, devoted companion.

Temperament: Intelligent, keen and biddable, with a strong will to please. Kindly nature, with no trace of aggression nor undue shyness.

Head and skull: Skull broad with defined stop; clean-cut without fleshy cheeks. Jaws of medium length, powerful not snipy. Nose wide, nostrils well developed.

Eyes: Medium size, expressing intelligence and good temper; brown or hazel.

Ears: Not large or heavy, hanging close to head, set rather far back.

Forequarters: Shoulders long and well laid back, with upper arm of near equal length, placing legs well under body. Forelegs well boned and straight from elbow to ground when viewed from front or side.

Body: Chest of good width and depth, with well-sprung barrel ribs — this effect not to be produced by carrying excessive weight. Level topline. Loins wide, short coupled and strong.

Hindquarters: Well developed, not sloping to tail; well-turned stifle. Hocks well let down, cow hocks highly undesirable.

Tail: Distinctive feature, very thick towards base, gradually tapering towards tip, medium length, free from feathering, but clothed thickly all round with short, thick, dense coat, thus giving "rounded" appearance described as "otter" tail. May be carried gaily, but should not curl over back.

Colour: The only correct colours are wholly black, yellow or liver/chocolate. Yellows range from light cream to red fox. Small white spot on chest and the rear of front pasterns permissible.

Gundogs

The same has happened with other breeds, such as the German shepherd. Those in the show ring are never used, or even fit for use, as they were originally designed. However, other hunting breeds, such as the German shorthaired pointer, have managed to maintain an animal that is fully functioning, fit for purpose and successful in the show ring.

So how does the labrador find its way back? As a breeder, I prioritise traits that I am looking for. I breed for temperament, health and working ability. If any of those is even in the slightest doubt, I will not consider using them.

Traditional stamp

I also think about what is missing. The only thing my line currently lacks is bone and a more typical head. This has been a consideration in each mating I have chosen and, slowly, the more traditional stamp of dog is returning with each generation, while maintaining those three vital characteristics I mentioned above.

I very much doubt my lines will ever produce a show champion, but this is not something I am particularly concerned about. However, I feel it is important to honour the heritage and origins of the original dogs.

It is important that, when breeding, we all look at what our own lack. If they have the original stamp and are fit for purpose, do they have the necessary temperament? Perhaps they are stunning, but lack drive and ability, or even biddability.

All of the above are considerations that it is imperative no breeder ignores. I have spoken to many different sources on this topic and, through my research, have found dedicated breeders who are determined to bring the labrador breed back closer



Breeders seem to have moved away from producing dual-purpose dogs

to its origins – a dog that is of breed standard but is fully functioning and fit to do the job it was designed to do. One that can work all day in cold temperatures, sit quietly and patiently waiting for retrieves, but also hunt and flush when required.

There are some fine examples of dual-purpose dogs, you simply have to look for them. A good place to start is the BASC arena at Crufts. Working dogs there compete in the show ring. The stamp of dog is much more closely related to the original labrador seen in the early 1900s, when dual-purpose labradors were much more common.

In fact, it was the 2016 field trial class Crufts winner that caught my eye – not only because of his working ability, but his stunning looks. He sired my own stud dog – and previous *Shooting Times* front cover star – Keepa. He received a lovely critique, mentioning traits such as his “kind head and expression”, “excellent length of muzzle, firm topline and sound mover”. This particular dog qualified and ran in the IGL Championship

the same year as he won at Crufts, demonstrating a true dual purpose.

It is easy for any breeder to get hung up on one set of characteristics. And many may well believe that certain dogs should not be bred from. While I understand this in part, it is important that we do not become so hung up on what is lacking that we simply stop or refuse to breed from those we considered to be deficient in something.

Staying true

By doing this, the gene pool of labradors will be greatly reduced and make inbreeding a bigger concern. Instead, everyone breeding should be looking for balance. Physically, the dog should be of a sound and balanced type, staying true to the breed standard where possible. But the temperament, health and ability must be deemed to be as important.

If the dog has a huge flaw, such as health or temperament issues, breeding should rarely be considered. However, if it is only lacking slightly, then the dog that it is bred with should complement it, with the ultimate goal of producing an all-round, dual-purpose labrador.

No one can tell someone else what they believe makes a beautiful labrador. For me, seeing them do what they were bred for in a day's work, seeing them comfort my children at home as their original temperament was designed for and observing them achieve competitively in their field of speciality will always make them the most beautiful dogs in my world. 🐾



Left: labradors competing in the BASC arena at Crufts are fine examples of dual-purpose dogs

The Fisherman's Diary

Winter outings might be challenging, says Jeremy Lucas, but that's part of their appeal



Changing position on the bank, or even pausing for a hot drink, can bring fresh hope to a blank day

Almost every river or lake I visit carries colour at this time of year, and regrettably this must be expected with rain and snowmelt washing mud from the agriculturally devastated English landscape.

I dislike fishing in coloured water for two reasons. First, trout tend to avoid the worst of it and secondly, our flies are much less visible. I was out recently on a lake and felt fairly hopeful, as I thought the visibility in the water was reasonable — so long as I could avoid areas of the bank exposed to an onshore wind that stirred up the mud. Fortunately, it was a calm morning, allowing me to choose a favourite, undisturbed area.

There were grebes and coots diving nearby, and I generally find this encouraging, though there was no sign whatsoever of any feeding fish. I set up what has become a favoured winter rig, consisting of a buoyant “hopper” pattern on point with a pair of nymphs on droppers. I use a floating line, which gives an excellent “washing line” presentation, as the buoyant pattern slows the sinking rate of the nymphs. This allows a slow retrieve without the flies catching on the lake bed.

It was difficult to get a good, clean cast at long range in the flat-calm conditions, so I was relieved when a slight breeze picked up, even though it immediately coloured the first metre or so out from the bank. A long period followed during which I searched fruitlessly around a broad point, gradually losing confidence.

I changed the nymphs several times, ending with a black and green buzzer-like pattern on the first dropper and a red-headed Diawl Bach on the top dropper. The intense hotspots of colour, tied with fluorescent floss, considerably improve the visibility of the flies in coloured water.

“This time the hook held, and I brought to hand a lively overwintering rainbow”

The usually most productive, brightest time of day was passing and I was beginning to think that this would be a blank trip. I was cold and having to force myself to do more than simply go through the motions of cast and retrieve. Changing position on the bank, changing flies and leader construction, even pausing to have a hot drink from the flask

all helps, because after any change comes fresh hope.

Suddenly I had a take, an unmistakable, electrifying draw on the line. I watched the line tip jab along the surface, but I failed to connect. In that instant, though, the entire day changed. I knew there were fish within range. I wasn't cold any more, but alert and excited. Even so, almost half an hour passed before the next take. This time I hooked the fish, but it came adrift after a few seconds. I noticed that both takes had been in mid-retrieve, about 15 yards off the bank.

Two casts later, in exactly the same place, I had another take. This time the hook held, and I successfully brought to hand a lively overwintering rainbow. It had taken the red-headed Diawl Bach.

Purple patch

I fished on for another half an hour without a take and mused just how often this happens. You have a purple patch during which comes all the day's action, but it's usually of very short duration. Fly-fishing in winter is all about finding a way, which is seldom as easy as during other seasons. This is where the immense satisfaction comes from when finally you find the solution, and what makes enduring the inclement conditions so worthwhile.

As I write, the snowdrops are out in force. With the noticeable increasing day length, there are numerous signs that

the worst of winter has passed and the ebullience of spring is not really very far away. While looking forward to this, I am in no hurry for these challenging winter trips to end. I will rather simply be on the lookout for the subtle changes on both river and lake, try to adapt accordingly, and marvel at them. 🎣

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

RIFLE TEST

Merkel Helix RX Explorer £3,216

Designed for big game abroad, the Helix's solid build and ease of handling make it suitable for all kinds of quarry, says Bruce Potts

Bruce likes the ambidextrous nature of the stock and its moulded, reinforced composite skin guarantees it is warp-free and weather-resistant



OUR VERDICT

There was a time when straight-pull rifles were scarce on the hunting scene, with Blaser offerings dominating the market. Things have moved on, and now there is a multitude of manufacturers producing excellent straight-pull rifles, with the Merkel Helix among the best of them.

The Helix has been designed with enclosed bolt operation to make it as safe as possible and improve the accuracy. The receiver is reassuringly solid and the

Bruce found the Helix Explorer's upright stock handling afforded him a planted stance, so he made a perfect heart shot when harvesting a roe doe





Not only is the Helix Explorer impervious to the worst the weather can throw at it, it also handles well

NEED TO KNOW

- ▶ **Manufacturer** Merkel Jagd
- ▶ **Model** Helix RX Explorer
- ▶ **Overall Length** 42.25in
- ▶ **Barrel Length** 22in, fluted with 15mm/1 thread.
- ▶ **Sights** open sight and integral Picatinny-type mounting
- ▶ **Stock** black synthetic fixed comb
- ▶ **Weight** 6.55lb
- ▶ **Trigger** direct trigger system
- ▶ **Safety** slide action on rear tang
- ▶ **Magazine** detachable 3 or 5 shot
- ▶ **Calibre** .308 on test
- ▶ **Price** from £3,216
- ▶ **Contact** Viking Arms; 01423 780810

Bruce mounts a Burris Veracity scope on to the Helix's integral Picatinny rails

The free-floating 22in barrels have a diameter of 17mm and a 15mm/1 metric threaded muzzle



lightning- fast cycling rate and smooth bolt action are superb. The Merkel is specifically designed to provide an instant second shot for moving targets, which is very useful for large driven game abroad, but is also a handy function in the UK if things don't go quite to plan.

Merkel has a real knack for designing

black polymer exterior shrugs off the elements, and the gun's compact features make it straightforward to carry in the field.

Utility

Viking keeps an array of calibres available including .223, .243, .270, .308, 30-06, 9.3×62 and 8×57, which keep hunters covered across the spectrum of quarry and

“The Merkel Helix is specifically designed for moving targets which is handy if things don't go to plan”

strong, light, synthetic stocks that feel natural to hold and give the rifle an instinctive feel and steady aim. The all-

disciplines. The barrels are quickly interchangeable without need of a specialist tool, further adding to the rifle's utility. Starting at £3,216, the Helix is also very reasonably priced for a straight-pull rifle.

Far left: the Helix has a short, straight bolt throw and its spiral locking lugs are beneath a sliding cover (left)



IN DEPTH

At the heart of the rifle's design are the helical rotating six locking lugs that plug directly into the back of the barrel. By pulling straight back on the bolt handle the bolt reciprocates around its centre to lock and unlock in milliseconds. This system realises a 2:1 transmission operating system where the handle only moves half the length of the bolt; in this case a distance of 2.75in. This makes it faster than an equivalent standard bolt-action rifle.

Open sights were provided, but it would be more natural to utilise the integral Picatinny rail on top of the action for the mounting of a telescopic sight.

The Helix features fully free-floating, cold-forged 22in barrels with a 17mm diameter and a 15mm/1 metric threaded muzzle. All of this is coated in a seriously hardwearing blacked finish.

Smooth blade

The barrel is easily removed through the depression of a small lever and the change between calibres can be completed with a swift bolt head removal and replacement. The three alternative bolt head sizes available are mini, standard or magnum and collectively they can accommodate cartridges from .222 to .338 Win mag. Correct and consistent shot placement starts with the trigger-pull and the Helix direct-action trigger has a slender, smooth blade that is adjustable from 2lb to 4lb. I had the test model breaking dead on 2lb and 6oz, which is a safe and practical stalking weight.

The safety catch is a sliding button at the rear of the action. If the safety is in the elevated position it means the Merkel is cocked. To make it safe, you push a small



This nice roe doe is harvested cleanly at about 70 yards off sticks with the very capable Helix Explorer

FIELD TEST

I removed the foresight so that a lightweight yet effective Wildcat Evolution sound moderator could be fitted, and I mounted a Burris Veracity scope on the integral Picatinny rails.

I started with four lead-cored and four lead-free .308 Win loadings. The Helix digested them all smoothly except the Geco Zero 136-gr bullets, which gave 2in groups. The best of the bunch were the old-school Sako 123-gr soft points that never disappoint and we had solid 1in groups at 100 yards for three shots at 2,994fps and 2,449ft/lb. The best lead-free were the 168-gr Barnes TTSX which held their own with groups of just under 1in at 2,676fps and 2,672ft/lb. That would make a nice red deer load.

The doe cull was already well under way when I set off armed with the Sako 123-gr bullets. I like to achieve a good number early on in the year as the bucks

are not yet guarding territories and roe are more visible on the fields. I had harvested three from an ancient bit of coppiced woodland the previous week, so this time I silently stalked the fields and hedges, which were cloaked in a thin veil of mist, the trim Helix Explorer comfortably slung by my side. Damp, wet foliage brushing up against the Helix were of no concern to me or the rifle, and at a small enclosed field between two woods seven roe were feeding. The rifle was de-cocked.

I raised the rifle to aim off the sticks and my thumb instinctively raised the safety catch and we were live again. I selected a single doe without followers. The really good upright stock handling afforded me a planted stance which ensured a perfect heart shot. She dashed 20 yards and then went down. I do feel a good deal more reassured with the Helix's enclosed bolt system too.

button on top of the catch, which lowers the safety catch and locks everything. There is a little bit of a knack to the smooth operation of this system, but owners will soon get used to it. A little easier to handle are the opposing dual-release catches that drop the three-shot magazine directly into the hand.

I like the highly ambidextrous nature of the stock. The moulded black fibreglass-

reinforced composite skin guarantees that it is warp-free and weather-resistant even when subjected to the most testing weather conditions. The Helix features a straight comb, raised side panels for additional friction, and a well-angled pistol grip, which allows the rifle to sit comfortably in the shoulder, providing a basis for a relaxed and natural aiming stance. 🦌

CONCLUSION

The Merkel Helix system works reliably and accurately and is nice to have in the mix if you are considering a straight-pull rifle. The price point is good and in this Explorer format you get a no-nonsense, accurate, all-weather stalking rifle that's ideal for going exploring for deer.

17

/20

Accuracy

Good accuracy from both lead-cored and lead-free loadings

17

/20

Handling

The Explorer just feels built for a good day's stalking

17

/20

Trigger

A nice trigger but the sliding safety is a little awkward

17

/20

Stock

A no-nonsense yet comfortable and practical stock

17

/20

Value

Compared with other straight-pulls, the Helix is good value

85

/100

Overall Score

A hardwearing, utilitarian rifle that's a joy to shoot with

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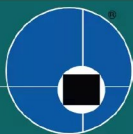
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Rabbits on the railway

When you can't use a gun, dog or ferrets, an alternative approach is needed to bag the bunnies, recounts Derek J Robinson



Rabbits on railway lines occasionally cause harm. These days, when infestations become serious, populations are gassed as the preferred method of control. But before health and safety regulations were enforced, ferreting rabbits was not uncommon and I often controlled embankments between Ely and Peterborough.

Rabbits in marshalling yards, however, need swift eradication. Rabbit scrapings cause accidents and in one case, in Peterborough Yard, a locomotive driver broke his leg after stepping back into a rabbit hole during the hours of darkness. This was the fear in Cambridge Yard when the bunnies began wreaking havoc. Numbers had resided in Cambridge Freight Yard for 20 years or more without causing an issue. However, when the Post Office purchased part of the yard and demolished the shed where the rabbits resided, they sought refuge elsewhere.

New digs

Rabbits are great survivors, and these Cambridge bunnies were soon causing holes around the freight yard as they established their new digs. Then the complaints began, which led to the arrival of Rentokil. I had just walked into the office as Jimmy, the yard shunter, was explaining the dangers to the Rentokil operative.

Jimmy was always after making a few quid, be it on horses, football pools or even a friendly game of

cards. Everything had to be worth something and I am sure he could visualise making a load of money from selling the dead rabbits. He was clearly unaware how little value a few bunnies held.

"This way," Jimmy beckoned. The pester followed, with me bringing up the rear. Walking along the fence line boundary, Jimmy came to an abrupt stop. "Here's their first home," he remarked, pointing to a hole in a slight rise in the ground.

"Somebody's already on the case," the pester suggested, pointing out a crude snare 2in from the entrance. I explained to the pair that the hole in question was a bob-hole – a hole that only goes into the ground a few feet and is only used for a rabbits to evade danger. "When the threat is gone, the rabbit leaves the hole and goes on its way," I explained. "You'll find no rabbits living in a bob-hole," I added.

We set off again, reaching the end of the yard. Scanning the

reside. Only a muppet puts a snare outside a hole."

"Well, where would you put it?" Jimmy retorted. I asked the pair to follow me so I could show them where. Cutting across the yard, I took both men to the main line opposite the station and towards the cable ducting concrete troughs, which carry electric points and signal cables. We stopped at a junction where three concrete trunkings converged.

To Kings Cross

A gap above the cables revealed strands of rabbit fur. The cables shone, indicating an entrance and an exit. Looking along the trunking, the pester inquired how far the cables went. "As far as the concrete ducts," I told him. "They go to King's Cross in that direction and to Peterborough in that direction."

"Where do they come out?" he asked. I said that his guess was as good as mine but it was safe to assume

"I lobbed the stone, hollered in full cry and dashed forward. The last bunny hit the net"

surroundings, there wasn't a hole in sight. Jimmy was astonished. "I thought they were down here in the bushes," he stammered. "We never see them in the day, only at night."

"It's just as well I'm here," I told the pester. "It's no good taking any notice of Jimmy. He knows absolutely nothing about rabbits, their habits or, as you can now see, where they

that the rabbits could come and go from every junction where one line of cables met the next – or where there were breaks in the concrete. "So gassing and trapping are out of the question," I explained.

We headed back to the office, where the Rentokil man made his excuses and left. Jimmy looked forlorn. His rabbit-catching ventures had hit the

buffers. All the skills he thought he was going to learn had vanished.

"I'll go and talk to the manager," I told Jimmy. "My dad used to say if you can put some salt on a bird's tail you can catch it. Maybe that will work with rabbits too?"

That afternoon, I met the yard manager, Frank Port, and advised him that I could help rid the yard of rabbits. He immediately told me that I was not allowed to shoot any rabbits, so I laid out my own plans to net them. The process was easier than it sounded but it would take weeks – or even months.

"How much will it cost?" Frank asked. "Nothing," I replied. "I'll do it for you when I'm on night shift and fit it between meal breaks when there are no yard movements. I'll let you know when I've got the lot," I assured him. I then explained that I thought we were dealing with around six rogue rabbits but that there was only one place I could effectively net them – in the centre of the yard opposite platform four.

The site in question was right under the yard lamp stand, the only area of the yard in shadow enough for a long-net to be set and still remain invisible. Normally, two people would drag a rope across the ground, herding rabbits into the waiting net. I couldn't do that; there was too much debris on the ground. I would have to walk them to it and throw ballasts at them to get them to bolt into the net.

"Have you done this before?" Frank asked. "Yes, but we did it with ferrets and dogs," I explained. "You cannot work either in a yard with passenger and freight trains running



Derek used to work ferrets to control rabbits on the embankments between Ely and Peterborough

through. Walking rabbits and scaring them into the net is the only option."

On my next shift, I set to work. The ground was rock hard, and I had to hammer steel rods in to make holes to support the net rods. Each hole was positioned beside a wooden sleeper, which I marked with a white cross for future reference. Two weeks later, everything went to plan. I set the net, then wandered around the outskirts of the yard looking for the rabbits. I soon found two, ideally placed and not requiring much deviation from my route.

With my pockets bulging with lumps of ballast, I skirted the rabbits, slowing pushing towards them until both were in line with the waiting web. I quickened my pace to pressure them. One went wide, dodging the

net, but a well-aimed stone smacked the dirt ahead of the next, changing its direction, and it hit the net at speed. Now only five remained.

In the shadows

I repeated the exercise once a month. Rabbits are quick to learn, and if I went out too often, they soon vanished at the sight of me. There were highs and lows over the months, but eventually only one remained. On the final night, I lined it up with the net hanging invisible in the shadows. I got within 20ft, just as excited as when I caught the first – and oblivious to everything around me.

I lobbed the stone, hollered in full cry and dashed forward. The last bunny bolted, hit the net and was captured. "Yes!" I cried, punching the air. Then my attention was drawn to platform number four, heaving with passengers, all of whom were staring at the antics of a mad man lobbing stones around the yard.

I wondered if they could see the rabbit. I'll never know. But seeing their train arrive, I made short work of the despatch, removing the rabbit from the net and disappearing into my cabin as quickly as I could. The following week I advised the others that the job was complete.

"How did you get to them?" Jimmy asked. "Fieldcraft and perseverance," I answered. "I might not have a flashy van loaded with traps and poisons, but I do know how to catch rabbits. All you need is a bit of salt and a fishing net." 🐾



Once the long-net is made, Derek positions it in the shadows and sets about snaring the bunnies

ATTACK: KEEPER HOSPITALISED AFTER RUN-IN WITH POACHERS

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Working Dogs



A long-awaited foxhunting trip to Norway showcases just how effectively Scandinavians work a variety of dogs

In early March 2020, just before the Covid madness kicked in, I fulfilled a long-held ambition to experience foxhunting in Scandinavia. Thanks to social media, I had formed a friendship with Sten Erik Hagen, which resulted in a trip to Norway. Sten Erik is a genial, outgoing character, with a passion for hunting. He is one of those people who seems to tackle every new task with huge energy and enthusiasm and, in the process, becomes extremely proficient at whatever he does.

In the UK, we tend to regard the fox as nothing more than a pest — at least since the Hunting Act 2004 anyway — and as such, it doesn't qualify for a close season. In Norway, the situation is different and the open season for hunting foxes runs from 15 July to 15 April. However, you can only hunt foxes with dogs from 21 August to 31 March.

At the time of my visit, Sten Erik was in the process of entering an 18-month-old purebred Finnish hound, or stover

(pronounced sterver). You'll come across names like Hamilton stover, Smalland stover and the like. Helvi is a beautiful dog but, as I saw for myself, she is completely focused on hunting and has a bit of fire in

“The Nordic hound is expected to be able to cope with all eventualities”

her belly to go with it. Her courage was to be put to the test when she was taken to Sweden and introduced to bear hunting.

Ordinarily, young hounds are laid on to a fresh fox track in the snow. This is to try to increase the chances of the youngsters getting on to a fresh scent and reduce the possibility of them “rioting” on a non-target such as roe deer or hare. This isn't an issue for experienced hounds, which show admirable discipline and stay true to fox.

The first morning we managed to lay Helvi on to a fresh track that led us to a Swiss-style wooden cabin, tucked away

among the spruce and pine. She was wearing a GPS collar so we could trace her movements. I held Helvi on a leash while Sten went to get Luna, a smooth fox terrier bitch, from the pickup.

Sten and Luna soon arrived back at the cabin and, after securing Helvi to a tree, we entered Luna under the cabin and took up positions on opposite corners. Luna wasted no time in getting the fox to bolt for me, and I acknowledged her efforts by missing it.

Quality hunting dog

The second day, I was introduced to the exploits of fellow hunter Kristoffe's mixed-breed hound, Amy. After seeing her perform, I have no problem stating that she is a quality hunting dog by any standards. Kristoffe also owns a very useful smooth fox terrier bitch (pictured) which, in addition to working fox, is also used to dig badgers. It was terrific to find that hunters are making good use of fox terriers in Scandinavia.

Nordic hunters make great use of GPS collars, so the progress of the hunt can be followed and the hunter can try to ensure they are in the optimum position to intercept the fox. Used in conjunction with handheld radios, this definitely improves the efficacy of the hunt.

Foxes have been hunted in this way, GPS excluded, in the Nordic countries for generations, and the hounds are ideally suited to it. The Nordic hound is expected to be able to cope with all eventualities, on its own. This has helped to create a hound that is capable of working independently and problem solving. We accounted for several foxes during the course of my visit, so it's proof positive that the system is effective. It was a great trip. 🐾

∞ Martin Webber is a former keeper and lifelong hunting and working dog enthusiast. He lives in south-west Scotland where he maintains a small kennel of working Border terriers.



Kristoffe uses his talented smooth fox terrier bitch not only to hunt foxes but also dig badgers

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Silence is golden



Top of the wish list for a moderator is sound reduction, of course, but there are several other desirable qualities to consider as well

Choice of sound moderator for your stalking rifle can be very personal, with many of us bemused by the huge variety on the market. Calibre does play a part in the decision-making, as does the length and the diameter of the barrel contour.

Here is a selection that covers all the bases for the expectant stalker.

You would think noise reduction was the main concern, but if a suppressor weighs a ton it's not practical, so decibel reduction, weight, longevity, ease of cleaning and good looks are all relevant. Ultimately, though, you should choose what is best for the calibre, weight of rifle, length of barrel and the frequency at which you shoot.



WILDCAT ELITE

Wildcat sound moderators are made in the UK and there is a diverse array for any application from rimfire to centrefire, and magnum calibres, too. The flagship Elite mod offers everything a stalker could wish for in three muzzle-mounted models: the Elite Compact, Elite and Elite TI. As the name suggests, the Compact is a smaller version of the standard Elite, while the TI version is made from titanium.

Prices range from £495 for the Compact to £865 for the TI.



The Elite in .30 calibre is a very well-built, premium product designed

completely from scratch with the aim of making the ultimate rifle moderator. It had to be extremely durable, rated for magnum use if necessary and able to withstand a high shot count. The standard Elite is 44mm in diameter and 187mm long but adds 172mm to the rifle as these are muzzle cans, which I personally prefer. It weighs 635g while the titanium version weighs only 364g with the same overall dimensions — that's a whopping 271g weight saving.

The rear section has replaceable threaded inserts for differing rifle muzzle threads, which are £80 each, and the thread options include 14×1, 15×1, 17×1, 18×1, 18×1.5, 1/2×28, 5/8×24, 1 1/16×24 and 3/4×24.

The Elite utilises a combination of 17-4 stainless steel and grade five 6Al-4V titanium for its unique single-billet manufacturing process, which incorporates a front-mounted dual core design. This achieves excellent durability, for a high round count or magnum use, and is highly effective at recoil reduction.

The Compact Elite is best suited to short-barrelled woodland deer rifles because the noise reduction and handling is still excellent.

- RRP from £495
- wildcatmoderators.com

SVEMKO HUNTER 1.0

New to the British market, the Svemko Hunter 1.0 is the result of seven years of development, with a focus on sound, reduction, weight and strength.

This unit, weighing just 285g, barely affects the balance of the rifle but still offers fantastic sound reduction up to 34dB for .308 Win and reduces recoil.

The Hunter 1.0 Standard measures 220mm and 46.5mm in diameter and is built with a grade five titanium core to reduce burnout. Meanwhile, the outer tube and cap are made from

corrosion-resistant aluminium, which offers higher muffler strength and reduces weight further. A Hunter 1.0 Short is also available.

The unit is built for standard ammunition sizes, up to and including .30-06 and equivalent, and stalkers will have the opportunity to explore the full range hands-on at the British Shooting Show on 14-16 February.

- RRP's available online
- edgarbrothers.com



STALON X108



The Stalon X108 is available in calibres from .204 Ruger up to .30-06

Sako and Tikka test rifles always come fitted with Stalon mods and are famed for their noise reduction and lightweight construction. The X108 model is a “reflex” design — over the barrel — and as such only adds 108mm past the muzzle. The minimal extra length makes the whole outfit far less cumbersome, especially when slung on the shoulder. The X149 is the longer version for bigger calibres as necessary.

Offered in calibres from .204 Ruger up to .30-06, the Stalon design has calibre-specific baffles, thus maximising decibel reduction with the ability to separate and exchange threads or baffle sizes to match your rifle’s cartridge. Threads include M14x1, M15x1, M17x1, M18x1, ½in-28 UNEF, ½in-20 UNF, ⅝in-18 UNF and ⅝in-24 UNEF.

This aluminium moderator is 235mm long and 49.1mm wide but only weighs 334g, with most of that weight rearward of the muzzle and back over the barrel.

The front primary thick baffle deflects most of the gases away from the bore axis and rearward through the vented forward baffles. This gives the gas time to flow through every part of the moderator and diffuse its energy — and thus noise — by the time it exits the moderator. Overall, it offers very good noise reduction and barely affects the balance of the rifle with little weight addition for its size, and is well priced.

- RRP from £345
- gmk.co.uk

ASE UTRA
S SERIES SL5i

The slimline SL5i can reduce muzzle noise by up to 25dB



The S Series SL5i from ASE Utra is the smallest moderator on the market, but it still yields an impressive sound level of less than 140dB at the shooter’s ear with a .308 Win calibre rifle.

Finland-based ASE Utra has been making moderators for more than 30 years and has forged a reputation for producing some of the most durable and reliable mods for demanding conditions, such as the Arctic wilderness.

Well suited for stalking in woodland and thick cover, the SL5i sound suppressors are the updated and lightened version of the popular SL5 range. They are available in a range of calibres, from .223 Rem up to .308, and come with a variety of internal threads to fit directly on to most rifle barrels.

These stainless steel moderators weigh only 345g and are a mere 118mm long and 44.5mm wide. But don’t be fooled by the slimline design, these units can reduce muzzle noise by up to 25dB and feature a robust build to ensure a long service life in the field.

- RRP available online
- jacksonrifles.com

SCHULTZ & LARSEN
ULTRADOME

The Ultradome provides a slim, lightweight moderator for stalking or foxing and weighs only 322g. In its over-barrel reflex form, it measures 225mm long, has a 38mm diameter and only adds 120mm to the overall length of the rifle. On a longer barrel this balances it better than a muzzle-mounted moderator would, and it’s available in 6mm, 7mm or 8mm calibres and in M14x1, M15x1, ½inx20 UNF and ½inx28 UNEF thread sizes.

The Ultradome forms part of the Hardcore range of moderators, which use stainless steel cone inserts within the core of the aluminium moderator. These resist the effects of fire erosion from the hot fast-burning powder gases produced, and it’s a sensible answer to a question that most people have about the longevity of aluminium sound moderators.

The Ultradome is made as a strippable unit with three differential parts, consisting of a rear overbarrel section, mid-connector section and then baffles. The baffles are 10mm-thick threaded sections that all connect to form a linear baffle stack. There is a final large 19mm baffle that then forms the end plug. The number of baffles is governed by the calibre you intend to shoot through them. The .223 version, for example, has a six-baffle stack, but you can customise it to suit yourself, which is handy and offers a very flexible and versatile sound moderator system.

- RRP £210
- alanrhone.com



The Ultradome weighs in at only 322g, making it a great lightweight option

“The units feature a robust build to ensure a long service life in the field”

At the coalface

Andrew Hunter,
managing director of Outwear



Andrew Hunter is the managing director of Outwear, a Scottish business that focuses on importing and distributing premium-quality outdoor and protective clothing for enthusiasts and professionals alike. Andrew grew up in Dumfries and Galloway, where he had the chance to develop a wonderful relationship with the outdoors through sailing, fishing, golfing and hill walking. He studied law at Edinburgh University then spent time developing a foundation in business and business development.

Andrew was eventually approached by a successful company and tasked with growing one of its business divisions. Its intention was to create a new business that could step up the company's growth. As a result, Outwear was born in 2018.

Selective

Outwear is incredibly selective about the brands it works with. Andrew explains they only collaborate with brands that are "independent or family-owned, committed to quality, innovation and long-term relationship building". He adds: "They need to offer something special and be leaders in their industries."

So far, Outwear works with only five brands, all of which have undergone rigorous suitability checks. Andrew says: "For every brand we work with, a lot of time and energy was invested at the beginning to determine if we are a good fit for each other. Trips to see the Woolpower production facility in Sweden and the Crispi factory in Italy were key to building trust and commitment early on."

"In every industry we work with, there are experts with stories to share"

Sasta of Finland, Woolpower of Sweden and Crispi of Italy are three of their brands that cater for the fieldsports sector. Sasta specialises in top-quality hunting outerwear and accessories, Woolpower makes an extraordinary range of merino thermal layers, and Crispi produces some of the most technical, comfortable hunting and walking boots on the planet.

Outwear has faced several challenges due to Brexit, COVID-19 and inflation, but Andrew says these experiences have prepared Outwear for the future. "We are a small, strong team that works hard for each other, our brands and our customers. We've

had to adapt early on, and this will help us cope with future challenges," he says.

Andrew reflects on the difficulties placed on the company during Covid, when they were expected to furlough staff. He says: "We understood our markets and the importance our customers placed on our products. We supply a range of sectors, including forestry, arboriculture, military, police and fieldsports. It became clear that

these customers would still be working and needed support from their suppliers."

Although Outwear is still a relatively small player in the UK fieldsports industry, Crispi already has waiting lists, and some Woolpower products have sold out due to large Ministry of Defence orders. In the short-term, Outwear plans to grow its existing brands, introduce new products and explore new industries.

Opportunities

While Andrew enjoys fieldsports, he came to them a bit later in life. He shares: "The past seven years have given me some tremendous opportunities to try my hand at deerstalking, clay pigeon shooting, fly-fishing and dog trialling."

Andrew loves meeting people in the field and hearing about their passion for sport and the countryside. He believes these encounters often provide some of the most valuable learning experiences, explaining: "As someone who has an eye for detail and an obsession for high-quality gear, I've embraced the opportunity to hear opinions from others. In every industry we work with, there are experts with stories to share."

When it comes to his ideal sporting experience, Andrew concludes: "I have treasured memories of my first sika stalk in Caithness, fishing in the Borders and grouse shooting in Yorkshire." 🦌



Crispi, supplied by Outwear, produce some of the most technical and comfortable boots around

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We'll see you again next year!



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Game Cookery

Low-and-slow cooking is perfect for goose meat and Cai ap Bryn adds some punchy Mexican spices to elevate this delicious quick-fix classic

I don't often go goose shooting, but here in the south-east, we are blessed with some exceptionally good marshes that are home to an abundance of wildfowl.

There are plenty of Canada and greylag geese, but wild goose is one of those

quarries that I don't get to cook enough. I love the richness and variety you get with it.

However, the thought of cooking goose can fluster people. Many think, incorrectly, that you can cook it as you would a normal farmed goose, but it has less fat content, making it tricky to get right.

that can turn any goose into a delicious meal. I have decided to cook this goose using a low-and-slow method, coating it with Mexican spices and cooking it with stock until it shreds apart. For this recipe, I used goose breasts, but the legs would be even better.

Ingredients

WILD GOOSE LEGS OR BREASTS

SPICE RUB

1TSP SALT

1TSP CRACKED BLACK PEPPER

1½TSP SMOKED PAPRIKA

1TSP GROUND CORIANDER

1TSP GARLIC PUREE OR POWDER

½TSP CAYENNE

1TSP CUMIN

2TSP CHIPOTLE PASTE

2½TBSPOLE OIL

1TSP LIME JUICE

½TSP BROWN SUGAR

TO COOK

1 ONION, DICED

1 BELL PEPPER, SLICED

2 CLOVES GARLIC

450ML BEEF STOCK

ASSEMBLY INGREDIENTS

400G COOKED RICE

200G TOMATO SALSA

200G GUACAMOLE

150G GRATED CHEESE

10 30CM TORTILLA WRAPS

SOUR CREAM OR MAYONNAISE (OPTIONAL)

HOT SAUCE (I USE CHOLULA)

HANDFUL OF FRESHLY CHOPPED CORIANDER LEAVES

“Wild goose is one of the game types that can fluster some people... it is tricky to get right”

The thing is, it's difficult to age a goose. Like most animals, an older goose is tougher and stronger, whereas a younger one is more forgiving.

Roasting a wild goose can certainly be risky. It can be dry, tough or very strong. However, there are some foolproof recipes

It is no secret that I love spicy Mexican food. I love the depth of flavours and the variety. One of my favourite handheld foods when at an event, or in need of a quick fix, is a burrito. It's a whole meal in a wrap that is filling and incredibly tasty — and goose is a perfect alternative to traditional chicken. 🦢

WILD GOOSE BURRITO

THE METHOD

Makes 8 to 10 burritos

1 Place all the spice rub ingredients together in a bowl and mix well. After removing the skin, score the jointed meat with a knife so the flavours penetrate deep into it. Liberally coat the goose meat with the spice mix and leave to marinate for about 30 minutes, or longer for a deeper flavour.

2 Brown the meat in two tablespoons of vegetable oil. Then add the onions, peppers and garlic and cook on a medium heat for five to 10 minutes, stirring frequently.

3 Add the beef stock, stir and cover with a lid. Cook in the oven at 150°C for three to four hours, turning the meat every hour and adding a little water if needed to stop the dish drying out. While waiting for the magic to happen in the oven, prepare the rest of the assembly ingredients.



4 When the meat is ready, remove it from the pan and shred it by scraping two forks across the flesh. The remaining liquid should coat the back of the spoon. If it is too thick, add a little water. If it's too thin, reduce it on the stove to achieve the right consistency. Mix the shredded meat back into the pan to create an unctuous mixture ready for assembly.

5 Assemble the burritos. There is no hard-and-fast rule. I like to add the rice first and then the shredded meat with all the toppings on one half of the wrap. Then, I fold in the two ends and, starting from the side with the filling, roll tightly.



Smokin' hot sport

Many people despise rats but they are much loved by youngsters and terriers. *White Face* recalls days spent scouring hedgerows in the 1970s

Today, the common brown rat is a forgotten mammal. Ask the average village lad when he last saw a specimen of this rodent and you collect a very, very blank stare. Vastly different from the days of my youth when *Mus decumanus* was a source of sport and profit.

We had no television, no wireless nor youth club, but there was ample entertainment to be gained in the pursuit of rats and sparrows. Rats were our main quarry. In spring we hunted the banks of well-laid hedgerows looking for runs. We encouraged our eager terriers to poke their noses down likely holes and tell us, with excited yelps and twitches of their short sterns, when the inhabitant was at home.

When a dog marked, we would untie the string securing the canvas bag, take out the ferret and pop it into the hole. We never muzzled ferrets for ratting and there were many desperate encounters in the darkness between the equally fierce contestants. But usually the rat shot out of its home and darted down the hedgerow, pursued by stick-swinging, yelling lads and hysterical dogs.

I still remember a little Manchester terrier bitch we owned in the 1920s. Old Lassie invariably grabbed her quarry and, with a lightning flick of her neck, hurled it over her shoulder. When it hit the ground, life had

departed with the snapped vertebrae. The rodent dead, our lambfoot knives, keen as razors, severed the scaly, scabby tail, for this was our token to be presented to the farmer for payment.

Well-padded runs

As the year advanced, so the lush vegetation grew on the banks and gave our quarry ample cover to escape. So now we concentrated our attack on the well-padded runs at feeding places, at duck ponds, beside barns – any place that offered food. We'd sneak up to a pig's cot with a gun in our hand and, with luck, might get a couple at a shot, though care had to

be taken not to wing a saddleback. I still own a little No 3 garden gun with the Warnant block-action – the rat gun par excellence, better than any .410 and the ammo a lot cheaper.

When the autumn arrived, we were ready for a real ratting foray. Very early one morning, the fire had been lit in the steam engine standing beside the wheat rick. When there was a real good head of steam, a ladder was reared against the stack, the thatch ripped off and the men commenced to toss down the topmost sheaves into the drum of the threshing machine.

This is the moment of truth for the hordes of rats, who imagined that this snug, warm heap was going to be their



"Soon the rats ran – but we lads were waiting with excited dogs and long, heavy ash plants"

home forever. Though it took a ladder to reach the top, their house and larder was swiftly demolished from the roof down. Soon they ran. But we lads were waiting with excited dogs and long, heavy ash plants.

Slaughter

When all stacks have been threshed, when frost and ice bite into every living thing, then the rat comes indoors. He creeps into the house, into the barns, the pig cots, the stables and the byres. And now, if we really get busy, we can slaughter him. We certainly earned our pocket money in winter. Creep into a barn with your little gun, a mate to hold a hooded acetylene bicycle lamp, and, when the light flashed, there'd be a pair of

“A rat squatted, paralysed in the beam, until a pinch of shot knocked him off his perch”

rubies where a rat squatted, paralysed in the beam, until your pinch of shot knocked him off his perch.

There was the skin warehouse in our market town; a gruesome place. A gaunt brick building with a slate roof and awful heaps of blood-stained hides from cattle and sheep; dreadful piles of severed hooves and other unmentionable offal. By this time I'd acquired a powerful torch and taped it securely to my gun barrel so a strong, thin beam of white light landed straight on to the target.

When our sports ceased, the vile stench of the charnel house was overlaid with the sweet, sulphurous smell of blackpowder and our knives were extremely busy severing the tails. I assume that skin house still exists, but frankly I did not think my now-aged stomach would be strong enough to seek sport in one.

Labyrinth

The majority of our farm outbuildings were built of random rubble, as the architects would term it. Odd-sized sandstone quarried from a local hill was bedded in a strange mix of soil, cow dung and straw, producing a wall 2ft thick. Generations of rats found it extremely easy to burrow through



“I still own a little No3 garden gun with the Warnant block-action — the rat gun per excellence”

the soft core of such a wall and these buildings became honeycombed with a labyrinth of tunnels.

One farmer was the proud possessor of an ancient belt-driven James motorcycle and, when the rats had taken over in his outbuildings, he would convert it into a gassing machine. A long hosepipe was attached to the exhaust, the engine started, the controls adjusted to get a fairly rich mixture and, when a steady stream of carbon monoxide was blowing out of the pipe, it was inserted into the lower hole.

Soon gasping, retching rodents were staggering out of the top holes, creeping along the roof trusses seeking pure air. Some fell

to the dogs, others that retained an unsteady foothold were knocked off by our small guns.

I suppose some lads still pursue the ancient and honourable sport of ratting. And you know, though you do not see them on your way to a village pub, dance or youth club, the rats are still there in their old haunts. The anticoagulant rat poisons are already showing signs that they are losing their punch as Dame Nature builds up the rodents' resistance. Are we finally to revert to little gun, terrier and ferret in our fight against the rat? 🐭

➡ This article was first published in the 5 February 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

A .22-250 for muntjac?

◆◆ STALKING

Q I am using a thermal sight on my .22-250 for foxing. Is it legal for me to use the rifle and thermal sight to shoot muntjac?

A In England and Wales, the law allows you to shoot deer from one hour before dawn until one hour after sunset. It does not specify what sighting devices may or may not be used.

Likewise, a rifle with a calibre not less than .22 inches, producing a muzzle energy of 1,000ft/lb and using a soft or hollow-nosed bullet not less than 50-gr, may lawfully be used to shoot muntjac and Chinese water deer.

In practice, this includes the .22-250 Rem. Therefore it follows that you can use your foxing rifle with thermal sights to shoot muntjac during lawful shooting hours. **GD**

Acorn shortage hits jays

◆◆ MIGRANT BIRDS

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

A Jays are largely sedentary, seldom moving far from where they hatched. However, northern populations do make periodic irruptions, usually when the acorn crop

has failed. Last year's crop was almost non-existent in much of the UK and northern Europe, and this triggered much more jay activity than is normal.

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

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



Contact the team

Email: ollie.harvey@twsgroup.com

Do I need a bigger box?

➡ FERRETING

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

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

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

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

Among my array of boxes, the main ones I use are 40cm long, 23cm wide and the same height. I ensure that the lid fits snugly, with no gaps. The last thing I want is water dripping on top of my ferrets after they have worked hard.

This size of box comfortably holds four jills and gives them everything they need to be warm, secure and ready for work when called upon.

There are a lot of smaller ferret boxes on the market, but these are generally designed only for one or two ferrets. **SW**

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



How to push up returns

➡ MIXED BAGS

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

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

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

Have a look at the winter holding cover. It needs to be thick enough to offer birds protection from the elements and sanctuary from predators and prying eyes. Then look at roosting and review predation control. Roosting should be warm, predation control timed and targeted. If you get these right, you will be more than halfway there. **LB**

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



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Bluish haze in dog's eyes

► VETERINARY CARE

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

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

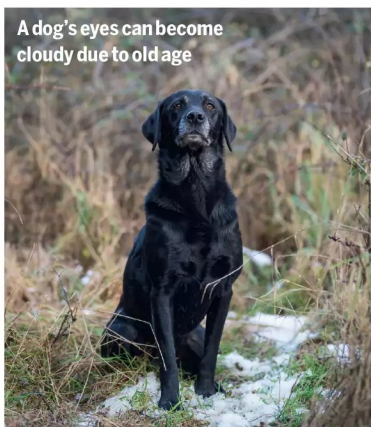
The lens, although transparent, is made up of thousands of tiny fibres. Lens fibres are produced throughout life, but the lens does not become bigger. Consequently, as a dog ages, the old fibres in the lens become compacted, creating a cloudy appearance in the eye. This density is called lenticular or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

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

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

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

A dog's eyes can become cloudy due to old age



Avoid all puppy parties

► GUNDOGS

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

A I am actually not a fan of puppy parties and advise all my clients to avoid them where possible.

I appreciate it may not be the case with all of them, but the vast majority are run by well-meaning but clueless people. Essentially, the puppies turn up and are released to play. There is

no structure, no matching puppies of suitable size and energy, and no understanding of dog behaviour.

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

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

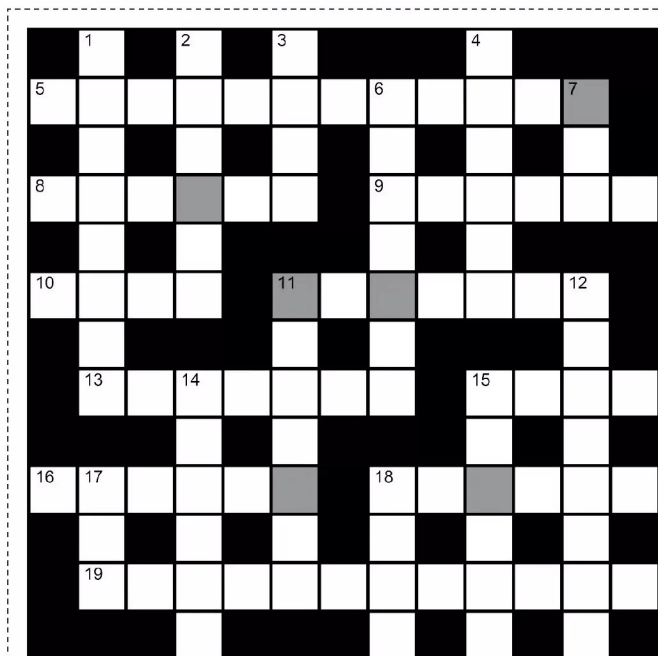
Socialising should be with one other puppy that does not overwhelm yours, or physically hurt them (and vice versa). Or use an older, calm, balanced dog to help teach manners and calm, polite play. Sessions should be kept short, about 15 minutes or so.

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

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



Crossword / Compiled by Eric Linden / 1704



Across

- 5** Clues from the crime scene are blemishes on clean guns (12)
8 A range of guns as seen on TV? (6)
9 Dopy around Romania with basset-like ears (6)
10 One of a forester's concerns is lurking in the theatre entrance (4)
11 & 12 down They grant permission to shoot to a commander with driving documents (7,8)
13 Patients lack information about protectors of innovation in gunmaking (7)
15 Chop your way through undergrowth on horseback (4)
16 If a car is different, the guineafowl's home continent is revealed (6)
18 An animal settlement resembling part of the intestine, yes? (6)
19 Not open to a travel pass if the firearms certificate is restricted (6,6)

Down

- 1** A fat viper ruins Universal Trench shooting (4-4)
2 Carry some foreign items that cause primers to take effect (6)
3 They go out on a limb in the gunmaking industry (4)
4 Go undercover at such a shooting range — it's not for outsiders (6)
6 Sort of snorted at rats and the like (7)
7 Tree liquid revealed by a gullible fool (3)
11 A secure storage solution for the shooter who's not at risk (3,4)
12 See 11 across
14 After an excursion, do return the gun stand (6)
15 He sees Alice go topless when target shooting! (6)
17 The football club initially holds a small firearms certificate (3)
18 Acts strangely with wild bird predators (4)

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To enter, email the solution with the crossword number in the subject line and give your name, address and mystery word answer to:
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 Each monthly prize will be despatched as soon as possible.

Competition: 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 19 February 2025 and correct answers will be added to our monthly prize draw. All usual conditions apply. The February winner will appear in the 12 March issue. **January winner:** Russell Coleman, Norfolk



Solution 1702/29 Jan 2025

Across: 4. Aims 6. Overtravel 8. Brakes 9. Lairds 10. Agent 11. Release 14. Estates 16. Throw 19. Barrel 21. Plants 22. Sighthound 23. Tint

Down: 1. Averages 2. Broken 3. Brass 4. Alpine 5. Maid 7. Velvet 12. Shooting 13. Redleg 15. Arrest 17. Head-on 18. Spots 20. Anti

★ **PRIZE WORD: MIGRANT**

AR-15 semi-auto in .223?

◆ RIFLES

Q I want to buy a semi-automatic .223 AR-15-style rifle, but I can't seem to find anything except .22LR versions. Can you recommend a brand or shop that stocks them?

A The reason for this is that semi-auto centrefire rifles are banned in the UK for general firearms certificate

holders. You can legally purchase AR-15 versions in centrefire calibres that have been modified or purpose-built to fire shots singly and need to be manually cocked between each shot.

I have a semi-auto .22LR AR-15-style rifle. It's great fun to shoot. If you want an AR-15, you either have to have a semi-auto .22LR or you will have to settle for a straight-pull version if you want a centrefire calibre. **MR**

Soil analysis: worth the cost?

◆ ON YOUR SHOOT

Q I have been advised to get soil analysed from our covercrop sites, but this is going to add cost. Do you think it is worthwhile?

A Soil analysis is well worth the cost. Properly done, it will tell you about far more than the basic nitrogen, phosphate and potash levels. While it is easy to add these with a simple granular

fertilizer, many of the micro nutrients, such as sulphur, magnesium and manganese, are not normally present, but these can be in short supply and compromise plant health and growth.

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

TO CATCH A FISH

Black Magic Spider

Some days in January and February are so cold that rod rings are icing up. In contrast, other days can be relatively mild, with fish rising.

Spider patterns will certainly pull fish on more inclement days and this variant is excellent for imitating small terrestrials, especially if there are trees over the water. The trout see these as basic food. Perhaps it suggests a caddis, stonefly or even a midge. Who knows, but they will frequently work well and it's advisable to have a range of sizes in your box to try if the conditions are right.



In the spotlight

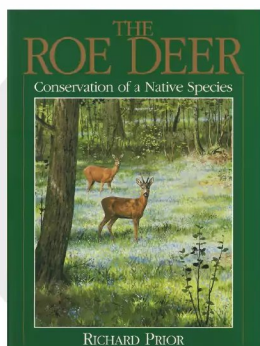
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The Shooting Times Almanac

15 FEBRUARY 2025

FEBRUARY MOON PHASE



Snow Moon, 12 February

The full moon in February is named after the snow on the ground in the northern hemisphere. Some Native American peoples named it the Hunger Moon due

to the scarcity of food and hard hunting conditions during midwinter. The other name, Storm Moon, perhaps better suits the windy conditions in the UK.

Pigeon shooter's diary

A fast, furious and very busy season has come to an end and at last I can have a break from travelling the country and instructing in the field. The final outing, however, was a perfect friends and family day to finish. All was going well until Ireland decided to ruin the party as England narrowly missed out on the opening weekend of the Six Nations.

I was looking forward to shooting the following day and was hopeful of an afternoon in a local friend's woods. The

initial plan was well thought out, though I wasn't shooting as my shoulder is still not cleared for action. Unfortunately, the plan was less successfully executed, mainly due to the previous evening's antics, which resulted in most of us leaning against trees feeling sorry for ourselves.

As I write, I'm waiting for my first shooting for a long time. I have my fingers crossed that, in the next couple of weeks, I have a few good outings, the weather plays ball and England can get a couple of wins under their belt. **Tom Payne**

EDITOR'S PICKS: RIFLE BIPODS



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**NorneHunt
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**Magpul MOE
bipod**

RRP £99
edgarbrothers.com

THE WEEK IN NUMBERS

25 million
pounds

The Duchess of Roxburghe officially opened the new salmon-fishing season on the River Tweed in Kelso by blessing it with a dram of whisky on 1 February. Pipers also led a procession to the riverbank, marking the start of the two days of events to celebrate the Tweed's best salmon season in a decade. Organisers say the Tweed contributes around £25m to the local economy and creates jobs for around 500 people.

£24,000

Schöffel Country has raised £24,226 for the GWCT following its autumn giveback campaign. The brand pledged to donate 5% of all website sales to the GWCT between 21 October and 3 November 2024. Schöffel says the initiative was born out of a desire to do something meaningful that would both raise awareness for and support a charity that is making a real difference.

£1

As part of a new partnership, Bramleys Restaurant has committed to donating £1 to the British Deer

Society (BDS) for every venison dish sold. All venison served at Bramleys is sourced from within a 30-mile radius of the Nottingham Venues Orchard Hotel. The BDS says the partnership will "ensure low food miles and a direct connection to local land and wildlife management".

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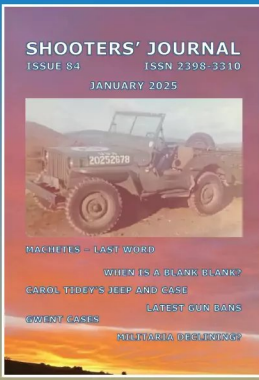
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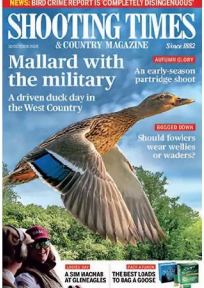
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Sharpshooter



Leaving culled deer to rot is anathema to many but with culls necessary and prices for venison plunging, it may be time to think the unthinkable

Will it ever become acceptable to leave the carcasses of culled deer to rot? I think I can detect a gradual but inexorable move in this direction. The reasons are more practical than ideological. Are deer pests, or sporting quarry, or human food? In truth, they may be all three, in varying degrees, according to circumstances. But the balance between these three elements may be changing.

In a characteristically insightful piece, the estimable David Whitby (*Action needs be taken, and fast*, 22 January) gave some startling figures that show how the price of venison has plummeted in real terms over time. He emphasised the need to shoot

all, or declining to collect beasts — charging to do so — or refusing to take any stags. They are increasingly picknickety about those deer they do accept. All this, with prices at rock bottom, has an impact on the economics of deer management.

The recent legislative moves in Scotland relating to male deer are a purely political distraction. While we need to shoot more female deer, there are certain barriers.

I am a proponent of stalking red deer hinds. I love being out on the hills and forests in winter. It is, arguably, better value than chasing stags. You generally get to do a lot more stalking and shooting. I am lucky enough to have shot my fair share of stags and I don't have any room for more

is narrow-sighted, if understandable. We need more people shooting deer; we cannot afford a closed shop.

Leaving the carcasses of culled deer out in the field has been anathema to many of us. When the John Muir Trust left 86 stags to rot at Knoydart in 2015, there was an outcry from keepers and walkers alike. But now attitudes are beginning to shift. What were seen as mere excuses — the provision of eagle food, the return of nutrients to the land — no longer seem quite so silly.

The idea of leaving meat that is fit for human consumption offends many people who care about deer. It smacks of treating an iconic animal as a mere pest. Yet the effort and costs of extracting the carcasses of female deer from almost inaccessible places are forcing us to think the unthinkable. If we need to shoot more deer but no one wants the meat, what alternatives do we have?

Perhaps we need to be more ready to harvest and pack out the best portion of carcasses and leave the rest. I am not sure whether this might count as processing. But what does seem clear is that we cannot simply go on as we have in the past. 🐾

“If we need to shoot deer but no one wants the meat, what alternatives do we have?”

more female deer and I think he is right. But this leads to the next conundrum: what should we do with all the carcasses?

The market for wild venison is, frankly, dismal. This past season, I have heard stories of dealers refusing to take deer at

wall-hangers. For many other recreational stalkers, however, the lack of a chance of a trophy is off-putting.

Quite a few professional stalkers prefer to get the hind or doe cull done without the encumbrance of paying guests. I think this

DOG BY KEITH REYNOLDS



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