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BEN RANDALL

Shooting and gundogs have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. In many ways, they have shaped not only my career, but the person I have become. I have been extremely fortunate to build a life around dogs, fieldsports and the countryside, but I have never taken that for granted. Every opportunity I have had has come from years of hard work, from people who have supported me along the way, and from a deep respect for the traditions and responsibilities that come with our sport.

For me, the gundog has always sat at the heart of it all. Long before the judging appointments, the competition wins, the articles, the training days or the videos, there was simply a young lad with a dog, trying to understand how to get the best out of it. In truth, that is still the part I love most. A good gundog teaches you patience, timing, discipline and humility. They expose your mistakes very quickly, but they also reward fairness, consistency and feel in a way very few things in life can.

Whether you are standing on a peg, walking behind a spaniel, picking-up at the end of a long day, or quietly training a young dog in a field on your own, the relationship between handler and dog is what draws so many of us back. It is not just about performance. It is about trust, partnership and understanding. That connection is one of the most powerful parts of our world, and I believe it has never been more important.

We all know that fieldsports face challenges. There is more scrutiny than ever before, and there are many people outside our community who either do not understand what we do, have no strong opinion, or only see a very small part of the picture. We cannot ignore that. The future of shooting will not be protected by being defensive or by assuming people should simply understand us. It



PHOTOGRAPH: SARAH FARNSWORTH

will be protected by standards, education, responsibility and by showing the very best of what our community represents.

That is where I believe gundogs have such an important role to play. A well-trained dog can open a conversation in a way that shooting alone sometimes cannot. People may have mixed views on fieldsports, but most people can recognise the bond between a handler and a dog. They can admire the control, the kindness, the teamwork and the purpose. A gundog gives people a way into our world that feels honest, natural and relatable.

Over the years, I have trained dogs and worked with people from all walks of life, from complete beginners to experienced shots. Again and again, I have seen how a dog can change someone's understanding. A dog encourages people to learn properly. It teaches them to slow down, to read the countryside, to respect game, to think about timing, and to appreciate the work that goes on long before

and long after a shoot day. In that sense, gundogs are not just part of fieldsports. They are one of the strongest foundations beneath it.

As a community, we should be proud of what we do, but we must also be thoughtful about how we represent it. We have a responsibility to welcome new people in, to support the next generation, to maintain high standards and to show that shooting is rooted in conservation, respect, discipline and community. If we can do that, then I believe there is still a very positive future ahead.

That is the tone I hope this issue reflects: pride without arrogance, tradition without being stuck in the past, and a genuine belief that our dogs, our countryside and our conduct can help secure the future of the sport we all care so deeply about. ■

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading 'Ben Randall'.

Ben Randall

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SPORTING Gun

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£40,000 ON THE LINE

Could one competition finally answer shooting's most debated question: who is the best all-round clay shot?

Eaton Hall set out to do exactly that with TopGun, an ambitious new event set over nine days in June, with the finals day comprising English Sporting, Skeet, Olympic Trap and Compak to qualify for a unique Super Final with a handicap format designed to level the playing field between classes. The reward was Britain's largest-ever clay shooting prize fund, with £400,000 up for grabs and a staggering additional £40,000 cheque awaiting the overall champion.

More than 1,000 competitors descended on the

Derbyshire ground for the inaugural event, which attracted everyone from club shooters to world champions. After nine days of competition, it all came down to one final pair. Hungarian clay shooting star Tamás Jéri held his nerve to claim the title and £45,000 in prize money, while Emma Stacy produced one of the performances of the weekend, pushing the eventual champion to the very last targets in front of hundreds of spectators and thousands watching online.

Pictured: The final sim pair that secured Tamás Jéri's historic TopGun victory and Britain's biggest-ever cash prize in clay shooting.

[Read the full report on page 74.](#)





GAMEBIRD WELFARE

REVIEW CLEARS PHEASANT RELEASING OF HARMING INSECTS

A scientific review commissioned by Natural England has found no evidence that releasing pheasants reduces insect numbers across the wider countryside, handing shoots fresh evidence as gamebird releasing comes under regulatory pressure.

A scientific review commissioned by Natural England and carried out by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) has concluded that pheasant releasing has no significant effect on insect populations in the wider countryside, a finding shoots will welcome as releasing comes under growing regulatory pressure.

The review, published on 15 June, found that any negative effects on invertebrates were confined to the places where released birds gather in the greatest numbers, such as inside release pens and around feeders, and that well-managed releasing kept even those local impacts to a minimum.

Its author, GWCT senior scientist Dr Rufus Sage, said the evidence

contradicted one of the most common criticisms of gamebird shooting. "Pheasant releasing is often blamed for causing insect declines, but we have found no evidence for this," he said. "The studies showed that, even where up to 20 birds per hectare were present across large areas, there was no detectable effect on invertebrate abundance, species richness or diversity."

One study drawn on by the review sampled nearly 40,000 invertebrates, representing 308 species, across six grassland Sites of Special Scientific Interest of between 50 and 200 hectares. A second compared 17 paired woodlands, with and without release pens, using pitfall trapping, vegetation surveys and pheasant counts before and after release.

The review also examined what released pheasants eat, finding that adult birds had diets dominated by plants, with invertebrates typically making up less than 3 per cent of their food on arable farmland. The review

noted that bird numbers on the ground fell to around 1 per hectare or less in spring and summer, when most insects emerge, limiting pressure at the time of year that matters most for invertebrates. The report concluded that pheasants were accidental rather than deliberate predators of invertebrates.

Where bird densities are higher in late summer and autumn, the review said that following GWCT guidance on spreading feeders and capping the number of birds per hectare of release pen could reduce any risk further, pointing to a likelihood of biodiversity net gain at a landscape scale.

The findings come at a difficult moment for releasing in England. Natural England has confirmed further restrictions on releasing pheasants and red-legged partridges on or close to Special Protection Areas ahead of the 2026 season, while BASC has been granted permission for a judicial review of the licensing regime.

To read the review in full, visit: gwct.org.uk.

PHOTOGRAPH: MIKE DABELL



EVENTS

KEEPERS TURN OUT IN FORCE FOR GOLDEN GROUSE 2026

The National Gamekeepers' Organisation's annual Golden Grouse competition returned to Thimbleby Shooting Ground, North Yorkshire, on 8 June, drawing 115 competitors to test their eye, nerve and patience on a challenging 100-bird sporting layout at one of the country's finest grounds.

In the headline Golden Grouse category, reserved for grouse keepers and sponsored by country footwear brand Treksta UK, Daniel Marwood took top honours, ahead of Jack Robinson – who also won the

Juniors – and Iain Conn. Anthony Clark won the Supporter category, Dudley Bell the Veteran, Jo Smith the Ladies and Roger Ayton the Side-by-Side, while Les Rushworth secured the Pool Shoot.

This year also introduced the Davis & Bowring four-man Team Flush, which began as a bit of fun but became a serious matter of estate pride. Team Rosedale claimed the inaugural title, with Colsterdale second and the Anthill Mob third.

Beyond the scores, the day proved again that the Golden Grouse is among



gamekeeping's great social occasions, uniting keepers, supporters and friends. For full results, visit the NGO's website via nationalgamekeepers.org.uk.

MP SHOWN HOW SHOOT INCOME FUNDS CURLEW RECOVERY

A lowland partridge shoot is paying for the upland habitat work behind a rise in breeding curlew in mid Wales, BASC Wales has shown a local MP.

David Chadwick, MP for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe, visited the estate to see how income from sustainable shooting funds predator control, heather management and habitat restoration for one of the UK's most threatened birds. The work, carried out in partnership with the local farming community, has helped lift breeding curlew to double-figure nest numbers across the estate.

The curlew is on the UK red list of birds of conservation concern and is regarded as one of the country's most threatened breeding birds, so any sustained local increase in nesting is significant. Much of the estate is upland



habitat, where year-round management aims to create the conditions wading birds and other wildlife need to thrive.

BASC Wales engagement manager David Boden said: "This estate is a fantastic example of how sustainable shooting can help fund habitat management and

species recovery projects that produce measurable results. The increase in curlew nesting activity is a testament to the dedication of those involved."

The visit comes as the shooting community in Wales presses its case with politicians over the management tools used in the uplands.

AWARDS

GWCT AND SCHÖFFEL REVEAL 2026 COUNTRYSIDE AWARDS FINALISTS

The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) and country clothing brand Schöffel Country have named 28 finalists for the 2026 Schöffel Countryside Awards, the conservation prize the two run in partnership.

Now in its second year, following a successful inaugural event in 2025, the awards recognise private land managers, farms and partnerships whose work in wildlife management is improving the health of the British countryside. Organisers describe the aim as celebrating working conservation: practical, on-the-ground action that proves wildlife recovery and food production can go hand in hand.

More than 70 nominations were received, from which finalists were shortlisted across six categories. They span individuals, farms and estates from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, competing for the Nature-Friendly Farm/Estate, Innovation in Conservation, Farm-Environment Partnership, Wetland and Watercourse Conservation, Rising Star and Working Conservationist awards.

Among those shortlisted is the Swaledale and Wensleydale Environmental Farmers group in the Farm-Environment Partnership category.

Megan Lock, judge and senior farm environment adviser for the GWCT, said she was looking forward to meeting finalists nominated for delivering benefits for wildlife on private land. She praised the rising stars among them and the work done to improve wetlands and watercourses, adding that much of it goes under the radar.

The judging panel has been strengthened by two winners from 2025: Rupert Brewer, game and wildlife manager at the Bisterne estate, who took the Working Conservationist and Wetland and Watercourse categories, and Tom Hilder, of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, who won Rising Star. They are joined by Paul Coulson, Alison Baker and Richard Negus.

Judges, drawn from GWCT ecologists, advisers and external experts, will visit each finalist to see their conservation work before casting votes later this year. The winners will be announced at a ceremony hosted by Coutts Landed Estates in London in November.



PRESSURE BUILDS FOR TOUGHER CATAPULT LAW



Pressure is building on ministers to control catapults after a Home Office roundtable heard mounting evidence of misuse against people, property and wildlife. Chaired on 9 June by Policing Minister Sarah Jones, it heard one Kent constituency recorded 105 incidents in 12 months, and clinical experts described teenagers left with serious eye injuries. A "legitimate purpose" test, modelled on knife law, was discussed. The Government says there are "no current plans" to change legislation.

SUFFOLK CLAY SHOOTING MOURNS DENNIS MEEKINGS

Clay shooters in Suffolk are mourning Dennis Meekings, a stalwart of the CPSA, who died unexpectedly aged 72, on 8 June. A huge supporter of the sport, Dennis refereed at grounds and clubs across Suffolk over many years of dedicated involvement, and served on the county committee as its contact for Allround and Sportrap. Beyond the county, he was a long-standing fixture at Clacton Gun Club and refereed at major championships locally and further afield. Always with a smile and always early, he was a reliable, professional presence who will be greatly missed by many.



From the Somerset Levels to championship field trials, luxury kennels and some of the country's best-known gundog training platforms, **Ben Randall** has built a career around dogs, shooting and the countryside. He shares the experiences, philosophies and lessons that have shaped his approach to training, fieldsports and producing the ultimate all-round working dog

PHOTOGRAPHY: SARAH FARNSWORTH



WHO IS BEN RANDALL?

First and foremost, I am a husband, a father, a son, and somebody who has been very lucky to build a life around dogs, shooting and the countryside. Professionally, I am a gundog trainer, a field trial judge, a kennel owner, an author,

and someone who has spent most of his life trying to understand dogs better. But away from all the titles, I am still just the same person who loves watching a good dog work, being outside, and seeing people get more enjoyment from their dogs.

TELL US ABOUT HOW YOU GOT INTO GUNDOG TRAINING.

My first real memories of gundogs come from the Somerset Levels, wildfowling with my father, Keith Randall, and our labrador, Tessa. She was a pet dog in the house, but to watch her out on the marshes





retrieving ducks and geese was something that completely captured me. I was hooked by the whole thing: the atmosphere, the birds, the dog work, and the partnership between man and dog. I did not know then where it would lead, but I knew I wanted to understand how to train dogs to that level.

WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT YOUR FIRST FIELD TRIAL WIN?

My first field trial win was with a little springer spaniel bitch called Mollie.

She was quite a white bitch, very talented, and I often look back now and think how differently I would train her today compared with how I trained then. The trial was down in Cornwall, and she had a very good first run in sugar beet with a couple of nice retrieves. In her second run, we had five birds shot on the ground. She picked the first two quickly, then I hunted her on again, another three got up and all three were shot. The judge was not quite sure what to do, and I remember saying, probably with a bit more youthful confidence

than I would now, "I'll pick them all." She did exactly that, and we ended up winning on ice, with no run-off. It made the three-and-a-half-hour drive home feel a lot shorter.

Of course, it does not always go like that. I have had trials where everything that could go wrong did go wrong, and those days teach you just as much as the good ones. But that first win gave me belief. It opened doors, gave people confidence in me, and made me feel that maybe I could genuinely make something of this.





WHAT DO YOU REGARD AS YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT?

Away from dogs, my greatest achievement is my wife and my two boys. From a dog perspective, it has to be Fatty, my cocker spaniel bitch. Winning the Cocker Championship with her in 2011 was truly amazing, but to go back and win it again in 2012, back-to-back, is something that will live with me forever. Moments like that do not come easily, and they do not come often.

DO YOU STILL COMPETE?

Yes, I still compete with both springers and cockers. I qualified for the Cocker Championship last year, although unfortunately I was judging, so I could not compete. Judging is now a big part of my life. I judge throughout the UK and across Europe, from novice and open stakes through to national and European championships, as well as the British Championship. I still love competing, but I also really enjoy watching dogs and handlers develop from the judging side.

TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR BUSINESSES TODAY.

I have been running kennels full-time for around 20 years, and at Ledbury Lodge Kennels

we run a luxury boarding kennel where we regularly have between 30 and 50 dogs a day. They come in all shapes, sizes, breeds, temperaments and backgrounds, ➤





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and that experience has been invaluable. If you imagine seeing that number of dogs, day after day, year after year, it gives you a huge education in behaviour.

That has made me a much better trainer, not only with pet dogs but also with working dogs and gundogs. We also train gundogs professionally, run training days, produce online training through the *BG Gundog App*, and I have written my first book. My second book is now with the designers and will hopefully be available later this year. I have been lucky enough to train dogs for people from all walks of life, including some very well-known names, but the principles are always the same: the dog in front of you matters more than the name attached to it.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR INTERESTS IN OTHER COUNTRY SPORTS.

Shooting has always been a big part of my life, mainly because of the dogs. Throughout the season I am shooting over my own dogs or clients' dogs three or four times a week, whether that is rabbit, hare, woodcock, snipe, pheasant, partridge or duck. I also enjoy driven shooting, especially high driven birds. As a sportsman and a former rugby player, I love the test of hand-eye coordination, timing and pressure.

I also love the smaller local days. A 50-bird day with good friends, good dogs, good humour and a bit of mickey-taking is often as enjoyable as anything. The camaraderie is a huge part of it.

WHAT'S YOUR GREATEST CLAY SHOOTING ACHIEVEMENT?

There are not many, trust me. I enjoy clay shooting, but I have never allowed myself to get addicted to it, because I know what I am like. If I do something, I want to do it properly, and that would mean being on the clay ground five days a week, which I simply have not had time for with family, work and rugby commitments.

That said, I used to shoot the odd charity shoot where Michael Pinker coached me. There was one stand linked to a local pub, the Dog and Duck, where if you hit them all you won a free meal and a bottle of red wine. Every year Michael would remind me how nice the meal was and how good the wine would taste,



and every year I would miss one. Then one day I managed to blank it all out, hit 10 out of 10, and finally won my meal and bottle of house red. That may not make the record books, but it made me very happy.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU STALK, AND WHAT DO YOU MOST ENJOY ABOUT IT?

Stalking has been part of my life for around 25 years, but in the last five to 10 years it has become a much bigger passion and now also a business with my son, Jack. We stalk regularly on our own ground, which is a wonderful piece of woodland in Herefordshire, with roe, muntjac and a few fallow. Over the last five years, we have managed it carefully, and the quality of the deer has improved hugely.

I enjoy the whole process. It is quiet, disciplined and honest. You have to read the wind, the ground, the animals and yourself. Everything matters. We also now take clients to South Africa, usually twice a year, with a trusted family outfitter we have become very close to. Everything is field-to-fork, whether for ourselves, the workers or the local community. That is very important to me.

TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR SHOOT.

The shoot I have taken on is also our stalking ground. It is around 500 acres of woodland in Herefordshire, very undulating, with steep valleys, bracken, natural cover and some really special corners. I have tried to make it as much of a wild bird shoot as possible by releasing ex-layers and hand-reared birds, while doing as much predator control as we can.

We have also put ducks down on one of the larger ponds and restored a couple of old woodland ponds. Some of the evening light deep in those woods is remarkable. I do not use it as a driven shoot. It is more for walked-up days with my father, Jack, Joe and the occasional client. It is a very special place.

WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE TIPS FOR PEOPLE CONSIDERING GETTING A GUNDOG TO TAKE ON THE PEG?

First, do not buy the fashionable dog; buy the dog that suits your life. If you shoot 10 days a year and need a family companion for the

rest of the time, a labrador may be far more suitable than a very hot cocker. Secondly, train the basics properly before worrying about the exciting stuff. Sit, stay, recall, heel and delivery are everything. Thirdly, be honest about how much time you have. The right dog in the wrong home is often where the problems start.

WHAT IS YOUR ADVICE FOR ANYONE CONSIDERING A CAREER IN GUNDOGS?

Learn from people who have genuinely achieved what you want to achieve. Not just the loudest people online, but the people who have done it, proved it and lived it. Watch, listen, ask questions and keep your ego under control. Dogs will humble you very quickly if you think you know everything.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE TAKING THEIR FIRST STEPS INTO FIELD TRIALLING?

Join your local clubs, offer to steward, carry game and watch as many trials as possible. Watch the judges, watch the good dogs, and just as importantly, watch the dogs that go wrong. Then be honest with yourself. Is your dog ready? Are you ready? Field trialling is not easy, but if you approach it with the right attitude, it will teach you a huge amount.

WHAT'S AN AGA DOG?

The Aga Dog is my idea of the ultimate family shooting dog. It is the dog that can lie by the Aga 365 days a year, be kind and





Ben's first book has seen copies sold all around the world

sensible around mum, dad, children, grandparents or anyone else in the house, but when the family gets invited shooting, that same dog can go along, sit quietly on the peg, pick a few retrieves and behave beautifully. To me, that is the complete dog.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR BOOKS.

My first book *How to Train Your Gundog* was published two years ago and has now sold all over the world. I often have people in Europe bring copies along for me to sign, which is very humbling. I waited more than two decades before writing it because I wanted to achieve at the highest level first, and I wanted to know my methods worked not just for me, but for other people too. Through the BG Gundog App, which I co-founded with Kristian Forsberg, those techniques are now helping thousands of people around the world. My second book is now nearly complete and should be out later this year. It is different from the first, and I am very excited about it.

WHO ARE YOUR SPORTING IDOLS?

That is easy. My father and my Uncle Nick. There are many people in the shooting world I respect hugely, but those two shaped me more than anyone.

My father encouraged me to follow my dream and allowed me to have my first dog. My Uncle Nick

also had a huge influence. I stayed with him during holidays and learnt so much from him. He was a natural animal man, whether with horses or dogs, and many of the things I learnt from him have stayed with me to this day.

WHAT IS THE MOST DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENT TO WORK A DOG?

A maize crop is one of the hardest. It is drilled in straight lines, pheasants run the drill lines in straight lines, and your dog wants to do exactly the same. My simple view is that sometimes you are better off using a stick and asking your dog to walk at heel.

WHAT BRANDS DO YOU WORK WITH?

I have people and companies I work closely with, collaborate with, or act as an ambassador for. These include Animal Transit Boxes, Designer Kennels and Sporting Saint, among others. I have also worked closely with brands such as Le Chateau and Schöffel on photo shoots and clothing promotion.

WHAT ARE THE FIVE MOST ESSENTIAL ITEMS FOR A GUNDOG HANDLER?

A whistle, a lead, water, a bowl and a game bag. I also always like to have a tick remover and an antihistamine tablet with me, too, because the simple things are often the things you need most.

WHO WOULD BE IN YOUR DREAM TEAM OF GUNS, AND WHICH DOGS WOULD YOU BRING?

That is quite an emotional one. First would be my father, and then my Uncle Nick. I would also have Derek Lloyd, one of my closest friends, who sadly passed away about 10 years ago. He was there when I won the Championships with Fatty, and we became very close through dogs and training. I would also include Luke Thompson from Westhide, who I have shot with regularly over the last five years, and my good friend Charles Granlund, who is always good company on a shoot day.

As for the dogs, Fatty would have to be there. I would also have Wigeon, my black labrador, who many people will remember, and Nell, another black labrador of mine who was a real character and a very special dog to me. Those are the dogs that stay with me.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR LIFE OUTSIDE COUNTRY SPORTS.

There is not much life outside dogs, if I am honest. I am a proud rugby dad though, and probably a bit of a rugby geek. Both my sons, Jack and Joe, have played a huge amount of rugby, and I can hand on heart say I have hardly missed a game. I was also their head coach at prep school for seven years, which was a very special time. In the last couple of years, since turning 50, health and fitness have also become a big part of my life.

TELL OUR READERS SOMETHING PEOPLE WOULD BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT YOU.

People might be surprised to know that for all the confidence people sometimes see in me, I am incredibly hard on myself. I analyse everything: dogs, training, shooting, sport, business, fitness and probably far too much else. I have studied psychology and performance for years, not because I think I have all the answers, but because I know how much the mind affects everything we do. Whether it is a dog trial, a shoot day, a rugby match or life in general, I have always been fascinated by why some people cope under pressure and others do not. That probably says a lot about me, for better or worse. ■



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GUEST EDITOR'S GUN

Ben Randall explains why lightweight handling, practicality and reliability are the qualities that matter most when selecting guns for a life spent working dogs in the field



PHOTOGRAPH: SARAH FARNSWORTH

Some guns stay with you forever, not because of what they cost or how prestigious they are, but because of the memories attached to them. For Ben Randall, that gun is still sitting in his cabinet today.

"My first ever gun was, and still is, a folding hammer-action .410," he says. "I have owned a lot of guns since then, but that little .410 will always be special to me. I remember shooting my first woodcock with it as clearly as if it happened yesterday. It was just before dusk and Grouse, my young black-and-white springer spaniel, flushed the bird out of a hedge towards the field. I shot it about 20 yards out and Grouse went straight out and retrieved it perfectly back to hand. I will never forget it."

After the .410 came a short-stocked 12-bore over-and-under that Ben used for walked-up shooting and duck flighting during those early years. "It had 28-inch barrels and was just a cheap Spanish gun, but it did exactly what I needed it to do," he explains. "It was the sort of gun you could carry all day without thinking about it. Those early guns were practical, honest tools."

As his career evolved, so too did his choice of guns, although

one thing has remained constant throughout: a preference for lightweight, responsive guns that work naturally around dogs. Given that so much of his shooting revolves around spaniels, labradors and young dogs in training, these characteristics have always mattered more than fashion. "When you are walking behind spaniels, handling labradors, watching young dogs and trying to read the ground in front of you, you do not want a gun that feels heavy or slow."

Today, Ben's everyday game gun is a Beretta Ultralight over-and-under, a gun that suits walked-up days, rough shooting, training days and some driven days. "It has lovely wood, handles beautifully and is lighter than some 20-bores I've used over the years," he says. "My usual set-up is quarter and half choke because it gives me a nice balance for mixed shooting."

Not every gun in Ben's cabinet is chosen purely for practicality though. One of his most treasured guns is an AYA No.3 20-bore side-by-side originally bought for his father's 60th birthday and is now shared between them. "It has stunning exhibition-grade wood and is an absolutely beautiful gun," he says. "It is very smooth to shoot, and there is something very special about using a

gun that has that family connection."

Ben is particular about cartridges and choke combinations, especially on game days where clean killing matters above all else. For most mixed driven days, he favours Hull High Pheasant cartridges in either No.5 or No.6 shot. "I have always found them to be a smooth, clean cartridge to shoot and they seem to hold their pattern extremely well," he says. "A lot of birds, especially when shooting over dogs or on walked-up days, are going away from you, so the vitals are presented differently and they can be deceptively difficult to kill cleanly." For higher pheasants, the set-up changes accordingly, with tighter chokes and Hull High Pheasant Extreme cartridges coming into their own.

More recently, Ben has been working with GMK and testing a French-made Chapuis shotgun, with plans for something rather more personal in the future. "It's a very exciting development for me," he says. "I'm hoping to have a completely bespoke gun built with some very personal engraving. I can't say too much more at this stage, but watch this space."

While shotguns remain central to his sporting life, rifles have become increasingly important over the last decade. His current stalking rifle is a Blaser R8 in .270, topped with a Swarovski dS scope.

"I've always loved the .270 calibre," he says. "It's flat-shooting, hard-hitting and has been trusted by riflemen for decades. I use it here in the UK on all our deer species, and this set up was used extensively in South Africa on plains game recently, working perfectly."

Despite the quality of the equipment he now owns, Ben's overall philosophy around guns remains refreshingly straightforward. "For me, whether it's a shotgun or a rifle, the important thing is always the same," he says. "It has to suit the job, give you confidence and allow you to do things properly. The kit matters, but it should never become more important than judgement, fieldcraft and respect for the quarry." ■

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HIDES & HEATWAVES

As record temperatures hit Britain, **Geoff Garrod** finds pigeons still feeding hard on rape crops and enjoys some excellent sport from the shade of a hedgerow

PHOTOGRAPHY **RICHARD FAULKES**

The weather is up to its unpredictable tricks again. Since mid-April, we've only had 6cm of rain here and the crops are

beginning to struggle. The rape is well up and away, but the forming seed pods are looking small and very dry for this time of year. The good news is that my maize for the cover crops

is doing well... mainly because it's still sitting in bags in the farm shed.

To top it all off, a heatwave has hit most of Britain and the hottest spring day on record has now been set for May. Guess what I was doing on this record-breaking day? You guessed it – I went out decoying. They do say 'mad dogs and Englishmen', after all.

I knew it was going to be a scorcher and went prepared. I returned to the same field of rape



still feeding there and, secondly, because I knew I could comfortably set my hide in the shade of the hawthorn hedge, exactly as I had done previously.

There was plenty of room to place the decoys along the strip of damaged crop running beside the hedge. Being in the shade was absolutely essential on this particular day and I planned to shoot from around 1pm onwards, once the sun had moved behind the hedge. What little wind there was blew straight up the hedgerow from my right and it was very welcome indeed.

I also took plenty to drink with me. I nearly always take a dog when I go decoying, but I decided to leave Drake at home this time. In that sort of heat, it simply wouldn't have been fair on him, no matter how much water I took. If you do have to take a dog out in hot conditions though, try to work them as little as possible and only in short bursts. Ideally, keep retrieving to a minimum until the day cools down. Running through standing crops is hard work for dogs even in cooler weather.

When I drove down the farm track to the field, I stopped to watch for movement as usual. I disturbed a few pigeons as I approached, but there didn't seem to be much activity on the bare patches where I intended to set up. I started wondering whether the pigeons were simply too hot and bothered to feed in the midday sun and had gone back into the woods for shade.

I drove a little further along the track towards a small stand of trees at the top of the hill. As I came into view, about 30 pigeons lifted and scattered in all directions, which immediately gave me hope for the afternoon ahead. Although there wasn't much happening at that particular moment, I suspected the pigeons would begin feeding properly once the afternoon wore on.

I didn't have any dead birds with me for decoys, so I used my full-bodied plastic decoys instead, placing them slightly upwind of the hide in a loose line along the damaged crop. No V-shapes or U-shapes – just copying the way I'd actually seen the pigeons feeding and leaving natural gaps where incoming birds could land amongst the pattern.

Some decoys were placed directly on the ground while four of the 10 were mounted on sticks to lift them above the crop. They would be highly visible whichever direction the pigeons approached from.

I knew there would be two main flightlines into the field. One would come from the roosting wood behind me and down the hill to my right, while the second line would come from the nearby village in front and slightly to my right. Either line would have no trouble seeing the pattern and, if all went to plan, the pigeons would turn into the wind and approach the decoys across the front of the hide. ➤

Evidence of crop damage

that I wrote about in my last article. The pigeons were still feeding there because there were few other crops available locally. I was hoping a field of legume summer mix would soon come into its own, but it still hadn't been drilled. It was the huge blocks of rape that were still sustaining the pigeons.

It was never going to be a huge bag day, but with my day-old chicks arriving in a couple of weeks and my poults following shortly after, I wanted to make the most of any opportunity that came my way.

There are a couple of obvious things to say about shooting during a heatwave. Quite simply, you have to plan ahead for the conditions. I chose to revisit this particular field for two reasons. Firstly, because the pigeons were



A shady spot was vital for an afternoon in hot conditions



I had to level the ground slightly to give myself a decent shooting position and I was very glad I'd brought the spade with me because it really helped getting the hide poles into the sun-baked ground.

Once everything was ready, I sat down, adjusted the hide poles to the correct height and waited to see what would develop.

It was about half an hour before I even saw a pigeon in the air. It

came from the direction of the village and passed straight by out of range without even glancing at the decoys. It didn't look particularly promising.

The wind freshened slightly though and that certainly helped cool me





down. I'm guessing it encouraged the pigeons to move too. About 20 minutes later, another pigeon came low across the field on exactly the same line as the first. This time though, the bird swung neatly into

the wind, headed directly for the decoys and presented me with a very straightforward shot. It couldn't have decoyed any better.

That slight drop in temperature – and it really was only slight – seemed

to encourage the pigeons back out to feed and suddenly they were decoying exactly as you would hope for.

Some birds still passed by on their way elsewhere, but enough





were now coming within range to provide excellent sport. There were a few groups of five or six birds that committed to the pattern, but most arrived as singles and pairs. The large winter flocks had now completely broken up and that is always great to see if you enjoy proper decoying.

I had steady shooting once the pigeons finished what was clearly their midday siesta. Eventually though, the heat simply got the better of me and I decided enough was enough.

I'd spent around three hours in the hide, although the first hour had been virtually a write-off. I ended up picking just over 30 pigeons from either the bare patches or the standing rape, which thankfully wasn't too dense at that stage.

I certainly didn't need Drake with me that day and I'm glad I left him at home. He would have roasted in that heat with his black coat, and the picking-up was straightforward anyway. As predicted, it wasn't a huge bag, but it was enough to keep the farm happy and I thoroughly enjoyed watching the pigeons decoy so confidently.

Looking ahead, it's difficult to predict what will happen next unless we get some steady rainfall. The corn is already beginning to form heads, but the crop is only around 8in tall. It certainly shouldn't be heading this early. I've even seen patches beginning to turn already, so there is every possibility of an early harvest this year. If conditions continue as they are, it could even begin by the middle of June.

Barley looks like the next crop likely to need protecting from pigeons. It would probably take some very serious storms to flatten patches this year because the stems are so short, so I'll have to look carefully for thinner areas where the crop hasn't taken properly. Otherwise, we'll be concentrating around field edges and birds feeding along the tramlines.

It could become quite tricky if the pigeons spread themselves out and there are no obvious feeding hotspots to focus on. Still, we all enjoy a challenge and one thing is certain – the pigeons will always be feeding somewhere.

I'll just have to make time for the reconnaissance and get another day or two in the hide again soon. ■

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BROWNING STEFAN SHIRT
Classic hunting shirt designed for those who appreciate timeless outdoor apparel. Tailored with a focus on simplicity and everyday field comfort, this shirt is ideal for hunters and outdoor enthusiasts seeking reliable clothing during mild conditions.

- 100% Cotton

RRP **NOW**
Green.....£66 **£49.99**



BROWNING SUMMIT FLEECE COLLECTION

SUMMIT FLEECE GILET
Elegant, light and warm
Blue, Brown & Olive
RRP £71 **NOW £54.99**

SUMMIT FLEECE JACKET
Elegant, light and warm
Blue, Brown & Olive
RRP £88 **NOW £69.99**



SEDGEBROOK SHIRT
Versatile, semi-formal country shirt. Made from hefty, peached 125gsm cotton, this classic country working shirt is the perfect partner to Ridgeline's new collection of high-performance gilets. Available in a choice of three contemporary checks, it features a single chest pocket and is cut in a middle-of-the-road regular fit.

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Russet / Roasted Cashew RRP £34.99 **£29.99**
Deep Forest / Smokey Olive RRP £34.99 **£29.99**



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Warm, premium knitted gilet. Traditional look. Revolutionary performance. A premium knitted gilet made from Ridgeline's revolutionary Moleskin Tech-Knit Supreme fabric for warmth, wind-resistance and a luxuriously comfortable hand-feel. It features two zipped hand pockets and a zipped security pocket.

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Deep Forest RRP £79.99 **£69.99**
Moody Teak RRP £79.99 **£69.99**
Shale RRP £79.99 **£69.99**



BERETTA FULL MESH VEST
Great for warm summer days, the wide mesh inserts are positioned in key areas to help aid moisture control. Features cotton padded shooting patches. Its cut and wide size range means this vest is also suitable for women and young people.

Ice Grey & Sulphur Spring.....£79.95
Ebony & Ice Grey.....£79.95
Blue Beretta.....£79.95
Green Moss.....£79.95
Cordovan Spirit & Bark.....£79.95
British Green.....£79.95



BERETTA UNIFORM PRO 20.20 VEST
The latest among Beretta shooting vests and presents numerous innovations both in terms of materials and design.

Blue Total Eclipse / White.....£129.95
Black Jet / Orange.....£129.95
Blue Total Eclipse / Blue Royal.....£129.95
Black / Blue Excell.....£129.95
Ebony / Ice Grey.....£129.95
Ice Grey & Sulphur Spring.....£129.95



BERETTA TEAM T-SHIRT SHORT SLEEVED
Men's Beretta Team Short sleeved shooting t-shirt in 180 gr jersey cotton with Beretta Team print on the back.

- Beretta logo
- Beretta Team print on back
- Regular fit

White, Black, Blue Total Eclipse, Bellwether Blue & Cordovan Spirit **£35.95**



BERETTA TEAM T-SHIRT LONG SLEEVED
Men's Beretta Team Long sleeved shooting t-shirt in 180 gr jersey cotton with Beretta Team print on sleeve.

- Beretta logo
- Beretta print on right sleeve
- Regular fit

White, Black, Blue Total Eclipse, Bellwether Blue & Cordovan Spirit **£44.95**



BERETTA PINTAIL HOODIE
Men's Pintail hoodie made of 100% cotton with Beretta logo embroidered on the front.

- Beretta graphic embroidered on the front
- Pouch pocket on the front
- Beretta logo printed on the back
- Regular fit

Saffron Yellow.....£74.95
Green Stone.....£74.95
Black.....£74.95
Cordovan Spirit.....£74.95



BERETTA SONORAN SOFTSHELL
High-performance outdoor series designed for shooters and outdoor enthusiasts who demand durability, comfort and versatility.

Jacket - Gunmetal Black.....£149.95
Jacket - Green Stone.....£149.95
Jacket - Flat Dark Earth.....£149.95
Vest - Gunmetal Black.....£114.95
Vest - Green Stone.....£114.95
Vest - Flat Dark Earth.....£114.95



BERETTA 4 WAY STRETCH EVO PANTS
Men's hunting 4 Way Stretch EVO studied for different types of hunting and outdoor activities, especially during autumn/winter. The pant is highly elastic, resistant to the wind with abrasion resistant inserts in key areas.

Green Moss.....£169.95
Brown Bark.....£169.95
Peat.....£169.95
Ebony.....£169.95



HÄRKILA PORTFIELD SHIRT
Men's long-sleeved, easy-iron, classic shirt that features a 4-hole button closure, button-under collar and a left chest pocket with button closure.

- 98% cotton
- 2% elastane for
- Breathable
- Silent
- Classic, comfortable, fit

Naval Blue.....£59.99
Grape Leaf.....£59.99
Mandarin Check.....£59.99



HÄRKILA KALIX FLEECE WAISTCOAT
The Härkila Kalix Fleece Waistcoat is a lightweight hunting midlayer designed for versatile warmth without unnecessary bulk. Built for hunters and outdoor enthusiasts who require quiet, flexible clothing in the field, this fleece waistcoat offers silent insulation while maintaining excellent freedom of movement.

Dark Earth.....£119.99
Willow Green/Shadow Brown.....£119.99



HÄRKILA SCANDINAVIAN TROUSERS
Combining a softness that allows you to stalk in silence, with a robustness that makes them suitable for gamekeeping and other outdoor activities all year round. Extremely comfortable to wear with ventilation zips, phone and cartridge holder, silent magnetic pocket closures and more.

Willow Green / Deep Brown.....£159.99
Salute / Anthracite.....£159.99
Dark Earth / Slate Brown.....£159.99



HÄRKILA RAGNAR TROUSERS
The Ragnar trousers are designed for active hunting and leisure activities. They have a relatively snug fit and are made from a stretch fabric that closely follows the body's movements. Featuring a variety of ventilation options, they are also suitable for intense exertion and for summer wear.

Willow Green / Shadow Grey.....£179.99
Duffel Green / Phantom.....£179.99
Grey / Willow Green.....£179.99
Willow Green.....£179.99
Jet Set / Shadow Grey.....£179.99

SIMULATED SHOOTING



GOOD COMPANY, GUNS AND GENEROSITY

Few events better showcase the strength of the rural community than a charity clay shoot, and this Warwickshire gathering was no exception.

One will struggle to find a stronger example of countryside folk coming together than at a charity clay shoot. While competitive spirit is encouraged – often fully on display by sporting celebrities in attendance – the real winners are those who benefit from the funds raised long after the last cartridge has been fired.

That was certainly the case at the fifth annual Newton LDP Charity Clay Shoot, held at Warwickshire's

Shuckburgh Estate, where more than £46,000 was raised for RABI, the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution. The event attracted over 240 guests and 180 competitors – including well-known faces like Vinnie Jones and Tom Croft – making it one of the largest and most successful editions of the shoot to date.

For Newton LDP, a land and property consultancy deeply embedded within the rural sector, the event has become far more than a day of sporting competition. Since its inception, the annual shoot has grown into a flagship gathering

for the farming, land and property communities, combining first-class shooting with fundraising for causes that directly support those working within British agriculture.

The latest total means the event has now generated almost £185,000 for charitable causes since the inaugural shoot was launched, a remarkable achievement in just five years and a testament to the generosity of those who continue to support it.

Held against the backdrop of the historic Shuckburgh Estate, competitors enjoyed a day of sporting targets organised by the experienced team at Honesberrie Shooting. Known for delivering challenging yet enjoyable layouts, the team once again provided a varied course that tested shooters of all abilities while ensuring the

NEWTON LDP CHARITY CLAY SHOOT



focus remained firmly on enjoyment and camaraderie.

As with many successful charity shoots, however, the shooting itself was only one part of the day. The event also offered guests the opportunity to network, catch up with friends and colleagues from across the rural sector and contribute further through a charity auction and raffle following lunch.

Catering was provided by Warwick-based Flying Pig Catering, ensuring competitors and guests were well looked after before the fundraising activities got underway. The combination of shooting, hospitality and fundraising has become a proven formula for the event, helping it establish itself as a regular fixture in the diaries of many within the farming and land management industries.

At the heart of the day was support for RABI, an organisation that has become increasingly important within modern agriculture. While many people may still associate the charity primarily with financial assistance, its role has expanded significantly in recent years.

Today, RABI provides practical, financial and emotional support to farming people across England and Wales, helping individuals and families navigate challenges ranging from financial hardship and ill health to mental wellbeing and family pressures. In an industry that continues to face economic uncertainty, changing regulations and environmental pressures, the charity's work has arguably never been more relevant.

Speaking at the event, Richard





Foxon, Managing Director of Newton LDP, highlighted the company's strong connection with the communities it serves.

"As a business, we are rooted in the communities and networks that we work within, especially the farming industry," he said. "Having the opportunity to support the industry with such a fantastic event is something we are incredibly proud of.

"Over the past five years, the charity clay shoot has developed into a much-anticipated event, and we're hugely grateful for the continued backing from the land, property and farming communities.

Their enthusiasm and generosity have been instrumental in raising a substantial sum for RABI, and the support shown each year continues to make a real difference."

Those sentiments were echoed throughout the day. While clay shooting provides the platform, the event's enduring appeal stems from the fact that it brings together people from across the rural economy who share a common desire to give something back.

The rural community has long demonstrated a remarkable ability to support its own, particularly when times are difficult. Events such as

this highlight the strength of those networks and the willingness of businesses and individuals alike to contribute to causes that directly benefit families.

Guests also heard from Paul Pirie, Head of Fundraising at RABI, who delivered a keynote address outlining the charity's work and explaining how money raised through events such as the Newton LDP Charity Shoot directly supports people working within agriculture.

Pirie thanked the organisers, sponsors and participants for their continued commitment to the cause.

"We are incredibly grateful to



everyone who helped make the Newton LDP Annual Charity Shoot such a tremendous success – from the organisers, staff and sponsors to every guest and shooting team who took part,” he said.

“The event has truly become a flagship occasion in the rural calendar, bringing people together in support of farming communities while celebrating the very best of countryside spirit and generosity.

“Events like this make a real difference to the work of RABI, helping us continue to provide practical, financial and emotional support to farming people across the country. On behalf of everyone at RABI, thank you to Newton LDP for helping us continue to be there for our farmers when support is needed.”

The success of the event would not have been possible without the backing of a substantial group of sponsors drawn from across the land, development and property sectors. This year’s supporters included Lodders Solicitors, Ainscough Strategic Land, GRAF UK, Mulberry Homes, Hallam Land, Darbshire Sporting Agents, Brookbanks, Manor Oak Homes, Stockton House, Gallagher Developments and Richard George Tailoring.

Additional support came from Sytner Land Rover Coventry, which supplied a fleet of Land Rover Defenders to transport guns and guests around the estate throughout the day. Their presence proved invaluable in keeping the event running smoothly across the extensive grounds.

As charity shoots continue to

“ The latest total means the event has now generated almost £185,000 for charitable causes ”

play an important role in the rural calendar, the Newton LDP event stands as an example of what can be achieved when sporting enjoyment is combined with a worthwhile cause. In an era where farming faces numerous challenges, raising awareness and funds for organisations such as RABI is more important than ever.

The continued growth of the event suggests its reputation is spreading far beyond Warwickshire. With participation numbers increasing and fundraising totals reaching new heights, it has firmly established itself as one of the standout charity shooting events in the region.

Attention will now turn to next year’s shoot, scheduled to take place on 13 May, 2027. If the success of this year’s event is anything to go by, organisers can expect another strong turnout and, hopefully, another significant contribution towards supporting the people who remain at the heart of British agriculture.

For those involved, however, the figures only tell part of the story. Beyond the £46,000 raised this year and the £185,000 generated since the event began lies something perhaps even more valuable: a demonstration of the generosity, community spirit and shared purpose that continue to define the rural sector. ■



IT STARTS WHEN THE BIRD HITS THE GROUND

The close season is the moment to look at how your shoot handles dead game. With lead shot's exit confirmed for 2029, four leading voices explain why the bar is rising – and how to clear it

By **Selena Barr**

First, the caveat that matters: the great majority of shoots handle their game conscientiously, and standards have improved beyond recognition in a generation. This is not an indictment of an industry. But it takes only a minority – sometimes a single careless shoot – to undo that good work. Birds piled at the peg, slung into a pickup and forgotten while the Guns head for the pub: the sight is rare now, but it is exactly the image our critics reach for – and the bird that never reaches the table. The close season is the moment for every shoot, however good, to take stock, because from 2029 the stakes change again.

The idea for this article came from Dylan Williams, who organised and chaired The Game Shooting Conference in association with the GWCT which was held in

March at Holland & Holland Shooting Ground. The panel on game handling stole the show. The argument was simple, and worth restating: the utilisation of shot game – graded, well handled and sold – is the most important leg of shooting's three-legged stool. Knock it away and we lose the central defence of everything we do. We shoot food – and the moment a shoot cannot demonstrate that, it hands our critics their easiest argument.

THE LEAD RECKONING

The Government has now confirmed that the sale and use of lead shot for live quarry shooting will be banned from 1 April 2029, after a three-year transition. That removes the single biggest barrier keeping British game off supermarket shelves – lead.

Tristan Kirk of Lincolnshire Game, which supplies Waitrose, M&S and Aldi, cannot wait. Once the ban is in, he says, he can present game

to every retailer in the country; the notion that too much game is shot is a myth. The problem was never volume, he argues, but that too little of it is looked after well enough to reach a shelf, where people buy with their eyes.

Stewart McIntyre of Loyton draws the corollary. More game entering the food chain means more scrutiny, not less – and non-toxic-shot birds that turn green just as readily if mishandled. The window to put our house in order, he warns, is closing.

THE MOST IMPORTANT HOUR

All four converge on one truth: a bird's future is decided in the minutes after it hits the ground. Alan Hayward of Oakland Park, the first new game processing plant to open in the UK in 40 years, puts it plainly – that next hour is the most important hour of that bird's life as food. Lay birds on their backs, spaced out, never heaped. "Treat it as if you want to eat it yourself," he says. "If it looks nice and you'd want



to eat it, that's how every bird should go out."

Tristan is more precise still. Heat damage, he explains, begins within the first 20 minutes. Birds left touching one another generate their own heat and taint the meat, even on a cold day, and no buyer will touch anything showing a hint of green. From the peg the birds should move quickly to a game cart – segregated, wings open, breasts up, hung individually wherever possible – and then into a chiller at 0-4°C as fast as can be managed. It is exactly the regime set out in BASC's Guide to Good Game Handling: rapid cooling, scrupulous cleanliness and storing small game at 4°C or below.

THE PROCESSOR'S BRUTAL MATHS

The economics explain why processors are so exacting. Alan grades out around half of everything he handles – too small, a damaged breast, a broken leg, a touch of green – which makes the job barely profitable but keeps his name in the game. Tristan's figures are starker. He has 14 refrigerated vans covering all four corners of England. Each one costs some £50,000, lasts for three years and holds about 1,000 pheasants; if 40% of a load arrives heat-damaged, you have driven a fortune around the country to collect almost nothing. Picking up a single bird, he notes, costs at least 50p before anyone has processed it.

Game is also far costlier to process than farmed poultry, Tristan points out. Chicken is bred for meat and plucked by machine; a chilled game bird, held below 4°C, has its feathers all but welded in, so they must be drawn by skilled hand and then waxed – a chicken plant's worth of process at a fraction of the speed, with a vet from the Food Standards Agency on site every day.

And the market that does exist is largely abroad. Two-thirds of Alan's pheasants are exported, mainly to Belgium, where they are actually eaten; English appetite for the whole bird remains thin, and every extra stage of handling – breasting, metal-detecting – erodes the margin further. The old escape routes are closing, too: pet food now demands near human-grade standards, so a poorly handled bird can no longer be written off as dog meat.



WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Loyton shows what is possible with infrastructure and intent. Across its five sporting shoots on Exmoor, their chillers are inspected by North Devon Council where birds are hung for around 24 hours, then crated, cocks and hens kept separate, and graded again before Oakland Park collects. Because the quality is reliable, Stewart's shoots are paid for their game in a season when many dealers stopped collecting altogether or charged shoots to take birds away.

One Loyton investment deserves singling out: they train the person on the game cart. The cart, not the peg, is where a bird's fate as food is sealed. This is arguably the most important step in the process. The game cart handler grades each bird and sets

aside the damaged ones before one spoiled bird taints a tray. However big or small, every shoot should train their game cart handler properly.

"How can we justify going out and shooting pheasants, then paying to get rid of them as if they were a waste byproduct?" he asks. He is equally candid about the regulatory vacuum. Much of what shoots ought to be doing is already a legal requirement few realise exists – anyone supplying game to an approved handling establishment must have a trained person to inspect the birds and complete a declaration – yet there is little enforcement and no real penalty for getting it wrong. Cost, he concedes, is a barrier for smaller shoots, but a chiller "doesn't have to cost a fortune". His sharpest point is traceability: walk into a beef or dairy

farm, ask to see every record and inspection, and you are handed the folder. Few shoots could survive the same scrutiny – and that, he argues, is the gap the industry must close.

SELF-REGULATE, OR BE REGULATED

John Duncan of Roxtons, which books days across some 60 shoots, has watched assurance schemes come and go – from the British Game Alliance and Aim to Sustain to today's Trusted Game, under which a Yorkshire shoot he is involved with recently earned a gold award after a full vet inspection. Not every shoot can run a Loyton-grade operation, and John is a realist about it. In the north he opened his own chiller so smaller shoots could hang their game and have it collected in one place – a model he believes more areas should adopt. His abiding frustration is that not every shoot signed up to self-regulation when it had the chance. Had the whole community done so, he believes, we would be far better placed to defend ourselves now. The alternative, all four agree, is regulation imposed by people who understand nothing of sustainable shooting or rural land management.

There is reason for optimism, if the industry raises its game. With beef and other meats having roughly doubled in price, well-handled game at a steady price suddenly looks attractive. New routes are

opening too. Eat Wild – the only body marketing British game in this country, and funded entirely by Guns through a voluntary 50p-per-bird is no longer shifting the odd brace but moving game by the tonne, with one catering partner alone placing 54 tonnes of venison on its menus this year. Its work has put venison and pheasant into stadiums and hospitality from Wimbledon and Twickenham to the Oval, Edgbaston and Wembley, onto the shelves of every major supermarket, and into NHS and nursery kitchens. That is exactly the market Tristan and the others need, and it costs a shoot almost nothing to build: the levy is little more than six pounds a Gun on a 100-bird day. Any shoot not yet signed up should add the 50p to its invoices and back the campaign – the case, and the sign-up, are at eatwild.co. The Country Food Trust, meanwhile, turns shot game into meals for food banks. Guns are wising up too: John is increasingly asked questions such as "where's the game going? Does it have a route to market?" before a day is booked.

START NOW

Which returns us to the close season – the moment to walk your larder, confirm the chiller holds 0-4°C, send a competent person on the trained-person qualification, agree collection dates and grading standards with your dealer, and



brief every picker-up and beater. None of it is glamorous. All of it is the difference between producing food and producing waste.

A sensible first step is BASC's Guide to Good Game Handling at basc.org.uk/game-handling-guide, which sets out the practical steps and food hygiene rules that apply to your shoot. Because come 2029, when the lead excuse has gone, there will be nowhere left to hide a badly handled bird. ■



HELP THEM OR **LOSE THEM**


PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES/ANITA NICHOLSON

‘Do nothing’ and red squirrels will be extinct in mainland England within 25 years, government warned. **Conor O’Gorman** investigates

When I was a child, we had red squirrels in a mature oak tree at the end of the garden and thought nothing of it. Fast forward 40 years and seeing a red in any garden nationwide would be a treasured occasion.

Red squirrels have declined dramatically in England, largely due to squirrel pox virus and competition from invasive grey squirrels and habitat loss.

The species is also being forgotten in the public consciousness. A recent survey of 2,000 children aged 8 to 15, commissioned by Center Parcs in collaboration with The Wildlife Trusts, found that one in three was unaware that red squirrels live in Britain.

From an estimated 3.5 million red squirrels 150 years ago, the population has fallen to around 120,000 today, confined largely to Scotland, northern England, and a handful of offshore islands.

Research recently carried out by the Zoological Society of London on behalf of Natural England has set out the causes behind the red squirrel’s dramatic decline and, crucially, what it will take to reverse

it. The main finding is hardly rocket science – we need to kill more grey squirrels nationwide.

However, let’s look briefly at the research results and recommendations, which have been published in a report titled ‘England Red Squirrel Recovery Strategy’.

The researchers looked at the pros and cons of 18 ways to reverse the red squirrel population decline with consideration of cost, public acceptability, animal welfare, non-target species bycatch, and socio-economic factors such as tree damage.

The options included various combinations of grey squirrel control measures, red squirrel translocations, and the use of grey squirrel fertility control and a squirrel pox vaccine (should they become available).

Doing nothing, continuing with the current status quo, and switching from lethal management of grey squirrels to fertility control alone would all fail to deliver red squirrel recovery, with a high chance of red squirrel extinction across mainland England over the next 25 years.

England-wide grey squirrel control was found to offer the best chance for large-scale red squirrel recovery, but with high monetary costs, high species bycatch potential, welfare concerns, and predicted low public support.

The public support aspect is interesting. If there was a nationwide grey squirrel cull an estimated 55.7% of the public would be opposed.

What happens next will be fascinating – will the recommendations be mothballed for fear of upsetting folk – or will the government invest the resources needed to save the reds whilst taking the opportunity to educate an increasingly disconnected and squeamish public on the realities of wildlife management for nature recovery.

Putting red squirrel recovery to one side, there is also an economic argument for a nationwide government supported cull of greys.

Grey squirrels cause significant damage by stripping bark from trees, which affects timber quality, woodland health, and long-term forest resilience. The total cost of grey squirrels to the UK economy has been estimated at £37-40million annually.

Surprisingly, scientists don’t know why squirrels strip bark – there are just several theories.

In Britain, bark stripping often occurs in spring and early summer when food is plentiful, suggesting that hunger alone does not explain the behaviour.

Are squirrels seeking extra nutrients such as sugars or minerals to meet the extra demands of breeding, are they using bark stripping as part of aggressive or territorial behaviour, or perhaps they are self-medicating against parasites?

A bark stripping assessment is being carried out by the UK Squirrel Accord to help create a national overview of damage levels and support local management strategies.

You can carry out a survey in any woodland that you own, manage or have permission to access. The assessment involves walking a transect through the woodland and recording fresh and cumulative bark damage at regular intervals before submitting the results online. ■



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NEW

BERETTA AX800 SUPREMA

Lloyd Pattison puts Beretta's radical new AX800 to the test and discovers how decades of gas-operated semi-auto development, cutting-edge materials and recoil-reducing technology have combined to create one of the most futuristic shotguns the company has ever produced



Beretta's dominance in the semi-automatic shotgun market is a relatively modern story when compared to the history of the company. It began in earnest following World War II. Seeking to expand beyond its famous break-action shotguns, Beretta introduced the Model 60 in 1955. This early design relied



NEW BERETTA AX800 SUPREMA

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

NAME: Beretta AX800 Suprema

CALIBRE: 12

BARREL LENGTH: 28" on test, 26, and 30 available

WEIGHT: 3.5kg or 7.5lb as reviewed

LOP: Adjustable

RRP: From £2,445

CONTACT: GMK Ltd, sales@gmk.co.uk

field. In the 1990s, the AL390 and subsequent AL391 Urika models introduced self-regulating gas valves. This innovation allowed the shotguns to reliably cycle everything from light target loads to heavy magnum hunting shells without manual adjustment.

My first shotgun, in 1988 was an A301 and I can tell you that even then the recoil reduction vs an O/U was noticeable. Recently, Beretta's A400 series has set the bar for gas guns. The modern action utilises the B-Link gas system, combining a rotating bolt with a redesigned gas piston. This allows the shotgun to cycle up to 36% faster than competing models, while integrated recoil reduction systems (like Kick-Off) absorb up to 70% of the kick.

If you have been paying attention, and since you are reading this I guess there is a decent chance you have, you will have noted that Beretta are not afraid of investing in R&D and trying new things, which explains the radical new gun we are looking at today.

THE ENGINEERING

The AX800 is as close to a science fiction prop made real as I have seen when it comes to shotguns and yet when speaking to Pietro Scovazzo I learned that the



on a recoil-operated system, where the backward force of the fired shell cycled the action.

The true revolution occurred in 1968 with the launch of the A300. This model marked Beretta's pivot to a gas-operated system. Instead of relying on raw recoil, gas operation bleeds off a small amount of high-pressure combustion gas from the barrel to drive a piston,

which unlocks and cycles the bolt. This mechanism offered a massive engineering advantage: it drastically reduced felt recoil for the shooter and handled varying ammunition loads with much greater reliability.

Throughout the late 20th century, Beretta continuously refined this gas system. The A301, A302, and A303 series became legendary for their durability in the

appearance was not part of the primary brief for this new model, it evolved from the design process and choice of materials.

During Covid, with engineers at home, the team floated a question: "How do we improve on the A400 Extreme Plus?" Targeted squarely at the tech focussed wildfowling





market, the team took a fresh look at the problem with no guard rails and decided to start with the best barrel tech available at the time, and

hence started with a Steelium Pro tube topped with a 7mm step rib. The internals of the Steelium Pro barrel are already engineered to deliver

best in class recoil reduction, but opting for this barrel tech on a gun at this price point was a bold move. Additionally the rib is drilled for fitting of a pic rail should the shooter decide they need to mount optics or accessories forward of the receiver.

The B-LINK gas system was the next challenge. The A400 is no slouch when it comes to cycling and is already optimised for gas flow, so the team looked to motorsport for inspiration. Being only 90 miles from Ferrari HQ, one can imagine that the engineers at Beretta are open to influences from advances in automotive technology. The team opted to look at coatings for the stainless steel gas piston that would reduce fouling (which let's face it, is the bane of gas operated guns)





NEW BERETTA AX800 SUPREMA



and increase longevity, just like the cylinders in a modern engine. Beretta claim the system is 46% cleaner than before and 36% faster than any gas system released before.

The stock was another area of focus for the team, improving the existing Kick-Off Plus recoil system with the new Kick-Off Pro but incorporating adjustability for drop, cast, and interchangeable cheek pads and pistol grips, means this is a gun that can be adapted to almost any user and handle the heaviest wildfowl loads for those birds you would swear are wearing little plate carriers under their feather jackets.

Tying all of this together, and of course the most radical thing about the gun at first sight is the use of technopolymer throughout. Black

plastic shotguns are hardly new, but Beretta, who have already proven the use of this material in the ARX160 AR and ARX200 DMR, in use with Esercito Italiano since 2008 had no qualms about using plastic for the receiver as well. This choice led the team to a design unbound by convention, as injection moulding meant they could do wild things that would be prohibitively expensive and heavy if milled from aluminium

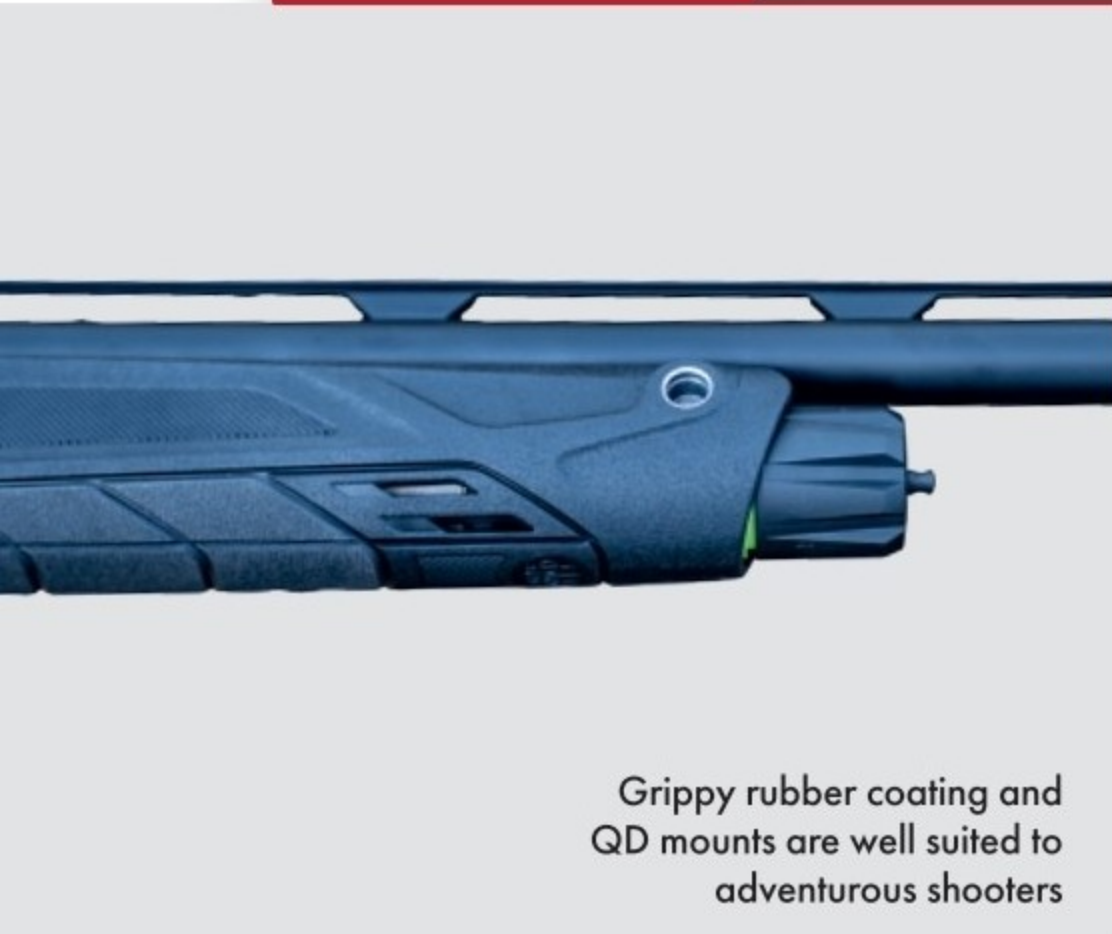
or steel. Polymer obviously does not corrode or oxidise, and requires no lubrication which is perfect for a piece of its kind, but it also doesn't resonate, which further reduces felt recoil.

BALANCE

Picking up the 7½lb AX800 for the first time one is immediately struck by the feel of the gun in the hand. The ergo is as radical as it



The Kick-Off Pro recoil system



Grippy rubber coating and QD mounts are well suited to adventurous shooters



looks and this translates to a feel unlike anything I've shot before. The balance is extremely neutral and shouldering it for the first time just feels weird, there is no other way to describe it. This feeling continues the first time you pull the flat trigger blade (another first on a shotgun as far as I am aware) the trigger has a little creep but it's surprisingly smooth, and pleasantly light. The oversized controls are easy to use, and understand. The oversized trigger guard and large safety button are obviously designed to be used while wearing gloves, but feel easy to find and operate without.

The fore-end is chunky and features sections of grippy rubber coating that offer positive grip and feel quite premium, capped with the

B-LOCK (are you seeing a B-Pattern?) nut requiring only a 1/3rd of a turn to release. The nut has a swivel stud for standard sling fitting, but the stock and fore-end also feature QD mounts for more adventurous users.

The sci-fi receiver is drilled for optics as well as the rib, so owners will not be short of options there. Clever touches abound here with the front of the enlarged trigger guard acting as a feed ramp for slick reloads further enhanced by the fact that the elevator stays open when the bolt is in battery, clearing the loading gate, means slotting in additional cartridges without overcoming the resistance of elevator spring is a doddle.

I can say honestly and without hyperbole that shooting the AX800 with normal clay loads is disorienting the first few times, as the lack of recoil and resonance from the gun is almost spooky. Heavier loads (up to 3 1/2") are dealt with in just as eerie a manner with the combination of barrel, polymer receiver, Kick-off and B-ufer (B-ok we get it) recoil pad, meaning this gun is engineered from top to bottom to shoot hot loads faster and more comfortably than any other auto loader on the market.

For the clay shooter this might seem like overkill, but I am sure there are plenty of people out there with shoulder injuries or who just don't like recoil who will love this gun for all sorts of applications.

The swing is about what you would expect for a gun of this weight with no surprises in the handling, or the ability to break clays. This will of course translate to all manner of quarry from the hide or foreshore. 7 1/2lb isn't 'racing snake' spec, but it's light enough to be handy, and I reckon more than

a few of these will – in their various camo finishes – find their way into the hands of pest control shooters on corvids and pigeons, as well as the intended wildfowl shooters.

With an RRP of £2,445 the AX is a little more than the current A400 Extreme Plus, but honestly, Beretta have thrown the kitchen sink at this gun from a technical perspective, and I think the price is beyond reasonable for what you are getting.

This new generation of autoloaders is sure to be polarising with adherents to both new and old technologies and those who clutch their pearls at the plastic receiver, but in all honesty, I can't see anyone shooting one and not being actually impressed with what Beretta have achieved. I expect we will see more like it in future. ■

SCORES:

DESIGN: 17/20

Out there, but in a good way, the AX800 looks like it belongs to a colonial space marine.

HANDLING: 17/20

The only surprise with this gun is the total lack of recoil.

ERGONOMICS: 17/20

Excellent, well thought out ergo and controls, although shooters with smaller hands might struggle.

QUALITY: 17/20

Beretta semi auto's never disappoint here in my experience..

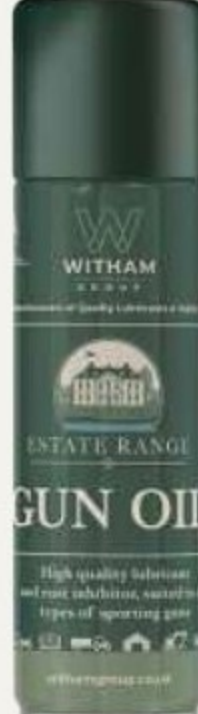
VALUE: 17/20 Given what's included, this gun is a steal.

TOTAL: 85 – Great*

Addendum:

0-19: stinker avoid at all costs;
21-40: buyer beware; 41-60: fair;
61-80: good; 81-90: great;
91-99: iconic, must have; 100: perfect, this gun transcends scoring and deigns to exist despite the laws of physics.




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FROM ROCK FACES TO FLIGHTLINES

For more than 20 years, **Jerry Moffatt** was addicted to climbing some of the world's toughest rock faces. Today, that same passion is reserved for pigeon shooting, with the former world No.1 climber spending almost every day with a gun in the hide or at a clay ground

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: **MATT KIDD**



The middle of the pea field was almost bare. Several days of sustained attention from woodpigeons had left a noticeable scar through the centre of the crop. The farmer had been pulling his hair out, rightly concerned that without intervention much of the field would simply disappear. Bangers had helped keep the birds moving between shooting sessions, and Jerry Moffatt – former world No.1 climber turned passionate decoyer – had been here six times already. Despite thinning the population considerably, the woodies continued to return in numbers, dropping into the peas whenever the opportunity presented itself.

As we arrive, hundreds of pigeons lift off the small field. I quickly unpack the cameras as Jerry begins assembling the hide. I normally see decoyers waiting, judging the wind, watching flightlines. Jerry already knows exactly where the poles are going, as if they are going into old holes. I ask why: "It is the only spot to safely shoot this field. Dog walkers often cut along the hedgeline in front to get to the nearby village, and the road which is behind us is, for me, too close for comfort if shooting from the opposite hedgeline," he explains. "This position gives us safe shooting in front, to the left, and to the right. Plus, the hedge behind offers great concealment." Public footpaths, neighbouring roads and nearby houses are considered long before the first decoy is positioned on any of Jerry's permissions. Every field in his permission has already been scouted with a golf rangefinder that lives permanently in his decoy bag, with key distances committed to memory. Flightlines follow safety, every time.

It is obvious he has built his hide hundreds of times before and it is completed in minutes. Four poles are stuck in the ground in a rhomboid shape, small-side facing where the decoys will go. We have all built a hide which is a little big for the netting or a little cramped to sit comfortably, but Jerry has devised his own



method for fixing that. Three lengths of black PVC pipes with drill holes on each end go over his hide poles and are clamped in place to make the optimal-sized shell. The perfect length of camo stealth net then goes on first, followed by a ghillie net, about 9in lower than the stealth net so that you can see what's going on in front of you without being seen. Each is clamped, then some natural foliage is added to the front, taken from the hedge. It blends in beautifully, and is the perfect size for Jerry and his dog. Or Jerry and me, on this occasion.

The wind is into our right shoulder when looking directly out of the hide. The decoy pattern itself is refreshingly uncomplicated. Twenty decoys are placed into the peas, facing roughly into wind, the first is 25 long paces directly in front. Five paces 90-degrees to the right, Jerry stamps in a rotary and pops on two cold pigeons from a previous outing. Five paces to the left of the original decoy, he puts a pair

of flappers. This is to encourage any incoming birds to cross the front of the hide before committing to land. Any shot birds will be upturned where they land or picked.

We settle behind the netting, able to see clearly through the Stealth Net while remaining almost invisible ourselves. It takes barely five minutes. A pair of woodpigeons appears from our left, heading over the decoys to the rotary. Jerry remains motionless until both birds are committed, mounts the gun folding the front bird first, before dropping the second, further away bird almost instantaneously after. A smile from Jerry. As starts go, it could hardly have been better.

As is often the way when one gets the cameras out, all went pretty quiet. Between the odd singles and pairs of pigeons, I was able to learn more about Jerry, a legend of the climbing world.

"I grew up on a farmhouse in





Leicestershire, and that's where my love of the outdoors began. I had a gat gun, followed by an air rifle and eventually a side-by-side 12 bore when I turned 14. Rough shooting filled many afternoons and, although the bags were really small, the excitement was immense. A box of cartridges would probably last me two months," he laughs. "I can still remember going into the gunshop to buy a box of cartridges. It was super exciting."

Jerry, being severely dyslexic, attended a specialist school in Somerset before moving to St David's College in Wales. Rugby and cricket occupied much of his spare time, until he tried climbing at the age of 15. "I was immediately hooked. I packed in everything and became obsessed with climbing."

By 17, he had left school and hitchhiked to Tremadog in Snowdonia, spending the entire summer climbing. The progression was extraordinary. Within a year he had completed what was then regarded as the hardest route in Britain. The following year, he made a first ascent of a climb in the Peak District that nobody else had done before. He was the best in Britain, with a single desire to be the best in the world. "I thought if I wanted to do that, I had to go to America," he adds.

And so he did. By 19, Jerry had completed America's toughest climbs. Routes that others spent three days working, Jerry climbed in around 10 minutes without a fall. He won the inaugural round of the Climbing World Cup in 1989, topped the world rankings, travelled

the globe establishing first ascents and became one of climbing's defining figures. Ambassadorships with brands like Patagonia, Oakley and Swatch followed, along with television appearances and, much later, his award-winning autobiography: *Revelations*. Yet despite all that, medals were never his motivation.

"I was ranked No. 1, winning the biggest competitions and prize money. I had Americans coming up to me in bars like, 'Hey, you're that guy, Moffatt – Let me buy you a drink!' But I loved first ascents," he admits, pausing to take a more hopeful shot at a flighting pigeon high on our right. "People look at a piece of rock and wonder if it is possible – I wanted to be the person who would prove it could be climbed."



Completing a first ascent gives the climber the opportunity to name the route, leaving a lasting legacy. There are hundreds bearing Jerry's name around the globe. Climbers continue to travel from around the world to attempt lines he established nearly 40 years ago. "I've even got one in Japan called 'Moffatt's Traverse' – I didn't even know about that one until a couple of years ago," he laughs.

Every now and again, likely distracted with a pigeon coming into view, Jerry's stories about climbing and close calls are interrupted. We talked about the usual guns, cartridges and chokes. His choice is a Browning 525 XS-Pro Crown, choked light-full in both barrels. He has a particular affection for Fiocchi 32g No.6 Bio Wad Pigeon

cartridges right now. And he has a second 525 in the cabinet. Jerry's favourite time to go decoying is when *Test Match Special* is on, played through a portable radio.

We hadn't seen much action but at least a couple dozen pigeons had been added to the bag. After an hour or so Jerry kindly offered to switch over for a while. Typically, on changing seats and unslipping my gun, there was a load of action in and around the decoys despite us walking around the hide. When I finally loaded the gun, all but one pair had moved off. I shot at the closer bird of a pair dropping in and cleanly killed that and the one behind it with the one cartridge. A good start.

I sat behind the hide and waited for the next opportunity, and continued probing Jerry's past with

eyes fixed on the field in front.

"I liked the physicality of climbing and I liked the fear of it," he says. "A lot of success came down to genetics. I was very thin and wiry, with a good power-to-weight ratio. But I also think, with my dyslexia and struggling so much at school, you feel inferior to a lot of people. I was determined to show that I was good at something."

He pauses for a moment, as I fire another couple shots successfully. "At 40, and starting a family, I decided to retire from professional climbing. I loved racing go-karts – until I had a bad crash. I bought and raced a Group-B Peugeot Rally Car which I loved, and surfing was my other huge passion – until I broke my neck in Lanzarote!

"I still climb – I co-own The Foundry Climbing Centre in



Sheffield, which is where I get my income to afford to do what I enjoy, along with book sales. But after retiring, I found myself always thinking about shooting," says Jerry, as another pigeon finally heads to the decoys, but I stood and shot at it too early with it banking and heading back in the direction from which it came. "I've still got Archie Coats' *Pigeon Shooting* book that I was given for my birthday when I was about 14. I remember reading it again and thinking, 'I'd love to do that with my life.'"

The problem, he explains, was that shooting isn't a sport you simply wander back into after 30 years away, unlike climbing. "I had no friends that shot, and I didn't really know where to go clay shooting. You can't just go pigeon shooting because you haven't got any permission. You don't really want to turn up on a game shoot and say, 'I haven't shot for 30 years. Can I come game shooting?' either."

Eventually, he decided there was only one way to force the issue. "I just thought, right, I'm going to buy a gun. I still had my old one, but I thought if I buy another gun, then I've got to go shooting." That decision proved to be the catalyst he needed and later purchased a guided pigeon day in Lincolnshire with a friend who was also keen to shoot. "We probably only shot about 30, but it was amazing," he laughs. "We should have shot 200, but we couldn't hit anything!"

That first outing was enough to reignite a passion that had lain dormant for more than three decades. A chance meeting with another pigeon shooter while accompanying a friend on a falconry day soon led to more invitations, before Jerry gradually secured permissions of his own around Sheffield.

These days, shooting occupies much of Jerry's time, with him found in the hide or on the clay ground around five times a week. From November to January he'll spend around 10 days on pheasants with his syndicate and a handful of other days. Spring is dedicated almost entirely to improving his technique on the clay ground, before attention turns to peas, standing crops, stubbles and beans as the pigeon



shooting season gathers pace.

"My son calls me a try-hard," he laughs. "When I'm not shooting pigeons or game, I'm at the clay ground trying to get better. March, April and May are when I'll really work on my technique." That pursuit of improvement has seen him regularly in front of top shot Nick Hendrick, with several lessons each year helping to refine his approach, along with many days spent in the hide together.

"Nick's helped my shooting massively," Jerry explains. "It's all about getting away from looking at the bead or gun, and instead focusing wholly on the bird. Every shot comes from behind; it's either swing-through or swing-to." As if on cue, I too did my bad habit of checking the gun with a crossing pigeon in front and missed with the first barrel before sorting things out and hitting it with the second. Jerry gave me a knowing smile.

The bag was just over the 40 mark, light of where we expected by some way, though conditions weren't ideal. Normally I would have been keen to stick it out, but having committed to an evening function I had to leave. We had still done our bit and gave the farmer some welcome respite, but the pigeons clearly weren't finished with this field. A text later that evening to Jerry said that hundreds of pigeons were back feeding on the peas.

The following afternoon, Jerry returned to the same spot, timing his arrival for much later in the day. It proved to be the right decision. In just over an hour he fired more than 200 cartridges as pigeons poured back onto the peas.

As for me, I left with something arguably more valuable than a big bag. I had spent an afternoon learning how one of the world's greatest climbers had found himself back doing exactly what he had dreamt of as a 14-year-old boy. ■

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COMPETITION REVIVAL

Two storied competitions – the **Clay Shooting Classic** and the **Sporting Gun Clubman** – return to Eaton Hall this autumn. Here's everything you need to know

The Sporting Gun Clubman Championship has not been shot since 2012. The Clay Shooting Classic has been dark since 2022. This October, both return to Eaton Hall Shooting Ground in Derbyshire.

Fourteen years is a long time to wait. Long enough for novice shooters who were cutting their teeth on the Clubman circuit in

2012 to have become seasoned competitors. Long enough for the competition to have passed into the kind of folklore that gets talked about at grounds up and down the country – the scores, the shoot-offs, the teams that came within a clay of taking the prize home. Long enough, frankly, for its absence to have started feeling permanent.

But it is back. And alongside it, the Clay Shooting Classic – dormant since Phil Gray claimed the title in

2022. His performance that year was comprehensive: he topped the Sporting podium, claimed the Blaser F16 prize, and then won the Pool Shoot for good measure. The trophy has been in his keeping ever since.

If you shoot clays competitively, you already know what both of these mean. The Classic has a roll of honour worth being on. The Clubman has a team trophy worth winning. Both have been absent for too long, and both are back with something to prove.

EATON HALL SHOOTING GROUND, DERBYSHIRE

The venue needs no introduction to anyone who shoots competitively



Phil Gray was the last champion of the Clay Shooting Classic

in this country. The shooting ground at Doveridge has hosted numerous serious clay shooting competitions – it is a CPSA Premier Plus ground and was named Clay Ground of the Year at the Great British Shooting Awards 2026 – and it is exactly the right stage for what is being asked of it here.

The topography gives course designers genuine options – the kind of ground where you can show targets that demand real reading, real execution, and no margin for lazy technique. It does not flatter poor form. It does not offer easy stands to compensate for hard ones. What it offers is an honest test, set by people who know what one looks like.

CLAY SHOOTING CLASSIC 2026: 1-4 OCTOBER

- Open to all. 125 targets. 15 stands.
- 3 x Qualifying days.
- 1 x Final Day (Shooters that have qualified in Lettered Class or Category – which will be over 100 shooters) with a top 6 super final at the end.
- Finals day on Sunday.

The Classic's format has always rewarded the shooter who can maintain output across a full card without leaking targets in the middle. 125 birds over 15 stands means there is nowhere to hide a bad patch and nothing to bail you out if your

concentration drops at the wrong moment. The shooters who have won it previously will tell you the same thing: the margins at the top are small, and they are decided by the stands you almost took for granted.

Phil Gray, the reigning champion, will be the man to beat. Whether you are coming to take his crown or to put your own name on the trophy for the first time, the field is open.

The prize list is currently being secured, but based on the 2022 benchmark – £4,000 in cash and £4,000 in product – it will be substantial. High Gun is anticipated to carry a top-end gun from one of the major manufacturers, with Ladies and Junior category prizes alongside. Full details will be published once sponsorship is finalised.

SPORTING GUN CLUBMAN CHAMPIONSHIP 2026: 3-4 OCTOBER

- Open to individuals and teams who are B Class and below, or non-CPSA registered.
- 100 targets: 25 single-barrel DTL, 25 English Skeet, 50 English Sporting.
- Teams – 5 Person (2 x SNR, 1 x LDY, 1 x JNR, 1 x VET). 2 Person team (Any Category)

The Clay Shooting Classic Cup





George Digweed
MBE has competed
in past events



Both events will take
place at Eaton Hall

This one needs to be said clearly: the Clubman has been gone since 2012. That is not a brief hiatus. That is 14 years without one of grassroots clay shooting's most distinctive competitions – a championship with its own identity, its own history, and a prize structure built specifically to reward club shooters rather than the elite. That changes this autumn.

The format is 100 targets: 25 single-barrel DTL, 25 English Skeet, 50 English Sporting. B Class and below, or non-CPSA registered. A Class need not apply – this is not their competition. The Clubman was always about finding the best club shooter operating below the elite tier, and the best team any club can put on the line. That brief has not changed.

The discipline mix is unforgiving in the way that all-round formats are unforgiving. You cannot carry a weakness into this competition and expect it to stay hidden. Solid DTL, composed skeet, and the ability to read and execute on English Sporting targets – that is what the winner will have. That is what the winning team will have.

Team prizes: a Laporte trap for the winners, a pallet of clays for the runners-up. Individual prizes across High Gun, Ladies, Junior and Veterans. If entries come in fast enough, the competition may open from Friday 2 October – so do not leave your entry late and find yourself squeezed on squad times.

ENTER BOTH – THE CLASSIC AND THE CLUBMAN

The overlap is obvious and deliberate. Classic shooters who are eligible for the Clubman – B Class and below – can shoot Thursday and Friday in the Classic before moving straight into the Clubman on Saturday and Sunday. Four competition days, two titles, one venue. For the shooter with the form and the stamina to back it up, the double is there to be done.

The Clubman has been gone 14 years. The Classic for three. Both are back, the ground is booked, and the only question that remains is who is going to step up and get their name on these trophies. ■

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TEMPERED LEAD

30 GRAM
5 / 6 SHOT



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MAKE THE SWITCH

With the transition away from lead now firmly underway and an official end date in place, there has never been a better time to make the switch to lead alternatives

For many shooters, steel cartridges still carry a reputation forged years ago, when early non-lead loads often produced inconsistent patterns, increased recoil and failed to inspire confidence. Fast forward a decade and the landscape has changed dramatically.

Manufacturers have invested heavily in developing steel cartridges for every discipline, from affordable club loads to premium competition

and high-performance game cartridges and even those that can be used in older guns. Advances in propellants, wad technology, shot cups and loading techniques have all combined into today's premium offerings. They can deliver excellent pattern density, clean-burning performance and consistent velocities that, in many cases, are virtually indistinguishable from comparable lead loads.

With the shooting industry now preparing for life after lead, there has never been a better

opportunity to make the transition before it becomes a necessity – just remember to go up a shot size or two from what you would normally shoot, and take off 20-30% of the payload for an equivalent experience. E.g. if you shoot 32g No.6 lead, a good place to start would be a 25-28g No.4 or No. 5.

So, here's a few lead free options to build your confidence.

RC

HPF3 Blueshot

Rather than simply producing another steel cartridge, RC has taken a different approach with its innovative HPF3 Blueshot range. Instead of steel, the cartridges are loaded with a premium zinc-based alloy shot manufactured by Spanish specialist PLP Premium. With a density of 7.6g/cm³, Blueshot sits between steel and lead, but its much softer 40 Vickers hardness allows it to be safely used through full choke and in any nitro-proofed shotgun. Available in loads from the 25g to 36g HPF3 magnum loads, plus a 20-bore option, Blueshot provides a familiar shooting experience while embracing the industry's move away from lead. RC recommends increasing shot size by





one compared with equivalent lead loads to compensate for the alloy's lower density.

**PRICE: APPROXIMATELY £390-£430
PER 1,000**

SHOOTINGSTARCC.CO.UK

GAMEBORE

White Gold Pro Steel

Developed specifically for shooters demanding premium performance from steel shot, White Gold Pro Steel has quickly become one of the benchmark non-lead cartridges on the market. The cartridge features Gamebore's advanced wad system, protecting the bore from steel shot while Quad Seal gas technology delivers efficient sealing, reduced recoil and exceptional consistency. Dense, even patterns inspire confidence on challenging Sporting targets, making the transition from lead almost seamless. Available in both plastic and Bio-Wad

configurations, in 24 or 28g loads, White Gold Pro Steel demonstrates just how capable modern steel ammunition has become.

**PRICE: FROM £313 PER 1,000
GAMEBORE.COM**

LYALVALE EXPRESS

Ultimate Steel HP

For shooters tackling the toughest game days, Ultimate Steel HP is Lyalvale Express's flagship High Performance steel cartridge. Available in powerful 34g and 36g loadings with larger shot sizes, it has been developed to deliver exceptional retained energy and dense, effective patterns on high pheasants, geese and other demanding quarry. Purpose-designed components and carefully balanced ballistics ensure consistent performance at extended ranges, giving shooters confidence when every shot counts. As a High Performance steel cartridge, Ultimate Steel HP must only be used in shotguns bearing the Fleur-de-Lys High Performance Steel proof mark, making it the ideal choice for those equipped with modern steel-proofed guns and looking for uncompromising game performance.

APPROX £163 PER 250

LYALVALEEXPRESS.COM

JOCKER

Steel PaperWad

Jocker has combined two of the industry's biggest innovations into a single cartridge: steel shot and a fully degradable paper wad system. Its unique paper shot cup features a soft sealing skirt that maximises contact with the barrel, maintaining



high velocity while generating lower operating pressures. An internal fibre wad completes the design, creating a cartridge that is entirely free from plastic while delivering excellent ballistic performance. The range covers everything from 21g clay loads to 33g High Performance game cartridges, alongside dedicated 16- and 28-bore offerings, giving environmentally conscious shooters an impressive choice for both clays and live quarry.

APPROX £365-£390 PER 1,000

SHOOTINGSTARCC.CO.UK

BASCHIERI & PELLAGRI

Legend Professional Steel

Designed to offer clay shooters a genuine lead-free alternative without compromising performance, Baschieri & Pellagri's Legend Professional Steel has been developed for Trap, Skeet and Sporting disciplines. Available in 24g and 28g loadings, the cartridge uses zinc-plated steel shot to improve corrosion resistance and deliver dense, consistent patterns. B&P's renowned F2 powder provides reliable velocities, while the company's Gordon recoil reduction system helps minimise felt recoil and shooter fatigue during long days on the clay ground. Available with either a traditional plastic wad or the biodegradable Green Core wad, Legend Professional Steel offers a refined shooting experience for use in suitable steel-proofed shotguns, making it an excellent choice for those making the transition away from lead. ■

PRICE: FROM £335

PER 1,000

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KEEPING HIS COOL

As temperatures soared and pressure mounted, Phil Gray delivered in the final hours to take a challenging victory at the 2026 Orston Masters. **Clare Young** reports

For much of the weekend, it looked like 116 was going to be the winning score at the 2026 Orston Masters.

A couple of impressive 116s had been sitting at the top of the leaderboard for most of the competition and, with temperatures climbing well into the late-20s, not many people fancied anyone finding enough extra targets to beat them. As more and more shooters came and went, the feeling around the ground was that the title race was all but settled.

But there was still one final twist to come. Phil Gray had other ideas. Holding his nerve when it mattered most, he put together a superb round to finish on 117 ex 120 and snatch the title by a single target. It was a performance that showed just how important consistency can be over a demanding Masters layout.

The three-day event attracted another strong entry and, despite the baking conditions, Orston once again delivered a course that tested every aspect of a shooter's game. The heat was relentless at times and certainly added another layer of difficulty, especially during the middle of the day when concentration became almost as important as shooting ability.

The shoot itself flowed well throughout the weekend, with competitors moving around the ground smoothly despite the large entry. Credit must go to the Orston team for producing a layout that challenged shooters without ever feeling unfair.

As always, a few stands generated plenty of discussion. Stand 6 was certainly one of them. The first bird, a green target quartering away and showing plenty of face, looked fairly inviting. Most shooters stepped into the cage thinking it was a good opportunity



to get off to a solid start.

Then came the left-to-right midi looper. It wasn't an outrageous target by any means, but judging exactly how far away it was proved surprisingly tricky. Some shooters got caught chasing it, while others gave it too much lead. It was one of those targets that looked straightforward enough until you missed it, and it accounted for plenty of losses over the course of the weekend.

The final stand also had a bigger say in the results than many expected. On first inspection it looked fairly routine, but standing there needing a score is a very different proposition. More than one competitor arrived knowing they were still in with a chance, only to let a target slip away under pressure. It was a reminder that no stand is easy when there's a title on the line.

That was really the theme of

the weekend. The targets were all there to be hit, but they demanded concentration from the first stand to the last. Those who stayed patient and trusted their shooting generally came out on top.

Away from the competition, the atmosphere around the ground was as good as ever. The pool shoot provided plenty of entertainment and Tony's collection of 'interesting' shirts over the weekend became something of a talking point, attracting almost as much attention as the shooting itself.

Overall, the 2026 Orston Masters was another excellent event. Great targets, a strong field, plenty of close competition and a worthy winner. Despite the heat, the shoot ran smoothly from start to finish and once again showed why the Orston Masters remains one of the standout fixtures on the sporting calendar. ■



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JACK PYKE ENGLISH OPEN

Clare Young reports on the 17th running of the Jack Pyke English Open delivers another memorable week at Sporting Targets

The Jack Pyke English Open once again delivered everything competitors have come to expect from a visit to Sporting Targets - first-class organisation, a friendly atmosphere and, above all, a course that showcased just how enjoyable sporting clays can be.

Now in its 17th year, the five-day event attracted a strong field to tackle a 120-target layout that began in the Plantation before winding its way onto the main ground. Alongside the main competition, the High Tower Challenge, Pool Stand and daily sponsor giveaways ensured there was plenty to keep shooters entertained both on and off the shooting line.

Although the weather kept

competitors guessing with sunshine one moment and passing showers the next, it did little to dampen spirits. Instead, conversations around the clubhouse focused on the quality of the targets and the creativity that has become a hallmark of Sporting Targets.

Starting at the far end of the ground, the course immediately set the tone. In a discipline where originality is increasingly difficult to achieve, the target setter once again produced a layout that rewarded commitment and good decision-making rather than simply relying on distance or speed. Every stand presented its own question, encouraging shooters to stay positive and trust their instincts.

The middle section quickly emerged as a favourite, with stands five, six and seven striking the perfect balance between challenge and enjoyment. Technical without becoming frustrating, they demanded concentration while remaining hugely satisfying to shoot. The closing stand provided a fitting finale, its flowing sequence reminiscent of Supersporting and ensuring the course finished on a high.

Competition at the top of the leaderboard was fierce, with Mark Fisher claiming Overall High Gun on an impressive 115. Bastien Havart, Phil Gray, Toby Reed and Mark Ivey shared the runner-up honours on 114, while Cheryl Hall secured the Ladies High Gun title with a superb 108.

Away from the scores, the event's sponsors played an equally important role in creating the experience competitors have come to enjoy. Daily giveaways from Jack Pyke, Swatcom, Shots & Company, Shellplant and Fitzjohn Estates proved as popular as ever, while Kevin Ovenden claimed the coveted Jack Pyke Golden Ticket, Zoe Bruce

successfully defended her SCS Haulage Guess the Mileage title to win 100 practice clays and Will Hillier took home the Fitzjohn Flash Clay prize.

Social media reflected the mood around the ground, with competitors quick to congratulate the winners while praising the originality of the targets, the quality of the presentations and the welcoming atmosphere. It reinforced what many already know – the Jack Pyke English Open is about far more than posting a score; it's an opportunity to catch up with friends, enjoy outstanding sporting targets and appreciate the effort that goes into producing one of the country's premier competitions.

Jack Pyke sponsored shooter Andy Crow said:

"What stood out for me was just how enjoyable the whole course was. There wasn't a single stand that felt out of place and every target encouraged you to stay positive and trust your plan. The middle section was a real highlight, with plenty to think about without ever feeling over the top, and the final stand was a brilliant way to finish the round. We had a couple of showers, but they soon passed and it turned into another fantastic English Open."

The Jack Pyke English Open continues to set the benchmark for a modern sporting competition. Creative target setting, generous sponsor support and a dedicated team behind the scenes combined to produce another memorable week at Sporting Targets, leaving competitors already looking forward to returning next year. ■



PHOTOGRAPHS: SPORTING TARGETS

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ORSTON'S NEW CHAPTER

After one year under new ownership, **Jasper Fellows** explores a reinvigorated Orston Shooting Ground

What happens when a multi-national, billion-dollar arms manufacturer buys up one of England's best clay grounds?

For many who have long loved Orston Shooting Ground, the news that the Germans were coming, in the form of Heckler & Koch, was a worry. Thankfully, just over a year later, we're pleased to report that Orston is operating with a surprising level of self-autonomy, while benefiting from the financial

backing most grounds can only dream of.

"H&K have enabled us to make positive changes to the grounds," says Rox Driver, Orston's marketing manager. "We're still self-sustaining whilst also having the support of a larger business to fall back on."

This independence has allowed key staff to remain in place doing what they do best, but with more resources than ever before. "(General manager and target setter) Paul Murgatroyd still has



serving English Skeet. These layouts are open to all and particularly popular for lessons both with our internal coaches and external coaches who use the grounds for their lessons."

When it comes to internal coaches, Orston has a stable of highly experienced instructors, each with their own specialities. "Andrew Watson is great with both game and clay disciplines and is well known for his enthusiastic nature. He tends to be the go-to for students looking to improve their game skills," says Rox.

"Dave Grayson is a cheery northern chap with a strong background in the national and international competitive scenes, so he's a great choice for those looking to boost scores and iron out bad habits.

"Last but certainly not least, we have Steve Spiers. Steve competes with the Leicestershire Police Clay Shooting Team and is particularly welcoming to new shooters who might be a bit nervous."

"We take great pride in helping new shooters onto the stands. From the off we will guide them through every aspect of gun safety and help them to understand each part of the gun, how to disassemble and clean it, and essentially how to know one end of a shotgun from the other.

"Our instructors can then explain all the different disciplines they might encounter. Finally, our team can guide clients through the process of licence application and then see it all the way through by joining them in our onsite gunroom to buy their first gun."

Whether a beginner, or longtime shooter who's shied away from the podium, Orston also encourages shooters to dive into its packed competitive calendar.



freedom in his work, so our usual high standard of practice targets and competitions have remained and even improved," continues Rox.

"Take our biggest events as an example. We are continuing to run The Orston Masters, but last year we hosted our first annual HK Cup. This is an even larger competition, with a bumper prize pool thanks to the sponsorship provided by our parent company."

As Rox hints, the practice targets are looking better than ever too.

"We run up to 25 Sporting stands at any one time," she explains.

"Thirteen of these are utilised for our CPSA registered competitions, with nine usually set as training stands and ideal for warm-ups or beginners.

"The targets are adjusted every week or so, but if we have a competition, then Paul will usually keep those targets in place for at least the following week.

"Alongside our Sporting course, we also have two Skeet layouts





"Everyone should shoot a competition at least once," says Rox. "Naturally, we can provide appropriate competition readiness tuition, or shooters can get involved with our weekly Friday Club sessions.

"Friday Club participants arrive for lunch with Paul Murgatroyd, then

shoot 100 targets in a low stakes 'dry run' of our competition stands. It's a brilliant way to get used to a competition setting without having to worry about the pressure of trying to climb the podium."

So, the sporting course remains, tuition opportunities abound for shooters at all levels, and

the competition calendar has been expanded. But what of the clubhouse facilities?

"The biggest change our visitors will notice is that our shop is now run by the team from The Simpson Brothers Gun Shop. They're well known for their brilliant shooting knowledge, and Marcus, Holly,





Dan, Harry and Timmy the dog have slotted right into Team Orston.

"They stock a wide range of major brands including Blaser, Browning, Beretta, Swatcom and Clayclo. I could go on. Even if you're on the hunt for something not in stock, then the team will be able to source it from their Wittering store or from their wider network. They also have access to a gunsmith at their main site, so can handle restoration and repair jobs too."

For the rest of the clubhouse, we will just have to wait and see as renovations are currently underway,

with the final plans currently under wraps. What we can say is that Sarah of Snax & Shooters is still here serving up refreshments to hungry visitors.

"Sarah is currently working on a slightly limited menu because of the renovations, but she's still making a banging Full English!"

While corporate takeovers have a reputation for being cold, profit-focused affairs, the stereotype could not be further from the truth here in Nottinghamshire. From the welcoming atmosphere to the cooked breakfasts, the warmth remains at Orston.



"We believe that our targets are exceptional and that's what keeps people coming back," concludes Rox. "But it's the staff and customers that make Orston what it is. We're very community-driven and are proud to have a brilliant relationship with our shooters."

"Some of our customers have been returning to Orston for 40 years, and we hope that our newer members will still be here, shooting with us, through the next four decades and beyond!" ■

WHO'S WHO?

General manager Paul Murgatroyd sets the targets and oversees the business, alongside Gaynor Ellward. Leoni Grant co-ordinates tuition, events and competitions from the back office, where Roxanne Driver boosts business as the marketing manager. Russell Fisher is the groundsman, while Andrew Watson, Steve Spiers and Dave Grayson make up the tuition team.

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Web: www.orston.com

TUITION

Lessons are available from £70 per hour, exclusive of 25 clays and cartridges. An additional shooter can join for £20. Discounts are available for Juniors or when booking a course of six or more lessons.

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Standard membership is £60 per year. Benefits include reduced clay and cartridge prices and golf buggy rates, entry into monthly prize draws, and 'buy in' opportunities for exclusive members-only events. Premium membership is £225 per year and additionally includes free gun hire and storage, complimentary tickets to members-only events, and a free one-hour lesson.



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EATON HALL FINDS ITS TOPGUN

The biggest prize fund in UK clay shooting history drew thousands of shooters to Derbyshire for nine days of competition. ***Sporting Gun*** reports on Eaton Hall's debut TopGun – and the unlikely champion it produced



Nick Hendrick on
the Finals Day
Sporting Layout

Eaton Hall set out to answer a deliberately provocative question: stripped of class advantages and home comfort, who is the best all-round shot? It was an audacious thing for a first-year competition to ask. "It will find out who the real top gun is," said Amy Phillimore, who owns the Derbyshire ground with her husband Syd. The event delivered its verdict on 14 June, when Hungarian Tamás Jéri was crowned the first Overall TopGun Champion – and walked away with £40,000 of a record £400,000 prize fund, £45,000 in all once his class win was added.

That made TopGun the biggest-money clay shoot ever staged in Britain, and it drew a field to match. Running from 6 to 14 June, it attracted over 1,000 entries for the main event and a further 700 for the companion Sportrap, in only the ground's second season of operation – among them established names such as Brett Winstanley and Phil Gray, alongside hundreds of club shots chasing a share of the pot.

CASH, NOT KIT

The defining decision was to pay in cash. "No one's ever done a cash shoot like this in England," says Sam Hargreaves of Eaton Hall. "They do them all over the world – the UAE, America, France – but not here. Other competitions tell you there's a massive prize pool, and when you whittle it down it's shotguns and cartridges. People who win guns in competitions tend to sell them straight back to us in the shop. So it was important for us that every winner here walked away with cash."

The money ran deep. Every class winner took £5,000, second £4,000 and third £3,000, with payouts down to 20th place and every finalist guaranteed at least £250 – a structure built for a community that knows the true cost of competing. A further £180,000 had been set aside for a perfect score in the Super Final, a bonus that ultimately went unclaimed. The prize fund, though, was only



Finals Day included 25 challenging Compak targets



The debut TopGun winner Tamás Jéri





Mark Winsor tosses cartridge while waiting to complete the Skeet layout

half the ambition. "Our biggest concern was making it an event, not just a clay competition," Sam says. The answer was a trade village, food and music laid on daily, Top Gun film lines on every stand, and pool shoots with serious payouts – among them a 100-metre target christened "mission impossible", to be taken on with a Benelli, with four guns going to anyone who could break it.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF TEST

The main event was an English sporting competition over 250 targets, 125 a day across two days, shot in four rotations – a format that proved its worth when the weather turned. "One day was torrential rain, the next was wind," Sam says. "But everyone shot in rotations, so it hit the group, not the result." From those rotations, the top five of each lettered class and the top two of the ladies, colts, junior, veteran and super-veteran categories went through to finals day. Crucially, CPSA registration was not required; anyone could enter, and the field



James Attwood shot 125/125 in the Sportrap qualifier and final



Scoreboard pressure for the Super Final qualifiers

On the closing pairs, shooters called targets worth up to eight points apiece. Tamás played the percentages, taking the five and six every time; Emma went hunting, picking off the harder sevens and eights, and stayed level to the final pair. "She could have shot the five and six, finished equal and forced a shoot-off," Sam says. "Instead she went for the six and eight, hit the six and missed the eight. Everyone was gutted – but she went for the win." It was the performance of the day, and it left the title to the Hungarian, as the Red Arrows tore overhead to close the show.

THE CHAMPION

Tamás makes an improbable champion. The 32-year-old danced competitively from the age of eight and, by his own account, was the best ballroom dancer in Hungary by 18 - before quitting the sport as he felt scores were settled by politics rather than performance. Two months later he picked up a shotgun for the first time; six months after that he took silver at a world championship in Russia. What followed was



came from Ireland, Scotland and France as well as the length of England. "The number of people from all over blew us out of the water," says Amy.

Running alongside it was the Sportrap Challenge, 125 targets across five layouts with a prize fund and trophy of its own, decided the day before the main final. The ground even built a stage for the occasion: a brand-new Sporting course, a year in the making, carved from neglected woodland at the foot of the property and left deliberately unshot, so the first shooters to walk it did so with no sighting advantage. Its setters, Clive Bramley and Jamie Peckham, produced targets unlike anything regulars had seen. "The attention to detail on the new course is second to none," Amy says. The real departure, though, was the final: qualifiers would not simply shoot more sporting but face disciplines most had rarely touched.

DOWN TO THE LAST PAIR

Finals day stripped the field to a single, merciless examination. The

qualifiers shot 125 targets spanning 25 skeet, 25 Olympic trap, 25 Compak and 50 Sporting; the top five of each class then shot off on the main stage for a place in the super final. In AAA class – Nick Hendrick, Mark Winsor, Richard Faulds, Dave Ferriman and Tamás – drew in a huge crowd, with David and Tamás tying with only one pair to go.

The following Super Final was the format Eaton Hall had gambled the week on, and the part commentator Sam was most nervous about putting on a live broadcast. Class winners from C up to AAA went head to head, the lower classes handed a points start while Tamás, at the summit, began with nothing in hand. "The handicap system worked really well," Sam says. "It proved an A-class shooter can take on a AAA shooter."

One very nearly did. Emma Stacy, two classes below Tamás, matched him target for target in front of 700 spectators on the grandstand and 25,000 watching the live stream.



Emma Stacy thrilled the crowd in the Super Final



Tamás raises the inaugural TopGun trophy

12 years and a cabinet of world and European FITASC titles, won largely on the Continent.

Shooting a Perazzi High Tech with Baschieri & Pellagri cartridges, he had not expected to feature on the leaderboard, having already booked his flight home before the final.

He was generous in victory and unequivocal about the venue: "That was the best organised competition I have ever been to. Every detail was on point. I found no mistake" – praise that carries weight from a man who has run two world championships of his own at his shooting ground back home. The cash winnings, he confirmed, will go towards the house he is building.

THE STATEMENT

For Eaton Hall, only in its second season, TopGun was a statement of intent. The ground has already hosted the British, England selection shoots and the BUCS universities final, and its team – more than 40 referees across nine days, planning begun the previous November – delivered



700 spectators gathered to watch the Super Final

a debut that exceeded its own expectations. Every member played a part, from the course setters to John the gardener. "The buzz," Amy had promised, "is going to be really good." On the evidence of its first year, the question she set out to answer has a habit of producing the right result – and a champion nobody saw coming. ■

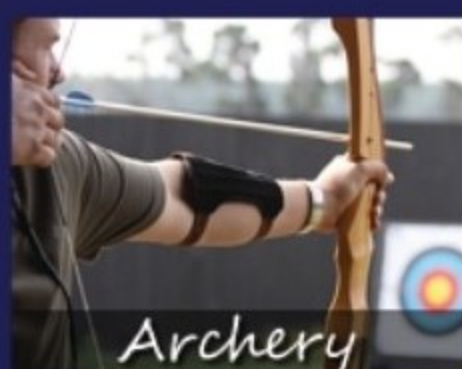


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A photograph of three dogs looking out from the open side door of a dark-colored vehicle. On the left, a golden retriever's head is visible, looking out. In the center, a black spaniel with long, curly ears is looking out. On the right, a brown and white spaniel is also looking out. The dogs are sitting on a grey, textured mat. The background shows the interior of the vehicle and some structural elements.

THE DOGS THAT MADE ME

Guest editor **Ben Randall** reflects on the dogs that shaped his life, career and understanding of training

I People often ask me how many dogs I have had over the years, and the honest answer is that I do not really know. Over more than 30 years,

I have bred puppies, kept puppies, trained young dogs on, won trials with different dogs, bought dogs in for clients, developed them, and sold dogs all over the world. Some became very successful,

some taught me hard lessons, and some never became famous at all, but every one of them added something to my understanding.

The biggest lesson dogs have taught me is honesty. If a dog does



not stop on the whistle, take a cast, hold an area or do the job I ask of it, the easiest thing in the world is to blame the dog. Most of the time, if I am truthful, the fault sits with me. I have moved too quickly, missed a step, or failed to finish a piece of the

training before asking for more. Dogs have a very good way of showing you the gaps in your system.

I have also learnt that the dogs that stay with you are not always the ones that won the most. Some stay with you because they changed your

career. Some stay with you because they changed how you train. Some stay with you because of a single moment. Others stay with you simply because of who they were around the house. These are a few of the dogs that have shaped me.

TESSA LABRADOR

Tessa was where it really started for me. She was our family labrador, and the dog I remember watching on the Somerset Levels with my father, Keith. At home, she was very much part of the family, but out on the marshes she became something completely different.

I can still remember watching her retrieve ducks and geese and being completely taken in by it. It was not about competition, rosettes or pressure. It was simply a dog doing the job she was bred to do, in the place she was meant to do it. That had a huge effect on me as a young lad.

Tessa was not a famous dog, but she gave me the first feeling that gundogs were something I wanted to understand. She showed me that a dog could be a companion at home and still have a real purpose in the field. In many ways, she lit the fuse for everything that followed.

GROUSE SPRINGER SPANIEL

Grouse was a young black-and-white springer spaniel, and he belongs to those early years when every day out with a dog felt exciting. He was keen, busy and full of natural enthusiasm, and he gave me one of those memories that never really leaves you.

What I remember most about Grouse is not a big title or a famous win. It is the feeling he gave me as a young dog man: that excitement of watching a spaniel hunt, flush and retrieve, and realising how addictive good dog work can be. He was part of the stage where I was learning by being out there, making mistakes, watching dogs and slowly beginning to understand what made them tick.

Some dogs teach you through great success. Others teach you by giving you a spark. Grouse gave me that spark. He made me want to get out more, train more and learn more. That is a powerful thing for any young trainer.



Nell often
accompanied
Ben & Jack stalking

MOLLIE SPRINGER SPANIEL

Mollie was the first dog that made me feel I might genuinely have a future in field trialling. She was a little white springer spaniel bitch with plenty of natural ability, and looking back now, she probably carried me more than I realised at the time.

The interesting thing with Mollie is that I often think about how differently I would train her today. That is not a criticism of the dog; it is more a reflection of how much she taught me. At that stage, I was young, confident and probably in more of a rush than I should have been. Mollie had the talent to get away with some of my mistakes, and that is something you only really understand years later.

She gave me belief, but she also taught me that ability alone is not enough. A talented dog can win for you, but it can also hide the gaps in your training. With more experience, I now realise that the

very best dogs are not just the ones that win; they are the ones that make you look back and think harder about yourself as a trainer.

Mollie opened doors for me, but more importantly, she started to open my eyes.

FATTY COCKER SPANIEL

Fatty changed everything for me. She was my cocker spaniel bitch, and without question one of the most important dogs of my life. Winning the Cocker Championship with her in 2011 was an incredible moment, but to go back and win it again in 2012, back-to-back, is something that will stay with me forever.

There are very few dogs that can change the direction of a person's career, but Fatty did that for me. She had drive, heart, game-finding ability and that extra bit of magic that is hard to explain. Some dogs are good because they are well trained. Some are good because

they are naturally talented. The special ones have something beyond that, and Fatty had it.

She was not a machine. She had character, fire and her own way about her, but when we were together and everything lined up, she made me feel that anything was possible. Dogs like that do not come along often. When they do, you have to appreciate them.

Fatty gave me some of the greatest moments I have ever had with a dog, but she also gave me responsibility. Once you have had a dog like that, you realise how much you owe them. She raised the standard for me, and I will always be grateful for that.

WIGEON LABRADOR

Wigeon was one of my black labradors and a very special bitch. She was used extensively over a five-year period when I was running my walked-up field trial training

days, and she made a real name for herself during that time.

She was my go-to dog. Over those years, many Field Trial Champions and Field Trial Winners were trained and developed on those days, and Wigeon played a huge part in that. If a bird was clipped and landed 300 yards away, everyone knew Wigeon would be there and back in seconds. She had that incredible ability to mark, travel and get the job done quickly and honestly.

What made her so valuable was her reliability. On training days, especially with young or inexperienced dogs, you need a dog you can trust when the pressure comes on. Wigeon was that dog for me. She was not just useful; she was essential. She gave confidence to the day, picked the difficult birds, and showed exactly what a proper labrador should be.

She was one of those dogs that quietly built a reputation by doing the job properly, day after day. To me, that is every bit as important as winning a title. Wigeon earned her place in people's memories because she delivered when it mattered.

NELL LABRADOR

Nell was another black labrador of mine and a real character. She was a wonderful working dog, but her greatest chapter probably came later, when she retired into the house with my wife, Nikki. From that point on, she became what Nikki always called her "lottery labrador".

That summed Nell up perfectly. She was the ultimate family pet and the ultimate companion for Nikki. She would walk to heel off the lead in any environment, settle beautifully in the house, and then spend her evenings asleep on the sofa with Nikki watching films. She had that rare quality of being completely trustworthy, completely kind and completely part of the family.

I have always loved labradors that can live properly in the house and still carry themselves like proper dogs. Nell had that in abundance. She was calm, honest, loyal and full of character, but above all else, she was loved.

She left us too early, and she is missed every day. Some dogs leave a gap because of what they

achieved. Nell left a gap because of what she meant.

TWEED BORDER TERRIER

Tweed is our Border terrier, and although she is not a gundog, she absolutely deserves her place here. She is an absolute legend in the house. Terriers have a completely different view of life from most dogs. They are tough, funny, stubborn, loyal and usually convinced they are far more important than everyone else.

Tweed has mastered that. She has huge character and probably believes she runs the place. To be fair, she may not be completely wrong. One of the funniest things about her is the relationship she has with my father, Keith, who lives with my mother, Jenny, in the annex next to the main house. Every morning, when Tweed is let out early for a wee, she goes straight to what we call Grandpa's door and waits there to be let in for a treat.

In the evening, once my parents have finished dinner, she takes herself back over and spends most of the night in there next to the log burner. I would like to think it is because she loves Grandpa's company, but I suspect it may also have something to do with the biscuits he has with his cup of tea last thing at night.

That is Tweed all over. She has worked out exactly where she wants to be, who is most likely to spoil her, and how to make herself part of everybody's routine. Dogs do not always have to win trials, pick game or perform in the field to leave a mark on you. Some just make the house better, and Tweed does that every day.

ROE BAVARIAN MOUNTAIN HOUND

Roe is our Bavarian Mountain Hound, and she arrived in our lives in a slightly unexpected way. I first fell in love with the breed while stalking in Scotland with a friend

Fatty, one of Ben's career changing cocker spaniels





who had two of them. I remember him saying to me, "If you ever have one of these, they get under your skin." He was absolutely right.

A year or so later, he surprised me with a puppy, and that puppy became Roe. I had big plans for her to become a serious deer-stalking companion, but once she arrived home, everyone fell in love with her. The result is that she has never seen a deer in her life.

That probably tells you everything you need to know about Roe. She was meant to become a working tracking dog, but she became part of the family instead. I sometimes laugh about that, but I would not change it. She has a lovely, unusual nature and a way of making people fall for her very quickly.

Roe is a reminder that dogs do not always become what you planned. Sometimes they become exactly what your family needed.

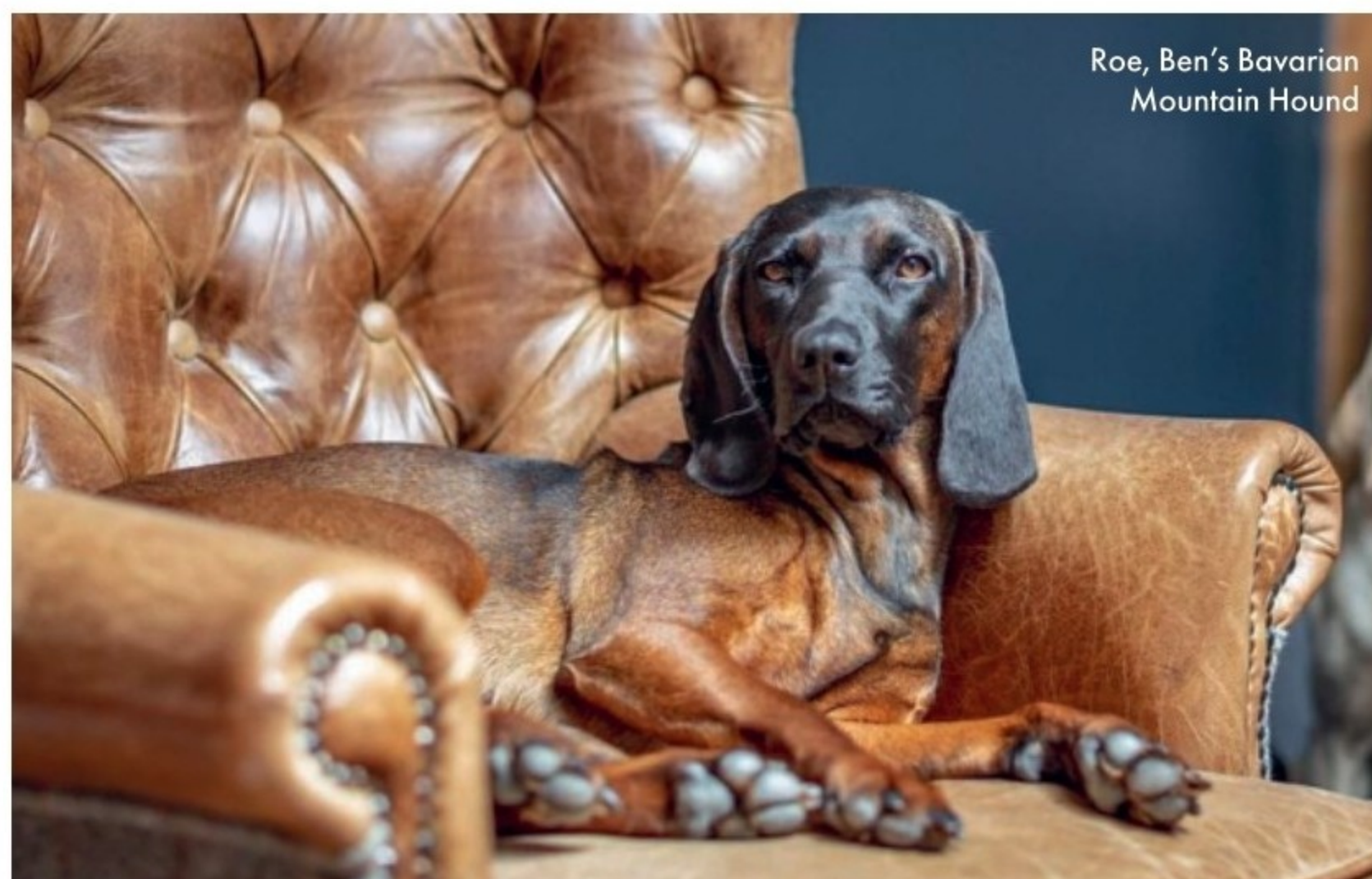
Looking back, I realise that every important dog in my life has left me

with something different. Tessa gave me the beginning. Grouse gave me excitement. Mollie gave me belief. Fatty changed my career. Wigeon gave me trust. Nell gave us love.

Tweed gives us laughter. Roe gives us something completely different again.

That is the wonderful thing about dogs. They all arrive with something to teach us, but we rarely know

what the lesson is at the time. Only years later do we look back and realise how much they shaped us. I have been lucky enough to train, handle and live with many dogs, but the best ones never really leave you. They stay in your habits, your standards, your memories and, if you are very lucky, in the person you become. ■



Roe, Ben's Bavarian Mountain Hound



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BEYOND THE GUNDOG

Ben Randall's forthcoming book, *Beyond the Gundog* delves into the mindset of the handler, offering a practical, honest and thought-provoking insight into the craft of gundog training

In his forthcoming book, *Beyond the Gundog*, Ben Randall draws on more than three decades of experience training, competing, judging and working alongside gundogs to explore what truly creates a successful working dog. Rather than focusing on commands, drills or quick

fixes, the book examines the foundations that underpin good gundog work: understanding, timing, patience, consistency and, perhaps most importantly, the relationship between dog and handler.

For more than 25 years, Ben has also studied human psychology, and that influence runs throughout

the book. *Beyond the Gundog* encourages handlers to look beyond the dog itself and consider their own decisions, reactions and responsibilities. Was the dog genuinely disobedient, or was the lesson unclear? Was the mistake really the dog's fault, or did it begin with the handler's timing, pressure, expectations or lack of preparation?



A Panel Spaniel Judge, field trial competitor and shoot-day handler, Ben brings together practical experience from every corner of the gundog world. His approach is built on clarity, fairness and structure, combined with an ability to understand both the dog and the person standing behind it.

The book follows the complete journey of developing a working dog, from early foundations and everyday manners through to hunting, steadiness, retrieving, shooting over dogs and problem-solving under pressure. It examines the situations that truly test both dog and handler, whether on a busy shoot day, in the excitement of game, or in those moments when weaknesses in training begin to appear.

Central to *Beyond the Gundog* is the belief that many training problems cannot be solved simply by blaming the dog. Instead, Ben

challenges readers to think honestly about how issues develop, how mistakes are repeated and how a better understanding of the training process can prevent them from happening again. Throughout the book, handlers are encouraged to ask themselves difficult but important questions: Was I fair? Was I clear? Did I rush the process? Did I expect too much, too soon?

The book also examines the responsibilities that come with professional dog training. In an age where training advice is readily available online, often without context or proven experience behind it, newcomers can easily become overwhelmed by conflicting opinions. Ben discusses the importance of finding trainers whose methods are not only effective, but grounded in genuine experience, practical results and a deep understanding of working dogs.

For Ben, the responsibility of



The author and guest editor for this issue

a trainer extends far beyond producing results with their own dogs. The methods they promote, the standards they demonstrate and the advice they give can shape the next generation of handlers. Good training should not simply impress; it should educate, guide and help safeguard the future standards of gundog work.

Beyond training itself, the book reflects on the traditions, standards and etiquette that surround the sport. From behaviour on shoot days to respect for quarry, ground, keepers, guns and fellow handlers, Ben argues that producing a capable dog is only part of the equation. Equally important is developing responsible, knowledgeable and respectful handlers.

Throughout the book, Ben shares the lessons, dogs and experiences that have shaped his own journey. Some achieved notable success, while others taught quieter but equally valuable lessons about patience, humility, trust and partnership. At its heart, *Beyond the Gundog* is about understanding the process behind the finished picture.

Written for both new and experienced handlers, it offers a practical, honest and thought-provoking insight into the craft of gundog training. Ultimately, it is a book about training dogs, but perhaps more importantly, it is a book about understanding ourselves as handlers, teachers and custodians of the next generation.

Further details on the release of *Beyond the Gundog* will be announced in due course on sporting-gun.com and on Ben's social media pages. ■



BENELLI LUPO ALPHA

With its radical 3D-printed skeletal stock, lightweight chassis system and sub-MOA performance with lead-free ammunition, this new Benelli is one of the most distinctive modern stalking rifles on the market, writes **Bruce Potts**

There are periods within the shooting world that genuinely mark a progression in firearms development. Having tested rifles for more than 35 years, I can appreciate when a



TECH SPECIFICATIONS

MANUFACTURER: Benelli
MODEL: Lupo Alpha
TYPE: Bolt-action
CALIBRE: .308 Win tested
BARREL LENGTH: 20in, 1-in-10in twist
OVERALL LENGTH: 40in
FINISH: BE.S.T Dark Grey Matte and Crio
STOCK: 3D-printed polymer
MAGAZINE: Five-shot detachable polymer
TRIGGER: Single-stage
WEIGHT: 2.6kg
PRICE: £1,950
CONTACT: www.sportsmanguncentre.co.uk

Combined with the ultra-smooth bolt operation and Benelli's patented BE.S.T surface treatment, which carries a 25-year corrosion warranty, the Lupo Alpha is a very hard act to follow at £1,950.

SPECIFICATION

The Benelli Lupo has an unusual action design and personally I really like it. On this Alpha model, where weight saving is key, extensive scalloping and machining along the action sides help reduce unnecessary mass while also giving the rifle a very modern appearance.

Attached to the receiver is a one-piece aluminium Picatinny rail, allowing straightforward mounting of conventional optics, thermal devices or NV units.

One feature often overlooked on Benelli rifles is the quality of the metal finish. The Alpha benefits from the company's superb BE.S.T treatment, wearing a satin black and grey finish that is exceptionally resistant to corrosion, scratching and poor weather. The bolt body itself is gloss black and extremely hard wearing. For stalkers spending long periods outdoors in miserable conditions, this finish is a genuine asset.

Lupo actions are quirky, yes, but they are also extremely pleasing to operate. Again, weight reduction is clearly part of the design philosophy, with the bolt body heavily scalloped and paired with an elliptical three-lug bolt head producing a short 60-degree lift. The polymer bolt shroud incorporates a red cocking indicator and the whole action cycles incredibly smoothly without binding.

I particularly like the tang-mounted safety which, when engaged, can still allow the bolt to



manufacturer brings something genuinely different to the table rather than simply re-stocking or tweaking an existing model.

Benelli has always been one of my favourite manufacturers because the company pays little attention to trends or what everyone else is doing. Instead, it treads its own path and produces rifles that shooters and stalkers genuinely appreciate once they understand the thought and engineering behind them.

Every Benelli I have tested has exceeded expectations and, judging by the deer that have

passed through my larder over the years, the company has produced another very special rifle with the Lupo Alpha.

This Alpha model is a real revelation when you look at what is currently available on the sporting rifle market. Benelli has taken the normal genre of rifle design and completely tipped it on its head. First up is the radically designed skeletal stock, produced using 3D-printed polymer technology, making this one of the lightest chassis-based sporting rifles available today.



be opened via a small side lever while the rifle remains safely on. It is a very practical arrangement.

The dog-legged bolt handle is another sensible touch. It protrudes enough for a confident grip but not so much that it constantly snags on clothing or vegetation. Old-school perhaps, but it works.

Barrel weight can make or break a lightweight stalking rifle in terms of handling, harmonics and accuracy. Benelli has sensibly opted against a carbon-wrapped design, instead using a lightweight steel barrel treated with the company's CRIO

process to improve stress relief, thermal stability and longevity.

The Alpha's barrel measures just 20in, which I think suits the .308 Win chambering perfectly. The barrel profile is very slim, tapering from 26mm at the action down to just 15.4mm at the muzzle, creating an exceptionally lively rifle. Naturally, after six to eight quick shots it benefits from cooling, but that is hardly an issue in genuine hunting situations.

The barrel is fully free-floated and threaded 5/8in UNEF for moderator fitment.

THE STOCK

Now to the really interesting part of this rifle. I admit I am quite conservative when it comes to rifle design, but genuine innovation deserves recognition and this Alpha stock is something genuinely special.

Benelli has looked at conventional stock production and simply decided to do things differently. Rather than moulding together two synthetic halves or machining away material from a traditional stock blank, the Alpha uses 3D-printed polymer technology to build the stock structure upwards layer by layer. The result is a skeletal honeycomb design that is both visually striking and remarkably lightweight while still retaining rigidity and strength.

At only 2.6kg, or 5.7lb, the Alpha is currently one of the lightest chassis-style sporting rifles available. The two-piece stock attaches to a central aluminium chassis system, providing a stable bedding platform while maintaining excellent balance and handling.

Visually, the stock has an almost organic, bird-skeleton appearance. It looks unlike anything else currently on the stalking market and creates a huge visual impact while serving a very practical purpose in reducing weight.

The dark grey anodised chassis follows Benelli's familiar angular styling and incorporates further scalloping and cutaways to remove excess material. The detachable five-shot polymer magazine integrates neatly into the design and feeds flawlessly.

The stock is also highly adjustable. Comb height can be altered using interchangeable comb inserts, while length of pull can be adjusted from 13.75in to 15in via supplied spacers, allowing the rifle to fit a wide range of shooters.

The textured finish eliminates the need for aggressive chequering and provides excellent grip in poor weather, while Benelli's Progressive Comfort recoil pad system does an excellent job of softening recoil from the .308 chambering.

TRIGGER

Accuracy can easily be ruined by a poor trigger, but Benelli generally gets this right and the Alpha is no exception. The single-stage trigger

BENELLI LUPO ALPHA



A very striking and unusual looking rifle



on test broke crisply at 2lb 3oz and felt very predictable in use. It is adjustable between 650g and 1,650g should shooters wish to alter it, while the trigger blade itself can also be adjusted slightly using supplied spacers.

AMMO TEST

Let's be honest here – I am an old fart these days and I have seen plenty of rifles come and go over the decades, but this rifle genuinely gets the pulse racing a bit. Given the direction of future legislation, I tested



the Alpha exclusively with lead-free ammunition.

The standout load was Hornady's 125gr ECX ammunition, which I rate very highly. Velocity averaged an impressive 2,996fps for 2,492ft/lb of energy, while three shots grouped into just 0.45in. Exceptional performance from factory ammunition.

Next came two Sako Powerhead Blade loads. The heavier 162gr version grouped into around 1.25in at 2,567fps and 2,370ft/lb, but the lighter 130gr Blade Pro loads were much tighter. Velocity averaged 2,870fps for 2,376ft/lb and sub-MOA accuracy, making these a strong hunting option.

The aluminium chassis system is the heart of this modular design with plenty of cutaways and scallops



The trigger is adjustable, and you can see the tang sliding safety and extra safety button are conveniently placed

Norma Eco Strike 150gr loads also shot very well, producing sub-MOA groups at 2,722fps and 2,468ft/lb of energy.

RWS HIT ammunition continued the trend. In .308 Win I generally favour lighter lead-free bullets and the 130gr version produced excellent 0.55in groups alongside 2,585fps and 2,403ft/lb.



Overall, the Alpha clearly favoured lighter lead-free bullets and delivered consistently impressive accuracy throughout testing.

IN THE FIELD

No surprise then that I selected the Hornady ECX loads for a late-season Chinese water deer outing.

CWD generally bed in ditches and hedgerows at field margins and are always alert to danger. Conditions were typically wet underfoot – quiet for stalking perhaps, but less enjoyable once my wellies started leaking.

Using the excellent Pulsar Symbion DXT50 multispectral binoculars, I carefully worked my way into position overlooking a roughly 100-yard-wide field bordered by dense scrub and a known bedding area.

Resting the Alpha on a Harris bipod immediately highlighted one of the rifle's greatest strengths – its effortless handling. The rifle feels incredibly light and manoeuvrable without sacrificing stability.

I initially spotted deer around 180 yards away on the Pulsars, but moments later another doe suddenly appeared just 20 yards downwind before bolting across the field. Thankfully she had not fully identified my position.

After another 30 minutes, during which a fox also appeared to test my patience, the doe finally re-emerged at 93 yards. The Alpha came smoothly onto aim and, with the ECX load, dropped her cleanly where she stood, validating the Alpha's hunting credentials perfectly.

CONCLUSION

Benelli rifles are always interesting to test because they genuinely offer something different while still remaining practical and highly effective in the field.

The Lupo Alpha combines extremely lightweight handling with excellent ergonomics, superb lead-free accuracy and genuine all-weather capability. Some shooters may initially question the radical stock design, but once used properly in the field it becomes very easy to appreciate the thinking behind it.

From static ambushes to woodland stalking or hill work, the Alpha handles beautifully and carries effortlessly.

Considering the amount of innovation and engineering involved, it also represents excellent value for money.

If you want a lightweight stalking rifle that genuinely stands apart from the crowd while still delivering where it matters most, the Benelli Lupo Alpha deserves a place near the very top of the list. ■



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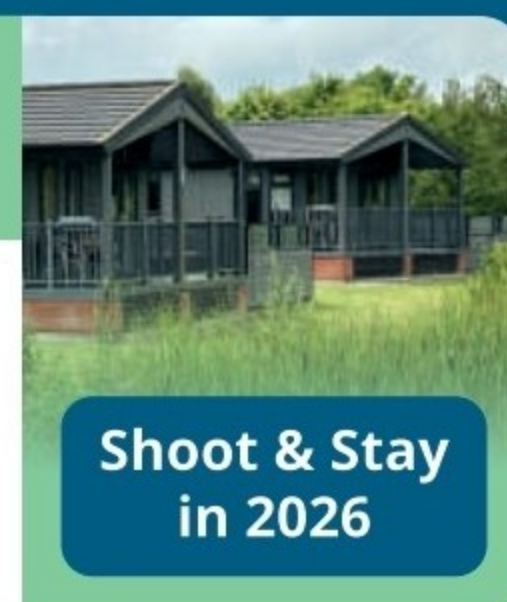
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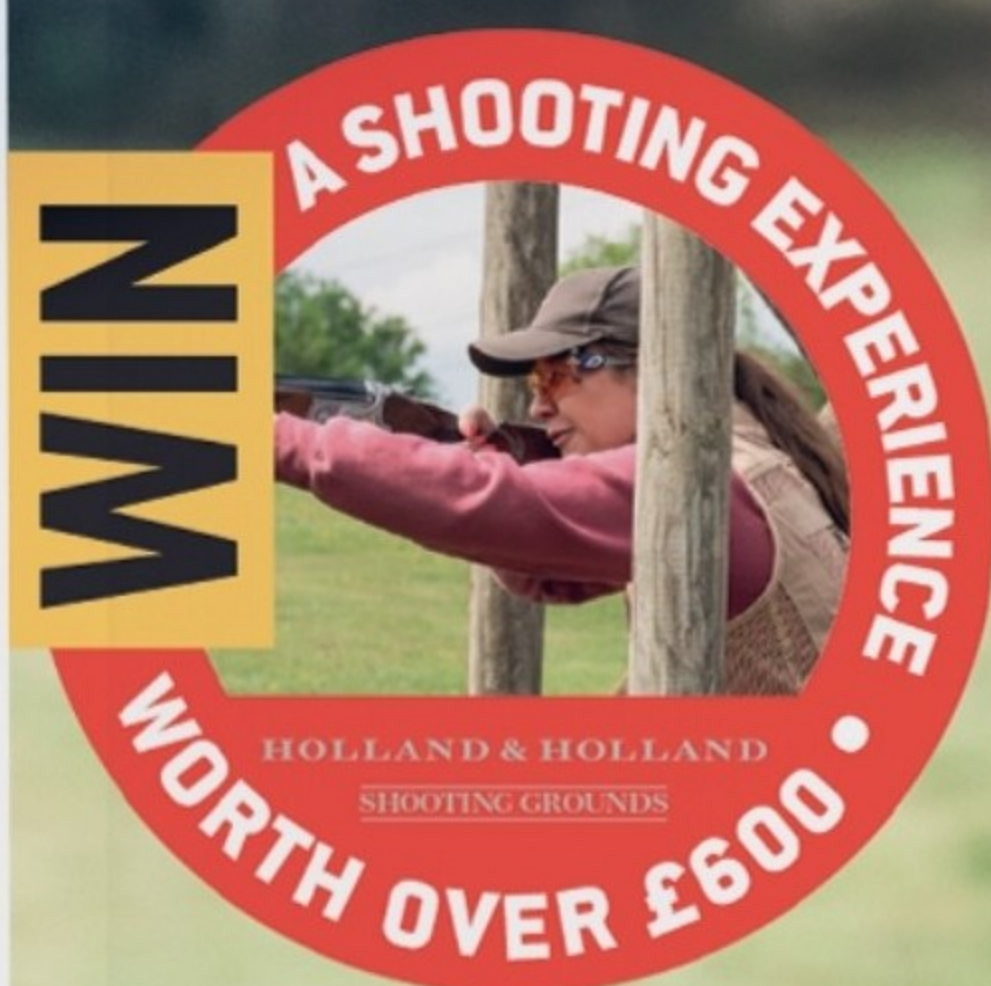
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in a heatwave

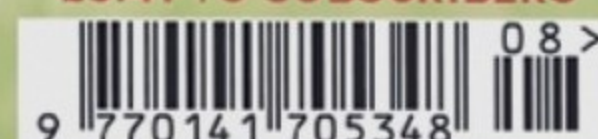
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DEER STALKING

A man with a mustache, wearing a tan baseball cap with a deer head logo, sunglasses, a dark green short-sleeved button-down shirt, and a camouflage-patterned tactical vest, stands with his hands on his hips in a field of tall, dry grass. He is also wearing a brown leather belt and a black wristwatch on his left wrist.

GOING MY OWN WAY

Raised among working dogs and country sports experiences, son of this issue's guest editor **Jack Randall** has turned a lifelong passion into a vocation of his own. Here, he reflects on the lessons learned from the field, the responsibilities of deer management and his ambitions for the future



I have grown up in the countryside and around working dogs, shooting and stalking. It has been more than a part of my life, it is my way of life. My earliest memories are of days out with my father, his gundogs and an air rifle, shooting rabbits, watching dogs work and learning without realising how much I was taking in. Looking back now, those early years in the field taught me far more than I knew. They taught me patience, observation, respect for animals and the importance of doing things properly.

My stalking journey only really began when I was out with my father at the beginning of August, when I shot my first roe buck. It was late evening and we had just watched the sun begin to set, piercing through the clouds and creating an unforgettable sky. We were on a stubble field resting on

a bale, with Nell, our labrador, sat quietly by our side. She was patient and still, her eyes fixed towards the woodland edge. She knew the deer was there. She could sense it and understood exactly what was unfolding. I remember really trying to take everything in, the fading light, the cool breeze, the ducks on the nearby pond and the geese flying low overhead. We waited anxiously, knowing we were losing the evening light.

But we were in luck. A young buck stepped out from the woodland edge and hesitantly made its way across the field. It dodged between the bales and rarely stood still long enough to offer a shot. As the light continued to fade, my adrenaline continued to build. Everything felt still and perfectly set. A small whistle from dad and the buck turned broadside, looking in our direction, I knew I didn't have long before it took its next step. I could feel my heart

beating in my throat. I released the safety, took a deep breath to steady myself, and squeezed. I remember looking up to see the buck running and I thought I had missed, but then I saw him slow down and begin to look unsteady on his feet. And after a few seconds – what felt like minutes – the deer dropped.

I still remember the feeling of my heart pounding, and the pulse in my neck. My hands still shook minutes after the shot and I was overwhelmed with emotions. It was not a feeling of joy for taking a life, but one of achieving something I had dreamed of, and an understanding of the seriousness of the moment. It is a feeling that never fades with every deer I have shot since, and one that makes you realise just how special this sport is.

From that moment onwards, I truly understood what deer stalking was all about. It was never simply about taking an animal's life, but about the entire experience. The sights, the

Jack now manages his own ground in Herefordshire



Jack has enjoyed three trips to South Africa for plains game hunting

smells, the sounds, the appreciation of the environment, and those moments shared with friends, family and companions like Nell.

Since then, I have gone on to shoot many deer and complete both DSC Level 1 and DSC Level 2 qualifications, but it hasn't changed the way I see stalking like I thought it might. It is not about numbers for their own sake, nor about making something serious appear fashionable. It is about stewardship and being fully immersed in nature. It comes with responsibility, and respect towards the countryside.

I now manage my own ground here in Herefordshire and that has taught me a great deal. Knowing the ground properly is everything. Understanding where deer are likely to be, how many are around, and what damage they are causing. You also learn how they react to weather, to seasons and pressures from farming. All of this only comes from time spent out there. There is no



shortcut, and you must have a real interest and understanding of what it is you're doing.

One of the parts I enjoy most is guiding clients. I genuinely enjoy taking people out and giving them a proper experience, not simply putting them in front of an animal. For me, it is about talking them through the ground, the species, the individual animal, the reason for taking one and leaving another, and helping them understand the whole process.

Although we do have high seats, and they have their place, I prefer to stalk on foot and give them a real memory of a hunt and not just a shot on an animal. I feel that is where the real experience lies. I often think about a quote from hunter and filmmaker Donnie Vincent, he says: "The closer you get to something, the more interesting it becomes". This resonates with me and the way I go about stalking through woodland. Understanding the land, using the wind, moving slow and becoming a part of nature. When it comes together, there is no better feeling.

I'm particularly fond of guiding clients who have not shot many deer. Seeing the enjoyment on their face and helping them understand what it is all about is something I value greatly. Often, I feel more



Jack will be co-hosting trips to South Africa after graduating

emotion in those moments than they do, even though I am not the one taking the shot.

I am well prepared for guiding too, with my Toyota Hilux set up specifically for deer stalking and guiding, and I always want clients to feel they have had a genuine day in the field. Not something rushed or artificial, but a genuine experience that they will remember.

A significant part of all this for me is the field-to-fork process. Through our set up with Fisher Chillers, everything is handled correctly from the moment the animal is harvested and taken out of the field. It then goes into the chiller, hangs in the fur, and the process begins exactly as it should. I enjoy skinning and butchering deer by myself. It gives you a real sense of gratitude for where the food has come from. I feel strongly about this because it shows the true value of stalking when it is done properly. You are not only managing deer responsibly, you are

Jack fully embraces the field-to-fork process



pick up knowledge from the way they do things. They have such an understanding of the landscape and know the animals so well.

Once I graduate, I plan to guide clients full time in Herefordshire and across the country, as well as arranging trips to South Africa with the trusted outfit we have used over the past three years. It is a special set up in the Eastern Cape, with the diversity of high altitude mountains and lowland terrain with dense bush, an abundance of wildlife and game. This allows you to experience two very different environments within one trip.

For me, one of the most important aspects of stalking is that you never stop learning. Every day in the field teaches you something. You learn so much from watching an animal or another person's style of stalking. You learn from mistakes, from success, from others with more experience and from simply taking the time to observe.

I often think back to those early moments in the field, beside my father with Nell at our side, watching and learning without fully realising it at the time, and how much they shaped everything that has led me to where I am now. That is one of the things I respect most about this life, and one of the reasons I know it is what I want to be a part of in my future. ■

A passion for hill stalking too

also producing some of the finest sustainable wild food available. Venison is natural, healthy and completely connected to the land it came from.

I am still studying at Exeter University and I often take venison back with me. I live with a few of my friends who rarely eat game, so sharing it with them is very rewarding. That has been an important part of the journey, as it has given me the opportunity to introduce people of my own age to venison and to the story behind it. Many people have never really considered where wild food comes from or what sits behind it in terms of management, responsibility and sustainability. Once they taste it and understand the process, their perspective changes.

I have also been lucky enough to travel to South Africa three times for plains game hunting, and those trips have taught me a great deal as well.

We have met some remarkable people there and built lasting friendships, which has made those experiences even more meaningful. I have also been fortunate to hunt extensively with Josh Harris during my time in South Africa. Spending so much time alongside him and learning as much as I can about plains game hunting has helped me tremendously and has already added greatly to my knowledge and experience. The abundance of species and the quality of game is exceptional, and it offers a completely different perspective on hunting. There, hunting is simply a way of life. It is not questioned; it is part of who people are and how they have grown up. That is something I respect greatly.

Different species, different terrain and different conditions, all make for an unforgettable hunting experience. It is also great to learn how other people hunt and to



A recent gold medal muntjac buck



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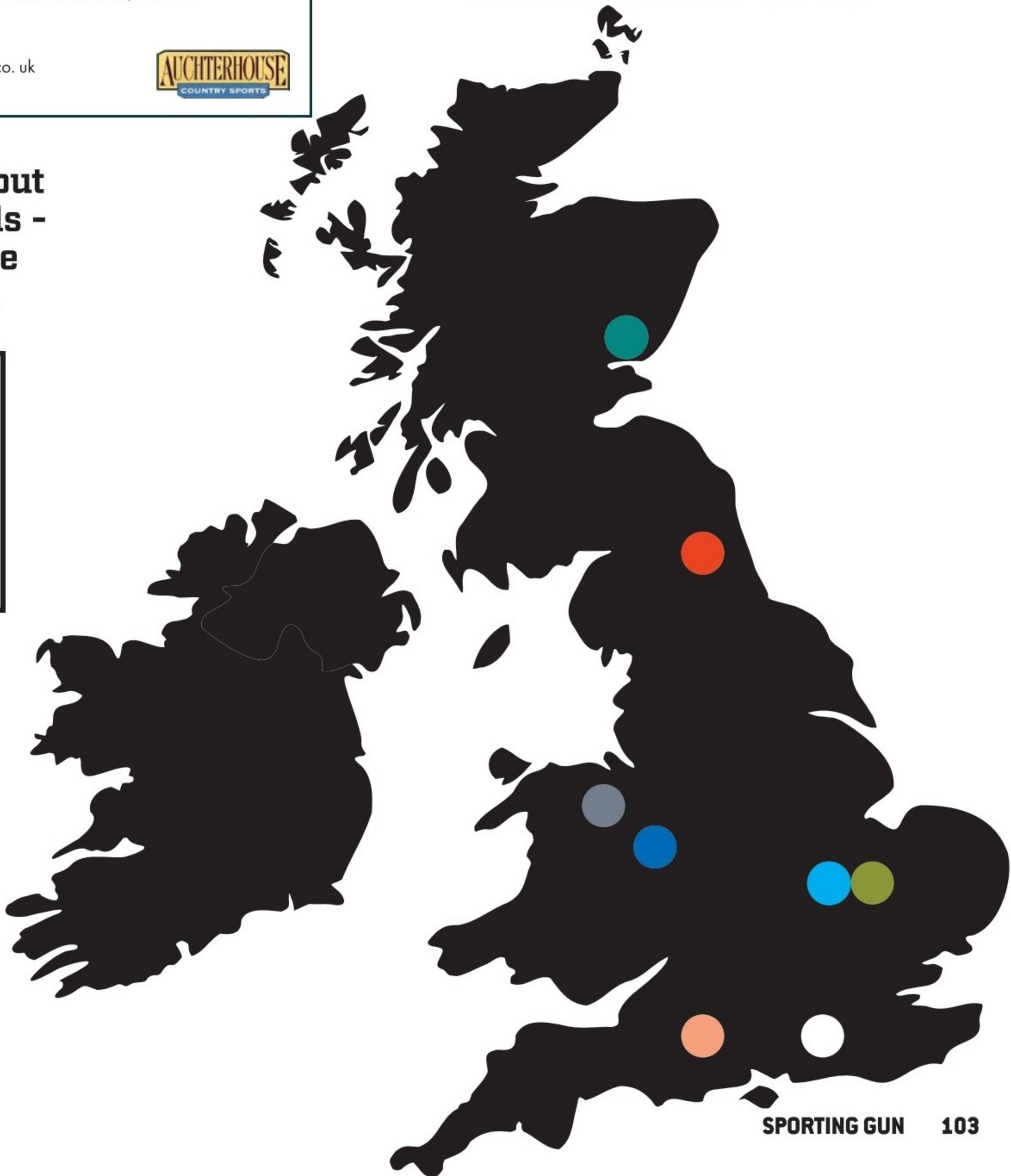
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WILD RABBIT RANCH SALAD

An indulgent salad that allows the flavour and texture of your carefully prepared rabbit to take centre stage, says **Cai ap Bryn**

RABBIT PREP

I find I have much better results if I place the rabbit in a bowl of water in which I've dissolved three tablespoons of salt and two tablespoons of sugar, and let it sit in the fridge overnight. This creates a very white, clean-looking rabbit and also helps to

tenderise the meat and removing any earthy taste.

For this recipe the rabbit will need to be placed in a pan of water and simmered for around two hours – enough for the meat to start pulling from the bone. Once done, remove the rabbit and let it cool for a couple of minutes before using your hands to

remove all the meat from the bones.

Season the meat with salt and pepper and cover with olive oil to prevent it from drying out. It can be stored in the fridge for a few days, ready for when you want to make a dish at short notice, or you can freeze it if you are keeping it for a longer period.

Serves 3-4

INGREDIENTS

- 1 rabbit, prepared as above
- 80g bacon lardons
- 20g croutons
- 150g mixed leaf salad
- 2 small peppers, sliced
- 10g seeds and shoots
- 10 vine tomatoes, chopped in half
- 2 spring onions, sliced

Ranch Dressing

Mix all items below in a bowl

- 6 tbsp mayonnaise
- 5 tbsp buttermilk
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1/2 white onion, diced very finely
- 1 tsp chopped fresh chives
- Half a lemon, squeezed
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1/3 tsp Dijon mustard

THE METHOD

- 1 Prepare the salad – be creative with what you have got. The listed ingredients are what I used at the time, but you can design your own salad that is more to your liking or to use up what you have left.
- 2 Fry the bacon lardons and, when crispy, remove them from pan. Add the rabbit meat to the bacon fat and fry for three minutes. This will give it flavour and a nice colour.
- 3 Place the rabbit, bacon and croutons on top of the salad, then slowly pour the delicious ranch dressing over the top. Its creamy, savoury flavour works very well with the rabbit and bacon.



4 Some people like to serve the salad as it is, but I like to mix

it around so that everything is covered in the dressing. ■

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I AM A SHOOTER

HARRY HUTCHISON

Mullet, moustache and an Instagram feed you can't scroll past – at 27, Stirling-based **Harry Hutchison** is doing something almost no one else in fieldsports is: tackling the online critics head-on. Gym owner, stalker and game shot, he's bringing a younger voice to the shooting conversation

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY OF FIELDSPORTS?

I was three. My dad had been out shooting and I went to grab something from his old, green Defender, when I saw two feet sticking out of the back – a brace of pheasants. I was absolutely mesmerised. I carried them into the house demanding to know where he'd got them, and from that moment on I never let him go shooting without me. It's so strange, because I don't have many memories from that age, but I can still picture opening the back of that car. It was a pivotal moment. After that I'd turn up in my little puffer and race his dog, Lupin, to pick the birds. I was annoyed if Lupin got there first.

WHAT WAS THE FIRST GUN YOU HAD?

A little AYA boxlock .410 that had been my dad's. He was keen I wasn't given a gun too young, so I got it at eight, having already been tagging along for years. It's a lovely thing – people are always trying to buy it off me. I'd potter around the farm after rabbits and pigeons with it. I didn't really shoot on pheasant days until I was about 12. My first rifle came at 17 or 18, a Browning X-Bolt .243 that my grandpa passed down when he stopped stalking. I've still got that, too.

WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT KIT?

My main shotgun is a Perazzi 12-bore that I picked up for a good price years ago when I was working at the London Gun Company on the King's Road. My current rifle is a Sako in 6.5 Creedmoor. Those are my two go-to guns now.

YOU'VE BECOME A FAMILIAR FACE ON SOCIAL MEDIA – HOW DID THAT START?

The older generation's instinct has

always been to keep your head below the parapet and not respond. That worked for a long time, but everything is openly debated online now, and the anti-shooting content is clickbaity and all over people's feeds. If all you ever see is "shooting's cruel, it's just rich blokes in Range Rovers," you're only getting one opinion. I wanted to offer the other side, and to show it isn't all 70-year-olds smoking cigars – there's young people from every kind of background too. I taught myself the basics of video editing. The algorithm doesn't favour glossy, polished videos anyway, which suits me fine.

WHAT KIND OF REACTION DO YOU GET?

It's very mixed. I get 20 or 30 messages a day – around 20 of them are friendly and really encouraging from people in the industry, and the rest range from "you're a prick" to far worse. I'm thick-skinned, so the positive majority keeps me going. The posts I value most aren't the ones with the biggest view count but the ones that spark conversations with people outside shooting.

WHY DO YOU SHOOT?

I love having a genuine connection to the food I'm eating, and I don't think there's any greater link to your dinner than shooting. That connection has been lost for a lot of people. Everyone talks about "getting out into nature" now, but they park up, walk for an hour and come back – you're on it, not *in it*. When you're shooting, working your dogs, you're properly part of the natural world.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR DOGS.

I've got four: two cockers, a black labrador and a springer. They're



my little crew, and I really enjoy picking-up with them.

HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND SHOOTING?

It's hugely seasonal. A lot of my stalking is contract work – estates on the west coast book me in advance, mostly around Taynuilt and Inveraray, and I'll be out for the red stags from October and then on the hinds through the winter. In the thick of the season that can mean being out every day for a couple of months at a stretch. This time of year is much quieter – roe once a fortnight or so, and maybe 10 driven days a year on pheasants. Game shooting isn't cheap, so the honest answer is: as much as I possibly can. ■

Find him on Instagram
@harryhutchison



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