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BASC DEFENDS ITS PROPOSAL TO DITCH LEAD SHOT

SHOOTING TIMES[®]

4 MARCH 2020

& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

Since 1882

Stolen gundogs

Revealed: where they end up

BEST BIRDS

Which is Britain's favourite strain of pheasant?



WILDFOWLING

Following in the footsteps of Col Hawker

ROOST SHOOTING IN THE EYE OF A STORM

ON TEST

AYA'S NEW OVER-AND-UNDER IS A TRIUMPH





Money well spent

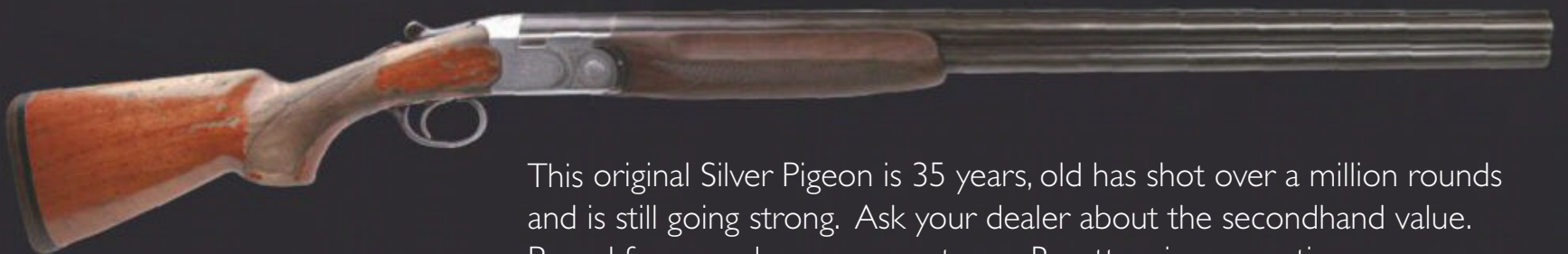
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SHOOTING TIMES[®]

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ORVIS[®]

DOG OF THE WEEK

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Tucker

Tucker is a nine-year-old working cocker who enjoys his days out beating and sitting on the peg. He loves to perch in an ash tree to keep a watchful eye over the pheasant poults for the coming season.

Owned and Photographed by Amie Donne

SHOOTING TIMES

Back to the future



Every week, after the magazine has gone to press, I snatch a few hours to escape into our archives. Last year, during one such moment, I came upon a gloomy 1930s piece by Stanley Duncan about the challenges facing wildfowling. I spent days thinking hard about the piece and eventually hit on the idea of running a series in which a contributor sets off in search of sport in places shot over by fowling greats of yesteryear.

In October, I kicked it off by heading up to the Humber to trace the legacy of Duncan himself, and in this week's issue, John Bishop is after mallard in Hampshire, where Colonel Peter Hawker made his name (p20).

In one sense Duncan was right about change. Punt-gunning is sadly now increasingly rare, the fowlers' quarry list has shrunk and foreshore access is diminished. But at the heart of it, the series has emphasised the timelessness of the call of the marsh.

Shooting once again faces change. Last week, BASC got a mixed reaction when it announced it is endorsing moving away from lead shot (p6). However, when it comes to ensuring shooting has a bright future, we have to both dig our heels in and evolve. The trouble lies in deciding when to do one and when to do the other.

Patrick Galbraith, Editor

Follow Patrick on Twitter
@paddygalbraith

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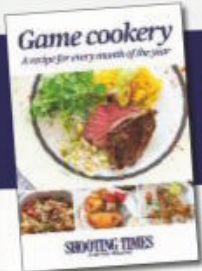
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On the case of canine crime



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Intrepid ferreters won't be denied

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The move to phase out lead shot over a five-year period has had a mixed reaction



Outcry over lead phase-out

Members say they should have been consulted by UK's shooting organisations over plan to phase out lead shot over five-year period

The decision by the country's shooting organisations to call on members to move away from lead over a five-year period has met with both criticism and praise.

Reader James Priscott told *Shooting Times*: "In my view it was something that was going to happen, an inevitability. There was never going to be a firm move by the industry without a deadline. The announcement will now push the development of alternatives and the five-year time frame seems sensible."

Another supporter was Angus Cuming, who contacted *Shooting Times* by email to say: "The self-regulation promoted by the shooting organisations is forward-thinking and proactive and should help to protect shooting in the long run."

Other shooters were more critical. A common theme

was criticism of the way the announcement was made without consulting members.

Welsh shooter Tony Meredith said: "I am happy about the lead change but not happy about the way it has come about."

Another reader, who asked not to be named because of bad feeling over the issue,

“What they have lost sight of is that they are answerable to their membership”

said: "I personally am totally convinced that they all did this with the right motives and what they felt was right."

"However, what the organisations have lost sight of is that they are membership organisations and are therefore answerable to their membership."

"You cannot dictate in this manner to your members."

Garry Doolan, BASC's deputy director of communications and public affairs, responded on behalf of the organisation.

He said: "The announcement was made with the full buy-in of nine organisations, who individually represent the

interests of their membership. In BASC's case, we have a council that is drawn directly from our membership and is elected by our membership to represent them in every strategic decision."

"The timing of this announcement was sensitive and was never going to be perfect for everyone."

"People would expect us to involve government and other key stakeholders and this sort of background work affects how and when such a statement is released and how much we can tell people in advance."

He added: "This announcement, we believe, was made in the best long-term interests of shooting."

"While the announcement presents challenges for the next five years, it should not have come as a major surprise. The organisations have been talking about lead and sustainable ammunition for many months, indeed years."

"The key is that this is a transition. It is not a ban. The organisations, their members and the wider gun trade has five years to make the change that is right and necessary if shooting is to thrive."

Matt Cross

Wild Justice calls for new ban

Wild Justice has relaunched its legal challenge to the release of game birds on protected sites in England (News, 29 January).

The group is “calling for a ban of releases of pheasants and red-legged partridges into the English countryside this year except where Defra has ruled out any impacts on... Natura 2000 sites”.

The group has filed legal papers asking the High Court to rule that by not carrying out a Habitats Regulations Assessment for the release of game birds on protected sites, Defra is in breach of the EU Habitats Directive. EU law still applies in the UK until the end of the transition period on 31 December.

Wild Justice has gone further than it did in previous challenges and is asking the court to order the minister to issue a “stop notice” preventing releases this summer.



Wild Justice is challenging the release of birds on protected sites

Depending on exactly what the court ordered and what the minister subsequently issued, this could make it illegal to release birds on and around protected sites.

However, the campaign group has suffered a setback, with a judge ruling there was no need for a rushed response from Defra and the case should proceed on the normal time scale.

SGA breaks ranks on lead

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association has broken with the UK’s other shooting organisations and has not backed a five-year transition away from lead shot.

In a statement the association said: “Our members, whose responsibility it is to control wildlife populations, want to have confidence that the ammunition they are using is going to be effective, quick and humane. This is considered to be of paramount importance.”

The statement went on to draw on the experiences of SGA members. “The majority of people in our industry have eaten shot game all of their lives, from childhood — and during times where food testing and scanning was less

comprehensive than it is today. It is natural for them to be somewhat sceptical of lead impacts, given that they have eaten it all their lives without any quantifiable impact on their health.”

An SGA member who spoke anonymously to *Shooting Times* condemned the decision, saying it “puts us out of step with everyone

else and, to be honest, it leaves us behind.

“This is a positive change and we should be backing it.”

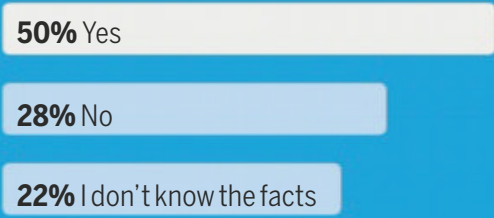
However, the decision found widespread support on social media and a Facebook post announcing the stance received overwhelmingly positive and supportive comments.



The SGA has criticised the decision to move away from lead shot

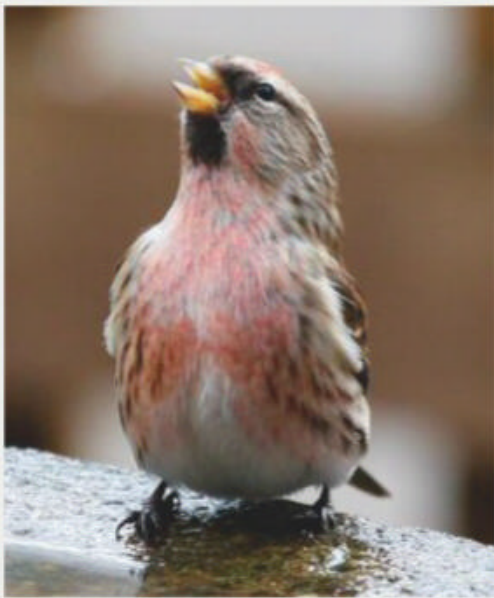
Weekend Twitter poll

Do you believe the shooting community should move from lead shot to non-toxic alternatives?



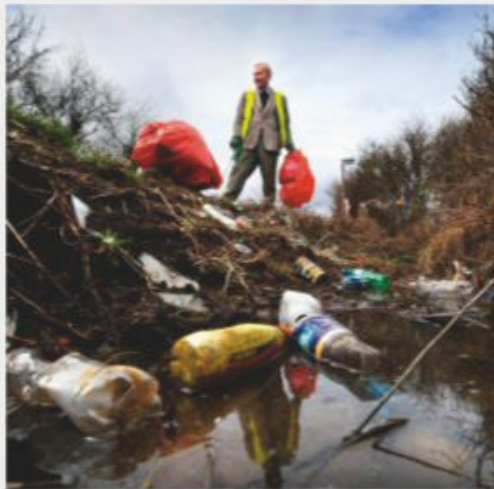
follow us @shootingtimes Respondents: 366

To do this week



CHECK Ensure that there is abundant clean water for birds. With the weather turning cold again make sure that birds can get access to unfrozen drinking water. This also provides a wonderful chance to see which birds reside in your local area.

APPLY If you would like to support efforts to get on top of fly-tipping contact sarah-lee@countryside-alliance.org and learn how to download the fly mapper app for your smartphone. This allows you to record any fly-tipping you come across in the countryside.



EVENTS DIARY

07 MARCH

**NEXT GENERATION JNR
FIELDSPORTS DAY**

Yeaveley Estate and
Shooting School
Ashbourne, Derbyshire
bit.ly/jnrfieldsport

09 MARCH

**INTRODUCTION TO
PIGEON SHOOTING**

West Kent Shooting
School, Paddock Wood
[events.basc.org.uk/
events](http://events.basc.org.uk/events)



12 MARCH

**BASC WALES
OPEN EVENING**

7 to 10.30pm, Three
Salmons Hotel, Usk
[events.basc.org.uk/
events](http://events.basc.org.uk/events)

21 MARCH

**LADIES' INTRODUCTION
TO CLAY SHOOTING**

Thimbleby Shooting
Ground, Sandpit Lane,
Northallerton DL6 3PY
bit.ly/thimbleby

24 MARCH

**GWCT ROADSHOW
FARNHAM**

The Castle Inn, Castle
Street, Farnham, Surrey
gwct.org.uk/events

26 APRIL

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Goshawks have fledged chicks
from all eight nests in the
Dark Peak area

Peak performance for birds of prey

Hen harrier returns as new report shows 2019 was a successful year for birds of prey in the Peak District

There is good news about our birds of prey in England in the newly published 2019 breeding season report for the Peak District Bird of Prey Initiative.

According to the report, goshawks have fledged chicks from all eight nests in an area known as the Dark Peak — home to several grouse moors — and

died due to wet weather. The Peak District also had what is believed to be its first successful red kite nest in 150 years.

Peregrine numbers were the same as last year with nine pairs, — still below the target of 17 — three of which produced chicks.

Wildlife crime also tumbled, with just two incidents recorded —

challenging times for birds of prey in the Dark Peak, a positive return to breeding for such an iconic species as the goshawk gives us cause for cautious optimism.”

Amanda Anderson, director of the Moorland Association, said the report was “very encouraging” and a “testament to the hard work undertaken by gamekeepers and raptor fieldworkers”.

She added: “Merlin are holding their own with very high chick survival, short-eared owls do well when vole numbers are up and the weather is kind, harriers returned to breed for a consecutive time — a first in 100 years — and chicks fledged from all goshawk nests.

“Peregrine are slowly recolonising old haunts and keepers are helping keep watch. This report clearly shows that the best results can be achieved through partnership work.”

Matt Cross

“It’s a testament to the hard work by keepers and fieldworkers”

the hen harrier is back as a breeding bird.

The experts were particularly pleased that two of the goshawk nests fledged chicks after failing every year for almost 20 years.

Less welcome was the loss of two young hen harriers due to natural causes, and while a dozen short-eared owl nests managed to hatch more than 40 chicks, many

the poisoning of a buzzard and the theft of a peregrine falcon chick.

The report praised co-operation with gamekeepers, saying 2019 “saw continuing improvements in the relationships between raptor fieldworkers and gamekeepers/shooting estates”.

Sarah Fowler, chief executive of the Peak District National Park, said: “While these remain

Fox seems to be to blame as curlew numbers drop

The role of foxes in driving curlew declines has been highlighted yet again by a new study.

Scientists from the University of East Anglia and the RSPB found that “low nest survival rates were primarily attributable to predation by the red fox”.

Along with many wading birds, curlew have been in a steep decline in the UK and are now nationally classified as “threatened”.

Curlew are generally associated with upland areas, but historically have bred in the lowlands, and the scientists looked at two sites in East Anglia.

They found differing levels of breeding success

between the two sites and were able to connect this to different regimes of predator control.

The report went on to recommend that a combination of fencing and lethal control be used

to protect nests from predation. Curiously, the report also found curlew preferred to nest in areas where the ground had been disturbed by cultivation rather than on areas of longer, more natural grass.



Foxes are preying on large numbers of curlew, according to a study

Licensing: ‘could do better’

A BASC survey of firearms licensing teams has revealed huge variations across the country in the quality of service.

The survey found that the granting of a shotgun

certificate took 112 days in Avon and Somerset but only 32 days in Cleveland.

Top spots for quality of service went to Cleveland, Essex, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire and Hampshire.

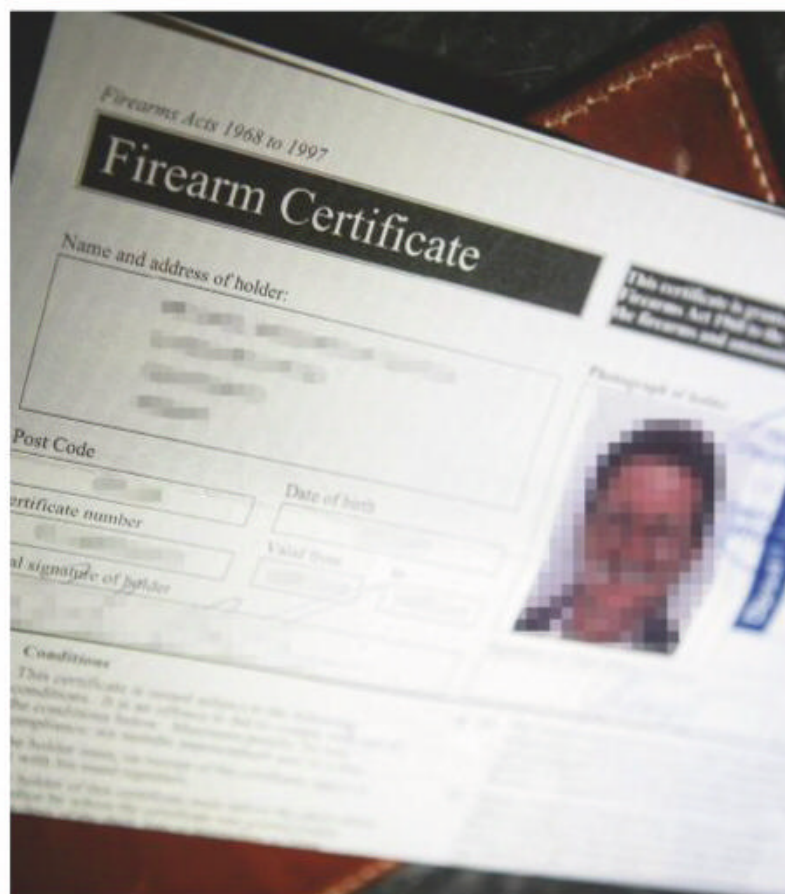
South Wales, Dorset and Warwickshire showed the greatest improvement in 2019 compared with 2018, while the forces with the greatest deterioration were Durham, West Midlands and Lancashire.

BASC’s research shows the mean average for firearms certificate grants is 61 days — an improvement on last year’s figure of 69.

Shotgun certificate grants improved for the second year in a row, from a 68-day average in 2017 to 61 days in 2018 and 59 days in 2019.

However, FAC and SGC renewals slowed slightly.

BASC’s firearms officer Rory O’Loughlin said: “All police forces should be striving towards providing an efficient, cost-effective, robust system of firearms licensing that protects public safety and provides excellent service to the shooting community.”

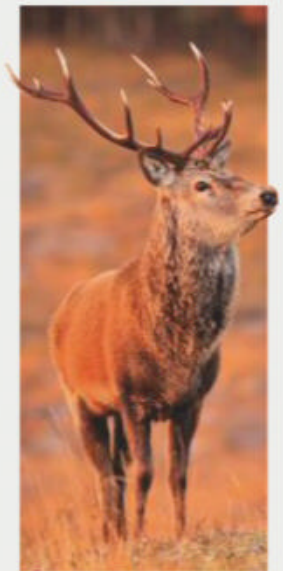


There has been a big variation in the quality of firearms licensing

NEWS IN BRIEF

Man feeding deer attacked by stag

Tourists in the Highlands have been warned not to try to feed deer after a man was attacked in a hotel car park. The man was offering a packet of chocolate biscuits to a herd of red deer in the car park of the Kingshouse Hotel in Glencoe when he was charged by a stag. An onlooker told the *Daily Record* it was “nothing short of a miracle no one was hurt”.



Helen all set for fundraising trek

Helen Benson of the Gamekeepers’ Welfare Trust is undertaking a remarkable fundraising journey. Starting at the Castle of May, she plans to visit all the royal residences using every form of transport gamekeepers have ever used, including foot, pony, quad bike, an old Land Rover, Argocat, gun bus and everything in between. Helen told *Shooting Times*: “I decided the GWT needs to do something and what better way of demonstrating our support than getting out there and meeting gamekeepers all over the country in their working environment.”

If you would like to support Helen practically or financially you can find out more at thegamekeeperswelfaretrust.com



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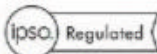
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This week's cover image was captured by Steve Magennis

LETTER OF THE WEEK

A work of art for our *Times*

I am studying art at school and I recently completed a collage using pages from *Shooting Times* magazine, old cartridge boxes and cases. I really enjoy the magazine and I am a very keen shot. I thought it would interest you and would be delighted if it were be included in a future issue.

E Wells, Hampshire

IN ASSOCIATION WITH BROWNING

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RIGHT DIRECTION?

There has been much recent encouragement within your pages for game shots to use cartridges loaded with steel shot — soft iron — instead of lead. It has even been suggested that a “voluntary” ban on lead shot should be widely adopted.

It has already been shown that there is no danger to human health from eating game birds killed with lead shot. And that there is little or no evidence to suggest that lead shot — used in normal game shooting as is practised in this country — has a practical detrimental effect either on other wildlife or the wider environment.

Steel shot, when used as a normal game load, effectively reduces a 45-yard gun to a 35-yard gun. In practice, a 12-bore to a 28-bore. Birds are either wounded at extended range because of the lack of pellet density in a pattern, or wounded at closer ranges because of a lack of pattern spread.

I suggest that not many sportsmen and sportswomen

would be content with reducing the range of their guns by 10 yards. Was it not the Norwegians who banned lead shot then reinstated it on the grounds that steel shot caused excessive wounding to game birds?

All good sportsmen and sportswomen regard wounding as a type of failure, so I am baffled that practices that cause more wounding are encouraged by your contributors.

S Judd, by email

TROPHY BAN

The bill to ban the import and export of hunting trophies into and out of the UK is being proposed by Zac Goldsmith, a man born and bred in Central London, who has been democratically de-selected from Parliament by the electorate. Despite this he has been appointed Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and given a seat in the House of Lords.

Mr Goldsmith is an old school friend of the Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his live-in girlfriend,

Carrie Symonds, a woman with an extreme anti-shooting agenda. Miss Symonds is known to keep company with the countryside's biggest enemy, Chris Packham, and she clearly has the ear of the PM.

It becomes clear how this ignorant policy that ignores science and peer-reviewed research is getting pushed through Parliament.

What is not clear at all is the complete lack of real response from our main shooting organisations to this undemocratic travesty. Bar a couple of emails that BASC and the Countryside Alliance eventually sent after a lot of contact from disgruntled members, our main representative bodies have done very little to stop this bill being pushed through.

This is hardly a key policy at the forefront of many UK home-owners minds, and with the correct lobbying from our organisations this bill should have been scrapped. We expect them to be protecting shooting, making the Government listen

and take heed of the facts. The Nordic Safari Club is doing more to stop this bill than our own organisations!

Last August, 133 wildlife experts in a letter to *Science* magazine placed scientific evidence over subjective sensitivities to recognise the importance of hunting in wildlife conservation (*News*, 11 September 2019).

The authors also advised governments not to take actions that would undermine existing well-managed hunting programmes. They noted that a "conservation policy that is not based on science threatens habitat and biodiversity and risks disempowering and impoverishing rural communities". Safari Club International (SCI) has sent 150 different independent articles as to why the bill is flawed; the IUCN, WWF disagree with it, so why is it even being considered?

This is an attack on shooting in the UK and it is going to get through the back door with no opposition. They will not stop until the countryside is a barren wasteland and our main shooting organisations are letting it happen.

H Skeffington, by email

SEVERAL FEVVERS

A reader asked how many feathers are on a pheasant or mallard (*Sporting Answers*, 19 February). While David Tomlinson answers this handsomely, I wonder if readers would be interested in my late father's observation. A keen music hall fan, he assured me that there were "forty fahsand fevvers on a fwush".

Jackie Drakeford, West Sussex

TAKE A CHANCE

I have had four springers in my 40 years of shooting and I am expecting to get a fifth this summer. Jeremy Hunt's

ROCKET SCIENCE!

I would like to point out to readers that, as your writer states, WD-40 is the worst thing to clean your gun with (*Don't skimp on cleaning your gun*, 19 February). WD-40 was invented in 1953 by the Rocket Chemical Company in the USA. WD-40 is abbreviated from "water displacement, 40th formula". It was the 40th attempt to get it right. It was never intended as a lubricant because it was designed to replace water and protect the outer skin of the Atlas missile from rust and corrosion.

It's very good at freeing locked screws and bolts by displacing any moisture. It's basic composition is kerosene, a petroleum base oil (non-hazardous paraffin),

aliphatic hydrocarbons — similar to kerosene but flammable — and carbon dioxide as the propellant.

It was also found to have a number of household uses. It was therefore mass marketed in an aerosol can that could be bought worldwide as a result.

It is not a lubricant in the long-term and was never designed as such. Its whole purpose was to displace moisture.

The best stuff to clean your precious guns with are the products designed specifically for the job. They might be a little more expensive but their ability to clean, protect and enhance the life of your firearms is well worth the extra costs.

G Roy, Norfolk

article (*The right raw material*, 12 February) was so packed with good advice for a first-time gundog owner that, had I read it before I bought my first dog, I might still be deliberating.

Instead I have had a lifetime of pleasure with four wonderful and willing, but inadequately trained, spaniels of dubious lineage. My advice to a novice, especially one with a limited budget, is use all the advice and information available, then take a chance and go for it.

E Oxlade, Belfast

EDUCATION

I am once again left speechless by the naivety of the Wild Justice crew. Do they truly believe that a ban on releasing reared game birds on or around Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation will stop a naturally wandering set of species invading these areas (*News*, 29 January)?

By definition a well-managed shoot that releases pheasants and partridges will endeavour to

manage the shoot area on which they are released. This includes planting and/or maintaining good areas of cover for their birds, while trying to minimise their losses due to wandering birds. These areas of special protection are set aside to give wild species the space they need to flourish. This is enabled by the hard work of all the head, under and beatkeepers.

If the release of reared birds is curtailed these areas will be overrun with all the species that we try to control.

We need to be very careful in our reaction to this challenge. It could very well be the opening salvo to a war we may not win.

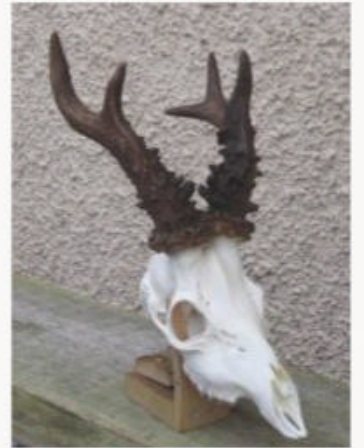
I implore all the organisations that support our way of life to combine their thinking and start a countywide education scheme. It must show the wider population that gamekeepers, gillies and rangers are the friends and not the enemies of the wildlife that is endangered on our amazing island.

C Bamforth, West Yorkshire

NEXT WEEK IN SHOOTING TIMES

THE SCORES ARE IN

Where were the biggest bucks shot last season?



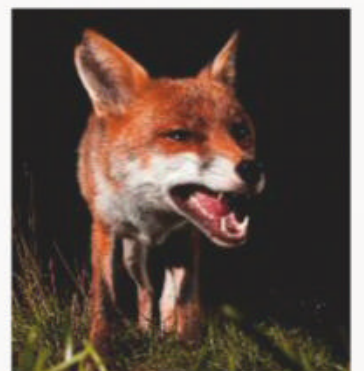
NURTURE NATURE

How to turn your shoot into a wildlife haven.



PROBLEM FOX

Doing farmers a favour at lambing time with foxing in the small hours.



LEADING THE WAY

How other countries' hunters have fared after ditching lead.



... **AND MUCH MORE!**

"The wildlife of today is not ours to dispose of as we please. We have it in trust. We must account for it to those who come after." King George VI



Patrick Laurie

Country Diary

Choosing a top 12 of birds – one for each month of the year – might be a mere flight of fancy, but it shows how endlessly fascinating they are

Isometimes think I have a favourite bird, but there are so many candidates that it is never an easy choice. How do you measure a kingfisher against a green woodpecker? Is it possible to stand a barn owl next to a bittern and draw a clear line between them?

In pondering the subject in these dark days of early spring, I've come up with a compromise; that a favourite bird should be chosen for each month of the year, creating a top 12. While this is an absurdly ambitious topic to grasp in a single *Country Diary*, here are my current rankings...

The bird for January has to be widgeon; the late-season hero of flightponds and flying ice. Hear the rascally whoop of a widgeon under the moon and you know that you're in the dead of midwinter.

February's winner is the song thrush, and I can attest to the recent joy of hearing a thrush singing on the edge of darkness after a wet, dark day in the Galloway countryside. It's a complex, beautiful weft of sound, which seems to fill the empty branches and reminds the world that all is not lost.

The curlew wins March, hands down. As they return to their age-old breeding grounds on the moors and the deep meadows, the curlew's call is a real tear-jerker. It's a rich pleasure to find them striding carefully around the sheep and

cows and, while their glorious displays belong to April and May, the first few peeps and squeaks fire them into the ascendancy.

Perhaps it's a cliché, but cuckoos take pole position in April. Despite having declined horribly in other parts of the country, cuckoos have held strong in Galloway. It's

“I’ve been obsessed with blackgrouse for the best part of 20 years, so May’s winner is a shoo-in”

not uncommon to hear nine or 10 calling at once on the verges where willow scrub and rowan trees provide somewhere to perch.

I've been obsessed with blackgrouse for the best part of 20 years, so May's winner is a shoo-in. There is nothing like an early rise in May to find the hills ringing to the tune of blackcock. I'm only sorry that the spectacle has become so unusual in recent years, because visiting a busy lek should be on every would-be countryman's bucket list.

June is complicated. I simply cannot choose between nightjars, swifts and lapwings. Perhaps it's inevitable that I haven't settled on a “winner” for

midsummer yet and this certainly requires more thought.

July is the month for grey partridges, seeing the new coveys setting out into the world, their parents watching over them with beady eyes. It also seems obvious that red grouse should win the crown for August, particularly when the young birds are stuffed full of wild berries and come clattering up from the deep grass like a storm.

Here in Galloway, we get big falls of snipe in September and it's a subtle sign of the dying summer. It was tempting to make snipe into April's bird as an act of respect to the joy of drumming and breeding displays, but there is something fine and mysterious about the wisps of snipe that come down from Iceland in the September wind.

Geese dominate October and the *winkwink* of pinkfeet over the Solway is a life-affirming sound as the hedgerows ripen and you can gather all the berries you can eat. Geese on the wing leave me gaping.

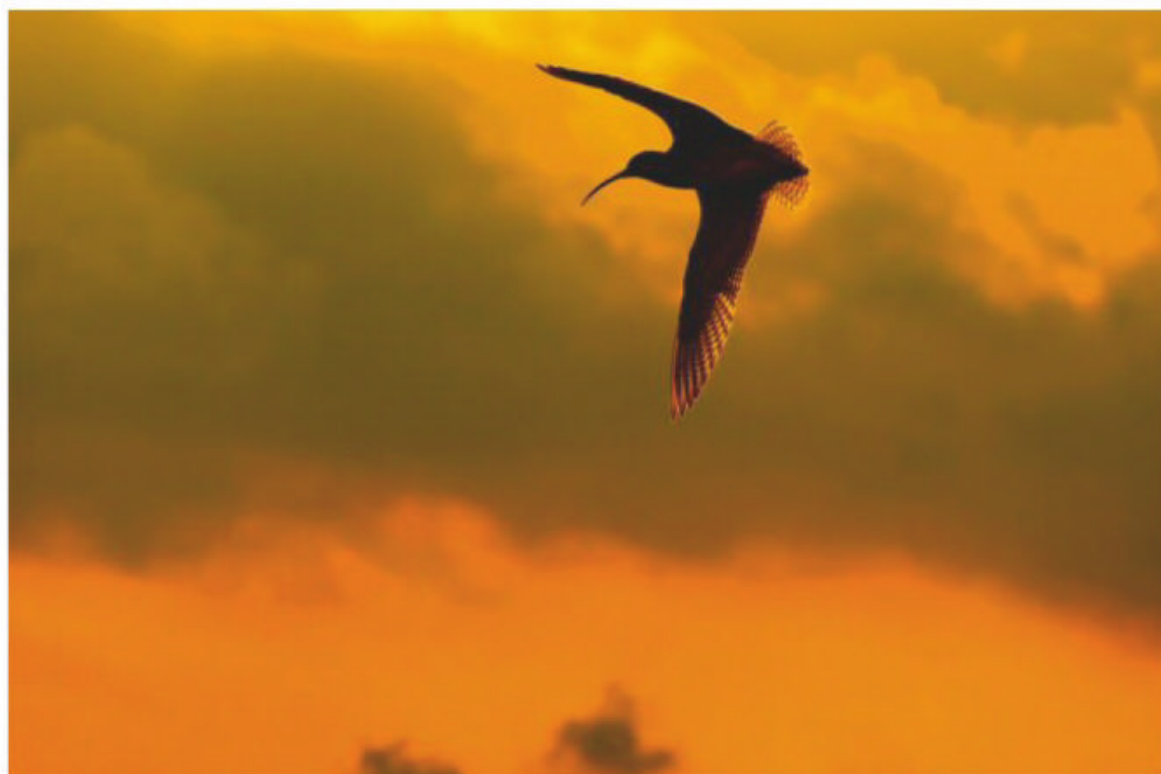
The raven's month

By the time November comes, I'm ready to be swept off my feet by woodcock under the full moon, but there is no doubt that December is the raven's month, when all the world is silent and the hills are wholly breathless. That's a fine time for a raven, turning his belly upside down in the snow and speaking in dull, booming tones that used to make the Vikings quiver.

Even as I present these top 12, I feel a wave of uncertainty. Maybe it would have been better to pick short-eared owls for October; was I right to place partridges in July? The more I think on it, the less certain I am that I will ever be able to choose a winner for June. So perhaps this goes to show that birds are endlessly fascinating. 🐦

➡ Do you agree with Patrick's choices? Let us know at STletters@ti-media.com

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



The curlew's call is a real tear-jerker as they return to their age-old breeding grounds in March



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Alex Keeble keeps in the Chilterns, having previously been headkeeper on an estate in the Cotswolds

Gamekeeper



Managing woodland areas for game birds is a difficult balancing act, but careful planning and meticulous work will be richly rewarded

Maintaining the habitat within woodland and inside pheasant release pens is an ongoing task that needs to be performed every year to keep the habitat matrix diverse. Far too many woodland areas are manicured, with dead wood and branches being burned, leaving little in the way of cover on the woodland floor.

Trees are left without thinning, which overshadows the bottom; this leaves poorly developed trees and a meagre understorey. Leaving piles of deadwood, brash or logs not only benefits the game birds being released, but also allows a whole host of other flora and fauna to flourish.

In terms of habitat, each of my release pens have pros and cons. Some have far too much ground cover and little to roost in, whereas others are so thick with mature beech trees that little else grows beneath the canopy. Finding a balance and trying to maintain sunny areas in the open, low ground cover, middle storey and roosting habitats takes some planning.

Sunlight

First, the direction of the rising and setting sun will need to be established, along with the prevailing wind direction. The poults are great lovers of the sun in the beginning and will all end up in the sunny part of the pen at first and last light. Too little sunlight then creates an issue, as the birds all congregate where the sun hits, which increases the stocking density of the pen and could potentially lead to feather pecking, stress and disease.

Creating instant low/medium cover can be achieved by felling, laying trees or



Keeping a woodland habitat in ideal shape for driving game birds requires some work every year

it falls should allow enough protection from grazing wildlife, which will hopefully promote the regeneration of brambles.

We have had some recent thinning in some of my pens that has enabled the sunlight to penetrate the floor. The brash from the trees has been left in piles to create other areas of interest for the poults. Bracken and nettles will quickly grow in these newly sunny places and care will need to be taken to strim a proportion to give the poults a greater amount of sunlight.

Do not be afraid to fell trees to improve the habitat. Each situation is different depending on whether the woodlands are

the woods to roost. Larch are a particular favourite of pheasants, due to the long, clean, straight branches. The trees around the release pens need to give the birds plenty of choice as to where to roost once out of the pen. If the habitat is not suitable, they will find another area.

The vast amount of laurel on this estate also needs maintaining, with topped plants requiring re-topping and some of the larger laurels needing felling to maintain various heights of cover. Larger laurel bows tend to snap while being cut, which will be most likely to happen when chainsawing them. Coppicing or pollarding trees can help by giving you brash for ground cover and middle-storey growth after a few years.

Improvements to the overall habitat within the woods that are used as drives will also need to be implemented. Flushing areas will need to be maintained or refined to give optimum performance from the birds. Pheasants prefer to be able to take off at a 40° angle and will need spaces between the trees to achieve this. Having low ground cover with medium-height trees in front will help to keep them lifting before heading over the gun line. 🦌

“Far too many areas are manicured, with dead wood being burned, leaving little in the way of cover on the woodland floor”

moving brash into the pen. If you have used the pen in previous seasons, take note of which trees the birds choose to roost in, because if you are planning on thinning trees it is wise to leave these favoured spots alone. Felling a tree and leaving it where

young plantations or semi-ancient, but many shoots are reluctant to fell enough trees to make a real difference.

When the poults become older and the leaves start to fall from the trees, you may find that the birds prefer other areas of



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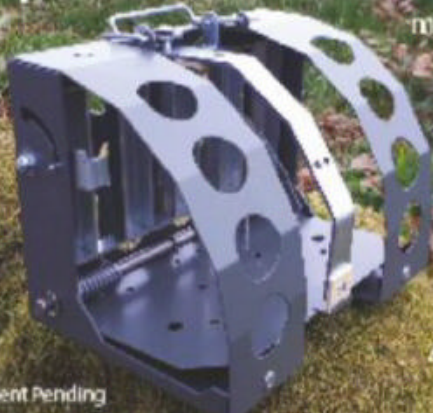
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Hot dogs

Dog theft is all too common – but what happens to stolen gundogs, asks Matt Cross

The social media post has become all too familiar: a picture of a dog, an appeal, a phone number, the details of the crime. The comments, too, are depressingly recognisable – promises to share, pictures of similar-looking dogs found online, condolences. The theft of gundogs has become part of the way of life for people involved in shooting.

Last month *Shooting Times* reported on the case of Emily Kretz and her boyfriend Francis Bere, a gamekeeper, whose springer bitch was stolen from a kennel in Somerset (*News*, 19 February). Emily called the theft “a punch to the heart”. Just a few weeks earlier, gamekeeper Reece Ronald had all four of his working dogs taken from his kennels.

The fact that gundogs are stolen is no secret, but one question has always remained unanswered. Who steals them and where do they go?

Two stories circulate persistently on social media about the fate of stolen gundogs. The first is that these unfortunate animals are used to train fighting dogs. The thought of a friendly spaniel or an easy-going labrador meeting this barbaric fate is deeply distressing.

It is a fear that has been promoted in salacious tabloid reporting but there appears no evidence for it. A gundog is not only particularly ill-suited to dog fighting, it is also a valuable item. Consigning one to certain death is simply a waste.

The other persistent rumour is that gundogs are stolen for use in puppy

farming operations, with Ireland often being cited as their ultimate destination. There is a little more evidence to support this claim.

Stolen gundogs certainly have gone to puppy farms. In 2010 a springer bitch called Biscuit was stolen from her owners’ home. It was a carefully planned operation, with the thieves cutting through the glass in a door moments after Biscuit was dropped off at home by a dog minder.

Eighteen months later and 150 miles away, a specialist dog-theft investigator recovered her from Surrey puppy farmer John Lowe. Lowe went on to achieve grizzly notoriety when he was convicted of the murders of his partner and her daughter.

Puppy farm horrors

The horrors of puppy farming are well known. In February 2019 James Kavanagh was sentenced to three years in prison at Carlow Court in the Republic of Ireland after admitting 30 counts of causing or allowing animal cruelty. The court heard that 340 dogs and 11 horses were removed from his property after the inspection.

Four horses and 20 dogs had to be euthanised. The prosecuting counsel described the dogs' plight: "Many had no water, were living in stalls full of faeces, were feeding off dead horses and dogs, many dogs were living in cages with one another not giving them any room, there was no ventilation, with many infected with lice and worms."

These are the fears that understandably haunt victims of dog theft. But puppy farms are not the destination of most stolen gundogs.

Personal experience

Wayne May is a director of the website Dog Lost and one of the country's foremost experts on gundog theft. Wayne's experience is deeply personal – in 2008 six

“You don't know who these people are but they are watching you all the time”

of his own working gundogs were stolen. Wayne's experience in helping to recover more than 200 stolen gundogs points to a set of uncomfortable truths.

“There are people specifically looking for working gundogs,” he said. “I refer to it as organised crime, where they will target gamekeepers, beaters and anyone with gundogs. You don't know who these people are but they are watching you all the time. Social media is one of the main ways they identify targets. We all like to talk about how good our dogs are and the dog's name becomes recognised.”

The most uncomfortable thing for the shooting community is what happens to stolen dogs. “They are sold on for quite a high value to people who shoot,” Wayne said. ➡

Left: Never leave a gundog unattended in a vehicle – thieves may be tracking your every movement

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Gundog theft

One of his own dogs provides a case study.

“One of my spaniels actually turned up on the Isle of Wight,” he revealed. “It was the only spaniel I had without a docked tail. A gentleman had purchased her, as he believed legitimately, from a selling site. On the first day of the shooting season she injured her tail and the new owner took her to the vet. Fortunately, the vet ran her microchip through the computer and it flagged her up as stolen. The microchip company notified me and we went to the Isle of Wight and got her back.”

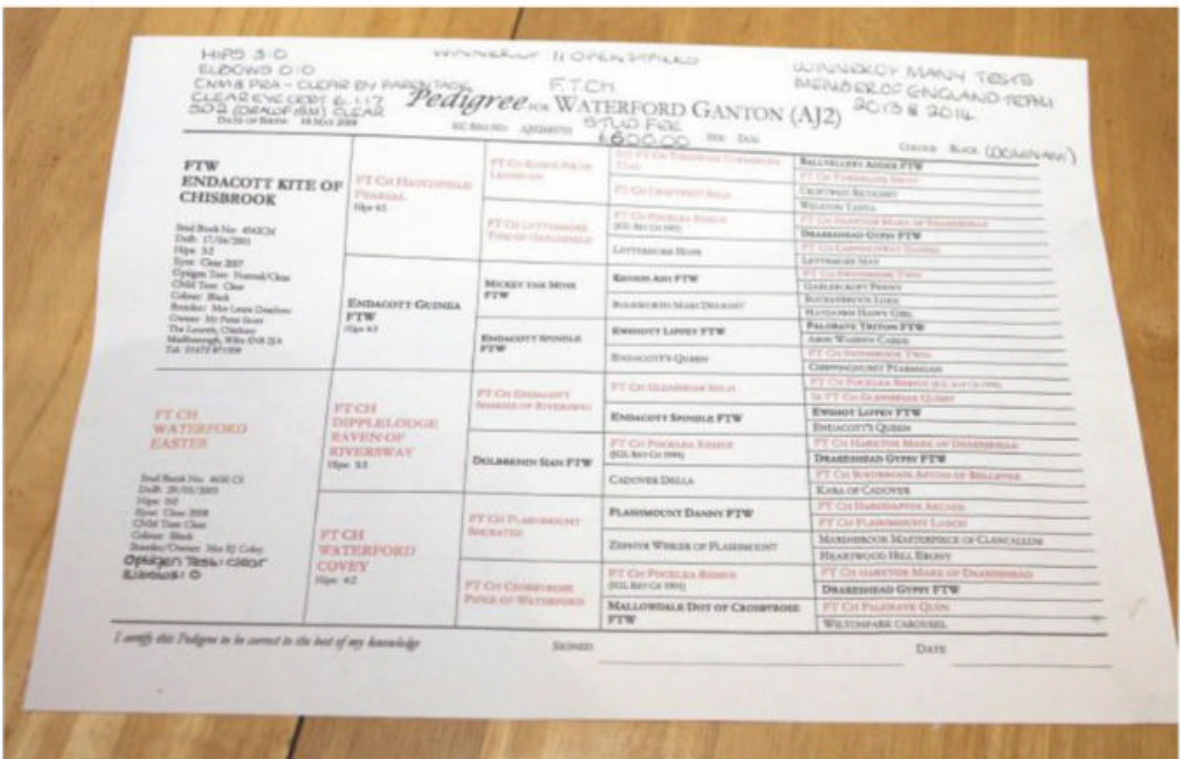
Economics

Wayne explained the motive is simple economics. “A springer spaniel puppy is worth £400 to £600 but for a fully trained gundog the sky is the limit.”

Websites that are used to buy and sell goods will often also carry hundreds of adverts for dogs, including gundogs, most of which are legitimate. As well as puppies, adult dogs are offered for sale, but some with no mention of paperwork, which should ring alarm bells.

If a large part of what is driving dog theft is the ability to sell trained dogs on, part of the answer must be in educating potential buyers. Wayne is a keen shooter and knows the sport’s values. “Most people involved in shooting are honourable – they would never willingly buy a dog they knew was stolen and there are things you can do so you don’t end up buying a stolen dog,” he said.

Wayne advises anyone looking at buying a dog to insist they see the



If you are buying a gundog it's vital to ask to see the paperwork and make sure it all checks out

paperwork. If the dog is docked the tail-docking certificate should always go with the dog. Nearly all working gundogs should be chipped – a new law requiring all dogs and puppies over the age of eight weeks to be microchipped came into force in April

“They will offer to meet you halfway but the truth is they just don’t want you at their house”

2016 – and the paperwork should also be present.

“If you can’t see the paperwork, ask the seller to accompany you to the vet to have the dog scanned,”

said Wayne, and warns against ever picking up a dog anywhere except the seller’s home. “They will offer to meet you halfway at a cafe or a services and you might think it would save £30 in fuel, but the truth is they just don’t want you at their house.”

His advice to help victims recover their dogs is shaped by his own experience. Make sure you change the microchip registration from the dealer’s name to yours is his first and most important tip. If your dog is stolen he advises you to contact every dog warden in the country with your dog’s picture and details, register with a service such as Dog Lost, use social media to spread the word and check the selling websites every day.

Blame

It’s easy to blame others when bad things happen and dog fighters and puppy farmers make excellent scapegoats. But without willing buyers, gundogs would be much less appealing to steal.

We contacted several websites and they insisted they worked closely with the police. They confirmed that any adverts which do not fit terms and conditions – such as bitches in whelp or in season, whole litters sold together, multiple dogs on one advert – are rejected.

However, they also pointed out that it is impossible to tell if something is stolen from the images and information given on an advert. As always, it’s buyer beware.



Left: The sky is the limit when it comes to the value of a fully trained gundog



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Wildfowling

A £10 gun and a lifelong love

Following in the footsteps of sportsman Colonel Peter Hawker brings an undimmed appreciation of the beauty of the marsh

WRITTEN BY JOHN BISHOP • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS WARREN



Colonel Peter Hawker was born in 1786 and first visited Keyhaven in 1814. The following January, he first ventured eastwards from there with a gun, on to the mudflats that stretch for seven miles along the north-west Solent shore, past Lymington to Pylewell. The flights of wildfowl he saw were “prodigious” and, as a result, Keyhaven became his fowling base until his death in 1853.

My early life followed in Hawker’s footsteps, quite unknowingly. My primary school in Lymington was opposite the former premises of Alfred Clayton, Hawker’s favourite local gunsmith. Clayton built Hawker’s final punt-gun, which won the Prize Medal in the Great Exhibition of 1851. As a boy, I caught

“As a boy, I caught bass from the sluice only 100 metres from Hawker’s cottage”

bass from the sluice only 100m from Hawker’s cottage. Later, in my teens, I moored a boat in the adjoining creek.

Growing up in Lymington, most country people tuned into Jack Hargreaves’ *Out of Town* programme at 6.40pm on Fridays. In a 1969 episode, he showed a punt-gun and extolled the virtues of punt-gunning as a sport, something I fancied trying. My schoolboy Saturday job ➡

John Bishop looks out over the waters of the Solent from Tanners Lane, near Lymington

Wildfowling

was in the fishing tackle shop where Jack bought his bait. He was an unassuming man and always quietly waited his turn to be served. He kindly divulged the location of the gun.

Cold as steel

Straight after work, three of us were fumbling in the dark in an old shed at the Keyhaven Boatyard. There was only one torch, with batteries past their best. We were each running our hands through separate racks of wooden masts and oars, feeling for something different. Something as cold as steel. “Over here!” I shouted. “I think I’ve found it!”

The two men came over and we dragged out the massive old punt-gun. It was more than 9ft long in the barrel. But would they sell it to me? I only had £10, a fortune to me in those days. In the end, £10 was the price I paid. The acquisition sparked a lifelong interest in Hawker.

The Keyhaven Boatyard doesn’t appear on Colonel Hawker’s engraving, *Return to Keyhaven after a Day’s Gunning in the Winter of 1838*, for an obvious reason. It lies on the east side of the harbour so is behind the artist, whose view is taken looking



Colonel Peter Hawker’s engraving *Return to Keyhaven after a Day’s Gunning in the Winter of 1838*

west. Hawker’s cottage is shown in the centre, with the Gun Inn just to its left. Hawker is standing in the centre punt, holding a telescope. While a creek runs to his cottage, the engraving suggests his modus operandi was to beach his punt on the “hard” at the boatyard on the opposite side of the harbour.

My interest in Hawker developed in the 1990s when the late Michael

Brander lent me his facsimile copy of Hawker’s diaries. He also invited me to shoot my first grouse on his moor in Scotland, over his pair of pointers.

Not surprisingly, my Hawker interest seemed to rekindle around the middle of August each year. I followed this with several visits to Yale University, in the US to pore over the original Hawker diary manuscript.

Hawker’s cottage in the village of Lymington, with the Gun Inn to the left



The diaries make fascinating reading for both sportsmen and local ornithologists.

Blown to atoms

Hawker's country residence was Longparish House in north Hampshire where, until recently, Hawker's stanchion gun of 96lb was kept. In February 1818 he says it was: "...literally blown to atoms from the breeching to near the end of the stock... and I was for a considerable time on fire (with a pound of gunpowder in my pocket)..."

I was allowed to take this gun out on to the rear lawn to photograph and weigh it.

Another entry in Hawker's diary, which is doubly poignant to me, is the punt shot he made at wigeon off Shorehead. First, because the location has now been lost due to erosion and spartina dieback. Secondly, because this was the scene of my first wildfowling trip at the age of 15.

I was alone and the light was already fading by the time I reached Shorehead. As I beached the boat, two wigeon left the saltings with a whirr of wings. I quickly hid myself in a narrow creek and didn't have to wait long before two ducks swung back over me and obligingly settled 100 yards away. Were these the pair I had disturbed earlier? I have always liked to think so.

Sunset

The sun was well down and, in the failing light, I crept forward. After what seemed an age, up and away they went, low and clearly visible to my young eyes in the last vestiges of the sunset.

I don't remember raising the gun. It all happened by instinct. There was a loud bang and one bird fell. It never occurred to me to fire again. I raced forward to claim my prize. The beautiful cock wigeon had fallen on its back, white breast uppermost, as if to help me find it. I carefully picked it up and headed home in triumph.

It was to Pylewell – Hawker's "Pilewell" – east of the Lymington River, that I ventured on the last day of the season just past. The unprecedented wet weather and gales dictated that we should stand for



Echoes of Colonel Peter Hawker as John Bishop takes to the water in the Solent near Lymington

morning flight, rather than go afloat. I chose to walk out on to the saltings where I hoped to intercept a mallard en route to the Isle of Wight. Any duck that did venture out would come over tall pine trees along the shoreline.

Standing in the pre-dawn gloom, my hopes weren't high, given the number of attractive splashes left by the recent rain. Good hearing is vital at such a time. A single mallard called and circled over the edge of the marsh, but remained unseen.

"Life moves on, and is it so bad that so many people now see the beauty in the marsh that I have enjoyed for more than 50 years?"

Then I heard more, and realised they were heading to sea to the west of us. As I strained to see them, they appeared as a moving smudge of six or so birds, high and some 100 yards to our left.

Moving in the direction of the flightline, a bigger bunch of birds was heard approaching. Now knowing where to look, I picked these up

earlier and counted 10 mallard purposefully beating high and fast towards the Solent, still some 70 yards distant.

Not to be outdone, I moved further left and was rewarded with the sound of more mallard coming. It was lighter, but not significantly. Anticipating more high, fast birds to the left, I waited. Then they appeared, but not where I expected.

They came much lower, three of them, fast and low, straight over my head. I spun around and got on to one and fired. As I did so, they jinked and dived to water level, before levelling out and continuing offshore. I had missed clean.

We waited a while longer, but the flight had finished. We launched the punt and laid some decoys in the hope of enticing a wigeon, but none appeared. It was time to leave.

The Solent shore is under huge pressure today from population increase and its demand for recreation. In the 1960s I hardly ever saw a soul on the "banks", as we affectionately called the sea wall. Now, it is not unusual to see 50 people on the Solent Way Walk.

Colonel Hawker would have been horrified by the level of disturbance from kite surfers, canoeists, mountain bikers and the like. But life moves on and is it so bad that so many people now see the beauty in the marsh that I have enjoyed for more than 50 years?

Though wildfowling along this shoreline has been dramatically curtailed, it has never been a sport of large bags, and an empty day can be worthwhile. I saw a pair of barn owls hunting, a pair of Egyptian geese and a pair of spoonbills.

That should be enough for any true wildfowler and it was certainly enough for me. 🦆

In the teeth of the

Raging February winds make it a day to savour for Simon Garnham on a three-phase expedition geared to capitalise on the conditions

Gale-force winds can supercharge rain like claymore mines firing. They assault your face and find every way to knife at your body. They break branches for fun and send the estuary into a vortex of angry spray and lather. Forecasters advise staying indoors. But, in February, to a sportsman such winds bring the same joy that an early school closure does to a schoolboy.

One such February day occurred. Tess and I set out into the teeth of the storm. On my little piece of East Anglian coast, wigeon are still considering their next mammoth journey. There are pintail too. And teal zip around in packs.

The lure of the marsh proved too great. I decided on three phases: a walk out at low tide, an afternoon in the woods chasing pigeon, then later

back on the saltings for evening flight at high tide.

Phase one was creek crawling. Daytime shooting on the estuary near me has to be approached with caution. It's a favourite spot for bird watchers, and rightly so. On the Big Farmland Bird Count this year, I was able to report lapwings, curlew, skylarks, grey partridges, linnets and corn buntings on the fields, while on the marshes, for the discerning twitcher, there were all manner of waders, duck and geese.

Entirely alone

While I'm proud of what we do within the shooting community, I don't wish to upset people, so I rarely venture out during daylight hours when binoculars are poised and telescopes are ready on the seawall. But on the afternoon in question, Tess and I were

entirely alone between the dark sky and the foaming deep.

Teal jumped early from a sheltered gutter. I've had a good season on the little birds this year and, as they whipped away in the wind, I left them. A better shot than I might have had a chance, but they were too good for me. Snipe, too, have provided superb sport and seem to have flourished, but they were out of season in February. They also lifted and whirled away.

I knew that the sandy point was where I wanted to be – out on what *BB*

“I rarely shoot this precious piece of saltmarsh, but today was going to be an exception and I looked forward to returning for evening flight”

D. ROGERS

storm

called “tide’s ending”. That required a leap of a dyke and a wade of a creek.

On the angry blackening brine, wigeon bobbed in flotillas. Then from the splashes, to my front, silently, dark shapes jumped: six of the mallard that rest up on the saltings during the day and still enjoy my hospitality by night – guzzling more than two tons of barley this winter on my little pond. Two shots at a trailing duck saw her somersault on to the mud and Tess marked the fall. She

powered through the sucking ooze and returned with the mottled buff brown body and iridescent speculum glinting in the maelstrom: a healthy plump female.

Retrieve made, we enjoyed the apocalyptic conditions and hunkered down into the grasses on the estuary

edge hoping for a second chance. The heavens opened, sending horizontal daggers of rain. Oystercatchers hadn’t even flinched at the shots and gulls turned and twisted like sheets of paper buffeted in the storm.

I rarely shoot this precious piece of saltmarsh, but today was going to be an exception and I looked forward to returning for evening flight. In the meantime, I knew I had a super-keen son waiting to get stuck into roosting pigeons, so the dog and I enjoyed the wildness and solitude for only a short time before swapping waders for wellies. It was time for phase two: off to the relative shelter of the woods chasing roosting pigeon.

William, my son, is very fortunate at the age of 14 to have been introduced

Pigeon and duck shooting



Simon’s labrador, Tess, powers through the water to make a retrieve

to most forms of shooting. While he loves going after geese, his favourite sporting moments have been roost shooting.

A duty and a pleasure

Traditionally, the first two weekends of February have been the times when the shooting and farming community have tried to make a dent in pigeon numbers. My father taught me that it was both a duty and a pleasure to make sure our little woods were set in ambush. This year, with winter drilling being the exception rather than the rule and with new regulations about neonicotinoids ➡

Simon Garnham takes aim after hunkering down into the grasses on the estuary edge

Pigeon and duck shooting

reducing the national acreage of rape, I felt it more important than ever to do our bit for preventative crop protection. So we found ourselves once more entering the darkened world of ancient woodland, where twisted sweet chestnuts vie with vast holly bushes and grizzled oaks for a share of the daylight.

William took up residence at the base of his favourite ash tree – a huge specimen that has lived through the space race, both World Wars, the Industrial Revolution and more.

“Want me to stay with you?” I offered paternally. “Definitely not. You can make sure they don’t settle in the corner.”

Note to self – lessons on unselfishness and charm in the field are required next time.

Hand-eye co-ordination

Duly relegated to the corner among the sitty trees, I settled back with uncharitable thoughts about ungrateful offspring. Rather irritatingly, my eldest has inherited his maternal grandfather’s hand-eye co-ordination and soon knocked a plump dark shape from a branch.

“Easy when they’re sitting,” I observed, uncharitably. But I had to acknowledge that he had listened to the lesson about building a bag by taking an easy first then a more challenging second if it presents itself.



William Garnham adds yet another pigeon to a decent bag from roost shooting in the woods

I, meanwhile, missed a curling pair dark against the apocalyptic skies. Dampness crept down my collar and up my wrists. With great magnanimity, I offered to take a little drive round to stir up the woods; things were slow to get going. “If you’re cold, that might be a good idea,” chirped irritating offspring. In fairness, he once told me he loved

a warren of briars, sycamore and elder left after the ballast had been dug out for the railway. A group of six birds didn’t see us pressed against the fence line and tore across the winter stubble towards us into the teeth of the storm like grouse. Off to my right I was able to take the leading bird, but was too slow as the remainder performed acrobatics worthy of the Red Arrows. I didn’t manage to knock down a second as they whipped away.

I returned to our original ambush to find a satisfying bag being built and a son glowing with excitement.

“Thanks, Dad. I’ve had my best shot ever. Can you send Tess? It’s over the ditch and in the cabbages.”

Some 70 yards away, hidden among winter cabbages, we found the source of such pleasure, still with some life in it. William had four at his feet. I had three in the bag. The light was failing and birds came with an urgency that only the most violent of weather would engender.

Double figures

For the first time in the whole day, rays of light from the dying sun exploded through the canopy, lighting the chests of the birds as they pitched into the skeletal branches above. We called it a day after another dozen or so shots, adding another three birds to make double figures. There was just enough light to make a return visit to the marsh worthwhile: phase three.

“The light was failing and the birds came with an urgency that only the most violent of weather would engender”

it in the woods. “It’s like there is no time and all the time. I put on my ear defenders and wait. I could be there forever,” he told me. It’s not a bad sentiment.

Tess and I discovered Farmer Charlie didn’t feel quite the same way. His wood was unmanned. “Six Nations; sorry. Help yourself,” was the rather uncommitted text. But his absence afforded me a high curler that thumped in a satisfying way to earth and allowed Tess the chance to show that she’d not lost her ability to leap fences by way of a retrieve. A similarly pleasing ambush took place at the Ballast Hole –

Mallard twisted and dived in the wind. Wigeon hurled themselves into the creek and teal scooted across the sea purslane, seeming to flick the ground as they turned. I felt as though I was watching the most wonderful of fireworks displays where it’s best simply to enjoy the wonders shining against the inky skies. Not a star shone. No moon or sun lit the sky. Darkness settled. We managed to add a teal and another duck – both shared birds.

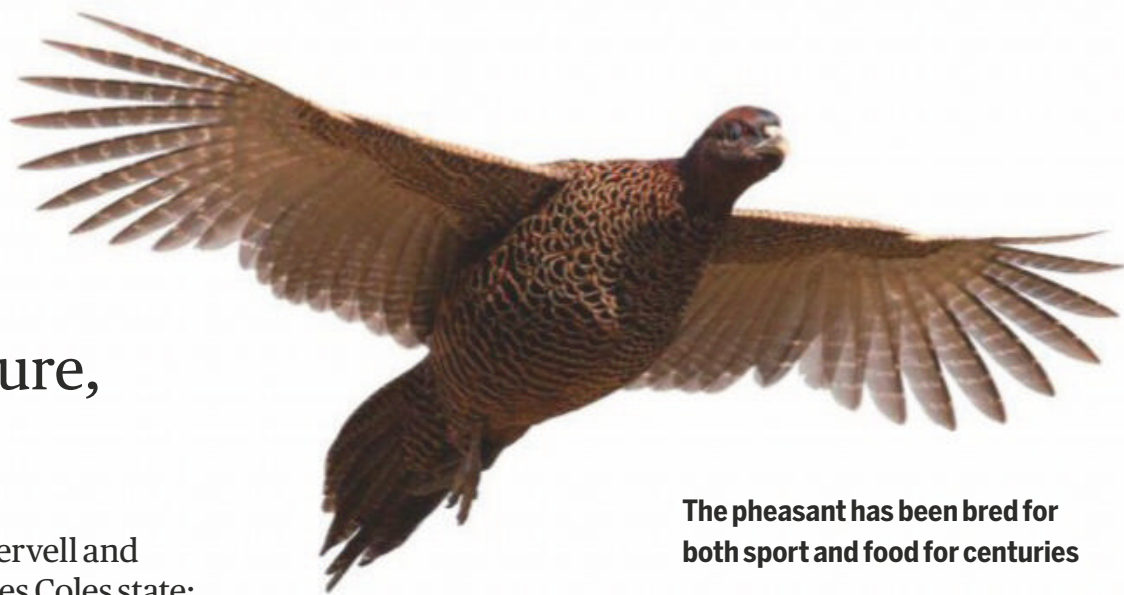
As I write now, the wind has dropped and the skies are blue. Daffodils are opening in the garden. I’m glad to have savoured the storm while it raged and hope readers were able to get among the birds while the winds raged. 🐦



Wild weather helped to make it a successful afternoon for Simon

Green and pheasant land

The pheasant has a long and colourful history in Britain – but what of its future, wonders Jeremy Hobson



The pheasant has been bred for both sport and food for centuries

Always a bird for the table, pheasants have been taken by falconers and various other methods for centuries since their probable introduction by the Romans.

The first documentary evidence of the pheasant in Britain comes in 1059 when King Harold offered the canons of Waltham Abbey a “commons” pheasant as an alternative to a brace of partridges. After the Norman conquest the birds were protected and nurtured as a delicacy for baronial banqueting tables.

Primarily a food source, their potential flying ability was unconsidered – until, that is, the advent of gun manufacturing when it became possible to contemplate driven pheasant shooting as a sport.

In their book, *Game & the English Landscape* (Debrett’s, 1980), Anthony

Vandervell and Charles Coles state:

“This approximate version of the modern system of driving seems to have started about 1829... Soon, a small platoon of estate workers walked through the undergrowth towards the guns, who stood outside the woods to shoot birds which were flying higher and faster to other coverts.”

In 1909, Owen Jones wrote: “Provided it is a good one, I do not care a rap whether a pheasant is hand-reared or wild when I am shooting at it; and the better it is, the less I care.” In 1924, Sir Peter Jeffrey Mackie was of the opinion that prior to World War I “the rearing of pheasants had been overdone”.

“It had become artificial. In many cases a larger number of birds were reared than the land would carry.

Complaints by farmers, and agitation, started by cranks, against all forms of rearing and game-preserving were the result.” Almost a century later, pheasant rearing continues – with similar comments.

It is, of course, now illegal to release certain non-indigenous species to the British countryside – and that could well include various types of pheasants. Not so 100 to 150 years ago when, for example, large Reeves’s pheasants, endemic to China, were released with varying results.

Flying low

In 1903, CJ Cornish mentioned that they were “... a great success in rough and mountainous districts, such as at Lord Tweedmouth’s ground at Guisachan, Inverness, where the six-foot [from beak to tail-tip, not in height!] pheasants find it difficult to run amongst the bracken, fallen trees and rough heather”. But he noted that “...at Balmacaan, Lady Seafield’s estate on Loch Ness... they were got to rise with difficulty and flew low”.

Cornish says of the common pheasant that: “[It] is now far from common in England in its original form, the Chinese ringnecked species having predominated in the artificially bred crosses...”

Edwardian game shots and estate owners were great enthusiasts and experimented with the introduction of several strains of pheasants to their shoots. The Japanese and Mongolian are still occasionally mentioned but what of the likes of the Yarkand or Shaw’s pheasant – or indeed, the Prince of Wales pheasant?



The huge Reeves’s pheasant was tried out at the turn of the 20th century



Game birds

A pair of Japanese pheasants, one of many novel varieties introduced by shoots over the years

The naming of the latter must surely have been a sycophantic gesture but it was apparently first discovered “during the progress of the Afghan Boundary Commission, on the banks of the river Bala Morgab [where] it was noticed that the birds not only ran in the swamp, but also swam”.

Prejudices

In the years after World War II, when pheasant shooting eventually began getting back on its feet, the readily available, traditional types of birds were caught, their eggs collected and the resultant chicks released as poults – and would subsequently fly over the guests of the shoot owner.

As the more commercial shoots emerged during the 1970s and 1980s some of these strains proved to be lacking in challenge, and keepers began looking for alternatives.

Gamekeepers have always had their favourites – and their dislikes. There are certainly prejudices. Many, for instance, say that the melanistic type is prone to wandering.

David Parks, an enthusiastic and extremely successful part-time gamekeeper in Northumberland, is of the opinion that traditional English



Polish. Is the Polish a pure breed? Not according to Mr Gronning: “Almost every ‘breed’ has an infusion of something and it certainly doesn’t breed true to type.” The Heart of England, like many others, overwinters its potential laying stock and selects only the truest looking with regards to size, colouring and other factors. Steve King from Knowle Game

Farm agrees that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find a pure breed. Like Mr Gronning, he thinks there are few, if any, pure strains of pheasants left and says that it’s the Polish type that seems very much in vogue with customers at the moment.

Richard Crofts, sales director at Bettws Hall, comments: “Over the

ringnecks are a type that, though they are “very big birds” that took “a while to get going”, the returns were “excellent”.

Will such thinking influence the future – and how are they influencing the current situation? Might it even produce a new breed of pheasant? This is doubtful.

“We are supplying eight different strains of pheasant but the most popular is the good old common ringneck”

Ole Gronning of Heart of England Farms says the type of bird he sells most is the Polish or bazanty. He classes it as a “good, all-round, average bird” that flies well in most situations. His customers tend to agree, at least judging by the order book, as half of requests are for

past few years, the most popular pheasant strains have varied from bazanty to common ringnecks to Michigan blues” and that “though we are supplying eight different strains of pheasant... we are seeing that the most popular is the good old common ringneck.”





Asked whether it's likely that any new breeds will appear and find favour with shoots and gamekeepers, Ole Gronning replies: "Not unless they discover a new breed on the moon – there's nowhere else in the world for new breeds to come from. If anything 'new' does develop, it can only be a strain of an existing one."

Food potential

Steve King admits to being a little cynical when he hears people say that a certain type flies too high or too low, or wanders off, or whatever it might be, and that no matter what the type, "there will always be a demand for a strong, powerful flying bird".

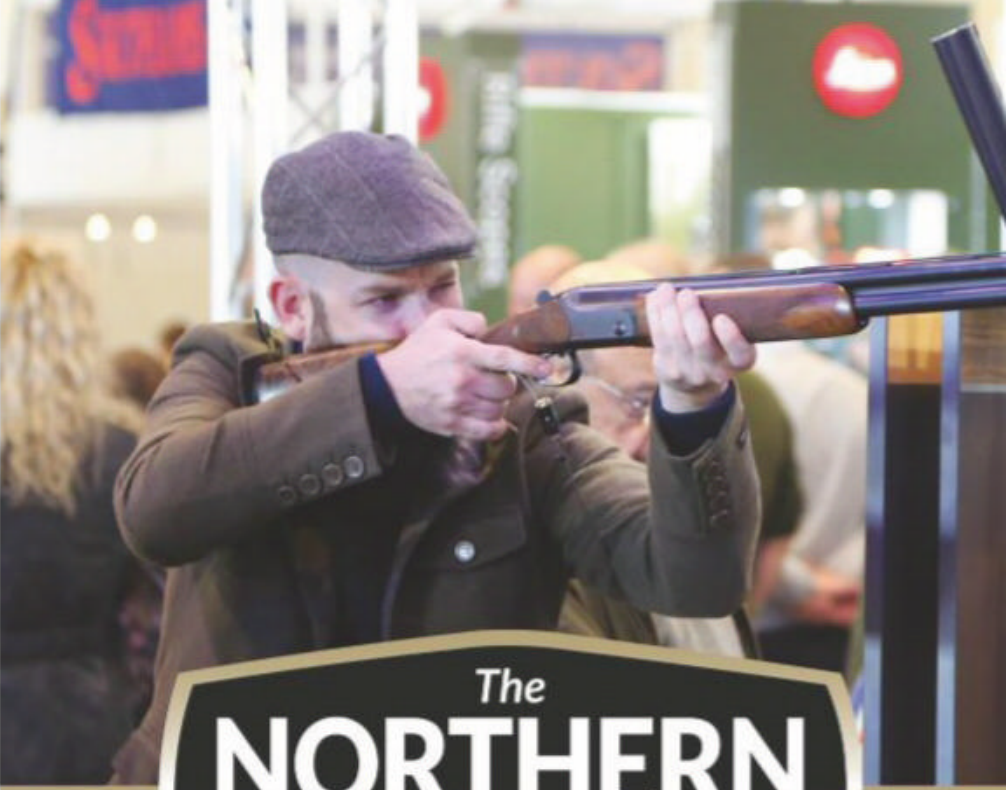
Richard Crofts believes that over the past 20 years, as the demands for more challenging shooting have increased, the general size of pheasants has decreased, producing a more energetic and lighter bird.

"The demand for driven game shooting is strong and the money that it brings in to rural communities is paramount so we, as a producer, will make sure that we supply whatever strains the customer requires to ensure that game shooting is here for good," he says.

I hope that increasingly, due to good work by the likes of the British Game Alliance, the emphasis when choosing birds in years to come will focus not just on its sporting potential but also the quality and quantity of the meat, rather than being weighted towards how well it flies. Pheasants, after all, are food. 🦌

Fancy breeds of pheasant became fashionable in the late 19th and early 20th century

Left: The common or ringneck pheasant is still one of the most popular breeds



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Licence to kale

Sea kale is the coastal gift that keeps on giving, but don't go mad – you only need to take a little at a time, says John Wright

It was several decades ago that I found my first patch of sea kale. Those plants – incongruous, enormous, almost alien – presented the most extraordinary vista I have encountered in my travels through the natural world. I had been walking east along the beach beneath the red cliffs at West Bay in Dorset.

As the cliffs ended, the beginning of Chesil Beach came into view and I was confronted with what looked like hundreds of gigantic cabbages. In fact they numbered in their thousands, stretching from where I stood for most of the length of the beach, some 17 miles. It is likely to be the largest population of this plant in the world and a great British treasure.

Sea kale is a plant of pebble and shingle beaches, usually on unstable upper shores. In Britain it can be found in suitable habitats from Lowestoft in Suffolk, then west to Penzance, and around the Irish Sea from Anglesey to Portpatrick in south-west Scotland. It is a substantial perennial at more than 1m across and

high, sprouting from thick, roots that bury deep into the beach. Late in the year it dies back.

The entire ecosystem of these vegetated pebble beaches is fascinating and highly variable. A plant found with sea kale – one that you most definitely would not wish to eat – is the yellow horned poppy. It is strikingly beautiful but secretes a yellow sap when cut that is poisonous. Sea beet, one of the best wild vegetables, and the considerably less edible sea campion and rock samphire can also be found.

Covent Garden

Sea kale is reported to have been first 'discovered' as an edible plant circa 1710 when the Reverend John Frewen sent some to the London markets from Sidmouth in Devon. Or it might have been a Giles Temple from Weymouth who sent some collected from Chesil Beach to Covent Garden in 1750.

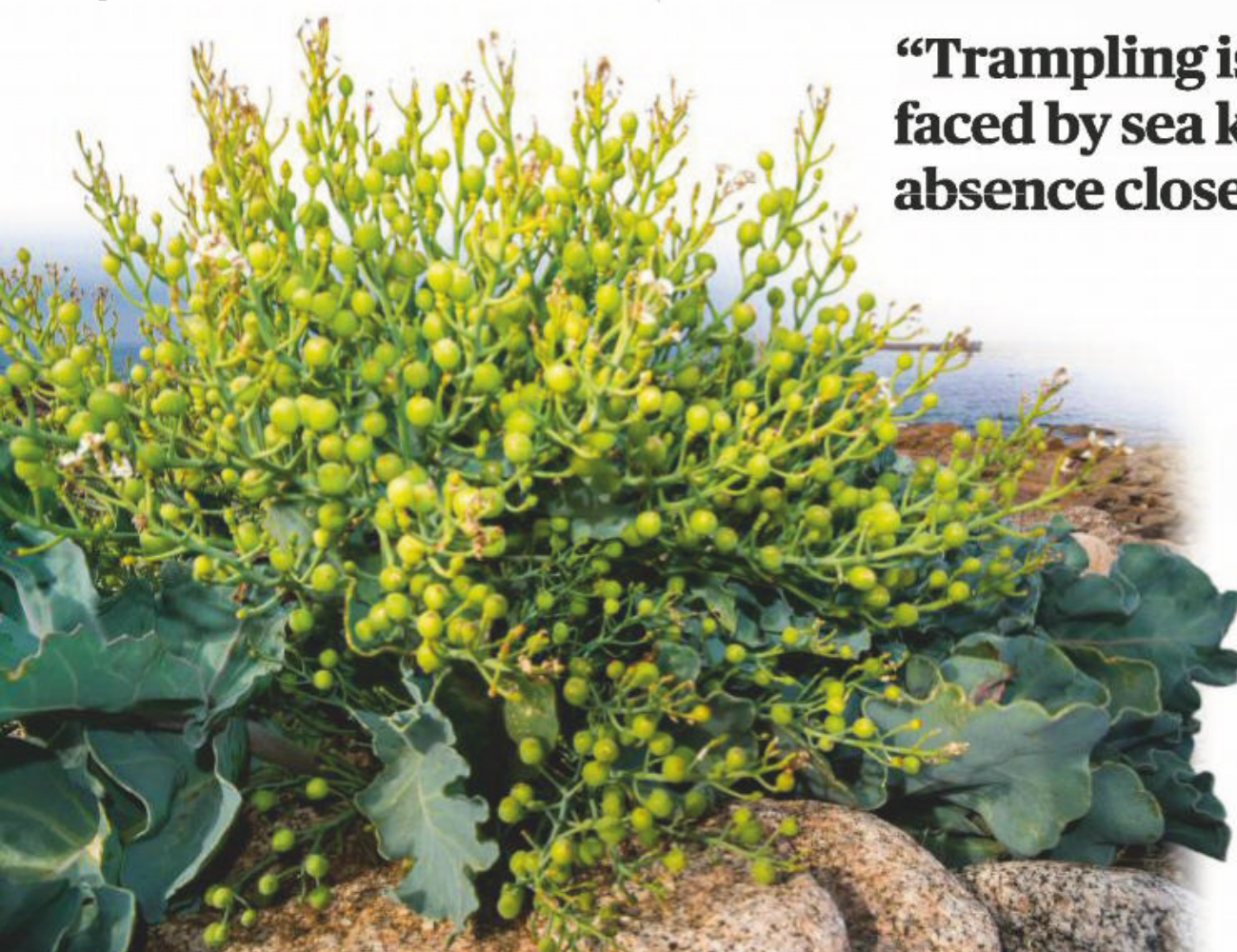
But there are other contenders for the honour. A writer for *The Globe* in



1905 came inelegantly clean about these "discoveries", admitting that "it is probable that from a remote period the humble inhabitants were in the habit of procuring it for their meals, long before intelligent minds were manifestly directed to the observation of its useful qualities". Indeed, an 18th-century traveller noted that the locals near Southampton had long been in the habit of collecting and cooking the tender shoots.

By 1770 sea kale became moderately fashionable among the intelligentsia and the plant was widely cultivated in gardens in the 19th century, sometimes being grown

"Trampling is the main problem faced by sea kale, shown by its absence close to beach car parks"



commercially. It is still available from seed and plant stockist for growing at home. However, it is a plant that is hungry for space, so only large gardens can accommodate it. I have noticed that some beachfront houses have it growing, fortuitously and appropriately, in their front garden.

Despite its restricted habitat, sea kale is not under threat, but it is not a plant you would wish to damage in any way. I am very careful about what I take from sea kale and when I go to harvest it I spend a fair proportion of the time chastising people

A plant found on our beaches, sea kale demands a lot of space to grow



for treading on the many young individuals that grow between the mature giants. Trampling is the main problem faced by this plant, shown by its absence within 200 to 300 yards either side of beach car parks.

It must be said that sea kale does not look particularly edible. Certainly, any attempt to eat the fully grown leaves is doomed. They are the diameter of a family-size pizza and possess the texture of leather, and as the 19th-century agricultural

Young sea kale is tasty but don't be tempted to eat the fully grown leaves – they have the texture of leather

improver Sir George MacKenzie said: “Sea kale cannot easily be overdone in cooking.” They are also quite bitter.

The roots were once considered the choicest part but this of course involves destruction of the entire plant. But there are several parts that can be collected and eaten which are very good indeed.

The first of these are the young shoots, which appear in late March and April. They can be eaten just as they are, but it is better to blanch them. To do this, find a resting plant – those showing dead flower spikes – and heap up 8in of pebbles over it. This should be done in February or early March.

Restraint

Go back about three weeks later and gently remove the pebbles to reveal the etiolated, pink shoots. These have little bitterness about them, being sweet and succulent and requiring a minute or two of cooking, or they can be eaten raw. Do be restrained and take just a few from each plant. The young, unblanched leaves are edible too, though that bitterness will be quite evident now.

The next thing to appear are the immature flower heads. These are very similar to purple sprouting broccoli and just as good to eat. It would be easy to fill a bin bag with sea kale “broccoli” on a productive beach, but your karma would take a long time to recover from such excess. Simply cut one or two from each plant – they are the plant’s future.

Nectaries

Those immature flower heads that escape your attention turn, unsurprisingly, into flowers. These are the typical cruciform shape of all brassicaceous plants but larger than most and white. Being so large, the nectaries make them noticeably sweet and they can be used to decorate a salad.

The final gift from this plant are the immature seed pods. Unlike most brassica pods, these contain a single seed each and are spherical. They must be picked while immature as they acquire the texture of .303 bullets when ripe. What are they like to eat? Imagine something halfway between a cabbage and a slightly crunchy pea and you have it.

They are good fun to serve to guests because, looking like peas while tasting of cabbage, they inevitably cause comment. 🐣



All parts of the plant are good to eat – at the right times



AYA Legend De Luxe 20-bore

In making a return to the over-and-under market, AYA is taking on big competitors, but the quality of its new Legend impresses Mark Heath

I can remember in the 1970s as a youngster reading *Shooting Times* and scanning all the adverts for guns that I admired, from the significantly expensive handmade English guns to the more affordable offerings from Italy and Spain, together with slightly agricultural guns from the old Eastern bloc.

Among all the adverts, I can remember seeing the AYA Yeoman over-and-under, which looked well made and at a reasonable price. Looking at the trade index, there are a number for sale from that period starting at around £150, so the robust appearance seems to have been carried through in its longevity.

I cannot recall the AYA featuring in the competitive clay shooting. I think it was more likely to have seen use in driven game shoots of the time, where it probably would not be required to

tackle the higher birds on offer on some of today's sport. AYA ceased production of this model around 1988.

In the intervening years, AYA has built a reputation for its side-by-sides, from a plain No4 boxlock to the No1 deluxe based on the style of a Best English sidelock. My favourite would be a No1 or No2 round action or, if you're really offering, a No56, which is a heavier side-by-side in the style of a live pigeon gun.

These guns have a reputation for reliability and the ability to take heavy use in a busy season in their stride. Their handling is excellent, especially if you take advantage of the made-to-measure option, which costs a little extra and is normally delivered within 12 months.

So it's quite interesting when we hear that AYA is dipping its toe back into the over-and-under market with the launch of the Legend De Luxe.

NEED TO KNOW	
Manufacturer	AYA, Spain
UK distributor	ASI
Model	AYA Legend De Luxe
Bore	20-bore
Barrels	29½in
Action	Boxlock ejector
Weight	6lb 13oz
Features	Handling, build quality, options available
Price	£10,600

However, it still makes a true sidelock over-and-under, mainly directed at the European market.

The new model comes in both 12-bore and 20-bore, with game and clay versions in both the standard and deluxe finishes.

A bit clunky but effective

The model we are testing is a 20-bore game version with 29½in multichoked barrels, fitted with a single selective trigger. The selector is very much like the Rizzini style with the switch-over button on top of the safety; it's a bit clunky but effective.

My personal choice is the Browning style where the safety moves across; I find there is less chance of selecting the wrong barrel accidentally with this. It has almost a semi-round action, with acanthus hand engraving on a dark background. The stock on the De Luxe had fine high grade wood and, though we are looking at a pre-production model, the finish and wood-to-metal fit is excellent and the stock finished with chequering.

The action features an acanthus hand engraving on a dark background



N. RIDLEY



The stock measurements came in at 14⁷/₈in length of pull with an additional ¹/₈in at heel and ³/₈in at toe. Drop measurements are a little high at 1¹/₄in at comb, 1⁷/₈in at heel, with ¹/₈in cast off at heel. However, I would strongly recommend that you take advantage of the custom stock service offered by AYA to ensure that your gun fits correctly.

A great-looking gun that doesn't fit is not much use to anyone and will languish in the gun cabinet, unloved. I have fitted a number of AYAs for

“A great-looking gun that doesn’t fit is not much use and will languish in the gun cabinet”

customers and the measurements come back exactly as ordered. A properly fitted gun is a pleasure to use rather than trying to convince yourself that it will be all right on the night with something straight off the shelf.

Stock options include semi-pistol grip as per the test gun, full pistol or straight hand stock. I personally see little point in this last option unless the gun were to be fitted with double triggers, thereby allowing the hand to slide back for the second trigger.

The overall weight of the gun is 6lb 13oz so there's no heavyweight 20-bore here. The clay version is a little heavier and adds around ³/₄lb. The barrels weigh 1,307g pretty much as expected; the version on test came with a solid mid-rib and ventilated and tapered top rib. Barrel lengths from 28in to 34in are available with a choice of multi or fixed choke.

Precise and accurate

I would probably opt to try the 32in barrels on the 12-bore and perhaps see if AYA would do some 31in barrels on a 20-bore, only because I tested a 20-bore with similar configuration last year and it was amazing to shoot. If you're a fan of heavy cartridges the chambers are 3in magnum proofed so will swallow anything you dare to drop in, but if you are recoil sensitive my advice is shoot something



The Legend De Luxe handles exceptionally well and the trigger pulls are crisp

CONCLUSION

This price bracket is fairly heavily populated and competitive, with offerings which include Perazzi MX12/20, Blaser Grand Luxe, Chapuis C40, Caesar Guerini Revenant and Browning B15. There's a hefty decision to be made and much of it is down to shooting style and personal taste.

Action/barrels	The fit and finish, as we would expect from AYA, is first class, with a double locking mechanism action that has all the signs of lasting a lifetime. The engraving of the action and the blacking of the barrels, even though pre-production, is exceptional.	19 / 20
Trigger and ejectors	The ejectors operated with well-timed efficiency in spitting out the variety of cartridges that we fed the gun. The trigger was non-adjustable in terms of length of pull and crisp in execution.	19 / 20
Stock	The wood on the stock was well figured and finished to a high standard. I would always opt for the custom stock after a proper fitting with a try gun especially when buying a gun in this price bracket. The slightly longer wait for your new gun is well worth it.	19 / 20
Handling	The balance was perfect just in front of the hinge pin, this kept the lighter gun controllable and a pleasure to shoot.	20 / 20
Value	This is a highly competitive price bracket with some established competitors. The Legend De Luxe has all the right ingredients, especially for the game shooting sector. Whether it will hold its price in the second-hand market time will tell, and will depend to a certain degree on how it builds its reputation.	18 / 20
SCORE		95 / 100

that is comfortable and gives you confidence. A couple of extra grams of lead with some discomfort will not make the difference; your skill, ability and concentration will bring down the bird that gives you pleasure.

It's been busy with families getting a lesson before shooting together so I managed to get out just before dark to finish the test.

Roddy Richmond-Watson, whose grandfather founded West London Shooting School in 1901, had a spare hour so we headed out with a variety of cartridges from 21g No8 to 30g No5 from three different manufacturers. For his shoot days, Roddy switches

between a 28-bore over-and-under and a pair of Boss 12-gore side-by-sides that were inherited.

We headed to the 40ft tower for a quick warm-up then straight to the 80ft tower. I had put in half and three-quarter chokes before the test and they did the job regardless of the cartridge used with some great pattern quality. The gun handles exceptionally well and was a pleasure to shoot, the trigger pulls are crisp and the ejectors efficient and well timed. We shot the final targets just after dusk and, even without thermal imaging, the Legend De Luxe remained precise and accurate. 🦋

A focused mind and eyes of fire

Hunting with powerful hawks is a pleasure that leaves *Soldier Palmer* feeling inspired

I once spent three consecutive days flying a goshawk after mountain hares in the Lammermuir Hills, almost within sight of Edinburgh. It was in the days after the grouse season had finished and snow lay in the heather like sodden lavatory paper. The Lammermuirs have nothing to offer shelter nor break the bitter easterly wind that rides over the sea from Bergen, and it takes a stern, stolid constitution to find fun there on a winter's day.

The hawk was unloaded from its travel box and decked out with telemetry equipment. Soon we were out on the hill with a couple of dogs and a clear view to the Firth of Forth.

Grouse were all around us, but I was surprised to find that this goshawk showed no interest in them whatsoever. She was a grand, fire-eyed female and could have taken her pick of the birds on offer, but she

was consumed with an obsession for mountain hares.

Most of these were in their pure white winter coats; more like teddy bears than wild animals. Some paused at long distance to gaze at us with curiosity and seemed to provide tempting targets, but we could only fly under certain conditions of wind and terrain.

Spaniels worked neatly at our feet, pushing grouse and hares into the terrible cold breeze, but we moved on to a prearranged bank of old heather and moss. At last we were ready to make a start and my hands were already completely numb.

Trust

A cocker was cast a little way ahead and the goshawk waited for contact. Grouse flashed and cackled all around us, but somehow the hawk was able to retain a dazzlingly single-minded focus on ground game. My host was

an experienced hawker and he had worked hard to build trust with his bird and the local keepers in order to have his sport.

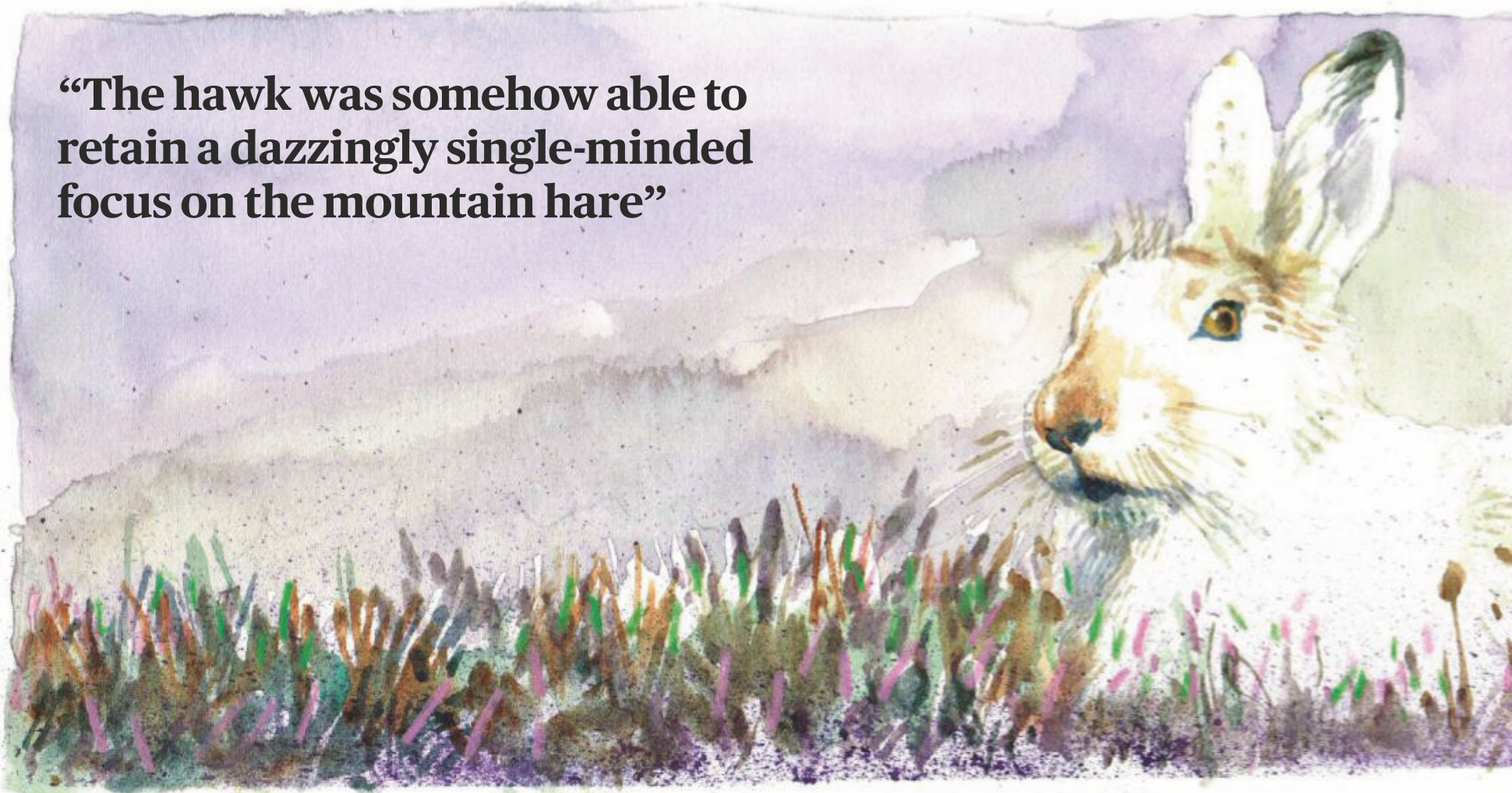
Wild goshawks can do a great deal of damage to grouse stocks and while natural predation is one thing, domesticated hawks flying for sport is harder to accept. They had to see the predator's selectivity at first hand before allowing the hawk to visit and many of the keepers were still left scratching their heads in disbelief.

When the time came to act, the hare was caught in a single, fluid blur. The hawk left the glove and killed the hare, and that's all there was to it. The performance was so quick that I hardly had time to register it.

Staggered and a little unnerved by the goshawk's power, I made a mental note to stay on the ball next time. But after half an hour, the hawk had caught two more hares and began to make the work look brisk and easy. In the time it took for the floppy white shapes to rise up from the heather, the goshawk had descended upon them like an avenging angel.

On the first day, we stopped after three hours because I could no longer carry the bag. Mountain hares are chunky and I began to regret my offer to serve as porter. At least I was kept warm with work as the first flecks of snow began to fall, but slogging up and down a grouse moor with almost a dozen hares in a backpack

“The hawk was somehow able to retain a dazzlingly single-minded focus on the mountain hare”



The way the raptor works with the human and the spaniel or pointer is beyond impressive

soon began to flatten my batteries. It was a strange baptism to the world of hawking.

A compelling relationship seemed to have arisen between the goshawk and her owner, and the level of training and mutual understanding existed in a league of its own. It was clear that this is an extremely time-consuming hobby; the kind of pursuit that can eat you alive and still require more input. I later learned that this goshawk did not hunt grouse because she never had done it and seemed to lack the self-belief required to do so. That's a challenging trick to instil in a bird, particularly when you are training it to kill hares that are bigger and stronger than grouse.

Fragile

My second encounter with hunting raptors came the following year and the stated aim was grouse. This was a different game altogether, flying a peregrine at extreme height to hunt heather with English pointers. It seemed like a fragile, chancy mechanism to work with; there was so much that could go wrong.

For a start, the peregrine was so high up that we couldn't see it. If grouse were flushed, it would have to cover an awful lot of ground to come near them, let alone catch



one. I began to wonder if it was even watching us. From a height of 1,000ft, there would surely be plenty of other distractions for a bird with exceptional eyesight.

Thrilling

Then suddenly dogs were on point. We humans inched closer to the cover and suddenly the air was thick with birds. It is always thrilling to be surrounded by a covey of grouse, but I peered upwards to see if I could spot any sign of the falcon. Astonishingly, Oit was coming.

It's no exaggeration to say that bird fell upon its prey like an anvil – this improbably ornate mechanism of man, bird and dog had actually borne fruit. Again, I had underestimated the level of training and interaction and it was extraordinary to imagine how much time must have been invested in honing that connection to perfection.

In their white winter coats, the hares looked more like teddy bears than wild animals

Working with falcons seems to belong in a rarefied category of old country pursuits with emphasis on quality over quantity. I was impressed to hear that this peregrine might only catch a dozen grouse in a season. But each one is a monumental event in its own right, particularly when measured against guns who kill several dozen grouse between August and December and might only recall the specifics of two or three of them.

The amount of time, preparation and training implicit in old-fashioned fieldsports such as hawking and falconry beggars belief, particularly to people like me who are more used to short-term, quick-reward hobbies. But when it works, whether in the catching of a hare or the complete destruction of a grouse, the pleasure is vastly amplified. Perhaps I lack the patience and commitment to keep a falcon or a goshawk of my own, but I take my hat off to those who turn raptors into a way of life. ♀



Northern Nature Notes

WITH LINDSAY WADDELL



Waxing lyrical

Instantly recognisable by their bright blazes of colour, waxwing are among our prettiest birds – but you may have to travel to see one

I first saw this little bird when I was a youngster; it was feeding on berries in a garden as I walked through Dundee north of the Tay. I did not see one again until I was working in the north-east of Yorkshire seven or eight years later. It's one of those birds that, even if you have never seen one, if you have any interest in ornithology you will recognise as soon as you spot it. The downside is that unless you live on the east side of the country, the Solway estuary or the east side of Northern Ireland, you are unlikely to see one as those are the areas the bird comes to when it crosses the north sea.

The waxwing, *Bombycilla garrulus*, is one of only three species; the other two are the Japanese and the cedar.

Ours is not what you might call a common visitor compared with many, with numbers only in the region of around 10,000; waterfowl number hundreds of thousands. It's a striking and very dapper bird,



Both male and female waxwing gather nesting materials, including lichen, moss and grasses

with a notable crest and beautiful plumage, with quite a variety of hues.

The bulk of these are browns, buffs, greys and chestnut, but what sets this little bird apart from many others is the contrasting brighter colours. The body is variations of brown, with a black bib with white stripes up either side. A black stripe from the eye runs up into the crest, bordered with white.

Yellow stripe

On the buff to grey wings the primaries have jet black on them, but also yellow stripes nearer the end. Its crowning glory is the bright red tips from which the bird gets its common name, as the red is typical of sealing wax. The tail is noteworthy, too, the upper side of the grey rump turning to black then tipped with bright yellow, while the underside is a bright amber.

It's not a big bird, quite stocky and around 9in to 10in long, with a wingspan of about 18in. It's main

haunt is the northern arboreal forests of Europe where it often nests close to bodies of water.

It's thought the waxwing chooses those areas because of the supply of insects that habitat brings to the table for food for the youngsters, and adults. The nest is built of grasses, lichen and moss, with some reinforcing from light twigs and sometimes camouflaged with even more vegetation to avoid predators.

Both birds gather materials, though it is the female that does most of the building. Once the clutch is laid, she also does the incubation while the male supports her by bringing food.

No song

The waxwing has little in the sense of a song, its calls limited to a few not very musical sounds. However, there may be a reason for that as singing is a sign to others that you are claiming a territory and the waxwing does not hold one when breeding. This means that birds often nest quite closely together, maximising the best breeding sites, as well as giving each another some cover from predators.

From insects in the early summer, the bird has quite a range of foods to work through for the remainder of the year. It basically goes from one fruit to the next as they ripen. From early season flowers, wild strawberries, mulberries and other dwarf shrub fruits, it then moves on to raspberries, blackberries and honeysuckle. Next on the menu come the crab apples,



“The waxwing basically goes from one fruit to another as they ripen, from wild strawberries to juniper and cotoneaster”

juniper and cotoneaster, as well as mountain ash, and indeed anything it can lay its beak on.

Dangerous

To reinforce that statement it will eat buds when pushed. It makes full use of any ornamental berries it finds in our gardens when it is forced over the sea by a lack of food in mainland Europe. Though it is not classed as a

long-distance migrant, the waxwing does cover thousands of miles and is nevertheless often forced to cross what is a dangerous piece of water in order to sustain itself in times of need.

For those of us fortunate enough to see a flock of these pretty birds, it's worth spending a few minutes to watch them, as those colours brighten up what can sometimes be a drab winter's day. 🐦



The black bib is clearly defined, and the wings have a yellow stripe

A rabbiting right-and-left

Let Storm Ciara do her worst; Simon Whitehead and friends don't care a jot for the weather so long as they can keep catching bunnies

To say it was stormy would be a crashing understatement. Ciara was in town and she wasn't happy. What was originally booked as a "catch and cook" day for two women with a knife-sharpening demonstration quickly morphed into a few hours harvesting some fresh rabbits for lunch.

The weather wasn't conducive to a full day on the hill but, being an avid wildfowler, Alan from Danum Blades still made the hike north. I couldn't think of a better way to demonstrate the full field-to-fork ethos than taking Alan ferreting, using what we harvested for our lunch, prepared by knives made and sharpened by Alan's own hands.

The day started in typical fashion. First, we had a power cut, then we had to negotiate

severe flooding on the A66. Once we arrived at the farm, a torrent of water running through where we usually park threatened to run over the tops of our boots.

At times it was a struggle to keep upright and, with the sideways lashing rain, we had possibly the worst ferreting weather imaginable. The biting wind, plummeting temperatures and driving rain ensured that the simplest of jobs, such as collaring the ferrets,

skittish in the storm, especially with the water running through every nook and cranny on the land. Would they be more inclined to stay under, preferring the damp, peaty pipes to bolting in the open in high winds and driving rain?

Buffeted

A sodden brace bolted for freedom the moment I went near the small collection of warrens I wanted to work. As I started to drop the long-nets, I squinted through my damp lenses and saw the forlorn figure of Shaun. I was being buffeted about

"The weather forecast was of an impending storm and risks of flooding – so we went ferreting"

became hard work. We had no dogs as I saw no point in having them out in these conditions.

I was apprehensive about the rabbits being

carrying my baskets, but Shaun had his back to the rain and all I heard were faint, broken soundbites as he struggled to be heard against the wind, which is a rarity. "You all want to do what I do, until you have to do



what I do,” he chuckled. it’s a line I use frequently when people idealise the life of a professional rabbit catcher.

We all knew the score. The weather was going to be relentless but we love ferreting and as long as it was safe, we were going to get the job done. The forecast was of storms and severe risks of flooding. While the public tends to panic buy and empty supermarket shelves, we decided to have a few hours out ferreting, not only harvesting our own food but preparing, cooking and eating it.

Unfazed ferrets

Each of us was protected from the elements – or so we thought. The driving wind was pushing water into places the wind itself couldn’t reach – down the back of my neck, inside my boots and across my legs. Dry and cosy quickly became damp and uncomfortable. The ferrets, however, weren’t fazed one bit. Nice and snug in their straw-packed ferret boxes, they don’t mind these conditions.

Setting the long-nets was eventful. The wind was blowing the bagging the wrong way and over the top running line. If my balance was

wrong, I was getting blown about and the last thing I wanted was to drop a basket of long-nets in this. Shaun laid a scattering of purse-nets. With no dogs, and screaming wind robbing us of any useable audio guidance whatsoever, we had to completely rely on our eyes and reflexes.

Our senses were in overdrive; we didn’t know what was going to bolt, from where and when. But when the first two rabbits bolted they did within seconds of the trio of albino hob ferrets being entered. A ferreting right-and-left – one ran towards Shaun, the other to Alan. Even in such conditions, the long-nets worked a treat, bagging the bunnies so well that both Shaun and Alan had their work cut out removing them quickly in case more decided to bolt. They didn’t.

If these were big and deep warrens, we may have struggled more, but in the shallow warrens the rabbits cannot hide as well. The best option they have is to make a run for it. If they don’t, as was the case for a few rabbits we encountered, it takes only brief excavation to remove them.

The rain was starting to get worse, as was the wind. ➡



ABC OF FERRETING



In this column, Simon outlines the essentials of good ferreting

HOME SWEET HOME FOR ESCAPE ARTISTS

The rabbiting season is all but over and ferreters’ thoughts are turning towards the next. Do we need more nets? Do the old ones need repairing? Do we need more ferrets? While turning these questions over, a little time should be spent on a quick spring clean. Ensuring all the hutches, for housing our ferrets and hopefully their kits in the summer, are in good order.

The weather plays havoc with the ferrets’ housing. The hutch is the centre of the ferret’s universe. If we are expecting them to work with the drive and vigour we want, they need to have a solid, safe and secure place to live.

I use an animal- and pet-friendly wood preservative to paint my hutches. It’s good for the wood but even better for my ferrets. It takes a couple of coats all over, with a couple more in the latrine corner. Ferret urine can rot almost anything and if you are not careful the wood in that corner will soon rot away and present a means of escape. You could fix a plastic sheet in the corner to add extra protection.

The locks and hinges should have a squirt of oil and a check to see if the screws are still firmly keeping the hinges and locks attached to the wood. Ferrets spend a lot of their time scratching at the doors and if you are not careful some catches can work loose. I have known hutch doors come open with a little persuasion from the housed ferrets.

Inspect the mesh for any bite holes and any spots that have become rusty and may be a little brittle. Inspect the water bottles and clean or replace as needed. When you have finished, your hutches will be all ready for the next 12 months.

With a little time and effort, your hutches will be in fine condition, meaning that your ferrets will be too by the time the season starts.



“It took barely 30 seconds to locate and remove the rabbit that thought it had got the better of us”

When a storm's blowing the only thing to do is focus on the task at hand and get things done

My attention was being taken from the nets and ferrets to keeping warm and trying to forget about the water inside my boots. My hands underneath my gloves were starting to cool. The dexterity and strength of my grip was starting to suffer. The gloves were nothing more than a hinderance when a rabbit bolted into the long-net.

Despatch

My glasses became steamed up as my rising body temperature met the driving rain. I couldn't really see in them and was relying on muscle memory to despatch the netted rabbit.

When I heard the muffled bellow from both sides of the fence – “Rabbit in net” again – I couldn't jump the barbed wire fence quick enough. As the rabbit hit the net in a spot where the wind was blowing the bagging outwards, the rabbit managed to evade my grasp and go back underground.



A deliciously fortifying snack packed full of protein, bunny in a bagel

I could sense the huddled figures of Alan and Shaun watching me as I sloshed over to get my spade. The wind was picking up and the rain was getting heavier.

It took barely 30 seconds to locate and remove the rabbit that thought it had got the better of us. By this point my ferret-finder was clogged up with mud and full of water; instead of making a lovely bleeping noise it sounded like a drowning dalek.

With my boots now holding water, my fingers cold and wet, legs saturated and vision impaired, I decided enough was enough. We collected the ferrets and kit and made for the warm fire in my kitchen a few miles away.

We had enough rabbits for what we needed and I was keen to make everyone lunch. As I did so, Alan showed us how to keep a good edge on our knives. It turns out that when sharpening less is more. He also showed us how to use a leather strop and stone while I rustled up some delicious bunny burgers in bagels from our harvest.

The weather may have been atrocious, but our lunch by the fire was as organic as it comes and had the carbon footprint of a field mouse.

I do hope the two ladies who were meant to be coming out manage to make it another time for another adventure but I'm very glad they weren't out in the storm – because it may have put them off the sport for life. 🐾



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It's worth a shot

Gundogs at Crufts have a great record, having won Best in Show 23 times, and it's an event we should visit once, says David Tomlinson



MUCH AS I LIKE DOGS, dog shows are not my scene. Thus I won't be at Crufts for gundog day this coming Friday, though I have been often enough to know exactly what I'm missing. The day starts with a long, cold walk from the car park to the halls of the National Exhibition Centre, home of Crufts since 1991.

The cost of parking seems to go up every year: this year it's £16 but you can save £4 by paying in advance. Entry to the show itself costs another £19, with concessions £14, though again you can save by pre-paying – check on the Crufts website.

If you've never been to Crufts it's worth going once, if only to discover the importance of dogs in our society. The annual attendance is around 160,000 people over the four days, which is considerably more than the Game Fair has ever attracted. Some 28,000 dogs are estimated to take part. Not all of them are being exhibited, as some come for events such as fly ball or agility, while others

take part in Discover Dogs, with representatives of some 200 breeds present. Supporting the show are numerous trade stands, so you can buy anything from beds to books, collars to crates.

Even for those not interested in canine beauty contests there's lots to entertain, though if you dislike crowds you won't enjoy Crufts. It is always packed and moving from hall to hall is slow and tedious. It's

most successful group. Individually, cocker spaniels have been the most successful breed, winning Best in Show seven times. In contrast, no English springer has even won the top award, while the last time a labrador did so was in 1937, the winning dog belonging to gundog enthusiast Countess Lorna Howe. She also won the award in 1932 and 1933.

Crufts does provide the chance to see all those rare breeds of gundog

“There are only a small number of dogs in the running. I will be astonished if the champion is an English springer”

much easier to walk along the rows of benches and past the grooming tables where the contestants receive a last-minute brush. Labradors, being shorthaired, escape this indignity, but for the American cocker it's a serious business.

Gundogs have won Best in Show at Crufts 23 times, making this the

that you might have read about but probably not seen, at least in the shooting field.

You can spend a lifetime shooting and never come across a curlycoated retriever or a field spaniel, but 61 curlies and an identical number of fields will be at Crufts this Friday. Intriguingly, the number of dogs of

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DAVID'S VIEWPOINT

HOW A POM MADE WAVES

Looking back at Best in Show winners at Crufts

Over the years the best of breed winners at Crufts have had some extraordinary names, but none more so than last year's top dog, a Pomeranian called *Planet Waves Forever Young Daydream Believers*. It's comfortably the longest name of a Best in Show winner since the competition began in its current form in 1928, when it was won by a greyhound with the modest name of *Primley Sceptre*.

Before the Best in Show award was invented, the top dog was called the best champion, the first winner of which was, in 1905, another Pomeranian known as *The Sable Mite*. It was something of a relief to find that Countess Lorna Howe's

two Best in Show-winning labradors had more simple names. Her first was *Bramshaw Bob*, who won in 1932 and 1933; in 1937 she won with *Cheveralla Ben of Banchory*. These wins make her the second most successful breeder in Crufts history, behind H S Lloyd, who won best in breed six times, the last time in 1950.

Countess Howe was the third wife of Richard Curzon, the 4th Lord Howe. He married Lorna, his first cousin once removed, in 1925. Her marriage to Lord Howe allowed her to follow her passion for both working and showing labradors.

She handled her dog FTCh *Balmuto Jack* to win the Retriever Championship in 1926, 1928 and 1929, and she had another win in 1936 with FTCh *Balmuto Hewildo*, handled for her by Tom Grant. She also made-up three dual champions, *Banchory Bolo*, *Bramshaw Bob*, and *Banchory Painter*, a feat that will never be repeated. I would have loved to have met Countess Howe, who died in 1961, because



Cheveralla Ben of Banchory won Crufts 1937

she was clearly a great character, as well as a formidable breeder and competitor with labradors.

It's fascinating to consider what she would make of the labradors now: I doubt she would be impressed. The photographs of her dogs show classic, athletic-looking black animals, perhaps slightly heavier than the super-fast trialling labs we have today, but beautifully put together.

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each breed being exhibited rarely corresponds with the popularity of the breed, as either a working gundog or as a pet. For example, English springers will be outnumbered by Welsh springers – 162 to 177 – while the 331 flatcoats being exhibited rivals the 370 cockers.

Irish setters

Setters have long been popular as show dogs: this year 294 Irish setters will be there, along with 153 Gordons and 150 English.

As usual, the most popular breed at Crufts, and not just on gundog day, is the labrador, with 543 entries, but it's a total that only narrowly beats golden retrievers (519). Just in case you're wondering, some 212 French bulldogs are being shown this year, which is only exceeded in the utility group by the English bulldog on 235. The breed with the smallest entry at Crufts is the foxhound, with just four entries, but no serious foxhound would ever put a paw inside the show.

I've always thought that judging of the show gundog classes at Crufts should be preceded by a shotgun being fired in the ring, with all the dogs that bolt at the sound of the bang being eliminated. However, I don't think that's a suggestion likely to find much favour. Fortunately, Crufts still

features its gamekeepers' classes, run by BASC, and these do cater for proper gundogs that, in theory at least, have got their paws dirty during the past shooting season.

Sadly, the ban on showing docked dogs, introduced by the last Labour government, has emasculated the gamekeepers' classes, so there's hardly a real working springer or



A Clumber spaniel at Crufts – the breed will be represented by 68 dogs at this year's event

cocker to be seen. Even so, some 97 dogs have been entered, only a slight decline in numbers from the 111 that took part in these classes five years ago. More than 20 trophies will be competed for, not all of which are for the dogs. The BASC regional gamekeeper team competition includes the Derek Vaines Trophy for the smartest team taking part, so expect to see some stylish tweeds.

Entertaining

The BASC rings used to look forlorn and empty during lunchtime, but there's now a gundog training display, featuring a variety of breeds. In the early evening there's another gundog display put on by Philippa Williams of Castlemans Gundogs. Philippa has been a regular here since 2003 and her displays are entertaining and finely judged to the audience, most of whom have probably never seen a gundog working.

Somewhat naively, I used to think that any of the thousands of dogs entering Crufts were in with a chance of winning the Best in Show award. The truth is that there is only a small number of dogs in the running for the top prize, all of whom the judge will be aware of before they come in the ring. I will be astonished if the champion is an English springer. 🐾



Snow-happy pigeon

Their eyesight is legendary but why can't woodies see decoys against the glaring background of snow? Colin Willock adapts his plan of attack

There is so little apparent choice for our local flocks of woodpigeons that, when the snow clamps down, their targets are predictable. They head for young cabbage, spinach and, often, the tops of turnips. Moreover, they start their tuck-in early, just in case the supply runs out or the mob from the woods the other side of the bypass finds it first. Hence my look around just after first light.

Despite everything people tell you about the fantastic pigeon shooting to be had in snow, I remain extremely doubtful. The worst thing is that you can't decoy. We have a great deal to learn about woodpigeons. One of the first things that the scientists might try finding out is why a bird with such astonishing eyesight simply cannot see decoys laid out against the glaring white background of a snowy field.

The only conclusion I can come to is that pigeon are easily dazzled. Who has not had the experience of walking home from a day's shooting, with the setting sun low on the horizon behind him, only to see a pigeon steaming straight at him on a collision course?

The fact is that my just-out-of-town nursery farms rarely produce a good snow shoot. When it happens the reason is that outer suburbia offers very few alternative feeding grounds under hard weather conditions. They have to come into the one field where the grub is available.



"The ironmonger had 50 cartridges with rusting primers, showing how long they'd been in stock"

I struck it like this one Saturday morning during that snow span that fell across January and February 1963. Dawn patrol found nothing on the spinach on number one farm where I had expected a heavy concentration.

Every bird

Just outside farm number two, about a mile distant, I came across every pigeon in the district. They were not on the farm itself but on a tiny smallholding, planted with cabbage, just alongside. Goodness knows why they had chosen this place.

It cannot have been more than 50 yards wide and was all of 150 yards long. It was bordered on two sides by lanes. There were huge areas of identical and far more remote cabbage out on the farm itself. There, no human or vehicle would come within 200 yards of them the whole day long. But still they chose that narrow strip of allotment.

I put them off and set up a net hide on the hedge. It had now started to blow nicely with a delightful fine dry snow that even settled inside my glasses. Who cared? This promised

“An attacking force of pigeon was in, on and around that field of rape”



“The pigeon cannot have had enough to eat, but they had had enough of being shot at”

to be a big shoot. Once I had fired the first few shots, they ceased being suicidal and had a good look round.

There were no sitty trees anywhere for them to squat in. Instead, they made their recce by piling in downwind at full throttle, coming in over the hedge with undercarriage down and flaps set.

A hundred cartridges

When I connected, they went rolling down the storm to fall a good 70 yards behind into deep snow. By lunch time I had fired my 100 cartridges and picked 75 birds, with extra effort by myself to find those birds in the deep powdery snow where they had crashed down.

I packed up and went to see if the local ironmonger had any cartridges. On this occasion he had 50 with rusting primers, which gives an idea of how long they had been in stock.

I gave a thought to domestic relations and returned home for a quick lunch. I was back in that hide an hour after firing my last shot, keyed up and expecting my 50 cartridges to give me not much more than an hour’s shooting. I fired three of them all afternoon. Those pigeon cannot have had enough to eat, but they had had enough of being shot at. I never saw them again that day.

This year’s snow has brought no worthwhile attack on any of my local

crops. I was therefore delighted to get an SOS to assist the Greatest Living Expert on pigeon shooting in saving a large field of seed rape in Hampshire.

After everything I have said about the effect of snow on pigeon, I suppose I should not have let my heart turn a back somersault when I saw the strength of the attacking force. In, on and around that rape, sitting in the shelter belts and strips, must have been fully 1,500 pigeon.

A Town Gun finds it impossible to staunch the flow of adrenalin that pumps into the bloodstream when faced with such a prospect. I remarked to the Greatest living

Expert that I doubted whether my 200 cartridges was going to see me very far into the day. “We will be lucky,” he said, “if we get 50 between us.” The GLE does not operate on chance. Shooting pigeon is his business. His intelligence service is impeccable. It pinpoints accurately, and with up-to-the-hour information, every possible target for every pigeon flock within 10 miles.

Overhead traffic

Those pigeon were snow-happy. Once the cannonade started, they did not want it, even though the field was plenty big enough for them to drop well beyond points at which we could trouble them. They came half-heartedly for a bit. Up to midday there was a certain amount of high overhead traffic.

Then they had all vanished. We could not wait for them to come back at dusk, either. When we loaded our inadequate bag of 47 pigeon into the car, the return flight had started. We shot one, just to show them. Its crop was almost empty. Almost as soon as they had got back to their home wood, they took off again and streamed out, down a valley even though there was barely an hour of feeding light left.

So we looked on our way home and found them clobbering a tiny field of turnips. Do not tell me – and particularly do not tell the Greatest Living Expert – that it’s easy to make big bags of pigeon in the snow. 🐦

➡ *This article was first published in the 17 February 1966 issue of Shooting Times.*



“As soon as they got back to their home wood, the birds took off and streamed out down a valley”





Game Cookery

Marinated pheasant in miso paste makes it succulent and perfect for elevenses, as well being ideal fingerfood at a party, says Tim Maddams

It is very easy to get stuck in a rut, relying on the same old recipes time and time again, and there is nothing wrong with that; we all have our favourites.

But I also get bored and I want to be constantly coming up with novel ways of making tasty treats from my sporting endeavours. That is how this recipe came about.

I love little meaty skewers but satay has been done to death and while I, like most people, love a satay skewer with that lovely peanut dip, this is a touch

TO MAKE THE MARINADE (enough for 4 breasts of pheasant)

Mix 1 dessert spoonful of the miso paste with 2 spoons of water, until you have a well-mixed opaque brown liquid. Slice the breast meat lengthways about as thickly as your little finger. Add the meat to the marinade and leave for about half an hour before threading on to skewers.

TO MAKE THE SEVEN SPICE

You could cheat and just use a shop-bought Chinese five-spice mix, but I prefer to make my own seven-spice mix.

Grind all the whole spices below in a small electronic spice grinder or a pestle and mortar, add the ground cinnamon and mix together. This mixture will keep well in a jar for several weeks.

Ingredients

- 1 TSP OF SICHUAN PEPPERCORNS
- 1 TSP CORIANDER SEEDS
- 1 TSP CUMIN SEEDS
- 1 TSP FENNEL SEEDS
- 1 WHOLE STAR ANISE
- 1 TSP SMALL DRIED RED CHILLI
- 1 TSP GROUND CINNAMON

more interesting. Despite the apparently outlandish ingredients, you will be able to find most, if not all, of what you need in even a modest supermarket these days. It is well worth the effort.

Miso is fermented soya bean paste. There are various different versions

of the season just gone and they have gone down a storm. But they are easily more than a snack, with the simple addition of some rice or a few steamed buns, and a couple of cold beers.

They also work very well as part of a sort of sharing board of hot gamey treats.

“I have been doing these little skewers for elevenses and they have gone down a storm”

available with added rice, wheat, barley and so on. But what does that have to do with pheasant? Well, miso paste is a very good producer of extra umami, the savoury flavour element that is all important in a well-balanced meat dish.

There is a happy side-effect of marinating pheasant in miso paste and that is that the meat will be tenderised by the process, with the result that it is uber succulent, soft and delicious. I have been doing these skewers for elevenses for most

There is one more added bonus, which is that the kebabs freeze very well in a vacuum pack, so you can prepare loads of them well in advance and simply defrost them as you need them, which is ideal.

There are lots of miso pastes out there, but the one I like best for this recipe is the Sanchi brand of dark miso paste, made with soya beans, barley and koji seeds. This gives a great flavour but, of course, is not gluten free, worth bearing in mind if you are cooking for people with intolerances.

PHEASANT MISO KEBABS, SEAWEED, SOY DIP

THE METHOD

TO MAKE THE SOY DIP

Warm everything together in a very small pan until the sugar dissolves — bring to a simmer and then take off the heat. You can add a squeeze of lime and fresh chopped coriander after it has cooled if you wish to do so.

Ingredients

- 2 TBSP OF GOOD TAMARI SOY SAUCE
- 1 TBSP COCONUT SUGAR, OR LIGHT BROWN SUGAR AT A PUSH
- 1 CLOVE GARLIC FINELY CHOPPED



1 In a good non-stick pan or under a very hot grill, cook the kebabs with a small amount of vegetable oil brushed on to them. Cook them until they are firm to the touch but try not to overdo it and end up drying them out.

2 Once cooked, simply serve them up with a pot of the dip and the cut up seaweed. I like to remove the stick, drizzle with dip and then fold into a seaweed sheet for ease of nibbling, tip-top gamey street food style.

Ingredients

- A FEW SHEETS OF NORI SEAWEED SQUARES (THE TYPE YOU BUY FOR SUSHI ROLLS) CUT INTO QUARTERS WITH A PAIR OF SCISSORS
- CHOPPED CORIANDER AND TOASTED SESAME SEEDS TO GARNISH, IF YOU LIKE

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A new puppy and an older springer can learn to live together, with a little help

A new shooting companion

➡ GUNDOG TRAINING

Q My springer bitch is eight years old and has just finished another season of hard work, but she is ready to slow down and it won't be long before she is too old to come out with me, so I am considering getting a new puppy. Can I safely introduce a new puppy to the family? What should I do to avoid any issues between the old dog and the new arrival? My springer is good-natured, but she is closely attached to me and can be somewhat over-possessive.

A This is a problem many who have a loyal shooting companion have to face when the time comes to finding a replacement. It's understandable that these dogs might feel they are being undermined when a new and unruly puppy enters the household. The old girl may decide to make her supremacy quite plain to the puppy, so you have to keep an eye out. Applying her seniority

is inevitable, but you do not want a vicious attack on the new arrival. She has to accept that the youngster is there to stay and that it is not going to undermine her position with you. Equally, you must make sure she knows you will not tolerate her showing unjustified displeasure towards the puppy.

To prevent this, continue to do all the things you usually do with your older bitch so that she does not come to resent the puppy because she feels left out. Give her some one-to-one time with you and have time with both of them, showing that you are the leader of this pack of three. The puppy will need to learn that you are the boss too. Step in if you see potential confrontations developing between them that have been instigated by the newcomer. Demand tolerance from them both – they have got to learn to live together.

Make sure little things such as the feeding routine and the sleeping arrangements allow them both their own space – these can be trigger points so take care not to let them happen. **JH**

Finding a funny noise

➡ FERRETING

Q Halfway through a recent morning's ferreting, my MK3 ferret-finder started to make a bizarre noise. What would cause this? I have never heard it before.

A To the uninitiated, the MK3 ferret-finder emits a strange bleeping sound. The tone of this sound is then used to gauge the depth of the collar-wearing ferret – along with the numbered gauge on the top of the receiver. Because it is all to do with the pitch and bleep, and because I haven't actually heard the strange sound you report, I can only guess what it might be.

The first thing to do is change the batteries in the collars and test them with a receiver that you know works. The same applies for the receiver. Change the battery and test it in a collar that you know works. You can then determine if the receiver or collar is malfunctioning.

Even though the receiver has anti-interference capacitors fitted to avoid interference, having a mobile phone close to the receiver can upset its working ability.

The most common error in sound is the receiver's battery going flat. I hope it is simply a battery issue. **SW**



The most common issue with an MK3 ferret-finder is an easily solved battery problem

Missing winter thrushes

➡ WILD BIRDS

Q This past season, winter thrushes, redwings and fieldfares, were conspicuous by their absence on our shoot. Has this been a poor winter for them?

A I have also noted few thrushes this past winter, but this is, I suspect, only a local phenomenon, because I haven't heard reports of a crash or even a decline in numbers.

It may be that mild weather on the Continent has resulted in fewer birds

crossing the North Sea to the British Isles. Both redwings and fieldfares are highly nomadic in winter, wandering widely in response to both weather and the availability of food.

Ringing has also shown that birds that winter in Britain one year may well go to Italy or even Greece the next – unlike other wintering birds, such as woodcock, they are not site faithful.

In a typical winter it's estimated that around one million birds of each species winter with us, but these numbers fluctuate considerably from year to year. **DT**



Numbers of fieldfares wintering in Britain can fluctuate, depending on the weather and available food

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Pros and cons of spaying

VETERINARY CARE

Q My bitch came into heat this season, so I was unable to work her for three weeks. I am thinking of having her spayed, but I am not quite convinced this is the right course of action to take. What would you advise?

A First, you have to realise that there are pros and cons to any surgical procedure and nothing is absolutely safe. You have to strike a balance in judging what's best for your dog and remind yourself that thousands of dogs are spayed every year, with only a relatively small minority suffering any adverse effects.

Neutering bitches has certain health advantages. Not only does it prevent the inconvenience of her "heat" periods, it also voids the risk of ovarian cancer

and, especially if carried out at an early age, reduces the incidence of mammary (breast) cancer. The bitch will not suffer the signs of false pregnancy and neither will she develop womb infections (pyometra), which tend to become more common as she gets older.

If there's concern about the extent of the surgical intervention, you might like to consider a laparoscopic spay as an alternative to the traditional method. The procedure enables your dog to have her ovaries removed through a keyhole incision. It is less invasive and allows faster recovery time than the traditional spay. Laparoscopic surgery usually costs more than traditional neutering.

Or you could consider postponing or delaying heat by using hormone injections, only available from your vet. There is some slight increased risk of pyometra associated with continuous hormone administration. **TB**

Muntjac management

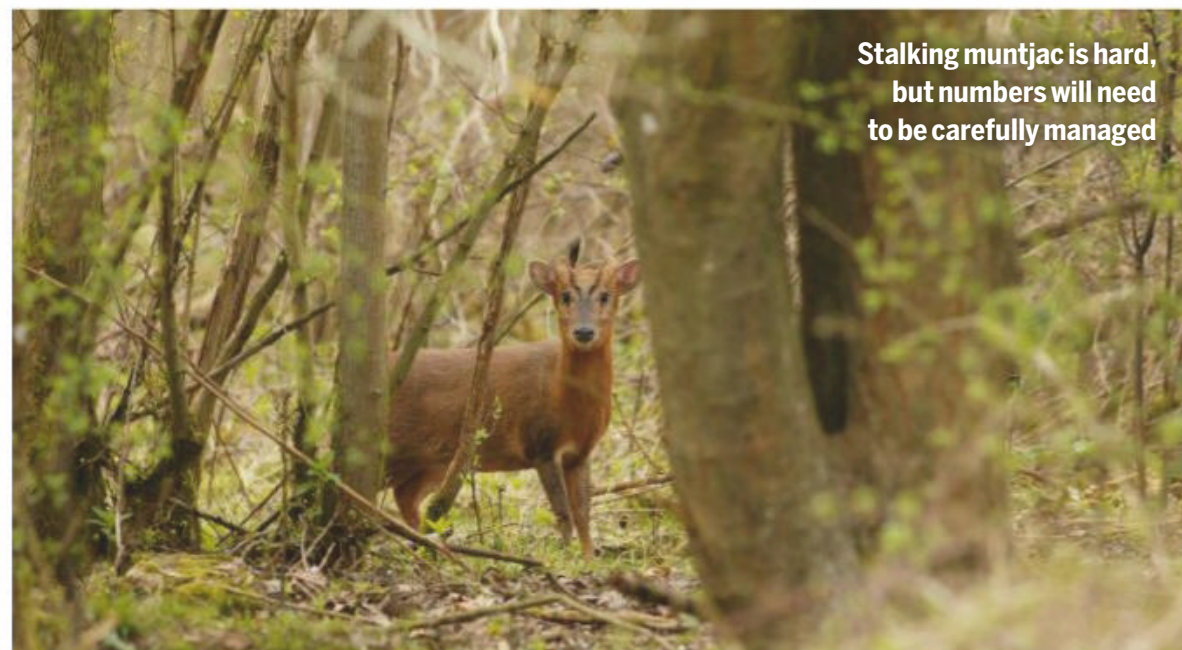
GAMEKEEPING

Q Muntjac have only recently appeared on our shoot, so we don't want to over-shoot them, but at the same time we want to keep numbers to manageable levels. Should we have a management plan for them?

A I don't know if a management plan along the same lines as those written for the control of other deer species will work for muntjac. Yes, they need to be included as part of any existing programme, but as far as a specific management plan for them as a

species goes, I have my doubts. The reasons for this are the difficulties associated with accurately calculating numbers and the animal's secrecy and reluctance to leave cover makes stalking them so hard.

Most of our muntjac – which, like yours, are fairly recent visitors – are shot opportunistically when out feeding, foxing or staking fallow and roe. Their adaptability and sense of survival is such that it is doubtful that you will shoot them out. My advice is to start shooting them now to try to stem the tide and reduce the associated habitat damage while you can. If you don't, it won't be long before you are overrun. **LB**



Stalking muntjac is hard, but numbers will need to be carefully managed

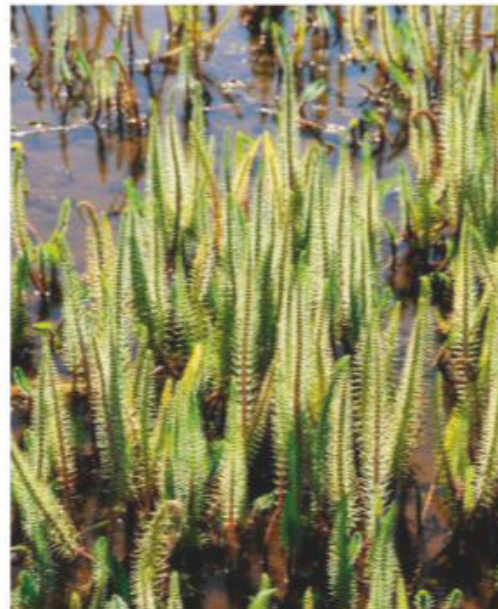
Native Britain

Plants, flowers and fungi of Great Britain at a glance

Latin name: *Hippuris vulgaris*

Common name: Mare's tail

Other names: Bottlebrush, cat tail, joint weed, paddock pipes, witch's milk



How to spot it and where to find it:

This creeping perennial herb is found in pond margins and ditches, shallow waters and mudflats, with its roots underwater and its narrow, pale green leaves mostly above the surface. The stems are solid and can grow up to 60cm long, often curving. It produces creamy flowers in summer, but you could miss them entirely. An area of mare's tail looks like a spruce forest in miniature.

Interesting facts: A member of the plantain family, mare's tail is often confused with horsetail — *Equisetum arvense* — which is a deep-rooted invasive weed. Mare's tail is useful for oxygenating and maintaining clean, healthy pond water and providing habitats for small fish and wildlife. It is a common aquatic plant of Eurasia and North America. Studies of the plant on this have shown that it is a prolific emitter of methane.

Mare's tail has plenty of benefits, though. The whole plant is vulnerary; that is, helping to heal wounds. It stops internal and external bleeding, cures stomach ulcers and soothes inflammation of the skin. Mare's tail is edible too, with young shoots and leaves eaten raw or cooked. The eskimos — who call it *tayahuk* — use it in soup and even ice cream. **NJS**



Deer droppings can give you clues about numbers and movement of animals

A deer tracking beginner

STALKING

Q I am new to the deer stalking business and looking for some pointers on the best way to watch and track deer in the area I have been given permission to stalk. According to the owners, there are a lot of deer, but so far I haven't seen many.

A That's a wide-ranging question, so I can really only give some general pointers. A good starting point would be to talk again to the people who have given permission, or to those who live on or adjacent to the area.

You need to know the species of deer and the possible numbers in the area, so talk to locals to establish what is seen where and when. It would be beneficial to take time to go over the ground, looking at likely food sources,

areas of shelter and cover, and any water bodies or watercourses. Look for signs of deer activity from slots and droppings and, depending on what species of deer that are present, look for signs of regular usage and tracks.

Try to be on the ground at likely times of the day when deer will be expected to be active or moving, and visit during differing weather conditions to see how these impact on resident deer and alter their habits and timings.

It's always useful to use technology such as trail cameras for confirmation about movements in the hours of darkness, as well as to identify individual animals with some certainty. To find out about deer on your ground, you have to commit to investing time and tapping into the knowledge of those who work on the ground and live in the surrounding area. *IW*

Can I eat the lungs?

GAMECOOKING

Q I often shoot the odd roe and I like to use the liver, heart and kidneys, but I have never used the lungs and wondered if they are OK to eat. I have never seen any recipes for them.

A If you are happy that the lungs are clean and healthy, then

there is no reason for you not to use them up.

When used in game cookery, the lungs are referred to as "lights".

I tend not to serve lights on their own because the texture can be a bit too much for even the most pro-offal diners.

I suggest you add them to a mince mixture of other offal and make some nice faggots for your supper. *TM*

Issues with accuracy

RIFLES

Q I use an old Parker Hale .308 rifle for deer in all weathers and the accuracy has become erratic. I do clean the gun, so a build up of dirt can't be the problem. How do I check what is wrong with it?

A We have all experienced those days when a shot goes off kilter or a perfect group is ruined by a stray shot or more. Sometimes it can result in endless time wasted trying to find the cause and become costly in ammunition used. There are many reasons for this.

Here's what to look for:

Step 1: Remove the metal work from the stock and look at the four key areas – the barrel channel, recoil lug mortise, front bedding area and rear bedding area.

Step 2: The barrel channel can be a problem if the barrel touches the wood along its length if it is supposed to be free floating. Check if there are any tight spots. If the barrel is meant to have in-built pressure points, check these are equal.

Step 3: Most actions are secured to the stock via a recoil lug that dissipates recoil on firing and seats the action squarely in the stock. If this is loose, cracked or soaked in oil, you have a problem.

Step 4: The bedding areas to the front and rear of the action, especially around the stock screws, should be uniform and not spongy from ingress of oil. *BP*



Bedding areas should be uniform and not spongy

GAME BEYOND OUR SHORES



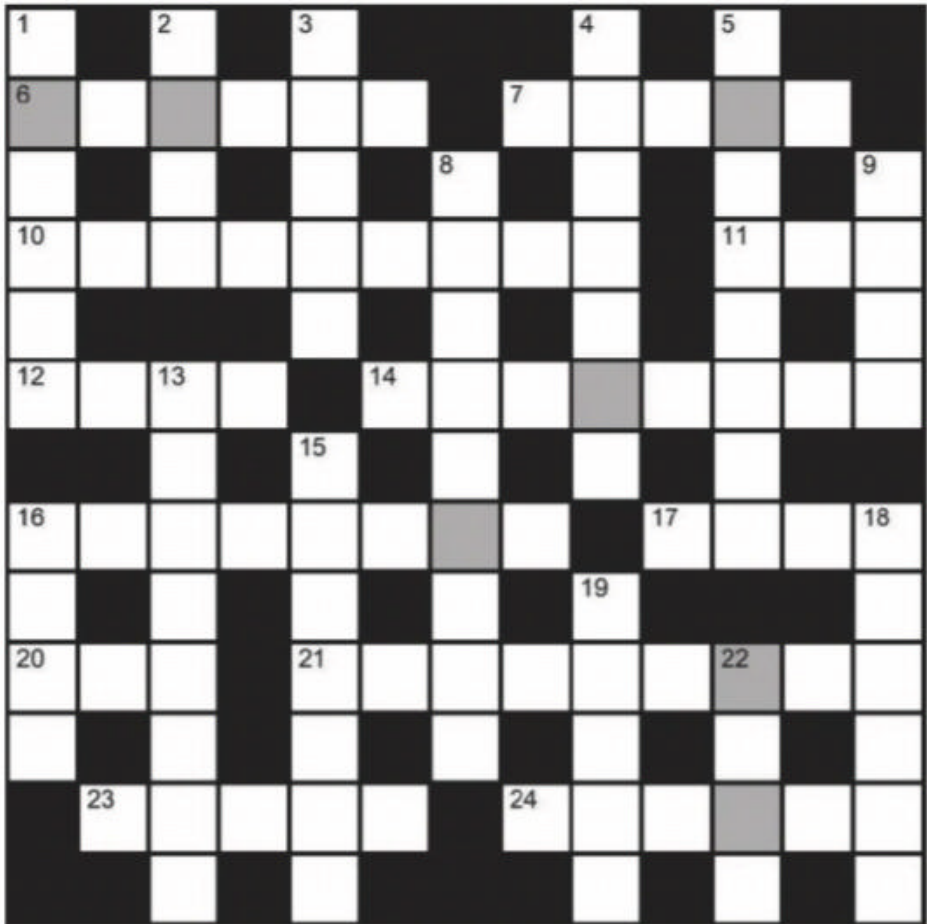
BROWN BEARS IN EUROPE

It may be 2,000 years since brown bears, *Ursus arctos*, were exterminated in the British Isles, but they can still be found in Spain, France and Italy, as well as the Balkans and much of Scandinavia. Reintroductions have been undertaken in the Pyrenees and the Italian and Austrian Alps.

Where sufficient wilderness survives, brown bears will thrive, though predation of domestic livestock often brings bears into conflict with farmers, while their passion for honey makes them unpopular with beekeepers.

Despite being wiped out from much of its former range, the brown bear is a remarkably successful species, with a wide distribution in the northern hemisphere, including the Far East and Japan. In North America, it is known as the grizzly, though it is the same species.

Bears do their best to avoid humans. However, where they are protected, they become more bold and more diurnal. Trophy hunting is possible in a number of East European countries, but through much of its range the bear is strictly protected. Bear watching from hides is becoming increasingly popular. **DT**



Crossword / Compiled by Eric Linden / 1446

Across

- 6 On the estate, a guest comes in with the choke maker (6)
- 7 The cartridge wad is a good thing, nutritionally (5)
- 10 A "side-to-side" delivering a possible blow to shooting accuracy? (9)
- 11 A numerical brace is at work, hidden inside (3)
- 12 Prior to the final, it's on the house (4)
- 14 Slippery fish on the lawn revealing a marine plant (8)
- 16 Assume responsibility for a cut of venison (8)
- 17 Youngster in falconry? Yes, a funny one! (4)
- 20 Tree seen one Wednesday, every year? (3)

- 21 For those who know the drill, it's a pre-charged one (9)
- 23 To become involved in competition, invite visitors in (5)
- 24 Nonchalant redhead with a German gunmaker (6)

Down

- 1 Gun components worth investing in? (6)
- 2 Sort of soak the Finnish rifle maker (4)
- 3 A money carrier is attached to the net (5)
- 4 Take someone's breath away before the era of scope setting (7)
- 5 Tiny brat upsetting an HPR breed (8)

- 8 A cocking component is redesigned on Lee's drive (4-5)
- 9 The sounds of collared doves reach the outskirts of the cosmos (4)
- 13 Curious about the hormones of the coot's cousins (8)
- 15 One having a flutter on a bit of pigeon shooting kit (7)
- 16 A small and unnaturally pale water bird? (4)
- 18 If the rescue goes wrong, gun storage should be safe (6)
- 19 It's not great to be a bore! (5)
- 22 Impromptu skills are integral to the growth of Chinese water deer (4)

Solution 1444 / 19 February 2020

Across: 5. Foot follower 8. Ringed 9. Twenty 10. East 11. Priests 13. Tipping 15. Foam 16. Anglia 18. Grouse 19. Conservation

Down: 1. Dominant 2. Pond 3. Tweeds 4. Grit 6. Tight 7. Letting 11. Private

12. Snap shot 14. Poland 15. Frost 17. Neck 18. Give

MYSTERY WORD: TRAPPING

WINNER: D HINSHELWOOD, DEVON



TO CATCH A FISH

Phatagorva

The Phatagorva fly, also known as the Scandinavian Hairwing, is adapted from Håkan Norling's famous Temple Dog. It is a fly that is almost irresistible to salmon and many have fallen to its beauty when I have cast it into the water. In terms of use, I find

that the Phatagorva is most successful when fishing cold, high and stained water. **EW**



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Rules: Entries must be received by 11 March 2020. All usual conditions apply. Solution and winner will appear in the 18 March 2020 issue. Photocopies accepted.



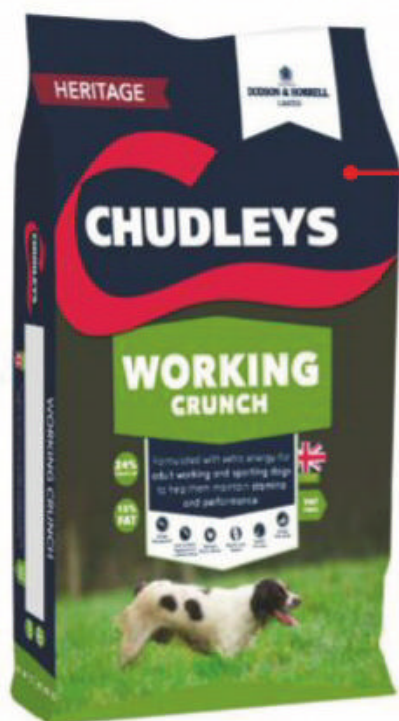
From the gun shop

The Editor's pick of the latest and best shooting kit to hit the market



2

1



3



4



5

1 Kilburn cotton showerproof raincoat

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farlows.co.uk

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2 Antler 3-piece thumbstick

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furfeatherandfin.com

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3 Working Crunch

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chudleys.com

This food is ideal for working gundogs and contains increased levels of fat and high-quality protein to make sure your dog is fit and healthy for setting off on the next sporting outing.

4 Skeet softshell jacket

RRP: £94.99

gb.seeland.com

Launched at last month's British Shooting Show, this jacket is the ideal clothing for springtime. Designed to keep you warm and dry, the jacket features a two-way zip and large front cartridge pockets and it allows your arms to move easily without restraint, making it easier to swing your gun in front of the target.

5 Toul boots

RRP: £150

royal-scot.co.uk

This boot is water-resistant and is extremely durable, matching up to the toughest boots around. They are pretty smart — with a bit of polish, you'll be ready for that drinks party. A women's version is also available.

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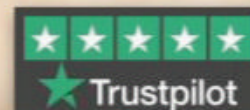
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SITUATIONS VACANT

JOB DESCRIPTION

Ballynatray Estate is seeking applications from interested individuals for the post of Head Game-keeper to manage and promote its established shoot.

The ideal applicant needs to have the following attributes:

5 + years relevant experience.

Experience as an existing Head-keeper or an Underkeeper willing to step up to the responsibility of a single handed keepers role will be recognised.

Must have an excellent knowledge of bird husbandry, planting of cover crops, and vermin control, and the day to day duties of all aspects shoot management.

Take sole responsibility of organising all aspects of shoot days, managing all the logistics i.e. beaters and pickers up. Must be approachable and willing to engage with all the people involved in organising shooting days.

Organise suppliers such as; game feeds, veterinary supplies, poults, farmers, and game dealers.

Organise with the estates insurance provider to ensure all shooting related activities are covered.

Ensure all guns shooting on the estate provide evidence of their own insurance for the year.

Have a good knowledge of the Irish Wildlife legislation and manage interactions with the parent Department to ensure all proper licences are applied for the shooting of game, including deer stalking licences and licences to catch up birds after the season has finished.

To be confident in hosting guns on shoot days and other members of the public when they come Clay shooting throughout the summer months.

Must hold a chainsaw ticket, shotgun, and rifle licence.

Have access to at least two or three dogs for the amount of dogging required on the estate.

Clean and maintain the estates guns. Dehumidifier needs to be maintained and emptied each day to stop guns rusting.

Applications should be addressed to Henry Gwyn Jones. Please send to katherine@glendine.eu and copy henry@glendine.eu in the same e-mail

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Sharpshooter



Fieldsports bodies are finally speaking as one on the use of lead shot and they should be applauded for displaying leadership on the issue

For years, shooters have been calling for “leadership” from their organisations. Well, now we’ve got leadership in shovel-loads — on the issue of lead shot. Do you like it?

It says something that virtually all the organisations are singing the same song on lead. That’s no small achievement. I suspect this remarkable unity has been forged, at least in part, in the white heat of the general licence legal challenge.

Whatever the motives, inter-organisation relations are now on a different planet compared with the days of yore, when competing organisations eagerly sought to mine each other’s membership base by the simple expedient of making their own message fit whatever any particular audience wished to hear. Combined with relentless sniping and negative briefings, this internecine strife had the enemies of shooting rubbing their grubby hands with glee.

The big difference today is that the current coalition of organisations seems — so far — to have very few cracks in its armour. Take the issues surrounding the toxicity of lead in the wider environment; this is a contentious area. Many people believe the risks are being overstated. I am no scientist, but the boffins at the GWCT most certainly are. And I trust the GWCT.

So if the GWCT supports the proposed phasing-out of lead, that’s all I need to hear on the relevant environmental issues.

In the past, strident campaigners within the shooting community — and those outside, as well — have been able to insert wedges between organisations, sometimes aided by personality clashes at the top. Today, by contrast, everybody seems a bit more grown-up and better focused on the real enemy.

“I reckon that lead, along with illegal persecution and plastic, is an entirely avoidable own-goal”

Indeed, that may be a major part of the new attitude to sustainable ammunition. We’re in a war, and we don’t have time for office politics.

Others have made the transition. I recently watched a fascinating presentation given by a representative of the Danish Hunters Association. As many of you will know, Denmark has a vibrant shooting community that has been thriving in the absence of lead

since 1996. A whole generation of Danish hunters has grown up without the stuff. I know a number of Danish shooters and have yet to meet one who wants to go back to lead.

Anyway, this particular representative gave a fascinating talk on the Danish experience of moving away from lead, addressing each concern in turn. But it was a more general point he made that has really stuck in my mind. He said that in defending shooting, he could cope with questions about cruelty. But as a committed conservationist, he was relieved that he no longer had to deal with questions about lead. In short, lead had been an unwelcome distraction from the core defence of shooting.

This chimes with my own view. I reckon that lead, along with the illegal persecution of raptor and plastic wads, is an entirely avoidable own-goal. It provides ammunition for our opponents to fire at us. They know that merely raising the issue damages our cause. If we fail to neutralise the lead issue, we are effectively having to fight for shooting with one arm tied behind our back.

Yes, it’s early days and much could yet go wrong in the transition away from lead and single-use plastic. But I salute the organisations for getting together, taking the initiative and leading the way forward. In other words, for displaying leadership. 🐾

DOG BY KEITH REYNOLDS



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