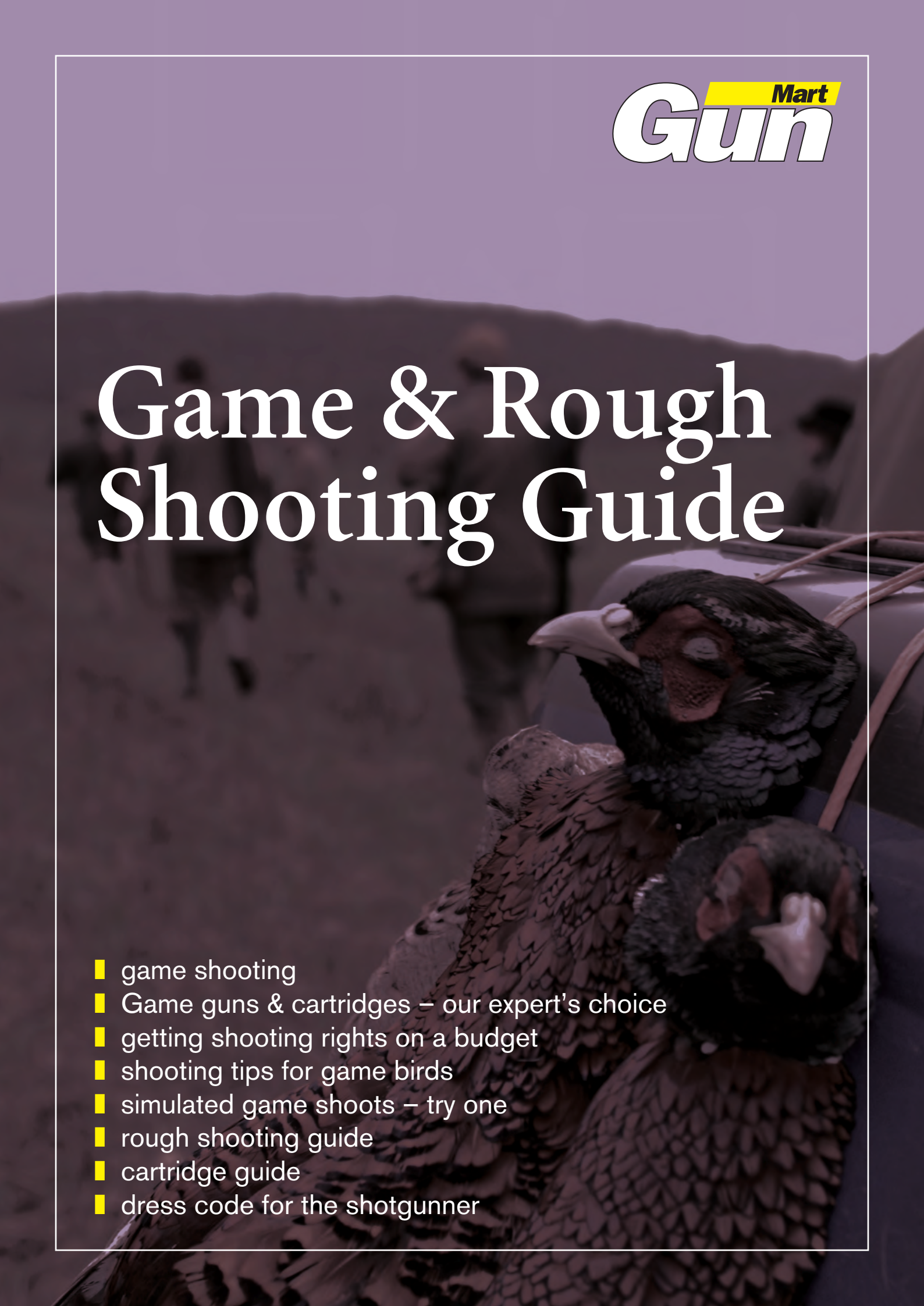
Gun Mart

Game & Rough Shooting Guide



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The Great British Game



Don Brunt looks at the quintessential British shotgun sport...Game Shooting

From August 12th through to the 1st of February the countryside resonates to the sound, sights and smells of the very best shooting the world has to offer. Avid enthusiasts from every corner of the globe make the UK their number one destination and for good reason, its something that we are very good at. Of course those that arrive at Heathrow and are stood on a peg tackling high Devon pheasants the following day know little of what it takes to present those sky scraping birds to them, or of the huge number of people involved.

Rearing

The process begins way back in the early summer with the hatching of partridges and pheasants. Whether done on a small scale to produce a few dozen birds or as commercial operation producing tens of thousands of 'poults' as the young birds are known,the process requires careful husbandry to ensure that the birds are maintained in the best of health. A few weeks later and the birds are ready to 'go to wood' which usually takes place from mid July through to the end of August depending on how early on in the game season the first days sport is due to take place.



In the case of Pheasants the pens are usually in woodland clearings, and can stretch for several acres on larger shoots. With high wire sides and protected from foxes by electric fencing this is the danger time for young birds, who in the first days after release are particularly susceptible to bad weather, disease and predation which in turn means that the Gamekeeper - and if the shoot is big enough to support it his Underkeepers - will be busy keeping an eye on their charges; checking them several times a day in some cases and out once night has fallen looking for Mr Fox.

Hopefully though their pest control efforts in the months leading up to the birds release will mean that the threat is minimal and that the birds can flourish. As time passes the 'pop holes' in the wire will be opened so that the birds can begin to explore the surrounding area, hopefully heading home each evening to the relative security of the pen. Even that though requires the help of the keeper who for the first few weeks and possibly months will spend much of their afternoons 'dogging in' the birds, pushing them back towards home, though these days that often means using a quad bike rather than the more literal traditional way of doing things.

Partridge shoots are of course more often found amongst rolling arable farmland, with pens constructed amongst swathes of cover crop which gives the emerging birds protection from the elements. Many of the issues that have to be dealt with are the same as with Pheasants though with the Partridge season starting on September 1st the weather conditions are often more favourable than



with Pheasants for whom hostilities don't begin until a month later.

The first shoot of the year

This is often a nervous affair for the keeper who will be hoping that the birds fly well and that they go in the right direction when pushed from cover. The beating line may consist of from anywhere from 2 or 3 people to 20 or 30 depending on the size of the shoot and they walk through the cover, maintaining as straight a line as possible pushing the birds towards the guns, often to a 'flushing point' from which the birds will take off heading towards the waiting gun line. Usually there are 8 or 9 'guns' waiting for the birds, spread along a line that may be 200 yards or longer and on particularly big days where there are large numbers of birds to be shot they may be 'double gunned'. This term means that each will be using a pair of guns, and once they have fired both barrels they swap for the other already loaded gun while their loader reloads the first gun. A good loader can often enable his 'gun' to maintain a rate of fire far superior to that which they might manage if they were loading just the one gun.

Protocol

The etiquette on a British Game Shoot is a big part of the day and a full explanation would require more space than is available here, though there are some key points which must be followed by the 'gun' at all times. The shooting of low birds is frowned upon, the reasons for this are twofold; firstly shooting at birds close to the ground puts both the other 'guns' and the beating line at risk of being on the receiving end of some stray pellets and also very low birds are considered to be too easy to hit and are therefore unsporting. If a bird is flushed and is heading for a neighbouring gun then it is regarded as very poor form to shoot at the bird until that gun has done so; 'stealing' a gun's birds is one sure way to make sure you aren't invited back to a shoot again, though if he does shoot at it and misses then you are perfectly entitled to have a go yourself so long as it is a safe shot. On more and more shoots the emphasis is turning more to the quality of the birds and the ideal high pheasant is one that goes over the gun line at speed, at least 40-50 yards plus in height making a successful shot one that should prove to be memorable.

Once a bird has been shot and has come back down to earth responsibility for collecting the bird often lies with a 'picking up' team, which can comprise from between 1 person with a couple of dogs and up to as many as 8 or 10 people running up to 40 or 50 dogs between them. These picker ups sweep the ground and neighbouring cover after the 'drive' and their priority will be any wounded birds which obviously need finding and despatching as quickly as possible.

The collected birds are then loaded onto the 'game cart' after being tied together in pairs (a brace) and are then in the case of commercial shoots taken back to the farm to be stored in refrigerated chillers before being collected by the game dealer who will sell on the oven ready birds to restaurants and other outlets in the food chain.

Grouse
Season opens August 12th – Closes 10th December

Driven Grouse shooting is viewed as the epitome of game shooting and the 'Glorious 12th' is eagerly awaited by



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those fortunate enough to enjoy this most expensive of shotgun sports. With grouse skimming the moor land heather at high speed, quick reactions are called for, instinctive snap shooting is often all that the guns have time for and unusually in driven shooting shots are taken head on at the birds and also as they are going away. Driven grouse days often require a loader to allow a fair number of shots to be taken, especially later in the season when the grouse 'pack up' and come over the guns together in large numbers.

Guns stand in 'butts' which are typically stone built or may be dug down into the ground so that only the guns head and shoulders are above ground level. Because of the speed and adrenaline fuelled nature of the shooting it's not difficult for a gun to get carried away and accidentally swing his barrels 'through' his neighbouring gun, a practice that in the heat of the moment have tragic consequences; consequently a set of 'sticks' are erected to the left and right of each butt to ensure that everyone stays safe. Likewise the beating line who may start the drive quite literally miles from the guns will when they get within 300 yards or so of the gun line blow a whistle which signals that the guns must at that point no longer shoot incoming birds and must instead turn and only shoot birds going away behind the butts.

Red grouse are a wild bird and no birds are released, hence habitat management is key with practices such as heather burning encouraging the growth of new heather on which the grouse thrive. Unusually it's important to substantially cull numbers each year before the end of the season, as unless the birds are shot out - leaving only a small breeding stock - a large population will be prone to disease from parasitic worms. Uniquely in game shooting terms the bag is described in brace, i.e. 52 brace which would equate to 104 birds being shot.

Partridge
Season Opens 1st September – Closes 1st February

Driven partridge can often be found in areas that favour arable agriculture and shooting early season partridge on freshly cut stubbles in early autumn is a joy to behold. Whether French 'Red Leg' birds or the rarer English variety the birds often fly over the guns in covey's from a dozen birds up to 100 or more. There are some partridge shoots that specialise in presenting high partridges at 50 yards or more but the majority of traditional partridge shooting in the UK sees the birds over the guns at between 25 and 35 yards. Being small in size partridges can look as if they are actually moving faster than they are and as such its important not to give them too much lead as many are missed in front. Because of their relatively small stature when compared to pheasants, relatively light loads are all that are needed and 30 grams of no 6 or 7 are usually more than enough. The same principles of having a beating line are used as with pheasants but as most of the terrain is open each beater is often equipped not with a stick with which to thrash their way through thick cover but with a flag to make themselves more visible to the birds and prompt them into flight.

Pheasant
Season Opens 1st October – Closes 1st February

The archetypal image of game shooting is tackling a high driven cock pheasant on a cold frosty winters morn and as such this is by far the most widely available and popular form of the sport. From the legendary high bird shoots of the West Country and Wales through to the featureless fens of East Anglia, the sport can be found from one end of the country to the other. Driven pheasant days vary in size from 50 birds and upwards and caters to suit most pockets, with an average cost of around £30+ per bird which is on a par with partridges and less than half the cost of a driven grouse.

Woodland is the preferred habitat for the birds and the best shoots are those that are blessed with steep hillsides and valleys from which the birds can be presented at good height. The extreme High Bird shoots can regularly show birds at more than 60 yards over the heads of the guns but this requires a team of suitably experienced guns using the right equipment to be able to do the birds justice, most average pheasants though are shot at ranges less than 30 yards but a shot size of no 5 or 6 is preferred as they are a far bigger bird than either partridges or grouse. Those who regularly tackle the skyscraper high birds employ heavy shot such as number 4 in a load of up to 42 grams through long barrelled tightly choked guns, and as such those fortunate enough to be invited on such a day should go suitably equipped and having practised before hand at a clay range on long range driven targets.



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Game For Anything

Don Brunt gathers together a selection of game guns and cartridges and considers what you should be looking for when making your choice



When it comes to choosing a gun for live quarry there are many questions that you must answer in order to find what's right for you. Are you likely to be buying one gun that you will use throughout the year for clays, game, pigeons and waterfowl, or are you lucky enough to have a budget that allows you to have more than one? Let's begin…

.410

The tiny .410 is most often considered to be a gun for youngsters starting out on their shooting career, and there are plenty of options for those seeking such a gun. There are some specific youth versions around, but the sensible long-term choice is to buy a gun with 27" or 28" barrels sporting standard stock dimensions and have it cut down to suit. By retaining the portion of the stock that has been removed it can be reattached later on so that it can grow with the youngster and last them several years. However the focus for this article is on adult shooters and the .410 has a few die-hard fans who manage to shoot well with this tiny calibre.

If you fancy using a .410, be honest with yourself first: how good a shot are you? If you can honestly say that you are an excellent shot then it might be worth investing in what is perhaps the ultimate test of marksmanship. Don't forget that these guns throw a tiny pattern, which means the margin for error is minimal, standard two-inch cartridges carry a shot load of just nine grams or so, which is tiny compared to a standard 28 gram cartridge and only effective at very close ranges, whilst even the biggest three-inch magnum loads only pack a punch of 18 or 19 grams. Despite heroic stories of people bringing down stratospheric pheasants using these little guns I have never seen anyone consistently kill cleanly with them out any further than 30 yards, so it's also important to shoot within the limitations of the gun and your ability.

If you really have your heart set on it, I would recommend a 32" barrelled over-under, as that will feel a little more stable than a shorter barrelled version. Even if it's built around a 20-bore action don't expect it to weigh much more than 6lbs, so don't rely on the momentum of the gun to continue the swing for you, .410s need to be driven with pinpoint precision. Don't buy one to be your all-round gun, a .410 is a second or more probably a third gun to have in your collection.

Cartridge costs are high due to the complexities of loading these very narrow cases, so expect to pay between £220 to around £700 per thousand for the sublime Winchester Super X 20 gram Magnums or £7 to £22 pounds a box of 25.

28-bore

This gauge is a far more serious proposition and has become rather fashionable in recent years. Ballistically speaking it has a great deal to offer and can shoot a range of ammunition from 14 grams up to 28 grams. Although it may look similar in dimension to its .410 brother, this is a gun that can perform on live quarry on a par with many 12 gauge guns in most situations. Once again it's not a calibre for the inexperienced shot, the shot string of the 28-bore is quite short meaning that a high percentage of the shot load arrives together, but the flip side of that is that it's far easier to miss than with its bigger calibre cousins.

Tending to be light in weight, it's sensible to choose barrel lengths of at least 30" and if possible plumb for a solid middle and top ribs which add weight and therefore stability.

Early season partridge and pheasants are ideal quarry for this gun when loaded with 21, 23 or 24 gram loads, however the same rule of thumb applies. A good shot can make these little gems sing and with 28 grams of number 5 they are capable of tackling birds out to 50 yards and beyond when in the right hands. If you are someone who

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struggles to shoot an average of three shots to one kill with a 12 gauge, then you aren't going to gain anything by switching to a 28. One advantage of the 28 gauge's tight pattern though is that it tends to either miss completely or kill cleanly – it's not often that I have seen people consistently wounding with these little guns.

Once again ammunition isn't cheap, due in part to the limited economies of scale inherent in short production runs. Expect to pay between £245 and £800 per thousand, though the higher number once again refers to the Winchester 28 gram loads, while standard 28 gram cartridges are closer to £310 per thousand. Expect to pay around £7.75 per box of 25 to a worst case scenario of £25.

20-bore

Most keen shots have at one time or another tried a 20 gauge, and it is by far the most popular choice for those buying a second gun. They are light enough to carry long distances comfortably, yet capable of matching a 12-bore on anything but the most extreme of birds. Ballistically very efficient, the 20 is often mistakenly referred to as a girl's or youngster's gun and not something fit for much else; having shot high birds with one when using appropriate cartridges, it is definitely something that should be considered by those looking for an all-rounder game gun.



Short barrels aren't the way to go unless you are of reduced stature and, once again, 30" or even 32" tubes are the preferred option for male shooters of standard height and build. Expect an over and under to weigh in at more than 7lbs unless it's designed specifically to be a lightweight. Highly pointable and quick to react to changes of direction whilst still being stable on long shots, it has an awful lot going for it.

In fact lighter versions are something of a disadvantage if you intend to make the best of the calibre's flexibility. Starting with 21 gram loads there's a wide range to choose from up to 32 or even 34 gram semi-magnums and even 36 grams for those with 3" magnum chambers. If you do intend putting those heavy hitters through a light 20 then expect your shoulder to know it, for most standard applications a 28 gram load of 6s is more than enough.

Running costs start at around £205 per thousand for a thousand 21 gram shells up to £335 for 34 gram loads and £500 for 36 gram 3" magnums. That equates to about £6.50, £11.00 and £16.00 per box respectively.

16-bore

Although once the most popular choice in continental Europe, and not an uncommon sight in England, there are only a handful of new 16 gauge guns sold each year. Its popularity has increased slightly in the last few years possibly due to people having tried 20s and 28s and now being in the market for a gun with which they can stand out from the crowd. It is an effective gun sitting, as it does, half way between 20- and 12-bore, though its closeness to both makes it something of nothing in the eyes of many. It is so close to a 20 in terms of handling that you might as well buy a 20, while it is far more expensive to run than a 12 as there are so few of them around that production volumes are always tiny. Most 16s are side-by-sides of considerable vintage, with many being chambered for 2½" shells, there are a few manufacturers who bring over-unders into the country, but even those who have longer chambers are unable to perform to a level equal to that of 20 gauge guns as few cartridges are available that exceed 30 grams in term of load weight. For a partridge gun or for pheasants of average range they are more than capable, but their applications are arguably limited. It seems highly unlikely that it will ever regain its popularity other than in the eyes of a very small hardcore of enthusiasts and it lags a long way behind both 20 and 28 gauges in terms of numbers in use.

Expect to pay between £265 a thousand for 26 gram loads up to £415 for a high-performance 32 gram cartridge, which equates to between £8.50 through to around £13.50 for a box of 25.

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12 gauge

The ubiquitous 12-bore is undoubtedly the king of calibres; available in a dazzling array of sizes, shapes and styles it is highly capable and can perform at ranges from 15 yards out to in excess of 50 or sometimes even 60 yards. Probably the most accessible of all the options discussed here, it can be bought second-hand for as little as a couple of hundred pounds, though it's also possible to spend in excess of £60,000 if money is no object. From English 2" chambered side-by-sides through to 3½" wildfowling guns, it is capable of handling an incredible array of ammunition from 21grams up to 60 grams and, unlike most of the small calibres, non-toxic loads are also available for waterfowl.

That ammunition is also cheaper, generally speaking, because so much of it is produced, and if you are shooting game and happen to run short on a day then it's highly likely that one of the other guns can loan you some to keep you going. The chances of that happening if you are at the helm of a 16 or 28 bore are slim, to put it mildly, they are also more effective. With bigger shot loads at your disposal and good patterns, they are undoubtedly the easiest of all the calibres when it comes to connecting with your target.

As far as running costs are concerned, lightweight 21 gram shells start at around £160 a thousand up to £350 for a 36 gram high pheasant load, while the Super magnum shells can cost in excess of £1,000 per thousand, equating to £5, £11.50 and £40 respectively if you prefer to buy a single box at a time.

Side-by-side or over-under?

As this article deals predominantly with game guns, we will pass over semi-autos and pumps as, although they are acceptable on some rough shoots, they are frowned upon in general game shooting circles.

The big question then is: do you want something that looks traditional and harks back to the dawn of the sport or are you going to spend your cash on something more contemporary?

Forty years ago most would have gone for a slim, elegant side-by-side, which at that time was still very much the fashionable thing to have in your gun cupboard if you were a keen game shot. However, as time has gone by, it's become more and more apparent that the over-under has so many advantages over its horizontally aligned sibling that it is now by far the most popular choice.

Side-by-sides are, generally speaking, very light compared to an over-under with barrels of a similar length, and that lightness may make it easier to carry over long distances, but it also means that felt recoil, even when using relatively light cartridges, can become quite unpleasant. That increased bump on the shoulder also shows itself through increased muzzle flip, which can make it tougher to get off an accurate second shot. Many side-by-sides are not proofed to shoot the very heavy loads that are needed on some high bird shoots and, even if they are up to the job, the thought of shooting 36 gram shells through a 6½lb side-by-side is enough to get a private dentist rubbing his hands with glee at the thought of all those fillings that will need replacing.

Weights of most 12 gauge over-unders are between about 7½ and 8½lbs, and this is a good bet for most people – comfy to shoot without being too heavy to carry reasonable distances and stable to shoot.

The placing of barrels next to each other can also make it harder to see a bird in your peripheral vision, while the single sighting plane of an over-under means it is far easier to see 'through' the gun, which can be a big help when it comes to shooting driven game.

Pick a side?

Over-unders also tend to fit most people far better off-the-shelf while side-by-sides are invariably very low in the comb, and very few of them have pistol grip stocks, which are the easiest and most comfortable to use. Most, in fact, have straight or 'English' stocks with no pistol grip at all,



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though those fitted with Prince of Wales or semi pistol grips are an improvement.

A good percentage of those who still use side-by-sides have been fortunate enough to inherit beautiful examples of the gun maker's art from their parents and grandparents, however a majority of those guns have never been altered since the day they were made, so in many cases they are so far from being a correct fit to the current owner that they might as well use a tennis racket for all the good that they do!

"Oh but side-by-sides are so much prettier" is one of the objections raised by the die-hard side-by-side crowd, however there are some extremely ugly and plain-looking side-by-sides in circulation, while, yes, there are also some rather unattractive over-unders. However for the engraver, the larger surface area of the latter's action gives far greater scope when it comes to exercising their skills; although true sidelock over-unders are something of a rarity, there are plenty of sideplated guns out there which look stunning and don't have to cost the earth. Personal taste will ultimately be the deciding factor, and there is no right or wrong answer as to which you prefer, however there is little doubt that a majority of people shoot straighter with the more contemporary of the two.

The long and the short of it

There was a time when short 25" barrels were de-rigueur on side-by-sides for those who were fans of shooting the Churchill method, however with copious muzzle flip and an overly quick whippy feel to them, they are now something of a curiosity. While 28" tubes were for some time considered the perfect compromise of speed vs. stability, with the current fashion for high birds the trend has for several years been towards 30" and 32" tubes in heavier guns which absorb recoil and aid stability without making the gun feel too ponderous. Longer tubes also help maintain the momentum of gunswing, while shorter barrels need to be driven quite intensively. For those buying their first gun, 30" tubes are probably a good place to start if the purchaser is of an average size, and resale values are generally higher for guns of 30" or over, while short barrelled guns tend to lose their value quite rapidly.

Tight, tighter, tightest...

When it comes to chokes there aren't enough pages in this book to completely explore all of the technical data and supporting arguments written over the years on the subject. For many years the accepted norm in a game gun was fixed chokes of ¼ and ½, and for most purposes this will suffice – early season partridges and average pheasants are well within the capabilities of this combination, especially if loaded with 30 grams or so of number 6 or 7. However the need to take on higher birds has led to something of a sea change and there are now plenty of advocates who swear by ¾ and Full choke with 36 grams of number 4 or bigger for tackling the best that Devon and Wales have to offer. Choose a multi-choked gun and you will always be able to change chokes to suit your quarry and environment if you feel the need. Some purists will say that only a fixed choke barrel will throw a perfect pattern, however any infinitesimal improvement in pattern quality is overwhelmed by the advantages that come with being able to change choke at a moment's notice. Don't be afraid to experiment to find a choke/cartridge combination that delivers for you and your gun depending on your quarry, and once you arrive at a winning formula don't change things unless you encounter something out of the norm; but when it comes to using the gun for busting a few clays don't be scared to get the choke key out and mix and match.

Budget or bust?

Always spend what you can afford when buying a gun, but don't scrimp too much or in the long-run it can come back to bite you. If finances are tight go for a second-hand gun from one of the major manufacturers rather than a bargain basement new gun. If it's going to be your only gun then the chances are that it's going to get a fair bit of use, and if that's the case then ensure that it's comfortable, fits you correctly and is flexible enough to cope with all the different species and targets that you shoot. Realistically, a starting budget for a good second-hand gun should be around the £800 mark, but if you fancy something a little prettier have a look at what's available for £1,500 to £2,000, which takes you into the territory of quality new offerings, alongside some very nice second-hand pieces. From then on the sky is the limit, and there are plenty available at £10,000, £20,000 and beyond.

Choosing the right gun for you isn't easy, but try not to let your heart completely rule your head; as for calibres, barrels and chokes this article could have been much shorter if I had just started with what most will end up with – a 30" multi-choked 12-bore over-and-under…



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More for Less

On a tight budget? Don Brunt takes a look at the best ways to get the best out of your hard earned cash when looking for pigeon and game shooting at knockdown prices.

Lets face it, most of us would be more than happy to head off once a week during the game season on a 200 bird day with some friends, however at current prices that would be likely to cost you something in the region of £900 per person per day.... which if you wanted to shoot one day a week from the beginning of November till the end of the season would put a hole in your pocket to the tune of £13,000!

That is in anyone's book a sizeable chunk of money and I for one wouldn't stretch to that kind of expenditure but, if you are clever, you can still get some great shooting for next to nothing.

It takes some beating

One option is to go beating on a local shoot, this means you get to see and enjoy a good days sport even if you aren't the one behind the trigger, however join the right shoot and you will be rewarded with the chance to take part in the end of season "beaters day" shoot while getting paid for your efforts along the way.

Beaters are used to push the birds forward out of the woodland or cover crops over the guns, this is usually done by forming beaters into lines that walk through the cover, using sticks and dogs to "flush" the game. Beaters come from all walks of life, farmers, builders, plumbers, electricians, doctors, lawyers and accountants can all be found moving forward together as one in order to get the birds to fly where the shoots gamekeeper needs them.

No special skills are required, just an enthusiasm for shooting, an enjoyment of the countryside and the ability to keep going, whatever the weather or the terrain



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to ensure that the job gets done. It can be physically demanding, walking sometimes up to 8 or 10 miles in a day is not easy, especially if the weather is wet and cold, or as in some early season days very warm. Throw in the added test of going through thick undergrowth, often whilst trying to keep ones footing on the steep slopes from which game birds are "presented" at their most challenging and its clear that beating is no gentle stroll in the countryside. Being a beater throughout the season is certainly a good way of getting plenty of outdoor exercise!

It's important to make sure you are properly equipped for the job, a good pair of waterproof walking boots or Wellingtons are essential. Thorny hedges and copses are the beaters natural environment so moleskin or corduroy trousers are ideal. Waterproof and thornproof over trousers or leggings are a useful addition to avoid scratches and cuts.

A hat is essential, waterproof wide brimmed types or flat caps seem to be the standard, baseball caps are growing in popularity but do little to keep the rain from running down the back of the neck. There are dozens and dozens of shooting jackets on the market, though the features that make a good shooting jacket don't always translate to a good beating jacket. Its fabric must be strong enough to resist getting caught by thorns and ripped to shreds, it must be warm and waterproof but ideally it should also be breathable to wick away all that perspiration generated by the hard work of beating.

Other useful bits and bobs include a stick; this is used both to "beat" through the cover and also to keep your backside from connecting with the ground when walking through the densest cover or steeper slopes where it is easy to lose your footing. On partridge shoots the stick is oft replaced by a flag, this enables the beating line to make more noise and visual impact across the wide open areas of arable land that are the home of partridge shooting.

Always remember that the gamekeeper is the boss; if he tells you to do something then do it and be quick, running a game day is very stressful and the last thing he needs to be worrying about is whether his beating team are doing what they should be, by the same token do your job well and he will remember you and invite you back. A good beating team can make all the difference between a good days shooting and a bad one, keepers therefore are keen to look after those who know what they are doing.

So what's in it for you?

Well, we have established that its hard work but it can be a lot of fun, there is a real feeling of camaraderie amongst beaters, and it gives you an insight into the world of game shooting. If you were hoping to get rich from beating then you are out of luck, the pay isn't great and varies from nothing if you are beating on a friends and family shoot up to around £20 per day or maybe a little more. Some shoots provide you with lunch and a drink whilst others expect you to bring your own. Nearly all though have a beaters day shoot, and this is a chance for the team to get their guns out and have a go at the same high flying pheasants that they have watched fly over the guns for the past few months. It used to be tradition that on beaters day the guns from the shoot took their turn to put their guns back in the cupboard, grab a stick and swap places with the beating team but this unfortunately seems to be happening less often in recent years, so expect to alternate between being a standing gun on one drive and a walking gun on the next.

Most people find beating through friends who already shoot, though if you don't know anyone in the local area it might be worth visiting the local clay shooting ground or gunshop who can probably put you in touch with a nearby shoot. Another option is to join the National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up whose aim is to put beaters together with the shoots that need them. It's cheap to join and they also run training courses for those raw recruits who would prefer to have a little knowledge behind them before going beating for the first time. Visit www.nobs.org.uk for more information. Go on, give it a go!

Pigeon Shooting

Without question a good day on the pigeons is a truly memorable occasion, this wily bird is quite possibly with the exception of grouse the most enjoyable of all the



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UK species to shoot and a typical day in a pigeon hide presents every conceivable shot type from low incoming birds dropping into the pattern through to high crossers, driven and snap shots at birds jinking away at speed. All in all its exhilarating stuff and although there are plenty of operations that offer pigeon shooting on a day rate of around £150 and upwards, its always more satisfying if you can get it for free. The big question though is how to go about securing your own source of this superb sporting challenge?

Speaking to your friends may be a useful starting point, if you are fortunate enough to know some farmers your enquiries can start there, do they grow many arable crops or do they run a shoot on their land, if so do they put in cover crop? If you get a yes to either question then you may be in luck. Those that shoot game wont appreciate you wandering about in their cover crops during the shooting season disturbing their pheasants or partridges but once the season is over they will most likely plough the remnants back into the ground in preparation for replanting over the next few weeks. This can, depending on the crop, be a useful opportunity though if maize is their crop of choice then decoying over it now will be a fruitless task, better to wait until the end of the shooting season when it will be a popular source of sustenance to the local pigeon population.

If you don't know anyone in agriculture then things may be a little more difficult, there are more pigeon shooters around than you might think and it is likely that there are few farmers who haven't been approached by one at some point in recent years. To be successful you need to think about how and when you approach the landowner to give you the best chance of success.

Location, location, location

Reconnaissance is talked about in pigeon shooting circles ad nausea with good justification, well surprise, surprise you need to get out your field glasses and check out the local farms before steaming in to ask if you can wander their land with a gun.

As you drive around an area keep an eye out for the birds, if you see them moving where are they heading for, where are they coming from? What crop are they feeding on? Find out these key facts and step 1 is complete. Try to find out which farm the land in question belongs to, you might have a couple of false starts on this but politeness will get you a long way. Once you have identified your potential ally in pigeon shooting try and find out a little more about them, what kind of farm is it? Do they shoot game there? Do they shoot the pigeons themselves? A drink in the local pub might help answer some of those questions but be careful as to how you come across, appear too nosey and you might end up being branded as a potential thief or 'anti'.

Homework

Before you even try to make contact make sure you have done your preparation, it is vital that you are fully insured by one of the shooting associations such as BASC or the Countryside Alliance, that way the landowner knows you are responsible and take your shooting seriously. Similarly if you already have permission to shoot over other land then try to get a letter from your current landowner as a reference, stating how responsible you are etc., always have a phone number for your existing farmer on the letter as a quick call to confirm who you are can work wonders.



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Selling yourself

You may be someone who likes to shoot pigeons wearing full camo with a face mask etc, resist the temptation to turn up wearing any of it, similarly don't arrive with your car obviously bulging with decoying gear, gundogs and guns, it looks as though you think it's a foregone conclusion, never a good idea. Instead dress smartly and turn up in a vehicle that is clean and presentable, remember first impressions count.

Good timing as with shooting is essential if you hope to succeed, turn up on a mixed farm just as the farmer is trying to start milking and you will likely get short shrift from him, late morning is often a good time, but similarly if you see tractors busily silaging or working the fields in fine weather after a wet spell

the chances are he is trying to catch up with a backlog of work and wont want to spend time discussing pigeons. Understanding the way the farm works and the crops involved is also important, a comment such as "I couldn't help noticing the pigeons are hitting that

field of barley" sounds very observant until he corrects you with "actually that's oil seed rape"

When you do eventually get to speak to the landowner, be prepared that he will most probably say no, he might have had bad experiences in the past with shooters leaving gates open, littering hedgerows with spent cartridges or a whole host of other things. The ground may already be shot over or he might just be the kind of farmer who prefers not to have strangers wandering over his ground. Don't take it personally, just put it down to experience and start looking for those birds again, you might have to ask ten or twenty landowners before one says yes but eventually you will get lucky and then you will have your very own bit of ground to wage war against woody.

From then on your destiny is as they say in your hands, one mistake is all it takes for all your efforts to be undone so keep on the right side of your landlord, take care to cause as little disturbance as possible to both livestock and crops. Keep your wits about you and become an extra pair of eyes for the farmer, giving him the confidence that you are a man to be trusted, whose pigeon shooting expertise he might just recommend to his neighbours, oh and a bottle of his favourite tipple at Christmas always helps…

Pound stretcher days...

There are some shoots out there who sell very cheap days and you can if you look around find rough / walked up days for around the £75 - £100 a day mark. Some of these are very good and can represent great value for money but make sure that you do some research on the shoot. Ideally try to speak to someone who has been their before, sadly there are a few shoots out there who sell days when they know there are few birds left.

The other way of getting your hands on cheap shooting is to join a DIY syndicate, this usually includes 8 or more like minded souls getting together to start up a new shoot from scratch. Once you have done the hardest bit and found the land on which to try it which will hopefully have some good sized blocks of woodland within it you are ready to start but be aware that if you want to be shooting birds in autumn 2015 then your



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work on the ground should be starting at the end of this year's game season.

Year one always proves expensive for a new syndicate, with a pen or pens to be built there's always a large bill to be paid for stakes, wire and all the other bits and bobs required such as drinkers etc and that's before you even think about the bills for the birds themselves and the copious quantities of food that they will munch their way through. However remember that all of these costs are spread across all of the syndicate members equally so although it might look terrifying it tends to be rather less painful than it initially sounds.

Be sure to pick your syndicate members carefully, the whole point is that the members do the work and that includes every single aspect that a traditional keeper would be involved in. Clearing the area for the pen, building it, managing bits of habitat if the birds are to be encouraged to certain areas. Taking care of them when they arrive and are at their most vulnerable and the daily feeding and checking that is needed for several months from the day they go to wood until the end of the shooting season and beyond. If the syndicate members live miles away are they really going to be able to help or will it just fall to one or two more local members to do all the work? if that happens then resentment and a disbanded syndicate wont be too far into the distant future.

Fair returns

A small shoot like this on the cheap will never produce huge 200 bird days, in fact its better to hope that perhaps you might have one or two 50 bird days and 4 or 5 days where you might shoot 25 and, towards the seasons end, don't be surprised if your total only just makes it into double figures. However you must remember that you are getting a full seasons shooting for less than the price of being a gun on one 200 bird day so you need to be realistic about your expectations; don't expect a massive return on your investment and always bear in mind that when releasing birds if you put down 400 and manage to shoot 200 in the season you will have done very well.

Small shoots thrive on everyone pulling their weight and not cutting corners when it comes to the tasks that can make the difference between your birds staying around and seeking more pleasant places to live on the neighbouring shoot. Hand feeding may be time consuming but there's no substitute for boots on the ground when it comes to understanding the habits of your birds while "dogging in" the birds back to the pen in the evening is vital to making sure they understand where "home" is.

Vermin control is also key and foxes will have to be controlled without mercy while corvids will also cause problems and squirrels will chomp their way through plenty of your expensive pheasant food given half a chance. There are more than a few books written on running DIY syndicates so this article can only give a very broad view of it but if you are looking for shooting on the cheap and have the right bunch of people with whom to do it then there are fewer more rewarding or fun ways to find your shooting, and all your efforts will be worthwhile when the birds are flushed to climb over the guns for the first time on a frosty November morn...



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The Sport of Kings

Olympic Gold Medallist, Multiple Sporting and FITASC World Champion Richard Faulds gives a few hints and tips on tackling the best of our native driven game birds



Grouse

There are few things more likely to make me smile than a chance to get out on the moor for a day on the grouse; in my opinion little comes close to the exhilaration and adrenaline rush that taking on these birds can bring though it can be quite easy for the newcomer to find the idea quite daunting.

Safety is massively important when shooting driven grouse, remember you are shooting at targets travelling through the line at head height, consequently a set of sticks must be put up at the side of each butt to prevent the over enthusiastic from swinging towards disaster. Out in front or going away behind are the two places to shoot grouse though there is a little more freedom if you are at the end of the line, though that extra flexibility does come with a price; the responsibility of being very aware of the position of the line, flankers and others who won't take kindly to a dose of 6's heading their way…

You will always have loaders or someone else in the butt with you, so you both need to be aware of each other when you are turning to shoot behind - an experienced loader should be able to read the situation quickly but always be safe! If you have never double gunned its important to go to a shooting instructor prior to your first day to learn the ropes, as technique and safety are paramount in a grouse butt. People who shoot game can't get used to shooting at birds so low to the ground but this is perfectly acceptable right up to when the first horn is blown, then only shooting behind the line is allowed, up to the second horn which ends the drive.

Time flies

"Thinking time" is at a premium, quite simply because you won't have much time for it. Action is the name of the game along with a healthy dose of instinct, if swing through is your only game then don't expect to be top dog on the grouse moor.

That lack of thinking time is especially true when it comes to shot selection, the sheer velocity of these birds means that you need to have selected your victim ideally long before they get in range i.e. out at 80 or 90 yards, once you have picked one stay with it, don't get distracted and chop and change or the end result will undoubtedly be a miss, that is if you even manage to get a shot off.

Forget swing through, maintained lead or pull away, the technique on incoming grouse is simple but can be hard to get used to especially if you have shot one method at everything your entire shooting career. Select your bird, put the muzzles on it, bring the gun into the shoulder focussing on the body of the bird and pull the trigger almost in one movement, don't try to measure it out, let the gun mount do the work and you should see your quarry disappear into the heather but stay on it in case you need the second barrel. A left and right at driven grouse is quite an achievement and is only likely to happen if you are confident enough to start the process of that first shot with the choke barrel early on, hesitate too long and by the time your first shot has gone the rest of the birds will be a distant memory. Nine times out of ten you will be surprised just how close to the butt your victim connects with terra firma considering you first addressed it out at 80 yards or more, such is the speed of this incredible quarry. Taking one out in front and one behind seems like an easier prospect but footwork is often the undoing of those inexperienced "grousers" who fail to prepare for the rapid turn. As with all shooting your weight should be firmly on the front foot though if you are turning to take a shot behind there are plenty of other things to remember; hard focus on your intended quarry, lose track of it and the end result will be a wild shot that achieves little. Muzzle awareness is key if you are turning through the line, lift your barrels up clear of the sticks then bring them down

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into the shoulder still staring hard at the bird and fire though if you haven't moved your feet to allow your weight to have shifted back onto the front foot then the chances are all your efforts would have been in vain.

If the grouse are crossing in front of you follow the same technique, let your movement build in the lead for you, you will be swinging at a good rate of knots to get on them, select your target, put the gun out in the front of the bird and pull the trigger, and if the shot is good move onto the next.

Whether you shoot driven or walked up, Grouse is always something very special and anyone who has the opportunity to pit their wits against this king of game birds should consider themselves privileged. There is no better way to enjoy the sport of shooting and whoever called the 12th of August "Glorious" certainly knew what they were talking about…

Partridge

Partridge shooting in the UK has now effectively split into two types, there are the hedgerow hopping birds that our fathers and grandfathers shot and then there is the relative newcomer in the form of very high driven partridges that are sold at a considerable premium. Which you choose or prefer is up to you but each requires a different approach.

Being social creatures partridges

can fly in large coveys which can easily confuse the novice, as with grouse it's important to pick a bird, focus hard on it and stay with it.

Its not unusual to be stood quite close to a hedge,





say 30 yards or so back and therefore the amount of thinking time you have on a shot can be quite short which tends to make the shooting fast, furious and instinctive. Consequently it's very easy for an inexperienced shot to pick the wrong bird and end up turning it inside out, I would say that more partridges get "pillow cased" than with any other quarry species and many of us have done it at one time or another. Nobody likes to see it or do it, but in the heat of the moment when there are only seconds to pick a bird and take the shot it will happen, just make sure that if it happens you learn from it

and try to avoid repeating the folly which as your experience grows will become easier. Just remember that on a still autumn day a cloud of feathers can take a very long time to disperse and there will be no way of hiding your actions from the rest of your fellow guns…

Such quick shots require you to be at the ready position waiting to give you the best chance of getting off a good shot. There may well be someone the other side of the hedge who will blow a whistle as the birds approach to give you a warning so be doubly sure of your muzzle awareness at all times when shooting and reloading. If they are coming at you like grouse - as I have seen partridges fly when I was lucky enough to shoot on a wild English partridge day - then it's likely that the picking up team will be well back out of range of the guns.

Realistically most traditional partridges are shot at between 20-35 yards and as such they don't need much lead; longer shots might be taken out behind your neighbours (once they have had a go themselves of course) but generally speaking connecting with the bird is all about gun speed. Woe betide the partridge that takes his chances over the line on his own, flying with plenty of wingmen is the way to get over the line in one piece as

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its not unusual to see several guns shoot at a covey and nothing fall, so easy is it to change from bird to bird before actually picking one to pull the trigger on.

Instinct

Shoot instinctively, don't try and be too deliberate by trying to swing through everything, instead try and mount on the bird and pull off the nose or even mount ahead of the bird and shoot maintained lead. Though don't get drawn into giving them too much lead if you choose the latter method but by mounting in front it does save time for those quick snap shots. Its easy to get thrown off balance taking these quick shots and plenty of times I have seen someone with one foot off the ground getting completely crossed up, keep your weight on the front foot at all times which will help you keep your head down on the stock. If there was ever a time when you are likely to end up poaching your neighbours bird then this is it but you haven't got the time to be overly picky regarding etiquette because it all happens so fast, if you shoot a bird and it lands at your neighbours feet its not a big issue as there is probably another 19 in the same covey for him to choose from.

As far as equipment is concerned I don't personally advocate short barrels for partridge but it can be fun to shoot shorter 28" tubes on hedgerow partridges as it makes for a faster handling gun. If you have wanted to try a 20 or even a 28 bore on game then this would a good time to do so as there is nothing that either of those calibres won't kill cleanly on this kind of day. I would recommend ¼ and ½ chokes and an ounce of 7's through a twelve or even a good clay cartridge loaded with 7 ½'s will be more than enough to get the job done so long as you don't try taking on any extremely long range shots.

Early partridge can be a lot of fun; a day out in the sun in shirtsleeves can make for a memorable day but if there is no wind then don't expect the birds to fly particularly well. A bit of breeze makes for better sport and makes life easier for the dogs who can find September days very tough going and as such they should always have plenty of water on hand. Also don't forget that if it is warm, shot game can spoil very, very fast so be prepared to get them somewhere cool without delay.

Pheasant

For most of us the stereotypical typical moment that we all aspire to is bringing down a cockbird on a cold crisp morning that folds neatly with its head back before tumbling to earth. I would say though that the majority of pheasants shot in this country are at a range of no more than 30 yards, people can often think that birds are much further out than they are, not that you should enjoy your shooting any less for that fact. Generally speaking it's not as acceptable to shoot pheasants in the same way that you would shoot traditional partridges. If you get a partridge flying down a hedgerow 20 feet above a hedge with sky behind it its generally deemed to be fair game, but the same doesn't apply if it's a pheasant, especially a hen bird.

If you ever half-heartedly put your gun up at a pheasant then don't pull the trigger, because that half-heartedness is because its either unsafe or unsporting. There are plenty of clips on the internet of what constitutes too low a pheasant, don't let yourself fall into that category. It's



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not unusual to find yourself stood in a wood where snap shooting is the order of the day and the pheasants may be no higher than the tree tops. In that case use the height of the trees to judge the range, what might look like a screamer might only be 30 yards away, while if you were stood out in the open that same bird would look much lower. Quite often people will shoot a pheasant in a ride drive that they might not even put their gun up to if you were out in the open.

Technique and tactics

There is very little time for footwork changes if snap shooting, so place yourself on ground where you have the best chance of being able to move quickly, if you have several layers on to keep out the cold then be careful not to mis-mount the gun. If the weather permits it may be worth shedding a layer or two for the duration of the drive to allow yourself greater movement and better gun mounts.

As with partridges go straight to the bird, pull off the beak, and pull the trigger, the chances are that you won't have time to use swing through and even if you do there's a possibility you will end up getting crossed up and come close to losing your balance, so if you can try and practice this technique before the season begins. Be aware that a bird "cocking up" and flapping its wings like hell to get up through the trees is NOT something you should be shooting at, if you are on a drive where the birds are really not climbing very well then it makes sense to shoot your neighbours birds and vice versa which can turn simple slaughterhouse shots into something far more sporting that you will remember for the all the right reasons.

While on the peg it can be an interesting challenge sometimes to land a bird at your own feet which makes it a harder shot so you need to shoot it fifteen or twenty yards further out in front of you. If you are doing this then select your bird and don't dawdle, swing through, come off the nose and bang! Watch it fall…

Shot selection on driven pheasant days is far easier than when tackling partridges as there won't usually be as many in the air at one time if the keeper has got his line under control. As far as etiquette is concerned you should stick to your own airspace 45 degrees either side of you. Its perfectly acceptable to shoot at birds over your neighbour if they are either unloaded or have missed a bird out in front though there is a fine line between a good sporting shot over your neighbour and poaching a bird from the gun next door.

If a drive is quiet don't get tempted into taking on a low bird that flits through the line and goes away behind; pickers up may be in your line of fire and its hardly what you'd call a sporting shot.

You should have plenty of time to select a good bird, and to get your footwork sorted to give yourself a solid stable base. Come from behind, mount on the tail, swing through and job done. If a cock and a hen are flying together at similar heights and speeds I would always choose the cockbird, unless the hen is a more challenging shot.

For traditional early to mid season pheasants I would always recommend half and half choke through which I would shoot 30 grams of number 6 which is more than



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enough to kill effectively and reliably out to 45 yards. Use this combination and you can be assured that if you miss then its your fault and not the gun/cartridge combination. Bearing in mind the ranges you will be shooting at i.e. between 25 and 35-40 yards nothing more than 30 inch barrels are necessary and although I choose to shoot pheasants with a sporting over and under (because I like the weight and stability it affords) the choice is yours depending on your preference. Mid range pheasants can be shot with smaller gauges and a 20 bore or even a 28 can be very effective in the right hands, though don't go too light on the cartridge load as you risk wounding if you do. Similarly don't try and be a hero by taking on decent pheasants with a .410 shooting a tiny load of shot, people who can do this effectively and reliably are few and far between.

High Pheasants

Firstly can I say that it's important when dealing with live quarry to know your limitations, and those of your chosen gun and cartridge combination. Someone who struggles to connect consistently with average 30 yard birds shouldn't take on the challenge of High birds until they have done plenty of practice on a shooting ground's high tower and if possible they should take a good instructor with them on the day to help make the best of the opportunity. If they don't prepare properly then chances are that it will A) destroy all confidence in their ability and B) most importantly, they will probably end up pricking far more birds than they bring down which is unforgivable.

Correct kit

When taking on birds at 40 yards, 50 yards or even further you must go suitably equipped. A traditional lightweight English style side-by-side Game gun is about as far from being suitable as it's possible to be. Its slender builds means that the heavy loads that you will be using will turn it into a sledgehammer that pounds you mercilessly with every shot, whilst some may not even be proofed for the kind of ammunition required. Similarly as most Game guns are choked Improved Cylinder or ¼ and ½ you are likely to suffer from pattern failure at long range meaning that the picking up team will be searching hither and thither chasing runners after the drive has finished.

Talk to any of those who regularly shoot high birds and there preferred choking will be ¾ and ¾ or more often Full and Full or even Super Full and Super Full. For the shooter that likes to use one gun for all of their live quarry shooting that means a multichoked Over and Under is probably the sensible choice combined with a load of at least 34 grams of number 4 or 5. Some choose to go to 36 grams or even up to 40 grams and beyond with shot sizes of number 3 or on occasion number one.

Just remember that the larger shot sizes do give more stopping power but you run the risk of pattern failure, hence why those choosing such large shot tend to use magnum or semi magnum loads. My preferred choice for an all round high bird cartridge would be 36 gram 4 Express Super Game though I have on occasion used 42 gram 4's and even 52 gram 3's. Though after firing a box of such monsters you really do know it, so fierce can the recoil be.



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Correct lead

On the very high bird shoots it's actually quite rare to take a bird as a straight driven shot, most of the shots due to the height and angle of the birds may mean it turns into a high overhead crossing shot over either shoulder. This makes it far easier to see the lead picture, which reduces the disadvantage that would normally dog a shooter who closes one eye. When shooting at birds at extreme ranges it may require a lot of forward allowance, for example a bird half way between you and your neighbour is probably 25 yards out and fifty yards up which makes the distance to the bird close to 60 yards. Bear in mind that lead changes depending on the individual and their gun speed but my picture on such a bird would be six or seven pheasant lengths.

Getting on the line of the bird can be very tricky and a higher bird can be drifting left or right or curling. Footwork is also key, when shooting high birds you have plenty of time so you have time to move your feet into the right spot. For a right handed shooter tackling a bird to your right you need to shuffle feet round a quarter of a clock face clockwise. Doing this can make the difference between tail feathers and a dead bird.

Timing is always critical… if you mount on it too early the likelihood is that you will shoot too early so think of vertical as being where you might take your second shot. Try to mount the gun at 10 o'clock, take the first shot at 11 and the second at 12. Don't expect to be dropping these birds at your feet, more likely 30-40 yards behind you.

From a technique perspective rather than use "bum, belly, beak, bang" its more "belly beak, big gap, bang" which is more of a pull away shot than a swing through. You have to make contact with the bird but don't try and waste swing behind the bird, save the swing to drive away off the beak.



Confidence is vital so if you are struggling on a particular drive and the opportunity to boost your confidence with a 30-35 yarder presents itself don't shy away from that chance to get back into a rhythm. Bear in mind that on most shoots that would in itself be called a high bird.

Poaching isn't such an issue on these days and guns may well be placed closer together than normal, so that each pheasant may be fired at by more than one gun. Try not to shoot stuff over your neighbour but if you are locked onto a bird and it starts to curl it's difficult to then make a conscious effort to pull off once committed.

Get it all right and you will have a day that you will remember for years to come, so long as you arrive well prepared then you should me more than capable of bringing down some of the most challenging game birds seen anywhere in the world. Enjoy!

Woodcock And Snipe

The chances are that you will be stood on the peg with whatever gun / cartridge combination you happen to have chosen for your quarry whether it be pheasant or partridge, unless of course you are fortunate enough to be on a woodcock drive in which case I would opt for 28gram 7's through ½ and ½ chokes. Upon hearing the shout "Woodcock!" even experienced shots can forget themselves and get caught up in the excitement of bagging a woodcock as it flits along at head height which can lead to shooting too low, through the line or in the direction of beaters or pickers up. So keep your head and focus on safety!

Doing the double

If you do shoot a woodcock with your first shot don't open the gun immediately but instead look for a second bird and that chance at membership of the woodcock club. There is really no predictable flight path of these birds, hence why they are such a challenge, so all you can do is literally take a snap shot unless it's one of the very rare occasions that they fly straight and level, in which case be wary of overleading them as they don't tend to be moving too rapidly. Snipe are a rarity on a pheasant drive but there are a few places around the country that offer driven snipe days, these make devilishly tough targets and very rarely fly straight for very long, so again trust your instincts and try not to hesitate for too long.

Both of these gamebirds offer fantastic sport and for most of us the opportunity to shoot at more than a handful of them each year signifies a very good season so when you do get the chance relish it and the challenge it provides. Few things in the shooting world are more memorable and that's before we even mention how good they are to eat!

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Practice makes Perfect

Pete Moore attends a simulated game shoot hosted by the Philip Thorrold Academy for shotgun shooting

Philip Thorrold is an international shotgun coach and runs his own shooting academy. He has also trained and trains many world class shotgunners who have gone on to win international titles too. I recently attended one of his simulated game shoots, which can be just for fun as corporate events and team build days or as a way to sharpen up your shotgunning skills prior to the start of the game season. I was invited along to hopefully increase my skills as I am doing more shotgunning than I have ever done before and I want to get better!

The idea is a bit of a travelling circus as Philip and his son Ben can come to a nominated venue and set up their mighty mass of traps. In this case they were on my friend Andrew Johnson's land and brought along 12 fully automatic high capacity traps mounted on two teleporters (off road agricultural vehicles) with hydraulic booms. In this way the best ground can be selected for what you are trying to simulate and the vehicles driven into position to achieve it. There's little time wasted in breaking any of the scenarios down as the longest part is the crew moving the teleporters to the next location!

Sunny Saturday

Andrew told me that I would need to bring at least 500-rounds of ammo (felt wads please), so I brought two slabs of 250 Winchester Trap 100s and about 150 loose shells along with my Browning Maxus semi-auto with extended ½-choke fitted. It's a 26" from the box and the extra 2" added has proved effective in the past. I was the only one there with a semi and the rest were mainly over & unders with a few side-by-sides. Guns can also be provided for those without them along with eye and ear protection, these last two being mandatory!

The day starts at 09.00 with a meet and greet, cup of tea and a briefing. There were around 25 of us who were split into two squads taking it in turns to shoot. You get four drives in the day - two in the morning then a break around lunch time then two more in the afternoon. This culminates in the final drive in the 'pit,' which simulates high pheasants. The day finishes around 15.30 with shooters



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given the choice of going home or onto a local restaurant for a meal.

There is a small number of range/safety staff who marshal the shots and ensure everything runs smoothly, but in general it's a very relaxed day with plenty of trigger time. When you consider the day, in total you get unlimited clays in four, distinctly different shooting scenarios, all in a free and easy manner! The other aspect is that they are in real conditions you might encounter out on a live shoot.

Missing behind

Though I knew the action would be fast and furious I was still not quite sure what to expect as we headed for the first drive. Targets were mainly crossers consisting of standard and smaller midi clays coming in at medium height in random amounts and they just kept coming!

I thought I would not use up my 500-rounds but the day proved me happily wrong. As Max pointed out my biggest fault is that I stop to shoot, which results in missing behind. It's something I never realised I was doing, which is annoying! But the sheer volume of targets available started to get me out of this bad habit.

Drive 2 was on the edge of a wood with clays suddenly appearing. So from obvious crossers we were moving on to higher birds coming straight over our heads. I was set back from the main line in a beet field the idea I assume to pick up the clays that escaped the main gun line. With 12 people shooting at any one time you needed to be quick off the mark, as often you saw a bird swung onto it only to finds someone else had already dusted it!

Take 5

With Drives 1 and 2 out of the way and everyone seeming to have a good time; I know I was and my Maxus had not missed a beat in terms of reliability. Equally my loading and handling was now on pure auto pilot and my hit to miss ratio was also improving. We stopped for hot and cold drinks and burgers or sausages in a bun, then Drive 3.

This was in a stubble field with the teleporters not only firing high but also spaced further apart so shots were also angling in from the sides with what seemed like a bit more down range distance too. By this time the temperature was around 30-32° C – hot! Many shooters with doubles were wearing gloves on their supporting hands due to the guns being hot enough to cook on. The forend on my Maxus saved me but careless fingers brushing on hot metal was a very real hazard!

High pheasant

Finally the High Pheasant stage, which saw us lined out in the base of a big and deep pit. The teleporters were at near maximum elevation. Then the birds started flying and yes - they were high… at least 120 feet. Given their launch angle/height it was very hard to get on to them before they were almost overhead. Having done little of this before I was hopelessly behind even with the gun moving, I was told me they would need a good metre of lead from when I picked them up. I lead off the required distance and - low and behold - I started hitting them. At first I thought it a fluke but keeping the lead I started regularly dusting what were probably the most challenging birds I had ever shot. Other more experienced shots were taking them in their stride.

Then it was all over, hot, sweaty, tired but contented we trooped off for a final drink and then finish. It was a brilliant day, certainly as it was my first ever simulated game shoot and it taught me a lot. I took 650-shells with me and came back with 75.

Be you novice, experienced or expert then one of these days will be both fun and benefit to you and I heartily recommend it. Simulated shooting at the Philip Thorrold Shooting Academy is priced at £150. Bring your own ammo (500 minimum). Guns can be supplied. For more details and booking, contact Ben Thorrold on 07912 497000 or visit www.philipthorrold.com



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A Bit of Rough

Don Brunt brings us a beginner's guide to the more informal kind of game shooting known as 'rough shooting'



Those who grew up around shooting from a young age would most likely be very familiar with this form of the sport. Widely available, inexpensive and without much of the etiquette often associated with more high-brow driven game days, it is where most countrymen cut their teeth.

Although perhaps not as common as it might have been 20 or 30 years ago, it is still a thriving part of the shooting scene and for the novice it's a great way to get into live quarry shooting, although there are considerations over safety that must be taken into account.

Most rough shoots are run by a group of friends, often including one or more farmers/landowners upon whose land the shoot is run. Whereas driven days are all about standing at peg, awaiting the birds to be driven towards you by the beating line, the rough day is much more focused on going and finding the game yourself.

If you expect to be dropped off at your peg in a swanky gunbus then it's not the sport for you, as plenty of walking is usually involved, often across tough terrain such as ploughed fields and thick woodland/hedges, so don't take with you more than you are likely to need.

Guns of all ages and backgrounds can come together for one of these days, and it's not unusual to see a few family members dragooned into the proceedings to help fill out the line as beaters. The relaxed, informal atmosphere means that there's usually plenty of banter on a day, and be aware that if you miss the proverbial sitter then the rest of the guns probably won't let you forget it... at least until the lunch break.

Great guns

Quite often on a rough drive you may well find yourself lined out along with six, eight or more other guns moving forward together, perhaps with some bringing along hedgerows while others go straight across fields. Most game that is seen is often going away from the line as it will have been flushed by the guns themselves or their dogs. Consequently a majority of shots will be taken out in front or crossing to left or right; this means that shots might be taken at birds far lower than might be deemed acceptable on a more formal driven day where shooting birds in the backside is most definitely frowned upon.

Keeping that line straight is key to ensuring the safety of all concerned; someone who surges ahead may find themselves in the firing line, whilst the same can be said for someone who lags behind. Hence why the inexperienced shot must be quite clear as to what qualifies as a safe shot to take, and it isn't just people who are at risk if mistakes are made. Most rough days see a wide ranging mix of dogs employed to seek out quarry – labs, spaniels, terriers and a few of dubious parentage and unknown breeds are likely to be seen; although some may be well-trained to the gun, it's not uncommon for a sizeable percentage to be more used to hunting fields and hedgerows on their own and as such they may at times lack the control required. That means that, at any one time, there may be dogs well-ahead and behind the line questing for a sniff of a pheasant or partridge, a low shot taken in thick cover can result in a nightmare scenario, the outcome of which would stay with a gun in their nightmares for many years to come.

Of course, it may be that the team is on occasion split up, some guns and a beater or two going off in a different direction to bring in a piece of cover. In that instance it's vital to fully brief the guns as to where their comrades might be, and keeping both teams in touch via phone or, ideally walkie-talkie, is vital.

Move to the beat

'Stand and beat' is a common occurrence and this may mean that the guns are again split into two or more teams with one standing out around a piece of cover or game crop while the other beats it through, hoping to flush game over the guns. Those in the beating team must though only shoot at birds heading back behind the line else they may well end-up taking a pot-shot at the standing team.

Although etiquette is a big part of driven days, most

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people on rough days have a rather relaxed attitude – don't be too polite about whether a bird is yours or your neighbour's, chances are half of the line will shoot at most things that take to the air anyway, so dithering as to whether you should take the shot or not probably means you'll be too late. That being said don't let your rush to get a shot off compromise your safety routine, remember if there's any doubt, any at all, then you shouldn't be pulling the trigger.

The range of winged quarry seen and deemed to be 'fair game' on such a day is often far greater than on a formal day; pheasants, partridges, woodcock, snipe, pigeon, jays, corvids, ducks and geese might all be seen, while in addition some ground game species such as rabbits, hares, foxes and even squirrels might all end up in the bag.

Quadrupegged

It is important when contemplating a shot at these four legged species that the concerns about safe shots are even more important, shooting at a rabbit as it dives into cover when there might be a gun stood the other side of the hedge doesn't bear thinking about. While the cry of "Fox!" often sends owners of fox-red Labradors and of most dog owners into a cold sweat in the fear of someone jumping the gun in their enthusiasm to help keep the predators on the shoot under control. Always check with the shoot captain as to whether hares are to be shot or left alone, quite a few places now choose not to shoot them, and that applies equally with woodcock. Be aware, though, that if you do shoot a hare the usual rule of thumb is that he who shoots it carries it, and they are heavy



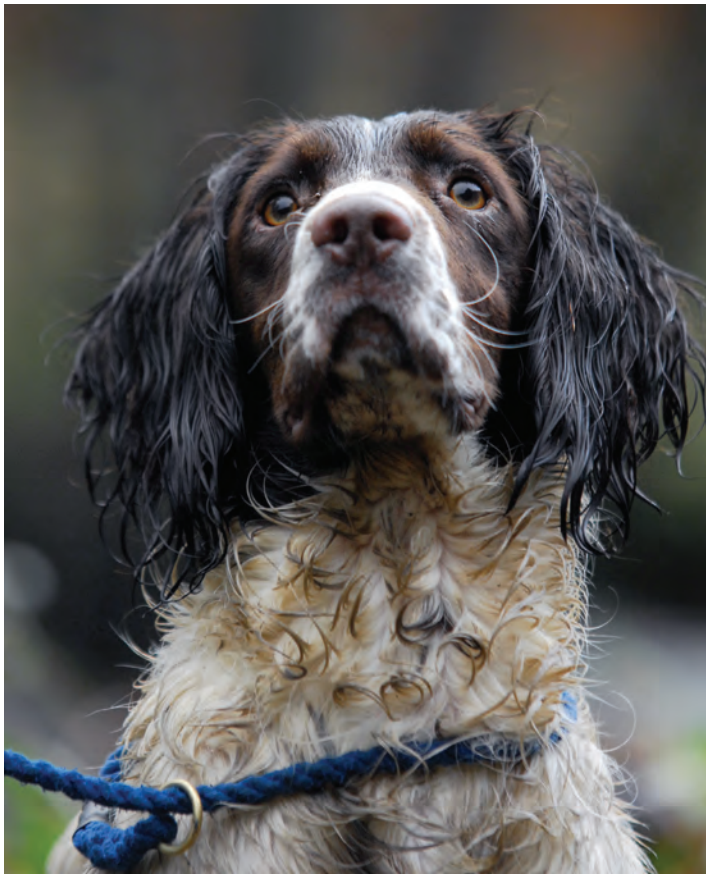
beasts to lug around.

If duck or geese might be seen, then make sure you carry some non-toxic shot in your pockets, there is nothing more frustrating than being stood under a pair of mallard knowing that you haven't got any appropriate cartridges.

When it comes to guns, the chances are that you will see a mixture, even greater than that seen in the pack of dogs



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that accompany the party. Old side-by-sides mix with modern over-unders, the occasional single barrelled gun, semi-auto's and even pumps.

I would never recommend the latter two for any live quarry shooting where the shooter is not on their own. Not only is it never very clear to your fellow guns if the gun is safely unloaded, when crossing obstacles or travelling, in a vehicle it's also easy to lose track of how many shots have been fired in the heat of the moment and swing round with a gun you may think is safe and empty when it is in fact still live and dangerous. Also remember that the Wildlife and Countryside Act prohibits the killing of game or waterfowl species with any shotgun capable of holding more than two rounds in its magazine. Therefore anyone who has a Section 1 (FAC) shotgun with a larger magazine capacity would be deemed to be breaking the law if they used such a gun for those purposes.

These days most guns that are sold are over-unders, and that would suit the rough shooter perfectly. If you intend to use your gun for a mixture of clays, rough shooting and formal game then you might want to choose a 12-bore of between 30" and 32" barrels weighing between 7 and 8lbs, but if your budget stretches to a gun purely for rough shooting, then it's worth considering something a little lighter. An 8½lb clay gun can get very heavy after walking four miles across ploughed fields! 20-bores are a popular choice as they are light, fast-handling and able to shoot a wide range of ammunition, a 30 or 32 gram load of 5s or 6s combined with ¼ and ½ choke will be enough to suit most quarry you might come across and will give you a little bit of reach for those longer shots.



Shell out

Bags aren't usually that high, but take at least a box and a half of shells with you – there is nothing worse than running out and it's surprising how quickly they can disappear if you come across pigeons circling a wood. Always carry a few extras in your vehicle or put them in the shoot vehicle if you won't be going back to your own until the end of proceedings, that way if you do get a chance at the lunch break you can top up.

Rough shooting can be a really enjoyable day out, manage your expectations re the bag, but go with a positive frame of mind and you'll have a great time; just remember that safety comes first at all times. It is, by its nature, a far purer form of game shooting than its more sophisticated big brother and whether the shoot relies on wild birds that wander across the boundary or putting out a few yourselves, you can be sure that you'll remember every bird you kill for many months to come.

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Small, Medium and Large

Bruce Potts takes a look at the three most commonly used shotgun cartridges; first off the .410…

UK sportsmen and women generally use .410, 20 bore and 12 bore shotgun cartridges, so I thought I'd have a look at them all and see how they perform- first off, the diminutive, yet effective .410.

Small but perfectly formed!

Often thought of as the starter shotgun calibre, or lorded as the expert's round, the .410 has a unique and very passionate place in the hearts of most British shooters. A lot of young shots must have cut their teeth on the venerable old .410 cartridge, as the first or training round before they worked their way up to the bigger 20g or 12g.

Eley started advertising .410 shells back in the early 1870s and they became popular as a short-range vermin and walking stick gun round. Today, clay shooting with the .410 is becoming more popular and cheaper double-barrelled shotguns, mainly from Turkey, make a good sporting .410 an easier proposition today.

.410 case facts

The .410 round, as its name suggests, has a bore diameter of 0.410 inch or 10.41mm but actually, when measured on a ½ choke is 10.2mm and on full choke is 9.8mm

As with all the smaller bores, the shot column is longer than say the traditional 12g and as such produce a more even pattern or lead shot spread. Despite having a significantly lower shot weight charge and smaller pattern, there is usually a better overall spread of shot and thus fewer holes for rabbits, squirrels or pigeons to sneak through. Many clay /casual shooters use the smaller shot sizes of No 6 or No 7.5 and even No 9 now, whilst many rough shooters like the larger No 5 or No 4 shot sizes that retain better energy per shot size for the range, despite the sparser spread of shot pattern.

That's why the three magnum loads are popular for the increased payloads and shells from Remington and Winchester are sought after despite their high price tag.

That leads you to the other consideration of what choke sizes to use. Most people use tight chokes in their .410 guns, hoping to extend the range. Trouble is, the effective range is only really 25 yards and all you are doing is keeping the shot pattern size smaller, making it more difficult to hit a moving target. In other words you have to be more accurate with a tighter choke. If you are not spot on, then few if any pellets will contact your target and you will be wounding or pulling out your hair. Limit the range to an effective 20-25 yards and keep the pattern large in diameter, with a more open choke.

Conclusions

I also shot the Eley 3 inch on ½ choke (as I prefer) and had 111 pellets on target for a good spread, but to the right and 29 inner circle hits and few holes. The same was true of the ½ choke Gamebore 3 inch loads, now 123 strikes with 42 inner 12 inch strikes and very good even dense pattern and my preferred choice.



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Dress Code

Mark Stone looks at suitable clothing for the shotgunner



If there's one aspect of shooting that's always set the sport apart from others, it's the clothing. Granted, other sports have team outfits to ensure they all look alike and team members can easily identify each other, but shooting attire tends to be individual, practical and to a degree stylish. Not so much because you have to have shooting specific clothing, but because it's the best dependant on what you're doing. The only variation tends to be what you're shooting, where and the time of the year.

Driven shooting has an unwritten code that you'll have to follow, your attire often a reflection of yourself. But when it comes to rough shooting and wildfowling, it's virtually a case of anything goes, within reason. Likewise clay shooting, although apart from the skeet vest or lightweight windproof jacket, the most sensible outfits tend to echo golfing clothing, polo shirts, shorts, baseball caps and the like often the chosen outfit. The only things you must have especially at registered events and grounds are hearing and eye protection.

In respect of brands, there's now such a vast selection that singling any particular one out is virtually impossible. The one commonality is that within the ever-expanding selection they all inherently offer the exact same thing with their own particular twist. The only thing the pending wearer has to decide on is in many ways the style and material used, plus of course how much they want to spend.

You can buy cheap and you can buy expensive, with a mind boggling selection in between, whilst holding off for the numerous country shows to begin will often generate top end kit at bargain basement prices, as outlets look to unload last year's stock and drag some money back in. The upside is that you can walk away with a full outfit for what should have been the cost of the jacket alone, camouflage outfits often especially cheap if you're happy to wear the once 'must have' pattern that's now been theoretically surpassed. And always remember, ducks, deer and geese tend not to comment on what season's clothing you're wearing, whilst if the camo pattern disguised your outline last year, it'll still do the same this year.

Formal and driven shooting

When it comes to shooting driven birds, nobody does it like the English. Equally, your preparation will start a good day or so in advance if only to make sure you have exactly what's required and the quantities needed. Whether your driven season starts on or around the 'Glorious Twelfth', or is held over until September, many of the items you'll require are exactly the same.

Starting with your head, the large and soft 'Baker's Boy' flat cap that's now regarded as the must have or if you've bought a top end suit, the same tweed pattern cap that goes with it. Alternatively, a large brimmed trilby or similar will keep both sun and rain out of your eyes. The benefit of the flat cap is that you can wear a pair of hearing defenders over the top, whereas it has to be earplugs with the hat.

Next comes your shirt, which tradition tends to dictate will be a nice cotton check shirt, with long tails since you wear your shirt firmly tucked into your trousers or whatever. Round this off with a nice muted wool or polyester tie, silk looks good but you'll end up destroying it courtesy of rain, catching it with your stock or getting it hooked up on something sharp. Alternatively, a toweling rain choker or cravat are both far more practical, stop the rain running down your neck and still look smart. For warm weather, then a nice shooting waistcoat such as one made of moleskin more than looks the part and still works well come the colder weather, when worn over a thicker shirt or sweater.

Shooting waistcoats need to be chosen carefully if you're not to look like you've just walked off a clay shoot. Moleskin, tweed, corduroy or canvases are the four materials from which to choose. For game shooting, button closure is also to be preferred for both looks and practicality, along with good-sized pockets for cartridges, plus smaller, often concealed zip pockets for essential bits and pieces. Game vests tend also to feature hand warmer pockets, something you'll quickly appreciate on those colder mornings, whilst waiting on the first peg.

For when the colder, wetter weather makes its presence felt, its time to ditch the waistcoat for a suitable jacket.

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Whether you go for traditional tweed in the form of a Norfolk jacket or one of the modern, breathable fabrics there's a basic rule of thumb. By its very nature a jacket will be heavier and bulkier than the waistcoat its replacing, so go for the lightest, most comfortable you can find and the one that offers the most arm and upper body movement.

Besides having to keep you warm and dry whilst you're stood waiting for the drive to begin, it has to move about with you when you start shooting. If it holds you back when you swing, your arms and of course shotgun, it's not the jacket for you. Courtesy of modern technology, you can now get what looks like a traditional tweed jacket that's far lighter and features a waterproof and breathable membrane, giving you the best of both worlds or one of the latest fabrics in a selection of colours and styles all of which look smart and more than appropriate on any big formal day's driven shooting.

Waist down it simply has to be a pair of plus twos, fours or breeches, of which there are many types and makes to choose from, along with a decent leather belt and braces to keep them in place. Trousers are all well and good but they have to be rolled up to tuck them in a Wellington boot or get wet and uncomfortable around the bottoms. Irrespective of whichever knee length style you prefer, your next item is a pair of good quality knee socks, either plain or as loud and bright as you can find, both patterns equally acceptable.

Next up, quite literally, are a pair of garter flashes that'll keep your socks in place since nothing looks worse than one or both lodged around your calves as the day progresses. All that remains is your footwear; if it's dry under foot, nothing equals a pair of handlasted brogues in looks or sheer quality, although they do tend to be a tad pricy. For bad weather, unless you prefer the knee length green rubber or brown leather variety, then something along the lines of a pair of high stalking boots will cosset your feet, support your ankles, keep your feet comfortable and offer outstanding levels of grip.



Walked-up and Rough shooting

Walked-up and rough shooting are by far the two most common forms of game shooting and for many the cheapest and most enjoyable. Whilst some are willing to spend thousands on a day's driven grouse, along with everything that goes with it, a late August day strolling across a moor with nothing more than a few friends and well-trained pointers is for many shooters the ultimate. It's not about bag numbers but more about the sociability of it all, which is why the clothing is at times more relaxed.

For walked-up, all you need do is take a leaf out of your driven counterpart's book. Flat cap, check shirt, breeches, socks and a good quality pair of boots with the waistcoat if it's cooler. Apart from that, a good quality cartridge belt and a game carrier of some sort in which you can also carry your packed lunch, flask and a lightweight waterproof and away you go. Walked-up is all about minimalism, whilst still looking reasonably smart.

Rough shooting tends to be where old formal attire sees out its time. The older and tattier it is the better, since it stands a far greater chance of coming into contact with brambles and barbed wire as you push your way through dense undergrowth. Since many rough shooters operate on the 'walk one-stand one' principle, you and your clothing will be far more active than your formal equivalent, so apart from a good pair of boots and a flat cap, an old cotton shirt with or without a tie and an old pair of breeches or heavy trousers and an old shooting jacket or modern shooting fleece are all that's required plus of course a game bag.

Camouflage is also reasonably acceptable on many rough shoots, so one of your old wildfowling jackets will also do nicely, their modern material often ideal for combating undergrowth. Don't go over the top but nobody will comment on a jacket that's seen better days, since its part and parcel of the day. Many rough shoots also work in a circular pattern, so more often than not your lunch will be awaiting you back in your car.

Woodies and wildfowling

The thing about pigeon shooting and wildfowling is that the kit is almost exactly the same, apart from the fact that foreshore shooters tend at times to wear waders, carry emergency whistles and at times SOS flares. That aside, unless you simply must wear old, heavy wax proofs, it tends to be modern camouflage and the latest lightweight materials. Makes and style are numerous, as are the various claims attributed to the various technological advancements and photorealistic patterns.

But whilst all the various makers try to convince you that their outfits are the best, it's the current crop of soft and fury peach skin fabrics that are proving to be the best.

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This also means it's the American styles that are catching on, which is actually no bad thing. Whilst its we Brits who dictate formal and semi-formal game shooting outfits, our trans-Atlantic cousins definitely know a thing or two about practical, hide or foreshore bound outfits.

To overcome the confines of a hide, hedge or ditch, the shorter jacket, along with higher cut trousers or bib & braces one-piece style are extremely comfortable and practical. And in colder conditions, these American-style outfits are actually far warmer than the more traditional designs. The bib overall also offers far more flexibility, the legs bellowed at the bottom to allow for a variety of boot styles to be worn and seal off the lower part of the body to the elements.

Dress for yourself

Irrespective of whichever form of game shooting you pursue, the overwhelming factor is that it must be comfortable and allow you to move as freely as possible. Equally, just because your friend's new jacket is the best he or she has ever owned or worn, doesn't mean it's going to be the best for you. Likewise, just because you've spent a small fortune on whichever suit or jacket doesn't mean it's the best. A huge price tag and top end name can at times mean nothing more than good marketing allied to the fact the manufacturers know their new garments will sell because of the name and all the adverts they've run.

Select wisely, take advice and make sure that when you try on whichever item of clothing you're buying, move about in it. Swing your arms about as if you have a gun in your hands, many a gun shop lending you one off the shelf to simulate actual shooting. And don't be taken in by the fact kit's the latest 'must have', many a newly designed, latest material or new camo pattern shooting jacket lasting no more than one season, since it actually doesn't work.

Always remember, many of the older fabrics and styles still exist because they still work and nobody has ever been able to better the design. Many an old wax proof is still far more waterproof than the latest fabric, which is why some of the old timers still wear them. Its not that they're mean and won't spend their money, it's because years of experience has taught them what works and what doesn't. The other factor is that the old designs still look good years after they were new, true quality never going out of fashion.

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