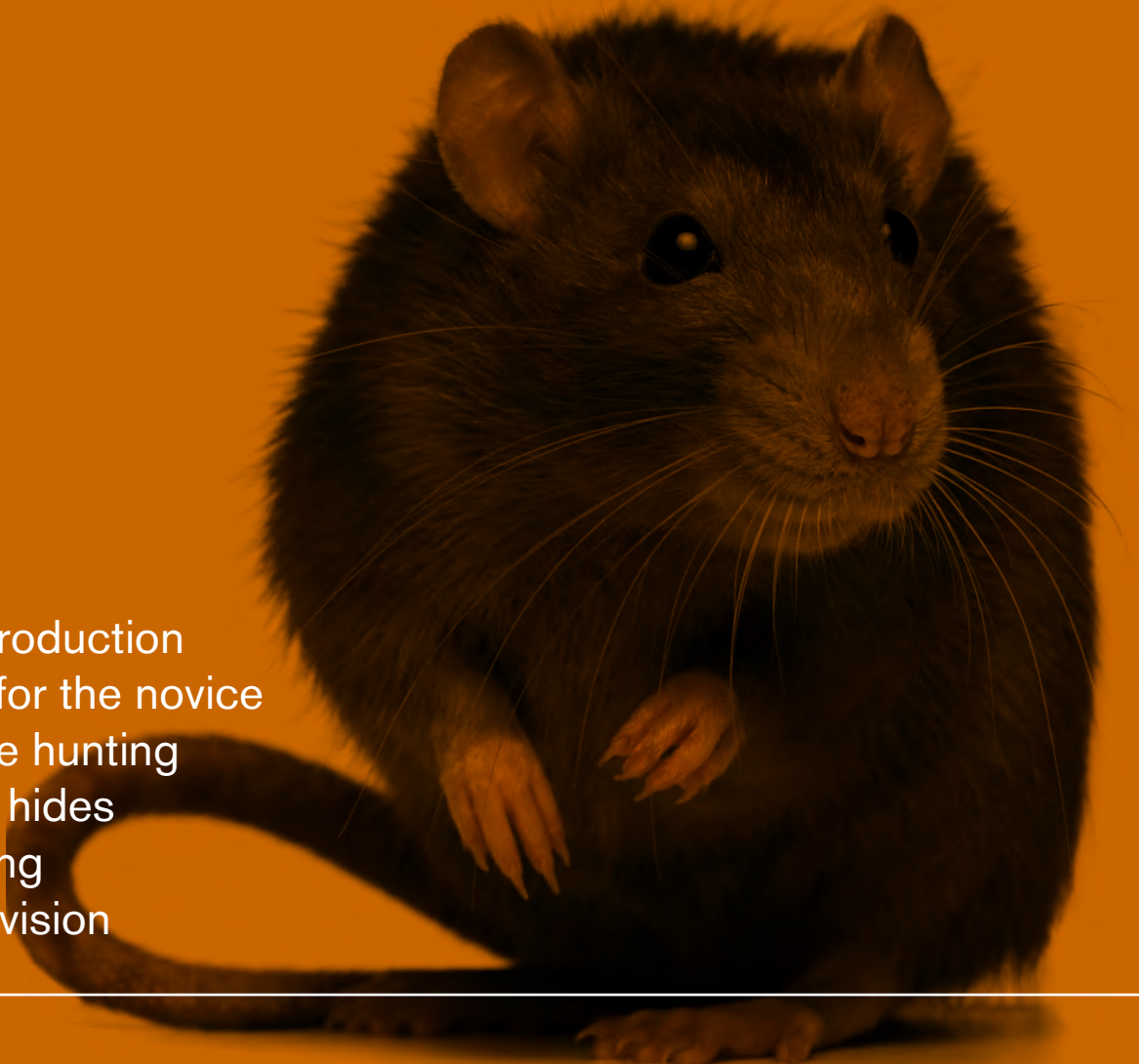


An Introduction to Airgun Hunting & Pest Control

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An Introduction to Airgun Hunting

Pete Wadeson explains hunting and pest control with a 12ft lb legal limit air rifle, and offers advice on rifles, scopes and accessories and techniques...

Many that are new to airgunning eventually hanker to try their shooting skills against live quarry. When making this decision, it becomes your responsibility to know the laws and the limitations of hunting with airguns.

Consider this - quarry such as rabbits can often be encountered well within 40yds. Within that range the energy from an 11ft/lbs air rifle is all that is needed to cleanly dispatch a rabbit as long as the pellet strikes home with precision at the head. This means the hunter needs to place a pellet into a target area not much larger than a 10p piece. So accuracy is a vital skill, as is fieldcraft – to get close enough to your quarry for your rifle to be effective. Accuracy comes with practice, a necessary but essential part of the airgun hunter's learning curve, and fieldcraft is a skill that will be dealt with as we progress through this guide.

Choosing an air rifle

The legal limit air rifle (under 12ft/lbs of muzzle energy) can be a great tool for hunting and pest control – but how do you choose which rifle amongst the many on the market that will best suit your needs?

The first major consideration is 'does the rifle suit your physique?'. Some rifles are quite heavy, some are quite light and certain rifles can also be quite lengthy – especially with a silencer fitted. If you can visit a gunshop (or an airgun club) and handle a few rifles, you'll have a better idea of what suits you.

Next on the checklist is do you opt for a stock made of quality walnut, less expensive hardwood or even



toughened plastic? Stock wood type and even design is up to personal choice and nobody but you can decide on this one. What I will commit to is that a rifle's inherent handling comes down to its initial design and if the stock is designed well, the rifle will handle well. But remember this, a hunting rifle will be subjected to its fair share of knocks and scrapes, so if you can't bear the thought of a lovely walnut stock getting scratched, then go for synthetic or a cheaper hardwood option.

Next up is calibre choice. The majority of UK hunters still opt for .22 calibre. However, anybody who knows my writing will know my preference is for .177 calibre – as do most HFT and all FT shooters – because the smaller calibre gives a flatter trajectory, and therefore is not so critical when judging range. So on the subject of calibre choice I'm saying no more except buy quality ammo that suits your rifle and then stick with it.

Springers

The spring piston powered rifle has been with us for many, many years and most airgun hunters cut their teeth on 'springers'. Don't think 'springers' are just for beginners or only of use for plinking at tin cans, as full power spring rifles will always be useful for pest control and sport shooting.

With springers you have the choice of a simple break-barrel cocking rifle – by far the most prolific – or a fixed





barrel rifle with under-lever or side-lever cocking. A plus point of any mechanically operated spring powered air rifle is that it won't run short of air, as the powerplant is self-contained – it's you! You simply operate the cocking action, thumb a pellet directly into the breech or loading bay, return the barrel or lever and there you have it – one shot ready to go.

In terms of accuracy, most quality spring powered rifles can produce good groups as long as you choose the right ammo and put in the practise. In fact, not that long ago, many would advise you start hunting with a spring powered air rifle to learn the basics of good shooting before moving on to a precharged pneumatic (or PCP).

PCPs

Once mainly the chosen tool of the Field Target shooter, now just as many hunters choose a precharged pneumatic air rifle for its obvious benefits, those being lack of recoil and therefore an easier accuracy potential. Also, many PCP's have a multi-shot (magazine) facility. If you're really going to get serious about airgun hunting then I'd recommend you get a multi-shot from the very start. Most multi-shot rifles are operated by a side mounted cocking

bolt, rear mounted bolt or 'side-lever', and they all use magazine systems. This is most commonly a 'removable' rotary magazine that is indexed around by the action once inserted into the rifle. The benefits of a multi-shot are obvious - no need to place a pellet onto a loading channel or in a barrel for each and every shot. Also, at night, there's no fumbling around searching for pellets or the breech or loading channel. Once you've emptied the magazine, you simply remove the 'empty', refill it, or better still replace with a pre-filled spare.

One other thing to look for in a PCP is a built in sound moderator (silencer), or the facility to attach one, as an un-silenced precharged pneumatic air rifle can give a loud crack without one.

Remember that when buying a PCP you need to budget not only for the rifle and a scope, but also for charging gear as well – either a diving bottle and gauge, or a manually operated pump instead. Connections are usually supplied with the rifle.

Choosing a Hunting Scope

For most forms of airgun hunting a good set of optics are priceless. I say this as many buy the best rifle they can afford then pick a scope almost as an after-thought. This section is designed to help you choose the right hunting scope from the huge selection that's available.

An important 'fixture' you definitely need to take into account as much as the scope are the scope mounts. These come either in pairs known as 'two-piece mounts' or as a single 'one-piece' mount. Try to buy the best mounts you can afford – you won't regret it. Magnification and objective lens





Scope specifications are always written with the first number (or numbers) followed by X relating to the magnification range. The last number relates to the size of the objective lens in millimetres and gives an indication of how much light it will let in – generally speaking, the larger the number the more light it will admit. So a 4x32 fixed power scope would have a 4X magnification and a 32mm front (objective) lens and a 3-9x40 variable power scope would have a range of 3X magnification up to 9X magnification with a 40mm front lens.

When choosing a scope you'll need to have a clear perspective of what you intend it to be able to do with it, with reference to the light conditions you're going to hunt in, and the ranges you're most likely to encounter your quarry. As hunting can be most productive during the early morning or late evening you'll certainly need a scope with reasonable low light capability. As a general rule of thumb large objective lens scopes (40mm – 60mm) are the best choices for low light conditions. Field of view or 'width of view' is vital for target 'acquisition' which means the ability to find the target in the area you are sighting and pointing the rifle. Low magnification (3X or 4X) will give a wide field of view. Higher magnification (9X or more) will give a closer view of the target for precision aiming.

The airgun hunter will require the following from a scope; a rugged build quality, a good sight picture, reasonable/usable magnification range, and a suitable sized objective lens to give a good balance between light gathering and field of view. The most popular scope specifications for all-round hunting is the 3 – 9 X 40 or the 4-12 X 40 as they offer versatility and adequate light gathering capability for their magnification. Purchase a good quality optic of this specification and it'll serve you well.

Features

Always go for a scope with good quality lenses before any other consideration. This is easily ascertained by simply looking through the scope and making sure that the 'edge-to-edge' sight picture is as clear and sharp as possible. Other features are secondary to glass quality, but still worth taking into consideration, for instance; range of magnification (zoom), WA denoting 'Wide Angle'



or wide field of view, and PA (Parallax Adjustment) or AO (Adjustable Objective) as it's sometimes known, which can be handy for range finding.

Another important feature is the reticule (cross-hair). Most people are happy enough with standard cross hairs - commonly known as 30/30, 'thick and thin' posts or 'Duplex'. However there are now many airgun specific reticules (from Hawke, MTC and others) that give multiple aiming points for range and windage, as well as those that can give a quick range estimation facility. More and more airgunners are turning to these scopes for the obvious benefits they offer. It's worth noting that for low-light work, some scopes come fitted with an adjustable illuminated reticule facility.

To sum up - a telescopic sight with a specification of 3-9 X 40 is still a good choice for the newcomer intending trying his hand at general airgun hunting. If you feel you need or want a higher mag capability, don't stray much over 12X magnification. If working in serious low light conditions - then move up to a 50mm objective lens.

Hunting Accessories

Once you've chosen your rifle/scope combo you'll still need a few more items of kit. Some of the following are essentials while others can be added when finances allow or indeed if you feel you need them. In some cases you will also need decoys, camo netting, hide poles, etc. – and a myriad of other stuff to help you hunt more effectively, but these are not essentials for every trip.



Gunbag

It's required by UK law that you carry your gun in a gunbag at all times if travelling in or through a public place. Gunbags range from simple fleece lined gunslips to fully padded cases with pockets for carrying extra kit. Take my advice and buy the best you can afford. A slip doesn't offer much protection. Better to opt for a more expensive padded case for the protection it affords your gun/scope combo.

Ammo

Even when you've chosen the calibre of your rifle, you're still faced with which type (or 'shape') of pellet to use – dome head (or roundhead), pointed, hollow point or wadcutter (flat head). The most popular type of pellet is the round or dome head shape pellet, and fortunately, in my opinion, you need look no further. Used since airguns were first mass-produced, it's still the best choice for general-purpose airgunning – especially hunting. All pellet manufacturers have 'roundheads' in their range, although there are dozens of variations on the theme. Only by trial and error will you discover which is best suited to your particular rifle. Experiment with a few brands to find which suits your rifle best – have a look at



our pellet guide for some tips on brands. Something to remember is that if a pellet is accurate enough for field target (FT) or HFT competitive sports, then it's an obvious choice for the hunter who requires pinpoint precision accuracy. Once you have found the pellet brand that suits your rifle, buy as many from the same batch as possible.

Silencer

Without a silencer some PCP rifles have probably a louder, sharper sounding muzzle report than most rimfires. Thankfully in this country an airgunner running his rifle at 12ft lbs doesn't need a licence to own a silencer. There are too many to list here but the best are those that come with a 1/2" UNF thread so will fit most screw cut barrels.

Rifle sling

Once you are on your shooting ground and have removed your rifle from its gunbag, you will need a shoulder sling of some kind to make the rifle comfortable and safe to carry over prolonged distances. There are many different kinds to choose from at various prices, but when budgeting, make sure that you include the price of sling swivels (for attaching the sling to your rifle).

Bipod

This must surely be one of the most useful shooting accessories, giving the hunter a rock steady platform from which to take more precise longer-range shots. As most makes of production air rifle don't come ready fitted with swivel studs, first job is to fit this little accessory that





facilitates attaching both rifle sling and bipod. If you're unsure how to fit a swivel stud, your local gunshop will usually offer a fitting service.

Rucksack

Since I first began seriously hunting I've taken my bits and bobs in a rucksack. In the early days I used ex-army rucky's in DPM, but now we have dedicated 'backpacks' designed for the hunter available in various sizes. Look for one which will carry all your kit with ease – a 30-litre internal carrying capacity should be fine. You'll also get outer cargo pockets that can securely hold items that you may need to access quickly. Also look for well-padded shoulder straps with webbing to secure the pack around the chest and waist. Another good feature to look for is a moulded rubber base (as fitted to some Napier Ranger bags) that allows the pack to stand up when placed on the floor and keeps contents dry, even if plonked down in a waterlogged area. Some good makes to look for include Napier, Mad Dog or Flambeau.

Observation Kit

A pair of binoculars or monocular is a must have piece of kit. Scanning around using the scope isn't the most advisable way of observing your shoot. Compact binos are

most popular, the usual specification being 8 X 21. A larger pair can be kept in your car for longer range observation.

Knife or multi-tool

An absolute essential is a good knife. A Swiss Army 'style' Knife or Opinel knife is always useful in the field, especially for paunching or preparing 'baits' but even more useful are the Multi-Tools. They're handy for all manner of tasks that can face you as you go about your shoot.

Lamping Kit

While you can opt for a hand held lamp and shoot with a partner, I always prefer to use a gun mounted set up. There are many gun mounted lamping kits on the market but for airgun use it needs to be light in weight, compact and mount onto the scope body tube quickly and easily. The name of the game with any gun mounted lamping kit is practicality, ease of operation and power.

Lasers

It's now widely agreed upon that a laser fitted to the rifle can be handy for aiding rangefinding. The two most popular are those from the Beamshot range and the hardy perennial Crosman Class IIIA laser. A stock mounted pressure switch allows instant on/off access. Once the laser is set up to bisect the cross hairs exactly in the centre of the reticule at your set zero range, you can evaluate distance; if the laser dot is lower than the crosshair, then the target is closer and if the laser dot appears higher on the target than the centre of the cross hairs, then the quarry is further away than the set zero.

Bits 'n' Bobs

Here are a few other small items of kit that are useful for hunting.

A sunshade and flip up filter for your scope can be handy in bright sunlight or awkward lighting conditions. A small torch or small headlamp is very helpful to have, even though you might not intend to hunt at night, as dusk soon turns too dark.

It will help you get your kit packed away and it makes the walk back to the car less hazardous.

You should also carry a small first aid kit. This doesn't need to be overly comprehensive but should at least include antiseptic cream or spray, and a selection of plasters in a waterproof pack or tin.

Always take a copy of your





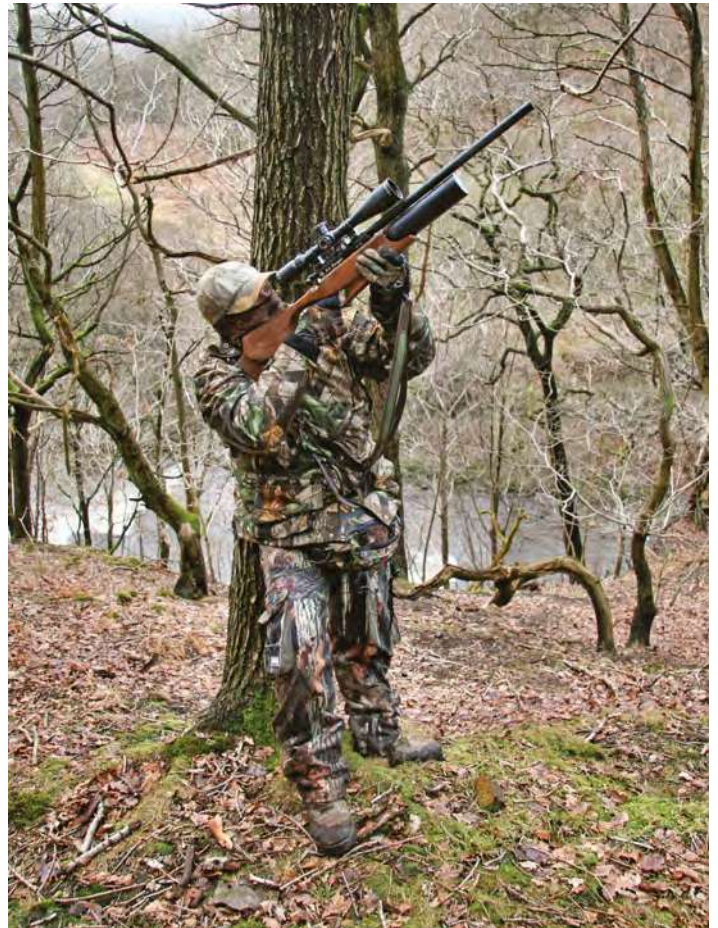
written permission to shoot. A mobile phone can prove invaluable - and though many feel them intrusive you can always turn it off when not needed. Then there are little items such as camo tape, string, quarry calls, facemask, gloves, and even paper kitchen towels - a really versatile accessory. Last but definitely not least, every hunter should have at least the most basic of cleaning kits.

Basic shooting

Now I know this will sound obvious, but it's no use having all the best kit if you don't know how to shoot properly. The best way to improve your shooting is practice, practice, and more practice - there is no easy way. No matter how good you think you are, when first taking up shooting it's best to go to an air rifle, FT or HFT club and get tuition on correct technique. Even if you never

intend to take up competition, you will learn more on a Saturday or Sunday session with experienced shooters than you would in months of struggling along on your own. Most air rifle clubs are populated by good guys (and gals) who will be happy to help you with zeroing, range estimation, shooting technique and equipment choice. In relation to airgun hunting, and indeed any shooting discipline it's the basics that can mean the difference between success and failure out in the field. Before attempting to shoot any live quarry, it's imperative that you achieve an acceptable level of accuracy. I can't stress enough the importance of making yourself fully accustomed to the capabilities of your rifle, scope and ammo combination. Get used to how much hold-over or hold-under is needed at various ranges, with the zero you're using. Everything should become second nature. You also need to learn how to shoot from different positions; standing, kneeling and prone, both rested and freehand.

Beginners often ask "At what range can I hunt?" and the answer is the distance where you can comfortably put every shot into a circle about one inch in diameter (just draw around a 10p coin) - or use a one inch 'spinner' target. That's the sort of accuracy required for a one shot kill on most airgun quarry. Generally speaking, most people will comfortably do this at between 25yds - 30yds or so with the right kit and the right technique. Some may be able to reach out further, while some may need to get closer to their target - which brings us nicely around to fieldcraft.





The Importance of Fieldcraft

Fieldcraft is probably the biggest factor in becoming a successful hunter and is a major skill you will need to develop and learn. Knowledge of your quarry, its habits, location and how to stealthily move across various types of terrain, all come under the heading of fieldcraft. Books and magazines will be an invaluable source of this information, but there's nothing like first hand experience. Take time to talk to countrymen and other more experienced hunters of all disciplines who may, if you're lucky, pass on tips that could otherwise take years to learn. As you spend more and more time in the countryside with or without your rifle you'll be amazed at what you can learn by just being there and keeping alert. Suffice to say that it pays to keep your eyes and ears open, and be willing and eager to learn at all times.

There is a definite art to walking over terrain as quietly as possible and unfortunately it's not as simple as just putting your feet down carefully. We can't even begin though without addressing the importance of quality footwear; a



strong pair of hiking boots will suffice most of the year and a pair of softer soled dark coloured trainers for stalking in summer. A stalking boot requires a soft, flexible sole - boots with a harder, tough and more rigid rubber cleat are more suited to wet muddy environments.

The hunter is most often given away by the three 'S's - Sight, Sound and Smell. In fact, for both the hunter and his quarry, movement is the biggest giveaway.

Sight and Sound

Adopt the style of walking that best suits your build and agility, yet helps shield you from the eyes of your quarry. Firstly you walk an area with your eyes. Look at the 5 yards forward of your position, making mental note of what lies on the ground and the consistency of the terrain. Then place the ball of the foot down on the ground. You need to 'feel' the ground beneath your feet as you look at the ground you're walking over. If you feel anything on the ground underfoot that will slip or snap - stop, and look at what it is. Carefully retract that foot and place it suitably in another place and progress on your way looking ahead, around and above for any sign of quarry. Only experience and practice will enable you to 'drift' quietly as possible over a variety of terrain, and it will eventually become second nature.

Camouflage is an obvious aid for the airgun hunter, as the rifle you're using has a limited effective range, so you need to get within striking distance so the shot cleanly and humanely dispatches the quarry. Camouflage works as it creates visual confusion, blending the shape of the human

body into the surroundings and breaking up your outline. However always remember that camo is an aid, not the emperor's invisible cloak!

Once camo clothing was just military surplus, and British DPM (disruptive pattern material) is still popular, but now there are more 'civilian' camouflage patterns, many originating from American companies such as Mossy Oak or Bill Jordan's (Jordan Outdoor Enterprises) the Advantage® and Realtree® patterns to be precise. There are also a few enterprising UK manufacturers making good camo patterns such as Artic Outdoors' 'Invisible', Jack Pyke's 'English Oak' and LR Active Ltd's own 'TreeDeep™'.

Most hunters will wear a camo jacket (or shirt) and trousers, some even wear a camo hat, but in my opinion it also important to keep your hands and face covered with gloves and facemask. I'm not overly fussy on pattern, but the mask should give clear vision while covering the face. As for gloves, I prefer a palm dot grip design and I cut off the top section glove's forefinger and thumb on the shooting hand glove to help with trigger feel and loading. I even wear these at night, as a white face and hands can stand out like beacons. The only times I think of not using a camo mask or gloves are when shooting from a vehicle or feral pigeon bashing indoors.

Make sure that your gear is not making a noise that might give you away. Obviously rattling zips and buckles must be dealt with; boots that squeak and clothing that rustles should naturally be avoided. Also be careful when using Velcro. Small tabs are acceptable for added security on pockets but avoid fastenings with large strips of Velcro or make sure you don't use them once you're near to your chosen hunting area. And remember, sound travels further at night.



Smell

A rabbit's sense of smell is legendary – so aftershave wearers and smokers are at a disadvantage. If human's can smell a smoker, then a wild animal would have no problem.

Some advocate the use of 'scent inhibitors' and they can certainly boost some people's confidence if nothing else. Also, don't use heavily scented soaps before you go hunting. Another factor to address is what you use to wash the clothes you hunt in. If possible leave them as long as you dare - without being kicked out of the house... Put them in a strong plastic garden rubbish sack and tie the top to seal. That odour is 'mother nature' and it's probably the best smell to cover the natural body aroma of a hunter who wants to get closer to his quarry. When things do need a wash, simply whack it in on a lukewarm wash with no detergent. It works well enough to take off dirt, but won't add anything.

Quarry

All the species we are allowed to hunt by law are listed in the 1981 Wildlife & Countryside Act. Reputable shooting organisations, like BASC, have these rules available – so get a copy and most importantly read and adhere to them. Amongst these listed and appropriate to control with a legal limit air rifle are; rabbit, squirrel, brown rat, magpie, crow, rook, jackdaw, jay, wood pigeon, feral pigeon and collared dove. There are others you can add to that list, but here we are concentrating on the main quarry.

It's important that you must make yourself fully familiar with recognising these species and also the vulnerable aim points of each individual quarry species or as it's known – the 'kill-zone.' This is the area on its body that when hit with a pellet of sufficient force will result in a quick, clean kill. Only when you have the ability and knowledge to achieve this should you embark on your first hunting foray. As mentioned earlier, this aim point is always quite small, usually a head shot - this is why consistent, accurate performance is essential. Never over estimate your ability to shoot accurately at various ranges; with adrenaline pumping the novice hunter can make hasty decisions and to your quarry a costly 'painful' mistake. Also, before any hunting foray always check your zero and if you're doing a lot of hunting keep a check on the rifles power output – be it spring powered or PCP.

So, whether bagging bunnies or potting pigeons, never to attempt to shoot live quarry beyond your effective





shooting range. If there is the slightest possibility that you will only wound the creature, don't shoot. Hunting can at times be very frustrating and sometimes you will need to be very disciplined so as not to squeeze the trigger. Responsibility plays a big part in becoming a successful hunter, especially so in these 'gun sensitive' times. Always be aware that you are the public image of the sport and act accordingly.

Remember it's your responsibility to be able to identify all legal quarry species from even the most obscure angle. In fact, a handy saying that has served me well is this, 'If in doubt, don't shoot.'

Hunting Methods

The tactics and techniques you can employ when hunting with an air rifle are pretty much the same as they have been for years. However, as air rifles have become more accurate, and precharged pneumatics much more affordable, certain hunting methods can be used that weren't viable in the past. Also let's thank the 'gods' for the sound moderator and multi-shot air rifles.

Stalking, ambushing, baiting down, decoying – these are the major methods the airgun hunter can employ. Some techniques cross into others such as baiting down corvids whilst using a decoy to lull the birds into a false sense of security. Also decoying woodpigeon to a shooting position then shooting them from an ambush position. As you can

see the possibilities are wide ranging. But for arguments sake let's take a look at the basic tactics and the main quarry species they can be used for.

Stalking

This technique is mainly employed for rabbits during spring right through to late autumn. Stalking is in essence 'sneaking' up to your quarry; to get within range without your movements alarming it and resulting in it bolting for cover. You must approach from downwind, keep as low a profile as possible and take advantage of every bit of available cover. If there are bushes or trees behind you, use these to prevent showing yourself as a silhouette. Also, the closer you get to the target the smaller you must try to make yourself appear. This means stooping as you carefully make your approach. Once you've got approximately within 60 yards of the rabbit, you will probably need to get down to your hands and knees and then certainly towards the end of the stalk you will have to belly crawl into a final position.

Whilst making the final approach, you should adopt a move, stop and look procedure. Keep an eye on the closest rabbit to see if it has sensed you or is disturbed by your presence. A rabbit on the alert will sit bolt upright, ears pricked, nose twitching as it uses its exceptional hearing and sense of smell to detect danger.

A stalk is strenuous, not only on the muscles but on the

nervous system - the adrenalin can have you shaking. As you reach a position you feel you can make an effective shot – lie perfectly still. It's all too easy to blow it at this crucial moment, so if your quarry isn't looking unduly worried or twitchy, rest yourself. Keep perfectly still and calm yourself before even attempting to put the cross hairs on the target. Once within a reasonable range, which for most hunters should be within 30 yards, you should always go for a headshot. From the side, the kill-zone of a rabbit is a walnut sized area between the eye and the base of the ear. An accurately placed shot here will cleanly and humanely dispatch the rabbit.

Ambushing – Hide Shooting

This is sometimes known as static hunting and often needs the hunter to use some form of hide or at least heavy natural cover. The ambush shooting position obviously needs to be chosen or built within effective range of where the quarry is expected to be. A hidden shooting position can be used in conjunction with decoying or baiting down. The most important requisites of successful ambushing are a well chosen shooting position and a well-constructed hide and/or suitable full camo wear.

Ambushing gives the hunter the advantage of surprise and in most cases if you choose your shooting position correctly you'll also know the range of the target. This is most beneficial when baiting crows or magpies down to bait.

Similar hidden position ambush tactics can be used setting up in wait near a rabbit warren you know to be well used. If you've located the main entrance holes and runs to a large, well-populated warren this form of shooting can be very productive. Again cover and concealment is your major concern. In many cases you should be able to position yourself under a hedge or heavy cover within range of the target. If you're using a PCP, then a bipod will give you an advantage or use a camo rucksack as a rest, and this too can partly conceal you from the forward position. Camo nets are also extremely handy for a quick makeshift hide.

For this method of hunting you really must know the movements of the quarry, as you don't want to be lying up for hours on end with no activity - and you need to be up before sun rise to get in to position.

Decoying

Decoys are used widely in all manner of hunting applications and requires you use a hidden shooting or ambush position, which has been outlined previously. As airgun hunters we can use plastic 'deeks' of woodpigeon to bring them down within range. Alternatively decoys can be used to annoy a bird into showing itself - as in the case of using a little owl deek or similar raptor



placed in magpie territory. This has corvids out to attack the unwanted intruder in the area, giving you the chance to cull a few from your hunting ground. Decoying is an art and it can take years to get 'the knack' of setting the deeks out so as to fool wary woodies down to the ground. Shooting woodpigeon as they land amongst deeks is probably one of the most difficult of hunting techniques. You'll need to have perfected your hide building skills so not a movement or glint is seen from outside the hide. The basics of decoying are straightforward; face the deeks into the breeze, if there is any, and choose a position

so you're not shooting with the sun in your face. Also make sure the pattern is under or reasonably close to an established flightline. The theory behind the technique is a simple one - a pattern of decoys are arranged to look like feeding birds so the real ones flying over will be attracted down to join them. Position a hide within range, and once the pigeon has landed and stays still long enough, you can take the shot. This is the main problem that faces the airgun hunter using this technique. I usually let a good few land to settle amongst the 'deeks' before I begin shooting. Then carefully choosing a woodie within range, I slowly and only slightly poke the muzzle through the camo netting, sight my target and shoot.

Another method is to set up a pair of decoys on lofting poles near established sitty trees or in areas the birds are known to roost. Set the decoys as high as possible so they're clearly visible to birds flying over. Settle yourself into a hidden position within range to 'snipe' the birds as they alight into the bare branches of the trees.

This form of hunting takes considerable skill, and before attempting it, practice shooting leaves and even matchstick size twigs high in the trees. Once you're hitting these - you're ready to target live quarry. As this is only an introduction to airgun hunting, I'm omitting roost shooting which is one of the most difficult forms of hunting. Once you are proficient enough in your shooting technique, you'll know if you feel ready to attempt shooting wood pigeon or crows at roost.

Baiting Down

This method is used for corvids such as crows and magpies, but in lean hard times even woodies can be brought to suitable bait, as can rats. Corvids are scavengers - always on the look at for an easy feed of carrion so bait choice is a simple one, it can be either a slit open rabbit or some left over pet food. Bait an area for a week or more and the corvids soon get used to finding the easy pickings. Then when you've got the birds feeling the freebie dining area is a safe place, you simply get yourself into position before feeding time to pick off the carrion eating critters. This method of hunting usually allows you to dictate the range the quarry is to be targeted. Before baiting out, choose your shooting position or even build a hide in readiness for when you'll be there to pick them off. But be warned. Both the magpie and crow are probably the earliest of risers in the bird world and can be moving around looking for food a good half hour or more before dawn. The ideal situation is to be fully concealed by shooting from a hide. Your hide needs to keep you concealed from above as well as the front, back and sides. Once you're in position with your cross hairs trained on the bait, you shouldn't have long to wait until the magpies arrival. They will usually land away from the bait then hop up to it once they've had a look around to check the area is safe. The crow will usually just appear

as if from nowhere to land upon the bait, filling your scope with a black flurry of wings. Baiting an area for suitable quarry can reap rich rewards for the patient hunter.

Opportunist Shooting

This is a method of hunting that requires hunters to be prepared for any quarry that presents itself as you stealthily move around your shoot - obviously this requires a lot of fieldcraft. It's not just a case of wandering around your shoot aimlessly in the hope you'll get the chance to take a 'pot shot', rather it's about reading the land and taking advantage of the opportunities that present themselves. It goes without saying that full camo wear is the order of the day and when I'm using this technique I'll be completely covered from head to toe. If it's raining or unsettled you can be sure most quarry will be found in and around wooded areas. Squirrels and birds don't like getting wet or cold, so in those conditions look to the sheltered areas for quarry.

Always look around to see what's going on around you. If you see the woodies landing in the next field, plan your route and using what available cover there is, make your way over there. If bunnies are appearing out of the hedge line adjacent to the one you're shooting along - carefully stalk over to that area. Needless to say, keep low and always try to prevent yourself showing as a silhouette. Approach from down wind and move slowly and quietly. All are basic requisites of good fieldcraft. Keep your options open and remain flexible. This method has resulted in some of my most challenging and memorable hunting forays.



Indoor Shooting & Ratting

Before leaving tactics it's well worth having a look at another form of shooting that requires a set of skills all of its very own – specifically shooting in and around buildings. This form of 'hunting' opens up a whole new range of opportunities for the shooter. You could get the chance to cull collared doves – and a tasty bird it is too – but invariably you'll be shooting for pest control only, targeting feral pigeon and rats.

The first factor to take into consideration when shooting 'indoors' is your own personal safety. Ricochets can have dangerous consequences and if shooting inside abandoned industrial units don't touch any bare wires – they might be live. Also watch for rotten floorboards, rubble underfoot, rickety stairs and dodgy ceilings. When shooting around and inside grain stores or large hangers used for storing winter feed, always pay attention to what's behind the targets. Airgun pellets punch nice neat holes in corrugated or plastic roofs and no farmer wants his outbuildings to have roofs like colanders. Indoor shooting might sound cushy but it comes with a whole range of do's and don'ts; just take care and be mindful of your surroundings.

While on the subject of indoor shooting I'll take the opportunity to briefly outline the method for baiting out for rats. The area to be baited should initially be illuminated with a low light on a regular basis so the rats become accustomed to it – a low wattage bulb of no more than 40W is enough. Then food should be left out regularly for up to a week, before any shooting is done. Anything will suffice from bread to rotten fruit and better to put out bait that can't be dragged away and eaten out of sight. Incidentally, try to choose a hidden and comfortable shooting position within range with a shooting angle that gives you a sturdy backstop behind the target. If needed put a big piece of heavy wood covered with carpet behind the bait to absorb the impact of pellets.

Baiting out can be an extremely effective method (while it lasts) but it can equally be a strain on your patience not to mention your eyesight. Always use tongs or disposable gloves to pick up dead rats and ferals, then dispose of them properly by burning or burying.

Lamping

Now to one of the most challenging forms of shooting – lamping, the term used for shooting rabbits at night with the aid of an artificial light source. Nightvision equipment such as a Gen 1 NV monocular is invaluable for observation at night and is being used more and more, but I'll stick to the traditional lamping methods here.

First, choose an area you know to be frequented by rabbits feeding at night. Carefully enter the field then bring the gun up to your shoulder and flick on the lamp to scan ahead. Don't scan too far ahead of your position but keep it down to 40-50 yards or so and don't over-use the lamp.

Eventually you'll come to a group of feeding rabbits. Once spotted, if out of range, immediately switch off the light and carefully stalk closer to your quarry. Once you feel you're within range raise the rifle to your shoulder in readiness of a shot, sight through the scope while turning the lamp on to search the area within your effective striking range. This is when you'll appreciate a scope with a wide field of view as you target in on the rabbit closest to your set zero – take aim and squeeze off the first shot. If all has gone according to plan you'll have your first night time bunny in the bag.

Big bags of bunnies can be amassed by lamping but usually I prefer to only take what I need for the pot, unless specifically shooting on pest control duty. For night shooting the other observation aid I wouldn't be without is a Nightvision monocular. These hi-tech but affordable units allow you to sight quarry undetected without any disturbance from an artificial light source.

Finally...

Remember that good shooting practice requires self-discipline. Always follow the country code and respect other people's right of way and their property. When your experience out in the field grows, so your game bag will increase accordingly. If shooting for the pot, don't overshoot your allotted hunting ground – it's not a limitless resource.



First Timers

Pete Wadeson looks at rifles that are ideal for the novice shooter

Shooting an air rifle is still the cheapest way into entering the world of pest control and shooting for sport, particularly hunting. The advantage of the air rifle is, as the law stands at present, you neither need an FAC or the stringent security to own a firearm, as long as the air rifle doesn't exceed the 12ft lb legal limit. Now the term 'introductory level' can tend to be interpreted by some as quite derogatory but in actuality an introductory level air rifle is - as the name clearly implies - a basic, solid but reliable air rifle that introduces you to the sport and/or to a particular power source such as the spring & piston, gas-ram or pre-charged pneumatic (PCP).

Spring Driven Thing

The spring/piston-powered air rifle will always be popular, due to the fact it's a completely self-contained as far as power goes. Cocking the rifle can be one of three action types - break-barrel, under-lever or side-lever - by far the most popular is the break-barrel.

For hunting, you need a rifle putting out a power level of at least 11ft/lbs and there's an absolutely massive amount of choice - some will want to scope up from the off, while others will be content to use open sights, although this does limit the ranges it can be used over, but purchase a rifle with 'irons' and you can shoot straight from the box. I'd advise such a rifle because as they say, 'walk before you can run' and all quality air rifles are grooved to accept scope mounts. Also, learning your craft with an open sighted recoiling springer isn't a bad thing, before moving on to bigger and better things!

Nowadays, even basic introductory level springers are accurate out to sensible ranges, have a decent trigger with safety and some even come with silencers already fitted! But more on the latter later - however, considering the features mentioned, there are many air rifles that fit the bill to the point that this area of the market is saturated, so the 'wannabe airgunner' is certainly spoiled for choice. Companies such as BSA, Cometa, Gamo, Hatsan, SMK, Webley, Weihrauch and many more have models to tempt the newcomer. In that respect, for price to performance a fine example is the...

Cometa 220 Galaxy, as it's an ideal choice for the younger and/or novice shooter.

The rifle's fully ambidextrous, synthetic stock has quite a



chunky but low profile cheekpiece, with a full black rubber butt pad, while the slim forend is nicely proportioned

to be in keeping with the rest of the 'handle'. Raised panels of stippling are positioned along either side of the forend and grip. It's equipped with Hi-Viz fibre optic enhanced open sights, configured as green bars set either side of the fully adjustable rearsight's square shape notch and a red fibre optic bar sits atop the hooded foresight. Upon cocking, the rifle's auto safety catch pops out at the rear of the air cylinder. The 2-stage adjustable trigger unit is basic but practical and certainly doesn't let the rifle down. Recoil would be best described as 'snappy' but manageable and muzzle report is very acceptable for a rifle in this price bracket.

Ready to Go Combos

Also in this area of the market, many companies now offer rifles bundled with a decent quality scope and mounts. Again, there are too many options to list but Gamo have a good selection of these 'ready to go' combos - my favourites being those in their 'Varmint' range. The Gamo Varmint Barricade being a very appealing offering, however other companies such as Walther and Crosman have equally tempting 'package deals.' Incidentally, although virtually all of the air rifles offered in a combo format omit open sights, many do however have an integral silencer. A good example of this type of combo is...

The Crosman Phantom II. Again another synthetic stocked rifle but one that has a full length barrel shroud cum silencer and comes bundled with a Center Point 3 - 9 X 40 AO optic and a sturdy one-piece mount. This sleek and stylish rifle features a generous and well-defined cheekpiece with a relatively low comb, ending in a very substantially sized full black rubber butt pad. The slim neck and steep drop down pistol grip allow for a very high level of trigger control.

The lengthy yet slim forend has a rounded underside and features lengthy panels of impregnated 'leatherette' finish grip aids. The bull barrel shroud is extremely effective at taming muzzle report, while the firing cycle is smooth and is very low in recoil for such a full power springer. The 2-stage adjustable trigger unit has a manual safety positioned forward of it and both sit protected within an ABS trigger guard. Although only weighing a tad over 8lbs



scoped, this is a more adult orientated air rifle, not only due to the lengthy overall proportions but the reach to pull measures 14.5", which some juniors and smaller build shooters might find a bit of a stretch.

There are introductory level gas-ram rifles available from various manufacturers, including Crosman, as in recent years this power source has seen quite a resurgence of interest. Different manufacturers give the power plant their own designation but all are based on the same principle as the 'gas-strut' that Theoben were once famous for. Most do show the benefits of having a faster lock time, smooth firing cycle, reduced internal vibration (due to the lack of a spring) and less recoil. So, if this appeals, look to rifles such as the Crosman Nitro Venom, Gamo Whisper IGT, Hatsan 60S-TG (Vortex), Webley VMX D-Ram – in fact some manufacturers such as Hatsan for instance offer what is essentially the same rifle in springer or 'gas-ram' format. The 60S-TG being an example of this and in keeping with the ethos of this feature, one that shouldn't be overlooked should this power source appeal to you.

Multiple Choice

If you want to dive straight into using a PCP or have decided to change over from a mechanical action rifle, then you'll need to be aware they need topping up with compressed air. This can either be from a pump, diver's bottle or regular trips to a gunshop that does 'fills.'

Whichever it is, this will have to be factored into the cost as will a scope and for hunting a silencer is a must, to tame the report from an untamed PCP. On certain springers, report can be quite acceptable, but on the whole I'd advise newcomers to the sport who are going to get serious about hunting, to think about the silencer the rifle has integrally fitted or the model you will choose to add at a later date.

Although you can opt for a single shot rifle, most hunters prefer multi-shot magazine fed rifles. Obviously the sky's the limit if you have a thick wallet but thankfully there are

some very nicely priced rifles to introduce you to these recoilless rifles. Air Arms offer the S200, which some smaller stature shooters will appreciate and although a single shot rifle, a retrofit 10-shot magazine system can be purchased for it. The Webley Raider 10 XS multi-shot that comes with a very effective QGS II silencer but the one that's recently impressed many shooters is...

The Gamo Coyote, which is the company's first PCP and can be purchased in either a Tactical (Synthetic stock) or ambidextrous beech wood livery. This model features a well-defined cheekpiece and a ventilated, thick black rubber butt pad. The slab-sided forend is relatively slim; having two-panels of 'skip-line' chequering set either side, while large contoured panels are found on either side of the pistol grip. The front positioned fill point is protected under a removable friction fit collar just rear of the large forward facing 'manometer.' A recommended fill of 232-bar gives approximately 90 shots in .177 and 110 in .22 calibre. The teardrop cocking bolt runs a 10-shot self-actuating magazine, held in place by strong magnets.

A 2-stage adjustable unit with an in-guard manual safety blade sends pellets down the hammer forged barrel that has a 1/2" UNF thread, protected by a ported cover cap for fitting a silencer of choice. A lengthy run of uninterrupted scope rail atop the action block allows the fitting of any size optic.

And Finally...

If I had space, I could go on naming rifle after rifle but the selection highlighted I feel illustrates it needn't cost the earth to get 'rigged up' even if you want to 'jump straight in' and start your shooting career with a PCP. Personally at this stage, I'd say learn your craft with a reasonably priced springer that is within your budget and progress in hardware as you progress as a shooter. Whichever to choose is certainly up to the individual but there's no denying air rifle shooting is a sport open and affordable to all...

Hunting with an air rifle

Pete Wadeson tells you how to get started in hunting – one of the core air rifle sports



Airgun shooting is still the easiest of all shooting sports to get involved in, but no matter whether you are just 'plinking' in the confines of the back garden, or join a club to try your hand at the demanding disciplines of FT or HFT, sooner or later, most newcomers will eventually want to try their shooting skills against live quarry. It's not for everybody, but for those that get bitten by the bug, it can be a lifetime's sport.

Hunting and the law

The first thing you need to know is the law pertaining to owning, using and hunting with an air rifle.

An air rifle is legal for an adult to own without a licence, providing the power output is less than 12ft/lbs at the muzzle. Explanation of this figure can be found in our pellet article elsewhere, but the most important thing to remember is that it is your responsibility to comply with this law, and that an air rifle that exceeds this legal power limit requires an appropriate Firearms Certificate (or FAC). For this reason it is always best to have the power of a rifle checked by somebody who knows what they are doing before you buy it; any decent gun shop or airgun club will be able to check this easily with a chronometer.

I must emphasise that it's also the responsibility of every individual to know the law pertaining to hunting with airguns. It's no use having the appropriate kit, even if you have somewhere suitable to hunt over, if you don't

know what you can and can't do. The police or the courts never accept ignorance of the law as a defence.

All reputable shooting organisations have the appropriate legal guidelines available on request so make a point of reading, memorising and adhering to them. The shooting press also keeps its readers informed. The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) have excellent legal information and quarry guides on their website www.basc.com. It's also worth joining BASC for the instruction and insurance services that they offer.

It is also the responsibility of those wanting to hunt to be able to recognise the quarry species that are deemed suitable for control with air rifles – something I've detailed elsewhere in this publication. All the legitimate pest species that airgun hunters are allowed to shoot are listed



in the 1981 Wildlife & Countryside Act. Amongst these listed and appropriate to control with a legal limit air rifle are rabbits, squirrels, brown rats, magpies, crows, rooks, jackdaws, jays, wood pigeons, feral pigeons and collared doves. There are some others you can add to that list, but those noted are the main quarry species.

Why use an air rifle?

As I've mentioned, the quarry species will be dealt with in due course, but the main aim here is to illustrate and introduce when and why the precision accuracy of a good-quality air rifle is more suitable than the out-and-out stopping power produced by a live-round sporting rifle. First, we need to take into consideration that the kill-zone of smaller vermin deemed appropriate for control with an air rifle is relatively small. In many cases the hunter needs to place a pellet into a target area not much larger than a 10p piece, and in some cases - such as when taking a head shot - this kill-zone is even smaller. An obvious scenario where an air rifle is the optimum tool, and preferable to a more powerful firearm, is when shooting inside buildings such as barns, or around outbuildings. A higher powered rifle could cause damage and the possibility of dangerous ricochets.

The airgun hunter using a 12ft lb air rifle can often operate safely and legally in locations where a live-round firearm user can't. Many areas of open land just aren't deemed suitable by the police for a rimfire rifle to be used, but that doesn't mean that the area will be devoid of vermin. Often it's quite the opposite, as these places become havens for all manner of unwanted pests.

Another example is in dense woodland, when squirrels or corvids such as magpies and jackdaws are the quarry. In many such situations you can't use a shotgun due to the damage that many shot pellets can do to the trees. A rimfire is also out of the question due to the power (and range) of the bullet, but a pellet fired from a 12ft lb air rifle has more than enough stopping power for squirrels and corvids. Some of the most challenging shots I've taken have been against these species. To be able to 'thread' a pellet through a maze of branches and twigs to hit a kill zone on quarry such as these takes precision accuracy from the hunter and precision performance from the air rifle. And there's the rub! We're already at the stage where you'll have realised that not only must the equipment be up to the job, but your shooting skills need to be too. These include accuracy with the rifle, and fieldcraft in your approach to the quarry. Both come with practice and are an absolutely essential part of the airgun hunter's learning curve.

Fortunately modern air rifle engineering technology has come along in leaps and bounds in recent years. Indeed, a newcomer to the sport can almost be spoilt by the fact that today's best air rifles, particular the precharged pneumatic (PCP) types, almost shoot themselves, needing only good technique and a keen eye to place the pellet exactly where it needs to go - the all important kill-zone. The air rifle is a precision tool that can do what many other sporting guns are just incapable of doing, which is to afford the shooter pinpoint accuracy without the 'overkill' factor that can be produced when using live-round sporting rifles. Within 50yds a pellet only requires



4ft lbs of energy to dispatch the quarry cleanly, providing it strikes with precision inside the kill-zone. Precise, low-power pellet placement is often better than greater power with poorer accuracy.

Permission to shoot

One of the most difficult obstacles in becoming an airgun hunter is the difficulty in finding somewhere suitable to shoot. I could glibly reel of the same old advice of asking at the local gun shop, studying O.S Ordnance Survey maps and send out letter after letter to landowners, stating your request all neatly typed and presented. Sometimes this works, however, I feel there are more fruitful ways to gain permission to shoot.

Initially seek out shooters who share your passion for the discipline of shooting air rifles. You'll find these people at your local airgun club. Here you'll get the benefit of practicing in a safe and suitable environment, and you'll meet people with a common interest, some of whom may already have permission to hunt on local land, and you may give you an invite.

Meanwhile, still send out the letters and occasionally 'cold call' – tell the farmer if you've seen rabbits damaging his crops, and explain that a few early morning raids near warrens will start making in-roads into them, you may get lucky. Find out if he has problems around the farm building with rats and feral pigeon; the former for obvious reasons of destructive behaviour and the latter for the grain they spoil, including the mess and health hazard that their droppings cause. Last but not least, nothing gains shooting permission as readily as offering to help a busy farmer keep wood pigeon off his crops at crucial times of the year. Few farmers will say no if you're ready to come over the next day with decoys, camo net and hide poles. When you find a someone who is prepared to let you shoot on his land, make sure that you get written permission, so as to be 100% legal – and always carry it with you when on the land.

It's important to be patient. Let your hosts – be they another shooter with permission or a landowner – 'weigh you up', and let them dictate your progress into their shooting world. It's all too easy to blow these opportunities due to over-eagerness, and remember that the shooter who first invited you to join him will probably have spent years gaining the trust of the farmer or landowner. He'll certainly have earned his right to shoot, so be prepared to do the same. Always respect those chances to shoot on 'borrowed land', because you may end up getting written permission and be allowed to shoot on the land by yourself.

It needn't cost the earth

Choosing an air rifle from the vast selection suitable for hunting can be a daunting prospect. Essentially you have a choice of three types – either a traditional spring-powered rifle, one that's gas ram powered, or a



precharged pneumatic powered (PCP) rifle. Whichever you choose, you will need a rifle that's capable of a muzzle energy of at least 11ft lbs – i.e. as close as possible to, but still comfortably within, the 12ft lb legal limit.

Presumably you will be working to a budget, but even before choosing a gun we've got to decide upon which calibre. The old airgun-shooting adage that says .177 for feather .22 for fur, as a general rule of thumb is a reasonable guide. However, there are exceptions to the rule. In fact you actually have the choice of four, because there are also .20 and .25 calibres with each having its devotees and specialised uses. I'd advise anybody to start with .177 – it has a flatter trajectory, so aids accuracy over varying distances, and providing you hit the kill-zone it has just as much 'stopping' power as larger calibres.

Not too many years ago, many would advise you to start off by choosing a spring powered air rifle for hunting and team that up with a general specification scope. However now that precharged pneumatic powered air rifles are much more affordable these days, if you're willing to fork out the extra for charging gear, then a PCP can be a better choice.

Which type of rifle?

The spring/piston-powered air rifle will always be popular due to the fact that it's power source is completely self-contained. Spring cocking mechanisms can be one of

three action types – break-barrel, under-lever or side-lever. By far the most popular is the break-barrel, and accuracy potential is now equal to most comparably priced fixed barrel models.

Don't jump in at the deep end and buy the first rifle you see that 'looks nice' or has been in all the adverts - go along to your local gun shop and ask their advice. I always recommend anybody new to the sport should be looking to spend £150 - £180 for the air rifle so with a reasonable quality scope the combo comes within the price region of £250. Later when looking at multi-shot or higher class PCP's that figure can easily double.

A handy feature of many spring guns is that they often come with open sights, so they can be used straight from the box – but they are also supplied with dovetail grooves to accept a scope if you prefer.

Higher priced spring rifles will usually have 2-stage adjustable triggers, a safety device, and may be threaded at the muzzle for a silencer. Incidentally, on a precharged pneumatic the muzzle report can be a loud, sharp 'crack', so a silencer (or sound moderator) can be a good investment. Yet on most springers the muzzle report can be quite acceptable without a silencer fitted.

Once you move up the ladder in price to around the £350 - £400 mark under-lever rifles are more commonplace and it's also here that gas ram powered rifles can be found. In effect the gas ram is still a manually cocked piston powered rifle, but one that uses a gas filled device like a car's shock absorber - rather than a spring - to power the piston down the cylinder. Advantages of a gas/ram over a spring piston are; faster lock time, reduced recoil and minimal maintenance.

Now on to the precharged pneumatic or PCP, which many hunters and virtually all FT and HFT shooters now choose for its main obvious benefit; that being a total lack of recoil and therefore a greater inherent accuracy potential.

If choosing a PCP you also need to decide if you want a single shot or multi-shot model. This is a decision only you can make but of the hunters that I've met, many who have started with a single-shot rifle soon hanker for a multi. The most common 'feed' for a multi-shot is a 'removable'



rotary magazine. These magazines are either spring loaded or are indexed around manually by the action once inserted into the rifle. The benefits of a multi-shot are obvious - no need to place a pellet onto a loading channel or in a barrel for each and every shot. At night, another shot can be ready in an instant without having to reload in the dark. Similarly if you miss a target, you may sometimes get a second chance before the quarry does a bunk. However, just because you have those extra shots at the throw of a bolt – always remember that it's no excuse for letting standards slip resulting in sloppy or bad shooting practice.

For a good quality multi-shot PCP expect to pay around £500 with another £100 - £150 for charging gear and roughly the same for a decent scope and mounts; that's around £700-£800 in all. So as the cost of a good quality





single-shot PCP can start as low as £250, price can be a valid reason to keep it basic and stay single...

If you have the cash, the sky's the limit as you can go anywhere up to a grand or more for either a hand built custom model or one of Daystate's electronically operated hi-tech rifles.

Personally, at this stage, I say learn your craft with a reasonably priced rifle and scope within your budget, then progress to more expensive kit as you progress as a shooter.

Kit bag essentials

By law you'll need a suitable gunbag to carry your rifle in a public place and you'll most likely also add a rucksack of sorts at some stage or another for holding the gear you will take with you hunting, but now lets look at what any airgun hunter should class as 'kit bag essentials'.

Firstly an observation aid such as a pair of compact binoculars or monocular is in my opinion a must have piece of kit. Scanning around using the scope isn't the most advisable way of observing your shoot, it's far better to have a dedicated observation aid. Compact binos are most popular, the usual specification being 8 X 21, but a fixed magnification laser rangefinder monocular can be even better. Granted you should be sufficiently skilled in range estimation before even attempting hunting but a rangefinder will confirm your estimation.

Next up is a small first aid kit in a watertight container; tweezers and small scissors can be handy too.

Spare ammo is an obvious requirement, and it's best

carried in a proper pellet pouch, but whatever you're carrying them in, make sure they won't rattle around or get damaged.

If you're a longer session hunter, take a cold drink for warm weather, or a flask to carry a hot drink in cold weather. A simple water bottle is also basic kit; not only to hold water to quench a thirst but to rinse hands and face. Include a small hand towel or a kitchen roll – the latter has many uses!

A traditional Swiss Army 'style' knife or an Opinel is always useful in the field, especially for paunching or preparing 'baits.' Ideally have a folding lock knife and a small (3 – 4-inch) fixed blade 'skinner.' Also, don't forget the sharpener, as knives have an infuriating habit of losing their edge at the least opportune moment. A Multi-Tool is handy for field repairs and hides, but do buy a quality tool. Pruners and/or a compact folding wood can be handy - ideal for building hides or cutting foliage to use as cover.

Just as handy to have in the kit bag is a reasonably size camo net, even if you don't initially intend to build a full size hide. You need something that packs down small and will still fold out to offer a reasonable amount of screen should you find yourself requiring the use of extra cover. Talking of which, I'm a big fan of the pop-up hides. Most are lightweight and fit into their own convenient carry case. Always have one in the car – they're an invaluable shooting aid for complete concealment.

Even though you might not intend to hunt at night, dusk soon turns to complete darkness at certain times of year and if you haven't packed away your kit a small torch such as a Mini- Maglite or better still a small headlamp is also very handy to have. It not only makes the walk back to the car less hazardous but light sources are very useful if you spill pellets in a hide and for signalling for help.

Always carry a copy of your written permission to shoot and though many feel them intrusive, a mobile phone is a valuable to have for emergencies. You can always turn it off when not needed.

There are of course many other accessories to aid the hunter such as Para Cord, flip up scope covers, eye piece shades, quarry calls, bipod, tripod, bulkier items such as decoys, hide poles etc... but these can be added as and when finances allow and you feel you need them.

Get the basics of your kit sorted first and add those extra more expensive or not as necessary accoutrements later.



Just because we can, does it mean we should?

Graham Allen puts forward the pros and cons regarding airgun hunting

Hunting', 'pest control', 'reducing vermin numbers': they all mean essentially the same thing and are the rather sanitised ways in which people talk about killing animals. Don't worry, I'm not coming over all soft and fluffy but taking the life of anything shouldn't be taken lightly; we are after all setting ourselves up as judge, juror and executioner on an animal that is simply getting on with its life; I don't suppose quarry species see themselves as pests or vermin! Technically, we should try to scare off vermin species before resorting to shooting them but that's often easier said than done...

Many air rifle shooters feel that they really should hunt, just because they've become proficient with their air rifle. There can be a lot of peer pressure involved, as some shooters think that hunting is the logical end result of hours spent honing shooting skills. They often can't work out why anyone else would be content plinking away all day, or taking part in FT or HFT competitions. Some hunters can be a bit snobbish towards target shooters, considering them to be not 'real' shooters, unless they go out hunting rabbits etc.

It's horses for courses though, and many target shooters have never even thought about using their finely honed skills to put a few bunnies in the gamebag. I started out shooting in the back garden as a kid and had been a member of various clubs long before I started bagging the odd bunny.

Personal Reasons

I took up hunting for two reasons:

1. I love rabbit stew!
2. I like getting out in the country and helping people who've got vermin problems; if the vermin happen to be rabbits, then all the better, see reason number 1!

I obviously don't eat feral pigeons, rats etc. but I can see the damage they can do and know about the rather nasty diseases they carry; I therefore shoot as many as I can. I have eaten squirrel before but can't really see the point, considering how much meat's on them, they usually get used as fox or magpie bait but once again, they get



shot in the woods at my local permission. The same goes for crows and magpies, as they're responsible for a lot of young songbirds meeting an untimely end. I don't however shoot jays, even though they can take chicks and eggs. The reason I leave them alone is because they're generally not in large numbers and if it wasn't for them burying and forgetting about the odd acorn, we probably wouldn't have any 'self-set' oak trees in our woodland. Other shooters will target them and that's up to them.

Personally, I have no problem at all with what I do as far as my hunting goes; if I did, I wouldn't do it, now would I? However, I can justify every shot I take, in that I'm legally controlling pests in a humane manner. I've probably let more vermin go on their way than I've pulled the trigger on though; often the shot's too far, not safe regarding backstop, or simply doesn't feel quite right for some reason. I set out to kill cleanly, ending the life of my quarry as quickly as possible, so that it knows nothing about its demise. I hate rats for instance but don't want to see them suffer in any way; I just want them dead as a Dodo as humanly as possible.

Duty Of Care

We all owe it to our quarry to give them as quick a departure from this mortal coil as we can. Our pellets have a limited amount of power and we need to use it to the best of our ability to get it to its intended target as efficiently as we can. Pellets start losing power as soon as they leave the rifle's muzzle, so we need to get as close as possible to our quarry; if that involves fieldcraft and stalking our quarry, or simply ambushing them as they go about their business from a hide or cover of farm buildings, the closer we are the better.

To sum up then, air rifle hunting is a very challenging, yet rewarding past time and must be carried out as humanely as possible.

In Need Of Support

Pete Wadeson faces a tricky spot of woodland hunting, where shots are often at range and at awkward angles

There are times when the airgun hunter sets out to target certain species in a specific location – one being shooting wood pigeon in the wood that they roost in at night. Another is 'Brancher Shooting,' the yearly tradition of shooting young rooks on the 12th May as they leave the nest. The particular situation I'm going to detail here is possibly one of, if not the most difficult I face.

Spaced out

The wood is long and oval, and is surrounded by large flat fields. Running up the middle, is a private pathway, often used by farm workers and this causes regular disturbances. Also, in many areas, the trees are spaced quite far apart; which means any quarry sitting high up can easily spot you. Even when amongst these trees, you're still vulnerable, as it's difficult to mask your approach; so overall it's quite a tricky wood to shoot! The wood provides the local woodie and corvid population with prime spots to rest after feeding or sit before flying further out.

Quite A Challenge!

Challenging but not impossible, even though every avian pest species in the wood flies away as soon as they see me walking through the field. The walk to the wood is 300



yards, so this is the reason the wood is always devoid of targets when I arrive. I make the most of this by leaving my 'rump rest' seat and shooting sticks at the base of a large beech tree on the edge of a medium sized clearing that has a commanding view of an area of trees. From past experience it's used by woodies throughout the day as sitty trees.

I often return to this position (in full camo) for the last few hours of the day and adopt my first hunting tactic. I walk at snail's pace to likely areas, carefully stalking forward, ensuring that I don't make any noise by inadvertently stepping on twigs, I also stop and stand still at regular intervals, to slowly scan the treetops ahead, as well as the sky above. It's not only what could already be up in the trees I need look out for but also what could be arriving.

Patience and discipline!

Infrequently I catch glimpses of woodies coming in from the sides of the wood, but if I'm moving and spotted, they fly straight over. On one occasion it took at least an hour of walking, stopping and just watching before a pair of plump woodies alighted in a very tall tree up ahead of where I was standing, statue like. This technique is difficult, even in dense woodland! But here I have to take even



more care as I choose my path to get within range of any potential target. The only cover I can use are the trunks of larger trees, and on top of that, I'll often need to use the tree once I reach it – partly for forward cover but of more importance to give me a steady rest to take an often long range, angled shot. Fortunately, though, a lot of the trees seem to have obliging limbs at a height that can be used for supporting the rifle forend, so that my aim is rock solid.

Well Supported

As I reached a large oak I slowly brought the rifle up and rested the forend in the fork made by a branch at approximately shoulder height. From the woodie's perspective, if I get it right and use the utmost stealth, it should see little to disturb it. Guesstimating range at 35yds I carefully adjusted my aim for this quite difficult shot. However, this natural rest meant my aim was rock steady, so a miss would be pilot error! Thankfully in a situation like this I never need rush the shots. The bird looked relaxed as I carefully squeezed the trigger, that ended with a perfect headshot and it tumbled to the deck, stone dead. Countless others I'd not even seen took off immediately, so I retrieved the bird and decided to head back to the place I'd left my accessories.

However, before settling into this static shooting position, I'd placed the dead woodie out on a low branch, approximately 30yds from where I'd be sitting in wait. I've found it acts as a superb natural decoy, giving birds alighting in the higher branches more confidence that the area is safe. I don't use a pop-up hide in these situations, as in this wood, even crows don't accept anything out of place, even if it does look like a bush and you have full cover! So, as long as I keep perfectly still, using a large tree trunk as a backstop and using full camo to blend in with my surroundings, the woodies do eventually alight in the trees. In the case of corvids, it's rare that they even make an appearance once I'm in the wood anyway; except for the a few foolhardy magpies I've bagged in the past.



Take a seat

Now back at the 'ambush' site, it's just a matter of setting the sticks to the height I can rest the rifle on and patiently waiting. The rump rest is little more than a low, four leg moulded plastic seat, which has a nicely curved upper area, making long waits more comfortable. You could use a shooting beanbag, but my seat elevates me high enough to put my back flat against the tree trunk and operate the sticks for different angle shots.

Sure enough, birds eventually arrived, easily seen as they flew into the trees I was concentrating on. Even the closest was a long shot but confident in the steadiness the shooting sticks offered, I adjusted the rifle to the correct angle, sighted in for a heart/lung shot and hit the mark perfectly, the bird crashing down; hidden from view meant I needn't leave my seat to retrieve it.

Thankfully all had gone to plan as I took another few woodies in a relatively short period of time, but then it went very quiet - so I decided the best of the day had gone and packed up. All shots were challenging, testing my fieldcraft, aim, and accuracy to the limit. But in this type of hunting situation it isn't about big bags or quick easy targets – any level of success gives extreme satisfaction that I've solved the problem of shooting in an area where some might feel is almost impossible.

Pond life!

Pete Wadeson reckons that duck pits are one of the most productive areas for airgunners – but first you have to get permission to shoot on them

Some shotgun shooting syndicates are quite happy to allow a trusted pop-gunner (i.e. airgunner) to keep rats, squirrels and even rabbits in check, as long as their birds are left alone and protected. If you can get yourself accepted, you can get some really good sport.

Wet. Wet, Wet

You'd be surprised how many shotgun shooting syndicates have a 'duck pit' – a pond or lake - lovingly managed, and fed, so the ducks will fly in to roost for the night... and keep coming back, giving the wildfowlers a chance to have a crack at them on their flightpath.

If you see a Quad bike heading to a far corner of a syndicated field to seemingly disappear into the trees or bushes, it may be lads who love their duck shooting taking feed down to the pond.

This particular tale relates to many times seeing grain sacks put on ATV's and then coming back empty, no pheasant around, no pet llamas... so it had to be one thing.



A duck pit. How you approach the subject is very much governed by how you feel your hosts will take to your questioning. I said things like "That pit's full of rats dug in the near bank where you leave the feed for the teal", adding, "and the squirrels and woodies snatch most of it before the ducks get a chance!"

After the initial jaw-drop and once they sussed that I knew what I was on about, they began to open up, slowly at first, but their responses often follows a pattern of – "We didn't know you walked all the way down that way", or "If you're down there again, see if the ducks are on the pond". Soon they were asking for information about the times when they couldn't be there themselves. I then offered to take a bag of seed down after a shoot, always





mentioning the pests that were stealing the costly feed they took to keep their fowl from wandering.

Eventually I was allowed to shoot the hallowed duck pit. No ducks of course, but I could try to get a few squirrel, woodies and definitely rats that were stealing the grain left out for the precious ducks.

Try for yourself

A well maintained duck pit costs money, so never push your luck or presume because you almost give yourself a hernia laying the grain down for the water birds that you'll ever be asked to see if you can sort some of the feed stealers.

But then one day it'll come, often when the shotgunners are sorting woodies over stubble, and can't be looking after the duck pit. Then you may get your chance to can sit in a concealed position in what often is a very tranquil haven beside a small still water, looking out for rats, squirrels and the like. These pests have their own natural runs, but they'll take every opportunity to steal food from hoppers and feeding stations and if food is being left at a pond, then they'll happily take that too.

Tactics

I'm often surprised at how varied the quarry is that visits. After putting out some of the feed I sit on the opposite side of the duck pond hidden within natural cover wearing the right camo, knowing on a good day I can bag squirrels, wood pigeon, magpies, rats, jackdaws – you name it. Some of these places are so idyllic, you could be 50-yds from a shotgunner, but quarry will be reacting in the most natural nonchalant manner, because it's so used to using this area as a safe zone to rest, feed or just grab a drink.

When I target such places I either get their very early or approach very cautiously in the hope a few woodies or corvids would be hanging around in the high branches taking in some early rays. Don't always sit directly opposite the obvious rat dwellings, try to find a compromise position that will afford a clear view for those long right across the pond shots, a good many various

angled tree shots (on your side and the far bank). Also keep an eye on the waterside, including the banks, all the way to the ground above. Quarry can often appear here as if by magic.

You'll have to resist the normal practice of collecting fallen quarry as soon as it's shot, as once you give your position away, that's your hunting session over - unless you are prepared for a long wait. As you are more or less 'anchored' in one place, it pays to use an FAC rated airgun if you have one and it is allowed on your shooting permission, as this will give you the opportunity to reach out beyond 50 yards for targets presenting on the other side of the pit.

Water voles

Watch out for water voles (sometimes called water rats) and NEVER shoot them; they do no harm and are becoming very rare. Water voles have blunt faces (like a guinea pig) and shortish hairy tails, so are easily distinguished from common rats which have pointed faces and long scaly tails – if you are not sure which of these species you are looking at through the scope, then don't shoot.

Special places

These secluded ponds and lakes are very unique areas that rarely see any human disturbance during the day. They are special places where you can have special moments, for instance, have you ever been waiting in ambush while a heron fishes at your side? But all hunting sessions have to end, and as I broke cover to collect my bag at the end of that particular day, the heron gave me a surprised look and then flew lazily away.

Nevermind, I was brought back to reality by one of the other shotgunners bribing me with a few plump woodies if I'd take his turn the next day to feed the pit. Well what could I say, after all it's all part and parcel of the comradeship of hunters. I just forgot to tell him I'd bagged over half a dozen or so myself that day!



Location, location, location

Pete Wadeson looks at the ins and outs of a permanent hide including where to locate it and especially how to build it...

Obviously, as it is in many aspects of hunting, observation is the keyword. A hide built in a well-chosen position can often offer all year round sport. The ideal places to consider are within range of where quarry crosses from one area to another or a favoured sitty tree. For positioning, the usual type of areas such as natural gaps in hedge lines that might accept a hide into the surroundings as a continuation or natural end to the hedge is ideal.

Part of the Scenery

The beauty of a permanent hide is it can be built to a much higher standard and to a large extent be able to fully withstand the elements. They can also usually be larger than semi-permanent structures, even having enough internal space to accommodate two shooters. A proper seating arrangement such as a small bench can be made and I certainly recommend you build a fixed strong roof of either weatherboard or go the whole hog with shiplap and roofing felt! You can even build a proper doorway but let's not forget the outside. This should ideally always be 'dressed' to suit the seasons. No matter what the main construction – even if it was made from breezeblock – the outside still needs to resemble the vegetation that surrounds it.

Think along the lines of a birdwatchers hide but one that has been purposely made to look like part of the hedge or a bush. The longer an object is in situ on the landscape no matter what it is, be it a hide or old tractor trailer, the more it will be accepted by the local wildlife. This is the major bonus of permanent hides that work in the hunter's favour as they are there much longer and therefore have more time to be considered 'just part of the scenery.'

Also as the season's progress, if built near growing hedgerow of bramble and hawthorn, nature really will soon encroach onto and around the structure blending it back into the natural background. As it will be there in some cases for years, you need to build from substantial materials. Thick fence posts make an ideal framework for the structure and should be driven well into the ground. Have a word with the



farmer it's surprising what he'll have knocking around the farmyard. And as you'll soon see, if he has time, he just might help you out.

One, two, three...

- 1: Here you see the farmer has brought some old railway sleepers to use for the lower front, back and sides. Alternatively substantially sized logs will suffice. On this build I really was spoiled – the farmer used the tractor to drive the side posts of the framework deeper into the ground for extra stability.
- 2: The beauty of sleepers is they give a flat narrow bench like rest for resting the leading hand on or somewhere to place a shooting bag to help steady aim.

- 3: The full frame of the hide is now built on-site. Note the cross bar at the front. This is for weaving in extra 'cut' branches to fully help conceal the front section
- 4: With a little help from my friends I soon have a roof on and a full enclosed back section. The material for the roof was my only monetary outlay but it resulted in me always being bone dry
- 5: Dressing up the front of the hide – but don't obscure any shooting points

Maintenance

Once you've built the hide, there's the matter of keeping it maintained so it will stay impervious to the elements and of priority that it still blends well with the surroundings. First job is before use always stop before you enter and give it the once over. Ensure side posts and framework are still solid and if you notice anything beginning to rot make a mental note and return with the materials and tools to effect repairs.

Most of this type of work will need to be done come autumn, which is also the optimum time of year to build a new structure. Always check to see if it still blends in. As the seasons change, so to will the surrounding foliage and any greenery you've cut to add to the structure to help disguise its form. If you have brown embellishments amid a wall of green, your quarry may notice the change of the 'shade' of the colour and its attention can be drawn to this.

Hopefully vegetation over the warmer months will have grown up in front or even all over to make it naturally blend into its surroundings. If all's well, fine. If it looks a bit shabby, give it a spruce up. If you haven't used the hide for a while certainly check the shooting 'points' aren't obscured. Embellished slightly with a bit more naturally growing cover is no bad thing but not to the point of impairing or obscuring your vision.

If the foliage needs trimming back then do so with secateurs or adjust the netting (if you use any) accordingly. After that, check the back of the hide is impenetrable to light. And incidentally, if you're after the dawn feeders such as crows or magpies, you'll almost always have to be in the hide and settled rifle trained on a 'bait' for a good half hour – and in some cases even an hour before dawn...



Lighter and Brighter

Pete Wadeson takes a look at lamping technique and the latest advances in lightweight equipment

Both lamping kit and NV equipment has moved on in leaps and bounds in a relatively short time scale. New technology has resulted in lights and torches using LED's and powerful but much lighter and more compact Lithium or Li Ion batteries replacing the heavy, bulky, out-dated batteries of the past. The kit now available can aid us hunt more efficiently and make any set up much easier to handle. Nevertheless, even with all this technology, the hunter who also has fieldcraft and practised shooting skills will be more successful.

We have companies like Deben Group Industries Ltd and Cluson Engineering to thank for many of today's 'lamping' innovations, particularly the design of gun mounted lamping kits for those who prefer to hunt alone.

Using an LED lamp and lightweight Li Ion batteries, the hunter can pay more attention to stalking up for a shot, without the worry of 'old school' heavy batteries swinging around or long connection leads getting snagged up. And then of course there is Night Vision (NV), this really is moving at a very fast pace – while lights are using LED, NV has gone digital!

Species – indoors and out

In my opinion, the availability of hi-performance 'shooter friendly' kit has made targeting vermin species at night much more appealing due to the benefits previously outlined.

Even so, the same codes of conduct/safety rules apply, always inform the landowner or farmer if you're planning



a trip out. In certain cases, even put a call into the local police station. You'll find the Codes of Practice for lamping on the B.A.S.C website www.basc.com

There are many shooting techniques and opportunities available to the airgunner using the lamp than just shooting at night over fields for rabbits. These amongst others include close range indoor shooting for rats and of course feral pigeon. Or using a gun lamp with variable intensity or a tactical torch for rat shooting in and around farm buildings.

I use a Nightvision (NV) monocular along with more traditional lamping kit. The modern day airgun hunter now has the opportunity to take advantage of such useful accessories and I'm sure even the hardened traditionalist will realise the benefits for observing an area without disturbing it with light – both indoors and out.

Kit considerations

If gun mounted, you want the lamp to be light, as unobtrusive as possible – so as not to affect the handling of the rifle – and of course it should be easy to use. The last thing you need to be doing is fumbling around searching for switches, or controls at a critical moment. More and more kits are self-contained like the re-chargeable LED Cluson Masterlite Torch and Super-Bright torch for ratting or one of the many LEDRAY Lights by Deben. At first we only had low power kit for ratting or a lamp with a brightness control. Now the LEDRAY series has the 'GL4' with a 120m beam and the 'Tactical 700' that can reach out to 250m. Deben use secondary control switches on the torch, and remote pressure pad stock mounted switches, while Cluson use a similar system plus the familiar stock mounted switch to switch on full beam, dim it or dab on/off.

No matter what you choose, they all affix onto the scope via a mount adaptor that quickly clips, or clamps, onto the body tube of the scope. These kits are very comprehensive and none cost the earth.

Using a red filter on the lamp 'diffuses' the harsh white light, and also shines back off the rabbit's eyes better than 'white' light. When within range, this aids you as a useful

reference point to put the pellet into the headshot kill-zone.

Always ensure the battery has a full charge before setting out. Don't forget your usual night hunting kit such as a small torch or better still a compact headlight. A multi-mode LED headlamp will prove very handy for changing/re-filling magazines or reloading a single-shot rifle in the dark, but a multi-shot air rifle at night is a big bonus. Carry a few pre-filled spare magazines and you'll be sorted for all but the longest of forays.

Incidentally, having a scope with a large objective lens isn't strictly needed because any quality scope will give enough light transmission to target your quarry when using a gun lamp. Of more importance is that you have a scope with a wide field of view and one that doesn't have overly thin cross hairs that can get lost in the sight picture. Winding the magnification down will always give a wider field of view enabling you to quickly find your target.

Moving and ranging

As the traditional lamping season passes through autumn into winter, the temperatures at night can drop suddenly and surprisingly low - so dress accordingly. Also remember that sound carries further at night, so take care

when moving and choose clothing that doesn't rustle.

The only sure way of walking more quietly is to lift the feet higher than normal and step down slowly and carefully. There's no need to rush and you need to ensure the ground is still flat, and not find yourself going down in a hole, furrow or ditch. Walking over terrain as unobtrusively as possible really is an art form in itself, but one that can and should be mastered!

Don't overly exert yourself in the process of your night hunt, otherwise by the time you reach any quarry, your pulse will be racing and breathing heavy resulting in a very unsteady 'shaky' aim. Be prepared to rest when needed, and certainly know when to call an end to a hunting foray. Better to cover a reasonable amount well while shooting on top form, than cover a lot but shooting below par due to tiredness.

Lamping with an air rifle isn't all about candlepower. Remember, more often than not, you only need to 'spot' quarry at long range. Then stalk up, and take your shots at sensible ranges - which will usually be much closer than you would in daylight.

Judging range can be very deceptive with artificial light. This is because light is being directed at the target from your shooting position and not coming from all around, as in daylight. This is one reason many use a laser in the set up, set to dissect your scope cross hairs at your set zero.

Rabbiting methods

Obviously you don't want a crystal clear, cloudless, still night with a full or partial full moon but you certainly don't always need a total blackout. However, when the cloud base is really low, surrounding streetlights from miles away actually reflect down making the ground lighter - creating

an orange tinted glow. You're easily seen from a rabbits 'ground view' as your silhouette is visible in the 'glow' no matter how well you conceal yourself.

I plan my routes when possible so there's a wooden fencing in front facing any field I'm interested in lamping. This helps break up my forward outline and if a target's close enough the fence or a post provides a steady rest for a shot.

Never over use the lamp or go clumping straight into a field you 'presume' will contain rabbits. In fact, everything you've previously read about stalking by day holds doubly so when lamping. Be especially mindful of wind direction because at night the rabbit will be relying heavily on its sense of smell and hearing. Before you use the lamp, stopping at regular intervals for a quick shuft through an NV monocular can be a great bonus. Granted, before these came along shooters 'lamped' rabbits successfully at night but they do give you an edge.

When you spot the feeding rabbits, your approach should begin with even greater care. Incidentally, when looking through a NV device let the observation unit aid you in two things. Spotting the rabbits that appear to be 'stalkable' and plotting your route across the area between you and a suitable shooting position.

Never try to get too close without quickly scanning the area with the lamp. This may seem strange as you have the opportunity to watch 'undetected' but this first quick sweep 'light on, light off' will allow you to determine how twitchy the rabbits are and where they will now be in relation to the distance you've travelled.

I use a specialist rifle sling that holds the rifle high across the front of my body, however you can adjust a normal rifle sling to do almost the same. It saves on continually bringing the rifle up to take a closer look after scanning around. If you don't want to use a sling then hold the right arm at 90 degrees with the rifle cradled in your arm and against your body pointed forward. It should be resting along the inside of the right forearm with the right hand holding the underside of the stock just forward of the trigger guard.

The left should be holding the rifle at the forend in a position to bring the rifle to bear when required, with the thumb over the stock mounted on/off switch. This allows you to easily operate the lamp switch and 'sweep' the light from left to right again without having to continuously bring the rifle up to your shoulder. This allows you to direct the beam in the exact places you want it to shine and keeps the strain off your arm muscles.

Once the quarry is spotted switch the lamp off immediately, and stalk slowly towards the target.

In the dark you might think you're heading in the right direction, but unless you've also picked out a landmark on the horizon, clearly silhouetted in front of you, it can be surprisingly easy to stray 'off' the line of approach. So, on first pass of the light, look for four major things - closest target to set zero, other potential targets close by, the state

of alertness of all the rabbits in the bunch and of course check the terrain.

This is a most crucial moment, quickly switch off the lamp and stop to gather composure and calm nerve's as adrenalin will be pumping. If you've approximated 60, 70 yards or beyond to the target, when ready to move on, count your steps until you've counted off enough to approximately bring you within 25 yards of the target. Then, move forward at least another five paces depending on the initial range judged. When you flick on the light you'll more often than not still be further away than you supposed. Because you're moving slowly, the distance of your pace is less, so you cover less ground than when walking in the daylight. Also, rabbits, even if not overly twitchy have a habit of shuffling around and moving away from anything larger in the field.

When within range of a clear shot, I recommend you steady yourself, adopt the more stable kneeling position, bring the rifle up to your shoulder, flick on the lamp, choose your target through the scope and without too much dithering take the shot. Hopefully you've knocked your first rabbit over, but as soon as you see it hit - as long as it isn't just wounded - turn the lamp off immediately. This is where an NV monocular comes in handy again as you can use the unit to assess the situation with other quarry. If other rabbits were in the proximity, they can either have fled for cover, whilst some might even hang around bolt upright, ears pricked up. Your actions at this moment could give you another chance of a shot. Don't wander off aimlessly in another direction in search of any other rabbits before retrieval, as you'll have great difficulty finding the rabbits you successfully shoot.

Always be prepared to put in a lot of effort and don't be put off by the times you'll come home empty handed. Lamping with an air rifle isn't as simple or easy as many would have you believe, and always alternate shooting areas - rabbits survive because they wise up quickly to an area that they relate with potential danger.

Ratting ways

Shooting rats with a gun lamp is even less about 'candlepower', because it's mostly done at much closer range. Invest in one of the gun mounted lamping kits or tactical torches with a variable power control to dim the lamp. If you want to use the lamp you use for bunnies, then get a coloured filter that really diffuses the brightness.

A multi-shot PCP air rifle is the ideal choice coupled with a scope with good light gathering properties and a wide field of view. A standard red laser sight with a rear mounted push button on/off switch or the more versatile stock mountable pressure pad design switch can be useful. I like the combined Laser/Flashlight from Nikko Stirling.

A quick look around will show where the rats have been visiting - the signs of rat infestation are droppings, scratchings, teeth marks, chewed materials and other such



damage.

If you are shooting rats 'indoors' in the farm barn you need to be mindful of your personal safety. Check the place over during daylight or with the lights on. It's all too easy to walk into a piece of angle iron or trip over a wooden pallet or worse at night.

If actively searching around the inside or outside of the barn, adopt the stalking technique I've outlined for rabbits. When searching inside, scan all the beams, girders, nooks and crannies. Rats love overhead structure that can provide 'off the floor' routes to and from areas of interest.

You might only see them at the points they enter (drop) into the grain bins or make out the unmistakable silhouette when they travel along the top of beams and girders in the gloomy roof space.

If a 'static' rat is spotted with a handheld NV device, angle the rifle higher than the rat's position so when you switch the lamp on, the beam doesn't hit the rat full on. Ideally you want the light to point above not shine directly at the rodent as it will immediately run for cover. The optimum way is to slowly bring the beam down to the point your cross hairs reach the rat's head, then fire.

When you get into the swing of lightless sighting - and this particular 'lamping and gun handling technique', you'll soon be dropping rats. But they'll not hold in the light for long. When they're becoming overly 'lamp shy', it's time to target them using dedicated Nightvision riflescopes - a specialised form of shooting that is an article in itself but your options again have never been more affordable or varied. From modules that fit onto the back of a day scope to a traditional NV scope, or the hot number everybody craves at the moment - the Digi-Sight Pulsar D550 - the digital age is definitely here so let's reap the benefits.

It's Snow Joke

Pete Wadeson proves he's no fair weather airgun hunter as he achieves another challenge – to bag a bunny at night during a long spell of snow using NV kit...



Regular readers will know I like taking on challenges in my airgun hunting, some of which I've related in the past – stalking and successfully bagging a Blue Hare in the Scottish Highlands being just one of the most memorable. In that respect this challenge was memorable due to the adverse weather conditions and the seemingly impossibility of it.

It was during the winter of 2009/2010 when we had one of the worst snow falls of recent times, hitting us equally as hard up here in the North West of England as they did in many other parts of the country.

During the day, when it wasn't snowing the fields and the landscape took on a typical picture postcard 'winter wonderland' appearance but were very barren of quarry suitable for the airgun hunter.

At the time my hunting exploits during the day were very limited, with most of my shooting time being spent at night in cold draffy barns using and testing various Nightvision kit to shoot rats - or very occasionally I'd be asked to undertake an indoor feral pigeon cull.

However, it was my good friend and now regular Shooting Sports contributor Howard Heywood who casually mentioned during one of our 'meet ups' that he was surprised at the amount of rabbits he'd seen out on a 'patch' of ground while out doing his fox control duties. Yip, despite the weather, when foxes are causing problems like other good pest controllers he has to go and sort it and sort it he does.

As 'luck' would have it, this area was also where he'd kindly helped me gain permission to shoot in the woods and adjoining fields so I knew it well.

Like myself, Howard regularly uses and get kit to test – sometimes on a lengthy loan period. At the time I'd been giving the Yukon Sentinel 2.5 x 50 Gen 1 Analogue Nightvision Rifle Scope from Thomas Jacks Ltd to put through its paces. I specifically remember the unit and the fact it was a traditional 'tubed' scope because it was one of the last of its type I tested as during that same year 'T.J Ltd' brought us the first Digital NV Riflescope, that of course being the Pulsar N550, so like many other NV enthusiasts I was smitten by trying anything digital that came my way.

I'd done a lot of shooting with the Sentinel and found it to be a highly capable unit for rats and rabbits at sensible air rifle hunting ranges long before the snow almost sank the UK. Now although Howard said, there were a lot of rabbits he didn't really stress the fact they were very twitchy as obviously the local foxes are out and about more when food is harder to obtain. So came the challenge: half-jokingly he dropped in the conversation 'y'know what, bet you can't get one at night using nightvision kit?' Well, right there the gauntlet had been thrown down and more so my interest in the possibility of trying to achieve the task fired.

No Time Like The Present

Mr Heywood's got a wry sense of humour; we'd left the conversation with me saying I'd seriously 'think' about 'trying' to bag a bunny in these conditions. Well, he didn't give me the chance to consider it or forget it because he phoned the landowner to let them know I'd be out with him that week. Sure enough, he phoned me immediately after, reminded me of the challenge. He wanted to be there to see it done, obviously he had a centrefire rigged up with his Maxi-Kite should a fox turn up while I attempted this seemingly impossible task.



Trying to stalk rabbits at night over snow is a definite no-no. For one reason they see you coming a mile off and they here you scrunching along the ground long before that. Obviously this was going to be a sit and wait job, 'sit and wait' being very much 'key' to achieving the goal.

After parking up well away from the shooting area, we both trudged over a few fields and over five bar gates to get to the shooting position I'd pre-chosen as I knew it was the only place I'd be within range of a shot.

Following the Trail

As we made our way to the side of the wood, we saw lots of rabbit tracks but unfortunately also fresh fox tracks, mostly following the rabbit trails and headed in the same direction as us! This likely meant the fox's presence would have put the rabbits down back safe underground, hopefully it'd passed by and they'd soon be back out, but in winter, rabbits feed quite infrequently, sporadically and can even for what seem like nights on end just 'switch off!'.

However there were quite a few signs that rabbits had been out, such as tracks and small open patches in the snow where they'd been digging down to get at the grass underneath. Not ideal or fresh but to a rabbit, it gives them much needed nourishment - in winter as it does in summer.

As we walked alongside the wood, we virtually followed in the Coney's footsteps as they were obviously staying close to cover to avoid overly exposing themselves to the danger of natural predation. Eventually I chose a spot where I could lean comfortably against one of the many large trees at the perimeter of the dense woodland in wait for them to venture out. Wearing multiple layers of clothing under my hunting suit, rugged wellington style boots, fleece balaclava, fingerless mitts and 'cradling' my Ben Taylor regulated and Hydrographics Custom stocked .20 Calibre Theoben Rapid 7 also rested on my knee, I was soon settled in-position for what proved to be a very long wait. After an hour or so, Howard decided I was mad and headed off in the opposite direction in search of old



Reynard. He's patient, but not insanely so, particularly if he's only watching. It seemed like an eternity before anything stirred, only my mobile set on 'vibrate' broke the monotony intermittently indicating 'H' was trying to contact me to see if I'd got anything so we could call it a night. Obviously keeping deathly quiet was of utmost importance so I couldn't let him know I was still 'toughing' it out. However, a word of caution: In these types of conditions, hyperthermia can easily creep up on you when staying still for lengthy periods of time and I must admit every so often I felt my eyes drooping so I did realise sooner rather than later I'd possibly have to admit defeat - for that night at least. After a long, long wait as I gazed at the blank white canvas, quick as a flash a large rabbit seemed to just appear alongside the wood hardly 20yds from where I was waiting in ambush. Clearly visible with the naked eye against the white bright backdrop of snow it sat stock still less than a foot from cover, not a difficult shot, but using an NV scope makes rangefinding trickier. Reason I always use a laser in my set up to help give me an indication of the quarry in relation to my position.

I didn't want to use the laser too much as I feel rabbits do see the light it emits. Also, I wasn't using the scopes integral on-board IR unit, not only wasn't it needed in these conditions but I'm sure rabbits (and rats) can at close to medium range see and spook at the infra-red light emitted. Eventually the rabbit lolloped further out from the safety of the wood, stopped and began to dig to feed. Very slowly I raised my NV combo that was rested not far lower on my knee to sight in on the lone bunny. Just 'dabbing' on the laser showed the target was now only a few yards over my set 25-yd zero. Just as I was about to slip the trigger, it suddenly turned and sat bolt up-right to face my direction - obviously aware of something it was now very alert. With no time to hesitate I carefully adjusted my aim to take a full on heart/lung shot. A kill-zone area I don't often aim for with a 12ft lb air rifle but at this range I was confident of a clean clinical kill. So with the recoilless PCP held rock solidly on aim and allowing a slight amount of holdover, I squeezed the trigger and quite literally dropped the rabbit stone dead in its tracks. Now if you think shooting rabbits is 'un-sporting' during such hard lean times - as I mentioned at the beginning of the piece, in this area they're very plentiful and still cause damage 'gnawing' at the bark of trees. Also, I only intended taking one and - this rabbit was the unlucky one to fancy having a hop out for a feed at the wrong time.

After retrieving the rabbit, I looked at my mobile showing 8 missed calls; obviously my host had been getting rather 'naffed off' at my stubbornness to sit it out for so long. But a challenge is a challenge and none better than when the task set is achieved.

The shot might have been a sitter - but believe me, in those weather conditions it was 'snow joke...'

Silent and Stealthy

Andy Watkins takes us on a trip after dark for some covert hunting

Night vision (NV) is one of the most useful tools for hunting and pest control. My first experience was with the Nite Site NS50. It was about two years ago when a friend loaned it to me, when he upgraded to the NS200. I soon got the hang of shooting with my head in an upright position and the rats on the chicken coup certainly didn't like it. The only thing that I struggled with was range finding. It was next to impossible to gauge distance using the little screen. I carried on using this older unit for a few months until Nite Site kindly sent me the brand new Wolf R-Tek and rangefinder to test, which has made hunting at night so much easier.

Little things

Over time, I have found little things that really help make a night shoot easier, more efficient and ultimately more successful. I was due to go and visit a local golf course with the NV; their greens were suffering, so I wanted to see if I could put a dent in the rabbit population. I had recently been focusing my efforts on daytime shooting, more trying to get the squirrels under control at the pheasant shoot ready for when the poults arrive.

As I felt my 'night game' might be a little rusty, a few nights before I was due to visit the golf club, I drove down to the farm, just to get warmed up and to make sure all the gear was working as it should. I took my Air Arms S200, which is by far the cheapest rifle I have ever bought. Second hand I paid £225 and for that I dropped on one hell of a gun. The accuracy is astounding and possibly equals that of my Air Arms EV2. The only issue is that it is a single shot, so not ideal for fast fire action in the dark; I'll trade that for superior accuracy at range any day of the week!



NightFox

On test, I also had the NightFox 100v. This is said to be the cheapest infra-red spotting unit on the market. I was a little sceptical when opening the box, as the feel of the unit is very light and a bit 'plastic' but for around £109, you do get a lot of tech for the money. The 3x magnification screen allowed me to spot rabbits with ease out to 100 yards.

When trying to spot rabbits through a scope, there are a couple of draw backs. To start with, it is not as safe as using a separate spotting unit. I tend to spot with my scope but I am sure it's not the best way. The same is true when out day time hunting. Bino's are always going to be the better option, even though it is just one more thing to be lugging around. Another advantage with having a spotting scope, compared to using the rifle scope, is the increased field of view! As I could see far more and had a much better idea of the lay of the land and even distances using the NightFox.

Whilst testing, I have been able to spot far more game than using the Nite Site Wolf alone. The Fox states that you can spot up to 100 yards with its integral infra-red illuminator set on full power and you can add an additional infra-red light source, if needed, to extend its capabilities. I managed to see over 300 yards with the Wolf illuminator.

Pros and cons

The NightFox is designed for two-handed use, as I would discover and sits nicely in the hands with all the buttons easily accessible and has a comfortable neoprene neck strap, for a first model its good! There are a few improvements I might suggest. I found the screen brightness too much, to the point of dazzling and



a rheostat would be mandatory. Another thing I found to be more of a hindrance, was the welcome and goodbye screens. Each time it's turned ON and OFF, a bright blue screen appears, which again is extremely bright and stays on for a few seconds and seems unnecessary! I did find I needed to take extra care when packing the unit in my bag, as it accidentally switched ON. A button lock or a press-and-hold type might prevent having an unexpectedly premature flat battery. Other than those points, it's a real help and I look forward to many more shoots using it.

I headed to the farm to try out my set up and see if I was ready to take the rabbits head-on at the golf course. When I arrived, I took the spotter and had a quick look around to see if there was any movement out in the field. I could just make out some black dots in the distance, right on the usable range of the unit without an additional light source. Knowing that they were well out of range for the air gun, I parked the car and continued on foot with the rifle and Nite Site in one hand and the Night Fox in the other.

Double hander

I soon realised that the spotter was not designed for one handed use, the buttons are located in such a way that it is impossible to effectively use single handed. I knew that a sling needed to be fitted to the rifle before the next trip out to free up both hands for spotting (which was exactly the kind of thing I was hoping to find out from this trip.) I struggled along and soon came across a rabbit sat in the field just off the track. It was bang on 25 yards. Prone would be ideal as this is far more steady than standing but I didn't have a bi pod fitted, so standing was the best option. Lining up the shot I had another thought. Because the Wolf's screen is positioned above the scope, it would be far easier for me to have a hamster attached to the bottom of the gun. This would raise the rifle and be more comfortable if a stander was needed. I remembered a spare one I had at home and decided to give it a try before the next shoot.

Feeling solid enough, I took the shot. The bunny rolled over as the pellet struck in the sweet spot, behind the eye and under the ear. I walked to retrieve it and it was stone dead. It was fully grown, strong and healthy. Having felt I

had learned all I needed to, I went home and began to get the bits and pieces together I needed to make the ideal night rig for me.

Handicap

The time came to visit the golf course. It had been pre-booked with the green keeper and I had organised my brother to accompany me and take charge of photography. So re-scheduling was not ideal should anything crop up; like a completely still night with a full moon and no cloud cover. We arrived at approximately 11pm and I could tell that we were going to be fighting an uphill battle. There were plenty of rabbits but they were a long way away and they didn't give us much chance to go get within even 100 yards.

Even though we walked for miles, stalking in on the hedgerows, trying to hide in the shadows that were cast from the moon, we had little success. I was satisfied with the upgrades and improvements made to the S200, even though we didn't have a lot of chance to try them out on the rabbits. The hamster was fantastic and very easy to use in the standing or kneeling position. The added height really allowed for a more solid shot. It will be no surprise for you to learn that the sling also was an essential addition. We were doing a lot of walking and not a lot of shooting and my arms would have been truly dead by the time the night was up without it. Finally, the Javelin bi-pod. I did not need to use it on this occasion for shooting off, but when it came to take a rest, it was nice to have the option to drop the gun down, rather than it being wet, lying on its side or propped against a tree with the potential to fall.

In the end, we had a couple of rabbits. This won't be remembered for the numbers but won't be forgotten either, because we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. The unfortunate two were taken with clean head shot with the .177 S200; what a nice rifle! I am looking forward to going out on a cloud covered night with a little more wind to mask our approach. We called it a night at 4am – starving! The sky had firmly established its blueness, so we hunted down breakfast and bagged a Big Mac and fries each on the way home!



NV or Lamps

Bruce Potts looks at the relative merits of lamping and NightVision kit (NV) in the airgun hunters pursuit of rabbits

The age old question of what is better for night time airgunners, lamp or NV will never be answered and in fact I believe it does not need to be. Much like calibre selection, the correct choice is what each individual shooter finds works for them. That's really the point; there is no miracle kit - both NV and lamps could have their own place within the airgunners arsenal.

The only problem has been - like scope and rifle selection - there is now an ever increasing choice available.

That's what's baffling, especially when you add into the mix that the technology for each device - be that the latest Night Vision or current lamp - is changing so fast, it is almost out of date before you buy it. Like trying to buy the 'most up to date computer' at some point you just have to dive in and depart with your money.

The primary point is that both lamps and NV are aids to night shooting by lengthening the useful shooting times available to us hunters. Besides, they not only add to the enjoyment and skills to master, but are also very beneficial for vermin control.

The agony of choice

Both systems have pro's and con's as you would expect but at least with 12ft/lbs airguns the range is far reduced to that of rimfire or centrefire rifles or even FAC air rifles. This helps in reducing the choice for both lamps and NV kit, as you do not need the most powerful lamp with the longest range nor the most sensitive NV kit. What we are looking to do some is connect with quarry at 30-40 yards maximum.

Firstly be truthful with yourself, where exactly are you going to use you new lamp or NV device, open field, farm yard or woods? It makes a difference to your choice and expense. When I come to buy a new piece of kit I will lay out a plan of the shoot where I intend to use it and then



map out ranges, quarry locations (not always accurate!) and make a choice based on this.

Now I can make a rational idea of what would suit me best, so further choices (or complications) can be eliminated. You also have to decide whether you want a dedicated system or a bolt on jobby; i.e. turn over one of your airguns to a 'night shooting special' with a NV scope, or attach a lamp to your gun 'as and when' you need it, or have a front or back mounted NV device that attaches to your standard day scope.

Lamps

Easiest and least expensive route to a few night forays is with a lamp. There is no need to re-zero your rifle, set up a complicated menu system (as found on some digital NV units), you just fit a light to your gun when needed. Handheld lamps are even easier, just switch it on and illuminate! These are by far the easiest way to go, especially if you are only intending to be shooting at night occasionally.

Even so you are still faced with the choice of a rifle mounted system or a hand held unit. Both have their own merits in truth. I like the rifle mounted system as usually the lamp comes with a quick detachable mount so you can mount or take off a lamp as and when you need it. A hand held unit is usually more powerful and the battery will last longer. Also if your buddy is scanning for rabbits and you are shooting then it just concentrates your mind on one thing.

This leads us to self-contained units (i.e. cordless) or battery packs.

Again battery packs work very well giving excellent long life and will probably last longer than a compact self-contained lamp but there is the extra weight to consider. More importantly the leads from the battery pack in your pocket or rucksack can be a pain if it dangles in the way as you reload, especially with a break barrel air rifle.

A self contained unit that mounts direct to the rifle that has the battery within its body is my preferred choice but power can be reduced and therefore longevity in the field. Some self-contained units have removable batteries so spares can be used whilst some newer LED lamps use a sealed unit with a recharging unit.

Power output

Lumens or candle power reflects the power output of a particular lamp, in truth at the ranges you use an airgun, 30-40 yards max (which will usually be only 25 yards at night any way) you do not need the million candle power unit.

More importantly to me is that the lamp has a variable power beam so that you can set a low light for around barns to stop blinding your eyes when its switched on, as it reflects off windows and tractor number plates! Then edge up the power setting when you need it for different terrain and distances.

Just as important is the use of the beam, as you are not “covert” like an NV sight user, although stealth and wind direction are still very important. The beam must not be used like a flashlight - waving it across the field continuously. Use short spots of light to locate the quarry; then stalk closer and locate again; then on again until within range and shoot. Also full beam on constantly will warn your quarry, annoy neighbours and have the blue flashing light appear very quickly!

Try to use the edge of the beam to locate a rabbit, otherwise the full beam in the eyes can stop a rabbit but just as easily make it run. Then pass the beam across it to confuse it and keep it stationary, which then gives you enough time to take aim and shoot.

In time quarry will become used to a lamp but in a bad way i.e. they will leg it! So the use of some form of filter to change the colour of the beam can really help. Flip lens caps are best but as to the colour, don't listen to the “expert”. I have tried all colours and I have had different results with all of them, so it's trial and error I am afraid.



NV devices

Here the choice is even more perplexing, due to the new era of digital devices. Once upon a time we only had Army surplus ‘hand-me-downs’ that were at best very expensive and not really suited for a spot of rabbiting. But the fact that NV gives the shooter almost ‘a cloak of invisibility’ has made it highly desirable here in the UK, and now you have a huge choice.

Most common are the intensifier tube models that use progressively better (and therefore expensive) light gathering tubes. These capture any available or residual light and amplify the photons so eventually the image you see is enhanced - albeit a greenish view.

The tubes go from Generations of 1 up to 3 but for airgun use Gen 1, Gen 1 Plus or Gen 2 or Gen2 Plus are ample. Each Generation is in theory better than the last.

Bear in mind that without some natural light, stars or moon or even farm yard security lighting, the lower end and cheaper Gen 1 kit can be disappointing with very grainy images.

Gen2 offers far clearer and brighter images but at a cost.

Unlike most standard ‘day’ scopes, the magnification on an NV device is usually low - say 4x power - otherwise the image is even dimmer and you start to see the image as maximised photons hitting the intensifier tube! With a lamp your scope can be on any magnification so long as the beam is strong enough to illuminate the quarry.

You also have to be careful when choosing an NV device as many use the same generic body and only alter the



intensifier tube inside, making it difficult to determine the actual tube fitted if buying second-hand.

Dedicated or 'add-on'?

You can go the dedicated NV sight route where it replaces a normal scope altogether - which I prefer personally - or use one of the many attachable units that either fit to the day sight's objective lens or at the rear of the eye-piece.

With front of the scope mounting units, be careful as you can get parallax issues and focus can become critical to get the image and reticule all in focus. On the other hand, rear mounted units force you to position your eye a long way back off the stock, so again not ideal. However most attachable NV units can also double as a hand held 'monocular' spotter so have a double use, which can be very handy.

Most definitely of importance is the use of a good IR (infra red) illuminator to enhance or boost the light levels. This is invisible to the naked eye so again covert and it will boost the performance of any Gen 1 scope for normal air gun ranges. Some come built into the NV sight but larger and more powerful IR units are not that expensive and well worth the money for the added performance they give you.

Going Digital

The intensifier tube on NV units can be damaged if there's too much ambient light - which is why the lens has to be fitted with a 'pin-hole' lens cover in daylight, but now there are some very good Digital NV sights on the market which don't suffer from this drawback.

Digital NV sights use a display from a highly sensitivity CCD array for maximum light enhancement that is further controlled by a Light Gain processing program. These sights cannot be damaged in daylight and have built in IR lasers for enhanced clarity. Some, like NiteSite and PitchBlack, use viewing screens instead of eyepieces.

They also give near Gen 2 performance but at much cheaper prices. Again you can go the dedicated sight, or a front or rear mounted - whatever you prefer. The prices are dropping fast and quality is going up, so many people think that Digital is the way to go.

The following companies are specialists in lamping kit and or Night Vision equipment.

Clulite: Cluson Engineering Ltd.

Tel. 01730 264672 www.cluson.co.uk

Tracer/Hawke/Deben: Deben Group Industries Ltd.

Tel.01394 387762 www.deben.com

Fenix: The Photon-Shop. Tel. 0292 1157162

www.myfenix.co.uk

Laser Genetics: BSA Guns Ltd. Tel. 0121 772 8543

www.bsaguns.co.uk

LED Lenser: Ledco. Tel. 01344 846 222

www.ledco.co.uk Distributor - John Rothery (Wholesale)

Ltd. Tel. 0239 224 5350 www.bisley-uk.com

Lightforce: Ruag Ammotec UK.

Tel. 01579 362319 www.ruag.co.uk



Pulsar & Yukon: Thomas Jacks.

Tel. 01789 264100 www.thomasjacks.co.uk

Night Master & Taclite: Rainplay Creative.

Tel. 01274 561856 www.nightmaster.co.uk

Tiablo: Inovatech. Tel. 0208 220 8000 www.inovatech.co.uk

Genesys/Armalite: Nightvision Gear.

Tel. 02830 263235 www.nightvisiongear.co.uk

Scott Country (night vision specialists and general retailers) Tel. 01556 503587 www.scottcountry.co.uk

Archer & Arrow: Starlight NV.

Tel. 01942 884378 www.starlightnv.co.uk

FLIR Scout thermal camera: PASS Ltd.

Tel. 0800 247 1949 www.pass-thermal.co.uk

NiteSite: Nite Site. Tel. 01759 377235 www.nitesite.com

Pitch Black: www.pitchblacknightvision.co.uk

Conclusions

Lamps are far from dead in fact their cheaper price and multifunctional use still make them excellent airgun hunting tools but with NV prices dropping and quality improving the gap between the two is lessening.

I prefer a dedicated NV unit over an add on unit set up at a particular range so I know what to expect but in practice that means I have to have a rifle permanently set-up for night hunting.

Even so I still use a lamp sometimes, especially around farm yards. Regardless of whether you use a lamp or NV, all shooting at night is a hazardous business, so knowing your ground and the locations of livestock, machinery and buildings is essential.

Night Moves

Jules Whicker rounds up the top NV products for airgunners...

Many airgun hunters spend as much, and often more, on quality rifles, optics, and kit in general, than their rimfire and centrefire counterparts. If this describes you, then take a look at my comprehensive night vision guide at gunmart.net. If, however, you are on a tighter budget, or simply prefer 'just what I need' to 'the sky's the limit', read on, because this is for you!

By day, the effective hunting range of a good legal-limit PCP can be as much as 50m, but it is wise to set yourself tighter limits at night, as it is harder to range your target, and even harder to read the wind. All the same, you do want to be able to see a good bit further than you can shoot. 100m ought to be far enough to locate and identify your quarry and to plan your stalk. Enough preamble, let's see what's on offer.

Spotting Your Quarry

Day or night, it is always preferable to spot with a separate, hand-held device, rather than using your riflescope and sweeping the landscape with your muzzle in the process. I've picked both digital and thermal spotters here: two you hold at arm's length and three you put to your eye.

In the first category is the Nocturna Sentinel range by NiteSite. There are three models: standard, Pro and Ultra (£199.00, £359.00 and £459.00). At 50m the claimed identification range (CIR) of the standard is probably too short, so go for the 100m rated Pro or Ultra and choose the latter if you want a recording facility.

My other arm's-length spotter is Seek's Reveal Pro FF (£619.95). It has competition from Leupold's LTO Tracker (£952) and FLIR's Scout TK (£523) in the sub-£1K sector, though, as the TK has the biggest LCD display (640 X 480) and the LTO has the fastest refresh rate (30 Hz). I even think the TK and LTO have better ergonomics. Nevertheless, the Reveal Pro has the biggest sensor (320x240) and this gives it a crucial edge when it comes to



spotting small quarry

You will get a bit more performance from Seek's Compact Pro FF unit, which plugs into your smartphone and uses its much higher-resolution screen to display the thermal image, but check first that your phone is compatible (it must have a USB OTG port). Mine isn't, so I've not yet been able to try the Compact Pro FF for myself. Remember too that your phone can be a crucial piece of emergency equipment, so keep a spare (charged!) battery handy.

When it comes to performance, ignore the manufacturers' claimed detection ranges (CDR) of 100s of metres: they are clearly based on something considerably bigger and hotter than a bunny! Actual detection range (ADR) depends on factors such as ambient temperature, vegetation, and terrain, but as a rule of thumb I'd say the TK and LTO have an ADR of around 50m, whereas the Reveal Pro can add another 20m to that. This means all three devices fall short of my 100m benchmark, making them marginal for bunny-bashing, though they still have a role spotting squirrels in woodland, or finding shot game, which is what they were primarily designed for.

A further consideration is your eyesight. If you wear glasses, and don't like to shoot with them on, it can be a nuisance having to dig them out each time you want to view the screen in your hand, in which case you'll get on better with a device you hold to your eye. Which brings us to monoculars.

Monoculars

In this class, my previous pick – Pulsar's Digiforce 860RT (£329.95) has to give way to Laserware's Nightfox series: the 80R (£89.99), 100V (£109.99) and new 120R (£179.99). All have a recording facility and an 18-month warranty, but go for the 120R if you can, as it features 3X optical magnification (6X digital), a dimmable screen, a 7-stage IR illuminator and a rechargeable Li-ion battery that makes it light enough to wear as a head-mounted device using the harness supplied. It also has a full-width eye-shield so you can view the image with both eyes, for reduced strain, and without having to remove your glasses (if worn!)





If you really want to crack the spotting issue, though, you should seriously consider Pulsar's Quantum Lite thermal monoculars.

There are two models, the XQ23V and XQ30V, and both come in massively cheaper than previous Quantum devices (£1,199.95 and £1,299.95). Don't be put off by the 'Lite' tag either: these are fully-featured units with a 17 μ m, 384x288 px sensor, 640x480 px OLED Display 50hz frame rate, and a sensible magnification range of 1.8x to 7.2x or 2.5x-10x magnification. The price is kept down by a flat lens design that uses less germanium yet gives a more even image. Having tested the XQ23V unit, I'd say it is everything you need.

In Your Crosshairs

There are still some excellent tubed NV units out there, such as the Pulsar's Phantom and hybrid tubed/digital Argos, but digital offers

greater choice and lower prices across the board.

First up are a couple of digital rear add-on options: the Atom (from £499.96) from Nightmaster and the Ward-D-Vision (£625.00), D-Mini (£350.00), or D-700 (£695.00) from Clive Ward at the Night Vision Store. Combined with a good illuminator and both companies can supply and advise on the best one to accompany your choice, any of these will give you the performance you need! Additional benefits of a rear add-on are that it can be detached for use as a spotter and leaves your regular riflescope -and its zero- in place for day-time use.

The same is true of NiteSite's system. Like the Atom and D-NV units, it places a low-light camera where your



eye would be, but unlike them it locates the display in a separate module that also houses an array of IR LED illuminators. The final component is a choice of rechargeable Li-ion battery packs sized to go on your scope (2Ah), your buttstock (4Ah) or your belt (5.5Ah and 6Ah), depending how much run-time you need.

The current range includes the airgunner-oriented Viper. The standard Viper (£319.00) is good enough, but upgrade if you can to the new Dark Ops version (£499.99), which – as well as on-board recording – has a 940 nm IR illuminator and a super-sensitive B/W camera to give the covert performance required at airgun ranges. The downsides of the NiteSite system are a unique head-up shooting position, the need for a bit of clever cable management, and less-than-rigid camera alignment, although a new aluminium mounting adaptor fixes this beautifully.





As mentioned above, spectacle wearers may find it inconvenient to switch between near-eye and arm's-reach displays, in which case I'd suggest complementing the NiteSite with the Nightfox 120R or Nocturna Pro spotter.

An alternative approach is to use a dedicated digital NV scope. A good Picatinny rail/mount system will let you switch between day and night scopes without losing zero, or you can dedicate a rifle to night work.

Photon Opportunity

The go-to choice in this category is Yukon's impressively capable and affordable Photon series. The XT 4.6 X 42S (£399.95) or 6.5 X 50S (£419.95) is the place to start, but if a WiFi/app/streaming package appeals, then check out the RT 4.5 X 42S (£549.95) and RT 6 X 50S (£599.95) models. All have capable, focusable and zeroable IR illuminators on-board, but for maximum performance you'll want to boost these with an external unit. A very useful feature of the Photon is its built-in stadiametric rangefinder, which lets you measure the distance to your target (the 'metric' bit) by bracketing it between two horizontal lines (the "stadia" bit) based on a predetermined target height.

Photons are hard to fault at night, but you wouldn't choose one for daytime use. In fact, if you want an integrated day-night device there's only one choice, and that's the HD 3X-14X X-Sight II from ATN (£649), which offers a full-colour HD image by day, as well as a lower-resolution monochrome image by night, all delivered via a feature-rich, Wi-Fi-enabled software/firmware package.

The X-Sight offers stadiametric rangefinding too, but it can also interface via Bluetooth with ATN's Laser ballistics handheld laser held laser rangefinder, combining either of these functions with automatic reticle adjustment. Yes, tell the X-Sight how far away your target is and it will 'dial-in' for you! More amazingly still, its built-in inclinometer and compass can factor-in the shooting angle and whatever wind value you enter, constantly monitoring where the rifle is pointing and correcting the point-of-aim accordingly. It will even record your shots automatically. The X-Sight II is heavier, thirstier on power and needs more external IR than the Photons, and ATN don't yet have a record of reliability to set against Yukon/ Pulsar's, but there can be little doubt that the X-sight approach reveals the shape of things to come!

Vision On

I'll wrap up this overview of airgun-oriented NV kit with one accessory and one 'heads-up'.

The accessory is a rangefinder. Regular laser rangefinders are virtually impossible to aim at night, so a specialised unit is required. Two options are currently available, one from NiteSite (£249) and the other from ATN (£339/£399). Neither has an eyepiece as both are aimed via alignment with an NV sight.

In Nightsight's case there's just a simple text display at the rear that shows the range and menu settings. To aim, you look through the sight for the flicker of the IR laser beam, adjust this onto the target, and read off the range. Previously available only for NiteSite systems, a universal mount is now available that lets you reap the benefits of accurate ranging with the NV aiming system of your choice.

The ATN unit, meanwhile, attaches to the objective bell of their new 4K thermal and digital scopes (see below), and interfaces wirelessly with their internal computer. This doesn't just give a raw range, either, but automatic reticle compensation too, for the ultimate nocturnal point-and-shoot solution!

The 'heads-up' relates to ATN's forthcoming 4K series of digital riflescopes. In 3X-14X (£849) and 5X-20x (£949) formats, they offer all the functionality of the X-Sight II but with a massive 3864x2218 sensor, 1080P video recording at 120 FPS, a rechargeable (but fixed) Li-ion battery, and a straight main tube that is compatible with 30mm rings, for super-flexible mounting. Think of it as a Photon on steroids! Exciting times!

You'll find much of this kit in your local gun shop, and even more from online specialists such as Scott Country. Prices given here are SRPs so shop around for the best deals.

