



Pigeon Shooting Hints, Tips & More

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Creatures of habit

Mark Stone passes on a few handy hints and tips in pursuit of the humble woodpigeon and the equipment you're likely to need

A positive anomaly when it comes to classification, the woodpigeon or *Columba palumbus* enjoys the rather unique position of being one of our most sporting birds whilst remaining firmly ensconced in the agricultural pest category. The largest of our native pigeons and doves, its ability to lay waste to crops are legendary whilst fields of stubble are attacked on mass.

Woodpigeons can be found nigh on anywhere, but attracting and decoying them into range is an integral part of the sport. The one thing you quickly realise though is that whilst certain pieces of kit are essential a large proportion of the 'must haves' or 'can't fail' pieces of equipment on the market have been designed to do one thing - decoy you the shooter out of your hard earned cash.

The most vital pieces of hard wear is you, your ability to learn and access, assimilate, look closely and understand your quarry. The average woodpigeon might not be overburdened with brains but it knows enough to keep out of harm's way. This in turn ultimately means fieldcraft and the aptitude to be exactly where you need to be, when you need to be there and to fool the birds into thinking all is safe and well.

Keep a look out

There's an old saying in woodpigeon shooting that goes "four days reconnaissance equals three days pigeon shooting". Basically if you haven't studied the land over which you're shooting, apart from the odd stray pigeon, forget it. But if you're serious, the days spent watching and studying the pigeons' directions, flight lines, 'sitty trees' and the branches the birds rest and look out from, behaviour and learning how to position your decoys should eventually pay dividends. Likewise a few solid woodpigeon facts are well worth knowing such as the bird's resilience to most things including disease, weather and to a degree persecution.

Woodpigeons breed, dependant on food availability, approximately three times a year mainly between March and October, laying their eggs in an untidy nest of twigs built on any suitable tree or platform. Incubation takes around twenty-one days, the young or 'squabs'



fledging around thirty days later. They don't migrate to any great degree over their entire life, probably not straying much over twenty miles from their place of birth.

Predominantly grey in colour, the woodie's main physical characteristics are the white wing bars and neck ring, both of which are used to give visual alarm to their fellow pigeons and something the pigeon shooter must learn to replicate to master the art of decoying. The woodpigeon's breast is usually a most striking shade of pink that gradually turns purple as the bird ages whilst both the wings and tail feathers are dark tipped. Lastly the eyes and something that any shooter worth his salt must learn to understand.

The eyes have it

An intense straw yellow in colour, it's how the birds vision works that can and often does fool the inexperienced pigeon shooter, the bird's ability to switch from monocular to binocular sight combining to provide the woodie with its greatest asset and most significant disability. When the pigeon is in the air, each eye sees a 170° field of view or a total of 340°, both eyes brought forward and together when landing and on the ground, their binocular vision equating to only about 24°.

The downside to this ocular ability is that whilst in the air, pigeons have blind spot both below and directly in front of them. To that end, providing the shooter keeps still and takes the bird at or around the twenty-five yard distance, a pigeon on the wing won't have seen or detected the waiting gun irrespective of concealment. Please don't become over excited though, it's only the occasional bird that succumbs to its own ocular fallibility.

Having found a suitable vantage point over the land you're going to be shooting over, the next step is to watch and wait. Woodpigeon are without doubt creatures of habit, many of which are remarkable similar to our own, especially when it comes to feeding. Just like us, when a woodie wakes up the first thing on its mind is breakfast and, just like us, it has a well defined method of going about finding it. Learnt from watching its parents, the safe airborne routes to take are instilled into its mind from the moment it first stretched its wings.

Habit forming

Like humans, if your first port of call each morning is the corner shop to buy a newspaper, you'll walk out of your door, turn right walk a subconscious distance and without thinking cross the road at more or less the same place each time, go to the shop and then return home. But on the return trip it's rare you'll reverse the outward journey to a degree it could be your habit to always stop and look in a particular shop before continuing on the opposite side of the road to re-cross in a completely different place. What ever you do, you'll continue to repeat these small, yet unique habits day after day and so it is with woodpigeons.

No more than fifty yards wide, flight lines or invisible roads take the pigeon to its first port of call, usually a safe field of food as the first stop. From there, a sitty tree or similar such as a church steeple will be the next stop so as too allow the food to digest before moving on, eventually returning to where it started, namely the woodland it roosts in.

What the shooter has to learn are the lines the pigeons take whilst ignoring the occasional deviations. Another vital point is that pigeons follow the contours of the land, their flight rising and falling in sympathy with the land. The basic rule of thumb therefore is look where the pigeons are in the air, not where they are on the ground. You will eventually see their lines or repetitive patterns.

Only when you can positively identify the exact route the birds take will you then be able to attract them with a well-positioned hide and decoys set out well on the pigeons' route. It's the learning of these routes and habits that's called fieldcraft. Also, make a note of where the lines cross hedges since they'll only ever cross at these points. Pigeons don't like to go where they can't see potential danger such as the opposite side of a hedge or wall where predators could be waiting.

It's for these reasons that a detailed map of the area and a pair of binoculars are as important to the pigeon shooter



as a shotgun and a case of cartridges. Using a pencil, if you've been observant you'll soon be able to mark on your map the flight-lines, lookout points and most importantly direction of travel, the more information you can include the more you'll be able to study exactly what and where you'll be positioning your hide and decoys.

Net gains

Given woodpigeons know their turf down to the most intimate degree, what you have to ensure is that you don't suddenly introduce something out of the ordinary. Used to seeing farm workers going about their work pigeons will often overlook 4x4's and quads. Great thing is given pigeon shooting can at times involve bags of decoys, hide nets and poles, a suitable seat, gun and ammunition, a 4x4 or an ATV to get you and your kit as near as possible to where you intend setting up is more of a necessity than a luxury and can also play host to a large cool box, an item well worth investing in to combat hot days and look after the birds you shot at the beginning of your day's shooting. If there's one thing woodpigeon shooting isn't its minimalist when it comes to the amount of kit you'll end up carrying, two or three trips from car to hide is not something any shooter looks forward to.

As regards hides you can acquire anything from large camouflage netting to pop-up tent like devices, both of which allow you to construct or locate a hide exactly where you need it. Equally, hide poles that you can buy from pigeon shooting specialists, telescopic aluminium ones all very nice but why not head off to your local garden centre and buy some green plastic canes that do just as good a job and cost around sixteen quid for six. Five will be more than enough along with a set of bungee cords to fix the net to the poles or hedge whilst local foliage woven



into the netting will add to natural concealment.

You may need to cut holes in your netting in order to swing your gun from side to side as the birds come into your decoys. Equally, make sure if you take a dog with you that there's enough room for it to sit or make its way out to retrieve the downed pigeons and most importantly make sure you've enough room to sit, stand, move about and stash you ammo and lunch. Alternatively if the farmer on whose land you're shooting is of a friendly persuasion and uses super bales, get him to place three under a flight-line in a field the pigeons frequent.

Remember if the centre bale is positioned slightly rearward of the other two, a simple scrim net stretched across the resultant gap will produce a near natural hide manufactured from materials the birds regard as the norm. If not, positioning your hide structure near a hedge or tree should result in the same effect but make sure the birds fly over this point. Always remember, pigeons won't cross a hedge where they haven't previously done so.

Seated and suited

Always bear in mind that when sat in your hide you're more than likely to endure long periods of inactivity which means you'll need a seat of some sort. Many dedicated pigeon shooters use a metal drum that not only forms a seat but also a convenient method of transporting decoys. If not you can use a simple three-legged stool, collapsible WalkStool or even the dedicated and fully adjustable Idleback chair.

Clothing wise, as most pigeon shooting tends to be undertaken during the warmer months, any lightweight, loose fitting, comfortable shooting clothes will do, as long as you have a waterproof layer to suit the conditions if the weather changes. Appropriate camo is also a good



idea, and don't forget a suitable hat or cap, gloves and face mask. If there's one thing guaranteed to alarm a woodpigeon it's the white disc of an uncovered face staring up at them.

Tool for the job

There's always been plenty of debate as to the type of shotgun suitable for pigeon shooting and the answer is simple - the one you own. By choice the ideal shotguns are either shorter barreled over-unders or semi-automatics. Short tubes give the shooter quicker reaction times whilst a semi offers three shots over two or even more if it's a Section 1. As regards bore size, 12 or 20 will do the job equally well whilst a 30 gram load of 6's is just about the best shell size you can opt for, most cartridge makers usually having a pigeon specific load within their range such as Eley's Pigeon. Since the birds in most instances are likely to be incomers or crossers twenty or so yards out and around fifteen feet off the ground you don't need anything too powerful to down them, especially if you want to eat them afterwards.

Into the wind

Working on the theory that you now know the pigeons' flight lines, its time to set up your hide which once

again requires a good basic knowledge of fieldcraft. For example, pigeons prefer a prevailing south-east wind and fly less on still days. They land head into the wind and will circle accordingly, all the record bags usually set on breezy days.

Its time to sort out your decoys of which the choice is numerous. Apart from the fuller bodied rubber types, the simple plastic half shells are unsurpassed. Either laid flat on the ground or mounted on the small stick that comes with them, these most basic of decoys will attract the pigeons. All you have to do is remember is to push the small stick into the ground at an angle so they rock in the breeze. In respect of 'flappers', the best there are are dead birds suspended on wire frames that keep their wings spread and allow them to move about on the breeze. Usually made from thin diameter steel rods, the top is inserted through the anal cavity of the bird, pushed through the body until the tip reaches the head. The wings are then spread out and held by small frames to simulate a bird either landing or by moving the wing tip's forward a bird taking off commonly known as the 'angel'. However, until you've shot three birds, the Chris Green 'Flapper' is about the best you can currently get. For those who want to go high-tech there's also the 'Magnet' or other devices that support and twirl between two and four dead pigeons round in a circle. But remember they can be heavy, are dependant on battery power and are still regarded by some as nothing more than a gizmo. Some shooters swear by them, others swear at them. The choice therefore is yours.

Distance and quantity wise, the 'angel' need be no further than twenty-five or so yards away, the rest of the decoys three to five yards apart forming a basic 'U' shape. Eight decoys are about the minimum whilst any extra should be placed outside the 'U' or loose 'V', incoming birds landing within the pattern in what they perceive

as offering 'Safety-Space-Salvation'. In other words, alighting within their friends is the likely to be the least dangerous place to land as their eyesight transfers from monocular to binocular once they're committed to landing.

If the wind isn't blowing in the exact direction you'd like in relation to the 'U' shape, the 'comma' or asymmetrical 'U' also works whilst the 'runway' or two parallel lines of decoys pay serious dividends when set up in the corner of a field. But whichever layout you find best on the day, and providing you've set your decoys head into the wind, the inside of the pattern of killing zone should remain no further than twenty-five yards away. The name of the game is to kill pigeons as they come in to you so don't be tempted to try your hand at long, forty yard plus crossers.

Let someone else

Lastly, you could let someone else do all the ground work and just turn up and pay for your woodpigeon shooting. Granted there were times and still are when pigeon shooting is free of charge. Problem is woodpigeon numbers aren't quite as high as they used to be whilst the interest in the sport is rising to a degree that there's more shooters than available sport.

And that's the reason why pigeon shooting syndicates now exist, an annual fee of £200 or so buying three or four days a year. It won't guarantee huge bags but if you pick your agent as wisely as you've surveyed your own private patch, some of the legendary big days could still be waiting just for you.

My thanks to the following without whom this feature would not have been possible;

Huntroyde Estate; www.huntroyde-estate.co.uk

Bond & Bywaters; www.bondbywater.co.uk

Rivers West; www.riverswest.co.uk

Eley-Hawk; www.eleyhawkltd.com



Crop Circles

Pete Wadeson pushes his airgun shooting and fieldcraft skills to the limit to target woodies landing in the middle of a crop field gorging themselves before harvest...

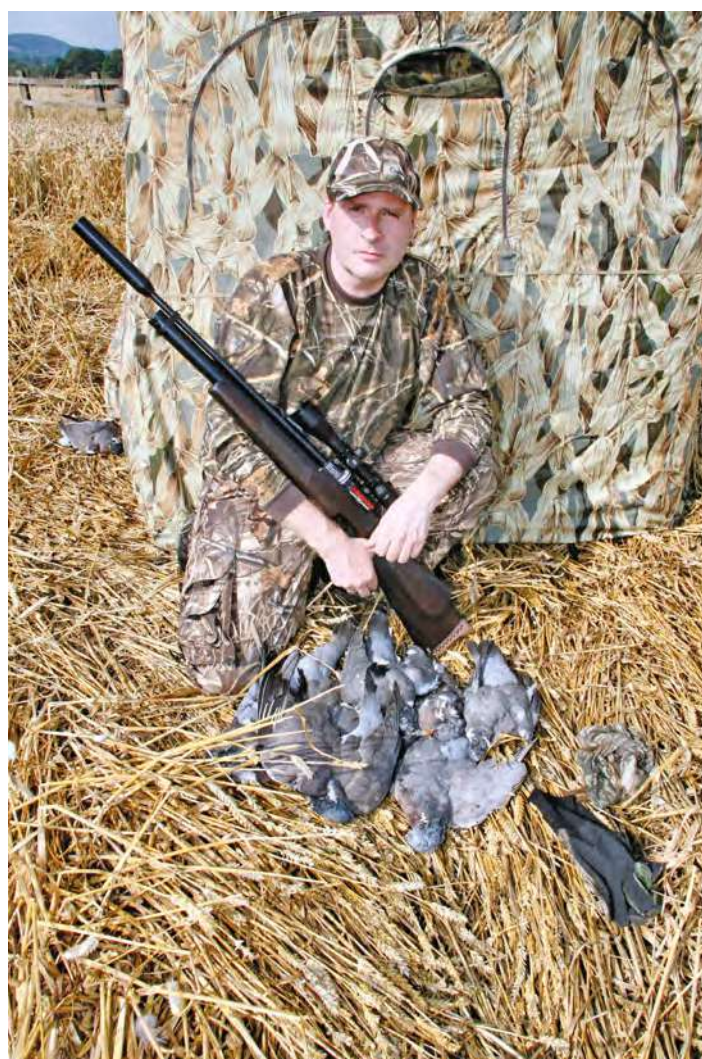
This is not about the 'mysterious' shapes and circles that appear in crop fields reported on the TV News, rather it's about similar shapes that appear overnight in the middle or edges of tall growing crop fields, and are used by woodpigeon and crows. These do occur naturally, by weather or where the fertiliser 'overlaps' when it's spread - the unfortunate result can be it flattens a section of the farmer's valuable crops. However, wood pigeons and crows are quick to capitalise on this and can land even in the smallest of 'flat spots' in a field of standing crops. While hidden from view they feed untroubled - in the process treading down more crop stems and when they land or take off 'en masse' they can break even more of the relatively fragile stalks.

My patch

These flat spots had only relatively recently been spotted on the land I shoot over, as the farmer had spied wood pigeon dropping over into the field but not flying on. On his routine morning dog walk he decided to take a look to see if a flatspot had developed. Sure enough, his hunch was right as when he approached up the track to the edge of the field, a blue/grey mass of birds took up from two separate areas. He knew this would soon spread, but the shotgun lads weren't due to come back until he'd finished cutting - another full week or so away. So he called me to ask if I had any ideas of how best to tackle the problem. I did but these scenarios are very tricky. You've got to get very close to the birds, as you need to position yourself to shoot into the flattened area, but with no cover you need to erect a hide that will not damage any more of the precious cereal crops but one that offers you full concealment.

Get in the ring

I walked down a tramline in the sweltering heat of this beautiful September day with my kit and checked out the largest flat spot as this was to be the killing zone and the area I intended to set out a small amount of decoys. The pristine feathers and ragged ears on the flattened barley told me this certainly was a hot bed of pigeon activity. I then looked over at the other battered area and it became immediately obvious that would be the only place I could set up a hide to be able to see into this flatspot without



having too many standing crops obscuring my view and causing blind spots when pigeon landed.

I always use the same decoy pattern - one that hasn't failed me yet. Basically I 'ring' the perimeter of the flat spot with birds facing outwards and leave one side and the centre clear for the birds to land. I don't like putting birds with a head up pose rather I place full-bodied flock decoys in a gorging posture, heads down and tucking in. But I do raise a few on stakes, but angled head down in positions they're most visible to any birds flying over. I needn't have worried too much on this, as further into the session it became apparent birds were heading straight for the flatspot as it had become an established feeding area.

Pop-Up

With the decks out, it was time to get a hide sorted. A no brainer as in these situations a pop-up hide really does come into its own. My major concern was how the birds would react to the hide, even though it was in a wetlands type camo pattern and would be totally exposed from all sides and above.

It was a scorching hot day and initially I intended to put up the hide and maybe watch the birds reaction to it but so keen was I (and the farmer) that I start shooting immediately; I set everything out on my first visit. Incidentally, in these situations you need to think carefully not only about positioning the hide but how best to get



it to the area as putting it up in the small flatspot would have caused further crop damage. For this job I used the Reversa-Blind from Corbieton Enterprises (01556 660506). This unique pop-up hide has a multitude of shooting windows but also is double sided with a woodland camo on one side and an 'open field' camo well suited to stubble on the other. So it was an obvious choice which way to set it up for this terrain. With the hide quickly erected I carefully lifted it above the growing barley and walked down one of the tramlines and placed the hide down in the smaller flatspot. I pegged it down for security and then got my gear in the hide ready for the birds to arrive.

Flat spot

Sitting totally still in the hide I saw the first bird come from the very far side of the field, obviously untroubled by my Tardis like structure it swept around to my left as it closed in, turned and put the brakes on to drop down into the flatspot almost exactly where I wanted it to land hardly 20yds from me.

I carefully placed the cross hairs directly on the back of bird's head as it stood motionless in the middle of the circle and slipped the trigger. The .177 calibre pellet slammed into the bird's skull knocking the woodie stone dead where only milliseconds earlier it had been ready to commence feeding. Luckily it hadn't fallen awkwardly, which was a bonus as I didn't want to have to be picking

my way through crops to pick up every bird I shot – but even so as the birds are only visible to others once they've committed themselves to land amongst the barley I wasn't too worried about them even falling with wings outstretched.

A useful return

A steady stream came and went the way of their brethren, but as the day wore on more birds flew straight over me to the fields behind. Seemed like that was the best of the day's sport but even so in a few short hours I'd bagged enough for a decent stew. The farmer had been busy in the fields behind me cutting and bailing up as the beautiful weather was forecast to break – pigeons were landing in all the surrounding fresh cut fields. He was happy I'd been up there as in a few days he'd have that cut as well and then the shotgun lads will have a field day.



Come on down

When the fields are cut and the crops are no more than stubble, Pete Wadeson says it's time to target the avian hoards

Come September, when many crop fields have been harvested, this is the time of year the shotgunner makes best advantage of using decoys. Shooting from a well-positioned hide picking off birds (more often woodies) as they come to feed on the left over spillage and split open seed pods. However, we airgunners can operate like this too, though we adapt this method to entice the quarry into shootable range and obviously wait for them to land for a static shot.

Time and effort

I don't believe in sugar coating anything, so as I always say to any airgunner who asks, decoying wood pigeon within range in situations such as this isn't as easy as it sounds! For instance - major factors that need considering before even getting your kit together are how long has the field been left cut. How many other shooters already (particularly shotgunners) have been shooting over the area you intend to try? Last but definitely not least – have you got the area to yourself for the day you intend to shoot? However, having said that, if there are shotgun shooters operating on adjacent fields, sometimes this can have the birds move towards your area due to it seemingly being less threatening. Even so, as I experienced on the day of the shoot I'm talking about, it can also make the birds very skittish!

Due to prior commitments, it was over a week before I got chance to try my hand here. Fresh cut fields are always the prime ones to shoot over, but birds will still visit the stubble for months, just not in the numbers they initially do. However, intermittent small groups of birds are more conducive to air rifle usage as you'll soon discover!

Tactics and gain

You could say, as airgun hunters, that we have to put a lot more time and effort into the tactics if we're to gain the most from them, so where to build a suitable hide? In this instance, it was adjacent to an established flight line that ran close to the field's edge, which is marked by intermittent lines of hawthorn bushes and various types of trees. These effectively form the boundary between my permission and the farm it backs onto.



Only prior observation can give you the knowledge you need to find flight lines. So take the time and trouble to watch the area in the days prior to your shooting, so that you can build up a picture of the birds 'routes' as they move to and fro – in the morning leaving the woods to feed over the fields and the last 'flight' as it's known before they make their way back to roost. I was satisfied I'd 'mapped' their movements to the point I knew they would either flight over from the large wood at far edge of the stubble field I intended to target or along the opposite side of the field itself before dropping down to feed.

Get in position

Having employed this type of hunting technique many times before, I soon erected a hidden shooting position using the traditional method with height adjustable hide poles and netting. I'd set the structure right in front and leading around a large oak tree beset on either side with hawthorn bushes. Reason being this type of rear cover makes for a great backdrop for a traditional hide and in this instance another bonus was the tree's lower foliated branches supplied a reasonable level of cover from above. I always use Camoreal netting due to the large open weave net and die-cut 'loose-leaf' design offering plenty of shooting points, plus this type of netting is the easiest for adding natural foliage onto, which gives you even more concealment and blends the shooting position nicely into its surroundings.

It's always advisable to cut foliage you're intending to

'embellish' your netting with from some way away from the hide, so as not to leave the area directly next to it looking unnaturally bare. Personally, I only sparsely dress a 'net hide' with natural vegetation and mainly near and/or next to the hide poles to break up the unnatural straight lines they form at the edges. But, follow these few simple guidelines and you'll be surprised how quickly a very effective hidden shooting position can be built.

Plastic Pretenders

Next it was out with the decoys; I've found in most cases a loose irregular horseshoe pattern works best. Also keep the pattern quite tight and use a mixture of full body flock and half shell deeks. The latter I place on 'spring sticks', so that any breeze gives them a slight 'jiggle' to bring some movement to the pattern. I would also normally place a 'floater' at the back of the pattern, but as the area had been shot over more than a few times prior to my visit – I find they can often deter as much as attract.

Speaking from experience, I feel this is due to birds having near misses by the shotgunners as they turn to land over them, resulting in any that do come to patterns with a floater deployed on future visits seem very reluctant to land. So with my hide in a prime position approximately 30yds from the centre of my decoy pattern – the area the birds 'should' be tempted to land in – I quickly put the essentials I'd need for the session in the hide, then after



loading my PCP, I was ready to go! I was confident; a well-positioned and correctly constructed hide and clear view of the deeked area; the scene was set!

Not long

I didn't have long to wait before the first birds came in textbook style, gliding in from my right to land towards the front rear of the pattern. As usual, they first stood alert, looking around for danger, then, when settled, they began to peck at the left over grain. Carefully poking my rifle's camo tape covered silencer through the netting, I placed the cross hairs on the closest woodie. Intermittently it'd raise its head, showing those familiar white bars as it 'double-checked' for anything unusual, and then when confident in its safety, it'd resume feeding again. It's at this point the airgun hunter has the all-important 'window of opportunity' to take the shot!

So as soon as the bird I was trained on presented itself again – its head held high – I carefully and slowly squeezed the trigger, sending a pellet to connect squarely with its skull. It dropped with hardly a flutter, wings partly outstretched, so I felt no need to break cover to retrieve my first of the day. A few more came in and again helped by the inherent accuracy of my rifle I kept dropping one from every small wave of birds that fell into my trap.

Then disaster struck; loud 'bangs' in the distance had birds flying over 'en masse', a clear indication a shotgunner had arrived, filling the skies with birds but unfortunately none dropping in to my area. Hoping they might return, I took the opportunity during this lull in activity to gather up a few birds I'd previously left where they fell to integrate them into my deek pattern. Reason being, there's nothing better than a 'real live dead one' as they say – so I set out the 'kills' amongst the decoys for added attraction. Rather than use a chin stick or cradle, which puts the dead bird in a 'heads up' alert position, I prefer to push their beak into the ground, smooth its feathers down and leave it in a feeding posture.

Bold as Brass

I eventually heard less and less shotgun noise from the adjacent field, then again I'd not seen a pigeon for nigh on 3hrs as well. However, as can often be the case in these situations, just as I was going to call it a day a crow 'bold as brass' silently glided in and land to take up residence at the tail end of my decoy pattern. At approximately 42yds it was a testing shot, but I was already in a very comfortable seated position, so the 'lonesome crow' got his!

It crumpled to the floor stone dead as the pellet impacted with a loud 'smack' on its very tough nut. Realising the best of the day was over, and with the gathering clouds further darkening and threatening rain at any moment, I decided to end the session on a high, still buzzing at what was a very memorable shot!

Precision Stalker

Our new airgun hunter Andy Watkins takes a BSA Gold Star stalking and appreciates its build and abilities

My name is Andy Watkins. I've been shooting and air rifle hunting for the past 8 years. Like many, my first rifle was an old Mark II BSA Meteor. I just loved spending hours sitting in the garden shooting at paper targets. I saved every penny I could from my pocket money and paper round to buy my Air Arms TX200HC.

I developed a real interest in shooting and it really kicked off for me when I started my YouTube channel, 'Andy's Range'. I had been inspired by meeting Ted from YouTube's, 'Ted's Holdover' and also, 'Vermin Hunters TV' at the Midland Game Fair 2012. Since then, the channel has grown in popularity and I have been given opportunities to hunt on some superb ground with some great people.

The gold standard

On a recent hunt, I reviewed the BSA Gold Star for my local gun shop 'Jayne's Fishing Tackle and Gun Shop' and posted the video on my YouTube channel. This is primarily a target rifle, with its loud stock and even louder muzzle crack; despite this, I took it down to the field to put it through its paces vermin shooting.

On this particular permission, there is a very good vantage point at the main entrance. As I drove though the gate, I immediately spotted a wood pigeon in a willow tree. The leaves had started to fall, so I was able



to spot the birds easily, at a distance. Having shot this ground before, I knew it would be better to drive closer, rather than to stalk traditionally on foot. The birds tend to be spooked a little less this way, as they are used to seeing vehicles coming and going across the land.

As I edged closer, I could see the pigeon was still sat there and appeared very relaxed. I drove to within about 50 yards and double checked it with the Hawke laser range-finder to be sure, only to find I was 45 yards away (the maximum range for Hunter Field Target). Due to shooting this rifle in a competition the previous day, this meant I knew the exact aim point the BSA scope needed. I quietly opened the car door and stood up to use the roof as a rest as I felt a little unsteady and didn't want to risk pulling the shot. I grabbed my beanbag seat as a comfy cushion between the rifle and car roof. That was much better!

Clean shot

A Mil-Dot and a half was needed on x9 magnification, there was very little breeze, so no wind was given and I was ready to take the shot. I squeezed the match grade BSA trigger and the un-silenced shot echoed throughout the small-holding, followed by the familiar 'thwack' of the pellet striking the pigeon's breast. It dropped with little fuss into the undergrowth 20 feet below. Generally speaking, I don't usually opt for chest shots on Wood Pigeons because the meat is very dense and I rarely find it a clean or instant kill. However, this one was a young woody, so the pellet had far less meat to travel through, making a clean shot a much better bet!

I left my shooting position and made my way over to retrieve the fallen bird. As I moved closer, I remembered similar shots I had made in the past from the same location and I knew the retrieve might not be easy. There was a lot of undergrowth, such as nettles and brambles, and I was concerned that the bird might have fallen into the brush as with previous occasions. Thankfully, this time, the young woody was lying on top of the tangle of greenery and was both easy to see and reach.

Long stalking

I decided to walk further down the 3-acre field to a spot that's often popular with rabbits. To get there I had to stalk along a bank of various different large trees and bushes. I noticed the Hawthorn berries were out and remembered seeing Pigeons there the previous year. On this occasion there was nothing to be seen, but considered it worth coming back with a decoy or two. I put the thought in my back pocket for another day and moved on.

My best bet was still over the brow of the hill along a hedge row on my left and kept my profile as low as possible. I wasn't wearing camouflage on this hunt, as I was in a rush after work and wanted to get out while there was still some light. I put up my hood to keep the light from my face and proceeded to hug the hedge line. Slowly, I peeked over the top of the hill, had a quick scan and to my surprise, nothing! The field was bare, or so it seemed. The grass had grown up since my last visit because the livestock had been moved to the adjacent field. I knew this meant more hiding places for the coneys, so I turned the magnification down to x3 for a wider field of view and made the rifle safe.

Making do!

Binoculars are preferable in these situations, as they are lighter, safer than waving the rifle around, also a wider field of view and are just generally built for this sort of work. With no binos, I made do with the scope. As I scanned, a pair of ears took my attention and there was a rabbit sat out in the field behind a tuft of grass at approximately 100 yards and well out of range for my sub-12 ft/lb Gold Star. I thought about stalking in and my best approach.

There weren't any ideal cover points to allow me to stalk and I could see a long crawl coming. I scanned once more and saw another rabbit hopping out of the hedge row at an estimated 50 yards. I could have taken the shot there and then but the rabbit had Myxomatosis (mixy), a terrible disease that plagues them and spreads from warren to warren. The effects are not pleasant for the rabbits, their eyes quickly become enflamed and scabby until the rabbit can no longer see, they suffer a long and painful death, which is not a nice way for any animal to die!

Make it count

With this in mind, I knew I had to make my shot count for the rabbit's sake. I adopted a low crawl and although the rabbit could not see me, it would still be able to hear and smell me, so I had to be careful. Within a few minutes I was within 40 yards and took out my Hawke laser once again and found the rabbit to be 35 yards; well within range! My calibration chart told me I would need to give $\frac{1}{2}$ - Mil holdover, to allow for the pellet drop, which is very easy to see using the AMX reticule. I slowly rose to a kneeling position where I felt stable enough for a shot. The palm shelf, or 'hamster' as it's more commonly known, was a great help and made the shot so much more

comfortable. I placed the aiming mark on the side of the rabbit's head and it rolled over with barely a twitch; job done!

I reloaded the BSA in case a second shot was needed or another opportunity arose but in the end that was not needed. I walked over to the dead rabbit and I could see it had been suffering from the latter stages of mixy'. It was a good animal to take. Blood had pooled in the ear and the shot was placed just behind the eye, which is perfect placement. Unfortunately, I didn't take this one home for the pot, although I do love slow cooked rabbit, I don't really fancy one with mixy', even though it probably wouldn't hurt. It still didn't go to waste, as the birds of prey at the local centre won't be as fussy as me, I'm sure.

Cocked and ready

I kept the rifle cocked on the walk back to the car, in case of another opportunity in the fading light. The only animal to be seen was a pigeon that I soon scared out of its roosting spot with my thoughtless, heavy-footed stroll. Maybe if I were just a little more aware I would have had another bird in the bag. He'll be back though!

On reflection, the BSA Gold Star gave a very good account of itself. The adjustability of the stock really leant itself well to stalking the hedgerows and made shooting from any position that much more stable and comfortable. If I were to take this rifle into the fields again I would soon drop the air stripper and instead, fit a short silencer. This would still keep the overall length short but offer a much quieter shot and hopefully a larger bag at the end of the day. All-in-all it was a very enjoyable evening out. The BSA Gold Star is often thought of as a target-specific rifle but performed as well as any other hunting rifle I have ever used.

Safe Hunting.



Summertime Ferals

Graham Allan helps stem the grey tide of feral pigeons

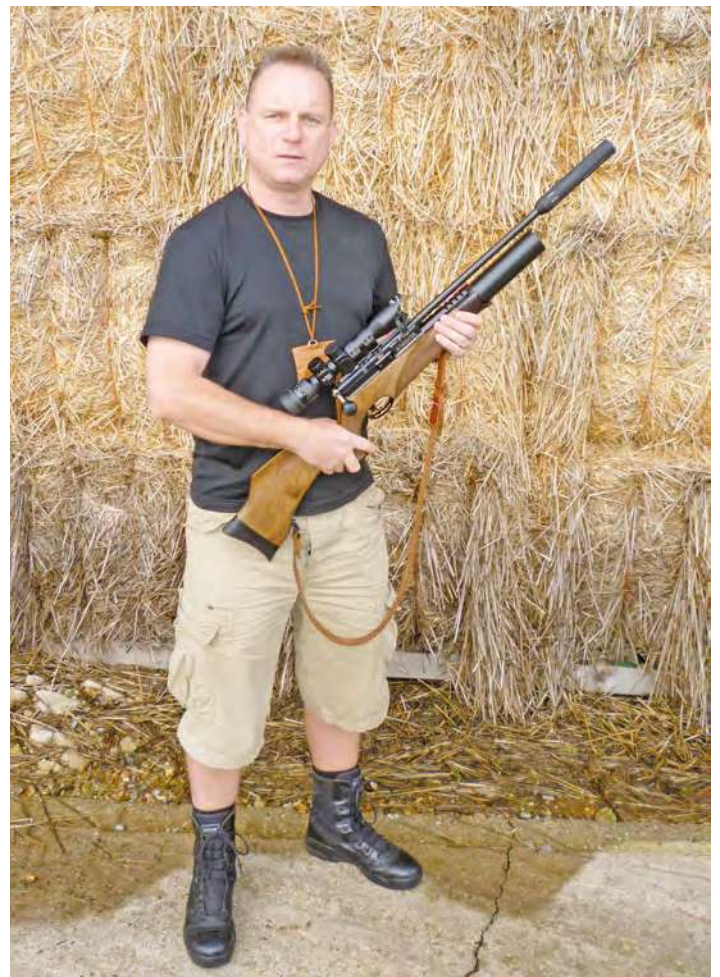
My friends and I control the vermin at a local farm and between us we visit at least twice a week. It was the dreadful feral infestation that originally got me shooting permission and we completely cleared the main barn over an extended period. It's not just the visual mess that's the problem, as the droppings can spread some rather nasty diseases such as ornithosis, salmonella and TB. Ornithosis is a virulent chest disorder, which can be fatal, so they had to go ASAP!

Kit check

I got there around 5 o'clock in the evening with at least four hours of shooting before the sun went down. The previous day had been the hottest so far last year and I'd come prepared in shorts and T-shirt, topped off with a camo mesh jacket and a baseball cap with integral veil. I was armed with a walnut stocked BSA R-10 that has had the shroud removed and a Hugget moderator fitted, topped with an MTC Viper Connect scope. I was carrying a couple of magazines and .177 H&N Field and Target Trophy pellets in a neck pouch, which keeps them protected, but easy to access. I also had a Deben rangefinder with in-built solar panel that keeps the battery topped up.

I have half a dozen FUD folding wood pigeon decoys and I set up three in the farmyard and three next to a cattle feeder

in a nearby field. I placed a couple of crow deeks near them to make it look a bit more natural, as the presence of crows is meant to give pigeons a sense of safety. Corvids are generally very wary birds and pigeons can get lulled into a false sense of security. Nothing came into the farmyard for about half an hour and I was starting to think the problem had been exaggerated... so I went walkabout...



FT-style

I could see into the next field and two pigeons landed about 200 yards from me.

I had a long stalk on my hands, but in situations like this it is often better just to walk normally, like a farm worker. The tactic worked and I was soon about 60 yards away from the feeding birds. Too far for a shot, so I made my way to the edge of the field using some small trees as cover. I settled down into the FT sitting position, which is my favourite other than prone off a bipod and soon had the nearest feral in my sights.

Using a rangefinder I found the bird was 34 yards away; a pellet to the back of its head killed it instantly. The feral's brain obviously hadn't told its body and its wings flapped for a while before it lay still. Its partner had flown off and circled a couple of times checking out its mate. Sensing all was not well, it cleared off. I was just about to reposition the dead bird as a decoy, when the other one flew back. When it landed it stood dead still, probably trying to work what was wrong. This proved its downfall, as this one also got a lobotomy...

I sat for a while longer, waiting to see if anything else was going to come in, but that was it.

A walk back to the farmyard produced nothing other than a quick glimpse of a rat running from the pigsty. At one time I would have sat for ages, waiting for it to re-appear, but I had ferals to clear. Walking back to the cow field, I saw an unwary pigeon eating with its head down. This made number three after another clinical brain shot.

I'd just gone back to the car to get my litter pickers to collect my victims, when I saw another eating spilt grain near the worker's rest room. Bracing myself against a tree, this one went down to a standing shot, I was really on form, if I do say so myself, and it felt good that I was being so clinical.

My mates were just arriving for some late night foxing, but I had an early start in the morning, so wouldn't be joining them. I'd not yet had a look in the largest barn, the one where the main infestation was years ago, so we crept in and turned on the lights. They take a while to heat up, which was to our advantage as they come one gradually and don't usually spook anything roosting on the beams. As the interior brightened, we thought there was nothing about and stood chatting. Amazingly our conversation didn't bother two ferals sitting in rather unusual places and I was able to get off two shots in quick succession at a very modest 10 yards. A total bag of six wasn't exactly huge, but it was all one shot, one kill and no suffering, so it had been a good evening's shooting; little did I realise I had one more, rather exotic pest to deal with.

Alien Invader

Unless you live in the South East of England, you might be unaware of the growing flocks of ring necked parakeets living here. *Psittacula Krameri* is now a huge problem, as their diet consists of buds, fruit, seeds, berries and nuts. Fruit farmers hate the things and as this farm had an apple orchard, they're shot on sight. The only problem on this occasion though was actually seeing them. I could hear one in the tree I'd rested on earlier, but try as I might, I just couldn't make out the bright green plumage amongst the leaves. I eventually managed to shoot it from a rather awkward kneeling position, but it didn't fall. Parakeets often cling onto branches for a while, even when dead, and this one was no exception and stayed put. It eventually dropped a little, but then got lodged on a branch. I just hope it doesn't plummet to earth when the staff are eating their lunch below...

Well, it was a great way to unwind after work, using quality kit to carry out an important job; it was ridiculously hot though, even in lightweight clothing. My mates later put the dead ferals to good use as fox bait; it's just a shame that parakeet couldn't join them in the bag...

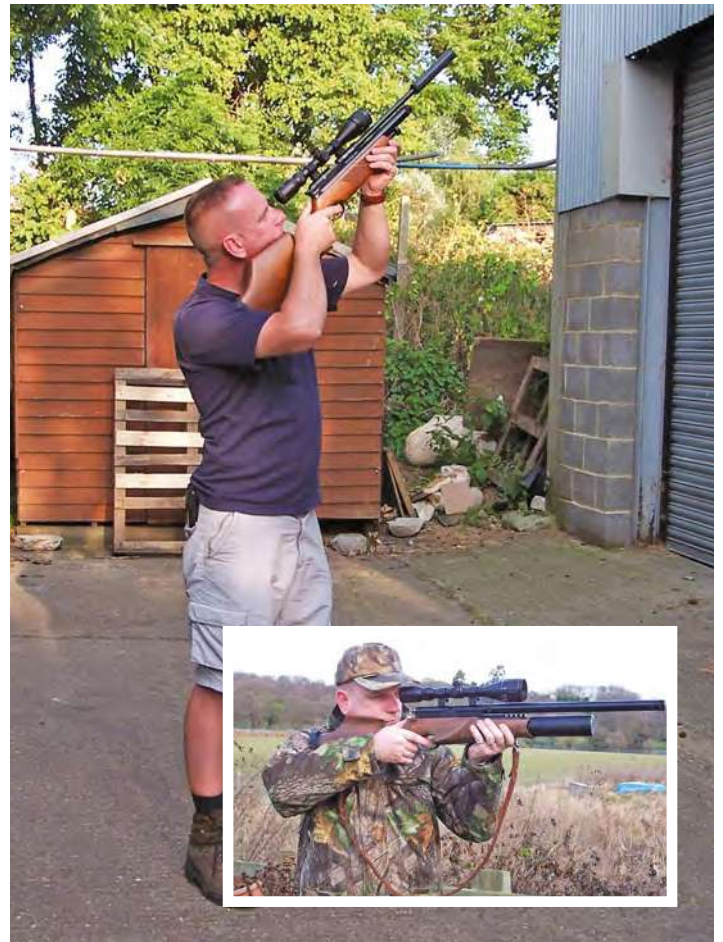


Taking on the ferals

Feral pigeons can be a massive nuisance and a major health hazard, here's how Graham Allen helped out his local farm by thinning out the pigeon numbers...

I've known about this particular farm for many years; it's run by volunteers as a charitable trust and is open to the public so that they can have a walk around and see the livestock. They have a lambing weekend every spring, when children can watch lambs being born and for a lot of kids, this is their only exposure to the natural world. It's quite close to central London, so it's the only place like it for miles around and is a real breath of fresh air - literally. I took my kids there a couple of years ago, and couldn't believe how big it was considering the location and how much it felt like being in the middle of the countryside. The double decker buses travelling up the nearby road were the only indication that we weren't quite out in the sticks and they seemed really out of place.

We had a nice couple of hours there, but I was rather shocked by how many feral pigeons there were about the place; the farm was alive with the things! Up on the roofs, in barns, pecking about on the ground, everywhere. There was also a lot of what feral pigeons deposit from their back ends and guano (as I'll politely call it) can harbour all sorts of nasty diseases. Farm workers can pick up these ailments from dried droppings and 'farmer's lung' is a very unpleasant respiratory condition. Someone had obviously tried clearing them from one of the barns, as there were quite a few telltale pellet holes in the asbestos panels in the apex of the roof. I therefore thought I'd offer



my services, gratis of course and soon tracked down the chap in charge. When I explained that I knew one end of an air rifle from another, and had shooting insurance and references (as well as knowing how to treat an asbestos roof!) I soon had written permission.

Plan of attack

Pest control isn't just a case of turning up and taking pot-shots at anything that's on the quarry list, it's got to be a considered, methodical affair, with safety the number one priority. I therefore had to do a complete recce of the farm to determine where the ferals were roosting, feeding etc and safe arcs of fire. Finding where they were roosting was dead easy; all I had to do was find the poo! The largest barn, where the ewes are kept out of the elements for lambing, had piles of the stuff below the roof supports and there were the trademark untidy nests up on the beams. Birds were coming and going through a large hole in the side of the barn where an asbestos sheet was missing, that would obviously need replacing ASAP if my efforts were to be of any use. Other nests were located in all sorts of nooks and crannies, but I envisaged doing most of the shooting whilst the birds were either on roofs or on the ground feeding. It's imperative that no pellet leaves the ground on which you have permission to shoot; so shooting off rooftops was out, unless there was a safe backstop, as a miss or ricochet could go a long way. There were also a lot of windows about that needed to stay intact, as well as all the asbestos panels that didn't need any more holes in them.



I would obviously only be able to shoot when there were no members of the public visiting or volunteers around, but I also had to be aware that several local people thought they could walk their dogs whenever they wanted on the farm. Early mornings were going to be a regular occurrence in the Allen household for some time to come, but you're a long time dead and I'd rather be shooting than sleeping...

Dawn patrol

It was spring and the clocks had just changed, so I had an extra hour of daylight before anybody arrived for work. The oak trees were just starting to sprout their reddish-coloured buds and it wouldn't be long before the woods came alive again after the winter. I'd already sussed out the most productive areas, but if I were to be effective, I'd need another couple of shooters to do things properly. Two shooting mates were keen to help out despite the early starts and I soon had them written permission too. When we arrived, there were pigeons all over the place, but they scattered when we drove into the farmyard; this was actually to our advantage and we soon had ourselves set up discreetly before they returned. We agreed to stick to our shooting positions, no matter what, as we wanted to shoot feral pigeons - not each other. At first we just kept to the main farmyard, taking out the birds as they returned; it should have been pretty easy shooting, as the ferals had not been in anyone's sights before, but pigeons just won't stay still for long, and as we were going for head shots, it was challenging shooting. We found it best to let them land, get settled for a bit, then take the shot when they'd stopped looking around for danger. The trickiest targets were up on the top of the massive roller shutter, as they'd pause on it for a second or two as they left the barn. The birds that chose the hole in the side of the building were impossible to shoot however, as they were obviously air borne. Ranges varied from 10 to 30 yards and we used various rifles between us. One I particularly liked using was a John Bowkett .25 Ultra with a Hawke 2-7 X 32 Airmax scope fitted; those big old slugs certainly knocked the ferals for six, that's for sure. In the three hours

we were there on the first morning we'd shot a couple of dozen 'flying rats' between us, and we were pleased with our efforts. The staff were over the moon and were even more impressed with the hardware we'd been using. To most of them, an air rifle was a basic spring gun, not a sophisticated pre charged pneumatic with a high-powered scope.

We used a litter picker to remove dead birds - better safe than sorry I say. A couple of dead birds were impossible to retrieve as they'd lodged on the roof, but they weren't easily seen from the ground but they had gone the following day when I visited, probably a free dinner for a crow or magpie. The dead ferals went in a heap near a known fox run, as we wanted them to get used to a regular meal before we tackled them with cartridge rifles, but that's another story...

A job well done

Over the following months, we shot scores of ferals in and around the farm and eventually cleared out the main barn completely and newborn lambs are no longer covered in pigeon droppings as soon as they are born - being crapped on isn't much of a welcome to the world now is it!

The volunteers fixed a new panel on the side of the barn, which made it much more difficult for new birds to replace those we'd shot. The later arrivals also had no idea they could gain access over the top of the roller shutter, so that trick must have died out with the previous inhabitants. I advised the staff that better housekeeping would prevent re-colonisation and if less grain were spilt, they'd limit the food available to unwanted guests. As a result, there are very few ferals about when I visit and it's a lot tidier too. Over the last couple of years, we've accounted for a couple of hundred filthy ferals and it's been very satisfying. It's also given me a great deal of pleasure just being at the farm, no matter what time of day or what the weather's like. Our little team has also taken care of quite a few crows and magpies and the local bird watchers say there are now many more songbirds about, which is a real bonus. Most importantly, we've done what we've said we would and tackled the disease carrying 'flying rats'.

Keeping it Simple

Bruce Potts likes to go back to basics when tackling ferals around the farmyard

I do like shooting deer and long range varminting but quite honestly some of my best and cheapest shooting can be enjoyed right in your own backyard. Here, some great challenging sport can be had using just an air rifle.

But I really like air rifles, as they add that extra bit of 'hunter participation' that some modern hardware has lost and mostly I use classic air rifles for a bit more challenge or just springers/gas rams. Due to the close ranges that most vermin are shot, then 12 ft/lb guns are fine but I do like FAC air when necessary. One particular species that always seems to be in plentiful supply and drives one of my landowners mad, are feral pigeons. Numerous, messy and always hungry, springtime or early summer is a good time to tackle them.

Planning and quarry

I usually like to plan a feral shoot like I would a regular deer stalking trip, in other words, check the weather, survey the food/crops available, plan a route dependent on the wind and quarry activity levels and when around barns check livestock, safe backdrops and shoot outside normal farmworkers hours, that's usually very early! But mostly I just pick up an air rifle, pouch of pellets and wing it, it's often much more fun that way and productive. Varying your routine can often pay dividends, as the quarry soon get use to regular paths trodden by the hunter.



Most farm yards or back fields have plenty of opportunities for sport and because of live stock, people, traffic, machinery and windows, the use of low powered air rifles at short ranges is actually a benefit for ferals. In a small space of the yard you can find opportunities to shoot at most times of the day, as feral pigeons can be a real menace, foraging grain from barns and causing mess with their droppings. They are great sport and really sharpen up those old shooting skills and can prove very challenging with a spring-powered air rifle, making it even more satisfying when you are successful.

Ferals

When out with an air rifle, you are entering a world where the animals have far keener senses than you and I and are very adept at avoiding humans, no matter how good our equipment is. Without a little 'insider knowledge', our stalk will be nothing more than a pleasant walk. Unlike wood pigeons, ferals vary in colour a lot and due to their propensity to be found around barns or farm buildings, make them a little less 'human sensitive' but you will only get one chance if you get it wrong or miss. Diets vary, from a predominantly green palate and grain (dependent on availability) with seasonal change, so a successful shooter will familiarise themselves with the rotational nature of the crops in the farm landscape and plan a course of action to



intercept the hungry birds to suit. Ferals can feed at least three times a day if possible, more on colder days and during springtime, they shelter in the rafters of grain barns and are a particular favourite and my first look see area.

The ferals eyesight is good, being able to spot the white areas of your face and hands and any movement, so a wary shooter will always wear gloves and at least a hat but better still set up a hide with lightweight camouflage mesh and sit patiently. You can usually get away with one shot, then the game's up if just walking around!

Kit

Air rifle wise, I really like the old classics that I grew up with, they are not expensive to buy and really give that excitement that I enjoy these days when out after ferals. I have a lovely old Air Arms Khamsin in .22 cal that has been tuned by Tony Wall of Sandwell Field Sports. This is a side cocking spring piston air rifle that loads with a tap that pellets are dropped into. It's wonderfully smooth and powerful but more importantly accurate with RWS Hobby pellets giving 0.5 inch groups at 25 yards. Yes, it's slow and heavy compared to a modern pre-charge but when you bag a feral with it you really feel you have achieved something.

Another lovely air rifle that I use regularly is the Venom Arms custom conversion of the HW77. This is a phenomenal gun, with a gorgeous walnut stock and is supremely accurate with any pellet. If I am feeling a bit nostalgic then the original Weihrauch HW35E or Feinwerkbau Sport air rifles come out and these are untuned and just how they came from the factory. Any ferals with these is again extra special compared to all the fancy air guns you can get these days.

Modern day air rifles like the HW97 or HW95 and especially the well-balanced HW98, with its adjustable stock design and barrels shroud, make for a good feral gun at any range. I also really like the Air Arms TX200 in either full length or HC hunter carbine guise. They are always superbly smooth, accurate and with power right up to the legal limit.

Best though I have to say is my BSA Tactical in .25 cal and I like this because it is short and handles very well, is light and wears a black synthetic stock, that I don't mind

scratching or laying on wet straw. With its large moderator, it is also quiet and with certain pellets, deadly accurate.

Pylarms or Rhinos are very good performers, as are FTTs and at the ranges I shoot ferals the large pellet hits hard, releases most of its energy within the pest for a humane shot and as a secondary advantage, the extra kinetic energy transfer often lifts the feral off its feet, so it does not get stuck on a barn's rafter and will fall to earth for collection.

FAC rated air rifles are a nice blend between the rimfire and standard 12 ft/lb rated air rifles. Here you have the extra power to be sure of a deadly shot and it flattens the trajectory but at the ranges most ferals are shot I only really tend to use them for outside shots across the roofs or grain towers.

These are the results in some of my rifles, but a velocity change, zero and particularly scope height will make a big difference in the pellets trajectory at closer range and at elevated or declined position.

For ferals, I zero at 20 yds due to the close ranges I shoot at for these species and it means that when I turn my attention to the pests among the barn rafters at 10 yds or less I know how that pellet will travel in relationship to the cross hairs. Because the shots inside will be mostly upward, it is very important to test where your pellet will hit.

Elevating or declining a shot will cause the pellet to go higher compared to a normal zero. The trajectory chart here is for my rifles at a level shot and then the same shot taken at a 45 degree angle.

Interestingly and why I like the slow lumbering .25 for ferals, is that when zeroed at 20 yds the pellet is -0.3 inches low at 10 yds but -2.3 inches at 30yds. But when shot at the same ranges at a 45-degree angle from my BSA Tactical .25 you are now zeroed at 10 and only +1.1 inches high at 20 yds and now +0.4 inches high at 30 yds. You will never shoot at 45 degrees at 30yds I suspect but the horizontal zero at 20yds for shots outside and then 45 degree shot becoming the new zero at 10 yds is very handy if your brain is a bit slow on a cold morning like mine.

For your own rifle/pellet combos I would recommend just setting up some targets at ranges and actual places you shoot and map your own trajectory, I do this for all pellets and especially at closer range for ferals and rats/squirrels.

Conclusion

Sometimes the best things in life are right on your doorstep or in your backyard and ferals, rat or squirrel shooting (in fact any vermin shooting) is very satisfying for you and the landowner. It's also cheap and with an air rifle great sport and gets the old brain cells working where closer and elevated shots are not always as easy as you think. In fact, these trips really sharpen your senses when you're trying to get close to game and allow you to practise at little expense. They are not governed by close seasons and can be enjoyed all year round, with as basic or exotic equipment as you desire.



Something Old Something New...

Pete Wadeson uses a pretty unorthodox method where he combines a more modern decoy with the traditional to attract wood pigeon to his lofted decoy pattern...

Decoying pigeon with artificial but lifelike looking imitation birds has been around since hunters realised that wood pigeon were attracted to their own kind. The difference in lofting is as the name suggests; the decoys are lofted up into the trees to hang tantalisingly like Christmas baubles to invite and attract other real life quarry to join them.

After experiencing my bags of pigeon dwindling over the seasons in areas with an abundance of birds I began to search around for ideas to get the birds to the shooting position in the trees. As movement is often the key to attraction, and knowing I couldn't loft a rotary pigeon machine up there, with the help of a few ardent pigeon shooters I eventually came up with the idea of lofting a motorised 'spinning wing' decoy. After a bit of DIY including gaffer tape plus the decoy of course - the plan was to place this 'contraption' amongst a few motionless standard lofted decoys set on G-Hooks.



The Shoot

On the farm that I was shooting on the woodies had absolutely ravaged the maize fields, leaving the ground looking quite barren. However the pigeons were still around but picking through the cover crops searching here and there for any foodstuffs they could find. The farmer informed me he's seen the pigeons hanging around a small duck pond, surrounded by tall trees. As they'd been hit



hard by the shotgun lads they were using the wooded areas to scan the fields around them for food rather than using them as sitty-trees.

I'd obviously have to attract and hold their attention here to give myself a chance of a shot. After a very early start at the area I chose the most dominant tree, set up the kit of traditional lofted decoys and 'motorised' decoy and chose my shooting position.

From the position where the attractors were the overhanging branches of bushes closer to my shooting position offered a bit of extra cover. As most birds came in from the sides or back of the large oak trees of the small copse, this cover also meant I could leave fallen birds on the deck without fear of them spooking birds coming in.

The main cover to my shooting position was just a suitably sized piece of Stealth Camo netting that was simply draped over a low wire fence near the tree line. This fully hid my outline from incoming birds.

I noticed pairs would zoom straight in past the moving decoy and then sweep around to land at the back. This was infuriating as I couldn't draw a bead on any birds that did this but the lone birds were relatively easy pickings, as they'd land on the edge of the lofted pattern. It was quite interesting to watch the behaviour of the birds that landed as every time the moving decoy pigeon rotated its wings they'd immediately look in its direction as if to see if it was going to fly, and as you know they often then leave with the 'lead' bird. As I had the control box next to me I could switch it on and off at will. I soon discovered shutting the power off, to stop the decoy moving would have the live pigeons either settle and sit looking around or shift position by walking along the branches to get closer to what they thought were their friends. But like a magpie in a Larsen trap these were Judas birds that had enticed the pigeon to its demise.



The Action

First bird that came in alone I dropped with an easy shot as it was in complete view of my shooting position sat on the end of a branch overhanging the field, the path of the pellet unhindered by branches or twigs. I was using a heavily customised Sandwell Field Sports (S.F.S.) tuned BSA SuperTen MkIII and a MTC Optics 4 – 16X 50IRS Viper scope. The 'optic' might seem like overkill for this type of shooting but it proved a good choice, giving a wide field of view and good light gathering when wound down to its lowest magnification. Then when zoomed up it was ideal for precisely placing the lead into the target.

I'd taken over a dozen woodies in approximately 3-hours shooting on fields that had been heavily shot over and almost bare of foodstuffs. I'm sure many will agree for any type of shooting discipline that's not bad going. Even a few crows came in and circled above the decoys, as did buzzards. At one point a buzzard coming so low to inspect the life-like lofted decoys I thought it might pluck one from the tree but thankfully it was more engrossed in bonding with the bird that soared with it than my cunning tactics.

Talking cunning I was about to call it a day when I noticed a smallish black bird zoom into the trees to land amongst the decoys. I lost sight of it amongst the tangle of twigs but eventually spotted it again as it flitted amongst the upper branches. I zoomed up the magnification to sight in on the mystery visitor to ensure clear identification. I immediately slid off the safety as it was a jackdaw that had sneaked in there. Strange at this time of year it was flying alone but it seemed totally at ease sat up amongst the pigeon decks. It finally presented a shot, not easy due to the branches between the target and myself, but once I decided the path of the pellet would be unhindered, I squeezed the trigger to let the pellet slam straight into its upper chest for a heart/lung shot. Possibly the finest shot of the day and certainly most satisfying as - like the pigeons before - it landed stone dead on the deck below.

Clear proof that traditional methods can at times be helped by more modern decoying aids...



No Better Sport?

Jules Whicker looks at the art of pigeon decoying and the equipment used

I love my game shooting, but have to admit that, whether for affordability, accessibility, variety or sheer engagement with the immediate natural environment, and even at times for intensity, pigeon decoying is supreme. In my book, no one ensconced in a well-sited hide, overlooking a well-deployed decoy array, armed with a reliable gun of whatever description, and equipped with an ample supply of cartridges, should feel the least envy for the occupant of a grouse butt or his counterpart on a partridge peg. What's more, how good your day is will depend on your own skills, and not on the depth of your pocket or on the diligence of keepers and beaters.

Boots on the ground

Of course the first thing the aspiring pigeon shooter has to do is to find his ground. Many go trolling around looking for permission on freshly-harvested stubbles, and some are successful, but you're more likely to be welcome, and welcome back, if you offer to tackle pigeons that are damaging growing crops, as this is of direct and immediate benefit to the farmer. Such shooting is more in the spirit of the General License too, however much year-round pigeon control may serve to reduce damage overall.

Cultivating a relationship with the farmer will also ensure you get a call when a field has been freshly drilled, or as soon as a blue haze descends on tender shoots. Of course, some farmers will take this too far, calling you out for the smallest of raiding parties: a situation that needs to be nipped in the bud or pretty soon you'll be moving on to pastures new, as either you tire of the false alarms or the farmer bets on the next shooter being a softer touch.

Hedging your bets

It is therefore prudent, when you do have access to some ground, to make yourself known to your host's neighbours. Don't be slow, for example, in finding hide sites on boundaries where you can defend their crops as well as his, and where you may need to cross the boundary to pick up. Asking permission to do this can provide the perfect opportunity to meet the chap next door, helping you to build a local network, and so giving you the flexibility to hit the pigeons where they are causing most damage: which is good for all concerned and can make for some exceptional sport.



Goodwill hunting

So much for the 'politics'. Actually, if you do things right, and are helpful and considerate as well as friendly, you should enjoy more shooting, enjoy your shooting more, and make some new friends along the way. So clear up after yourself, close gates behind you, and tell your host about such things as fallen stock, fallen trees, damaged fencing, and suspect persons.



Know your quarry

Having taken care of the human dimension, it's time to study your quarry. Read up on their habits, learn how their diet varies over the year, and when each crop –peas, beans, rape, wheat, barley, etc.- is most vulnerable to them. Then put theory into practice by watching their behaviour. Identify where they roost, where they rest during the day between bouts of feeding, where they go to drink in warm weather, and even which landscape features they use as waypoints when travelling further afield to feed, as all these will help you to look for birds at the right times and in the right places.

Think like a pigeon

Imagine yourself as a hungry bird, beady-eyed, and a strong flier, your choices conditioned by an ingrained sense that there is safety in numbers, counterpointed by a wide streak of opportunism. Remember too that the three factors that motivate all living things -appetite, laziness and fear- are operative in pigeons too, so as well as seeking food or rest, you will only fly as far, or as hard as you need to to reach them, and you will be constantly alert to signs of danger, with reflexes that will enable you to brake, swerve or flee the instant they are triggered.

Mind games

Birds will only ignore their hunger when convinced that they'll burn more energy seeking food than they will gain by finding it, and they will only expend extra energy when convinced that the rewards will make it worthwhile. These calculations are made all the time, but fear operates only in the immediate presence of a perceived threat. The challenge for the pigeon shooter, therefore, is to appeal so strongly to the birds' appetite and laziness that these override its fear. A good decoy array in the right place will do this so effectively that the shooter can stand in the middle of it, in full view of approaching birds, and they will still flight in.

Up in the air

So when you get out after pigeons, first take a bit of time to see what they are doing: not just where they are feeding, but where they are arriving from, and what other flight-lines are in use. Some flight-lines are 'permanent', dictated by roosting sites, way-points and prevailing winds, but others are temporary, short cuts between feeding, resting and watering sites. The point of knowing about them is that you want to bring birds that have set off to go somewhere else in to your decoys, as well as those that have already decided where to have breakfast. Sooner or later these 'early adopters' will realise their chosen spot is more dangerous than delicious and go elsewhere, at which point you'll be depending on your flight-lines for 'passing trade'.



A good sign

You want your decoys to be easily visible from these flight-lines, so think how you can catch their eye; and you want to convince them to peel off and drop in for a feed, so think through the birds' aerial approach to your pattern and how you can make it easy for them both to cruise in and to resume their journey afterwards. Force them to make too much of a commitment and they will probably stick to Plan A. I like to think of it as a motorway service station with good signage and ample slip roads!

Poetry in motion

Good 'signage' is mostly achieved by movement. The most mobile decoys are rotary ones (also known as 'whirlygigs' or 'carousels', or branded as 'Pigeon Magnets'). My old rotary is so heavy and bulky that I all too often leave it behind, especially if I can't drive right up to the hide site; but newer compact models use lighter motors and batteries and this makes them more practical.

Next come floaters (also known as 'bouncers'). These have a telescopic, extendible pole with a rigid lower section, complete with a blade, and sometimes a handy foot-peg, to anchor it into the ground; and a flexible upper section ending in a point and topped off with a cradle whose folding arms end in a crocodile clip. These require you to have a dead bird to hand, and to spear it from the vent to the base of the skull so as to mount it in the cradle, spreading its wings by means of the clips and fanning out its tail to suggest a bird coming in to land.

Helpfully, several types of artificial decoys are also available for floaters, relieving you both of the need to have a dead bird available and of the grisly business of impaling

it on a stake. These may have full, shell or silhouette bodies and fabric, foam or plastic wings, each designed to 'flap' in some manner as the decoy bounces on its support.

Spin tactics

You may also come across 'Air Pro' decoys. These are rigid plastic decoys with full bodies, pierced by a metal axle to which a pair of helical wings are attached by a thumbscrew. The original versions needed the shine taken off them (see below) first, but the current flocked ones are good to go. The principle is the same as a child's windmill: as the air passes over them they begin to spin, flashing white and grey as they do so, and so creating the illusion of beating wings. They work fine on a rotary, but on a floater, or on the ground, they need a stronger breeze.

Even more wind-dependent is the 'Reelwings' decoy. This is a rotary kite that can be pegged down and left to fly, so as to imitate a bird on a higher point of approach than a floater can simulate. They are finished in a paint that mimics the natural UV-reflectiveness of the bird's natural plumage too. You can only use them on windy days, but this is when they come in most handy, as birds won't waste energy loitering about looking for a meal when the wind is strong but will tend to be 'on a mission', heading directly to a known food source, and therefore need something extra to flag them down.

Whatever kind of floater you choose, it should be set up facing into the wind at the natural approach point to the pattern. I don't put them too close to the intended kill zone, as my strategy is to encourage the pigeons to overfly them so as to 'gazump' what they see as the prime feeding space.

More movement can be given to your array by using motorised pecking decoys, but the same effect can be achieved much more easily, cheaply and durably by using shell decoys on rocker or spring sticks and simply allowing the breeze to generate the rocking motion, so I've never owned one.

Air power

Another approach is to use Sillosocks decoys. The winged 'Hypa-Flap' type mount to conventional rotary arms or floater poles and have ingenious lightweight fabric wings spread on flexible polymer stretchers that flap realistically in even a modest breeze, whilst the standard type (which come in head-down and head-up varieties) use the fabric to create a body that acts like a windsock, filling and fluttering like the body of a feeding pigeon, and oscillating gently as it automatically adjusts to point into the wind. I've yet to find anything that creates a more realistic impression, and having multiple wind indicators in front of you lets you know it's time to adjust your pattern as soon as there's a decisive shift in the wind, rather than leaving it to diminishing traffic to the decoys to signal that something is amiss.

Lofty heights

Then there is the matter of lofting decoys. Most associate this tactic with roost shooting, but if I have to choose between taking the lofting poles and hoops and taking the rotary, I'll always take the former. A half-dozen lofted decoys in the tops of an overgrown hedgerow or a suitable lookout tree will not only be highly visible from all directions but also a strong confirmation of safety, assuring interested birds that they will be able to land and feed, protected by vigilant sentries. I have yet to find a lofting pole set that is both light and sufficiently rigid, so if buying aluminium poles I would go for heavier-and-stiffer over lighter-and-bendier. I would also look around for a sturdy funnel to fit around the end of the pole, as this makes recovering your lofted decoys at the end of the day so much easier, especially when the branches are dancing in the wind. Think of the pole as an in-flight refuelling hose, the funnel as the 'basket' on the end, and the lofting hook as the probe on the aircraft.

Playing the field

You can ring the changes a bit with lofters too, since both crow and magpie decoys make excellent alternatives. A few crow decoys outlying the ground pattern can also work well, both as 'confidence' decoys and to occupy spots where less confident pigeons may otherwise be tempted to land in preference to your designated kill zone. The flocked crow shell decoys from Jack Pyke are





excellent for this. Taking this a step further, you can use lofted eagle owl or peregrine decoys to keep birds away from areas in which they might otherwise congregate, in the far corner of a big field, for example. I sometimes 'block' sitty trees in this way, but I wouldn't put such 'scarers' within 400m of my hide.

Motley crew

When it comes to the decoys actually in the pattern, I supplement my Sillosocks with an assortment of flocked shell decoys, rubber $\frac{3}{4}$ shells, rubber 'Flexicoys', and folding neoprene FUDs. This is mostly because they're what I've accumulated over the years, but they all seem to work! Usefully, the Flexicoys are just small enough to fit inside the $\frac{3}{4}$ shells, thereby maintaining their shape even when packed tightly away in the bag, whilst the FUDs, if a bit heavy due to their steel anchor blade, are marvellously compact and adjustable. Together they prevent the pattern looking uniform, and so give it a more natural appearance.

Painting and decorating

Shine can be an issue on brighter days, and after showers, especially on non-flocked decoys, so either stick to flocked ones, flock them yourself –hobbycraft shops sell the necessary glue and flocking fibres- or spray them with ultra-flat paint. I like Krylon's Chalky Finish paints and sealer for pigeon decoys, and their Fusion range for poles, rotaries, etc. You might also consider using a UV-reflective white for neck bars and wing flashes. It may or may not work –opinion is divided- but it doesn't scare them away or cost a lot, so I use it when reconditioning my decoys. If all this DIY isn't for you, however, why not try the photo-realistic covers that are now available for full-body decoys?

Design principles

As for how you place your decoys, there are any number of diagrams available in the many articles and books on pigeon decoying written by those far more knowledgeable than me, but my basic principle is to read how the wind will determine the bird's approach –they need to be facing into the wind a minimum of 10m before landing- and then provide what looks like an attractive landing spot towards, but not at the very front of a group of feeding birds that

will serve as the kill zone –they can't resist a bit of one-upmanship but mostly don't like to be in the lead.

Just as important is thinking about leaving a clear take-off route from the kill zone. If your shooting's up to scratch, the birds won't get the chance to use it, but they don't know that, and they'll land more confidently if they think they can get out easily. Thinking about escape routes is important when it comes to judging the best distance between the kill zone and the hide too, as you want the second bird of a pair still to be in range as it breaks away after you have dropped its mate into the kill zone. At the same time, you don't want that first bird to be so close that you turn it into pâté!

Meat not murder

I may cover hides, seats, guns and other matters in a subsequent article, but my final point here has to be that in my opinion, as pigeon shooters, we should not simply be defending crops but also putting healthy meat into the food chain. Whenever possible, the birds you shoot should end up, fit to eat, on someone's table. This means identifying a game dealer to sell them to (preferably before you go out), finding a way to keep them well-aired and fly-free during the day's shooting, and having a cool place to store them overnight if they can't go to the game dealer the same day. This is why I won't use shot birds as decoys in warm weather. Instead, I erect a hanging frame made from plastic-coated metal garden poles and covered by fine camo mesh, placed in a good patch of shade a short walk from my hide, pick up often, and have a big chiller at home that will hold 100 birds.

If I find the sight of a pile of decomposing pigeons left in a ditch by a shooter exasperating, imagine what a non-shooter would feel... and how their disgust will ripple out and harm everyone's prospects of enjoying this wonderful sport for many years to come.

Final thoughts

The specialist pigeon-shooting retailers who advertise in these pages can supply no end of good kit and advice, but nothing is more important than access to land and an understanding of your quarry, born of observation and imagination. When I go pigeon shooting, it's not about big bags, or about impressive cartridge-to-kill ratios (if only!), but about reading quarry, weather, time and landscape to get a totally wild bird to do exactly what I want it to. Along the way, I want to make myself an asset to the farmer, a good ambassador for my sport, and a trusted purveyor of high-quality and seriously tasty meat... and if I don't, I only have myself to blame.

Contacts

A1 Decoy. www.a1decoy.co.uk

Jack Pyke. www.jackpykeshop.co.uk

UK Shoot Warehouse (Sillosocks & Pigeon Magnet).
www.ukshootwarehouse.com

Pigeon Stew

Andy Watkins takes to the winter fields for meat for his pigeon stew

With all crops now taken and all the leaves off the trees, I thought I would try my luck and shoot a couple of pigeons for a warm winter stew. The location was one of my larger permissions, spanning over 500 acres. There are a good many of us who don't tend to use all the land we have permission on. At least in my case, I stick to the 'hot spots' and don't tend to venture where I am rarely presented a shot. The same was true for this occasion. I stuck to what I knew and popped into the small patch of woodland where I'd been successful in the past.

S400 Classic

The rifle I chose for this mission was my ever-faithful Air Arms S400 Classic, which is now my go-to Hunter Field Target (HFT) gun, paired with the Hawke Air Max 4-12x40. This is easily my favourite budget scope. The 'Christmas tree style' reticle is ideal for my needs, but not so complicated as to confuse the eye when lining up on a target. The glass is crystal sharp with very minimal distortion around the edges and the light gathering capability in low light is extraordinary.

I have a new set of Sportsmatch 25mm lows on their way in the post and will be glad to replace my very cheap and to be honest, poor quality unbranded mounts that will be gone very soon. Truth is, we get by with equipment, but at the end of the day; quality will out, so I'd encourage



you all to buy the best you can. One thing I don't often use (but did on this day) is a silencer. This one is the dedicated S400/410 model from Air Arms. Generally speaking I find they make the set up feel a little too long, especially when using the full length Classic version of the rifle, but as it was such a still day, I didn't want shots echoing around and emptying the entire wood.

Pad foot

The ground underfoot was very noisy and demanded more care than usual, with branches and dry leaves everywhere. Some 'autumn-into-winter' days release a particularly woody smell, as the leaves on the ground begin to settle and melt into the earth. I drifted through the wood, attempting to be as gentle and silent as possible (not easy this time of the year). Every now and then I paused to listen out for any tell-tale sounds. To be more specific, scratching of claws on tree bark, that's what gives squirrels away most of the time, or a flap of a pigeon's wing.

Everything was quiet, so I continued on my way. It wasn't long before I had gone straight through the middle of the wood and come out the other side. Surprised and disappointed that I hadn't come across anything to shoot,



I set off for a walk up the side of the wood. It was here that I noticed a large number of mixed birds over the other side of the field. I looked through the scope and saw crows and jackdaws, pigeons and doves. They were much too far away to shoot, and a stalk would have been a waste of time. There was no cover between me and the birds, which would have meant a tiresome and probably fruitless 400-yard crawl. I was hungry for a potted pigeon but not that desperate!

Proper pellet placement

Walking along the outskirts of the woodland, I noticed a woodie on one of the branches of a silver birch that was overhanging the track. It was facing away from me, so I opted for a heart and lung shot, right between the shoulder blades. I prefer that shot from this angle and nine times out of ten, they drop cleanly for me. With heart and lung shots from a forward-facing position, there is a risk of too much meat to penetrate and if the pellet does make it though, it's then got to punch into the breast bone and vital organs, which is a lot to ask from a sub 12 ft/lbs air rifle.

I crouched down for a kneeler. As the angle was fairly steep I had to rest my elbow on my knee. Not the most stable position in the world but as the intended target was only 20 yards away, it was more than adequate. I released the shot and the small pop from the silenced S400 didn't even disturb the song birds that were foraging further up the track. The pigeon just rolled forward, not even flapping its wings and dropped to the woodland floor with a soft thud. With one bird on the ground, my options opened a little. The field to my right had not yet been ploughed and looked like a good opportunity for some decoying. It is very late in the year to be attempting this but spotting the birds on the field earlier on, gave me hope that it could work.

In range

Handily for me, there was a strip of sweet corn not harvested, which would act as a perfect natural hide for me. I laid out the pigeon on what was left of the stubble at 20 yards. This way, if a bird came in 20 yards further than the decoy it would still be in range. Once the decoy was set it was just a case of waiting. I was in the prone position for maximum cover (it was also the most uncomfortable position to be in for extended periods). My gun was set up on my Spartan Javelin bipod, which I always keep tucked in my pocket for occasions like these. Just have to say the ability to fit or remove it as required is an excellent feature of this lightweight yet practical design!

About half an hour went past and I still hadn't seen anything; maybe there was a reason no one decoys at this time of year. My back was starting to ache, and impatience was setting in. Just in the nick of time, a pigeon swooped in from over the wood behind me and



settled next to my decoy. It was side on and its neck was out stretched showing the brilliant white bar. It appeared uneasy and aware that something wasn't quite right. I knew I didn't have long. The bird was side on, I went for a heart and lung shot once more. The rifle was solid on its rest and I had no trouble letting off a quick shot. The pigeon rolled around a bit and I was not sure if the shot was a little too rushed. I was pretty sure it was dead, and the flapping was just nerves, but I cycled the bolt and put another one in him just to be on the safe side. I broke cover to set up this one up as a second decoy.

Commotion behind

The walk was good for me, as it allowed me to have a good stretch and refresh myself for another stint of lying in the dirt; sometimes you take the shots and cover you get given! I wasn't there too long, and I heard a commotion from behind me. It sounded like magpies and Jackdaws having a fight over something. I didn't want to turn around because I could hear they were close and any movement from me could spook them. This turned out to be the right call. A jackdaw came down and started hopping around the decoys. Although they are quite pretty birds, they are a real nuisance and don't do the local song bird population any favours!

They are bullies, and much like the Magpie they will rob other bird's nests. Not only this, if they get near the grain stores they can eat their way through an awful lot, so costing the farmer money. They also defecate in and around the grain, making it unhygienic for livestock. They really are a pest on the farm hence why the farmer is so keen for them to be shot. I went for a head shot on this bird. (Although the head is probably the biggest and easiest target to aim for, it is still a relatively small). There may be less meat to penetrate due to its slight build but the side-on head shot seemed the surest option. The pellet struck with a popping sound and the Jackdaw lay on its back with minor wing twitches. I broke cover for the final time to collect the three birds. Although Rook tastes good, I don't fancy jackdaw and gave it to a very inquisitive and appreciative farm cat instead.

I now had three birds on the ground and enough pigeon to make a meal. As time was once again getting on, I headed home with one thing on my mind. Pigeon stew!!