

Quarry & Pest Control Guide

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Know Your Quarry!

Pete Wadeson's guide to legal species for the airgun hunter to pursue

The airgun hunter has a specified selection of quarry species classed as vermin that are deemed legal to shoot with a 12 ft/lb air rifle on land where permission has been granted to the individual to hunt. It's your responsibility to be able to quickly and easily identify all quarry species in all conditions and from a variety of angles. You'll also find that knowing your enemy thoroughly will make you a more successful hunter.

For instance, the first crow you examine close up will show its true character. Personally, I feel there's nothing to like about the crow, though you have to respect its wariness and intelligence. While a magpie's curiosity can often get the better of him, a crow will never be so stupid - neither will the adult rook, nor a large gathering of jackdaws. It's fascinating to watch a flock of jackdaws descend into the treetops as they fly hither and thither on their daily search for food. Hardly have they alighted than one of them spots something below and the flock take noisily to the skies.

Eyes Wide Open

There's always something to be learned from watching your quarry, even without a rifle in your hands. For instance, you'll be amazed at the rabbit's voracious appetite as it nibbles and gnaws its way over the ground. These fluffy hoovers can eat for ages, but often as not you'll see one sitting motionless, doing nothing but listening and watching. Then, in the blink of an eye, it can either begin to groom itself, resume feeding, start to doze in the sun, huddle down against the rain or just simply leg it to the nearest cover. Observing animals can also show their destructive sides, which are the reason they're classed as vermin. Rabbits chew, eat, nibble and scratch at everything, squirrels are the same, while rats are the most abhorrent (yet also possibly the quickest learning) of quarry we seek - their urine and droppings being a particular cause for concern.

Droppings from feral pigeon and collared dove spoil grain, woodies eat masses of cereal crops and are responsible for other crop damage and let's not forget the problems caused by crows and rooks. Those who suppose crows only scavenge for carrion would be wrong! Along with the woodies they are the biggest cause for concern on barley and wheat fields at certain times of the year. Crow wings easily beat down crop stems and left unchecked they can strip the fields in a matter of weeks, sometimes days.

The same applies to rooks. Some say they should be given a reprieve for the good they do, as they eat leatherjackets which does earn some brownie points, but the trouble is they constantly dig. As it's such a large bird a rook needs only to walk forward and, like the wood pigeon and crow, literally bulldozes any growing crops that stand in its way. When you see this destruction and understand the financial burden it puts onto the farming community you realise you are doing a service.

Clean kills

Before we go any further it's time for a word on the importance of kill-zones. It must be remembered that quarry rarely presents itself side-on or fully facing you for that perfect shot, so you must be able to work out how to calculate the right aim point to send a pellet into the kill-zone for a quick and clean despatch, no matter how the animal is presenting itself. As we look at each individual species you'll clearly see how best to accomplish this. Vermin or not, we should be achieving humane kills at all times.

In this guide we give an in-depth view into the lives and behavioural patterns of the 11 species most commonly hunted with an air rifle. All the species we are allowed to hunt by law are listed in the 1981 Wildlife & Countryside Act. Those allowed for a 12 ft/lb (maximum) air rifle are as follows: rabbit, grey squirrel, brown rat, magpie, crow, rook, jackdaw, jay, wood pigeon, feral pigeon and collared dove. Fairly recently the house sparrow and starling were taken off that list. (In the case of the sparrow this was long overdue as there aren't as many twittering in the mornings as there used to be. The starling was becoming such a grey area and one best left to professional pest controllers, who have the proper licences and paperwork.)

There are other species that are legal to shoot, such as herring gull, greater and lesser black backed gulls, and certain waterfowl, such as moorhen and coot. If you live in the upper reaches of Scotland, then I'm sure you'll also know all about the hooded crow, as in some areas it has a worse reputation than the carrion crow. However, all of these must be regarded as more specialist quarry, due to location, seasons, and other factors. If you have problems with them in your area, seek out specialist local knowledge, if not, leave them alone.

I must add that it's the responsibility of every hunter to know the law pertaining to hunting with airguns. The reputable shooting organisations have this information available, so make yourself fully aware and abide by the law. There are more than enough quarry species for the airgun hunter (with a bonus that some are very tasty) so remember: if in doubt, don't shoot!



Rabbit

(Oryctolagus Cuniculus)

Habitat

Rabbits are adaptable and live anywhere - hedgerows, fields, scrubland, pretty much anywhere that provides good cover and food. Diet consists of anything that's green and edible, in winter they even 'bark' bushes and trees. By and large rabbits prefer soft sandy soil to build warrens that are usually found on slopes to provide drainage. They are accomplished climbers, scrabbling up saplings to get at shoots and clambering quickly over dry stonewalls to evade predators.

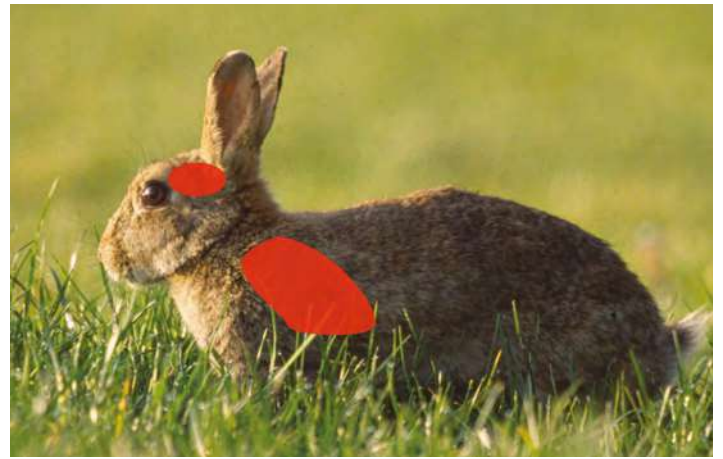
It's a social animal and generally spends most of the daylight hours underground. Depending on population, it can be seen at any time of day, but the early morning and late evening - especially in spring and summer - are best. One cannot mention the rabbit without considering myxomatosis, which is still around and comes and goes as it pleases, being spread by fleas. The symptoms are slow and uncoordinated movement, and swollen eyes that drip mucus. Some animals die, others recover, but it's an act of mercy to shoot infected individuals when seen.

Location

Rabbits leave clues to their presence - entrances to burrows, dense round pellet droppings and runs. Runs are narrow flattened pathways in the grass or undergrowth they use to move around. Feeding areas are easily identified as closely cropped grass or bare patches in newly sown crops at the edges of fields. Also bits of fur on low barbed wire fencing or at the edges of brambles will indicate areas of activity.

Rabbits don't like the wind, so on blustery days you will normally find them in a sheltered position. Look for them on the leeward side of anything that offers a windbreak; stonewalls, hedgerows and high embankments. The rabbit has many natural enemies so makes full use of its senses of smell, sight and hearing. Reputedly they can smell a predator from up to 100 yards away, and their hearing is even more acute. Also, due to the eyes being positioned at the side and towards the top of the head they have good all-round vision.

Rabbits are alert most of the time and rarely relax. With regular observation you'll soon recognise that their body language tells you a lot. Once the ears droop onto the back of the head it's relaxed one sense; the next are the eyes, which will half close, and then it will drop its head onto its chest, or even lie flat out on the ground. You often see this behaviour during hot weather and through the longer summer evenings. However it only takes the slightest hint of danger for the situation to change and it's ready to run.



Hunting Techniques

The rabbit is a candidate for virtually every hunting technique; on foot and by vehicle, day or night. In most cases stalking can be productive and is a skill that needs to be properly learned. There are times when it's unstalkable and this is when you should try lying up in ambush. But one thing that we have in our favour is the rabbit's habit of freezing when it first senses danger. This can either be its saviour or, if we spot it, its downfall. Ambushing can be very productive as long as you've chosen your shooting position with care.

Kill-Zones

With a 12ft lb air rifle all calibres are suitable, but pellet placement is crucial and I would generally advocate the headshot. Although the head of an adult rabbit looks quite large, the kill-zone (brain) is approximately the size of a walnut. To hit this correctly, imagine a line from eye to the base of the ear. The area to aim for is just off centre behind the eye, on that line. Hit dead centre with .22 or even slightly further forward or back and it's fatal. If the shot presents itself head on, take a line from just above the eyes to just below the neckline: hitting here will achieve a clean kill. Sometimes, especially at night, they will turn their backs to you, and a pellet into the back of the neck will stop them dead. However, the spine is not a big target and you have to be absolutely centre to do the job.

Now to the thorny subject of the body shot, which some shooters take with a 12ft lb rifle and feel is a valid kill-zone. That's fine if it works for them, but it's something I'd only take using an FAC-rated air rifle (mine is 22 ft/lbs +). If the rabbit is standing facing you, shoot directly into the centre of the upper chest to place the pellet between the front forelegs (high heart shot). From the side, follow the line of the foreleg to where it meets the animal's body. Then place the cross hairs so the shot will impact approximately a third of the way back on the body. This will place a shot straight into the heart and lungs. The rib cage is not overly strong at this point, coupled with the lower amount of body tissue surrounding these organs, but in autumn the rabbit has extra body fat, which needs to be taken into consideration.

Carriion Crow

(*Corvus Corone Corone*)

Habitat

The carrion crow is as at home over fields with a few trees, just as it is in dense woodland, moorland or even at the seashore. This is one of the reasons it has been so successful in colonising areas and becoming so plentiful. All but absent in Ireland and not too common in parts of Scotland where it's replaced by the hooded crow (*corvus cornix*), it is nevertheless, widespread in the rest of the UK. It will readily kill and eat small animals such as frogs, voles and even young rabbits using its heavy, big black beak as a formidable weapon. Whilst the crow's varied diet also consists of grain, seeds, worms and beetles, it will always prefer to take eggs, nestlings and gorge on carrion of any description. Hence its name!

Location

Where there are sheep, you will always find crows. The stories told of crows sitting on the backs of a young sheep pecking at their eyes are based on some truth. Not only do they sit on sheep to peck at ticks and insects in their wool, but they'll also attack the newborn, sick and weakly. Needless to say, lambs or adult sheep that die by natural causes are absolute magnets to these birds. But it's not all carnage when they're next to livestock! They follow flocks of sheep around primarily to pick up anything edible they might disturb. This also applies to the reason they follow cattle.

During late spring unattached crows pair off (apparently staying together for life) and will then move regularly.



During the colder months they cover quite a distance between feeding areas and the communal roost. Although it roosts in numbers, on the whole it can often appear to be quite solitary and at times single birds seem to wander lazily and aimlessly over the land - especially in the daylight hours of winter. However, it's quite common to see a few magpies moving around or feeding with a crow noisily bringing up the rear.

Having said that, when it comes to being with its own kind, the carrion crow displays a complex social infrastructure, especially when large numbers descend to feed. Some claim that certain individuals take it upon themselves to act as sentries, sitting on the outskirts of the roost or feeding area to watch out for any potential danger, and I've noticed this myself. It's also worth noting that when they are found in small groups these gatherings are known as a murder of crows, and a very fitting description it is to!

Hunting Techniques

Baiting down, roost shooting, ambushing from a hide next to a feeding area or established sitty tree, or an opportunist shot taken when hiding up in or next to woodland awaiting squirrels or woodies. Forget trying to stalk the bird, it's the wariest of the wary, even in trees. Like the magpie it's an early riser, so whether ambushing or baiting down you need to be up well before dawn and in position to reap the rewards. The crow's scavenging and curious behavioural patterns can sometimes be its undoing. Often when using decoys to bring in wood pigeons in autumn over stubble fields, and especially if using a 'confidence crow deek', I've had crows drop down for a quick look. They don't stick around long but if you've downed a few woodies you should be tuned in enough to take a shot. To bag a crow or two is always a true test of your fieldcraft, hunting and shooting skills as they don't call 'em 'crafty' for nothing!

Kill-Zones

Though some say .22 only for this tough bird, with a 12ft lb air rifle all calibres are suitable, but as ever pellet placement is crucial. The main kill-zones are the head or heart shot. When possible go side on the head, or full on the neck to upper chest. If the angle presents itself a slug in the base of the back of the skull is equally effective. When sensing danger it will turn around showing its back, while looking over its shoulder - usually just before it flies away. It's at this point you have a chance of the neck shot and between the shoulder blades. From below; slipping a pellet up into either side of the upper chest under the wing fold will find another weak spot. It has little protection here at the chest under those heavy wings.

With an FAC-rated rifle, full on or side on shots into the chest area will see it cleanly dispatched, even when shooting through the wing into this area.

Wood Pigeon

(*Columba Palumbus*)

Habitat

Although the scourge of every cereal farmer, this is primarily a bird of the woods and depending on season it will feed and readily move onto fields. Due to its massive population figures it can also be found even in relatively treeless areas, including towns and some cities. Like the collared dove it's becoming a much more common sight in urban areas. For nesting, it usually builds a small platform of twigs high up in the trees and will raise two to three broods. Unlike most other birds the adults feed the young on pigeon milk they produce during and throughout the breeding season. Young birds are known as squabs and are easily distinguished from adults due to their size and the lack of a white neck patch. Woodies can eat an amazing amount of food, stuffing their crops to bursting at every opportunity - especially when feeding on oilseed rape, corn, wheat, young pea or bean shoots and ivy berries in the winter. They feed three or four times a day, so ambushing them can be a very effective tactic once you've learned the areas they use as flightlines to the fields they feed over. Unlike a lot of other birds, its habitat is not in decline or under threat. Although some woodies are lost to foxes and cats, its only natural enemies are the sparrow hawk, peregrine falcon, kestrel and buzzard.

Location

The movements of wood pigeon are very much dictated by the seasons and their need to find food and shelter. They can usually be found over fields during the daytime, and around woods and copses in the evenings where they return to roost. And depending on season and forgetting weather conditions they will often spend a lot of time in the woods. This is when the bird's distinctive and repeatedly used throaty 'cooo, coo, coo - coo, coo' call will often give its presence away long before you see it.

The wood pigeon's voracious appetite and specific dietary preferences, coupled with the annual availability of those foodstuffs, are the definitive key to its location. Basically if there's grain on the soil or crops growing in the fields then you'll find pigeons on them. It pays to know when the farmer is sowing, as the birds will descend like a plague as soon as the grain is on the ground. This is because, unlike some birds, the wood pigeon isn't keen on scratching about deep in the soil, it will -rarely if ever- dig into the soil for food. It prefers to take easy pickings of seed kernels and grain off the top where and when it can find them. It also doesn't like getting its feet wet or muddy so when conditions



dictate, look to sitty-trees, the edges of woods or dry areas of fields with good drainage - a factor to take into consideration when choosing an area to set-out decoys. In winter the birds really do have to search for food and can be found foraging on the woodland floor, around the base of trees and hedges before they get the chance to descend on the winter rape fields.

Hunting Techniques

Though major methods are decoying and roost shooting, the airgun hunter can have superb sport if favoured sitty-trees are located. You can also encounter the birds while out wood walking.

When the birds are preoccupied, feeding on ivy berries in the colder months, you can often (with prior knowledge) be waiting for them to arrive, well concealed to pick the birds off when they're gorging themselves.

However, I'd primarily recommend you find the 'feeding' fields they're coming from or going to and ambushing them there with the aid of decoys.

Kill-Zones

All calibres are suitable to cleanly dispatch woodies at ranges out to 45 yards but the pellet needs to be placed with precision in one of three major kill-zone areas depending on how the bird presents in relation to your shooting position. Crop shots shouldn't be taken as the foodstuff in the bird's onboard storage tank can be packed so dense it can prevent it being fatal. First and foremost is the side on shot at the head and neck. Next is the upper chest cavity, but only if you can slip the pellet up between a wing fold from below and the angle into this area also has to be right so the pellet enters the heart and lungs. If the bird has landed on the ground, aim for just forward of the shoulder/ upper wing fold to put a pellet into the chest cavity. Alternatively, if shooting from behind, put one right between the shoulder blades, into the neck or crack it in the back of the head.

Jackdaw

(*Corvus Monedula*)



Habitat

Jackdaws are nomadic in nature but will flock readily with their own kind. Primarily a woodland bird it ventures out to feed and to breed. This is when it often presents itself as a problem when nesting in buildings in rural areas - doubly so if they've taken to regularly visiting farms with livestock and large outbuildings. When near human habitation, its fondness of dark crevices often has them nesting in chimneys or ventilation systems. This means they are a potential fire hazard, not forgetting the raucous racket they make.

Location

An unfussy feeder, you'll find 'Jakes' anywhere they can find food. Scavenging for scraps around picnic tables, walking amongst pedestrians in the rural areas picking over leftovers, or out in the country hanging around the feed troughs in sheep fields - yes, they know where life is easy. That's why when they find a free meal they'll regularly come back to it.

When feed is being put out for sheep or cattle, keep an eye out, as jackdaws sit - often in large numbers - in tall trees, on telegraph poles, then suddenly descend to steal what they want. They'll also invade farm outbuildings if the sheep are inside at lambing, and if left to their own devices will swarm over sheep pens, picking at anything that looks even remotely edible.

Locating the roost sites around buildings is simple - you only need find the white droppings familiar to all roosting birds. Come the spring, they are easily located due to their untidy nest building. Underneath a church spire, house roof space or tree with dense foliage you'll find thick twigs and sheep wool littering the ground - the two main materials the bird uses to build its bulky home. In areas near human habitation the nest is also padded out with any manner of litter it can find, such as bits of plastic, crisp packets, cloth - the jackdaw isn't house-proud. Finding a woodland roost is best done by observation in the evening. The bird's unmistakable call rings out over the fields as they fly into the woods to flock tightly together in dense trees. Roosts can be well established, deeper in the woods than a wood pigeon's and often shared with crows. But as with other roosting birds, once disturbed by shooting they'll very quickly move on. They feed liberally amongst other corvids, particularly rooks and crows. It's also not uncommon to see them feeding over pasture with woodies and even starlings.

Hunting Techniques

The time to target jackdaws is in the spring as they prepare to raise young. However, the sport with the birds in jackdaw 'plague' areas can last all year around and once you've found areas they regularly visit to feed you can be sure of some satisfying and challenging shooting. The main method is ambushing them near feeding areas. If they are visiting these feeding stations, whether outside or inside buildings, you need to be in a hidden position or if outside using a hide and always wear full camo clothing and use any cover that's available. The birds will noisily arrive very early in the morning in large flocks to gather on sitty-areas close to the source of food, before dropping down to dine. Then they'll leave, to return sporadically throughout the day in twos, threes or fours.

Not all the birds will disappear over the fields or back into the woods after the early morning feeding raids. In fact, even during the hottest of summer days a steady but dwindling procession will visit the area throughout the day. By mid-afternoon they will usually show up infrequently, and when they do it'll be in small groups.

Roost shooting isn't as profitable due to the shorter time slot you have and their intolerance of intrusion when disturbed and difficulty to spot. But again this is an area they can be targeted.

Kill-Zones

Like the jay and magpie this is a relatively small bird, therefore the kill-zones are equally small. Any popular calibre placed with precision into the head or upper chest cavity will see it cleanly dispatched. The chest shot will be most practical, as the bird almost never keeps its head still, constantly searching this way and that for something of interest. If shooting when they've entered a building then all safety aspects pertaining to indoor shooting apply.

Collared Dove

(*Streptopelia Decaecto*)

Habitat

The collared dove is a relatively recent arrival to our shores, but has now become firmly established as a common breeding bird. Originally they were from the Balkans, and the first reported nesting pair were seen in Norfolk in 1955. So it has established itself well in that time.

It feeds on anything from grain, corn or poultry food to household scraps. In dairy farming areas it will feed further out into the fields on anything from weed-seeds and young shoots to elderberries. They're a problem when in numbers as they will steal the feed from free-range hens, where they are often seen feeding right amongst the domestic fowl, and their droppings spoil stored grain.

The main place for the airgun hunter to target them is around the farmyard and surrounding buildings, so observation will soon show where they prefer to feed. Their call is the relatively high-pitched double 'coo', so common to doves of all varieties. The collared doves call is also a quite lengthy repetition of this set pattern. It has another quite raucous 'crying' call which is used when flying off or landing. Like other feathered felons, it will also have favourite sitty trees, ledges or beams where it will sit and digest large meals.

Hunting Techniques

Targeting collared doves is an act of pest control, not sport. Their tolerance of humans is their downfall and they will hang around much longer than any other quarry species, even more than established feral pigeon colonies. The three main methods of hunting are roost shooting, stalking and baiting down with grain. As soon as the dawn starts to break they'll probably already be out and about feeding. Although the bird tolerates human presence, it still has keen eyesight and if it does sense danger from you it will flutter up to move onto another part of the farm to feed. This can be infuriating, but it still won't be as shy or wary as any of the other legitimate quarry species. Roost shooting isn't anywhere near as productive as the other two methods, as they tend to roost in very small numbers. Baiting down is the most efficient method of making inroads into the bird's population where it has become troublesome. Once you have established an area that they frequent regularly, it's just a matter of putting out feed for them and leaving them undisturbed for a few days. This form of ambushing obviously necessitates the use of shooting from cover. This could be a perimeter wall, inside an outbuilding or from behind any type of static

farm machinery. Large bags can be built up shooting this way as, even when scared off, they will usually return quite quickly. Whether this is pure greed, or they are just plain dumb is anybody's guess. I reckon it's a combination of both! However, a trait they do display which is their downfall is that they tend to stay together in pairs and even when you shoot one, often the other won't fly far - sometimes only fluttering up to immediately settle back down, strutting around near its fallen comrade. These are the times where a multi-shot rifle is a godsend, as a quick back-up will usually end in you bagging a brace a time. As I said, shooting collareds is hardly sport.

Stalking is the most demanding method for dealing with the birds. Even though the doves might at times seem to be untroubled by the human presence, a person intentionally sneaking up on them is something else all together. When moving around farm buildings stay close to the wall and move slowly. If you shoot right handed, plan your route in an anti-clockwise direction so as to approach corners with the ability to peek around them rifle half-mounted at the ready. This allows you to keep most of your body concealed. (For lefties the opposite direction will obviously apply.) When sneaking quietly around in this fashion, be mindful to the possibility of coming across other people who might be working in the area. Remember, safety at all times!

Kill-Zones

Any of the popular calibres will suffice. Headshots and full-on breast shots will see this bird cleanly dispatched. Remember the head is very small so headshots takes accuracy, especially when shooting at awkward angles, so more often than not I'll always take this bird with a shot that punches straight into the upper part of the fragile chest cavity.



Grey Squirrel

(*Sciurus Carolinensis*)

Habitat

A prolific inhabitant of our forests and woodlands, it has been nothing but trouble to our forestry industry since its introduction to this country from its native North America in 1876. A busy rodent, it gnaws at anything, such as the growing shoots from young saplings, resulting in a stunted, unsightly tree. It also has another annoying habit of stripping the bark to reach the sap underneath. Most of these acts of destruction are due to the fact that, like other rodents, it needs to wear down its incisors due to their continual growth. Come the breeding season for birds, they're notorious egg thieves and fledgling killers.

Location

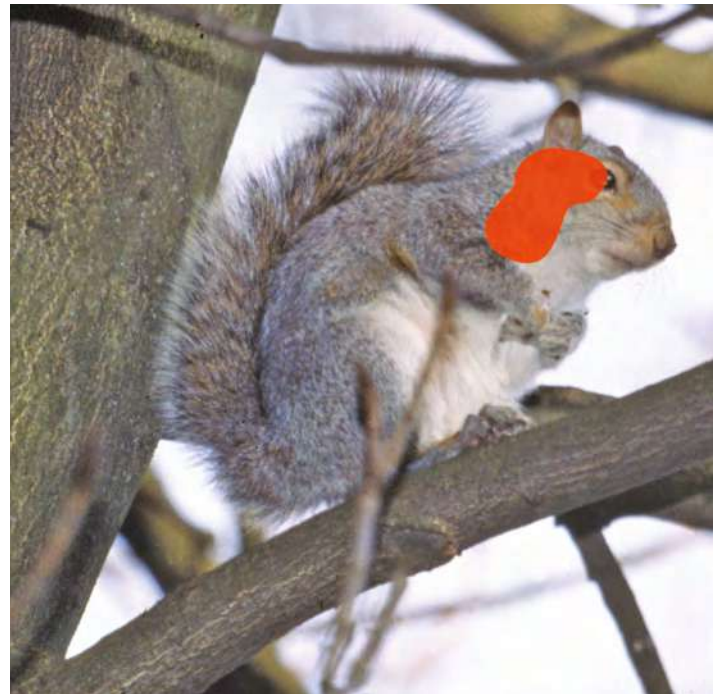
Signs of squirrel activity in the woods on your shoot will be easy to spot. They usually have a particular branch or stump from which they keep an eye on the trees around them, and this can often also be a favourite feeding spot. Around the bottom of these areas you will find pieces of stripped bark, broken husks, chestnut shells, split and gnawed fir cones, etc.

The drey (its home) is also easy to identify and locate once the trees have lost some of their foliage. This can look like a small nest but will often only be a scruffy collection of twigs, dead leaves and even pieces of bark jammed into the fork of a tree. Usually they're midway up the trunk as the squirrel isn't keen on repairing wind-damaged dreys perched in the upper branches. Occasionally it just takes up residence in an unoccupied crow or magpie nest, adding fresh building material when needed.

As with any form of hunting, location and patience is the key to success. A quick walk around a small copse or wood will soon have you find the tell-tale signs of habitation. These aren't always aloft either, as squirrels often have a favoured fallen log or branch they'll gnaw away at like hungry little beavers. When beech mast is ripening early on in the autumn, squirrels can and will stay in the trees but once the split-open husks fall, they'll follow the food source to where it's fallen on the woodland floor.

Hunting Techniques

The airgun hunter can target them in the trees, and where possible bait them down to a natural or artificially created feeding station. There is a technique known as drey knocking. This is more often used by shooters working in pairs whereby they 'knock' the drey with lofting poles to



send the squirrel out to an unexpected reception.

Wood walking is just as the name implies and can be allied with opportunist shooting, as the technique involves you moving slowly through woodland, scanning the trees for signs of activity.

Alternatively, you can set up near an area where you've found them feeding and wait in ambush. If it is a feed hopper they're visiting, then they'll come down to feed near it, but it often pays to give them an extra incentive. For bait, use assorted nuts and raisins, or cheap-brand breakfast muesli and put it out at the base of a feed hopper or favoured tree they use for descending from the canopy to bring them to the shooting position.

Make yourself comfortable, stay well hidden and still, wearing full camo, including facemask and gloves. But like any animal, they soon sense danger and once a few have been shot they'll wise up to the fact that hanging around on the deck isn't a good idea. But, thankfully, they're predictable little varmints and if they don't sit and hold on the ground, they might nick a piece of the tasty treats and hightail it to sit up on a branch nibbling the prize within range. The animal's inquisitive nature can also often be its downfall - one of the reasons using a 'squirrel call' can be worth a try too.

Kill Zones

Any popular calibre will suffice as long as your accuracy is up to the mark. Targeting these rodents isn't easy because the kill zones aren't large and if the squirrel is up aloft, the shot could be a tricky one.

If it's sitting side-on, the prime spot to aim for is the head down to the shoulder, but if it presents full-on, the higher part of the white underside is an exposed and tempting target. But it's deceptively tough, and even here the pellet can't be allowed to drop below the animal's front paws or else you'll miss a vital organ. If facing away, flat to a tree trunk, drill one right into the back of the head.

Magpie

(*Pica Pica*)

Habitat

Like the crow, the magpie can totally decimate the songbird population of an area. However, a born survivor, it'll just as happily feed on grain, seeds and insects which at certain times of the year make up the greater part of its diet. But there's no disputing the fact that it is a nest raider, taking eggs as well as chicks of all species. A common sight around housing estates as well as city-centre parks and gardens, its natural habitat is deciduous woodland and hedgerows. It's active throughout the year, but will retreat into woodland in harsh winters. Come the breeding season in spring into early summer, it will haunt the bushes and hedgerows. It's commonly found moving around areas in a seemingly non-stop search for food in small and even quite large groups. The latter gatherings are more commonly seen in winter, when like its relative the carrion crow it can flock with its own kind or mingle in with crows to feed over grain fields. The birds will eventually pair off to breed, which can be as soon as late January when they start to build nests, return to repair old ones or take over those of others. Breeding and laying takes place in April or May.

It will eat virtually anything, be it animal or vegetable, and although predominantly a scavenger, it will, like the crow, kill its own prey when the need arises. Chicks of

song and game birds present no difficulty, but on rare occasions 'a pack' of them has been known to kill a young rabbit.

Location

They often betray their presence by their distinctive 'chack, chack, chack' alarm call. When caught out in the open or alarmed, their response is usually a noisy one. However, in wooded areas, they are more likely to slip silently from tree to tree. Possessing good eyesight they will not stick around long, especially if they suspect even the slightest hint of danger. This, coupled with a preference for sitting high up in trees to survey the surrounding area, makes them almost impossible to sneak up on.

Nests are easy to find and are usually returned to year after year. These bulky domed structures are sometimes taken over in winter by squirrels and a fair kafuffle can be heard and seen whenever the two meet.

Hunting Techniques

The two main hunting methods are wood-walking and the more effective and dedicated method of baiting with a slit-open rabbit. However, it's worth noting that as with all techniques, prior knowledge of the area to be shot over can pay handsome dividends. They will more often than not be active at set times of the day - being in a hidden position at the right time can save hours of fruitless searching or waiting. Birds of a certain area will tend to have localised feeding spots and routes to and from them.

However, as this corvid is a scavenger it can stop off anywhere that might provide a likely meal, one of the reasons baiting down is so effective! Like the crow, the magpie is definitely one of the earliest risers of all flying quarry species. They are often active on the shoot a good half hour or more before dawn breaks. Also, some believe they're active so early because it gives them the opportunity to search out nests to raid as sitting female birds call out to males for food, or similarly fledglings are easier to hear at this time. Whichever it is, if targeting these wary adversaries you need to be out and in position, if baiting, at least an hour before sunrise.

Kill Zones

All popular calibres will suffice and you have definite choices of kill-zone depending on its attitude to your shooting position. If it presents itself side-on then a headshot or just forward of the wing fold will give an instant kill. But it rarely stays still and the headshot is a very small target. Alternatively, a full-on chest shot in the upper chest cavity is my preferred area of pellet placement. It's easy to see where the shot should go, as the bird has a large black bib extending from head and neck down to end approximately mid-point on the chest area.



Brown Rat

(*Rattus Norvegicus*)

Habitat

The brown rat is surely the most detested of all vermin. It will eat anything and carries all sorts of infectious diseases, including the potentially fatal Weil's disease. For this reason, never touch any you've dispatched without disposable gloves and dispose of the rat (and gloves) properly by incineration or burying. During the summer months they are spread far and wide across the countryside. When the colder weather comes they head for barns, grain silos and outhouses, in search of warmth, shelter and of course food. Spilt grain, chicken and pig feed - all make a ready food supply for the rat, whilst outbuildings, barns and chicken coops make ideal homes.

Location

On the farm, the first sign of rats is usually amongst the pigpens, cattle feed troughs and hen runs. Later or simultaneously they'll appear in and around grain silos and hay bales. You'll probably catch sight of one out of the corner of your eye as it scurries along the base of a wall, across a beam or girder making its way to food or back to an entrance to a communal home. Hundreds of them can occupy a labyrinth of tunnels and 'scrapes'. The rat causes two major problems. First it will eat a lot of grain but the major problem is the droppings left on top that permeate down into the cereal. Second is its penchant for gnawing anything that it comes across - like electrical cable, sacks, wood - and its burrowing into bales of hay, not only to rip out material to take away for nest building but also to find a cosy spot to raise yet another brood.

Hunting Techniques

Lamping is the best method, but the availability of decent nightvision equipment gives the hunter another and highly effective option. But let's concentrate on the tried and trusted traditional methods, the most widely known being 'baiting out'.

As the name implies, suitable bait is put into an area with the objective of establishing a feeding area the rats feel safe visiting. Food should be left out regularly for up to a week before any shooting is done. Anything will suffice, from bread to rotten fruit. Most that've done this type of shooting prefer certain foodstuffs. But putting out bait that can't be dragged away and eaten out of sight is far better. If there's one treat they can't resist its grated chocolate and peanut butter. Peanut butter is ideal as it sticks to the area you place it and the rats have to stick around to consume it. As an added incentive the grated chocolate is like icing on the cake when sprinkled onto it. There are



others including grated cheese or groundbait used by anglers. This small 'crumb' bait keeps the rat nibbling away on the spot.

The job is simple: choose a hidden shooting position within range. For situations such as this you don't need a gun lamp, as you can shoot by the illumination of a low power shaded light put near the baited area. However, I'll more often than not use a scope with a gunlamp onboard so as to target those detected in the areas out and away from the baited area on natural runs. This also allows you to actively seek them out on a walk-about, as does nightvision gear.

Kill-Zones

Though I'm a great believer in .177, I must admit it's a wiser to opt for the .22 when targeting rats at close range. Usually a pellet into the front third of the body will dispatch it. The .22 allows you more leeway from the exact point of kill whereas a .177 needs to go straight into the brain or heart. If the rats are hanging around, then I would use .177 but take full-on head shots and preferably the best shot by far is directly into its whiskery snout from the front as it peers down or up at you. Headshots are preferable and with this calibre essential. 'Ratting' can be very challenging and satisfying as every time a scaly tail snuffs it, you've done a public service - no arguing with that.

Don't shoot!

Rats can frequently be found near water - ponds, streams and rivers - but so can water voles which are a harmless and endangered species. Although sometimes called 'water rat' the water vole only vaguely resembles a brown rat in being small and furry. The water vole has a 'blunt' face (like a small guinea pig) whereas the rat's is pointed, also the water vole has a short furry tale whereas the rat has a very distinctive long bald tail. Under no circumstances should you shoot a water vole, and if you are not sure, then don't shoot.

Feral Pigeon

(*Columba Livia*)

Habitat

Ferals move where the food supply is most plentiful. In winter they do stay in the cities and towns where they feed on food leftovers. Come the spring and summer, many birds head for the country to feed on freshly sowed grain as well as farmland stubble. Though they usually nest on beams and amongst the roof space of disused buildings, they're not fussy where they sight their sparsely built nest of twigs. Any hollow or sheltered ledge will suffice but they do prefer to be indoors.

Location

Due to the bird's ability to adapt and its inherent nomadic nature, ferals can crop up almost anywhere on your shoot, but more likely than not around farm buildings. The main place you'll be able to shoot them in any great numbers is when they colonise abandoned buildings. Gaining access to shoot isn't difficult as any small business owner with a feral problem is worth approaching - as long as you do so in the right manner. If you gain permission, wherever practical and possible, shoot them off the roof, as inside work is specialised stuff but not beyond the capabilities of the practiced and disciplined shooter.

But before going inside to find them, you'll first see them sitting around the same areas for most of the day. The same applies to the barns and outbuildings on your shoot. Look to the ledges, ridging tiles and the sheltered 'sunny side' of the roof. They certainly seem to have favourite 'sitty' areas, especially in the colder weather where they can take advantage of the expelled warm air from chimneys and extractor fans.

Step inside a disused building and you'll have no trouble locating the birds as under the areas they roost and rest the floor will be a quagmire of droppings. This is one of the main reasons you'll be allowed - even asked - to shoot inside an old building they've taken over.

Hunting Techniques

It's hard to believe that you need official sanction to kill ferals. According to DEFRA (Department of the Environment, Foods and Rural Affairs), it has to be confirmed they are causing a major problem and you are only authorised to shoot them with the building owner's permission if other methods such as scaring and netting don't work.

Obviously the main qualifier for culling is they present a major health hazard which they undoubtedly do due to their droppings containing a multitude of dangerous pathogens and diseases. It goes without saying, don't

pick them up without gloves and make sure you dispose of them in the correct fashion.

Around the farmyard the method for dealing with ferals is exactly the same as for collared doves, these are stalking and baiting down with grain or bread. The most serious feral bashing (and rat shooting) will be done indoors. If there are no lights in the building, you can work with a partner operating a light or go it alone using a gun mounted lamping kit. This again is one area of shooting birds with the use of an artificial light source when given permission is allowed. The main factors to consider are the possibility of ricochets and the backstops behind the birds.

Kill-Zones

For this work I prefer a .22, though .25 calibre is as also an option. Here it can be useful if a building hasn't been cleared for a while, targets will more often than not be encountered well within 20 yards and that big piece of lead drops them like a stone. If shooting them off rafters or beams, an upward shot with a .25 will often lift them clear off their feet and drop them cleanly to the floor, saving you the job of recovering them from the rafters with a ladder.

Kill-zones apply exactly the same as they do for the wood pigeon but with one big exception: if you think the woodie is a tough bird then this is the 'Arnie' version. OK, somewhat of an exaggeration, but it is true to say whilst the woodie has soft downy feathers the feral has a relatively thick layer of full and very strong feathers all over its body - a sort of avian armour plating. These can absorb quite a lot of the energy - so place your shot carefully, especially if using the chest kill-zone.



Jay

(*Garrulus Glandarius*)

Habitat

Found in both broad-leaved and coniferous woodland I feel it's debatable whether the jay should even be on the airgun hunter's hit list, as it's not nearly as common as it once was in many parts of the country. But as it's deemed legal vermin for control with the air rifle and considered one of the main 'target' species it warrants inclusion here. I presume it's been tagged as vermin on the list for pest control because of its somewhat 'tenuous' links to the rest of its relatives in the corvid family. But rather than preach my own beliefs, I'll say the decision to shoot this species is best left up to the individual.

Originally there's little doubt the bird was targeted for its plumage which was used for decorating hats and is still used for the making of fishing flies.

Now resident throughout the UK, except in Northern Scotland, it rarely leaves the protection of the trees. It favours established oak woods but is equally at home around beech and hornbeam woods. In areas where these habitats are being reduced it will then move into suburban parks and gardens. Interestingly, the resident population figures fluctuate quite wildly because at times large numbers of Central European jays migrate here during early autumn.

Location

A shy and cautious bird, the jay must surely be one of the most difficult quarry species to find. In summer you'll most likely only hear its harsh screech as it sweeps



through a glade or alternatively in autumn through winter you can often see them flying in their characteristic bouncy fashion across your path with an acorn in their beak.

Like the squirrel, the jay will bury acorns for retrieval later when food is getting scarce. But obviously they don't remember where every one is so the upside for the natural environment is the jay is actually one of the most important natural planters of acorns, therefore helping to conserve and distribute natural oak woodland – yet another reason not to shoot them!

Even though it's so colourful, a jay can miraculously disappear in a tree, even one with sparse foliage. Whilst it will steal eggs off small finches and songbirds, it's nowhere near as bad as the magpie. It can easily thrive without thieving and pillaging due to its love of acorns, hazelnuts, beechmast, seeds and insects.

Hunting Techniques

Of all species the jay is probably only ever going to be encountered whilst opportunist shooting and wood-walking. Whilst at times quite nomadic, make note of an area you see them frequenting as the bird is territorial. During the breeding season it can be annoyed with a little owl decoy placed on its turf. Be in position and it could well show itself for a clear shot. Alternatively, at other times of the year due to their habit of carrying off food to bury, wait around these areas and pick them off as they go about their business. In fact, when feeding, they often carry food in their beak up to a favourite tree branch to pick out the kernels. Again, locate one of these through very dedicated and careful observation and this can be an area to wait in ambush for that lone solitary bird.

As this is a shy but busy bird, the first indication a hunter has that a jay is close by is often when the techno-coloured corvid flies past to disappear into the trees. In winter, this gives it away, as the bird lands amongst the branches then flits upwards until flying on, hardly pausing for breath. Jays hardly keep still. This is the main reason it's so hard to target. Also, it has the uncanny habit of keeping twigs and branches in-between you and it. In spring and summer, the only time you get to take a shot is when it peeks its head up above the leaves to take a look around before flying off. In fact, truth be known, hunters targeting squirrels deep in the woods will often be the ones who encounter most jays.

Kill-Zones

As this is a relatively fragile and small bird, the same kill-zones apply as with the jackdaw and magpie, as do calibres. These are the head and heart area. If you do shoot these birds at least know someone who will use the feathers for fly tying, or a retailer who will take them off your hands for this purpose.

Rook

(*Corvus Frugilegus*)

Habitat

The rook is an extremely social bird; it nests in the colonies known as rookeries. Few sights or sounds so epitomise the traditional view of the British countryside than the raucous activity that surrounds an established rookery in a woodland setting.

Although responsible for attacking freshly sown fields when it digs up shoots and seeds, not all the rook's activities are harmful to the farmer. Due to its taste for leatherjackets (crane fly larvae) and wireworms, it can serve a very useful purpose. But like all other members of the corvid family it'll pretty much eat anything. Unfortunately, like crows, they batter down the stems of growing corn and barley with their wings or simply land and walk forward primarily to get at the grain and seeds, but the 'flattening' damage to the crop left uneaten means it can't be picked up by the combine harvester. Over fields they dig around for worms and larvae and scavenge for the eggs of nesting ground birds. They're also attracted to freshly cut grass fields and ploughed crop fields. Areas with an abundance of molehills showing can also attract birds on a regular basis.

Location

Most deciduous woodland will have a rookery or two; so tall oak, birch or yew trees are the place to look. Finding one is easy - if the birds don't give themselves away with their non-stop cawing, then sooner or later, walking through a wood scanning the tree tops, you'll spot those big, untidily built nests that the birds return to year after year. In winter the rookery can be an eerie place with all the blobs of nests dotted above you, but with an uncharacteristic silence as the birds are feeding elsewhere. In fact, by mid-summer, once the young have left the nests, the birds form into huge flocks and leave. They usually roost in another location but in some parts of the country, as early as January, they start to return to the rookeries. At first they tend to use the trees nearby as sitty-trees as if getting used to the area again. Then in preparation for breeding they start to repair or rebuild a nest for the season's brood. This can be a clutch of up to five eggs, and laid so the fledglings don't all hatch together. This way, more are likely to be able to survive - unless you're there to knock them from the trees!

Hunting Techniques

The main method for controlling population numbers is what is known as 'brancher' shooting. This takes place around the first couple of weeks in May. For some reason, certain country folk like to pin this down to a specific day



- May 12th. To be there at the right time you need to keep a close eye on the rookery so as to take advantage of the young clumsily emerging to hop about near the nest. When the young rooks first leave the nest, they hang around on the surrounding branches. That's why they get the nickname of branchers. While in this fairly vulnerable position they're sitting ducks for the shooter below. Don't get the impression that this is easy, as the shots are often very challenging. After shooting you'll have a crick in your back and a pain in the neck from continually looking upwards.

It's best to wear full camo with gloves and facemask. Anything that helps you blend in below is a useful aid and don't go crashing about in the undergrowth beneath as you shift shooting position. It will keep the birds twitchy and have adults less likely to settle back. They'll constantly be calling an 'intruder alert' which the young rooks take heed of and sometimes hide back in the nest. Shooting upwards at awkward angles is difficult at the best of times, but couple this with the fact that the type of trees the rook inhabits means the twigs are plentiful - even starting to bud and sprout leaves - makes it even harder. There's plenty of opportunity for a pellet to get deflected on its way to the target. Always be aware of this and carefully place your shot.

Kill-Zones

As with the crow, it's often said that the prime kill-zone is the head. This is usually credited to the fact that the bird has a strong breastbone (keel) easily capable of deflecting a pellet, so head shots should be the name of the game. After much hunting experience this is yet another myth that I feel can be dispelled. Whilst the crow and rook have fearsome solid heavy-duty beaks, their skeletal make up is nowhere near as robust as the head and beak. The skull of a corvid is reinforced and is certainly thick to accommodate the proportionately large heavy bill. But the chest bone is only as strong as a bird of a similar size such as the wood pigeon, so upper chest shots are acceptable too.

Spring is in the Air

Pete Wadeson looks at the species and tactics to employ to enjoy the best of sport throughout spring into early summer...

Spring is a time of year that airgun hunters should look forward to. There is more quarry to choose from whose numbers need curtailing early, so they don't get into plague proportions later. There's still many opportunities in the woods before they get into full leaf, taking woodies and other avian species from sitty trees and targeting wood pigeon at roost. Squirrels are very active, their first litter of young often seen frolicking around, so target them while they're still naïve to danger. Alternatively, the fields will be coming to life as crops begin to grow, with fresh plants vulnerable to attack.

Wood Pigeon

At this time of year, roost shooting is still a favoured method for pigeons, as is targeting them in sitty trees; decoys are worth trying too. They'll be found visiting ivy-covered trees in search of berries and bushes that contain early spring berries, descending and gorging themselves until they are stripped bare. Early in the season food will be scarce, so as soon as a field is sown, they'll be there – erecting a hide and ambushing is another challenging method.



Squirrels

Before the woods get too dense, continue targeting these pesky bushy tails whenever you can. Walk quietly around the wood, slowly watching the branches and the ground for the flick of a silvery grey tail. Alternatively, if you know a place they frequent, quietly stand with your back to a tree trunk to hide your silhouette and wait for them to appear. Use full camo, including gloves and facemask, so as not to show any pink bits- if not they will spot you!

If the foliage is too heavy up above, then entice them down onto the ground with free offerings of food such as nuts and seeds. Be there in a hidden position within range, to hit them as they stop to pick up food. Squirrel calls are highly effective and imitate the chattering and barking they often make. The call will fire their curious nature, and often an area that shows no life or activity will suddenly show heads popping up and around tree trunks to see what the commotion is. The rest is down to you!

Rabbits

In most parts of the country rabbits will have already bred, and dependant on weather conditions, does could even be ready to have a second litter! For sport and practice, target the bucks and if you're not 'instructed' to decimate the area, the non-milky does too. If it's total pest control then there's no room for sentiment and picking off youngsters as they emerge from warrens or stops will reduce their numbers drastically.

Young rabbits are far less wary than adults and sit out betraying the positions of warrens and areas around cover where others emerge. Look for this and set up an ambush point using a cover screen of camo. Also, as the youngsters will venture out first, if you're shooting for the pot, wait a while until the far more worldly-wise adults appear before taking a shot. Another trick, while ambush shooting near well-used warrens, is to get into position very early, to try and catch them as they return from a night-time feeding spree.

Alternatively, early in the day or towards evening, you can try stalking as they feed besides the cover of hedgerows or out in the open fields. Lamping is always worth a go too! Targeting them at night is hard at the best of times, so trying your luck earlier in the year when

they won't be as lamp shy can be productive. However, if you're into night vision you can target them with utmost stealth using this technology.

Magpies & Crows

Arguably, the most destructive of the corvid species - magpies and crows will be paired off by now, and back at nest sites building or re-building old abandoned homes from the previous year. If you've done your homework over the winter months, you'll already know where these sites are and areas the birds frequent!

A method I employ at this time of year for certain corvids is to place a little owl or even magpie or crow decoy within their territories. The birds (including Jays) will mob the plastic intruders to scare them off their patch. If you're hidden and waiting, pick them off while they're preoccupied screeching and cawing at the deeks!

The all-time favoured method of using a bait to attract egg-thieving nasties is to use a slit open rabbit and snipe them from cover when they drop down to peck at the free meal. As this is the breeding season for many ground-nesting birds, also try using the trick of a few hens' eggs out in the open, bunched together with dead grass and hay, as a makeshift nest.

Like all avian species, but from the corvid family in-particular, crows will have favourite sitty-trees and look out points where they sit and 'caw out' their territorial rights. Find one of these areas and again, using cover of full camo (often a hide will be needed) snipe them off the branches.



Using a handy pop-up hide, you can quickly erect a fully concealed shooting position, as with these very wary adversaries 'being hidden from above' is more often than not required to get within range.

Some feel roost shooting is worthwhile, however targeting them at roost isn't easy but if you find an established site (as with all the airgun shooting techniques outlined) you'll need to be well concealed and wearing full camo. Because you're in the woods, if possible also use the shaded gloomy areas for your position. However, be prepared to only get the chance of a few shots before they leave and possibly never return. Unlike the wood pigeon, once they leave a roost site they can often seemingly disappear to another wood miles away or deep into the densest part of the wood.

Spotlight – Rooks

Although the traditional time and method to target Rooks is brancher (young birds) shooting on the 12th May – due to climate change this tactic is getting more difficult. However, they'll return to the rookery much earlier in the year to repair their bulky nests and also hang around on the edges during the evening before dusk. The adults are certainly not the easiest of birds to target but with caution and care – it's not totally impossible!

Be at the rookery at least two hours before dawn. When the adults emerge, waste no time in targeting them from the branches, as they'll soon be off to feed on the fields close by; demanding yet rewarding shooting. When the adults have wised up and left or keep flying high above the rookery, there might still be some late developing 'branchers' trying to fly that you can target as the day wears on.

If you've found a field rooks are feeding over, set up

a hide during the night and again be there waiting for them to come to feed. They rarely come to bait, but when they've found a natural feeding area, such as a freshly drilled field, they'll descend in large groups. You'll only have a short 'time frame' to target them but satisfying and rewarding shooting should you land in the right spot at the right time. But, as we know - of all the shooting disciplines, airgun hunting can be the most difficult – little surprise many welcome and embrace the challenge.

Jackdaws

Like most corvids, Jackdaws will turn up when least expected. They'll flit around the wood, visit sheep feeders put out near the backs of barns or in fields. Find where they are feeding and wait up in full camo in a hide and target them. They're quite a small bird, so be precise with your pellet placement.

Many times they'll have a sitty-tree or favoured fence posts, gates, telegraph poles etc. that they'll sit on early in the morning, after first leaving the roosting areas but near feeding spots, before they drop down to feed. Target them here! In many places that are overrun with them, they'll actually fly into barns holding either food or livestock and nick it. They will tuck in to the high protein feed pellets in the cattle and especially the sheep troughs.

Be waiting in the barn and catch them as they perch on the outer doors or once inside on the beams. Pay particular attention to the shots taken, don't attempt any off a sheep's back or those that are grubbing around within the pens. Get them above the livestock when sat on holding fences or overhead beams. Jackdaw roost shooting is again not the most practiced method, but find



a spot they favour and you can have some good sport with these raucous noisy birds while it lasts. They'll usually stay longer at a roost site than crows but if mixed in amongst them – expect sport to be very short.



Corvid Control

Jules Whicker tackles some of the airgun hunters' smartest quarry species – magpies, crows, rooks, jays and jackdaws

The Corvid family are probably the smartest birds, and indeed some of the smartest creatures, on the planet: with good memories and a remarkable ability to adapt to new circumstances. They are also social: pooling their senses to detect prey and danger, and communicating with one another via a wide variety of long and short-range calls.

These qualities make them very effective hunter-gatherers, which sounds just fine until you remember that their opportunistically omnivorous habits include digging up recently-drilled crops, robbing nests, killing chicks, and even making sure that weaker lambs never see the Spring, at which point it becomes clear why farmers, gamekeepers, and those with a genuine concern for songbird populations are generally keen for shooters to give them a bit of attention!

The main quarry here are crows and magpies, but rooks and jackdaws sometimes need controlling too, and – in boom years particularly – so may jays.

Tactics

As ever, the successful hunter will choose his tactics so as both to neutralise his quarry's defences, and to take advantage of them. As I have mentioned already, corvids have very keen eyesight, so attempting to stalk them is usually fruitless: instead you need to ambush them, using farm buildings, hides or plenty of camo, and keeping as still as possible. A silenced air rifle is the ideal tool for this kind of work. I have hunted corvids successfully with a single-shot break-barrel springer, but unless you're in almost total cover, you're much less likely to spook them if you use a multi-shot PCP. In either case, it's vital to keep your movements smooth, slow, and as small as possible.

Hide shooting

When selecting a hide, it's best to use something permanent and familiar, such as a building, or a screen made of natural materials that can be left in place all year round. If this isn't possible, then set up your hide as far in advance as is practical to give the birds time to get used to it. I like to occupy my hide before first light if I can, so that the early-morning scouting parties are unaware of my presence. If I can't get into position that early, I'll walk briskly down to the hide, drop off most of my gear, then make a rapid "tour of the estate" to move all the birds away without unduly alarming them, before returning to the hide and settling in. This manoeuvre prevents them seeing where I've chosen to set up, and may mislead them into thinking I am just having a "walk around" and so don't represent a serious or long-term threat.



the decoys will serve either to instil confidence or to provoke a challenge, either of which is likely to be to your advantage.

Calling

The other main way you can take advantage of corvids is by calling. Magpie calls are quite difficult to simulate, though shaking ball bearings (or other small, hard objects) in a plastic box or metal tin works OK, but crows can be called quite successfully using any one of a range of blown calls. By and large these sound like party trumpets, but each has a different tone and its worth having a selection of them and using them in rotation (one per outing) so that the birds don't come to associate any one of them with danger. When using a call, it pays to note the calls the real birds are making. In the area that I hunt, one caw can mean "I'm here!"; two can mean "Danger!"; three can be "Something interesting!"; four is a territorial call (very useful in the breeding season); and five or six indicates a high degree of excitement. There are other subtleties of tone and tempo, of course, but with a bit of practice you can draw in birds from a long way off and even stir them up into a frenzy when they arrive.

Another kind of call that can work well is a rabbit distress call or mouse squeaker, though these will often attract owls and hawks too, so always make sure of your target, especially in the twilight. Unfortunately, it isn't legal to use electronic recordings of any kind for shooting birds, even animal calls, or simulated bird calls, which rules out using remote-control electronic callers with suitable sounds on them. It's a pity, because setting a couple of electronic callers going when a flock of crows comes in will create bedlam. The good news is that just blowing on your call like mad at such moments can be enough to kick things off.

Hit the target

It probably goes without saying that there's nothing like creating a frenzy to give you the best chance of a good bag, but remember to keep your head, stay hidden, and (as always) don't miss: because zipping a pellet past a magpie's ear is a very effective way of letting him know it's high time to get the hell out of Dodge! Until you do miss, though, there's every chance the birds will be so transfixed by the sight of the bodies already on the ground that you'll be able to keep shooting.

Select the birds downwind or at the back of the pack (often the same thing) and if you've got both crows and magpies coming in, only go for the crows, since for some reason they're liable to make themselves scarce as soon as you drop a magpie. And even when they do push off, stay hidden and wait, because there's a good chance that adrenalin or curiosity will bring some of them back and let you add to the bag.

When it comes to not missing, don't forget that the comparatively short-range and elevated shots characteristic of corvid decoying will affect your point-of-impact. So practise on lofted targets, and, because you're shooting up into the air, factor in your danger area when siting your hide to avoid footpaths, etc. Take head shots only too, because, respect for your quarry aside, you don't want to be leaving your hide to dispatch a wounded bird while there's still a chance of some action.

The bottom line with corvid shooting is to develop a variety of tactics and never get set in your ways, because these wily birds learn quickly from your mistakes and – I'm sure – can pass on what they've learned to their fellows. But then that's what makes going after corvids a challenge, and success so rewarding!



Chimney Sweeping

Pete Wadeson faces some challenging high angle shooting when he evicts jackdaws from an old manor house...

Churches, old buildings, country-houses etc... they usually abound with one of my favourite corvids - that being the deceptively pretty jackdaw. A curious busy bird it seems to spend all of its day flitting hither and thither and depending on season, either in flocks or paired off building their familiar bulky nests. Where they become a nuisance is when they decide to pop in for a look in a chimney or begin to block up air vents.

Just gazing up at the high chimneys and turrets on the older buildings behind the lovely country house in the heart of an area I've permission to shoot, I always feel it an honour to be allowed my sport in such lovely and varied surroundings. But I have good reason to be controlling vermin here. The 'new house' lies in secluded grounds, surrounded by fields and close to a small wood. Close by but separate is the original old manor house and paddock courtyard, which at the time of this visit



was being refurbished. When workers leave this was also a playground for jackdaws, magpies and crows that come in from the wood.

Fire starter

The main features of the original manor house are chimneys – and lots of them. Some with quadruple pots on the impressive massive stacks that are needed to vent smoke out from a roaring log fire, which once again, some day soon, will be alight in at least a few parts of the building. If there's one crime the jackdaw seems to delight in doing it's building the bulkiest nest in any such opening which can create a major fire hazard.

As a matter of interest the largest nest from top to bottom I ever came across was nearly five feet. Now that's a lot of 'kindling' and an obstruction just waiting to ignite if the nest stays put and the home owners are



unaware of it until the inevitable. This is why around such buildings jackdaws need to be culled, until they leave to nest in the woods. So I always first look to these types of structure when shooting 'jakes' around old buildings and here was no exception.

As I readied myself to start 'nosing' around the empty outhouses I could here the familiar metallic tchak, tchak, tchak, call coming from the rooftops. Jackdaws flitted from one stack to another. Brazen in their inquisitiveness, most poking their heads down into the chimney pots or trying to hop in through the sides – yes this sure was a place they'd decided they liked.

Long shot

In my eagerness to get 'stuck in' on these corvids I tried a long shot at a 'jake' high up on the closest chimneystack almost as soon as I arrived. It was either going to be a clean head shot or a miss. Even though I'd zeroed the Deben Hawke 6 – 24 X 50AO IR Nite-Eye SR12 for 30-yds the little .177 Bisley Magnum went skimming well over its head, resulting in the bird flitting further along to land on another one of the many stacks that abound on the old manor house. Using the wall as cover, I ventured further towards the target and tried again, this time I solidly connected and sent the jake tumbling backwards from its lofty perch. One miss – one hit. I'll settle for that for starters.

This disturbance had a magpie fly up to sit chacking its alarm call well out of range but using the walls and shadows cast by the sun as it lowered in the sky. Once I got to the manor, I stalked slowly towards the main paddock area and the quarry that is usually found here.

Slowly taking a look around the corner, which if shooting around buildings (if right handed) you should do in an anti-clockwise direction (vice versa for lefties) so less of your outline is shown until you've checked what's around the other side. I carefully scoured the high roof structures on the old house, soon noticing another jackdaw preening on an adjacent rooftop.

Nut job

I cycled the loading bolt, and I connected again, this time with a clean headshot - the pellet striking home with a smack! At least half a dozen assorted previously unnoticed quarry flew away. I spied the opportunity to set up an ambush point, sitting part hidden in one of the old outbuildings. An old stone framed bare window offering a good view of the Jakes flying onto the surrounding rooftops. As I watched I noticed another pair of jackdaws now strutting up the slate roof tiles until they both stopped on the highest points.

Slowly raising my lightweight combo, I took careful aim and gently squeezed the broad trigger blade. Smack, a flurry of chest feathers and it was three down. Its pal flitted noisily away, not landing to offer a shot... a curious magpie did however land within killing range so that was

target number four. Nothing much presented for a good half hour so I took the opportunity to nip out for a quick clear up.

I made my way to where I'd previously seen birds flying into – a half re-built courtyard that had been completely gutted and part refurbished. It was plain to see the birds heading in looking for grub, possibly a potential roost site but already making a mess of the finely crafted wooden roof structure recently installed. I was shooting with the sun behind me, with the side of an old stone building helping to hide my silhouette... but the birds sat tight, high on the beams reluctant to fly out. Tricky upward freehand shots resulted in a few misses but another dead 'jake', and 'magpie' hit the deck.

Pre-emptive strike

As I entered the building I'd been shooting into to recover 'the fallen' I decided to wait inside to see if anything settled outside. Carefully leaning out to peer over a metal gate that had been leant on the only real ground floor access point, I noticed a pair of jays had flown into the closest tree. From the area I sighted them – they immediately became invisible. Incredibly how a bird with such striking plumage can disappear even in sparse cover.

Pre-empting at least one to reappear right at the top before flying out I stood up trying not to show myself leaning around to take the rested shot already sighting on the tops of the tree. Sure enough only the top third of its body appeared so without hesitation and with confidence in the Prairie Falcon/Hawke Scope combo I was using I took the jay clean through the chest at approximately 36-yards.

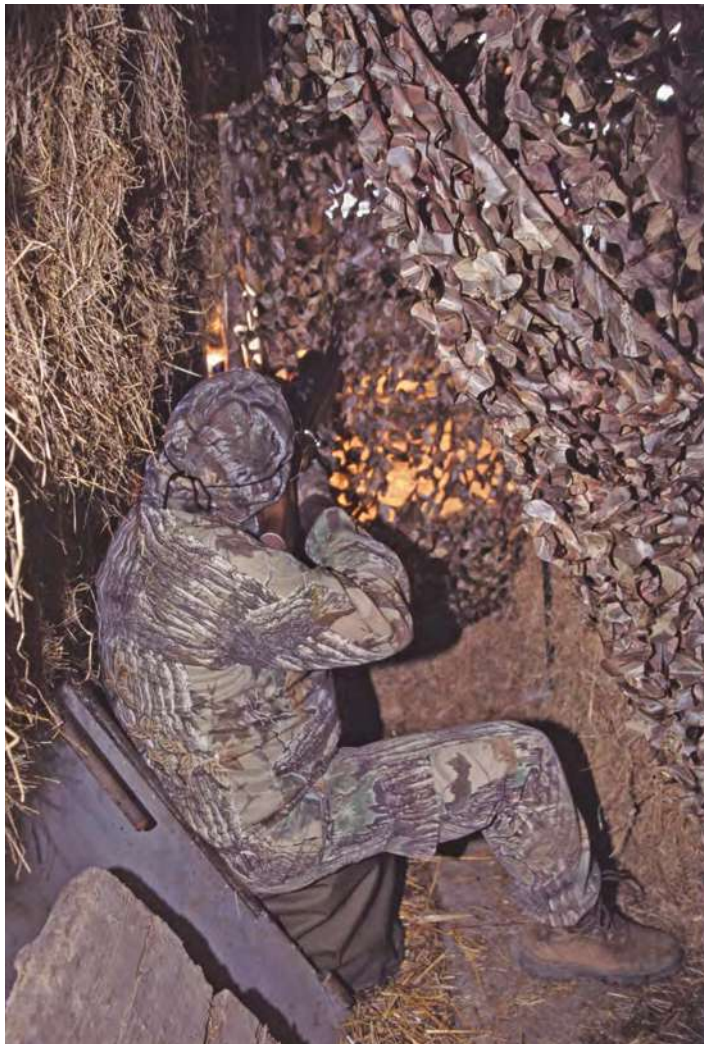
Any shot on a jay is a bonus, a successful tricky one even more so and equally important I never let the feathers go to waste as I use them for fly tying. In hindsight that was a fitting end to my early evening's chimney sweeping, as I was due to have a go at the growing trout population on a much improved local river thanks – but that's another story...



Shades Of Grey

Pete Wadeson recalls dealing with jackdaws causing problems in and around a large working sheep farm and learned a lot in the process...

Of all the corvids we're legally allowed to shoot, I feel the jackdaw must surely rate amongst one of the most intriguing. Its grey neck-cape gives the bird a look of a balaclava-clad burglar ready to get up to no good! Yet and despite its noisy, troublesome behaviour it's a pretty thing with its glossy black plumage, grey neck and head feathers. When seen close up you can't fail to be charmed by the pale blue iris of the birds very keen eyes. Its 'coughing' call is quite unique too, seemingly being an alarm as well as a call for general location and contact between individuals. This metallic 'tchak' or intermittent 'tcha-ak' sounding call usually heralds the birds' arrival on the scene but equally if being cautious it can appear as if from nowhere.



Prime Time

In rural areas, it can be problematic if they build their bulky homes in house chimneys. I've evicted them in these areas as well as from the spires of 'remote' churches, even located their nests in fully foliated trees close by. They are easily discovered due to the thick twigs and sheep wool that litters the ground below – which are the two main materials the bird uses to build its very bulky home. Locating roosts are more often discovered by observation in the late evening. The birds 'coughing' call ringing out over the fields as they fly deep into woodland. I prefer to target them on established feeding areas.

Like crows they're drawn to the presence of sheep. Not only in the fields, but anywhere the animals are fed on sheep pellets the jackdaws can acquire quite a taste for this high protein foodstuff.

It was on the invite to shoot on a friend's permission that I experienced this behaviour first hand. It was new to me, but in areas heavily populated by the birds it's a headache for those making their living from such farming practices.

My 'host' gave me the low down on the situation and their misdoings - by learned behaviour as soon as the feed was put out for the sheep indoors or out they would be virtually 'queuing up' ready and waiting to steal what they could. In this instance they were brazenly invading the farm buildings where the sheep are housed at lambing and some other times of year.

Stop Thief!

I'd never previously witnessed this scenario when jackdaws had become overly confident to the point of entering outbuildings en masse to feed. Here, they would first land anywhere close to the entrance point that offers them another quick look to check to see everybody has left the building. In this case it was a large gap left for ventilation between the top of the large double steel doors at one end of the large barn

They'd alight up on top of the doors, have a quick look around, before descending to sit right on the edge of the feed troughs in the sheep pens pecking at the pellets,

always seemingly taking one before they flew back out again. If they've already raised young and the juvenile birds are flying with them, they can even spend part of the day in the outbuilding - strutting arrogantly around or flitting hither and thither. They often call the magpie a thief, however just as fitting in this case is the thieving jackdaw!

Knowing the exact time the farm hands put out the feed meant my shooting acquaintance and I could be ready and waiting to give them a lead surprise. Though fully camo'd up you can't disguise the unmistakable 'shape' of the human form - a recognisable danger signal to any quarry. So, when shooting these intruders indoors, a hide of some sort is almost always needed. With no shortage of materials in the outbuilding to build a makeshift one such as wooden pallets, sheets of corrugated iron, heavy-duty cardboard sheets, old empty grain and feed sacks etc. Always when possible I prefer to use certain base materials if present, and thankfully they were in abundance here - hay bales. With a bit of ingenuity and suitable amount of camo netting you can construct a hide that allows you to be fully hidden yet affording a good field of view of the marauders comings and goings.

Inside Job

I set up a shooting position next to a large stack of bales that would serve as cover from one side. Using a few



of those already starting to come 'untied', I built a base next to it and stacked a few on top of each other to form a rest for my aim. For the framework of the hide I 'stuck' a couple of poles vertically into the lower bales. Then I used garden canes as cross pieces from the top of the poles and pushed into the adjacent wall of bales, and then covered the framework with camo netting. A clever creation if I say so myself!

I quickly slipped into the hide waiting patiently as the lads put out the sheep feed and watched them leave to get on with the many other 'jobs' around the farm. Within a minute or so the first greedy jakes alighted on top of the barn doors as I explained and then flew straight in. I left these to give the others outside time to feel safe before following suit.

There's nothing difficult about this type of shooting as they land, lean forward, so full on chest shots had every bird taken this way drop like stones onto the hay strewn feed pen below. Shooting near livestock is always a case of 'safety first,' so no shots were taken below a 40° upward angle.

Unfortunately, it doesn't take more than a dozen shots before the birds all leave to only sporadically return in twos and threes. Like other quarry they then wise up and stay 'chacking' away loudly outside with only the occasional foolhardy bird zooming in to 'risk it for a biscuit!'

Keep Still

Not all the birds disappeared over the fields or back into the woods after the early morning feeding raids. A dwindling procession visited the area, but from mid afternoon they stayed outside. Now on the opposite and outside of the barn doors, I soon spotted the ideal place to shoot from. A hedge stopped approximately 40yds from the back of the barn but well within range of the areas they were frequenting to land.

Here I sat well back so the foliage of the hedge gave me some cover from above, but a clear view of the sitty-areas. When shooting in this manner, it's preferable to have the birds come in small numbers, especially pairs as often you can shoot one whilst the other will at first 'fly up' but circle around the area calling down to the fallen bird. Sometimes it will land back on the sitty-area (which will be high structure such as a telegraph poles, rooftop etc...) but only land briefly to survey the scene below before flying off.

In such an agitated state; it won't tolerate the sight of any movement on the ground. So as soon as it folds its wings to land I always had my sights trained on the area. The last Jake I shot was memorable as it flew out of the barn and landed on the telegraph pole my sights were already trained on. Without hesitation I slipped the trigger, it fell like a stone and upon retrieving it to my surprise it still had a sheep pellet in its beak. Remorse - no way! They'd had their fill and the sheep need the extra protein not forgetting the farmer has to earn a living doesn't he?

Crowd control

With precious pheasant poults in the pens Pete Wadeson goes on patrol to help a keeper with a corvid problem...

We owe a lot to the often overlooked work of part time gamekeepers. Men and women who do a lot of hard and sometimes thankless tasks for the sheer enjoyment of working with the countryside and its inhabitants to make a balanced environment.

This brings me to mention Mark, a keeper I know, who is kind enough to allow me to shoot on his 'patch' of the Black Country. Mark works long hours in his role as keeper for a syndicate shoot. With his experience he knows how and when things need addressing, and at this time of year he is very concerned about the pheasants they rear for the season and of course is all too aware of the need to keep on top of predation. That in a way is where I and many others like me come into the equation, as most keepers if approached correctly will allow an airgun hunter to help out (especially if you have references or recommendations) in keeping pest species in check be it pigeons, squirrels, rats or as is the case in point here – corvids.

Penned in

Although rats can be particularly troublesome around the pens, the main scavengers and the ones I was here to deal with were the corvids; mainly crows and jackdaws that get into the pens to steal the feed – and also causing stress to the very young poults making them skittish and liable to hurt themselves. So it was hardly surprising that after a phone conversation, Mark was happy to have someone he trusted sit near one of the rearing pens to deter and dispatch any pests that might come around.

Mark greeted me, shotgun over his shoulder as he was out himself to take care of pests he might see away from the pens. Obviously with poults you can't be blasting a 12 gauge right alongside or overhead, but a silenced 12ft lb air rifle is just the tool for sitting up close by and waiting for the black stuff to show.

Late start

Mark had sussed out the corvids were dropping in during the evening rather than early morning so I got there around 5pm to check things out. When we met up I listened to my host's advice on where the birds had been seen congregating and equally importantly where I could go and not go. Always listen and adhere to your host's instruction



– they say it for good reason - not because they're trying to limit you.

Armed with information I decided to put out a few corvid decoys on and near the pen, then do a circuit of the area. As I walked the perimeter, I noticed a few crows skulking in the trees on the side that faced deeper into the wood. On seeing them I immediately froze, watching motionless as one with its back to me began preening itself. Easily within range it had its beak right down in its wing fold, obviously picking out the ticks that can infest the bird's heavy plumage. I'd already fully camo'd up, so I carefully and slowly lowered myself to a kneeling position using what ground foliage there was for cover. I didn't risk moving closer as I knew I'd be noticed. A pellet straight between the shoulder blades is the kiss of death for any feathered felon and sure enough after taking a careful aim, another crow bit the dust! I retrieved the body and marvelled at the size of the beak in relation to other birds on our hit list. It's little wonder fledglings and even small lambs have little chance against this formidable weapon. However, this one wouldn't have the chance to use that anymore.

Sitting it out

After the walkabout, I chose a position that allowed me to use a large tree strangled with ivy to disguise my silhouette

and settled down to patiently wait for the unwanted visitors to arrive. Sure enough, the birds were so confident feeding here they soon arrived in larger groups and more than one presented a clear shot. Picking my target, I slowly raised the rifle, centred the cross hairs on the chest of the closest which happened to be a jackdaw and with a gentle squeeze and 'whisper-quiet' muzzle report thanks to the very efficient silencer I was using my target tumbled to the ground.

Soon a couple of magpies appeared as if from nowhere, to alight on top of the side mesh of the pen but before I could draw a bead they'd flown inside where I could see one furiously pecking on the deck but as it wasn't a safe shot, I had to leave it be. This brazen landing had obviously given the crows confidence too, and spotting a couple closing in as they slipped from tree to tree I anticipated the area they would more likely appear in clear view and shouldered the rifle for a quick shot.

One of the pair did just that, so carefully but without hesitation I took a bead on its upper neck, took the shot and it crashed down near one of the magpie decks I'd set out on top of the pen mesh earlier. Again the other birds took up and away to disappear into the wood. The light was low but still streaming in strands through the side of the trees, making the area a tranquil haven until an unmistakable raucous cawing heralded more crows were about.

In range

You can't go craning your neck around continuously looking up or moving or you'll be spotted, so with my eyes shaded with the peak of my cap I concentrated my attention on the top of the pens and branches of trees close by where Mark had previously told me they gathered. He wasn't wrong, as eventually the black menaces arrived in a steady stream but out of range until



two's and three's glided over to land closer on top of the mesh of the pen side.

Taking aim at the top of one of the bird's heads to allow for this longer range shot and just as I was about to slip the trigger it started preening and casually ruffling its feathers. Holding on aim, I could clearly see through the scope a group of crows swoop past just behind the bird I was targeting and half expected it to follow them in. Luckily it stayed as it was, and thankfully looked up intently at the other birds as if waiting its turn to dine.

With its head lifted I knew it was now or never for this shot and already on aim I took the same mark and squeezed off. With a smack the bird was knocked off the wire and landed stone dead just outside the pen alongside the low electric fence. Once again the others flew down into the wood cawing loudly, some circling above and others calling unseen from nearby treetops. Unfortunately the dead bird was in plain sight and sprawled unnaturally so I retrieved it. Again I marvelled at the size of the beak in relation to its head. I also noticed the pellet entry hole below the eye, upper neck where it'd gone up from the shooting angle straight into the brain. Instant kill!

Fading light

I returned to my comfortable ambush spot and it soon became obvious I'd chosen a good position as a variety of corvids once again arrived in the trees close by. This was also testament to when good choice of camo pattern can really help you succeed in these situations as this new influx of corvids weren't looking in my direction but directly into the pens. They were intent on getting their fill and hopped around branches keeping just out of range until one came around the left hand side of me to perch on a thick branch with a very commanding view of the pen. The trunk of the tree almost obscured me from its view, so taking a stable shooting position I sighted in and dropped it out of the oaks. Before the light faded to the point that I couldn't target with assurance, I took three more crows, another jackdaw and a couple of magpies.

Mark returned just as the light had all but gone and said he'd blasted a few on the outskirts of the wood. He seemed pleased to see I'd bagged a decent short session bag. He gladly took them off me to put out in the open for the following few nights as in a couple of days he planned to be back suitably armed to wait up himself for a fox he knows has been visiting the pen. Archie Coats would be proud of our 'part-time' custodians of the countryside!



Farm Yard Foray

Pete Wadeson recounts a typical summer trip around the farmyard...

For the airgun hunter there's one place that will always have a steady stream of visitors during any summer's day and that's the farmyard - a prime example where and when the 12ft/lbs air rifle is in its element.

Early Start

The day began like many others at this time of year. I watched the forecast, rang the farmer, he gave me the go ahead to have a look around the farm yard, telling me where he'd be and the likelihood he'd have a delivery of animal feed that day. So I knew where people would be and they knew of my presence. This ensures the shooting session will be safe.

I decided to build a quick makeshift hide out of old pallets and bits of wood I found in the barn to conceal me. The ideal spot was an old trailer left out at the side of the main barn for top cover. Quickly putting up the



pallets to fully surround me and using lengths of old wood as slats to shoot through I decided I'd give it a few hours sitting in wait rather than continually following the birds around in the vain hope one would get too cocky and stay within range.

Sitty tree

Within 15 minutes or so I was in the 'hard hide', fully cam'd up with my Daystate Air Ranger rested on a Stoney Point Explorer Tripod, cross hairs trained on the upper branches of a well used sitty tree at the side of





the yard where magpies and other quarry often frequent.

Should one appear I only need make the least amount of movement to sight in on a target.

It was almost an hour before a young magpie flew up from the back of the far outbuilding and landed in the dead tree presenting itself perfectly for a shot. I placed the cross hairs square on its fragile chest, squeezed the trigger and down it went. In that instant the parent birds previously unseen flew up out of cover screeching at the event but it was too late. Being older and wiser they didn't stay still but two more of what I presumed were their brood appeared and landed almost in the same spot I'd knocked the other from. The adults by now where going crazy trying to fly their family off, but I was on song and on target so another 'got lead and dead' as they say. This time they all flew off, so I moved to another position I'd already prepared.

Be prepared

In any hunting, preparation reaps rewards and before beginning this shoot I'd already been to the upper story of one of the barns that overlooks the roof tops of the cow sheds and slid open the doors that are used for dropping hay down for the cattle to feed on in winter. I left the hide and strolled in plain view across the



farmyard but always looking around for any movement that could be a pest. Sure enough at the bottom of a stack of corrugated iron I spotted a big fat rat. In summer they usually frequent the fields but every farm has its 'stay at home' lazies. I walked closer using a tractor as cover and rested my leading arm on the spreader rig on the back. From this rock steady support, I took aim, squeezed the trigger and the rat just rolled over stone dead on the gravel. This is the beauty of this type of shooting, move slowly, keep tuned in to your surroundings and you never know what might pop out next.

Mixed bag

By now I'd reached the other main barn, entered and then climbed up the wooden ladder to the upper floor to see if anything was by now sunning itself on the far side of the farms roof tops.

Sure enough a few feral pigeon and collared dove where snoozing. I'd used two large hay bales to mask my approach to the opening that was virtually blocking the view from outside. Now on this farm the owner likes to see a few collared doves around and they cause him no problems, so ignoring these pretty pests I again carefully placed the crosshairs and hoped the twitchy feral watching in my direction wouldn't spot me. I took the shot and the feral went tumbling over the other side. I stayed up aloft a good few hours and accounted for two wood pigeon that flew over to land and rest on various high points. I even managed a raucous crow that followed almost immediately after. Always on the look out for a free meal it must have thought the last woodie I shot had decided to commit suicide by jumping off the cowshed!

Deciding whether or not to stretch my legs and go for a wander, I heard and saw magpies congregating amongst a few plastic covered hay bales that were piled neatly in a corner at the far side of the yard. I used all possible cover of the buildings and farm machinery and trailers between my position and the birds. They were fascinated by the bales, pecking and ripping at the plastic wrapping open. Using every bit of cover I crept from oil drum to trailer to tractor to woodpile. Yep, I was spotted but I reckoned they'd only flown over the bales to drop down into the adjacent field. Now this was much easier. Using the bales as cover I crept up to the back. Peeking over the rest of the brood and adults where now spread out at approximately 40yds from my position, totally engrossed in picking at the freshly cut grass field. Allowing almost an inch for holdover for this longer shot with my .177 trusty old Logun Solo, I took the closest bird clean through the upper back for an instant kill. As I walked back to collect up my gear I even managed another feral off one of the rooftops.

You may think it was a lot of effort for relatively few pests. But I've constantly been back, bagging more, and believe me the songbirds now have an easier time of raising their young with each passing year.