

The happiness dividend in obeying the call of the wild

Does a formal day's shoot at reared pheasants or partridges catch the breath quite so much as the hunter's stalk of a humble pigeon? Sir Edward Dashwood reflects

MOST Guns seek quality in their shooting, and that magic ingredient which makes the day special for themselves and their guests, be they family, friends or clients. But what is true quality, and where is it to be found? How can we measure such an ephemeral ingredient? To quantify an experience and the concept of enjoyment is not easy. However, certain factors play a huge part, which we can evaluate.

Starting with the quarry itself, if it is truly wild then one need ask for little more, as most Guns would agree. What this really means is that a wild quarry makes shooting totally unpredictable—often, in terms of bag numbers, unpredictably low, as many who have chased an elusive grouse or waited fruitlessly by a duck pond will know. Yet such experiences can be the most memorable and enjoyable. I have seen wonderful wildlife on such occasions, albeit not the species I was trying to shoot at the time. The sight of two courting hedgehogs beneath a high seat I was occupying while waiting for a roebuck one evening springs to mind.

This is not to suggest that if the intended quarry is not wild then the sport will be poor. More and more reared bird shoots are being run extremely well and are consistently de-

livering great sport. Some Guns prefer this type of shooting, knowing precisely what they will get. Their guests may be travelling a long way, and they want to guarantee them a good time (as they see it). So they opt for the certainty of, say, a 200-bird pheasant day, rather than the unknown quantity of a wild bird shoot. Do their guests see it this way?

We do not know the answer to this question, but it is worth remembering that we are talking about sporting enjoyment, not mere entertainment. Bag size is only one element



Pintail duck: 'True sport is about the unpredictable.'

of this, and a very small part if everything else is good. My advice is to take the plunge: seek wild game and forget bag size—for when wild shooting is good, it is so good as to wipe the slate clean of less productive days. Part of the pleasure must be in the instant realisation that you are taking part in something extraordinary, such as getting under a really good pigeon flight line. Rather like watching the Welsh win the Six Nations rugby Grand Slam, knowing you are witnessing a rare event serves to heighten the thrill.

What other rewards come with wild game shooting? Often you find yourself in a wonderful habitat in some fabulous part of the country. Grouse by their nature inhabit the high ground, morally and literally. Walk-up ptarmigan or stalk red deer and you can only



Greylag geese: If a man could choose from every kind of shooting (and the author can), what would the best of it be? Dog, gun, wild country and miles on foot is his verdict.



Red grouse: 'On high ground, morally and physically.'

be in glorious countryside. The same is true of wildfowling around our coastline. Even sportsmen can forget how privileged Britain is to have this natural asset—but I have often found that those who maintain habitats for wild game also have an extraordinary love for the countryside and for their sport. Accordingly their care of the land, and their attention to detail, make it a delight to be there—no wire- or plastic-infested woods for them.

The flip side of being at high altitude or on the coast is that the weather can be as unpredictable as the quarry. Every shooter I know realises that wild game is weather dependent, particularly the migratory species. Wildfowling and pigeon shooters like good winds, woodcock usually need a hard frost, and grouse shooters want anything but fog. Yet I read an article by a distinguished shooting writer recently in which he admitted that, were it not out of respect for his host he might have preferred to stay indoors on really wet days. Now, I know that he wears spectacles, but this is bizarre. The red-letter days in my sporting life have invariably been when the weather was really extreme—high wind, rain or snow. Is it our British sense of humour, making us enjoy seeing others even colder or wetter than we

are ourselves? Or is it that birds fly higher and faster and the whole sporting experience is more thrilling on such days?

Another attribute that wildness brings is the very quality of the game. Not only do wild birds tend always to provide a magnificent sporting target—as indeed can reared pheasants and partridges—but each individual bird is invariably very beautiful and in good condition. Grouse in particular can of course succumb to disease, and woodcock and other migratory birds may struggle in a severe winter, but, just as in Africa, the rule of the wild is that weaker individuals do not survive. Though even poorly-bred pheasants and partridges have a strong chance in the protected environment into which they are released, virtually every woodcock, teal or woodpigeon I have seen shot has been a near-perfect specimen. Not only this, but much of our wild game has to be 'streetwise' and develop its own survival methods.

Again, this makes the shooting more challenging. How often have we Guns seen a woodpigeon look sideways down at us as it swerves to avoid us, or a woodcock do a complete u-turn in mid-air, or a teal put on



Woodpigeon: 'Wonderful sport and the best value.'

its after-burners and fly straight up and away.

Where there is wild game, if the habitat is good for one species it will invariably attract others and thus give variety. This can be immensely exhilarating. We shot a small thicket in Pembrokeshire last year which contained teal and mallard from a central pond, woodpigeon, several woodcock, magpies, jays, a few wild pheasants and a fox. The whole area was not more than two acres.

Unpredictability, variety, superb countryside and a healthy, challenging quarry: all appeal to the hunter-gatherer in us. Bags being smaller, the chance is that we really are getting 'one for the pot', and feel a real sense of achievement—like catching a wild salmon instead of a stocked trout. If we miss, we are



Woodcock: 'Survival of the fittest brings perfection.'

unlikely to be able to repeat the exercise the following week, as on a reared bird shoot. I have not mentioned the cost of shooting wild game as it varies so much. Wildfowling and pigeon shooting are the best value sport; driven grouse is probably the most expensive. These prices generally relate to the cost of maintaining the habitat for each species.

Most sport involving wild game is likely to involve us in a long journey—to East Anglia, Scotland and the Isles, Cornwall or the Welsh coast. Furthermore, wild game cannot be the only answer for shooters, as there will never be enough to satisfy even a small percentage of the demand. Even Spain has recently succumbed to this problem, and there are precious few all-wild partridge shoots left there. My answer to maintaining quality in my shooting is to enjoy it all—but if we set aside some time and money for wild bird shooting we will not be disappointed.