

Field Sports at Home and Abroad

SPORTING GOSSIP

(By Richard L. Pocock.)

The Wonderful Whatisit?

This from Duncan. A rancher of the neighborhood killed a cow, not in mistake for a deer, but deliberately, for beef. At the scene of the butchery of the bovine remained traces of the slaughter. That night the rancher was awakened from dreams of prime cuts by a hideous snarling and yelping outside the house. Looking from his window towards the place where poor Bossie had become beef, he saw the shadowy forms in the dim moonlight of a pack of long, lean wolf-like animals which were snarling and snapping over the gory remains. He reached for the trusty fowling piece and discharged it in the direction of the savage animals, and could see that the shot had taken effect and that the pack which made off at the shot had left a stricken comrade on the field. As they might return at any moment to the scene of the feast, he deemed discretion the better part of valor and waited until daylight before going out to see what kind of a wild beast had fallen to his gun.

Bright and early he was out to examine the carcass of the slain. There it was sure enough stretched in death, a long, lean animal, with coarse, thick hair and a patch of white on the breast. What it was he had no idea, a new species to him at any rate. Friends were called in and shown the body, none of them could tell what it could be, a wolverine was suggested, but no wolverine do not hunt in packs, and one of them knew a wolverine when he saw it and this was not it. Too small for an ordinary wolf, it was unanimously decided that the rancher had achieved fame by the killing of a new species of savage beast hitherto unknown to science as a native of Vancouver Island. Carefully the beast was handled and wrapped in sacking to be despatched to the Curator of the Provincial Museum for him to decide the genus and species, name it for the rancher, mount it and add it to the Provincial collection of natural history specimens.

It went the next train "with a note to explain," and was eagerly opened by the curator. Tenderly it was handled and unwrapped, and then the curator lay back and laughed, and laughed till he was sore before giving his opinion that the new species of Vancouver Island big game should be properly named "Canis Siwashii vulgaris, sive Duncanensis," or in the vulgar tongue, a common, very common, Siwash mongrel cur!

Grilse in Saanich Arm

At the moment of writing snow is coming down thick and fast, and the very word fish sends a cold shiver down one's back, but as a matter of fact in the last few days when the weather has been kinder, some excellent sport has been obtained with the "grilse" on Saanich Arm by those who have been brave enough to venture out and chance the vagaries of the weather clerk. Sixteen and twenty to a boat were reported last Sunday, and a few spring salmon have also been landed, these latter fish in the very finest condition at this time of year both from the point of view of the epicure and of the sportsman. The winter "springs" in my experience put up a much better fight than the "springs" which are caught in the fall, and are not nearly so apt to go to the bottom and sulk; possibly this is owing to the difference in temperature of the water in the estuaries and inlets, the colder the water the better the fish being an indisputable axiom of the angler.

Ducks and Geese

The cold snap after the long spell of mild wet weather was a godsend to the wildfowl, some excellent bags of ducks having been made, notably at Cowichan flats where one sportsman reported getting 24 widgeon to his own gun in a little over three hours. This for these days is "going some". A few brant have been shot, but no very big bags have been heard of to date.

A New Game Act

Now that the legislature is in session renewed interest is being shown by sportsmen in the matter of the new game act, which was referred to us, to bring the existing regulations more up-to-date and also make them a little less unwieldy and hard to master. This is the time for sportsmen who really have the matter of better game protection at heart to bestir themselves and offer their opinions and suggestions, instead of waiting to see what eventuates and then kicking at what does not suit them when it is too late. A correspondent wrote me a very kind letter some time ago in which he suggested that a sportsmen's league should be formed open to all those interested in sport; this seems to me to be an admirable suggestion; the opinions of the majority of sportsmen should be of great value to the legislators in framing a new game act, and if a meeting of all interested were called and the whole matter discussed and resolutions passed determining what in the opinion of the now large body of Island sportsmen would be of advantage for the betterment of the game laws of this section of the country, and these resolutions forwarded to the proper quarter, it seems reasonable to suppose that

careful consideration would be given to the suggestions and recommendations they contained.

From my own opinion and that of many others who have asked me to voice their sentiments and keep hammering at them would humbly suggest that the time is more than arrived for the imposition of a gun license, and also for a day bag limit, also for some definite attempt to enforce the fishery laws relating to the taking of game fish. As it is, some fishermen open the trout season when they think they can catch trout, others find that their conscience urges them to stay their hand until March 25, no matter how tempting the weather and the reports of other big catches may be.

WILDFOWLING IN IRELAND

We were living in the country some two miles from one of the big Irish loughs, where wildfowl love to congregate and where fowlers were not too numerous. There had been a long spell of mild weather, so that marsh birds, such as ducks, snipe, and plover, were fairly plentiful, yet, with the exception of snipe, almost unapproachable, save during flight time. Our bags for the first week were not very heavy, though varied, which pleased us most. During a tramp at daybreak there was always a chance of a few shots at fowl as they flew back to the lough from their night feeding grounds inland, of which there were many, consisting of small patches of disused or "cut-out" bogland, which, after lying waste for a number of years, had developed into bottomless quagmires, where the willows and rushes sprang up and flourished, forming ideal feeding grounds for duck and snipe.

Snipe were found in these small bogs at almost all times; in fact, they were feeding places for some and daytime retreats for others, which fed by night on the surrounding meadows, or travelled perhaps many miles further afield. There was great excitement in going round these rushy plots of an early morning, and it just suited two guns, one taking either side. We generally allowed an outlying snipe to get off scot-free for fear of disturbing the best place, as it was not unusual, on reaching the fringe of the bog, to see a fine mallard, in all his glory, spring up in the centre, generally accompanied by one or two ducks; or, if the previous night had been stormy, probably some of these little bogs would contain a score of ducks. However, it was ten to one that some of them would detect us long before we came within shot, and, after a fly round, in which they took care to keep just out of range, they would head away for the waters of the big lough. Nevertheless, these manoeuvres did not always prove successful, for a charge of No. 1 shot occasionally brought one down stone dead from what seemed an almost hopeless height. On these occasions Ned made good use of his heavy 12-bore, though he hardly ever used anything larger than No. 5 shot, which size, we found by experience, to be about the best, except when there was a strong wind, when heavier shot proved more effective. The great charm of the morning shooting in these parts was the uncertainty of what next would spring up.

A place that looked a certainty for a mallard might contain just half a dozen newly arrived "jacks," and, if by good luck (considering our large shot) we managed to bag a couple of them, they were well worth an extra cartridge if they did not fall to the first shot. Passing from one bog to another, over the big intervening meadows, we were certain to come upon flocks of peewits, and, as the banks were low and the hedgerows thin, we had to manoeuvre very cautiously to get at them. Often, after a crawl up a dyke, or "shough," as it is locally called, to within 20 yards of where they were before, they would manage to shift their position just out of shot, some still feeding apparently unconscious of danger, others standing lazily up tip-toe with outstretched wings. However, now and then we outmanoeuvred them and bagged a few, but it was mostly through their taking flight voluntarily and circling within range. On dark, stormy afternoons they gave us good sport about an hour before flight time, for then they were generally much on the move, and some large flocks occasionally passed over in long, straggling lines. The deep, edge-covered watercourses through the meadows often contained a solitary duck or a small bunch of teal, which would frequently rise quite near us owing to the dense cover, and present fairly easy shots. In the case of teal, we would sometimes make the mistake of shooting too soon and too low, for these small ducks have a peculiar habit of springing vertically upwards until they get properly under way.

In the evenings during the mild weather we had some excellent sport at teal during flight time, as they mostly followed the course of one or two big drains, and came along well within shot, though at a desperate pace. Many inevitable clean misses were well repaid by an occasional good shot right overhead when the gun was held well forward. The duck, as a rule, flew too high at flight during the open weather, except on two afternoons, when it blew very strong from the north, and we managed to make bags of ten and twenty-five, though we might try in the same place night after night and get only three or four shots, so uncertain were their flight lines on coming off such a large extent of water. There were a few excellent feeding places on one or two small islands about half a mile off the shore—flats with good muddy

margins and swampy interiors, but with no cover to conceal a fowler except rush clumps.

The fishermen did not trouble much with the fowl on these islands, except when a company of pochards and divers came along, when they would charge a long single barrel with about five drachms of fine black powder and a couple of ounces of B. B. shot, with a piece of dried turnip as "coffin" between, made by pressing the barrel down on a thick slice of turnip. Whether this was a gaiting arrangement or not I cannot tell, but I have seen great things take place in the way of recoil. The modus operandi was to watch a single diver gradually work towards the shore. The native, with his long weapon—sometimes a converted or non-converted Queen Anne rifle—lay flat while the fowl was on the surface, but the moment it dived he jumped up and ran at a 100 yards pace in a straight line for it, only to fall flat again just before it rose to the surface. If an old hand, he could calculate to within about three seconds when the bird would reappear; but it was dangerous to draw it too fine, for if the bird caught him on his feet the game was up. However, supposing he reached the water's edge with the bird down, he would stand with the rifle at "present," and let fly the moment it appeared. The result would be a bird flattened out, well hit, a dense cloud of blue smoke, a terrific smell of powder burning, and sometimes the gunner recovering from a somersault. That was far more acceptable to him than stalking mallard or teal, for a fat diver, when skinned and stuffed with leeks and barley, will make an excellent pot of broth. However, these old fellows were real sportsmen at heart, and were always willing to take us out to any of the islands, leave us there, and come out again on receiving a signal. A plug or two of strong tobacco, a bottle of whisky, and a few shillings was sufficient remuneration.

Having told one of the men of our wish to try the flats on the next big storm coming on, he said it would be advisable to build a couple of "sconces" immediately, in order to get the fowl used to them. So, with the aid of some large stones we found scattered among the rushes on one of the largest flats and others transported from the shore, we soon built up a couple of semicircular shelters, some 3ft. high, and with mud and rushes made them to blend in color with the surroundings. We went to these shelters on two afternoons and bagged half a dozen teal and four widgeon on one occasion, but on the other he drew blank, as a small flock of inquisitive peewits kept persistently flapping around in a suspicious manner, and their behaviour warned off all the other fowl. One of the natives deemed the "sconces" to be at fault, as they were too new. He declared that "until the fowl got used to them and began feeding close to them they would not come near them"—somewhat of an Irish "bull," certainly, but his meaning was clear.

Towards the end of the month the long-winded-for stormy weather began looming up in the north; heavy showers of sleet came on at sunset, and the gale raged throughout the night. Next morning, an hour before daybreak, our man had a handy flat-bottomed boat ready, in which we embarked from the shore, well rigged out in waders and tight-fitting short waterproof jackets over woollen undergarments. It was a rough and strong pull against the gale, but we managed to get within wading distance of the flat and sent our pilot back ashore. The place was simply alive with fowl, duck, widgeon, teal and all sorts of smaller fry, which we could hear rising all over the place. But there was no chance of a shot, owing to the darkness. We spent the next half hour reinforcing the covering of our shelters, also the floors, as the water had risen, making things very unpleasant. As the first glimmer of morning began to appear, with it came a real driving storm of wind and sleet, and dark, bulky forms every now and again began flitting across our line of vision, more like great bats than wildfowl, being wafted here, there and everywhere before the storm.

The fun soon began. "Bang—bang" every now and then, and the pleasant thud and splash around us told that occasionally the aim was true. A closely packed bunch of teal would come whizzing along against the wind, only to scatter like sparks from a rocket; or a couple of mallard would appear suddenly overhead close together, and as suddenly separate and tower upwards as the gun was brought to the shoulder. But what a joyful sight as, after a quick right and left, both descended like stones to the ground. Or, again, when in the act of loading, with cramped and frozen fingers, an old duck of many years' standing would hover within range for a moment, and then fall back before the wind with terrified "Quack! quack! quack!" and so depart to fly another day.

As daylight came on the fowl, though occasionally driven within shot, began to skirt round the island, following up and down the channel next the main shore; but our boatman, with his long gun, began firing, evidently at some "wounded" birds which had drifted in, and after each of his discharges a fresh flight of fowl would come our way, giving us many chances, and adding considerably to our bag. Several bunches of curlew also came across, of which we shot several. As daylight came on the fowl vanished, except for an occasional

straggler, so we signalled for our man, and he soon arrived with his dog—a shaggy-coated, short-tailed sheepdog of some ancient breed. He proved an excellent retriever, and was very tender mouthed. Our bag proved to be quite a respectable one of 15 mallard, nine teal, two goldeneye, one pochard and five widgeon, also half a dozen peewits and curlews. Our pilot had picked up a mallard and two widgeon, or rather shot them as they drifted, winged, off the main shore, also a grebe. The latter he prized, as he intended boiling it down to extract the fat in order to make waterproof dubbin, which, he maintained, surpassed everything as a dressing for leather. We stopped in the neighborhood for the rest of the month in hopes of another storm, but all in vain. Indeed, such happy combinations of wind and weather so seldom occur that the fowler must be ready to take full advantage of them when they come his way.—W., in The Field.

AN EVENING MALLARD SHOOT IN THE OLD DAYS

"What do you say, we get Andy to do our chores tonight and go over there to Rice lake. It's only about half a mile and the ducks won't stay around much longer. We're liable to have a cold snap any old time and then they'll migrate for good. What do you say?" cried Paul, looking eager for the fray.

"Barkis is willin'," was Fred's rejoinder. Andy, the hired man, was easily persuaded to do the chores, and just before sundown there was an overhauling of guns, ammunition, hip boots, etc.

"Had we better take Pickles along?" Fred looked at the old dog reflectively. "I guess not. We can wade all over the lake, and he don't know much about finding ducks. We won't lose many. Come on," and they started across the bottoms.

Snipe swarmed in every low damp spot, and as the feet-winged rascals sprang up with a raunting "scape," and zig-zagged away over the bottoms, it was hard work to keep the gun down.

The rice lake they proposed to visit lay just across the open bottom at the edge of the timber that fringed the belt of sloughs and lakes adjoining the Mississippi.

Half way across the bottoms they turned slightly from their course to make the circuit of a small reed-grown pond, in the hope of routing out a pair of mallards. After "shooting" and shaking the reeds to no purpose, they turned away with the remark from Fred:

"Nothing in there sure." The boys had taken hardly ten steps, when a pair of mallards that had been hidden there all the time, sprang from the pond with derisive quacks.

It was a long shot, but Fred was disgusted, and turning on his hips, gave the cunning ducks one barrel, and dropped the drake.

"We must hurry and get there before they begin to come in," called Paul as Fred waded out and picked up the drake.

"We'll get there in time; I don't see anything movin' yet. Maybe that yarn of Bill's was all a fib."

"There's a pair of sharp walking, and they were there."

"Better go to the foot of the lake, and get on opposite sides," suggested Fred.

"Yes, the foot is the best place; they circle more there," assented Paul.

No ducks arose from the lake as they walked along the rush-bordered edge.

In five minutes each was at his stand. It was not necessary to build a blind. The rushes and long bottom grass affording plenty of cover in the evening.

The air was filled with a purple haze and a quiet peace brooded over the land. Colonies of belated blackbirds chirped and clucked as they drifted south, and across the bottoms came the clarion call of the old barn-yard rooster as he proudly sent a challenge to some neighboring cock.

Everything was so still and quiet that sounds could be heard an incredible distance. The deep low chuckle of a lumber wagon upon the public highway a mile distant could be heard distinctly, and from over at a neighboring farm came the evening call: "Co bossy, co bossy."

Five, ten minutes passes and no ducks. The sun was down below the Iowa bluffs, when Fred called softly across the pond: "I believe that yarn about the ducks was a hoax."

"Maybe it was, but I know Johnny wouldn't lie about it."

The evening glow was beginning to fade, when Paul who was on the east side of the lake, called softly:

"Mark west," and both disappeared in the rushes.

Half a dozen mallards swept over the timber and circled round the lake. The second circle they passed near Fred, who gave them both barrels, dropped one.

"Looks as if there were a few," Paul remarked as Fred waded out after his duck.

"Yes, but the way Bill Garr told it, the air ought to be full of mallards by this time." Fred had just reached his stand, when Paul said:

"Seems as if I could hear ducks getting up, over in the river."

"We'll know in a minute." And they did know for a certainty. Fred and Paul both said afterward that they never



saw anything to equal that flurry of ducks in so short a time.

In two minutes the wild fowl came streaming over the timber in droves and bunches, and the boys were buried four deep in ducks; all mallards. Such a circling, whizzing, quacking, fluttering mass of wild fowl would shake the nerves of any but the coolest old veterans.

Of course both guns were emptied at the vanguard of the feathered host and then came the test of reloading "under fire."

Paul knocked down a pair with his two barrels and then marked them down while he worked with hurried frantic fingers to reload.

He had just rammed the powder when the swarm of circling wild fowl swept around him. He had enough presence of mind to look at his gun instead of the ducks, and in a few seconds he was capping the nipples. He was ready now, but where should he point the gun? As well stand a few feet from a circling swarm of bees and decide at which bee to shoot. His gun wobbled from one duck to another a few times in a nervous uncertain way; then he heard the crack of Fred's gun and looking up, he saw a big drake drop at his feet.

The sight spurred Paul to do something, and just then a pair of mallards swung so close he could almost reach them with the gun barrel. In sheer desperation he sent a blast of thunder and lightning after the circling pair that singed the tail feathers of the drake and caused that badly frightened fowl to quack with terror. Fred, who chanced to look over at the time, saw the foolish shot and sent a ringing laugh across the pond.

"Say," he called out, "you ought to have a muskrat spear."

"I ought to have a rat trap," retorted Paul in disgust, "maybe some of them would fly into it."

"Keep cool," called Fred, "pick your duck and follow him until you shoot," and suiting the action to the word, Fred blazed away at a single drake. He simply tore a hole in the evening air, and the drake migrated to the upper end of the pond where he dropped down among the rice, safe for the present.

Paul laughed in his turn.

"Anybody can shoot holes in the air."

"O bang away and watch your chance; we'll get some of them," and Fred fell to reloading with renewed energy.

"Here's my meat," muttered Paul as a small bunch came directly over him, going to another pond.

The gun cracked and a pair of drakes thumped down upon the bare cut meadow.

"That's the way to sock it to 'em," called Fred admiringly.

But Paul failed to "sock it to 'em," to any great extent. As the glow in the sky slowly faded, the ducks came in increasing numbers, until he was literally dazed, bewildered, at the circling thousands.

"You shoot and I'll watch them," he said hopelessly.

Fred laughed in a chagrined sort of way.

"I was just thinking of doing the same thing. I'm the worst tangle of ducks I ever saw. I'm ashamed of myself."

"I thought you were an old hunter," from Paul.

"I thought you were," was the retort.

"I am; just watch me," said Paul with sudden energy.

He fastened his eyes upon a pair coming directly toward him. Hundreds of wild fowl crossed and recrossed between, but he saw only that pair of ducks and nothing more. A moment later they passed him at close range and he killed them both.

"I've caught the knack now," he cried exultingly.

"You caught the knack just as it's getting too dark to shoot. Let's pick up our ducks and get out," called Fred.

"All right. I'll remember how to do it next year," cried Paul gleefully as Fred started around the end of the pond.

"How many have we?" inquired the latter as he came to Paul's stand and threw down his game.

"Twelve," counted Paul.

"Twelve ducks out of fifty thousand," laughed Fred contemptuously.

"O, we've learned something besides," replied Paul in a satisfied way.

There isn't less than a trainload of ducks in that pond right now," remarked Fred as he peered through the gloom at the splashing whizzing wild fowl.

"O well, they'll come back in the spring; we have enough for the present," Paul said contentedly as they turned homeward.