

Field Sports at Home and Abroad

WILDFOWLING IN THE OLD COUNTRY

Among the many and varied pleasures of the wildfowler's existence must be included the fascination of watching and observing the arrival of northern fowl which visit our islands and their welcome appearance, though speaking too plainly of the coming winter, marks the commencement of a period of activity which only the close season alone will bring to an end.

To a certain proportion of sportsmen, of whom the writer is one, wildfowling is, and always will be, the finest sport which these islands can produce, and game shooting by comparison seems tame. Although August and September yield good sport in some years, it may be said that the coming of October really marks the commencement of the wildfowling season. Hitherto, the bag has been confined chiefly to home-bred species, such as mallard and full snipe, with an odd widgeon or two, and possibly a pochard or grey lag goose.

Towards the close of September we may expect the arrival of a few stragglers, which form the advance guard of the migratory legions, but the main flocks will not appear till October or November. During the last days of September the pink-footed geese are passing in their V-shaped formation, and from now onwards one may expect to hear the weird "honk-honk" repeated at intervals from day to day if we live within reach of the main routes of migration. To our home-bred species we now find other and less wary fowl added. Golden-eye haunt our streams, and dive in search of food amongst the shallows, and others of the diving ducks, tufted scap, and pochard, may be seen on river and loch. They are scattered from the highest mountain ranges to the sea—a few here, a few there—to be gathered into larger flocks by the first hard frosts of winter.

Widgeon arrive in their thousands, and the numbers of the home-bred fowl are reinforced by their kindred from the north. The bean and the brent geese take up their quarters on our coastline, and the trumpet note of the wild swan, the whooper, echoes from shore to shore in firth and loch. We all know spots beloved of the jack, where this tiny snipe, the first to arrive of all our migratory fowl, rises on wavering wings.

On the coast the shore gunner finds that the waders have returned from their breeding grounds; flocks of plover, green and golden plover and wheel in mid-air, and the long-billed curlew utter their thrilling, piercing cry, warning the other denizens of the mud flats of man's approach. For the curlew in winter is the guardian of the shore, and in summer it acts as the watch-dog of the moors. There is now sport for all, and the deep boom of the punt gun echoes at intervals across the dancing waves.

The use of decoys at this season of the year when the fowl are comparatively unsophisticated, is often attended with success. By mastering the call note of shore birds, the shore gunner may double, or even treble, his bag. A few live plover used as decoys will often bring a large flock within shot, and if at the same time the call note is uttered, birds traveling overhead may easily be decoyed. The gunner is in hiding behind a screen of rushes, or in a cask sunk in the mud, and the sight of the captive birds feeding in the ooze often proves an irresistible attraction. A shot fired in the air at a flock of golden plover when the latter are traveling too high often has the curious effect of bringing them down towards the gun, and the second barrel can then be used with effect.

Curlew are more wary and less easy to decoy with success, but their call note can often be used with advantage. The curious indescribable "wailing" note, often made by this species when settling for the night, is very easily imitated towards dusk, but difficult to imitate.

There are a few points in connection with wildfowling which the beginner may note to his advantage. In placing decoys for duck, for example, care should always be taken to point these swimming head to wind, as is the custom of such fowl under natural conditions. Live decoys are, in such cases, quite unnecessary, except when pinioned on a feed pond, to which it is required to attract other wild birds of their species. The collapsible indiarubber decoys sold for the purpose are very useful, but somewhat expensive. Wooden decoys are cheaper, but more cumbersome to carry from place to place.

Assuming that the gunner has concealed himself so as to command a stretch of flood water where a previous examination of the shallows has revealed the tell-tale feathers and droppings of ducks, he may often find that the latter settle everywhere except in his immediate neighborhood. In fighting there is, of course, an element of luck but the judicious use of decoys will do much to reduce this to a minimum. The object of the surface-feeding ducks is generally to settle close to the shallows, where food is easily procured, and especially on the side of the water towards which the prevailing wind blows, where the greatest quantity of food has thus gathered. By the light of the moon fowl can often be distinguished on the water at certain angles, and the fowler who means to take advantage of this fact must choose his position accordingly. In stalking diving ducks, such as golden-

eye, when feeding or resting on an open stretch of water where they cannot be successfully approached, it will often be found advantageous to fire a long shot over their heads. This has the effect of making them dive, and while they are under water the sportsman can often reach the edge of the river, loch or flood water, and thus get within shot of his quarry when they rise.

The stubbles may sometimes be watched with advantage during October, especially on farms, which are visited by geese. Both duck and geese are more likely to come to stubbles in districts where game is not plentiful, for the latter soon devour the food supply which is available, and in these days of modern farming comparatively little grain is allowed to "shake." Geese, as all wildfowlers know, generally feed at daybreak and the gunner should, therefore, be in his place before dawn if these noble birds are his quarry. In duck fighting we have two alternatives; to watch the feeding grounds at dusk for the incoming fowl—the surface-feeding ducks being night feeders—or to find the line of flight which leads them back at dawn to the loch, river or sea, where they rest during the day.

In a certain valley in the central Highlands there is a slow, placid stream with shallows, where the diving ducks feed at daybreak, for these species are day feeders. Here the writer often takes up his position on a winter morning, and, as it happens that this place commands the line of flight of the mallard and widgeon from the opposite marsh on their homeward journey towards the loch, he has often enjoyed excellent sport ere most folk are astir. Such places as this are probably known to every wildfowler in his own locality but it is only by close observation that they can be discovered.

If duck are in the habit of resting on a small hill loch, as is often the case during October, when there is much disturbance below, guns may be posted to command the water at daybreak, and very sporting shooting can be thus obtained. There are numberless places throughout the Highlands where the possibilities of wildfowling are either unknown or neglected, where the widgeon congregate in autumn, when the lessees of the shootings have gone south and where fowl of many kinds feed peacefully throughout the long winter nights.

To the wildfowler there is nothing which can equal an autumn day in such a sanctuary. He sallies forth, with his dog at heel, a retrieving setter per chance, or a steady spaniel or Labrador. From a bed of rushes at the edge of marsh a wisp of full snipe rise wild; a wet corner close to the loch yields a mallard. A pair of widgeon are the next victims. Jack snipe and full snipe are here in plenty. There are plover also, green and golden. Shoveller, pochard golden-eye tufted and other duck are added to the fowler's bag. And thus the day passes as he wanders from marsh to marsh, alone with nature, and ever learning secrets culled from her storehouse. He may kill or he may miss; his long and arduous crawl through wet morasses may be rewarded by success or failure, but he has always the joy of knowing that upon himself alone rests the praise or blame, and that upon his own exertions, upon his own knowledge of the habits of his quarry, his results are dependent.—H. B. M., in Field.

FAMOUS BAGS OF SNIPE

The statement that Mr. E. O. Bleoch, on October 14, 1910, created a new snipe record for Burma, with a bag of 114 couple, sets one thinking. Only those who have shot snipe in a muggy heat of a Burma October day can appreciate Mr. Bleoch's performance at its full worth. The rains are over, the ground is dry, and though the sky may be cloudy, the still, damp, hot air is like that of an overheated palm house. You may be as fit as the proverbial fiddle, but every movement makes the perspiration run in streams. There is no heat so exhausting as that which follows the rains, and prevails during the better part of the snipe season in the Rangoon district, namely, from September, when the birds begin to be plentiful, till the end of November, when they become scarce.

The grounds beloved of snipe in the Rangoon district—say within a 30 or 40 miles radius of the city—are the fallows on the paddy lands. In October the young paddy, otherwise rice, is a foot or two above the waterlogged soil, but, fortunately, it is not in the paddy field itself that you must seek the birds. They lie in the rough tussocky grass where the walking is rough but sound, and they rise at any distance from ten paces to forty. One point in favor of the snipe in the East must be made; he gets up and goes straight away without any of those twistings and dodgings which make him so difficult to hit in this country; unless the birds are very wild it is all fair, straightforward shooting so far as he is concerned; but when the perspiration trickles into your eyes, when you haven't a dry rag on you from neck to heel, when your hands are streaming and the plain is dancing in the heat haze three or four hours' shooting "takes it out of you."

In the Arakan district, further north, the snipe are more considerate; they remain until well on in January, and you can shoot luxuriously through the cold weather, finding the birds, moreover, on the then dried-up paddy fields when the crop has been carried. In De-

ember and January in Arakan you can shoot all day and find an overcoat pleasant for the drive home in the evening. Big bags of snipe are made within a few miles of Akyab, but so far the record is to the credit of Rangoon men.

In the Rangoon district the usual method is to sleep at the rest house nearest the ground of your choice, or at a native hut. The hospitality of the Burman is unfailing; if there is no rest house near, you enter the most respectable native dwelling available, inform the owner or his wife that you want to sleep there, and the welcome is prompt and cordial. More, if you want a man to carry your cartridges, your host will either volunteer for the job, or be at the trouble to find somebody else to do it. Spending his life in the fields he cultivates, he probably knows where the Boh sah hmit (the bird the gentleman cats) is to be found; having taken you under his wing he acquires personal interest in your success, and your only complaint will be that he regards your walking powers in the steamy heat as equal to his own.

The usual plan is to start for the snipe grounds at 8 o'clock, or thereabout; by that time the birds have finished feeding and are settled down on the fallows where they spend the heat of the day. If you have reason to suppose that snipe are numerous and mean to try for a big bag you may begin earlier. Mr. Bleoch started at 6 o'clock but did not do much till after 7, when he reached the particular tract he had in view. Being out for a heavy bag he had a loader with a second gun; his confidence in the stock of birds is indicated by his cartridge supply; he had 300 with him and a reserve of 200 more, to fall back on after breakfast. He shot from about 7 till after 12 o'clock, when he had finished his 300 cartridges for a total of 69½ couple of snipe; the birds lay very thickly on the ground; at one time he was obliged to discard one of his guns for a time as it became so hot that he could not use it, even with a protector and a handkerchief tied round his hand. Having run out of cartridges the inevitable happened; he had to walk about half a mile putting up snipe as he went, till he reached the rendezvous where breakfast, a change of clothes, and his reserve of cartridges were awaiting him. At 1 o'clock he started again, and going over some of the ground he had shot before breakfast, killed in two hours the 30½ couple he wanted to make the even hundred, which is the ambition of every snipe-shooter. He continued shooting until 4 o'clock when he fired his five-hundredth and last cartridge. Total bag: 114 couple of snipe, 1 couple golden plover, and a brace of quail. His object being a big bag he did not pick shots but took chances; nothing is said about birds not picked up, but he was exceedingly lucky if he and his Burmans found every snipe that fell; when the birds are rising thickly and firing is fast and furious, it is inevitable that birds should remain undiscovered in the coarse grass, however keen-eyed and careful the human retrievers. It was a great shooting performance; as a feat of endurance it was not less noteworthy; to shoot from soon after 6 o'clock until 4, with about three-quarters of an hour's rest for a meal and change of clothes between 12 and 1, in such a climate, is a day's work few men could manage.

Mr. Bleoch's bag has once been beaten. On February 11, 1899, Mr. W. K. Dods, a famous shot, killed 131 couple near Calcutta. This is the "record" for India, Burma and Ceylon, and is likely to remain so. Few men keep tally of their bags, but when the 100 couple is exceeded the fact is generally noted abroad. Mr. Dods is one of the few who kept an account of his snipe bags and the record for his best season, January 17th to March 7, 1897, is worth repeating. It must be added that the season 1896-97 in Bengal was a particularly good one; the dhools, or swamps, were much drier than usual and it was possible to shoot over ground which is usually too water-logged to traverse.

Mr. Dods's bags on nine days, in as many weeks, were:

17th January, 107½ couple; 24th January, 101 couple; 31st January, 71 couple; 6th February, 84 couple; 14th February, 113 couple; 21st February, 104 couple; 28th February, 103½ couple; 7th March, 54½ couple. His total for that season, 1896-97, was 1,637 couple, killed in 30 days—not all full days—shooting.

The best bag made in Ceylon is 103½ couple, killed on February 22, 1903, near Kantalali Tank, by Mr. Rice of the Royal Artillery; legend has it that 110 couple were killed in Ceylon some 35 years ago but no particulars of this bag have ever been forthcoming.

The average man is content with more modest things than these; he takes out 100, or perhaps 150, cartridges, and is well content to bring home from 15 to 30 couple of birds, with a teal or two to make variety. There is an uncertainty about the snipe which tantalizes. Certain areas within reach of Rangoon are safe shooting, season after season; but there are others where the birds lie thick one year and are not the next. Profound is the secrecy with which the discoverer of a snipe ground guards his find; and happy he who can preserve the secret for a whole season, for ardent sportsmen are always ranging the country within reach, and somebody is almost bound to stumble upon the tract whose whereabouts the original discoverer has kept to himself. Nobody resents his secrecy; it is part of the game, and the ac-

cepted theory is that any other fellow would do the same.

In Burma, the shooting is his who may find it; he asks leave of none, and it is a rival happen upon his favorite haunt, there is nothing for it but go further afield and try again. Sound information is sometimes obtainable from the Burmese cultivators who bring their paddy into Rangoon, but the men in government service, public works, and telegraphs departments by reason of their journeyings about the country, have the pull over others.

In Bengal the conditions are somewhat different. There are more rich men in Calcutta than in Rangoon, and when two or three friends hit upon a tract of good snipe ground, they "peg out" a claim—to borrow the mining phrase—put a native shikari in charge to warn off other chance visitors and preserve the place unto themselves.

Eastern snipe grounds are rarely overshot in a season. The white population is hard working, and from Monday morning till Saturday noon all are busy. Sunday is the Anglo-Indian holiday, and Sunday morning sees the snipe-shooter at work, to keep on at it as long as he can stand the strain of shooting. Needless to add, the Bengal snipe season is very much longer than that on the Arakan coast half way down "the Bay" and the Arakan season in its turn is much longer than that in the Rangoon and Maulmain latitude.

There are two drawbacks to snipe-shooting apart from the climate—leeches which are constant, and water buffaloes which are not. No man has ever yet found a method of protecting himself against leeches—the thin, black worm which finds its way through any gaiters to fill itself to the size of an unlovely gooseberry on your leg before you discover its presence at all. You may come home with half a dozen of the horrible creatures attached to you, and spend a weary half-hour with salt or native devices in getting rid of them; for if you detach a leech otherwise than scientifically, he leaves his head behind to create a sore that shall not soon be healed.

The water buffalo nuisance is familiar to every snipe-shooter in Burma. These huge and clumsy beasts, with their spreading horns, are the plough cattle of the country; and you rarely visit a snipe ground without seeing a few pairs of them, each pair in charge of a small and naked boy, who leads them to pasture. The water buffalo dislikes the white man, and a white man with a gun is anathema to him; fire within a hundred yards of the beast and his head comes up, his muzzle is protruded, the great horns lying back; fire again and the buffaloes begin to stalk towards you with slow, purposeful steps, what time the ten-year-old jerks at the nose ropes and shrilly scolds. When the buffaloes begin to advance you were best to retire; they mean business, and as there is neither tree or other refuge in sight, the odds are all in favor of the buffalo, who can get over or through, heavy ground at a much better pace than his bulk promises.

The small boy will stand your friend as long as he can, but stern as is his rule, he cannot control his beasts beyond a certain point; and when he shrills, "Your honor, do not shoot, go away!" The advice is to be taken without parley or demur. It is humiliating to retreat from buffaloes who yield obedience to 3 ft. of brown humanity, but it is wise; snipe may be rising at your every step, but they are not for you if a water buffalo is on the spot.—C., in Bailey's.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TAKING BIRDS WELL FORWARD

The prevailing fault amongst modern-day shooters is that they lose far too much time in mounting the gun to the shoulder and letting off the shot. Shooting books as a rule contain illustrations of men taking rocketing pheasants, and the back is invariably bent into a reverse curve, which suggests wonderful flexibility of body and an enviable absence of backaches and stiffness. Shooters may be unconsciously imitating the pictures that have been put before them as models of what to do but the fact remains that they are taking their birds under the most unfavorable conditions it is possible to select. A driven bird as a rule comes into view well forward, but not so distant as to prevent the gun being boldly thrown up at its first appearance. The frontal attack is in such circumstances the most suitable for achieving a high percentage of successes. If the advancing bird happens to be the leader of a covey a shot taken well forward will in all probability cause the other birds to swerve, some of them swinging off sideways and giving other shooters in the line chances that would not otherwise come their way. The spread of the shot as a rule gives far better killing chances when birds are taken well forward, as compared with an overhead shot.

It very seldom occurs that a bird taken at an angle of about 45 degrees is out of range. On the other hand, though birds may be flying clear of the tree-tops, their actual range is still so near that the extra distance provided by taking them forward, as compared with overhead, greatly assists the shooter by giving him a large killing circle. The fault into which so many sportsmen fall, probably as a result of not knowing what is best to strive after, is to look hard at an advancing bird until it has reached the 45 degrees angle, then to mount up the gun in a hesitating fashion, and finally



Sportsman's Calendar

JANUARY

Sport of the Month.—Wildfowl shooting.
In Season.—Ducks, geese, brant; snipe may be shot, but not sold.
Grilse and spring salmon commence to run.

to cancel further proceedings, in the belief that the first instinctive aim was faulty. The shooter may then follow the bird in its flight, in the hope of catching it up before it disappears, trusting on the second occasion to be more successful in giving it the correct forward allowance. Anatomically speaking, the back probably reaches its bending limit at the very moment when an extra 3 ft. of forward allowance should be given, and the charge then cuts through the end of the bird's tail instead of nicely meeting the head. Other shooters may anticipate the back-bending difficulty by swinging round on the hips and taking a sort of side-view shot at the bird as it disappears over the right or left shoulder, as the case may be. In any event, such shots are exceedingly difficult and unsatisfactory even when successfully accomplished. There is a tendency when taking high birds which have just passed the firing line and are slightly to one side of the shooter's stand to pull down the muzzle, so that the bulk of the charge passes underneath. Clean killing is seldom accomplished under these conditions, and on many occasions a bird falling some distance behind the shooting line must not be gathered till after the next beat has been finished. A rule that should be followed almost more than any other when out shooting is not to raise the gun until actually intending to shoot. An approaching bird may be viewed for the precise length of time which the shooter's senses require for sending the necessary signals to the brain, but the moment the brain is aware that the bird has topped the horizon and is fast approaching, the signal should go forth to the muscles that it be forthwith shot. Alignment and forward allowance should be combined in one sweeping curve forming a continuation of the act of raising the gun to the shoulder. The trigger should be pulled on the fruition of the process, not as a result of further signalling from the brain that the allowance is correct, but as a natural climax to the muscular effort of aiming. Success in shooting thus depends almost entirely upon correct timing, and this faculty in turn depends upon having confidence in the original instinctively directed aim. Previous failures should be obliterated from the mind, and the shooter anxious to retain his armour propre may assume that they were the result of cartwheel patterns, or belonging to some other category of error outside his control. Confidence and free movement are the appropriate and necessary concomitants to a fixed determination to shoot on sight. In practice under shooting school conditions is indulged in it should always be the aim of the pupil as well as of the instructor to shoot the birds as far forward as possible, and as proficiency increases to move closer and closer to the tower or platform from which the birds are thrown, so diminishing the time available for taking aim. From an anatomical point of view it must be remembered that though the breast feathers and pectoral muscles may count as invulnerable armour, the outstretched neck and widespread wings afford many points where shot may strike, and be instrumental in bringing the bird down. The legs also are presented at a favorable angle for shooting. A final argument in favor of taking birds well forward is that the shooter need no longer confine his aim to the outstretched neck in the manner necessary with strictly overhead shots. A bird taken at an angle of 45 degrees may be centred in the pattern without in any way injuring its condition for the table. Such shots are very sporting, though by no means difficult, once it has been fully realized that the muzzle must be swung well up, so as actually to hide the bird at the moment the trigger is pulled.—M.

BUSINESS PRINCIPLES

Father (to would-be son-in-law)—Young man, if you marry my daughter are you sure you will be able to take care of her in the style to which she has always been accustomed? Young man (earnestly)—I'll guarantee it, sir, or—or return the girl.