Field Sports at Home and Abroad

BRANT SHOOTING ON THE COAST.

(By Richard L. Pocock.)

Among the multitude of small islands forming the archipelago which fringes the shores of the Pacific ocean from the Straits of San Juan De Fuca to Alaska, large numbers of brant geese gather in the late fall and winter, and the wanderer by boat or launch, cruising among the islets of this inland sea, will view many a passing flock of these most excellent fowls, excellent for the sportsman and excellent for the epicure, journeying to and from their feeding and resting places. Here and there among the islands will be found one with a long spit of sand raised a few feet above high water level by the action of strong tidal currants and stretching perhaps half a mile or more into the ocean. These sand-spits are well known to the regular brant shooter, and it is them that he goes to set his decoys and build his blind.

The brant frequent these places for several reasons; first for the prime necessity of life, food. In the bights formed by the sand-spits will be found, growing in the shallows and floating, broken by the water's action, abundance of the long ribbon-like sea grass which is favorite food for these little geese, while on the edges of the spits themselves they get the gravel to help them digest it.

Being sea-going birds the brant are not found far inland up any of the coast inlets or inside the natural harbors, unless when driven there by exceptionally heavy windstorms. From ordinarily heavy weather the sand-spits and salt-water lagoons formed thereby on the shores of these sea islets afford them all the shelter they need. And the man who attempts to come to terms with brant in such waters as these without decoys will simply waste his time.

I have seen it stated in print that brant are difficult to decoy; the brant which visit these shores are certainly quite the opposite. In places readily accessible to the town shooter and the market hunter they doubtless get "wised-up," but there are no birds, according to my experience, which, generally speaking, decoy better than do brant. In qualification of this it should be said that the larger number of decoys, the more likely the achievement of a considerable bag. Nineteen times out of twenty a small flock of brant will come down to join an equal or larger flock of real brant or wooden imitations, apparently feeding or resting on the shore line, whereas a large flock will, not always, but often, ignore a smaller bunch on the water when flying in full view of them. The man with the big bunch of decoys scores in several ways. First, they show up better than a small lot and are therefore more likely to be seen by passing flocks; secondly, if they do see them, the large flocks are more likely to come in to them, and thirdly, supposing there happens to be of flock of the real live article settled within view to afford a counter attraction, as will often happen, especially after the first shot or two, the bigger bunch will prove the stronger magnet to draw later comers.

When a flock of brant coming in to feed or traveling past the spit which you have chosen on which to set out your decoys, spot them and make up their minds to come in to them, there is no hesitation about them; they come right in, if the blind is well made and you remain invisible, and sometimes even if you do not. Indeed, it is the best plan to load the gun and have it handy before you start in to set out the decoys and build the blind, as otherwise you are apt to look up from your task of digging to see a bnnch of the big birds hovering over the decoys you have just planted. You will then be sure to experience the mortification of seeing them wheel away, giving their croaking call of alarm at the sudden straightening up of the biped which all wild things fear by instinct, though often seemingly unafraid of that same biped when viewed in the doubled up position which gives him the appearance of a quadruped. We all know the old trick of shooting geese feeding on a field, by staking them with a bomb-proof-horse kept between them and the shooter until within range.

A horse, however, being a somewhat awkward thing to take around with one in a small boat, it is necessary to build a good blind to aid in decoying brant to their undoing. On this heavily timbered coast there is abundance of driftwood piled up about high-water level by the winter storms wherever there is a bit of beach, and with this as building material, and the vigorous use of a shovel, an ambush can be quickly and easily made which is practically invisible from a short distance. By digging a good wide trench in the sand a foot or two in depth, building up walls of drift logs round the edges of it for another foot or two in height, and banking these up on the outside with sand well smoothed down with the shovel, one has a blind in which one can sit on a chunk of wood in comfort (that is, comfort for a wildflower) while waiting for the quarry, so exactly similar in appearance to the background, as seen from the point of view of the approaching birds, as to reveal no break in the bare, bleak stretch of sandy beach.

The usual sand-colored canvas hunting coat, with a hat or cap to match are aids to the deception, while for the legs there is nothing better than a pair of fisherman's wading trousers over a pair of ordinary trousers. The bottom of a sand-pit dug as near as possible to tide level is apt to be a bit damp, to say the least of it. Then again, the retrieving is best done by yourself; the best of water dogs is apt to be in the way when shooting from such a blind. Furthermore, the decoys have to be mobed from time to time with the rise or fall of the tide, and this is easiest done by wading; the less often you have to haul down the boat or canoe, the better you will be pleased, and the more brant you are likely to shoot.

Set the decoys a little distance from the end of your sand-spit with one or two right out at the end, so they can be seen by birds coming up on either side of the spit, thus attracting them within sight of the main body.

The best decoys are made of a block of red cedar hollowed out, with a flat board nailed on to form the bottom and the heads made detachable. Each should have a good long anchor line with a flat lead anchor, attached to a staple in the front of the body so the decoy will float head to wind and current. Long lines and reasonably heavy anchors will save a lot of trouble if a stiff breeze gets up or the tidal currents are strong. To prevent tangles in the hurry of packing up the decoys it is a good idea to make the lines detachable by having a small snap hook at the end of each to snap onto the staple in the decoy. No matter how carefully you wind the lines around the bodies of the decoys, they will inevitably get into a tangle when they are dumped in and out of their sacks, and keeping the lines coiled up separately and neatly saves a lot of wear and tear—and temper. If the anchors are heavy enough, two or three decoys may be linked together by short lines from head to tail. These decoys are of course bulky to carry about from place to place, and for that reason many shooters use in preference painted profiles cut out of heavy tin and fastened at different angles in wooden floats. An excellent combination is a dozen or two cedar decoys floating a few yards from shore, with a few profiles stuck into the sand in two lines forming V from the water's edge to the blind. Set out in this form they are visible from the greatest possible number of directions, and being above the water line, they show up well to the view of the low-flying birds.

The flight of the brant is deceptive and causes many a miss by the novice. The very large size of their wings in comparison with their bodies, and the comparatively leisurely movement of them, makes their flight appear to be much slower than it really is. Also, the great spread of wings will draw the inexperienced man's fire by making him think the bird is within range when in reality it is still well out of danger from his scatter gun. Over anxiety to bag the incomers is a frequent cause of misses. Take your time and keep close, even if they do not immediately come right over the decoys, and you see them wheeling away, apparently decided not to join the imitation flock. Hold your fire and they will almost certainly wheel back again. To make certain of clean kills, wait whenever possible until they turn broadside to you, remembering that they will always turn head to wind when about to alight. A brant is a very heavily feathered bird, and head-on he is a smaller target than he looks, while his breast feathers will turn a lot of shot. But get him sideways and his most vulnerable parts are exposed. Then, if you hold straight, you will kill your birds clean and have few cripples to chase—they take a lot of chasing sometimes. When you do have a cripple down waste no time in fishing him, as a wounded brant will often rise from the water and fly away as if uninjured allowed a few seconds to recover from the shock which bowled him over. You will appreciate this if you have shot deep-water ducks.

When first shooting at an incoming bunch keep down as low as possibel, and duck out of sight immediately after shooting, as when brant come into decoys they seem to resent any interference with their intentions, and will often circle back to them a second time after being shot at, presumably not realizing what has happened and reasoning that, as that quietly feeding flock is still apparently uninjured and unalarmed, the disturbing noise they heard cannot be significant of danger.

The season for shooting brant on this coast is a long one, as the birds come down from the north in October or November and stay until about the end of April or even later in a backward season. In mid-winter sport is uncertain as the weather, and sudden storms are apt to come up which make small boat travel dangerous in these exposed places, where the tidal currents are very strong. The best shooting is generally obtained in March and April, and at this time of the year, the finer the weather the "better," as more birds are on the wing.

Whatever the weather conditions, brant shooting on this coast is never a lazy man's or a luxurious man's pastime. There is quite a lot of preparation necessary, as good points are difficult to reach even in a motor boat, and especially because the best shooting is obtained in the early morning. Camping on a sand-spit is apt to be cold, about as different as possible from the usual run of ideal and typical camping places described and pictured. There is almost always a cold wind blowing in such a place at night, and a tent is a luxury which will be considered a necessity by most, though I have dispensed with one before now in order to lessen the load of dunnage, and boxed myself into a sort of cubby hole with drift of various sorts and sizes instead.

One of the party at last (two is the ideal number for such a trip) must be one of those early rising enthusiasts so accustomed to non-magnetic blankets as to spring joyously out of bed in the dark of a cold morning. This is not nearly so easy as it sounds overnight, when squatting on a log in front of a blazing driftwood fire, snipping hot coffee and shooting all kinds of brant in anticipation. Nevertheless, you must turn out before day, for the tent must be struck and packed out of sight, the blind dug, decoys set and boat hauled up well away from the decoys by the time it is light enough to see to shoo.t

This done, the rest is a matter of luck and straight shooting.

SHOOTING AND FISHING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

On September 9, 1909, my boy and I steamed into Shoal Bay, a small settlement and P. O. on Thurlow Island, our craft being a twin-screw steamer of a little over 40 tons, arranged so that the two of us are the sole crew. The next day we steamed to a small nameless river in the vicinity, which is an ideal one for trout. It is about four miles long from the sea to a chain of large lakes, and abounds in beautiful sand-bars, pools, and ripples. Above all, the fly is the best bait; and we have frequently given trout to Indians who were unable to get them on their favorite salmon roe, whilst we were having fine sport with the fly. The lowest pool is formed only when the tide is out, but there is a fine clear beach to fish from; and it is quite unusual to cast without rising at least one fish. Several times we had a trout on each fly, and twice succeeded in landing the three and often landed two at at time. They run up to 3½lb.; the largest we weighed this trip being 3¾lb., and all very game fish. The best flies are the Silver Doctor and Jock Scott, but any large sea trout or small salmon flies do here. In fact, we find it a good place to use up the collection of old or impossible flies which one often accumulates, as at times nothing comes amiss. Our first day was 118 trout actually creeled, and as this meant at least three times that number pricked and lost, it will be seen the sport was exceptionally good. Naturally, a great deal of time is occupied in working to the best places in the best way. We used two boats, as the banks of the river are quite impassable—dense brush, logs, and deep sloughs prevailing—and the river too large to wade except in places. By skilful use of boats, a large one for the first part, and a small one which can be packed over log jams or bars, all the good spots can be reached, and good shallow landing places obtained. As we did not trouble to carry landing nets or gaff, the latter was indispensable. After a day like this, we had to dispose of the fish, which we did at Shoal Bay. Returning the next day with a friend, we had a nice easy day, landing ninety-three trout for three rods, but we did not get the the most difficult and therefore best pools. We fished a few more days on the river, and the lightest bag was fifty-four trout; but this merely meant that we did not fish quite so persistently, and that the magnitude of the catch was limited by our ability to dispose of it.

A few days later, about the beginning of October, we steamed to the head of Loughborough Inlet, one of the magnificent fiords which abound on the coast. This used to be a very quiet and deserted place, and abounded in game, but now has a post office, settlers, and numerous logging camps, whose noisy engines awaken the echoes for miles. In the loneliest parts of the coast one is hardly ever out of reach of their whistles, and the scenery is the only thing they have not frightened away! To crown all, near the head of Loughborough is a very large and up-to-date sawmill, the glare of whose electric lights can be seen a long way. However, we heard there were a good many bears about, so pushed on about three or four miles, and anchored at the mouth of a small river at the head. The inlet ends in a fork, into each branch of which flows a creek. We went up the right hand one, where, after the mud flats, there is a large grassy swamp, and, expecting geese and ducks, took our shotguns with us. We found it too early for much sport, as there was only one small bunch of geese—Canada geese or "honkers," the largest wildfowl in the country. By a careful stalk up a little creek I was so fortunate as to get them coming close overhead, and secured two. I then worked up to where the creek comes out of the woods, and saw my boy converging towards the same spot. I also saw a fine black bear on a bar ahead of me, shaking himself after swimming, and numerous signs of bear paths and tracks all round. On joining my boy, it appeared that another bear had met him as soon as he landed, so we decided not to alarm them that evening, but to bring our rifles next day. Accordingly, armed wtih a 45.90 and a 38.75 (Winchesters) we rowed quietly up the river next morning with the flood tide, which runs up for nearly two miles. The creek ends in beaver meadows and swamps in a deep valley, and the banks are thickly clothed with trees and a heavy undergrowth of berry bushes, crab trees, and devil's club, through which the bears have numerous paths, in some places like tunnels. We had scarcely entered this when we saw a bear which disappeared before we could get a shot, but at the next corner we saw another high up at the base of a small cliff. He started climbing up a long dead cedar which leant against it, and I got a long shot which only accelerated his movements, and he disappeared quickly into the brush at the top. My boy got him afterwards, not far from the same place, bringing him down with a shot through shoulders and heart, and we found I had just grazed him, the bullet having run up his back about 2in. under the skin. We counted the first day, and saw eight separate bears, but were singularly unfortunate, for we lost two hard hit, and got none. The next morning, however, we got a nice one in a small crab tree after a careful stalk, and saw several others in the bushes eating crab apples, but they were extremely shy and watchful. Altogether, we got five, and if we had been very keen on getting more, could easily have done so. But the skins are not very good in October, and troublesome to fix, and take care of. Moreover, in such a country, it is very easy to wound and lose them. The best way is always to take the head shot, when they collapse at once and give no more trouble. The next best thing is to hit them behind, as this is their weak point and cripples them badly. The shoulder shot is a poor one if the ground is open, or with good dogs, you may eventually get him; but it is no joke crawling up tunnels of brush and devil's club on all fours after a wounded bear—experto crede—and they will disappear from sight even after the heart is shattered. There were a few grizzly bears here (of which we shot one), and some brown or cinnamon ones, but as trophies, all have the same drawback on the coast at this time of year, the fur is not good. In the autumn and just before they den up—as late as December—it is better, but short; and in the spring, when they come out of their winter retreat, it is best of all if secured before they begin to scratch or rub. This is a great chance, for it is a miserably cold and wet time to hunt, and there is great danger from snow slides in the inlets and deep valleys. However, there is one great and compensating advantage about this coast shooting and fishing, and that is you are absolutely independent, i.e., you are not at the beck and call of a professional guide or highly-paid attendants, who get all the credit of your bag, and generally a good bit of cash. Such a trip as I have sketched a man might take with just a row boat and a tent, and single-handed if he choose; but, of course, it is vastly more convenient at times to have a launch or steamer.—H. C. Nixon in the Field.

THE "SURE THING" IN TRAP SHOOTING

The trap shooters are acquiring a very complete mastery of their game. Recently an amateur in Chicago broke 400 "birds" straight and then worried because he missed one. By and by their results may compare favorably with those of the fancy rifle shots, who have a record of 15,000 straight. An expert clay bird man now thinks that he is out of form unless he can break from 98 to 100 straight, and the misses might be attributed to the pattern of the gun.

I suppose the men who do the thinking for the trap-shooting fraternity believe this is all right—encouraging every man to fire the greatest possible number of shots, and making the conditions such that he can just about break all the birds thrown. Doubtless if conditions were made to in any manner resemble field shooting, many would become discouraged and quit, or a less number of birds would be used and fewer shells expended. The least that can be said of powdering 400 birds straight is that mechanically the feat is admirable. Put a man to stepping over a stick six inches high and he is liable to knock it down before the 400th step.

However, doubtless nearly every man who shoots at the traps has more or less faith that he is improving his field shooting. But is he doing so in fact? Granted that the ability to point a gun accurately is an advantage to the game shooter, even though he learns little about lead or swing, we might inquire whether or not under a changed style of trap shooting he might not improve a great deal more and faster. It seems that at present the trap makers have made as much progress as the gunners. Traps throw with such regularity and accuracy that an expert could probably break a great percentage of the birds with his eyes shut. Why not put the shooter out in the field occasionally and throw the birds over his head, throw them past him to this side and that, spring the bird when his back is turned? Why not develop in trap shooting an event in which there are at least as many uncertainties as there are in the skirmish run in military rifle shooting?

From my own observation, field and marsh shooting is not improving despite these wonderful scores. In the past ten years I have seen no work upon wildfowl to compare with that of the funners of twenty and twenty-five years ago. Doubtless this can be attributed to the increasing scarcity of ducks at which to practice, but why not invent traps that would send a target on a flight resembling that of a wildbird? Even if this were not perfectly practicable, it is certain that the clay saucers could be given a flight much more eccentric than anything we now witness at the great trap meets. This sort of 400 straight business has ceased to appeal to most people, and it is but a matter of time when the shooters themselves will tire of it.

The ordinary sportsman doesn't care a tinker for the trap expert's scores right now. Time was when if a man broke ninety-five in the hundred people were interested: they wanted to know the conditions, the kind of gun he used, the sort of ammunition and the load. How many could tell off-hand what make of gun one of our cracks uses today, or what description of ammunition, or who cares? Nobody questions but any one of a dozen makes of guns would do the work any of the better varieties of shells are perfectly capable of it; any one of a hundred experts is likely to grind out his hundred straight with a little luck, or if he sat up too late the night before he will still score ninety-five. Under present conditions the trap shooting game is no longer of general interest, not even interesting to the gun man who is not addicted to pounding away behind the traps. Not one of the latter would purchase any particular make of gun because one of its kind had smashed 400 clay birds straight, or even 4,000. He knows too well the conditions under which the work was performed.—Charles Askins in Recreation.

Sportsman's Calendar

OCTOBER

October 1—Opening of pheasant-shooting in Cowichan and Islands Electoral District (except North Saanich); opening of quail-shooting. Season now open for all small game.

For the Angler—Salmon-trolling, trout-fishing.

HOW TO MAKE GOOSE DECOYS

Sheet iron profiles for decoying wild geese are generally cut too large, painted too black—or too white—and too often are not fitted with a good solid leg with which to keep them in position when set up. The length of the decoy from breast to tail should not exceed 18 inches. For that length about 9 or 10 inches depth—from top of back to lower breast—is about right. The neck and head should be cut in one piece separate from the body and put on to it with a fairly tight rivet—though not so tight that the neck piece cannot be folded back for packing. The colors used in painting should be silvery grey for the breast profile and lower body and neck; and dark slate grey for upper half of body and head. For while these colors are not exact with the plumage of the Canada grey goose, they are the nearest suggestion to the plumage practicable. The pure white color would shine like a tin pan on a bright day, and the smut black would make a profile too sharp. Each profile ought to be equipped with a wooden leg ten inches long, sharpened at one end and sawed at the other. By slipping the lower edge of the profile into the saw cut and then drilling through wood and iron in a couple of places for rivet holes, the leg can be made permanent—and can be depended on to hold your decoy in position no matter how hard the wind blows.—J. R. Stafford in Recreation.

A KING'S RING MAGIC

A very great many of King Alfonso's loyal subjects firmly believe that their young King owes his marvellous escape from the bomb thrown at him on his wedding day to a certain ring which is supposed to bring long life and prosperity to a worthy Spanish monarch and death to everyone else who possesses it. This ring, which is studded with diamonds and pearls, was first presented by King Alfonso XII. to his Consort Queen Mercedes, who died a month after.

The King next gave it a present to his sister Maria, who died a few days later. Again it came into his Majesty's possession, this time he gave it to his late wife's grandmother, Queen Christina, who was dead in three months. Fearing to bring about further disaster and death, the King placed the jewel in his own casket, with the result that he died within a year.

The Queen Regent was so superstitious about the ring that she absolutely refused to have anything to do with it, and ordered it to be hung round the neck of the Statue of the Virgin of Almudena of Madrid which ornaments one of the parks of that city. Here it is safe from robbery, for no Spanish thief would touch it—one and all believing that, while it would mean death to them, it possesses a magic influence over the life of their King, who became its legal possessor upon his accession to the throne.