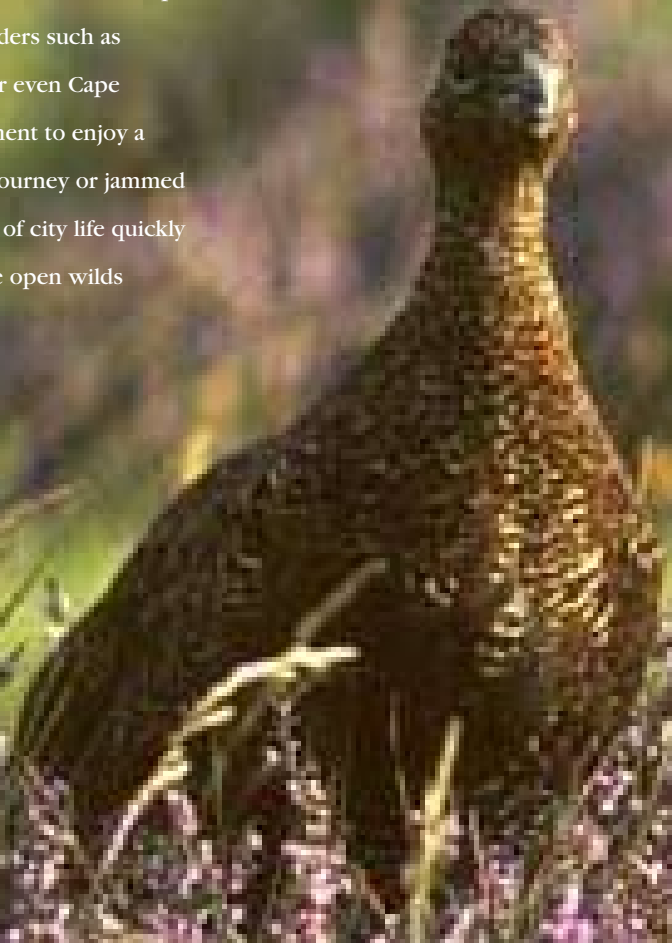


# A PERFECT DAY

If you asked a country sportsman to pick five shooting pursuits he would most like to experience, with no expense spared, then I would be surprised if driven red grouse across the purple heather of Britain's moorland did not appear more times than not. It would be the top of my quarry list, beating other contenders such as pheasants, partridges, deer, wild boar or even Cape Buffalo. I will often snatch a quiet moment to enjoy a grouse fantasy if stuck on a long train journey or jammed in a London tube. The noise and hustle of city life quickly evaporates as my mind conjures up the open wilds of the hill behind my closed eyes.

Text: Ian Valentine  
Photos: Glyn Satterley



As far as I am concerned, my perfect grouse day would take place in Scotland. Of course, there are famous and attractive grouse moors in the north of England and to a lesser extent Wales, which boast a proud heritage. Indeed, in recent times, the grand estates of Northumberland, the North Yorkshire Moors, Lancashire and Cumbria have enjoyed greater returns than their Scottish cousins; including several impressive bags last year where the total was the largest it has been since records began in the late 1800s. But this is my fantasy and I would sacrifice a few extra shots to be out on the Highland moors in full bloom, perhaps above the shores of Loch Tay in Perthshire or the Royal hills on Deeside. (It may sound a trite detail, but the Latin name for the red grouse is *Lagopus lagopus scoticus*. The clue is in the title!)

## ***The Glorious Twelfth***

While it would be a treat to be out on the Glorious Twelfth (the 12<sup>th</sup> of August and first day of the shooting season), it is not a prerequisite for a perfect day. That date used to command greater respect than it does today, notably because it stuck out on the gentleman's calendar like a festival. The national newspapers would report on who was shooting where, as they might nowadays for the Ascot Races or film premieres. Crowds would assemble to watch the great Shots in action like true sports stars, while local workers and school children would bunk off to join the beating line and drive the birds forward. There was also the practical reason that if these crack Shots were going to be back down south for the start of the partridge season in September, they needed to have had their fill of grouse in August!

Nowadays, a September day at the grouse will be every bit as special, perhaps more so with the change in climate during the last decade. A September morning can still offer a warm sun and clear sky, but with more chance of a helping breeze to keep the grouse moving and the biting midges off. August grouse might also be a little lethargic and non-fussed by the beaters, ignoring them as they might the hill walkers that regularly tramp through the Scottish hills. Come September, they are that little bit wilder and more difficult to shoot. It goes without saying that the driving rain and sleet, no stranger to the Scottish hills, stays away on my perfect day.

Mine is a driven day, but I would certainly not scoff at an opportunity at walked-up grouse or shooting over pointers. Both offer their own attractions, especially the latter, which has a claim to being the most traditional means of harvesting grouse for the table. It is a more informal day than the driven, with just two Guns, who take the lead from pointers or setters trained in the art of finding and indicating game. Aside from the shooters, there are usually a couple of dog men, who take turns to send their charges forward to nose for hiding grouse. On a warm, humid day, the scent will carry far, allowing the dogs, which quarter from side to side up wind, plenty of distance to pinpoint the grouse without startling them. A steady dog therefore permits the Guns to creep up on either side and be ready for



*Foto forlænges*



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when the grouse break cover. It can be the most exhilarating of sport as the lead dog freezes still, as though it has touched its nose on an electric fence, its head, body and tail literally pointing at the place where its senses tell it there is game. The other dog will usually 'back' its friend, taking up the same point, even if it has not smelled the grouse. Once the Guns are in position, the pointer will draw forward until the covey (small group) of grouse erupts from the deep heather, presenting a variety of shots to the ready Shots. On such days, then a bag of four to ten brace can be seen as something of an achievement.

#### **Walking up**

Walked-up grouse is perhaps the least challenging of the three disciplines, but to denigrate it is to say that we should not drink wine unless it is vintage! There will usually be a greater crowd of Guns, perhaps as many as eight, who will walk forward in a line and shoot grouse that are disturbed from the heather. Each Gun is likely split by a dog handler, although the dogs tend to be the more traditional retriever like a spaniel or Labrador, which will (hopefully!) not push too far forward. When a shot is taken, the line stops until the bird is picked. Perhaps there is not the same variety of shots, as most will be taken at birds flying away, but with a group of friends in wondrous scenery, it still rates as an excellent means of taking exercise.

During the later months of the year, when the temperature has cooled and the grouse are left alone, many estates will use the same walked-up technique to keep the indigenous population of Blue Hares in check, which, despite their name, turn white in winter. The French, especially, go mad for hares, having shot most of the brown hares in their own country and will return home with carloads of these enigmatic creatures for the Christmas dinner table. Like other creatures, such as the rabbit or brown hare, and the grouse itself, the Scottish blue hare will suffer from disease if allowed to multiply too much, so the annual hare shoots are a necessary cull, whilst bringing useful tourism to the area at a time when the grouse and red deer stag seasons have ended.

But I am digressing. My day is a driven shoot and with the sun shining in a blue sky, I would throw back the curtains of my hotel room in the morning full of exuberance. All hotels in Scotland will offer a fine array of whiskies, including some incomparable Single Malts, but sometimes it is wise not to push the boat out on the evening before the shoot. I will have been prudent and wake with a clear head to tackle whatever the breakfast chef throws at me. Again, there is the temptation to swallow the Full Scottish cooked breakfast – a calorific heart-buster containing such treats as haggis, sausages, black pudding, bacon, fried eggs, potato scones and baked beans.

But that is to run the risk of indigestion on the first steep slope to the butts. Even for a privileged Gun, who will stand and wait for the birds to be driven his way, there can be a gruelling march through knee-high heather to the starting point and you do not want to be puffing and panting and feeling bloated, when the mind and body needs to be ready for more important matters such as speeding grouse. This is not a new dilemma. Way back in 1901, the Shooting Times warned that "the untrained shooter will be wringing with perspiration, and as sorry an individual as you could wish to see. His heart is thumping tumultuously against his chest walls and he will not recover for the rest of the day. If a man wants to walk and shoot well, he should go in for a little training, instead of lolling away on his yacht or on the Continent. He should also diet a bit and not indulge in heavy suppers, strong cigars and alcohol for at least a fortnight before he steps into the heather". Perhaps I would go for the lighter option of smoked haddock with scrambled eggs instead!

#### **Friends and family**

My party would be made up of old friends and family, for whether we kill or miss, that is surely what shooting should still be about. If you are unable to laugh and enjoy yourself in the field, then your priorities have become somewhat skewed in my opinion, although the challenge of shooting well comes a very close second. And while it should not really matter, I always imagine

my fellow Guns and I decked out in all the proper finery, including smart tweed shooting suits, clean shiny guns and sparkling vehicles. Etiquette has been outlawed in so many walks of life, but grouse shooting still demands it.

A greeting from the headkeeper, a welcome from the host and then the caravan of 4x4s snake their way up the hill tracks as so many shooting parties have done in the past. Back in the old days, of course, there were no Range Rovers or ex-military trucks to take the keepers, beaters, Guns, dogs and luncheon up the mountain, so the day started that much earlier, with rugged ponies strapped with wicker panniers to bring supplies of ammunition, fine wines and food up; then the fallen grouse back down. During the heyday of driven grouse shooting it might not be uncommon for a team of Guns to down three or four hundred brace or more in a day. On a Lancashire moor in 1915, for example, eight Guns killed over 1,450 brace; while in 1888, Lord Walsingham shot 1,070 grouse to his own gun.

I would certainly not be after figures like that, not least because it would be impossible nowadays to achieve it. For one, the upper class assassins of that era were highly skilled operators, capable of hitting almost every bird that came their way. Indeed, it was expected of them, with any gentleman who failed to return a suitable ratio of shots to kills falling in danger of being ostracised from polite society.





Lord Walsingham lamented his poor shooting on his record day, having fired 1,500 cartridges! Each Gun would be joined by at least one loader, often his butler, who would pass freshly loaded shotguns to his master in a smoothly oiled sequence that would allow the shooter to fire up to six volleys at a passing covey of grouse.

The other reason that such high bags, so unpalatable by today's standards, could no longer be achieved is that there is not the same number of grouse. Moorland before the Second World War was dedicated largely to the production of red grouse for shooting. Teams of gamekeepers cleared the hills of anything that might harm a grouse, including foxes, crows, stoats, weasels and the variety of hook-beaked raptors that have since made a come-back protected by law. Nowadays, there is not the same blanket control of predators, allowing foxes and crows especially to colonise large stretches of moorland that once had enough grouse to shoot over. While raptors will take their share of grouse, especially chicks, they are something of a red herring, as a well-managed hill will support both grouse and birds of prey.

At the heart of a successful grouse moor is a healthy supply of heather, which provides food, cover and shelter for the hardy birds. Keepers will manage the growth, burning great swathes from October to April to ensure there are areas of longer woody-stemmed plants for cover and young fresh shoots for the parent grouse to eat. As relatives of the Arctic willow grouse, these specialist birds will survive most weather conditions, but if there is not enough heather to eat, then they will suffer. Their broods of six to nine chicks tend to hatch in late April and May, so an unwelcome cold snap or snow storm can cost the local population dear, especially if the chicks are unable to feed on protein-rich invertebrates during the first fortnight.

### ***An ample bag***

But grouse cost money and plenty of it. Indeed, it is largely a labour of love for estate owners who will struggle to produce meaningful days at even a small financial loss. Many a Highland laird has kept the grouse going by selling a family heirloom every year until the cash runs dry and he has to sell up. In post-war Britain, it was often more lucrative to graze the moors with EU-subsidised sheep than pay for sport. The rise in number of red deer has again put pressure on the precious heather. Deer and sheep also harbour huge numbers of tick, a blood-sucking insect that spreads virulent disease among grouse. Yet, on many of the estates where new and foreign investment has arrived, the grouse have returned.

So, for my day, a bag of 25 to 50 brace would be ample, no doubt providing plenty of shots for the party of Guns. We each draw pegs, choosing which Gun will stand at the butts with the number moving up two on the next drive. I am not too proud to want to stand by myself in a butt and would be very happy to have an extra pair of hands and eyes of a loader, often a gamekeeper himself, to ensure I did it right. As a beginner to this discipline, and despite various attempts at practice in the simulated grouse butts at a clay school, I expect I would take a while to master it, and there are no better teachers than the professional locals who have seen it all before. Besides, they are usually full of excellent stories, most unprintable, that add extra colour to the day.

As we line up for the first drive, the beaters are but specks in the distance, up to a mile away across the glen. These tyros cover huge distances during the day, battling through long heather and over steep gullies, waving their white plastic flags in a long line to send the grouse forward. Flankers, often wily ex-keepers who have earned a more sedentary role, try to chase birds back into the firing line if they look to escape out the side door. The team of beaters can number 30-strong, involving many members of the local community, who rely on the grouse as an added source of income during the season.



Being a beater is a grand day out in itself, especially if you have a dog in tow, as there is a deep camaraderie forged in sweat and toil. The young underkeepers walk with them barking orders to keep the beaters in line and coordinating the pace of the drive down their radios with the headkeeper. It is usually conducted with military precision to ensure the birds do not all flush over the butts at once, but rather in a steady stream to draw out the excitement. All of the estate staff wear the same tweed uniforms woven to a pattern that has not changed for generations. Developed as the first form of camouflage, these tweeds allow the keepers to melt into the particular terrain on the estate, as well as protecting them from the elements.

For the Guns in our crafted stone butts, dug down to ground level and topped with turf to blend into the hillside, the action is about to start. Safety is of paramount importance and all butts will have a pair of white sticks that act as a marker inside which the Gun must shoot. With the Guns close by and low down, any shot sideways can be lethal, so it is vital to lift the weapon up when turning round for birds that have passed.

### ***Ducking and darting***

The better grouse shot will take most of his birds in front. These chocolate-brown missiles arrive at a deceptive speed, skimming over the heather and hugging the contours of the hill. Instinct tells you to wait until they are close, as one might for a pheasant or partridge, but that moment's hesitation has probably just cost you your shot. "As soon as you see them, raise your gun to your shoulder," the loader might say, after you have fresh-aired the first covey. "They're on you before you know it."





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The grouse will not come in a straight line either, another distinction from the parkland pheasant, which is so often the modern fare. The group will criss and cross, some diving, others rising, all at heights which would be deemed unsafe in any other form of driven shooting. But if I was able to adjust my sights to that of the grouse, then I have no doubt it would be as good a challenge as all the addicts say it is. Sadly, it would be a costly addiction to develop!

I imagine myself ducking and darting in the butt, taking shots at birds that swoop and whistle past me, earning the odd grunt of appreciation from the loader for a longer shot or a right and left killed cleanly out in front. All the while, it is important to mark fallen game on a circular chart, so that every one of these precious birds is picked at the end of the drive. One hundred and fifty yards behind the butts, well out of range, there is also a team of pickers-up with their trained retrievers that will find those birds I may have regrettably wounded or not shown signs of being hit. As the beaters approach, the keepers blow a horn to signal that there will be

no more shooting in front. By the end of the drive, I am flushed with adrenaline and breathless with joy.

And so the day goes, including another two drives of high octane action before lunch in a cosy bothy or even on the open heather if it is warm enough. A spread of soup, pies, sandwiches or a hearty stew with a beer or glass of wine to wash it down, followed by a tot of something fiery to aid digestion would fit the bill. Then it is back out onto the hill with friends to soak up this regal sport. As the shadows lengthen, we make our way back down the hill, having provided a sizeable tip for both the keepers and loader. That evening, the hotel serves us each a young bird, roasted in a hot oven for just 15 minutes.

It is usually then, with the dream complete, that I will jolt back to London and remember I am in a crowded train and I have missed my stop. I will be late for work. But I do not care, as work is an evil that must be tolerated: maybe one day it will earn me enough cash to make my grouse fantasy a reality.

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