

Attempting Everest

Will a crisis of confidence demoralise a newcomer to one of Scotland's most testing pheasant drives?

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Game Shots need to be thrust from their comfort zone occasionally, otherwise they develop a false impression of their own ability. Just like the golfer who only ever plays at his local club or the skier who never strays from the blue-level piste at his favourite Alpine resort, success is often more attributable to familiarity than a sound technique that would cope with a windy day at Carnoustie or an icy black run at Aonach Mor.

After the two opening drives of the Whitehouse and Borland shoot in upland Glenshee, I was beginning to yearn for the gentle predictability of a parkland estate. The hardy pheasants and partridges on this undulating terrain had shown me a clean tail all morning, cavorting off into the distance with my self-confidence in tow.

Challenging heights

And there would be no immediate respite. Up in front of me now loomed the one thousand five hundred foot peak of Creag nam Brataichean. As my fellow Guns dispersed to their stations, a team of intrepid beaters were scaling the heather-clad slopes, until they appeared no more than figurines in the distance. Booking in at peg number eight, I craned my neck and shaded my eyes to make out their white flags flickering in the October sunshine. I would need one of my own if my current display continued.

Known simply as 'Everest', this showcase drive is celebrated for presenting some of the most testing birds in Scotland. Many a shooter has left at the end of it with a sore back and a puzzled expression, wondering if some prankster had swapped the lead in his cartridges for sawdust. Heartbreak Hill or Ben Disillusion might be a better name for it, as Everest does at least give the impression it can be conquered. The first pheasants lifted off the top of the mountain, like bees from a hive, and it was all

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I could do not to laugh. If the birds had a nose for self-preservation, they would fly directly for Peg Eight.

My technique had already been found wanting on numerous occasions that morning. A gusting wind that cleansed the lungs and stripped the horse chestnut trees of their conkers allowed the reared pheasants and partridges to float over the Guns at maximum speed. Natural gradients facilitated their escape, demanding that the shooter swing faster and further in front to intercept the gamebirds with a lethal hail of shot. All manner of units were being employed to measure how much lead (as in distance, not metal) was needed to down these Exocet missiles. Five-bar gates and Land Rovers were the most popular, but were they short or long wheelbase? Either way, I was still to balance the equation.

Trickiest of targets

Part of the problem, or so I had convinced myself, was that I had spent the previous day smashing artificial targets in the benign surroundings of the Scottish Clay Shooting Centre near Leuchars in Fife. The annual fundraising event, known as the Black Grouse Shoot, had been organised by the World Pheasant Association and the Scottish Countryside Alliance Educational Trust. A sizeable chunk of the profits will be used to finance a black grouse rehabilitation project in Perthshire, which was once a stronghold for these fascinating gamebirds.

But the attraction of clay-doo is that they are relatively easy to hit, being of predictable trajectory and velocity. They come when you say 'pull', and if you do miss, there is a friendly instructor telling you why, and, therefore, how to shoot the next one. A clay also flies considerably slower and closer than a revved-up Glenshee pheasant and it will lose momentum, while a feathered fiend on Everest gathers

Left: Shoot owner Keith Howman waits for the next flush of birds on the Quarry Drive



'Just put the gun in your shoulder and pull the trigger,' he barked.'

Clockwise from top left: Thumbs up! Colin Howman discusses the day with shoot stalwart Steve Makin; Underkeeper Brett Ormorod drives the beaters' wagon; Casualties from the duck drive after lunch; Barry Atkinson, record beater, who joins a different shoot on every day of the season to raise money for charity; Ian Valentine on the Quarry Drive; Roger Wheeler gets his eye in at the Scottish Clay Shooting Centre.

The shoot owner, Keith Howman, an erstwhile president of the World Pheasant Association, had cast me an anxious glance as he poured a generous slug of sloe gin at the Everest base camp, before we marched off to our pegs like so many Mallorys and Irvines in our tweed knickerbockers. Keith and his wife Jean are tireless hosts, ensuring that the day is a constant joy for all the party members. His fine-tuned social radar must have picked up my gathering frustration. 'Get as far ahead of them as you dare, and then double it,' he said warmly. 'But there's no shame in missing these. Just relax, enjoy yourself and don't get disheartened.'

My fellow Guns were also quick to offer advice. Local estate owner Michael Clark had shot beautifully all morning and was happy to share the secret of his success. 'Their speed is hard to gauge when they're coming towards you, so wait until they're passing over your shoulder. Let your hand-eye coordination work it out.'

Keith's son Colin Howman is also an elegant marksman and had been bringing down high partridges on the first two drives with a minimum of effort. 'Get on them early. On the straight-flying birds, I tend to miss them on the right-hand side, so I'll swing through the left



wing instead of the torso. Being a left-hander, you might be the opposite, so try swinging through the right wing.'

Change of tactics

Yorkshireman Steve Makin, whose team of well-trained Labradors retrieved the fallen game at the end of each drive, was typically direct when I asked him for his tuppence worth on shooting the Everest pheasants. 'Just put the gun in your shoulder and pull the trigger,' he barked. But it was all good advice, which I would be pigheaded to ignore. They were each gently prodding me to try something different, because my current strategy was nothing short of inept.

The high standard of pheasants is due entirely

FIELD FACTS

For more information on sporting opportunities, contact Steve Andrews at Whitehouse Estate, Blacklunans, By Blairgowrie, Perthshire, PH10 7LA or Tel: **01250882205**

I was delighted on the day to be reacquainted with Barry Atkinson who has joined a different shoot on every day of the season since 2003. In total, he has visited nearly 700 estates and raised over £250,000 for charity.

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to the hard work and skill of the gamekeepers Steve Andrews and Brett Ormorod, who raise the chicks from one day old, ensuring that they are strong-flying, mature birds by the start of the season on the first of October.

An intricate and time-consuming feeding programme is the key to coaxing the birds from their warm woods to the draughty hilltops of Everest.

That first squadron of pheasants had by now coasted along the thermals in my direction, heading down towards their roost pen at the base of the hill. 'Get on them quickly,' I repeated to myself, picking out a large cock bird that was shaping to fly over my right shoulder. 'Swing through them, bum-belly-beak, and don't stop the gun moving.'

I pulled the trigger and the unfortunate bird doubled in the sky, before tumbling down into the heather behind me. Confidence flooded back through me like hot soup. I missed the next one behind, but shot the third. While there were far more cartridges on the turf than pheasants by the end of the drive, I had held my own. Everest may not have been conquered, but at least she had not claimed another casualty.