

# The hunting life

The gun's been serviced, the dog reminded of his duty, new shooting boots worn in – but as **Nick Hammond** reports, there's a lot more to the shooting season than standing shivering on your peg...





When you mention the shooting season, the mind's eye turns to frosted mornings, bumpy rides in shoot wagons and a line of guns patiently waiting on ankle-breaking plough.

But driven shooting – so-called when pheasants and partridge are sent over the line of guns by a team of enthusiastic beaters and their dogs – is actually but a fraction of the sport enjoyed by millions between September and February. While many of us are delighted with the occasional invite to a driven shoot, or more often, an end of season Beater's Day, most rely on less highbrow – but equally exciting – winter's sport.

Pigeon shooting over decoys, walked-up rough shooting for the occasional rabbit, woodcock and snipe shooting in the south west or Ireland, flight pond shooting for duck or bone-chilling wildfowling dawns by the nation's waterways are all just a flavour of what's on offer in the UK.

Often, these exciting varieties on a theme cost little or nothing – which makes shooting one of the most accessible pastimes we possess.

As long as you're a known and trusted entity in the area, it's not hard to find pigeon shooting, particularly over winter when the Woodpigeon flocks together by the thousand and causes heavy damage to farmers' crops.

You'll need warm clothing, a sound understanding of your quarry and a healthy dose of fieldcraft skills, but there's little to beat an exciting day of pigeon-shooting over decoys.

Here, you lure the bird to within reach of your shotgun by the careful positioning of decoy pigeons and any number of ingenious and varyingly effective flappers, whirlers, peckers and floaters. Your success depends on a myriad of factors; air pressure, wind speed, time of day, availability of food (for the birds, not you) and where and how you site your hide and decoy pattern.

Get it right, and you will have a thrilling day, with every type of shot in the book coming your way as these birds lilt, rocket, stoop and fly past your set up. It's true what they say – if you can shoot well here, you'll shoot well anywhere.

You need no specialist equipment bar your

gun, dog, stout boots and some endeavour. You can walk miles along hedgerow and woodland, using your faithful friend to find any hidden game.


You'll never shoot big bags here, so every shot counts, but a day of chatter, a dose of exercise and a smattering of rabbits, pigeon, duck or the odd pheasant is the stuff dreams are made of when you finally collapse by the fire with a dram in hand.

You can of course pay to shoot in different areas of the country, which specialise in each form of shooting – with Devon, Cornwall and southern Ireland renowned for the quantity and quality of woodcock and snipe most years.

These birds are fast and manoeuvrable and so make snap shooting exciting and highly missable. You can walk up these gamebirds or indeed wait while experienced hands flush them towards you. Either version provides thrilling sport and delicious game for the table.

Wildfowling is the long-practiced and difficult art of getting within gunshot of a selection of wary wildfowl. A howling estuary gale on a bitter winter's morn is a Godsend to the wildfowler, so this is not for the faint-hearted. But if you can stand the gloom and dangers of the mudflats, you'll be rewarded with some of the most spectacular scenes the wild has to offer and you might just bag a goose for Christmas lunch.

And all that is before we've even mentioned the ancient and historic art of deer stalking. Traditionally a shooting sport of the Scottish glens, the huge increase in the numbers and varieties of deer living wild in the UK means there's barely a county where you can't find the opportunity to stalk – under the watchful eye of a professional – with a high-powered rifle. You may not bag a red stag (prize specimens of these are very expensive to shoot nowadays in the old-fashioned, pony-on-the-hill style of stalking), but a morning roebuck or a muntjac taken on a gloomy woodland ride all have their place.

If you add to the above tackling worrisome crows and magpies and 'bolting and banging' rabbit warrens with ferrets, you'll see why the shooting man doesn't have to be on a prestigious estate syndicate to have the sporting time of his life. 

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*Audley House 57 - 58 South Audley Street  
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### WILLIAM EVANS LTD

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