

Shooting Flushed with success

Bob Sherwood stalks woods and bramble, gun at the ready

➤ A HEN PHEASANT EXPLODES FROM THE UNDERGROWTH and is lost amid the dense trees before I have got the shotgun even halfway to my shoulder.

“What was wrong with that one?” smiles Howard Day, who is working his dogs next to me. Nothing, I think to myself, except I was too slow to catch it.

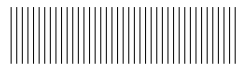
Together with one other dog handler and five other guns, Day and I are on a walked-up shoot on Hamptworth Estate, at the northern edge of the New Forest. There are 3,000 acres to explore, and we are making slow progress through patches of woodland. Birds can flush from anywhere at any moment, and it takes lightning responses to take them down. It is completely different from driven shooting, where guns standing at predetermined pegs usually have more time to line up their shots.

It's been a few years since I tackled a walked-up shoot. And it shows. Working, practically fighting, through dense rhododendron – so bushy I had lost sight of all the other guns – two cock pheasants flushed and climbed straight up towards the top of the tree canopy.

The first bird was too fast, but the second dropped to the



Walked-up shooting requires fast reactions: (right, from top) Bob Sherwood, left, and Howard Day, a cock pheasant



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ground and the air rang with two simultaneous shots from either side of the cover.

One shot was mine. The other was that of Nick, my regular fishing and shooting partner, who tried to claim the bird, sparking a not untypical argument. But I wasn't giving way.

For the driven game shooter, walking through rough cover with a loaded shotgun can come as a bit of a shock. As can the sheer amount of terrain covered in a day's sport. But with the guns carried safely (pointing to the sky or broken open) and the team of shooters staying in a straight line as they walk, all kinds of shots can be taken.

Often the birds will flush away from the guns, but many loop back over the heads of the team or quarter across, giving a few shooters an opportunity. Many shots are taken low as the birds seek to return to cover – another unsettling prospect for driven shooters used to high birds.

"Don't wait for the birds to get up 40ft in the air, because they won't do it," says Day, whose company Outside Days has

organised the shoot. "Although many people start with walked-up shooting, in my opinion it is not for beginners. They are better on a small driven day where everything can be controlled. Walked-up guns need to be quick and confident and it is a real test of their skills."

Though the bags are typically far smaller than would be found on a driven shoot, this is not about the numbers of birds killed. It is about savouring that rare perfect shot and remembering all too vividly the ones that got away.

And it is undeniably exciting. There is an almost childish thrill to stalking through the woods, senses attuned to every rustle, waiting for the telltale beating of a pheasant's wings. It is as close to a Boy's Own adventure as most of us get.

The unpredictability is the attraction, along with a sense of hunting out the quarry. Whenever one of the assembled group of labradors and spaniels takes a particular interest in a thick patch of likely looking brambles, we all tense perceptibly.

As we work through another patch of dense wood, a rustle turns into a crash of branches as a fallow deer breaks through the line of gun just yards away and bounds off. Nerves on edge, I feel as though I've just downed a triple espresso.

In a field by a stand of trees, I bring down another hen pheasant that breaks from my right and then Nick takes an unbelievable crossing bird at the limit of his range that I'd already missed, bringing admiring noises from the rest of the team. Frankly it was a lucky shot, but at least it stops him arguing about the first bird.

More than three-quarters of the Hamptworth Estate is wooded, offering ample habitat for game birds, and it has a long sporting tradition of shooting and deer stalking. It hosts plenty of



THE DETAILS

Outside Days offers a range of shooting activities. Walked-up days cost from around £125. www.outsidedays.com.

traditional driven shooting days, but the walked-up days allow shooters to explore odd corners and smaller patches of woodland that are not convenient for larger drives.

The high number of fallow deer keeps down the brambles and creates light, airy woods that make for relatively easy walking, as well as providing the odd heart-stopping moment when you meet one unexpectedly.

Day personally hosts the events organised by his company, whether they are in the south of England or the Outer Hebrides. Arranging our team for another assault, he leads us to a corner of the estate that has obviously escaped the attentions of beaters recently. Dozens of birds are flushed. The action is fast and furious, though Nick and I are on the wrong end of the team as the almost constant sound of gunfire tells us the pheasants are emerging on the other side of a rhododendron-clad hollow.

We manage a couple to finish the day as the rest of the adrenaline-fuelled guns emerge beaming. The final tally is 27 pheasants between the six of us. But many more cartridges have been fired, giving the lie to the common perception that walking-up offers easy targets.

It might be the rougher end of the sport, but the image many have of a day spent hiking and taking just a couple of shots does not always hold true.

The guns walking back to their four-wheel drives with empty cartridge bags at the end of the day, recounting shots taken, certainly wouldn't agree that this was second-class sport.

"You know, I'm pretty sure I hit that first bird," says Nick as he slides his gun into its slip. ■

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