



Game shooting Out for a duck

Bob Sherwood waits patiently at dusk to bag his first mallard

➤ **THE FIRE ORANGE OF THE MUZZLE FLASH IS STARTLING IN THE DARKNESS.** Somewhere out on the shallow pond a mallard drake falls heavily on to the surface and is still. Nigel Musto's words ring in my ears almost as loudly as the gunshot: "You'll think it's almost too dark to shoot. That's when they'll come in."

Not far from the Essex coast at Maldon, we are shooting wild duck at dusk on Musto's estate, which comprises 180 acres of former farmland. Crouched in deep grass, my knees are aching from the long wait as the sun went down. In spite of Musto's warning, I had all but given up hope of the duck appearing.

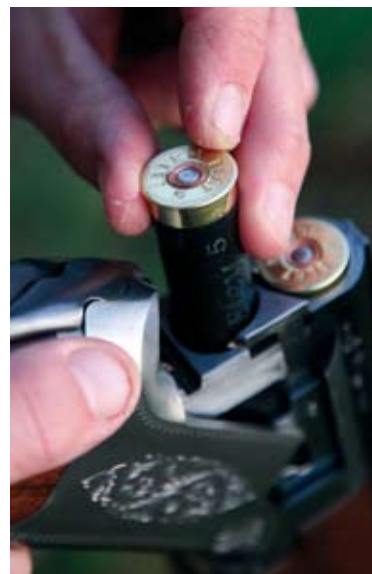
Suddenly, a pair flew in soundlessly from the left. I watched their wings flare as they committed to landing, oblivious to my presence. Now, I'm tense and scanning the darkening sky, expecting more.

Four more circle overhead, then glide in, heading into the wind. They

are still high as they pass my position so I leave them to Musto, who is 30 yards to my right. I hear the shot and see a mallard fall way out across the pond. It is clear my companion can shoot. But that was not always the case.

Musto, vice-chairman of the eponymous waterproof clothing company established by his father, Olympic sailor Keith Musto, came to shooting relatively recently as research for the business. Well known as a premium sailing brand, Musto had struggled to enter the country clothing market. Coming from a sailing family, "we didn't really understand the culture of the sport," says Musto. The business faced a choice: "We either pulled out or we learnt how to play the game."

Musto was duly dispatched to learn how to shoot – and how to appreciate the shooting fraternity's love of traditional, natural fibres, such as tweed. In the process, he says "it's become a passion. I haven't been on a boat since 2005."



THE DETAILS
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“For me, it’s become much more about the conservation than the shooting”

In fact, shooting and game birds became such a passion that two years ago, he bought the 180-acre farm and turned 100 acres of it over to conservation projects.

The conservation of species such as native partridges and snipe, as well as habitat such as wetlands, is an intrinsic part of shooting, but one that is not often visible to those outside the sport. "There was this phrase 'shooting and conservation' that kept cropping up as I started shooting," says Musto. "It seemed like a complete oxymoron, but then I started to get my head round it. You can't go shooting unless you do the conservation work. And now for me it's become much more about the conservation than the shooting."

Earlier, as we waited for the light to fade, Musto gave me a tour. Arable fields are now split with long mounds of earth covered in tussocky grass creating beetle banks as food for partridge. They are flanked by strips of crops for sustenance and brood-rearing cover.

Elsewhere, wide sections of grass cut in a crisscross pattern are split into three zones, mown once every three years to provide different lengths and densities of ground cover to suit the partridges. Other fields are ploughed and left fallow to encourage lapwings.

"When I moved in the place was wall-to-wall arable," says Musto. "If you walked round here then, you would have seen nothing. Now the place is full of wildlife."

His main goal is to encourage grey partridges to breed on the land again, and he has had some success already. One wild pair bred this year, far earlier into the scheme than expected. Musto hopes to achieve 12 breeding pairs on the land.

Organisations such as Natural England and the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust have advised on the project. A new Musto jacket is even named GWCT after the trust, with a percentage of its revenues going to the charity.

Of course, the cover crops are also ideal habitat for the pheasants that Musto releases for his informal shoot, which can prove expensive for his friends. There is a £50 fine for any overexcited gun who inadvertently bags a partridge.

Also safe from shotgun pellets are the snipe in the wetland area. These tiny, fast birds, which rise up seemingly from nowhere, provide famously testing shooting. But not here. "There is nowhere in Essex with breeding snipe," explains Musto. "If we get the habitat right, they will probably decide to stay."

To that end, he has cleared out an old ditch and repaired a sluice, which is used to flood a channel to create a wetland area and feed shallow scrapes that form ponds. He even borrowed 24 cows to churn up the ground and leave dung, which apparently attracts snipe.

The bonus is that the habitat that appeals to snipe is also loved by wild mallard and teal, providing thrilling waterfowl shooting.

Musto shoots over these ponds only occasionally and so the duck fly in with confidence. It is a rare treat to be allowed to shoot here, not just for me but also for Musto's black labrador, Jack, who is almost bursting with excitement. In the spirit of conservation, though, I am not making much of an impact on the local population.

In the growing darkness, the flash from the barrels is so bright that it is distracting. Another pair arrives without warning in front of me, and departs again unscathed.

The duck shift on the air currents as they come to land, jinking off a straight path. The smaller teal are harder to hit than the mallard, though they have saved my blushes by not appearing this evening.

Jack bounds forward to retrieve the first mallard I shoot, and then one downed by Musto. He is puzzled by my misses, though, and splashes around in a fruitless search, less than heedful of the hushed calls through his master's gritted teeth.

We manage another brace to placate the dog, who seems almost as disappointed as I am when the blackness becomes too much.

As we admire the wild duck in the headlights of the Land Rover, the symbiosis of sustainable shooting and habitat conservation makes perfect sense to me.

"The absolute rule we have here is that everything that gets shot, gets eaten," says Musto, handing me a brace. I am happy to comply. ■

Second opinion Leaf that brings relief

By Margaret McCartney

“Cannabis and the law have a clear relationship; to take the former is to break the latter. For years, pressure has been mounting on the government to change this position.

And not just for recreational reasons, but medical ones too. It is often claimed, for example, that cannabis improves the lives of multiple sclerosis sufferers.

A recent systematic review of the evidence in BMC Neurology found that cannabis did help alleviate spasticity, the uncomfortable cramp that can become constant in MS, making affected limbs hard to use. But while patients reported an improvement following treatment, objective measurements did not show any significant change.



Spasticity may not be affected by cannabis; the drug may instead be treating muscle tension and discomfort. That doesn't mean cannabis is not useful. Indeed, another review published last year in Pain Medicine found that "cannabis treatment is moderately efficacious for the treatment of chronic pain". But it also noted that "beneficial effects may be partially (or completely) offset by potentially serious harms".

We can hardly boast that the legitimate medicine cabinet is untainted by side-effect-free drugs. In cannabis, the most obvious side-effect is sluggishness – more commonly known as being "stoned". This is a real problem, but it may possibly be no worse than the sedation delivered by strong analgesics.

There are more worrying risks with cannabis, notably psychosis. A review in the Lancet in 2007 suggested there was a dose-related risk – the more cannabis, the greater the danger. Some studies have also indicated the risk is highest for young people, and those with a personal or family history of psychosis. So how many people are likely to be affected? A paper in Addiction last year found that the number of men who would have to stop heavy use of cannabis to prevent one case of psychosis would approach 2,800 in the 20-24 age group and 4,700 among those aged 35-39.

For many doctors and potential patients, addiction is an even bigger concern. Should it become available on prescription, cannabis would join other legitimate drugs which have dependence as a potential harm – from diazepam to morphine. The truth is that cannabis may well end up being just as useful as any of these drugs and, just like them, require careful prescription and informed consent.

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