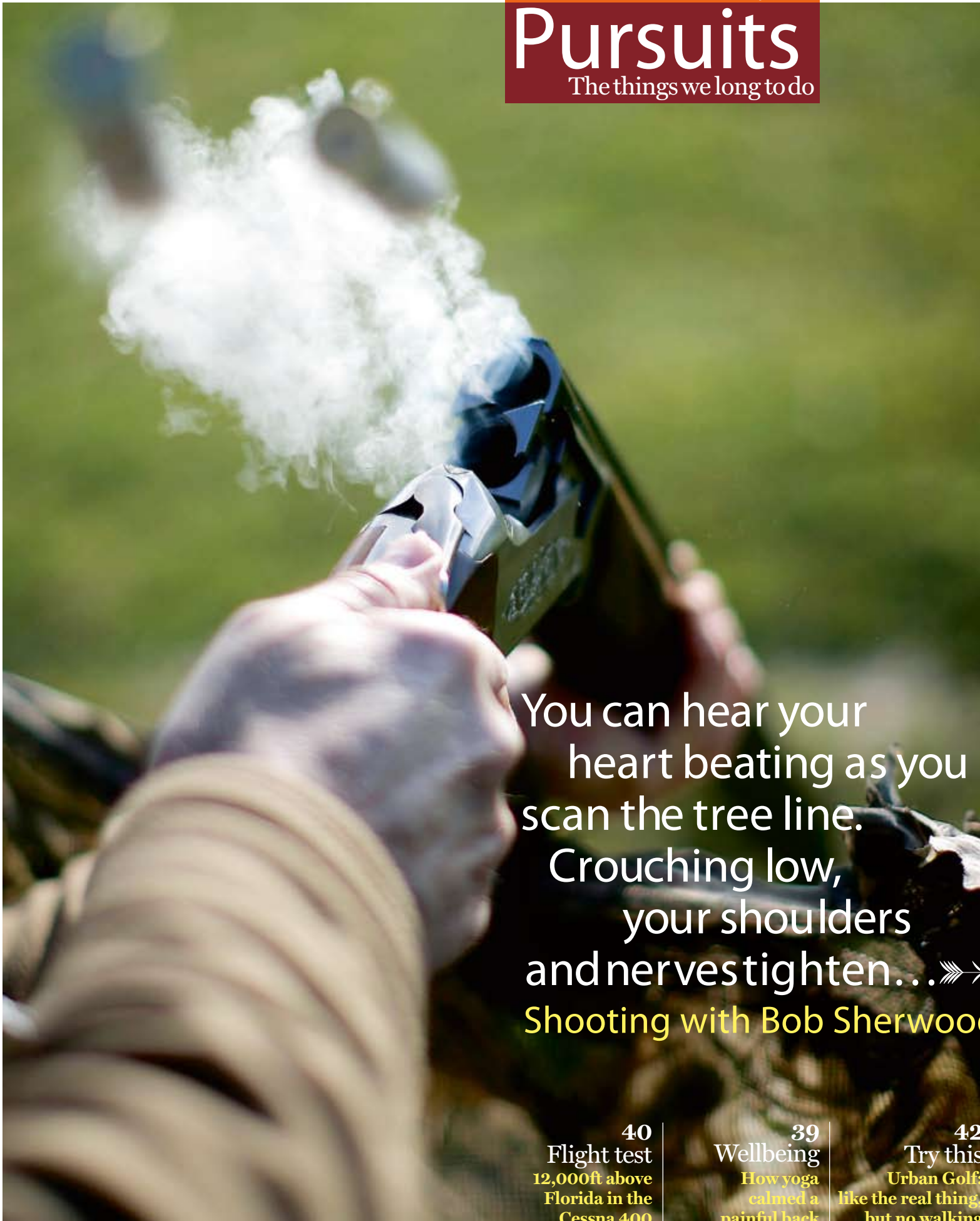


Pursuits

The things we long to do



You can hear your heart beating as you scan the tree line. Crouching low, your shoulders and nerves tighten...
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➤ A bird breaks from its flight line across a stand of oak trees, banking into the wind and dropping fast and low.

With effortless control, it uses the air currents to slow its descent, preparing to land on a field of flowering oil-seed rape. I have tracked its flight path and know exactly where it will make its final approach. As I rise above the screen of the hide and mount the gun, the bird flares away and starts to climb. My 30g of lead pass below. I have just missed my first shot at *Columba palumbus*, the wood pigeon.

The first bird only confirms the nagging sense of disorientation that I have felt since unslipping my shotgun a little after dawn on a misty April morning. It had been resting in my gun safe where, like most game shots, I had expected it to remain until the autumn.

It had felt strange being out with a dog and a gun on a breezy spring day. But the offer of a pigeon masterclass from expert Gary Green at Gaynes Park, Guy Chisenhale-Marsh's estate near Epping in Essex, had sparked my curiosity. Unlike the classic game birds, which are shot during the winter, wood pigeons are classed as an agricultural pest and can be shot all year round. The sport may lack the kudos – and price tag – of pheasant and partridge shooting, but it is readily available and more testing than I had expected.

After a few more cartridge loads of shot disappear harmlessly into Chisenhale-Marsh's rape crop, my shoulders and nerves tighten as I crouch low, half-perched on a stool in the hide. I can hear my heart beating as I scan the sky over the tree line, which Green has identified as the pigeons' natural flight path.

Another bird circles away across the steeply rising field and I assume it is gone. The decoys we have laid out to simulate a group of feeding pigeons don't seem to be working. But even at more than 100 yards range, Green knows better. "He's having it," he murmurs.



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THE DETAILS
A day's pigeon decoying in Essex costs from £150. Contact Gary Green on 07891 246550. www.basc.org.uk

Too afraid to move, I am peering through the net of the hide when I see the bird cut back across the wind and lock on to its seemingly safe destination. Only too aware of its powers of detection, I wait until the pigeon's tail feathers flare and its head drops to focus on its landing point before breaking cover. This time the bird drops and Brock, Green's eight-year-old springer spaniel, finally gets some exercise with a flawless retrieve.

"Look at that," says Green as the dog drops the pigeon into his hand. "They are such a beautiful bird." Close up, the colours of the pigeon are striking: iridescent greens and purples in the ring around the collar, pink on the breast and pale blues and greys on the head and neck.

Green, who grew up in the East End of London, has been fascinated by bird-watching since childhood. From just after dawn when we set up the hide and laid out the decoys, he has been talking pigeon. I have learnt about their natural flight lines – the same paths that they fly repeatedly from roost to feeding grounds – their habitat, preferred crops and instinctive wariness.

That intimate knowledge, even obsession, with the birds is central to pigeon shooting. Now I can see what Archie Coats, the doyen of pigeon shooters, meant when he wrote of the bird in his 1963 classic *Pigeon Shooting*: "I am very fond of him, though I do make my living out of his destruction."

|||||
"It's all about getting the birds where you want them to be – that's the skill of decoying"



As these are wild, indigenous birds, there is no sense of artificiality to the sport. "It's unpredictable. Nobody is rearing and releasing these birds, or beating them over you," says Green. "They are purely wild and they should be respected and appreciated."

It is not just the wood pigeon that captivates him. He also points out crows and jackdaws that look like dots in the sky to me, and quickly identifies a woodpecker

from its dipping flight. At one point, we ignore the pigeons and stare at a soaring buzzard.

Stealth is everything when tackling wood pigeon: hence the hide, the need to stay still and even cover our faces with a scarf. After a field has been shot over, the pigeons will often avoid it for weeks, which is why shooting is such a good method of crop protection.

And there is a need for it. We have been shooting while a pigeon-scaring kite circles over the field, clearly having little deterrent. A large area of crop to our left has been eaten bare by pigeons. That is why farmers often allow shooting at little or no cost. And even a day's shooting with a guide at prime harvest time typically costs £150-£200 a day, far below the cost of most driven shooting.

Green and I are shooting at a tricky time of year, though. Pigeons prefer to eat seeds, and crop drilling has not yet begun. The rape plants are a good bet, if not the birds' favourite. It is down to Green's skill – analysing the birds' habits, the wind direction, crop availability and decoy pattern – that we are getting any shooting at all.

"Knowing the flight lines is everything," he says. "You have to watch for flocks building up and know the crop rotations. Then you can use the knowledge to your advantage."

"It's all about getting the birds where you want them to be – that's the skill of decoying. The interaction with nature and then the successful deceit is the attraction for me."

The pigeons are coming in to the rear of the decoys' V-formation just where Green predicted they would. Later in the morning I'm relaxing into the sport and beginning to find my range. I drop three in succession.

By the time an icy rain squall ends our morning, we might not have amassed a large bag but there have been plenty of testing shots in the difficult conditions.

"It's not just about the big bags," says Green. "You get such a variety of different types of shot with pigeon. You will get a much better class of shot on a good pigeon day than you will in any other game shooting."

"People who put away their guns at the end of January don't know what they are missing." ■

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Wellbeing Yoga therapy

By Susan Elderkin



"I like difficult cases," says Dr Robin Monro, greeting us at the Yoga Therapy Centre he founded in King's Cross, London.

This is good, because I've brought him the most challenging patient I could find: my 46-year-old friend Sharif, who for the past three weeks has been suffering shooting pains in his lower back. Tall, strong and not very flexible, Sharif has also never been near a yoga mat in his life.

Monro is older than I was expecting – a sprightly 76 – with a small, lithe frame. "Contrary to popular belief, you don't

THE DETAILS
Yoga Therapy Centre, 90-92 Pentonville Road, London N1 9HS, 020 7689 3040, www.yogatherapy.org

have to know how to do yoga to benefit from yoga therapy," he says. Monro questions Sharif about the pain, then measures – literally, with a tape measure – his range of movement. He diagnoses a problem with the facet joints – not a slipped disc, as Sharif had feared.

Back pain is Monro's speciality, but the centre claims to help a huge range of conditions, from arthritis and diabetes to asthma and depression. Yoga is tailored to individual needs in one-to-one sessions, with clients graduating to small groups.

Lying on our backs, Sharif and I are shown a series of gentle exercises – lifting our heads to look at our toes, then bending a knee and rotating it gently, or pushing it to the side – designed to relax Sharif's muscles, bring restorative blood flow back to the damaged tissue and begin to strengthen his postural muscles. By the time we've finished, Sharif has a big smile on his face. "I feel different already," he says.

I notice that the session has passed without a word of Sanskrit being uttered – and we haven't done any of the classical yoga poses. Is what Monro has done any different to what a physio might do? Monro insists it is. "First, there's our emphasis on relaxation, breathing and awareness," he says. "The effects of yoga on the immune system are well documented – your heart rate and blood pressure go down, there are chemical changes in the blood, your endorphin levels go up..." For someone who was in as much pain as Sharif, the full *asanas* (postures) will have to wait.