



Border Bombshells

To show redlegs well you need a gale or undulating ground or both. The weather is down to luck but if you release birds in low hills you will have quality sport. Doug Virtue discovered this in his vastness in the Lammermuir Hills in the Borders and here he shows wonderful partridges. Get a wind up there on a shooting day and you have birds to die for.

On drive one we stood in a narrow valley, more a gully really and stared up at the crest where strips of bracken and gorse glowed russet. We basked in sunshine at a time when rainstorms deluged the rest of the United Kingdom, a rare treat for the bleak Border country. Beaters were at risk of growing one leg longer than the other for they crabbed along a precipitous slope; at almost every step a squirt of birds rose, spread like a fan and arrowed across the valley. Gosh, they were testing but the old rednecks in the team struck lucky for they all came onto form at once. Shots spattered and rolled, partridges one moment urgent and fast, shrank and spun tumbling down to thud into the short grass on the slope behind. Shooting was continuous and there were more than enough birds for you to get your eye in. We gathered at the end with bright eyes, each with a tale to tell of amazing hits or inexplicable misses. We boasted of rights and lefts, of eyes wiped and confessions of the odd low bird taken in the heat of the moment - in other words the same chitchat as you find on any good shoot. The drive produced seventy birds.

The secret ingredient of this shoot is not only the ideal terrain but also the swathes of bracken and gorse that cloak the hills. There are no cover crops but strong and healthy birds live *au naturel* in small coveys on the slopes. They behave and fly like wild partridges and this gives them a stunning edge as sporting quarry. It also produces a wide variety of shots. While many birds are steeple-high sailing over at extreme range, some bank and sweep round the contours like driven grouse, and many will not cross the valley but curl and skim along the face of the hill in front. This means that on any one drive the gun is presented with every shot in the book but the number of birds shown is such that he can be picky.

The beaters emerged from the gorse, a team of pickers up homed in from behind and between them they gave the ground an efficient Hoovering. Many of the guns had dogs and they helped. Very little was lost. Too many shoots hurry on to the next drive without picking up carefully. It was a short stroll along tussocky grass and an about face, and we were ready for the second drive. But surely Doug had given us his best one first and subsequent ones would not match it? Not a bit of it. If anything the second drive was more prolific than the first. Again the redlegs shovelled over from every angle, many of them very tall, others coming in small coveys round the bluff, zipping down the wind at hideous speed. Again gun barrels grew hot and we realised that, had we been able to afford it, we could have used double guns. A quick head count showed that already we had exceeded our limit but we decided to take lunch then and have one more drive in the afternoon, hoping that our respective bank managers would be understanding.

We went for lunch at the Thistle Inn said to serve some of the best Aberdeen Angus steaks in Scotland. Doug explained that his birds come from wild, local stock and over twenty-one seasons he has been upgrading, and improving the bloodlines by selective breeding, and culling anything less than perfect. The parents are fed on unmedicated rations, which means a high degree of disease immunity in their progeny. The result is a hardy, healthy stock of robust, well-feathered birds that produce returns well above the national average. Doug added,

'We can show highflying, sporting birds capable of beating the very best guns. Another bonus is that at the end of the season we are left with surviving hen pheasants with strong wild bird characteristics which, properly kept, are capable of rearing young in the wild. This provides a generous stock of home grown birds produced naturally!

Back on parade the sun had faded and a light drizzle set in. We faced another range of rocky outcrops, more bracken and whins where I noticed that tracks had been cut to allow beaters to get through. We did our best, hit some and missed some. The three keepers in matching tweeds, who double as game farm workers out of season, worked their dogs picking droppers. My little Labrador, China, was into the prickles and brought back five birds all alive and ignored the dead ones. She really was a star. The tally was mounting when two pickers up hove into sight with bulging bags.

The final count was 254 brilliant redlegs for three drives and eight guns. Days of such superb and consistent quality do not come along often and when they do they are to be savoured.



This extract of text comes from John Humphreys "Game Season".

All the UK's main game species are covered individually and there are chapters on grouse, partridge, pheasant, wildfowl, pigeons, rabbit, hare, venison, trout and salmon. Each chapter comprises a series of shooting or fishing adventures showing how each quarry species may be brought to the kitchen.

There then follow recipes for each species by Angela Humphreys (author of the highly-acclaimed *Game Cookery*). The recipes include cooking hints and include both traditional and innovative ideas.

The book is illustrated with paintings and vignettes by the internationally renowned sporting artist Rodger McPhail.

The unique combination of sporting lore and recipes and the magnificent illustrations, make *Game Season* a must for all field sports enthusiasts.

Game Season is available to buy from Amazon:
<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Game-Season-John-Humphreys/dp/1846890225>