

# A beautiful innovation - or a pain in the butt?

By Jonny Beardsall

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Bird brain: entrepreneurial student Ruaraidh Menzies with Lexi Byrne, 19, one of his loaders

## **Jonny Beardsall discovers that shooting enthusiasts are likely to encounter Heather as well as heather on expeditions this season**

Time was when women were barely tolerated on grouse moors on the grounds that they made too much noise and wore kit that frightened every bird off the hill.

Not any more, hopes Ruaraidh Menzies, a St Andrews student with a linguistically challenging name (pronounced Rory Mingeas). He is itching to fill grouse butts from Scotland to Derbyshire with as many young women - or "grouse chicks" - as he can muster. Unsurprisingly, they tend to be very pretty.

Recognising that a growing number of feisty female shots enjoy the sport as much as men, and are often very good performers, Menzies aims to dent one of the last predominantly male preserves this season by releasing a team of female loaders among the grouse.

He has hand-picked 15 recruits, most of them "easy on the eye" undergraduates or gap-year students in their late teens and early 20s, and dressed them in striking tweed uniforms designed and made by his mother, Hilary.

"We're taking something that is very traditional and shaking it up a bit," explains Menzies, 20, who launched the Edinburgh-based Splendid Game in May after coming up with the idea in a pub. "Attitude is crucial... our girls are fun, charismatic and easy communicators and, of course, they can load."

His team members have been training on a clay range to ensure they can exchange and reload shotguns in seconds when the sky turns black with grouse. Each has also been exercising strenuously to build sufficient strength to cope with a long day in the heather, lugging guns weighing up to 20lb plus the same weight again in ammunition.

Far from being daunted by the prospect, the fledgling loaders seem very enthusiastic. "I'm very excited about this," says the decidedly petite Lexi Byrne, 19, who is reading History of Art at St Andrews.

Has she ever been on a moor before? "Not before this summer. I'm from London, but I'm sure I'll cope."

Sophie Atkinson-Clark, 18, who has just left school, has more rustic credentials. "Grouse moors are not completely alien to me because my parents owned one in Perthshire - they think this is a great idea," she says.

The wives and girlfriends of "guns", who usually just join their partners for lunch, are unlikely to be quite so enthusiastic, but there may well be shooters who would prefer a fresh-faced female by their side to a strong, silent and wind-burnt male loader.

With guns paying £2,500-£5,000 each for a double-gun day this season, the loaders will certainly have to do more than look pretty when they head out onto the moors.

While a generous host picks up the entire bill on a guest day, protocol dictates that on let days, paying grouse shooters settle up with their loaders, which can add £60-£100 to the cost of the shooting. So, given the overall sums involved, will they be happy to pay Menzies a further £180 to blaze away in a butt with a doe-eyed girl beside them? "I believe so," says the entrepreneurial classics student.

Not everyone is so convinced. Adrian Thornton-Berry runs Dalesport, which lets grouse shooting and other driven shooting in the north of England. "It's a fun idea but in a big year which promises large bags, getting the lead off is what guns have in mind," he says.

"Girls will need to be super-fit, and by that I mean fit in the traditional sense of the word. Pulling the trigger and not other things is what most guns will want to focus on."

While Menzies gets top marks for enterprise in attempting to pay off his student loan, does he really think young women in butts will take off as an idea? "Definitely, and I can see us working with partridge and pheasant days too. Ideally, I can also see an office in, say, Cirencester and see where it takes us."

Thornton-Berry agrees that Gloucestershire may be the best target Menzies could aim for. "He could be on to something there - his idea could have a better chance with low-ground shooting," he murmurs thoughtfully. "Ask him to send me a photo... or three."