

Grouse shooting



November grouse are no one's fools. Strong and alert, they flash over the butts to test the best.

By Adrian Dangar

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End-of-season grouse provide superlative sport at an affordable price if you can bag a day and shoot straight. Adrian Dangar is blown away by the drama of a gusty day on the moor.

I am standing in a grouse butt on Arkleside Moor some 1,200ft above sea level and scouring the black horizon for approaching birds. Men who sweated beneath the August sun on these once-purple hills have long gone, migrating south like the swallows to warmer and softer climes. The wind is blowing hard from the north, stinging the face like salt on a wound, but the sun is shining so fiercely that it illuminates the surrounding moors as if they are a giant stage waiting for action. The guns crouching expectantly in their butts are mere props compared to the real payers in the unfolding drama – coveys of very wild grouse concealed somewhere in the heather ahead of us. The guns are much too far away to see the first birds scrambling skywards, and even though their arrival is what each has been anticipating for every second of the past 10 minutes, just one russet ball falls from the first silent covey that sweeps without warning across the line. Welcome to the high-altitude, unpredictable and undeniably thrilling world that is late-season grouse.

Fieldcraft from both guns and beaters is so much more important at this end of the season than during the hot days of August when birds sit as tight as ticks on a sheep. There's little chance of them doing that today, even though there are 50 per cent fewer beaters in the line than usual. Instead there is a danger that all the grouse on one drive will lift as a giant pack and offer just a few seconds of fleeting opportunities before strong winds gust them over the horizon. When the moor's owner, Martin Vallance, leads the guns to take up position for the next drive he abandons a path through the heather in favour of a soggy dyke bottom. Some sink to their knees

in cold, green slime but their host considers it a small price to pay for keeping bobbing heads hidden from the beady gaze of nervous grouse. November frosts can be cold enough to lacquer nearby Coverdale Tarn in ice, yet once ensconced in his butt, Martin turns to me and whispers, *“The excitement of a day like this in November makes my blood run hot – grouse are wild and observant creatures, you know, and by this stage of the season they are as cunning as stoats. Each drive is a manoeuvre to outwit them.”*

NO GROUSE VIRGINS HERE

Those shooting understand that excitement only too well – why else would they risk ice, fog and driving rain at a notoriously unpredictable time of year? None fits the profile of fat cat or Russian oligarch so beloved by the popular press, although Giles Shepherd-Cross has one or two in his team that can hardly be described as grouse virgins. This is probably just as well because, as Martin explains, there is a job to be done today that is crucial to the success of next year’s breeding season. *“You don’t want too few birds left for breeding, but neither do you want too many, otherwise there is a serious risk of worms and disease that can wipe out the lot,”* he says. *“Gauging how many extra days to put on in a good year like this is difficult, and the decision is based not just on worm counts but also experience. Unless the guns can kill grouse the day is wasted – we are taking an important crop and it is vital to shoot what is left down to a level that minimises the risk of disease for next year.”* These words are echoed by Dick Murphy who, as a partner in CKD Kennedy Macpherson, is involved in the management of some of the premier grouse moors in northern England. *“Our scheduled days finish in September,”* he tells me, *“but once they are over in a good year like this one we need teams of guns that can really perform, are available at relatively short notice and don’t mind taking a risk with the weather.”*

KEEP THE DIARY FREE

For many the attraction is not just superlative sport, it’s the affordable price. *“I couldn’t possibly justify the expense of driven grouse in August,”* Giles tells me, *“but when I was offered the chance of a discounted day with no overage or underage I didn’t have to think twice.”*

Neither did the eight friends he asked to join him on the basis that each paid his share, although Giles admits the day could still look expensive if his team shot only a small bag. If this sounds like your idea of the perfect early Christmas present don’t hold your breath – while the price falls as the season progresses, days tend to be offered to those known by the moor’s owner or agents to be reliable, proven grouse-shots.

Yet, according to Adrian Thornton-Berry, who manages Arkengarthdale moor and owns Dalesport Sporting Agency, finding a suitable team of guns isn’t straightforward. *“Persuading eight keen shots to set aside the same dozen dates during late autumn on the*

off-chance that there may be some grouse days available is another matter altogether. I know just one man who has the balls to keep his diary completely free from partridge and pheasant days at that time of year, and this season he has been rewarded by 25 days of superb driven grouse-shooting – it's a case of feast or famine." For those willing and able to take the risk, Adrian suggests contacting one of a dozen or so men whose lives revolve around grouse and moorland management in the Pennines, but he attaches equal importance to honesty. *"You are there to kill as many grouse as possible,"* he emphasises, *"and the guys that shoot the straightest usually end up getting a reasonable deal. If you are not an experienced grouse-shot it is best to work your way in gradually and be honest about your abilities. Nothing winds us up more than guns that can't deliver"*.



On the second drive the birds refuse to fly over all but the top three guns, relegating the lower five to the role of spectators. The expansive view to Little Whernside, glowing like a beacon in the weak November sun, and moorland spliced open by a green splinter marking the head of Coverdale prompts James Shepherd-Cross to observe, *"We think we live in an overcrowded island, but you can come up here and spend a day without even seeing another house."* The views may be clear but the birds on this drive are almost impossible to see against the backdrop of winter heather – a diamond sparkle of white underwings is the only clue to a rising covey. Every hint of life from the canvas ahead – the tremble of a beater's flag, the bounce of a questing spaniel – causes the grip to tighten on gun stocks down the line.

OUT OF THIS WORLD

The disciplined hush of morning gives way to raucous chatter inside the wooden lunch hut, which is decorated with documents, letters and poems chartering the estate's rise from overgrazed upland to a productive grouse moor. Pride of place is reserved for a plaque inscribed each year with the name of an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to the shoot, including Alan Wood, *"The Terminator"*, who is a man very much in the market for November grouse and guaranteed to deliver what is demanded of him. *"These days are not often in the public domain,"* he tells me, *"and right now in October they are still fetching top dollar, although I am expecting the price to drop soon. The birds are beginning to pack up on many of the Pennine moors and the owners need guns that can hit their targets. You have to really go for it – grouse-shooting is exciting in August but at this time of year it's absolutely out of this world."*

SPECKS OF PEPPER

On the last drive we see one of the great packs of grouse for which the Pennines are famous rising from the heather like a swarm of bees, but thumping hearts subside as the north wind buffets them to safety and I watch the disappearing birds fade until they are no more than specks of pepper merging with the darkening skies. What birds remain leave it until they are almost within range before banking skywards and curling back over the line of furious beaters, oblivious to the frantic flag waving that is taking place beneath them. *“That’s November grouse for you,”* says headkeeper Karl Alderson. *“They’ve been shot at enough times to know the score, and this wind is all the encouragement they needed to go the wrong way.”*

Karl and his boss are satisfied by the bag and there will be no more shooting on Arkleside this season. *“I think we are where we want to be now. What’s left is our breeding stock for next year,”* Karl announces as guns and beaters march homewards together across the moor with heads bent low, furred flags still rattling in the howling wind.