

The red grouse is as seductive as they come. The books will tell you it is endemic to the British Isles, living in areas of blanket bog and upland heath. They will also record that in the 70 years preceding 1980, numbers of birds shot fell by 82 per cent, diminished by having their natural habitat overgrazed by sheep and deer, converted to forestry and increasingly populated by raptors and corvids. They will also record that numbers are now rising again, but what they don't show is how fiendishly difficult they are to shoot.

The red grouse is a medium-sized game bird, plump of body, short of tail, with a lightly hook-tipped bill, reddish brown in colour and with rather fetching white eyelids. I go into this much detail as for us southerners, it's likely the only time we will be able to recognise one in the feather is in the chiller, rather than whistling downwind at 80mph. We are more likely to see them lying naked on their backs on a dinner plate surrounded by carrot purée and potato rosti. Their rich taste is derived from their diet almost exclusively of heather but supplemented with seeds, berries and insects.

Grouse shooting's window of opportunity

Short of being born into a moor-owning family, chances are you will come to grouse shooting later in life. Whilst it might become more affordable the older you get, with age come restrictions, notably in reaction time and mobility, so the window of opportunity should be opened sooner rather than later. An acquaintance succinctly summed up the situation by saying he was neither fit enough for walked-up nor rich enough for driven grouse shooting, but that hadn't stopped him from trying both. He attributed his limited success in the heather to the hubris of believing that if you can bring down pheasant and partridge quite handily, then grouse cannot be that different, but as he freely admitted, practice first would undoubtedly have helped.



On this course were, from left: instructors Bruce Sheppard & Mark Swiers, Paolo Morandotti, Leslie Lord, Kevin Parish, Ian Comer, Tom Gore & Ru Bathurst.

The north-south DIVIDE

How does a southern softie expect to get on with upland grouse? This training course will leave you better informed and better prepared but breathless, as **John Walker** discovered.

So it was that I found myself on a north Oxfordshire hillside, on Nick Johnston's Great Tew Estate, instructed by West London Shooting School's Bruce Sheppard and Mark Swiers, on one of their Purdey Grouse Course days in August. I was joined by a group of experienced and tyro shots, all anticipating a grouse joust. Ru the artist was graduating from his Gloucestershire pheasant to Northumbrian grouse. Tom the photographer didn't look as though he needed much coaching at all. Meanwhile Paolo the Italian oilman had an elegance of dress and address that was the envy of all.

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Safety first

This half-day course sets out to embrace all aspects of probably your most expensive day in the field, ever, with explanations of shooting safety, butt types, flankers, beaters, pickers-up and dangers encountered on the moor. We began beside what Bruce described as a 'pop-up' butt, a camouflaged collapsible framework that can be thrown up in minutes virtually anywhere. These are much in demand on the bigger moorland estates, to vary positions when early season grouse have become used to permanent butts and how to avoid them. First and foremost, everyone, but everyone, whether experienced shot, grizzled loader or attractive observer, should wear a hat and glasses, for, as Bruce hammered home: "Safety is a completely different and all-consuming discipline on the moor."

With grouse you are likely to be facing an advancing phalanx of fustian-clad locals whilst shooting low and



Paolo Morandotti and instructor Bruce Sheppard in one of the increasingly popular pop-up grouse butts.



Bruce Sheppard in one of the permanent stone butts at Great Tew.

often into the ground, which is initially equally difficult to embrace.

The whites of their eyes

Later, it got to how to actually shoot the wee beasts, how the days are likely to be run and other important aspects of etiquette. Stay upright. Keep your head and torso still. Wear heathery coloured tweed. Acknowledge your neighbours. Mark the wind direction. Look for features in front of you and visualise your 90° safe killing zone – safe for your neighbours, that is, not the grouse. Shoot off the front of the butt, go after them with purpose, shoot them early enough to get in a second shot but wait till you

to address your quarry in one movement and at one speed. Shoot its feet, or you will be too high.

Then, with preliminaries over, we took position in stone butts and faced a 100-bird flush. It all began to make sense, even when the clays started flying, fast, just above head height and in every direction, for that is what grouse do.

Like many shandy-drinking southern sportsmen, my guns are fitted to shoot pheasant and partridge, shooting fractionally high to give that extra bit of helpful lift and lead, but this is of no help when faced with a bird coming at you low and mean. "It's their legs,

“It all made sense as the clays started flying, fast, just above head height and in every direction.”

stupid," is the call and I spent much of my time in action trying to remember this. Better men than I have remarked that this layout, though simulated, is as close as it gets to the real thing and it is not difficult to see why.

Excellent practice

Not the only shooting ground to offer grouse familiarisation days, West London Shooting School and James Purdey & Sons have enjoyed and developed a fruitful working relationship over many years, offering their clients synergic services. Gun fitting at Northolt and Game Flyer courses for young shots and lady guns are now supplemented by the grouse course. This year, around 35 guns partook of the wit and wisdom of Bruce and Mark over three days and each enjoyed a half decent lunch at a modest cost of £175 per head.

And let us never forget that grouse are unbiddable wild birds and that is their attraction, so a half-day's reminder will send you out much better prepared.

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