

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Geese, ducks, pheasant and partridge are all on the menu as Rebecca Green joins a team of Guns on a new rough shooting package at Morphie Estate in Montrose, Scotland

Stumbling across the semi-frozen fields under the cover of the pre-dawn blackness, I curse my forgetfulness at not having packed my headtorch, although I am grateful for the many

layers of clothing and the chest waders which *did* find their way into my bag: it's late October and a few degrees below zero here on the east coast of Scotland, and soon I will be waist-deep in water in a ditch. A far cry from the heated car seat I would normally sink into on a Friday morning, but I wouldn't have it any other way as today I am joining a team of Guns trying out an exciting new shooting package on the Morphie Estate in Montrose. And first up is a morning goose flight on stubble fields just north of the Montrose Basin – world-renowned for its pink-footed geese.

Before we get tucked into our hides, Tom, our host, and Mike, the estate headkeeper, have some finishing touches to make to help ensure the hides don't give our position away. The decoys are then set out in front of us and, hurrying as the first ribbons of orange brighten the horizon, we slip into the hides and wait.

Tom and Mike have done their homework and know what time the geese are likely to put in an

appearance, and it's not long before a cacophony of honking is carried towards us enticingly on the breeze. Even though Tom and I are not shooting from our hide, it's a sound that sends excitement levels soaring. The temptation to crane my neck outside the hide and see what's coming is great, but I resist.

Gradually, the flame-red sky gives way to a grey October dawn, revealing the water-logged fields in front of us and the decoys enticingly positioned to attract the pink-footed passers-by we are waiting for. The 'honks' get louder and finally I see a huge skein passing overhead, but they are high up and show no signs of stopping. Tom explains that often they will circle back around and have another look, but not this time – they are obviously headed elsewhere.

The next skein approaching is smaller and lower. Mike and Tom use the calls to try and entice them in and it seems to be working – the geese circle around once, then again and, to my amazement, start to head in towards the decoys.

"Wait for the landing gear," Tom quietly pleases, as per the instruction that was given to the Yorkshire team back at the lodge an hour or so earlier, while we gorged on bacon butties. But he needn't have worried – unfortunately, before any shots are fired, the geese have second thoughts and veer off sharply. Something has spooked them, prompting frantic radio action between Tom, Mike and Mark 'Scouler', the spotter who's strategically positioned in a truck at the field edge to give us the head's up on what's approaching.

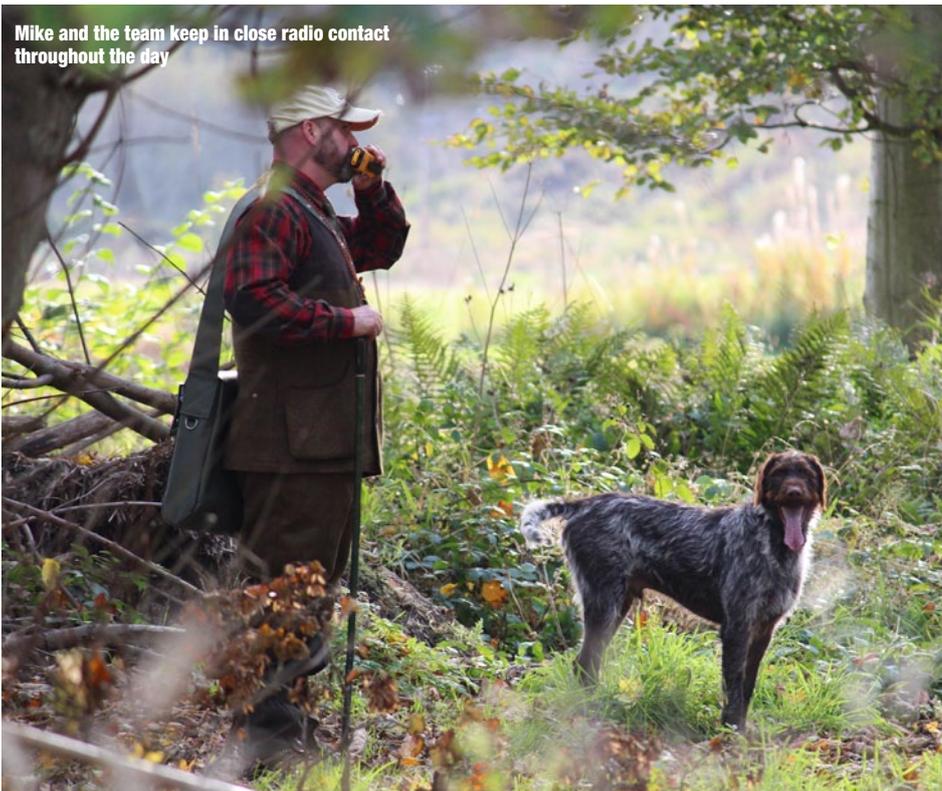
The general consensus is that it's the flapper; the wind has picked up since pre-dawn and it's now flapping rather too frantically. Mike's young

'The river North Esk carves its way gracefully through the estate, making for a picturesque setting and offering up the potential for duck'

After a successful point, Rab makes the retrieve



Mike and the team keep in close radio contact throughout the day



son Dylan (who's keen as mustard and has been given the privilege of helping out today) dashes out to remove the offending pole and adjust a few of the other decoys before the next skein pulls in.

Almost immediately another small skein comes into sight and, again, circles back around and heads for the decoys. It's all looking promising, but there's an over-excited early shot before the birds are fully within range and they exit stage left, taking the other Guns' chances of a shot with them.

Thankfully, from then on the action is almost constant, with skein after skein either passing over or coming in to the decoys, so that each of the five Guns gets some shooting. And with Guns now waiting until the first bird has committed, there's a chance for multiple birds to be picked off. It's exhilarating stuff: the anticipation as the geese near, the honking getting louder and louder... wondering if they will commit or not... waiting until you feel it's almost too late before taking a shot...

By about 9am the action dries up and the call comes over the radio from Mike to call it a morning. Five smiling Guns emerge from their hides with five geese to show for their efforts – though it could easily have been more.

The beauty of this new shooting package being offered at Morphie, however, is that far from being over, the fun is only just beginning; so it's back to the lodge to change, have a full English and a briefing from Mike, before heading off into the estate for the second part of the day – the walked-up shooting.

Morphie Estate

Recently acquired by Wainstones Estates, Morphie currently offers 150 acres of arable farmland, dens and grassland over which to

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All the Guns got some shooting on the pink-footed geese

shoot, with plans to extend this considerably for the 2018 season. The river North Esk carves its way gracefully through the estate, making for a very picturesque setting as well as offering up the potential for some duck shooting.

Indeed, if you are into fishing, the river is one of the estate's big attractions. Once one of the most prolific salmon beats in Scotland, a lot of work has been undertaken to help return this part of the river to its former glory. The shooting is part of a diversification package, led by Tom and headkeeper Mike, both of whom are incredibly passionate about the project.

"I grew up here," explains Mike. "I fished this river and shot the land from the age of about 12, so it means a lot to me to be back here now with this fantastic opportunity to reinstate the estate's sporting heritage."

There are currently five acres of game cover crop (more will be added next season), and it is in one of these that the day's walk-up begins. The Guns, Tom, Mike and Scoular line out, taking in the fields either side of the cover strip and some woodland alongside it. Mike's German wirehaired pointer (GWP) Rab and Scoular's dogs, Fern, Moss and Piper (GWPs and a Lab) work the



The area is world-renowned for its pink-foot population

Mike moves in to flush a partridge as Rab comes on point at Martin's Den



YOU CAN DO THIS

There are two package options available for the 2018 shooting season at Morphie. A team of five Guns can stay at the lodge for two nights' full board and one full day's shooting, from £2,215 per team. Alternatively, two days' shooting and three nights' full board costs from £4,150.

There is also the option to stalk roe, go pigeon shooting or have individual goose flights, with or without the lodge. Prices available on request.

For more details contact Tom Festing on 07714 783367. Alternatively, you can email tom@wainstonesesates.co.uk

ground well and it's not long before pheasants are flushed. Unfortunately, they don't fly in the direction Mike and Tom anticipated, so none make it into the bag, but this being the first day of the season it is inevitable that some strategies might require a slight rethink.

The Guns then line out in a stubble field adjacent to the river at the bottom of Martin's Den – a long, steep wooded bank, which the dogs work through. This produces some fabulous sporting birds – catching a few of the Guns off-guard, it must be said – but nonetheless, the bag is underway and with 68 shots by lunch it's safe to say the team has had plenty of good opportunities.

We refuel at the fishing hut overlooking the river, devouring a delicious rib-sticking broth made by Mike's wife, then it's back out for the afternoon session, in which we follow the river as it meanders through the estate, taking in various dens, grassy banks and shrub along the way. It is thrilling to watch the dogs working and coming on point; it really adds another dimension to the day. The tranquil Scottish landscape, now glowing amber in the autumn sunshine, is full of surprises: a kingfisher delights the group as it darts along

the riverbank, shimmering in all its blue and green brilliance. There are snipe too, and the habitat will surely hold woodcock when they arrive later in the year. We even add a rat to the bag, courtesy of young Dylan who miraculously manages to spear it with a stick in a drainage ditch! And, of course, there are the pheasant and partridge – more than enough to give the team some good shooting on a walked-up day of this nature. By the end of the afternoon the Guns have a bag of 10 pheasant, five geese and one partridge – a number which perhaps belies the shot count of 85.

The sun is beating a hasty retreat as we return to the lodge and the enticing aromas of the forthcoming venison supper. But for those that want it there is more shooting to be had: duck flighting from nine hides located along the Morphie fishings and at two bespoke ponds at the bottom of the beat. One or two of the Guns decide they've had enough sport for today, but four intrepid souls head out into the gloaming to try their luck.

This isn't like shooting reared duck, lazily circling a pond at the end of a driven day. This is the real deal: hunkering down in a hide, waiting for mallard, teal and wigeon to come in to roost. As with all wild bird shooting, the conditions play a huge part, and tonight it is too still and clear. Nonetheless, we come away with three mallard for 14 shots (Tom tells me later in the season that teams average about 35 shots on the duck) – giving a total bag for the day of 19; ordinarily the expected bag for the day would be around 30-40 mixed head.

With the stars now shining bright in the gin-clear Scottish sky, the day's sport finally draws to a close and it's back to the comfort of the newly refurbished lodge for supper and a well-earned drink in front of the roaring fire.

The Guns all agree that they have been treated to a day of exciting, varied sport, in good company and attractive surroundings – and all for

a rather bargain price. And of course the benefit of taking a package deal like this is that if on the day conditions don't favour one particular aspect, the team can focus on one of the other shooting options instead.

Tom and Mike have worked hard to make the day a success, while keeping things relaxed, fun and informal, and it has been a pleasure to see the dogs work so well. Mike is a veritable font of knowledge when it comes to the estate, its flora and fauna, and all things shooting, and there's been plenty of banter along the way too.

This combination of good sport, passion, professionalism and knowledge – not to mention the all-important financial backing – is certain to make Morphie a definite go-to sporting destination and an ideal shooting getaway for a group of mates keen to add a bit of variety to their shooting calendar, without breaking the bank. ■

Shooting opportunities were plentiful

