



Wildfowling scenes that BB would recognise (except the camo); the 8-bore is aged 150





Fowling with BB's ghost

Johnny Scott takes to heart BB's charge to enjoy the world's wonders – and how better than by following in his wildfowling tracks? Photographs by Kirsten Scheuerl

PROBABLY NO other author has given me so much pleasure, over such a long period, than the naturalist, artist and sportsman Denys Watkins-Pitchford, better known as BB, a pseudonym chosen from the size of shot he used for geese. Whether writing for children or adults, BB conveyed a great love of rural Britain in wonderfully evocative portrayals of our countryside and wildlife. *The Little Grey Men* and *The Little Grey Men Go Down the Bright Stream*, his stories about the last gnomes in Britain and their journey through the heart of England, were bedtime favourites.

As a reluctant boarder at prep school, I longed to emulate the brothers in *Brendon Chase*, who ran away to an ancient former royal deer forest, where they evaded capture for 18 months by living in an enormous hollow oak tree. I have read his wildfowling books, *Tides Ending*, *Dark Estuary*, *Recollections of a Longshore Gunner* and essays on the same subject in the *Bedside* series, countless times. Particularly compelling for me are his descriptions in *The Countryman's Bedside Book*, of 'fowling on the Firth of Tay and the goose country of east Perthshire and Angus.

I grew up on stories about flighting on the Tay. This was my father's favourite estuary and whenever snow or hard frost put a stop to hunting, there would be a flurry of activity as he put together his wildfowling kit: corduroy breeches, leather jerkin, oiled-wool seaman's socks, long johns, string vests and balaclava helmet, knee-length khaki smock with storm hood, deep canvas gamebag, thumbstick and the heavy, double-barrelled 8-bore.

Preparations for the journey to Perthshire were almost as exciting as his return and the vivid imagery he created of the great reedbeds rustling in the wind; thin auroral skies

and the distant murmuring of geese out on the mud banks; the clatter of wings and hoarse cackling as a pack of greylag lifted from their roosts and swung across the great, wide river towards their inland grazings; the adrenalin-pumping excitement of being "under" a skein and the hiss of wind through their feathers that indicated they were in range; following the geese to their feeding grounds along the Carse of Gowrie and laborious stalks down hedgerows and beside stone walls – between my father and BB, it was hardly surprising that I developed a passion for the solitude of windswept saltings and the eerie cries of waterfowl.

Over the years I have 'fowled on many of the estuaries that BB wrote about and have hunted geese on their grazings inland of the Montrose Basin but had never flighted on the Tay until a long-standing invitation from Donald Muir, BASC's events and training officer for Scotland and a member of The Tay Valley Wildfowlers Association, took me up there last January.

Under normal circumstances I would probably have gone earlier in the season: greylag and pinkfooted geese start migrating south from Iceland or Greenland around the beginning of September, with most on their winter feeding ground in eastern and south-west Scotland by late October. However, last winter's unseasonably mild weather was anything but normal. Towards the end of September, I was peering into the dawn at the mouth of the River Kent where it enters Morecambe Bay and there was hardly a goose to be seen. Not particularly unusual so early in the season but the situation was no better when I went to the Nith at the beginning of November.

In the following weeks, as "butterfly weather" persisted, reports of a scarcity of ►





The writer and Donald Muir tumbled a goose each...

them made predicting flight lines very difficult. Finally, at the end of January, there was a sudden drop in temperature. Donald telephoned to say that both the tide and moon were in our favour and that geese were now grazing along the Carse of Gowrie, the flat land that runs down to the north shore. If I hoped to see any geese before the end of the season I would have to drop everything and get up there.

The first hard frost of winter hung on the hedgerows and glittered on telephone wires as I drove north. Windscreens of vehicles in the car park of the Crees Inn at Abernethy – a great sporting pub – were thick with it when I arrived. Sleet and a driving easterly wind would have been preferable for bringing geese down, but frost was a vast improvement on the previous months of mawkish, warm weather. At 5am I clambered into my thermals and heavy fowling gear only to find, as I waited outside the pub for Donald, that overnight there had been a sudden rise in temperature and the frost had all disappeared. How this would affect the

geese came from all northern bays and estuaries: the Solway, Wigtown, Lindisfarne, Moray, Dornoch and the Tay. Huge packs appeared to have flown straight through to the south without stopping for any length of time at their usual staging posts, while others had stayed on Shetland. There was even a rumour that high temperatures and availability of food were keeping a population of greys back in Iceland. Strangest of all was not hearing geese on moonlit nights flying over our farm, following Tweed to winterings in south-west Scotland.

Just before Christmas a few geese appeared on the Tay but, as long as the weather remained mild, the scope of inland grazings available to



... then watched the great, grey birds surge past



Dawn on the Tay with the lights of Dundee in the distance

morning flight remained to be seen and we set off on the short drive to Perth along the A90 to Longforgan on the north shore and a lane leading into a farmyard. Here we unloaded our kit and, following the beam of Donald's torch, crossed a couple of fields to an avenue of ancient beech trees on a bank above the reed-fringed water of Invergowrie Bay.

The Tay reed-beds, so vividly described by BB, were established in the 1780s on the shore below Errol, in an attempt to stabilise bank erosion. Dutch engineers constructed long, stone breakwaters out into the estuary and planted reeds to bind the mud that built up between them. As the years went by, reeds spread out on either side of the breakwaters to form the largest beds in Britain, covering nearly a thousand acres between Inchtute and Glen-carse. These reeds stand about 10ft tall and in winter turn a whitish buff, forming a ghostly

screen between us and the river, clicking and rustling with the motion of the water.

The dawn always seems slow when you are sitting waiting for it, but this is my favourite part of a morning flight, listening to waterfowl wakening to a new day. Gulls are the first on the wing, shrieking hysterically as a thin glimmer of light starts to show in the east. Then the cacophony of yapping, tittering, yodelling and whistling as all the different waders start moving about. Lights were beginning to flicker in the villages over on the Fife shore and a rosy tinge was just showing on the low hills above them when there was the clamour of a big pack of geese lifting off their roost. We wriggled deeper into the reeds, praying the sound of hoarse *ang-ang-ing* would swing towards us, but the distant thump of a big bore farther along the shore indicated they had crossed the river well below us.

We waited another half hour in the forlorn hope that there might be more to come off, before packing up and plodding back to the truck. Our intention for the rest of the day had been to follow the geese inland and stalk them on their grazings along the Carse of Gowrie. Donald had been tracking their movements for days and had secured permission from the various farmers. However, with the frost gone, geese had other ideas and we saw the tail end of them disappearing over the Braes of the Carse, towards Strathmore and the arable fields on the other side of the Sidlaw Hills. It would be hopeless trying to find them over there but, ever the perfect host, Donald had a contingency plan for just this eventuality.

He took me to meet Kenny Willmitt, who keeps the Kilmany estate. Kenny had arranged for us to walk the estate woodland in the lovely rolling hills of north-east Fife, for an afternoon made memorable by the number of woodcock we saw. Stopping on the way back to the Crees Inn, where the road overlooks the Tay and great reed-beds on the north shore, Donald pointed out some of BB's favourite fighting haunts: Powgavie, where the reeds grow thick in the lee of an old breakwater; an inlet by Seaside House; the bay at Daleally

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overlooking Sure As Death Bank and Port Allen; the little harbour below Errol; and Paddock Muir and Mugdrum Island, once a 50-acre farm and now a nature reserve under the stewardship of the Tay Valley Wildfowlers. "I'm certain those geese crossed at Powgavie this morning," Donald told me. "If we try there tomorrow we might get under them."



The wall of reeds means the birds must be taken overhead

The Powgavie reed-beds were much denser than at Invergowrie: an impenetrable jungle extending 50yd or so out into the estuary. Generations of 'fowlers have made a narrow path through the reeds almost to the river's edge. We were halfway along this dark corridor when it became a quagmire into which we sank and had to struggle back to dry land,

towards us, bellowing in full cry. Unlike other longshore gunning, where you generally have unrestricted vision, we could see nothing but the wall of reeds. The fantastic baying music grew in volume until we could hear the swish of wings and suddenly the first skein was over the reeds and right on top of us.

We tumbled a goose each and then just watched these great, grey birds – five hundred or so – surging past, until the babel of their voices disappeared into the distance. No other sport can show such magic nor bring you so close to nature. A morning like ours, which may happen only once in a season, is what makes wildfowling so addictive.

As we hurried to pick up our birds, I was reminded of the aphorism, copied from a grave in Cumberland and used by BB to preface his books: "The wonder of the world, the beauty and the power, the shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades; these I saw. Look ye also whilst life lasts." ■

working our way into cover where the reeds grew at the bottom of an embankment. The faint glow of dawn was scarcely discernible above the hills on the opposite side of the Tay when there was the thunderous roar of wings as a big pack of greylag lifted. This was followed by a moment or two's silence and then they gave tongue together, coming straight