

# Walked-up rabbits

Snap shooting at rabbits over clean ground with keen gundogs is to be savoured. It is equally good for man and dog, says Johnny Scott, who hits the vast acreage of the Duke of Buccleuch's Queensberry estate on a mild October day

THERE ARE few things I enjoy more than walking-up rabbits, which reminds me of my childhood apprenticeship to nature and early experience in handling a gun. There is no better training for the young. Rabbiting is snap shooting and requires absolute concentration and quick, positive thinking. It teaches a child to be fast at changing his feet, getting his gun into his shoulder and firing.

Elementary mistakes common to all ages – in particular, shooting behind – are easily identified on rabbits; that little explosion of soil where the shot lands tells you all you need to know. Shooting rabbits on a bright frosty morning in late October, over well-trained, enthusiastic spaniels is, in my mind, pretty hard to beat.

My day on the Duke of Buccleuch's Queensberry estate in Dumfriesshire, had all of these ingredients. With so much leaf still on the trees, the autumn colours in the wooded valleys of Upper Nithsdale were absolutely stunning and the pink sandstone of Drumlanrig Castle glowed in the thin, wintry sunlight. I was met here by Roy Green, who manages all the sporting services on over 300,000 acres of the Duke's estates at Boughton, Bowhill, Dalkeith Palace, Langholm and Queensberry. With him was Rab Clarke, headkeeper of the 100,000-acre Queensberry estate; Keith Cottle, one of the 10 beatkeepers; David Lisset, the Buccleuch gundog trainer and breeder; Kirsty Cousins, a trainee gundog-handler whom the estate had recently taken on; plus Andy Platt and Martin Smee, both dog-handlers and friends of David's.

We moved off from Drumlanrig, through the tiny hamlet of Durisdeer with its magnificent 17th-century church and mausoleum, built for the first Duke of Queensberry, to Durisdeer Rig at the foot of the Lowther Hills. This is part of the Durisdeer beat, kept by Keith Cottle, one of five moorland beats on Queensberry. A well-maintained moor with its mixture of different ages and lengths of heather, it provides ideal lying-up cover for rabbits living in the adjacent cleughs and grassy banks. Ten years ago, rabbits were a considerable problem on the estate but a concerted control policy has reduced the surplus, leaving manageable numbers that are just right for a day with spaniels.

Once unloaded, the line-up, in terms of quality gundogs, was very impressive. Andy Platt had four springers, three of them field trial winners. One of Martin Smee's two springers was a field trial champion and his cocker a trial winner. Among the three springers that David Lisset had out before lunch was his championship bitch, Annickview Anna, whose list of achievements includes winning the English Springer Championship in 2004

and the Irish Kennel Club Championship in 2005. He also had a young black labrador, one of the famous Buccleuch line that can be traced back in unbroken succession to an import from Newfoundland in 1825.

Other dogs out on the day were a black lab handled by Roy Green, which is being considered as a brood bitch for the Buccleuch labrador breeding programme; and a young Irish cocker, out with Kirsty Cousins, intended for

breeding stock in the development of the Buccleuch cocker strain.

The appointment of David Lisset as the Buccleuch dog trainer and breeder in 2004, resurrected a historic position on the estate. With the sporting acreage involved across Boughton, Bowhill, Queensberry, Dalkeith and Langholm, gundogs have played an important role for the past 200 years. The Buccleuch kennel was formed in 1880, ►



**David Lisset, gundog trainer and breeder, leads the line; Rab Clarke, headkeeper, and Martin Smee collect one of many good retrieves**





**Go, cocker, go. A lovely leap adds to a perfect retrieve**

I love watching springers quartering the ground; their wholehearted enthusiasm and the way they pause for a second before their heads dart forward when they are on top of a rabbit never ceases to fascinate me. It was a pleasure to see these energetic, hard-working little dogs being handled by such professionals.

There is no prey like rabbit for training young dogs, and for handlers such as Andy Platt and Martin Smee, the day provided a wonderful chance to give their spaniels field trial experience. It is the best possible education for them to be in the company of other dogs and their handlers on a shooting day. It gets

them used to hearing different whistles and commands, and they have opportunities for long retrieves. If a rabbit was shot at one end of the line, a dog belonging to a handler from the other end was given a chance of the retrieve. Occasionally, if a rabbit thought to have been shot proved to have escaped down a burrow, a dead one was thrown into the vicinity so that a young dog running the line had something to pick.

Good, clean ground, carrying enough rabbits to maintain a spaniel's interest and with the right cover where rabbits can tuck in and give a dog a decent flush, is much sought after by handlers. It is very hard to find. A healthy population of rabbits can suddenly be affected

centred around the Buccleuch labradors with their characteristic broad heads, double coats, otter tails and exceptionally gentle mouths. By the Twenties, there were 150 gundogs in the kennel to meet the needs of keepers on the various estates.

The Second World War and an epidemic of distemper in 1948 took their toll on the kennel, leaving it substantially run down. Some progress was made to revive the stud in the Sixties and Seventies with the appointment of Len Humphreys as trainer but by 2004 there was only one female remaining with the Buccleuch blood-lines and she was seven years old. This bitch was successfully bred from, and under the direction of Roy Green and the Duke's son, the Earl of Dalkeith, a new breeding programme has been introduced to develop and maintain the breed. A state-of-the-art breeding and training facility is nearing completion at Chapel near Thornhill to accommodate the new venture, which will include the cocker and springer spaniel breeding programmes using David Lisset's prize-winning dogs.

It was the most glorious day: bright, sunny and unseasonably balmy. A big, oafish buzzard hung in a thermal high above us and there was a surprising number of wrens hunting for insects at the base of heather plants. The view from the foot of Durisdeer Rig across the Nith Valley, with Drumlanrig Castle gleaming in the distance, was breathtaking. Walking in line, we took a big, circular sweep up the foot of the Rig. The mix of heather and grassy patches here was an ideal combination for flushing rabbits and giving a gun the chance of a shot as they bolted across open ground.

*The mixture of heather and grassy patches was ideal for flushing rabbits and giving a gun the chance of a shot as they bolted on open ground. There's nothing like rabbit for training young dogs*



**Walking-up rabbits through rushes, Rab Clarke bowls one over with a snap shot**

by myxomatosis and, on places where they become a problem, there tends to be a policy of eradication. Rabbits are also extremely sensitive and, once disturbed, won't lie out in cover or will bolt as soon as they hear the least noise.

David Lisset has 30 dogs in kennels and requires as much rabbiting ground as he can get. However, with the demand for good dog-handlers to pick-up on the various estates through the season, Roy manages to provide 40 rabbiting days at Queensberry and 15 at Bowhill, to which handlers are prepared to travel miles.

By lunch-time we had a dozen rabbits in the bag and as many good retrieves. As we ate our sandwiches, a thick mist drawn up from the coast by the warm weather engulfed us. This disappeared as quickly as it had come and we moved off along the Roman road that runs beside the Kirk Burn to a steep-sided glen. Here

we walked-up rabbits through rushes in the valley bottom, providing the dogs with an opportunity to work different cover and the guns the chance of a testing shot as rabbits bolted for their burrows up the precipitous slopes. The new discipline was particularly popular among the dog-handlers, since many Scottish field trials are run on ground that is predominantly heather or rushes.

"Sometimes," Rab Clarke told me, "we stand guns up the slopes above the burrows, so that they get a shot at rabbits as they are bolting into them. This gives the dogs working with their handlers through the rushes a chance of a good, long retrieve."

Among the dogs that David Lisset had out on the afternoon beat was a small, black, two-year-old cocker spaniel called Bramble. This belongs to the Earl of Dalkeith's 14-year-old daughter, Amabel Scott, who is continuing the family interest in gundogs. Bramble, which

has already qualified for open stakes, was bred from Pebbles, the foundation bitch of the new Buccleuch cocker spaniel breeding programme, also belonging to Amabel.

If springers are fun to watch working, they are nothing compared to the sheer exuberance of a young cocker on the job; the incessant, merry action of the tail and irrepressible energy always bring a smile to the face. "What I love about these dogs," David told me, "is that they are so keen on their work and determined to please. There is always something to work on. If they make a mistake, it is only because they have tried too hard."

We stopped on our way back down to Durisdeer, to make a sweep through the rushes beside the earth banks of a Roman fortlet below Black Hill. A rabbit bolted out of the rushes and was knocked over with a long shot from Keith Cottle. It seemed a fitting end to a memorable day that Bramble had the retrieve. ■