



# Majesty of the rut

After an absence of many years **Johnny Scott** returns to Fasnakyle at the top of Glen Affric. Little has changed and the stalking is as exciting as ever, with every nerve on fire in man and beast. With aching knees and sodden tweeds our rifle's fatigue is more than matched by the weariness of the stag



Tête-à-tête:  
victims of their  
testosterone, two  
Royals battle for  
supremacy on  
the hill

**T**HERE are occasions when, after an absence of many years, one returns somewhere that holds special memories to find it completely unchanged. The 20,000-acre deer forest of Fasnakyle, at the top of Glen Affric, is one such place. For many of my contemporaries in the early Seventies and Eighties, an invitation to stay with Harry Calvert and his parents, Major Eddy and Mrs Calvert, was a first introduction to the splendours of a Highland estate. I remember those days with affection. There were walked-up grouse, black-game and ptarmigan, 10 pools on the River Glass, stags during the rut and capercaillie in the woodland. The Calverts were generous hosts and the Major went to endless trouble, sharing his great depth of knowledge with the young.

I went back to Fasnakyle at the beginning of October for a couple of days' stalking. The lodge was just as I remembered it. The dining-room with its watercolours of stalking in the 19th century and drawing-room with a new generation of tired dogs asleep in front of the fire were both familiar sights. So too, the bachelor quarters – "Slum Alley" – where I slept years ago. The most abiding memory was of standing on the lawn after dinner, listening to stags roaring in the surrounding woodland. At night, these deep, primeval roars are the most evocative of sounds, conjuring up visions of stags silhouetted against moonlight, coats matted and antlers dripping with peat mud, bellowing lust-crazed defiance at each other. That night they serenaded me to sleep.

### **A LONG PULL UPWARDS**

Immediately after breakfast, Harry, Gorm Reventlow-Grinling and I met Billy McLennan the stalker, down at the deer-larder. Billy's family has a long association with deer in the glen; his grandfather was stalker at Fasnakyle in 1900 and he was followed by one of Billy's uncles. Another uncle was stalker at Affric and Billy's father was ranger for the Forestry Commission. From 1964 to 1997, Billy's father-in-law, Ian Shewan, took over at Fasnakyle and Billy started with him in 1982. Assisting Billy on the day was Ian Robb, who had come across from the Black Isle. I had a few shots at the target with Billy's Sako .270 to get a feel of the rifle and see that my aim was true before we drove along the Affric to park by the old pony track leading to Fasnakyle Forest.

A long pull up through lichen-covered birch and aspen woodland brought us to the open hill of the Home beat, followed by a steep climb round Meallan na Ceardaich to gain the height Billy needed for a spy. Four beasts that Billy felt we should try for were spied grazing in the lea of a corrie on a distant face. It would be a long, circuitous stalk.

Fasnakyle Forest covers the mountainous peninsula between the Affric and Cannich and our route took us from one side to the other, until we were looking down into Glen Cannich and Loch Mullardoch. We stopped and ate our piece among boulders covered in vivid yellow lichen, watched by a grey hen silhouetted against the skyline.

Fasnakyle is a hind forest and I asked Billy whether he thought the long, cold spring, dry summer and warm back-end would affect the rut. So far, both he and Ian felt hinds were late coming into season and rutting seemed intermittent – a feature that appeared to be common to most forests. On several places, although there was movement among young stags, mature beasts were still holding together and the mild weather was keeping deer very high.



We pressed on and after half an hour were approaching the corrie where the beasts had been spied. The rest of the party hung back while Billy and I went forward along the shoulder of a knoll, crawling the last few yards to peer over the lip into the corrie. The anticipation always rises to a pitch of adrenalin-pumping anxiety as one squirms along, oblivious of the damp, soggy ground and it was a not entirely an unexpected anti-climax to find the beasts had moved on;

“ The anticipation rises to a pitch of adrenalin-pumping anxiety as one squirms along, oblivious of the damp ”



there are so many variables to stalking in the early part of the rut, with jittery eyes and ears shifting about all over the hill. We rejoined the rest of the party and set off up the side of a hill to gain height for another look.

**Billy McLennan (in camo) and the writer preparing for the shot**

butts. Apart from beaters, who took three days to move great rivers of deer in the right direction, innumerable watchers, trackers, stops, flagmen, signallers, loaders and ponymen were required to make the day a success. In the dining-room at Fasnakyle watercolours by Winans depict guests blazing away with heavy, double-hammer rifles as deer pour past.

While Harry, Gorm and I searched the butt for old brass cartridge-cases, Billy and Ian spied a stag among some peat hags. Another circuitous stalk and a tremendously exciting crawl as Billy took me in – we could see the antler tips above a bank – ended in disappointment when the wind shifted. By now the afternoon was wearing on and we decided to call it a day. Trudging down above Glen Affric, we could hear stags beginning to roar in the woodland far below. As the ➤

## SODDENTWEEDS

This hill had at its summit a stone structure like a large grouse butt, constructed on a substantial boulder. Not the sort of thing that you would expect to find at nearly 3,000ft but one of many similar structures in this part of the Highlands, built in the 1880s by the American millionaire, Walter Winans. He rented sporting rights over 200,000 acres from the east end of Glen Affric to the coast and engaged an army of beaters to drive deer to rifles waiting in



excitement drained away, my knees began to ache and I was aware how sodden my tweeds were. Thoughts of a hot bath were to the fore when there was a sound I normally associate with a Galloway cow separated from her calf – an incredulous bellow of fury – from somewhere up the side of Meall Mor, an almost perpendicular hill on our right.

Knees and baths forgotten, we scrambled in the direction of the grunts. About halfway up, this racket ceased; an ousted stag might be coming our way. Billy crept forward to look round the curve of the hill and, sure enough, a shootable beast was moving along the face slightly below us. Keeping as low as possible, he and I worked our way down narrow ledges until we were on the same contour as the stag. Billy wriggled ahead and I could see him slowly positioning the rifle and cautiously loading it. He beckoned me in beside him. “He’s just in front of us,” he whispered. “Get comfortable and shoot as soon as he appears between those hummocks.”

### CAN YOU SEE HIM?

With the rifle into my shoulder I peered tensely over the ‘scope. “Can you see him?” Billy hissed. I was about to reply that I couldn’t when the stag lurched into view within yards of us. “Shoot it,” said Billy, but I couldn’t pick him up through the ‘scope. The stag had now seen us, and letting out a snort, made a series of stiff-legged jumps downhill, stopping broadside to stare in angry disbelief. I frantically realigned the rifle but before I had time to take proper aim, he was off, only to turn and glare at us again – long enough for me to set the sight behind his shoulder and take the shot. He gave a great bound and disappeared from view. When we peered over the edge, he was lying dead in a hollow 70yd below.

The following day, Ian took us to the hill. At the lodge it had been mild, windless and sunny, but when we emerged through the trees to the open hill of the West End beat we

“ Well, there is a beast, but it’s not shootable... Now a group of hinds have appeared... And a Royal ”

were met by a strong wind – “a bit of a blow,” according to Ian – and heavy, blustery showers. In weather like this, deer would be lying tight and we had an even longer and steeper climb than the day before. “It soon flattens out,” Ian assured us as we hauled ourselves along by our thumbsticks, but in that wind it never seemed to. We ate our piece sheltering beside another of Winan’s extraordinary rifle butts, then worked along the face of Doire Mhor, until we were looking down on the Bealach Burn where it tumbles between two knolls into a natural amphitheatre. Ian got out his glass and took a long look. “Well,” he said after a while, “there is a beast, but it’s not shootable... Now a group of hinds have appeared .... And a Royal.”

Creeping closer, we lay and watched the pageantry of the rut unfolding. The Royal pranced off behind the knoll to herd back more hinds until 30 were grazing or lying down with expressions of wary resignation. The great beast was feverish in his unrest – a testosterone time bomb with every nerve on fire. Racing to the fringe of his harem with lowered antlers and coughing barks to threaten a couple of knobbers; rushing back to single out a hind and chivvy her through the herd, head back and tongue extended, uttering deep, anguished groans. Sometimes he would collapse abruptly and doze for a moment, before jerking awake and tearing after a hind that had strayed too far. We lay and watched this majestic, primitive scene until the wind changed and the deer moved from view. Lay so long, in fact, that sitting in the bath up in Slum Alley, I discovered I was covered in ticks. ■

**At the end of a long day Billy McLennan drags the kill off the hill**