

IN THE FIELD

NOVEMBER 2020

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

"IN THE FIELD"

A few weeks ago, four of us were sitting at our separate Covid secure tables in a village pub, on the first evening of a three-day wildfowling trip to north Northumberland. That morning we had lain on the edge of the salt marsh as darkness turned to the grey light of a new day and every conceivable type of wader or waterfowl started moving about on the mudflats. Greenshanks and redshanks, golden, ringed and grey plovers, oystercatchers, bar-tailed godwits, curlew, peewits and gulls, all screeching, whistling, yapping, tittering or yodelling. As the light strengthened, herds of ghostly, crescent-shaped curlews flew past, flocks of moth-like lapwings, trips of dunlin and periodically, with a strange vibrating noise, gaggles of pale-fronted brents, flying almost nose to tail in low, wavering lines. Behind this glorious cacophony of jubilant birdsong, we could hear a great host of pink-footed geese cackling with alarm out on the shore roosts.

The morning flight was not looking promising; there was no wind to bring geese within range and something or someone - a bait digger digging for lugworms perhaps - had disturbed them. Sure enough, there was a sudden distant roar as thousands of geese lifted, an eerie swelling sound growing in volume, followed by the ever increasing 'ang-ang-wink-wink'-ing as skein after skein of pink-feet poured towards their inland grazing, miles out of shot range. Nor was the afternoon tide flight any more productive; the bay was full of the lovely piping of whole companies of wigeon flying along the tide edge, but a steady drizzle made the decoys shiny and this was enough to spook them.

The rain had turned heavy, driven by a strengthening north-easterly wind by the time we relocated to some muddy gullies for the evening flight - vile weather, but ideal for geese. As dusk lengthened the shadows, we heard them returning and then the great grey shapes appeared through the murk, skein after skein of them fighting in low, battling against the wind and rain. Maddeningly they were still just out of range, until a straggler flying behind and below a skein flew over the gully 60 yards from me; an 8 bore boomed and finally, we had something to show at the end of a long day.

Over dinner the conversation drifted to the length of time a goose should be hung to allow muscles to relax and flavour to develop, with the general consensus being in favour of a young pink foot needing no longer than two or three days at about 5 centigrade, with a week or so for an old one, depending on the weather. The discussion moved on to game in general and all agreed that duck, partridge and young



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Sir Johnny (as he is better known) is an author, natural historian, broadcaster, columnist, countryside campaigner, artisan snuff manufacturer and retired hill farmer.

He wrote and co-presented the BBC2 series *Clarissa and the Countryman* with Clarissa Dickson Wright. He writes for a variety of magazines and periodicals on field sports, food, farming, travel, history and rural affairs.

A lifetime devotee of the countryside and its sports, he is currently:

- Joint Master, The North Pennine Hunt
- Regional Director, Vote OK.
- President, The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.
- President, The Tay Valley Wildfowling Association.
- President, The Newcastle Wildfowling Association.
- President, The Association of Working Lurchers / Longdogs.
- Centenary Patron and Honorary Life Member, British Association for Shooting and Conservation.
- Patron, The Sporting Lucas Terrier Association.
- Patron, The Wildlife Ark Trust.
- Patron, The National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up.
- Board member, The European Squirrel Initiative.

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grouse need no more than 48 hours and pheasant, about three days. This view seems to be supported by BASC's Taste of Game Initiative, Lee Maycock, the chairman of the Craft Guild of Chefs and William Aldiss, The Shotgun Chef. Milder winters have a bearing on hanging time and game hung for only a few days provide an infinity of culinary options, which would not be appropriate to anything hung for longer.

Sixty years ago it would have been unthinkable to eat game other than well hung. Denys Watkins-Pitchford, the great naturalist sportsman and author, better known by his pen name BB, recommended four for duck and eleven for geese, but that was a revolutionary short hanging period compared to most popular opinion at the time. Florence White's *Good Things in England*, (1968) recommended Major Hugh Pollard's *The Sportsman's Cookery Book*, as the best all round cookery book for game. The Major advised hanging pheasant for three weeks or "until their tail feathers give", whilst partridge or grouse should be hung as long as possible. Annette Hope, in her *Caledonian Feast* (1989), mentions a butcher of her acquaintance in the 1960's, whose customer judged a grouse ready to eat when maggots could be heard moving inside it.

Eating game high had been in fashion for centuries, so high that tongue blistering sauces were invented to disguise the necrotic flavour - Colonel Peter Hawker, the father of wildfowling, invented one consisted of port, lemon juice, lemon rind, chopped shallots, pounded mace, coarse red pepper, strong vinegar, tarragon, thyme, brandy and grated horse radish. Another, which became the once popular Harvey's sauce, was made with made from fermented anchovies, vinegar, garlic, Indian soy sauce and red pepper. Nor did the Victorians and Edwardians change their attitude to hanging game and eating it high, the main culinary difference was replacing the strong, spicy, pepper sauces of the previous generation with fruit.

Oranges, plums, prunes, raisins, apples, red currant jelly, cherries, quinces, bananas - even in the 1920's, Boodles was still serving grouse and partridge stuffed with mashed bananas. In the Edwardian era, Cumberland sauce, both hot and cold, was considered essential for game and made with port, the juice and zests of a lemon and an orange, dry mustard, red currant jelly and cayenne pepper, to which Auguste Escoffier, the great French chef, added ginger. Another popular one was invented by Elme Francatelli, the first celebrity chef, who worked at various times for Queen Victoria, the Prince of Wales at Marlborough House, Crockfords and the Reform Club. His sauce was made from two tablespoons of port added to half a pound of redcurrant jelly, a bruised stick of cinnamon and the thinly paired rind of a lemon.



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It seems extraordinary that century after century, eating game in a state of near decomposition was considered right and proper, even though there were plenty of opportunities to eat game fresh - birds shot or trapped in the coverts of big estates, long before the days of driven shooting. Duck decoys were common on inland waterways, to say nothing of the waterfowl shot by the market gunners supplying local coastal towns. Victorian game larders were specifically designed to be cool, dry places and once the Game Laws were relaxed in 1832, shooting rapidly increased and game became much more available. One would have thought surely, an invalid or someone requiring a less rich diet, would have discovered that game did not need to be eaten in a state of virtual decay, but there appear to be no records, at least that I can find, of anyone bucking the trend.

We have modern chefs and people such as Peter Barham, the author of *The Science of Cooking*, for our improved knowledge and thank heavens for them. Plucking game a few days old is immeasurably easier and a great deal more pleasant than anything that has been hung for longer. I remember the joy of shooting my first pheasant, almost as vividly as being given it to pluck three weeks later when the skin tore with virtually every feather and it stank to high heaven. Gutting it, is something I prefer to forget.



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