

IN THE FIELD

by

Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

The wheel of the seasons turns in September. Salmon move through to the upper beats, grouse start to pack and hedgerows fill with autumn colour as berries begin to ripen, whilst on our moorlands, bracken turns brown and the first equinoxal storms strip heather of the last purple flowers. Standing on my lawn with the dogs on moonlit nights, I invariably hear the evocative sound of pink footed geese - the Gabriel Hounds - calling to each other as they flight inland to feed on stubble fields beside the Tweed. This glorious cacophony makes a wildfowler's heart jump with joy and always provokes a longing for the stark beauty of mudflats and foreshore, salt marsh and estuary, the iodine scent of the sea, distant rumble of surf and above all, the music of wildfowl.

Our estuaries begin to fill with every conceivable species of wildfowl and wader at this time of year; golden, ringed and grey plover, greenshank and redshank, oystercatchers, bartailed godwits, whimbrels, and herds of ghostly, crescent shaped curlews. Endless trips of dunlin and teal, flocks of moth-like lapwings, densely packed gaggles of little pale-fronted Brent geese, mallard, wigeon, eider and shelduck, common pochard, tufted duck, goldeneye, pintail, shoveler and the great northern waterfowl fleeing the freezing temperature in Iceland, Greenland and Spitzbergen; Pink footed, barnacle, white front and greylag geese, whooper and Bewick swans. The exuberant birdsong when this great assembly greet the dawn, is for me, one of the great attractions of wildfowling.

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, legal wildfowl quarry is restricted to common pochard, gadwall, goldeneye, mallard, pintail, shoveller, teal, wigeon and tufted duck. Canada geese - most of whom are feral - greylag and pink footed, with white-fronted geese only in England. The vast majority of winter migrant quarry species geese are pink footed, which begin the journey south from the sub-arctic in early September and as each successive wave arrives In northern Scotland, the previous one is pushed south, with as many as 65,000 building up in the Montrose Basin and perhaps 30,000 in the Solway during the month. Over the following weeks vast numbers settle on estuaries down the east and west coast, with a particular concentration in north Norfolk.

The distant roar of thousands of geese lifting from their shore roost in the grey dawn is music of the gods to a wildfowler, crouching with his dog among the reeds of a tidal creek. An eerie swelling sound growing in volume, which changes to a jubilant ever-increasing "ang-ang-wink-wink" as skein after skein pour up the estuary towards their inland grazing. Will this be the moment when all one's careful studying of moon cycles, tides, flight paths and the weather prove to be correct and will the wind and cloud cover bring them in range? Maybe.

For years I shot geese with an old single barrelled 8 bore hammer gun weighing 10.8 pounds, with 3.25 inch chambers, Jones patent rotary under-lever, rebounding back-action, octagonal breech section and 34 inch Damascus barrel, made by EM Reilly of New Oxford Street and Rue Scribe, Paris, in 1885.

Reilly was among gunsmiths such as Tolley, Ford, Greener, Edwards or Adams who specialised in big bore fowling guns. This was a very plain gun with nickel plated parts as a protection against corrosion, indicating that it had once belonged to a market gunner, using his knowledge of the influence of wind, tide and moon on the movements of wildfowl to make a lonely living out on the marshes. It was a lump of a thing to carry any distance, but on the point of balance it became as light as a feather and I cherished it, because for me, using the same gun as an old longshoreman was as much a part of the mystique of wildfowling as the lonely estuaries, dawn melody of waking waterfowl and the unpredictable doings of geese.

I had many Red Letter mornings with the Reilly on estuaries such as the Ribble in Lancashire, The Kent where it flows into Morecambe Bay, the Nith in Dumfriesshire, The Tay, out on the marshes at Wells-next-Sea in Norfolk and along the Thames at Cooling in Kent. The ridiculous lead shot ban on foreshore had a detrimental impact on big bore enthusiasts such as myself; steel shot would wreck Damascus barrels in no time and tungsten matrix was not much better. Bismuth seemed to be the only alternative, but although I struggled on with it for several years, bismuth had nothing like the killing power of lead and too much time was spent hunting for wounded birds. Eventually, I was forced to buy an AYA Super Solway 12 bore, which can take the small quantity of steel cartridges I would use in a season and unlike the Reilly, is handy for ducks on the afternoon tide flight as well. Sadly, my old friend languished in the gun cabinet, until it was finally sold through Holt's in 2014.

There is nothing artificial, contrived or predictable about 'fowling and this, as much as the mystery and antiquity of our lonely salt marshes, the stark winter beauty of mudflats, tidal creeks, foreshore and cries of waterfowl, is what attracts people to the sport. To lie unobserved as nature wakes and starts moving around you is a truly wonderful experience and every wildfowler knows that, that during the course of a season, there will probably be only a handful of occasions when everything - moon, tides, wind, temperature and all the laborious studying of flight paths and movement of wildfowl will combine to produce the shot one remembers for the rest of one's life. I recommend it.