

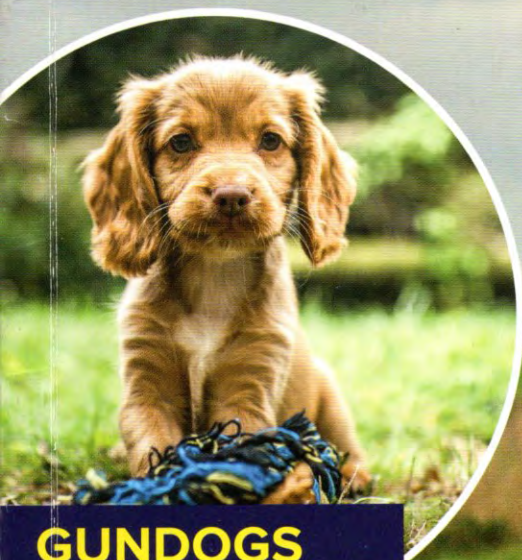
**SPECIAL EDITION: THE BEST IN SPORT**



# THE GAME GUN

## THE GAME SHOOTING GUIDE

Everything you need to be a better shot



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# A blast and a whale of a time

As if shooting with a 'smoke pole' is not challenge enough, Guns also must be able to tell French and English partridges apart

By Simon Reinhold | Photography by Callum Mcinerney-Riley



Dave Elvin's Gladstone bag with overwads glued to wads to reduce loading time

**B**lackpowder muzzle-loading is loud, smoky, dirty and slightly addictive. I've worked in the gun trade for nearly a quarter of a century but there are still things that I've never tried, such as using a 'smoke pole'. It may have seemed to my employer Nicholas Holt that this gap in my experience needed addressing. It was at his kind invitation that I joined the line-up at Glover's Farm in Sedgeford near the west Norfolk coast.

This is land that has been formed by the last ice age. The ridges of higher ground and their corresponding slopes are an ancient sea whose chalk floor has been forced upward by the pressure of an ice sheet that retreated 12,000 years ago — in geological terms that's 'yesterday'. It is also evidence that had Noel Coward put down his cock-

**“It is rich in insect life and perfect for English partridges”**

tail and gone for a walk, he might have reappraised his description of Norfolk as 'very flat'.

It is well-drained farmland and grassland, rich in insect life and perfect for English partridges. We are told by our host John Cross that, though there is a healthy wild population that can sustain us taking a few, we should concentrate on the reared pheasants »

Simon Reinhold discovers that muzzle-loading is 'loud, smoky and addictive'

and French partridges. As readers will know, this is the very essence of shooting as conservation: supplementing wild birds with released stock so that an enjoyable season can be had while also fostering the natural biodiversity.

**COMMITMENT**

Conservation of English partridges is often described by enthusiasts as a three-legged stool. Without each leg of winter food habitat, summer breeding habitat and predator control, the stool falls over. But it might be better described as a six-legged bench that also includes commitment from the landowner, the gamekeeper and the farm manager. Without the cooperation of all three, the whole construct in the modern farmed environment is likely to fail.

We receive a second briefing from Martin Crix who, along with his partner, Claire Mills, runs Anglian Muzzle-Loaders. Martin goes through the safety aspects and the mechanics of how a 160-year-old sporting gun is loaded — an operation that you must do almost looking down the barrel. He also dispels a myth; blackpowder is not slower to shoot and no more lead is required, though it may feel different if you are used to a lightweight side-by-side game gun, as I would discover.

We, as Guns, must pull the hammer back to full cock, as they will be passed only at half-cock, and as only the percussion cap is removed after the drive. The gun is not fully unloaded until the end of the day. Then we are introduced to our loaders, all enthusiasts with long experience. I am paired with Dave Elvin. Dave is reigning world champion with a flintlock so I am determined not to disappoint him.

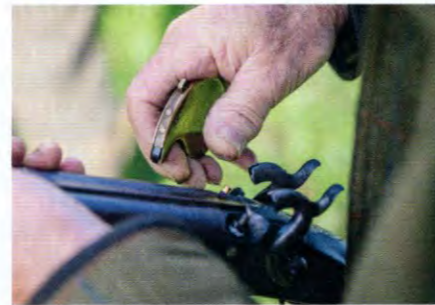
The first drive and the fact several of us are new to muzzle-loading throws up a problem. With wild game in the drive you have to be quiet. But us getting to know our loaders, and a slight change in wind direction, combine to send the wild



Filling a flask with blackpowder



Simon's loader Dave Elvin uses a cane with a pool-ball handle rather than the ramrod



Guns must pull the hammer back to full cock

birds out of the side of the drive. They are followed by the Frenchmen and many pheasants. This was to the benefit of those standing on pegs seven and eight and one of them, the Earl of Leicester, showed that this is not his first blackpowder day. It is entirely our fault and John's admonition is gentle but firm at the end.

**FORCE**

It does not prevent me having my first two shots at pheasants, only one of which was successful out the back. What surprises me is the recoil — it is very different from modern nitro powder. It has more force than I was expecting, but it is a gradual increase in pressure rather than a blow. The thunder and smoke produces thoughts of the first salvos of a great naval engagement, and I am left with a

grin that does not recede the entire day. That beaming face, the by-product of the best of game shooting, is endemic in muzzle-loaders.

In between each drive, gourmet food is served by Tim Crowley of Crowley's of Suffolk. Tim is everything you would expect of a bon viveur and surprises us with one carefully chosen delicacy after another. Over a damson vodka made to Tim's recipe — which had me wondering why we bother with shop-bought cough syrup — Nick Holt explains why he prefers muzzle-loading days.

"It proves these guns can still be used

for their intended purpose. You get to revel in each successful shot and you have to concentrate to make each one count," he says. "The bag is a very small part of the day when you are muzzle-loading — there is so much else to enjoy. I'm not expecting everyone to suddenly put down their over-and-under and pick up a muzzle-loader, but I want them to be aware, like you are now, just how much fun can be had with these guns."

**EPIPHANY**

On the second drive, a hanging wood standing atop ground that rolls towards us with cover to either side, with me right for the wind and near the hedge that looks likely to be 'route one', I have an epiphany. The ramrod underneath the barrel is not applied by our loaders; instead, they use a sturdier home-made cane with a pool-ball handle that is more comfortable and adds extra weight to the front end of the gun. Wider ribs on these side-by-sides contributes to this and I realise that this side-by-side has to be shot like an over-and-under.

With a slower, heavier gun, a more deliberate shot is required and a sight picture and technique I am more familiar with on a clay ground. As these jigsaw pieces of knowledge fall into place, birds begin to fall out of the sky. Partridges bursting over a Norfolk hedgerow beat Guns with their speed and not necessarily height, though properly driven across a wind it can be both.

Coveys of English partridges are a different order of difficulty: as soon as they clear the hedge and see you, they starburst: changing direction in a wingbeat with their sharper, wild instincts of self-preservation. It is exhilarating and testing at the same, but our challenge as Guns is to try to identify French from English and select the former. A new problem presents itself as a result of this frenetic activity: when to reload, and it is a gamble. You have to

make a judgement call as to how long the pause between birds coming through the drive will be.

As my confidence grows, I decide to keep hold of the gun after one successful barrel unless I could see the flag man had stopped on the hill, in which case I asked Dave to assist. Dave has some shortcuts

distracted and keep the rod in the barrel they have already loaded with powder so as not to load the same once twice. But try to chivy them along and you are likely to watch the shot being poured but not hear any running down the barrel — that will teach you a lesson.

The two subsequent drives are punctu-

**"As the grey partridges see you, they starburst, changing direction in a wingbeat"**

that shorten the process and, despite the complication of the operation, his fluidity and precision is impressive. He glues the overpower card and an overwad card to either side of the felt wad the night before. This turns three movements into one that can be done with the wad either way up.

As the wad is rammed home, the increase in pressure clears the nipple blocked by the residue build-up of the percussion cap and the igniting powder from the previous shot — it releases like a whale clearing its blowhole as it breaches. Dave never seems rushed and I am never aware of being left waiting. One thing you don't do is try to hurry your loader — they don't get

ated by rillettes of duck, which are joined by superb pork pies baked locally to Tim in Suffolk — the best he can find, though he says they are not commercially available. Kintyre smoked mussels, smoked trout and the freshest foie gras washed down with a muscat is a combination that once tasted cannot be forgotten. It's all a reminder that the pulling of the trigger is only a small part of the day.

After we finish, both barrels are emptied into the sky almost as a salute. Dave quietly says: "Next time you should shoot my 18-bore double flintlock — it's been tuned for a fast lock time and I think you'd enjoy it." I'm not sure I could grin any wider but that might just do it. ■



Simon adds a few brace to the bag

Simon takes his first cock pheasant behind the line