



THE GLORIOUS TWELFTH

The month of August marks the start of the grouse shooting season. From the Glorious Twelfth on our local moorlands and throughout the north of England, in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, it's hunting season for the red grouse. Prized as a game bird, the red grouse can only be found in the UK and lives and breeds on carefully managed heather moorland.

The sport of grouse shooting has shaped the landscape in which we live. The moorlands of the Duke of Westminster's 23,000 acre estate across the Trough of Bowland may look wild but this is a meticulously maintained environment. Just look across the border to his neighbour, the Duke of Devonshire who owns the Bolton Abbey estate and you will see acre upon acre of this scarce habitat. The expertise of the gamekeepers on these country estates ensures that red grouse stocks are maintained year on year, as well as preserving the habitat for other native birds such as lapwings and curlews.

The Glorious Twelfth brings an estimated 40,000 visitors to the UK from all over the world each year, making a vital contribution to our local economy. To satisfy these visitors and local hunters, those running the shoots need the very best in equipment and of course, that starts with the dogs. Gundogs play a vital role in the grouse shooting season, in fact it is true to say that without the dogs there would be no shoot. They work with the beaters to flush out game and with the pickers to collect the birds. Good gundogs are worth their weight in gold and the envy of the shoot.

As the Glorious Twelfth approaches, gundog trainer Damian Barson celebrates this annual tradition by walking us through a day on the grouse moors of the Ribble Valley with a gundog by our side. Photography: Tom Hartley

The Making of a Working Dog

Let's start by saying there is no such thing as the perfect gundog. Like people, every dog comes with their own personality and character traits – good training is all about knowing the dog and bringing out the best in them. There are pedigrees that have been bred for generations to work on a shoot but it's worth remembering that no amount of breeding will make a working dog, they have to be trained to bring out these characteristics. A working dog is not your average pet in the park. They have been bred specifically

to hunt, they have Ferrari engines with a built in desire to scent and retrieve game. These dogs have the stamina to go all day and are not for the faint hearted.

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Your choice of dog for the grouse moor is dictated by the terrain. On many game shoots, you are working in an open field and what is needed is a great peg dog, Labradors are a good example, they will





» sit by your side during the shoot then go in to retrieve the game. However, on a grouse shoot the Hunt Point Retrieve (HPR) breeds really come into their own. Grouse can fall at a distance from the gun and you need a ranging dog to retrieve them. These air scenting HPR breeds include the traditional English Pointers and Flat Coated Retrievers that a century ago would have been seen on hunts all over the Ribble Valley. In recent years I have seen an increase in requests to train a number of new continental HPR breeds like the Hungarian Vizsla, German Pointer and the Slovakian Rough Haired Pointer. These hunting dogs have the drive and the ability to cover ground that is essential on heather moorland.

to choose I ask them to consider one question: are you a shooting person or a dog person? If it's all about the shoot for you, perhaps leave the dogs to someone else. If you're a dog person, you might prefer to focus on working closely with your dog or with a pack

“ THE SPORT OF GROUSE SHOOTING HAS SHAPED THE RIBBLE VALLEY LANDSCAPE ”



I like to hunt with my Springer Spaniels. These multi-faceted dogs have great tenacity and drive to get into thick cover so are ideally suited to grouse shooting terrain. They may look pretty but if you're considering a working dog for the first time, Spaniels are a challenging choice as they are headstrong and extremely active. Every dog is different and I work my dogs to their strengths. Of my two four-year-old Springer Spaniels, Pepper likes to work at distance with a range of over 200 yards to retrieve. Nell likes to work in a pack and sit on peg, she is a short-range hunter but works incredibly hard – it's all about knowing how your dog will work best for you. When I'm advising a client on which dog

of dogs, as I do. Seeing your gundog excelling in what they were born to do is a really rewarding experience.

Your Best Shooting Companion

For your dog to be a great shooting companion, the work starts early and takes time. Gone are the old school training methods – it's enjoyment not fear that will make your dog work for you. Training is not a tangible, off the shelf product so visualise your end goal of striding across the heather with your dog at your heel and then get a steer on how this could be achieved. Working with a professional dog trainer will help you bring the best out of your dog; what you see as bad behaviour may just be a character trait waiting to be harnessed. The basic things you want from your gundog – steadiness, drive, determination, hunting instinct – are a combination of good breeding and excellent training. Don't rush to take your dog out on a shoot, it may mean waiting until next season but that wait will be worthwhile.

If this all sounds like hard work, that's because it is. There are no short cuts as any shoot is a dangerous environment and the grouse shoot in particular has very strict etiquette. It's more than just the clothes, though tweed is worn like a uniform, the behaviour of your dog will be remembered. Unruly dogs that run in on the grouse or retrieve early are unwelcome so your dog has to be under



strict control. It's your working partner and reflects on you – if you have the best dog, it will be noticed. On the excitement of a shoot day always remember the welfare of your dog is paramount. Just

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as you would transport your guns safely to a shoot, you should transport your dogs safely in appropriate dog transit boxes. Don't forget the basics like fresh water and allowing them to cool off on a beautiful autumn day.



Enjoy the Season

So how do you get involved on a grouse shoot? It's not a cheap pastime and the more prestigious shoots can be by invitation only. However, there's no need to start at this level, there's lots of local opportunities for shooting in the Ribble Valley. Shoot clubs and syndicates are given access to farmland to do rough shooting, driven shooting where the game is flushed for you or walked up days where you are flushing the game out yourself. These are all great experiences to share with your friends and of course with your gundog.

“ SEEING A GUNDOG EXCEL AT WHAT THEY ARE BORN TO DO IS A REWARDING EXPERIENCE ”

The grouse season ends on 10th December, giving plenty of time for moorland and game stocks to recover. If you are looking to extend your season, pheasant shoots run from October until 1st February and there are excellent shoots on the Gisburne Park Estate right here in the Ribble Valley. Whatever your plans for the Glorious Twelfth, we are privileged to live amongst some of the most stunning scenery in the world, let's appreciate it and all the hard work that goes into maintaining this precious environment. ■

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