

Why woodies even beat a capercaillie

Having travelled to Scotland for many years to shoot woodpigeons over decoys, Worth Mathewson believes they're the best days of his career



Worth is set up in the hide with his pigeon gun and plenty of cartridges for when the birds start to arrive

I saw a woodpigeon for the first time in February 1963 during that bitter winter Europe experienced. It was mixed in with some feral pigeons in a park near the hotel in London where I was staying. I was impressed with the bird. In the 1970s I found a copy of Archie Coats's book, *Pigeon Shooting*, in a Portland, Oregon, bookstore. After reading it, I began thinking about making a trip to the UK for some pigeon hunting.

In 1983 former *Shooting Times* editor Tony Jackson provided me with the name and address of a gamekeeper who offered days with pigeons. He was Duncan Clark and in August 1983 my wife Marge, son Jeff and I spent several days near Bridge of Earn in Perthshire hunting woodpigeons over decoys. The result was I became almost fanatical about woodpigeons and hunting them.

Over the next several years I made annual trips to Scotland to hunt with Duncan. Then he quit the hunting business and I couldn't find anyone

else who offered days with pigeons. That was more than just disappointing.

However, in 2005 I encountered what has turned out to be a remarkable stroke of good luck. In that year I was in Australia hunting stubble quail and waterfowl. My hunting partner and I stopped by the home of a man who bred spaniels. He had a few English shooting magazines and I thumbed through several.

Premier hunt

A small ad immediately caught my attention. It was placed by Scott Cruickshank of Mintlaw, Scotland, and stated he offered rough shooting, goose and duck, roe stalking and, most important to me, pigeon shooting. My wife and I booked seven days in August 2006. We have shot pigeons with Scott almost every year since. By and large, all the trips turned out to be excellent. I view the time I spend in the blind, on the edge of a field thick with pigeons, my premier hunt of the year.

Friends joined us sometimes. For two years it was my main hunting

partner from Oregon. Another year it was a different partner, also from Oregon. On three occasions another former *Shooting Times* editor, John Gregson, joined us from London.

One year my hunting partner from Australia travelled over to hunt with us. And for the past two years another friend from Oregon has joined me. All were as impressed as I am with the exceptional sporting wing-shooting the woodpigeon provides.

Wild turkeys

I have been very fortunate to have bagged all the legal gamebirds in the UK except the capercaillie. There is a long story around a cock capercaillie I saw for two days, failed to get, and still maintain that I would have bagged





Worth likes a boxlock and used to take his own guns to Aberdeenshire until he almost missed his flight back home due to confused staff

it had I been able to talk my Scottish guide into letting me hunt the bird in the manner in which I hunt wild turkeys here in the US. But of them all – including the ptarmigan that required an exhausting climb up a mountain in grim winter weather conditions – my favourite is the woodpigeon over decoys.

Scott Cruickshank was a young man in 2006 and had been guiding for only two years. He was working as a chef

and helped a long-established guide in Mintlaw. When the guide passed away Scott took over the business. He named it SAC-Shooting, which stands for Scott A Cruickshank. He had a natural talent for fieldsports and quickly established yearly bookings due to his ability to produce excellent days. For the past several years he has been booked solid for geese a year in advance. Much the same with pigeons in August and early September.

“I always call a halt at 30. I feel strongly that 30 is more than enough dead birds”

Scott places his clients in the Saplinbrae Hotel in Mintlaw. That fact is correctly viewed as a bonus of hunting with Scott. The hotel is owned by two farmers, Noel and Joanna Gall, and was built in 1756 as the shooting lodge on a once incredibly large estate. Meals are four-star, well known in the region for their perfection, and non-guests at the hotel need to make reservations. On weekends it is important to book well in advance or find all tables are filled.

A high point for me, aside from having the chef prepare pigeon in a multitude of ways, is the fresh Guinness on tap in the hotel's pub. Fresh Guinness is almost impossible

to find in the US and I commandeer a chair in the pub after the day's hunt to make quick work of several pints.

Scott seemingly has endless fields for his pigeon days, many of which are held over rape or barley. Generally he puts one hunter per field. For example my wife will hunt a field and I will hunt another. Scott comes around at lunch to check on how things are going and, if the morning has been very slow, he will frequently move you to a different

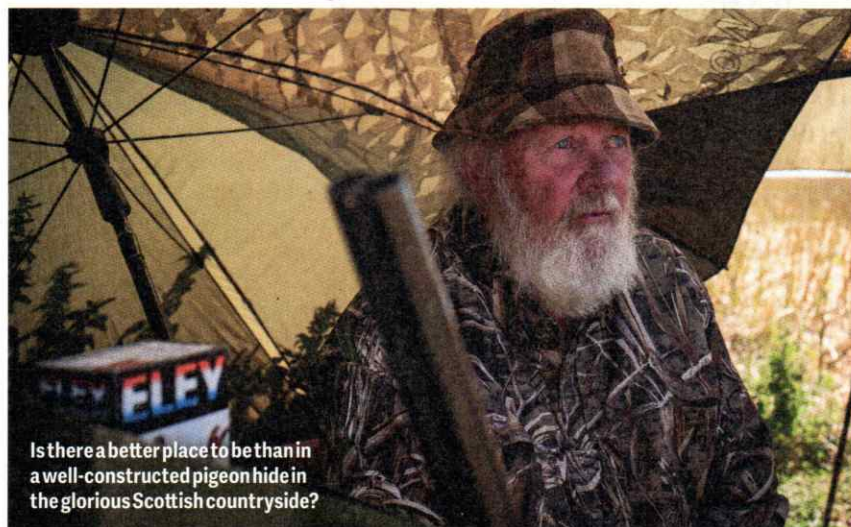
field. Most years we hunt for seven to 10 days, though in 2024 we did 18. In many years we have not hunted the same field twice.

Success varies from day to day. We have had days when we shot as few as two pigeons. In some cases this was due to few pigeons using the field. Having said that, other low number days were the result of extremely poor shooting; at best, I consider myself an average Shot. But there have been far too many days when the lack of pigeons on the ground was directly connected to my miserable and highly embarrassing shooting.

Combining all the days I hunt, my average is about 15 pigeons per ➔

Scottish outfitter Scott Cruickshank sets out decoys on a stubble field





Is there a better place to be than in a well-constructed pigeon hide in the glorious Scottish countryside?

day. On many days a good Shot would at least double that number. Happily, there are days when I am shooting very well and the pigeons continue to pour into the decoys.

Such days are not soon forgotten. Last year my friend from Oregon, an excellent Shot, was in a field blue with pigeons and shot 123.

Calling a halt

While it might seem odd to UK pigeon shooters, I always call a halt at 30 birds. I feel strongly that 30 is more than enough dead birds. There have been days I shot 30 in a short time, and had the blind down and the decoys picked up when Scott came to check on me. In the 19 years there have been two days that I went past 30 and stopped at 50.

Both days I was shooting mysteriously well after a run of several very low days prior to them. Coupled with this, both days had an abnormal

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number of pigeons coming directly into the decoys. I am certain that on those days, had I continued to shoot, I would have broken 100 or close to it.

For me a great deal of enjoyment of the day comes from the gun I am shooting. Up until a couple of years ago we brought guns with us. My favourites of all shotguns, regardless of where they are made, are the Charles Boswell pigeon guns, both

boxlock and sidelock, made between about 1895 and 1914. Over my lifetime I have owned many. Three years later, instead of a Boswell, I brought either a Purdey pigeon gun, a W&C Scott Monte Carlo B, and an American Parker DHE 16-bore.

But with each passing year the hassle of bringing a gun increased, including nearly missing our flight back home from Glasgow Airport due to some very confused staff with Iceland Air. I decided a change was in order and bought three guns from the Holts auction and had them shipped to Scott. When the day comes that we are no longer able to make the trip, we will give them to Scott as a partial thank you for all he has done for us.

The guns I got are a Charles Boswell boxlock pigeon gun, a Thomas Bland The Brent, and an AYA boxlock 20-bore for Marge.

Parkinson's will end my pigeon hunting at some stage. For the past two trips I have needed a wheelchair in airports and Scott's help getting into the blind. But I can assure you that at the top of many vivid memories will be smoky-grey birds jetting into the decoys with all the grandeur of Scotland as a backdrop. I am certain that many UK hunters will fully agree with this opinion. 🐦



Marge Mathewson has an AYA 20-bore boxlock for the Aberdeenshire forays