

Allotted a purple patch

A bid at The Heather Trust's auction leads to an ideal grouse day on a Deeside hill. By Graham Downing. Photographs by Kirsten Scheuerl





OPPORTUNITIES TO walk-up a grouse moor on the edge of the Cairngorms do not fall into one's hands every day. Those who shoot such places jealously guard the privilege, returning year after year: if you want to fill a vacancy, then first find your pair of dead man's shoes. Or make a successful bid in The Heather Trust's annual sporting auction.

It is the second course of action that has enabled Surrey gun Stewart Denton to shoot at a series of venues that will never appear in the sporting agents' brochures. "I've managed to be successful for the past three years. You don't get a bargain, but you get access to shoots which you wouldn't normally see," says Denton. Last season, with a group of friends from his roving syndicate, he successfully bagged the exclusive 14 August slot at Dinnet and Kinord.

Disaster almost overtook the day from the start, when a terrorist alert on the unlucky 13th cancelled flights out of Gatwick. There was nothing for it but to drive to Scotland, and so the guns gathered at noon at Denton's home near Guildford for the long haul up to Ballater and a night of glorious anticipation at the Cambus O'May Hotel. They were met the following morning by estate owner Edward Humphrey and headkeeper Alex Penman for the journey up to the hill, made all the more exciting by the sight of coveys by the side of the track.

As the six guns took up their positions for the start of the first beat, however, their sense of expectation fell somewhat. "We lined the party out in some white ground, and there were looks of amazement all round," said Humphrey. "They thought they would be shooting in heather, but to start, we had decided to walk though this piece of grass to see what the ground was like. For 20 minutes nothing happened, but Alex and I were pretty confident that we would see birds in the vicinity of some new butts which we have built, and sure enough, as we got within 100yd of them, two coveys got up."

The estate's principal guests are those who come from Scotland, England and France to shoot the eight to 10 driven days which are let every year, but like many moor owners, Humphrey likes to arrange a few walked-up days early in the season in order that he can take the temperature of the moor. No amount of counting in July can demonstrate for certain how successful the grouse production has been or where the coveys are thickest, and it is only when a line of guns and dogs walks the ground in the first week that the season's drives can be planned with confidence.

Denton was joined by his regular syndicate members Terry Baldwin and Geoff Lucas, plus Robert Ross, Lucas's son Martin and Mark Ancliff, headkeeper at Fasque and Glendye where the party has shot regularly in recent years. Ross and Denton proved to be on top form, and two birds dropped from each of the first two coveys. "All the guns are pretty experienced," commented Denton. "We've done predominantly walked-up shooting together, and although we have tried to find some driven-shooting, it's not easy." He was surprised to see a good show of birds on such unusual ground: "It really didn't look as though there would be grouse there, but we were thrilled to see such a good stock of birds." ►



Edward Humphrey (right), owner of Dinnet and Kinord, donated the day's shooting to The Heather Trust's annual auction



"We need more management to produce more young heather. It's an expensive game, and one that relies on deep pockets, but where people are prepared not to look for instant returns, a great deal can be done"
Simon Thorp, The Heather Trust

After that first exciting flush, a few solitary older birds showed themselves before more coveys flushed ahead of the line, each of between six and eight well-grown birds with not a cheeper in sight. Penman and his beatkeeper Gary Hillary steered the line into the breeze, and as the birds got up they cut away across the wind, providing some really challenging shooting throughout the morning. "You have to be focused all the time," observes Denton. "You really have to be aware of where you are in relation to your chums, because you've only got a couple of seconds – more than that and the bird is out of range."

Lunch on the hill, packed and prepared by the hotel, gave the party the chance of a breather and time to regroup. By now there were 14 brace in the bag, with all the guns having enjoyed some good shooting, but although the temperature was mild, a blanket of cloud hung over the hill, the wind was a chilly one and several of the party started reaching into the Land Rover for their heavy coats. They were dissuaded from doing so by the keepers, who knew that the afternoon's beat would take them on to the higher ground where the walking would be harder. Furthermore, the wind was dropping and as the afternoon progressed, the cloud broke to reveal welcome shafts of





August sunshine and at last there was heather underfoot, in full purple bloom with pollen that dusted gaiters and dogs, filling the air with the sublime scent of honey.

Heather management is central to the activities of this estate, and Humphrey is a long-term supporter of The Heather Trust, offering a day to its auction every third year – The Game Conservancy Trust and the Scottish Gamekeepers Association being the beneficiaries in the other two years of the cycle. “I regard it as my contribution to research and scientific input,” says Humphrey. To The Heather Trust, the income from the sale of such lots at its annual auction is a lifeline, funding the representational work for which it receives no other income. “We get a lot of support though, of course, we’d really like more,” says its director, Simon Thorp. “Those people who donate lots are very generous, and we’re also grateful to supporters who promote the sale catalogue.”

Overall, he remains worried about the quality of heather management in Britain. “Lots of people are talking about it, but fewer are actually doing it. If we’re not managing heather properly, then it gets older and older, more susceptible to pests, and if there’s lots of competition from grass then it doesn’t get a look in.” The best defence against loss of heather cover

– which in Scotland is occurring at the rate of half a per cent per annum – is to keep heather young and vigorous. And that means burning.

“What we need is more management to produce more young heather. It’s an expensive game, and one that relies on deep pockets, but where people are determined, committed and prepared not to look for instant returns, then a great deal can be done. In the Angus glens, Deeside and parts of Perthshire the management is good.”

Thorp confirms that mixed habitat, as at Dinnet and Kinord, can be equally valuable to grouse as pure, unbroken stands of purple. “Grouse are quite happy on 40 per cent heather, where there are wet flushes, bilberry and other dwarf shrubs to give a good mix. Ideally, we are looking for diverse moorland flora.”

That diversity is, of course, directly related to the underlying geology. On a large chunk of Humphrey’s land this is limestone, which favours grass over heather. “Not every successful grouse moor is a blanket of heather,” says Humphrey. “Of the 12,000 acres of hill ground which we have, about 8,000 acres is heather and the rest is white ground.” So far as grouse are concerned, though, it is no less productive for being so. “Many of the visiting guns who come here are astounded to find birds in grass.

I took my fishing tenants up here the other day and they couldn’t believe how many grouse they were seeing on grassy ground.”

The afternoon’s two long beats produced a higher proportion of older birds, with more singletons and barren pairs, but the headkeeper was happy and it was a delight for him to see large numbers of blackgame on the lower fringes of the moor. Denton’s team rose to the occasion and shot 23½ brace, plus seven hares and four rabbits. “It was a really good day. Everybody enjoyed it and I would definitely go back there, given the chance. We all had a lot of shooting, and you really could tell that it was a professionally run moor just from the huge amount of work that was going on,” says Denton. “You’re either drawn to Scotland or you’re not,” he continues. “For me there is nothing better. The scenery is fantastic, and when you’re on the top of those hills the silence goes on for ever. To drive 570 miles and back again just for one day’s shooting was a lot for us, but I’d do it again tomorrow.”

So, if you fancy securing a day of your own when walked-up grouse at Dinnet and Kinord next appears on The Heather Trust’s tempting menu, beware. You will require a fat chequebook, for Stewart Denton and his friends will doubtless be doing their best to outbid you. ■