

SETTING UP A FARM SHOOT

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SHOOT?

What makes a good shoot is clearly very subjective but if you take soundings around the game cart, over lunch or over a pint you will invariably find that there are some clear common denominators. Interestingly – although obvious for some – the size of the bag isn't anywhere near the top of the list, indeed in most cases it isn't on the list at all. Scale does not create demand and in dealing with South East Farmer's questions around how does the shoot contribute more to a farming business, in this case big is almost certainly not always beautiful.

What regularly appears to feature in a gun's mind in terms of what makes a good shoot, are challenging birds, excellent company and hospitality to match. Neatly encapsulating three things that are the ingredients for the make up of a good shoot, a shoot that is in demand. Some of the very best shoots are over a small acreage in a low key setting with not much more than a Landrover picnic and homemade sloe gin and sausages for refreshments. Memorable.

There is a little shoot in mid-Kent that delivers just that for a small number of guns on an even smaller number of days. A splendid day that is in demand from guns that know about it and as such a great commercial success for a small well run business. We talk elsewhere in this edition about meeting expectations – about not over promising. If you promise a small friendly day and deliver a small friendly day what is not to like? Guns should be seen as guests, customers no less, they will be back. And they will bring their friends.

The lovely people at Goodwood in West Sussex are understandably at the other end of the spectrum but in essence, on larger scale, they deliver the same thing. Memorable, challenging birds, great company and superb hospitality. The same ingredients mixed in a slightly larger fashion with their own twist. The immaculate white table cloth in the field for elevenses might not be something every shoot needs but if you are competing at the top end and need to stand out in your own way then improving the drives and the luncheon are two sure fire

ways of getting noticed.

Firmly not for sale but where the principle of what makes a good, even great shoot is practiced with great skill is a small farm in North Kent among the pear trees and somehow below the Thames waterline. To my mind it is one of the greats. Understated to the eye but producing stellar partridge, which are quietly shown from nowhere. Woe betide anyone who misses as the avuncular hosts won't hold back which is part of the fun. A small farm shoot that mixes super challenging birds with great company and superb hospitality.

Greatness comes in many guises. There is a young man in Bedfordshire who is working hard towards greatness along similar lines. A neat shoot lodge from a converted barn, tidy gun bus, very good partridge and carefully run let days. Starting from scratch the shoot is developing a sought after reputation and the days are quietly being sold and will I'm sure soon be sold out. Having visited last year as a guest with my gun I am looking forward to going back on the same basis to see progress again later in January.

Buckhurst – written about on the next page – has in our experience has gone from being what could at best be described as a rather dysfunctional syndicate and family shoot to being a great shoot in demand. While courtesy of Johnathan Cox, our head keeper, we have undoubtedly improved things on the gamekeeping front, the most notable change as witnessed by and immediately commented upon by those loyal patient guns and guests who've been with us for a while has been the change in atmosphere. No more the scowling keeper, the grumpy unfriendly side of shooting. A friendly, approachable, encouraging team who deliver every size of day from 100 upwards.

These changes are an improvement to any size of shoot that can be delivered quickly and with very little extra cost. The right changes can revolutionise a shoot. Meeting expectations for the guests, improving things commercially and leading ultimately to happy owners. Happy new year.

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