



LAST January I shot my first woodcock. It was during a small day on a family shoot. However, I had been lucky with the draw and was mortified by fluffing some good chances. After expending around 12 cartridges I had managed to bag only two hen pheasants – one of which had been poached by both my neighbours as I shot. “Sorry! I was convinced you’d miss,” shouted one. I politely thanked him for “backing me up”.

By the penultimate drive, there wasn't a gamebird to be seen. The beaters flushed an owl, a fox, a buzzard and several crows but then, just as I was applying my strawberry lip-gloss – I jest – a woodcock flew out of the cover straight past me. I pulled the trigger. Bang, it swooped down. I squeezed the trigger again and realised it wasn't swooping at all – I'd shot it again as it was falling to earth! No matter, it was doubly dead and my triumph had been witnessed by two of the guns, one of whom was an enthusiastic chauvinist. He

KEITH

Hallowed right-and-left AT WOODCOCK

No one forgets his first woodcock, but a right-and-left will grant him membership to the Holy Grail of fieldsports. By **Charlotte Reather**



looked bitter. I salvaged his pained ego, saying it was just a lucky shot. He readily agreed. However, the younger witness was genuinely impressed by my marksmanship and soon word had spread to the gamekeeper, beaters and other guns who vigorously shook my hand and gave me some firm slaps on the back.

Back at lunch my host's father raised a toast to me. "I would just like to say, well done to Charlotte on bagging her first woodcock. No one ever forgets his or her first woodcock.

A singleton about to join the bag. But a right-and-left at 'cock? Rarer than Simpson's sirloin

Indeed I remember my first woodcock, it was back in 1962..." The younger members of the party could barely contain their giggles at the innuendo. Frivolous, I know, but to most of us it was a rather unremarkable, transient achievement. I certainly hadn't grasped the real significance of shooting this elusive, magical bird.

I took a couple of woodcock (including the bird I had despatched) to my parents' house in Gloucestershire. My father beamed at me with paternal pride. We enjoyed some >



time together plucking the mottle-brown plumage, locating the tiny pin feathers, before cooking and eating every morsel of their delicate bodies.

It was only months later when I read about the *Shooting Times* Woodcock Club (STWC) that the bird's status dawned on me. The Club's exclusive membership is reserved for the lucky few who have achieved the Holy Grail of fieldsports – shooting a right-and-left at woodcock. Ian Haddon, STWC chairman and member since his triumph in Northern Ireland on 1 January 1990, says, “The club was established in 1949 and originally known as the Bols Snippen Club but the Dutch liqueur company decided that it didn't want to continue with it. Fortunately it was rescued and taken over by Tony Jackson at *Shooting Times* in 1983. After the transference of the original members and new ones coming in there are now more than 1,400 members worldwide, many from Britain and Ireland.”

FORTUNE AND FLUKE

“In order to become a member you must have shot two woodcock without lowering the gun in between shots and this must be confirmed by two witnesses,” says Haddon. Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? If my “field cred” had risen exponentially by bagging one woodcock, imagine the respect one could garner by achieving a legendary right-and-left? But how had the members managed it?

“The first thing you need is luck. Right place, right time,” says Mick Le Pelley, who has shot three right-and-lefts, two

The writer (above) has bagged her first woodcock. Now she's setting her sights on a right-and-left. Opposite: many woodcock winter in forests that never see a gun

recorded with the club, one on his own in his native Guernsey. “It's a rare opportunity for two woodcock to flush and still be in the air within range of one gun”.

Fortune hasn't smiled on Devon-based club member Geoffrey Ellis as often as on Le Pelley. “I was very pleased to shoot a right-and-left at woodcock in 1999. I couldn't believe it because it is so unusual. I've never even got close to achieving the same again – I've never been within range. Chance is definitely a big factor.”

Company director Alan McLaughlin says: “Woodcock are such elusive creatures; you never know when you're going to put them up. I had a very fluky day on a pheasant-shoot in mid-Wales six years ago when I got my right-and-left. They are such challenging birds: they jink, turn and twist – you've got to be fast. There's a large element of luck to get both down. You've often got two birds going at different angles and speeds. But if you manage it, it's a great feeling and a real personal achievement. I bought all the drinks in the hotel bar that night, which says something!”

PEOPLE BOTTLE IT

Graham Jeffery, who runs a syndicate in Kent and became a member in 1999, says, “The killing shots are not difficult, though you have to maintain coolness between them. When shooting, you should be relaxed anyway. If your day is going well you expect to shoot everything you intend to. You must have a kind of serenity; take it slow and easy. It's very common for people to bottle it after hitting the first bird.”

Five years ago Jeffery and his syndicate bought Chattenden Woods. Since buying the 80 acres of woodland, rated an SSSI, he has become extremely active in the conservation of woodcock. “Everything Natural England has told us to do has completely enhanced the environment for woodcock and we now have several resident birds plus a few breeding pairs. We have lots of grassed rides through the woods, which we keep mowed, and we coppice-cut the ride edges. If the trees are too high all around it's not good for woodcock. Coppicing helps them get to ground.”

According to Graham Madge of the RSPB, woodcock are one of the most rapidly declining British woodland birds. The latest figures indicate that the resident breeding bird population fell by 79 per cent between 1970 and 2005. “We are worried that woodcock is on the amber list of birds of conservation concern. If numbers continue to decline at this rate it will make the red list. Landowners and shots must participate in good conservation practices, especially in woodland areas, if stocks are to recover,” he says.

Owing to this decline, many landowners have banned shooting woodcock on their estates. Others control it tightly, only allowing a few days' woodcock-shooting a season if numbers in woodland areas are sufficiently high. But, of course, many large acreages of forest in the west (where the birds tend to winter) never see a gun – and the majority of woodcock shot by British sportsmen come from the wilds of the north. It's never been a prolific breeder in the UK.

The large immigrations of woodcock in winter from Scandinavia and the Baltics, the “fall”, usually happens >

FLAIR/ARTHUR CHRISTENSEN

“ To bag a right-and-left at woodcock, you need luck. It's rare for two woodcock to flush and still be in the air within range of one gun ”



on the first full moon in November. "People have seen hundreds of birds crash land into the vegetation after the long journey to Britain," says Madge.

An enthusiastic Jeffery says, "I've seen them come in and fly across a full moon like bats, just 10ft to 15ft away. It's better than shooting them to see them like that. I have the utmost respect for woodcock. They are the king of gamebirds."

Woodcock certainly made a lasting impression on 26-year-old William Skjott, the youngest member of the STWC, who has his right-and-left pair mounted in a glass cabinet. "A shadow came flitting towards me and then just plopped down in front of me about five metres away. A woodcock, just sitting there! It seemed quite untroubled by me standing there and I was sure it could see me. After what seemed a long time, but was probably less than a minute, it lifted off and flew along the track away from me. I didn't do anything about that one. I felt completely enchanted by the experience: the quiet of the evening, the clear air, the darkness and this strange bird just sitting in front of me, apparently contemplating what sort of strange thing I was."

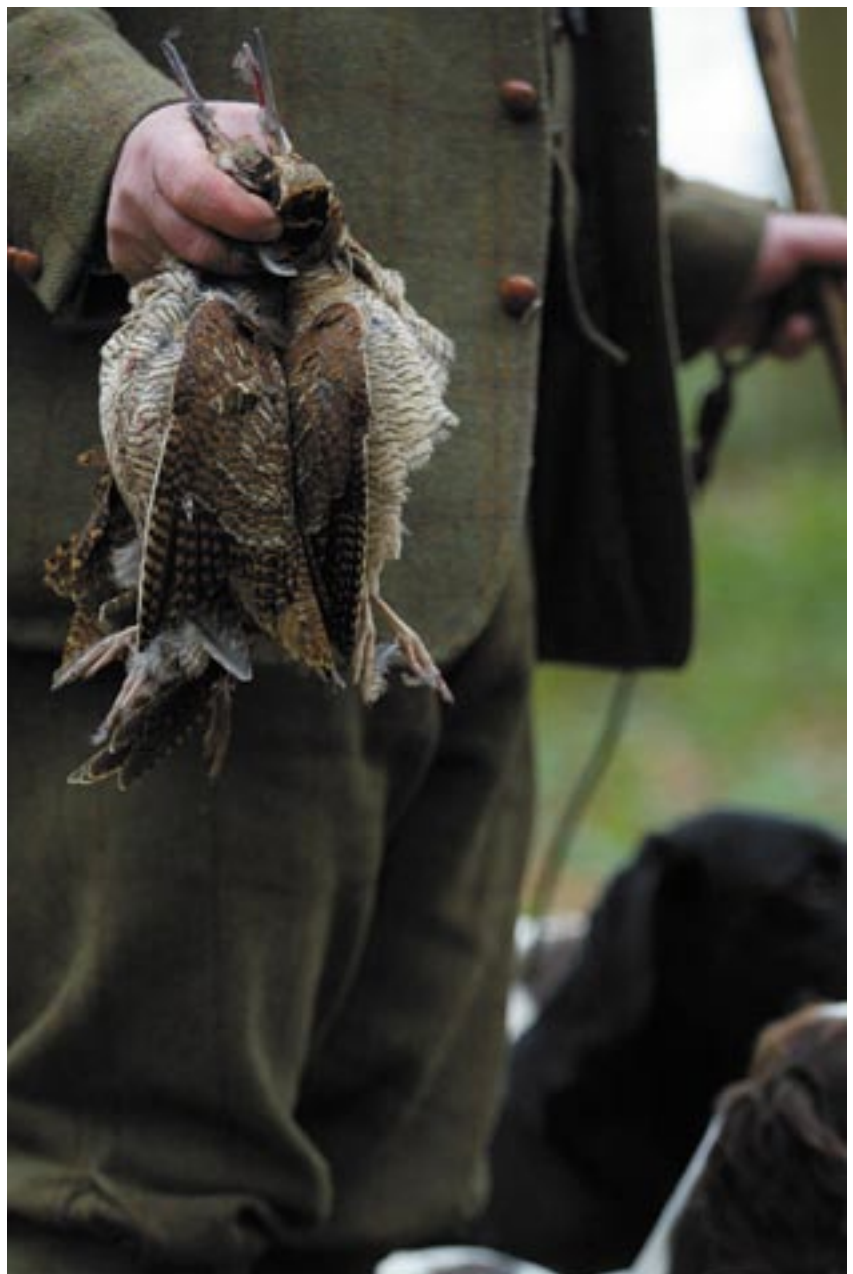
A MIXTURE OF EMOTIONS

When William shot his right-and-left, he was at first unsure whether he'd made it: "The picker-up came down with his dog and I pointed to where I thought the woodcock would be, about 20 metres in. He did not seem convinced by my assertion that I had hit one, let alone two. He found the first (I was vaguely miffed that he was so surprised), and asked where I thought the other one was. Just slightly farther in, I suggested. He looked and looked. My nerves were fraying, my heart was in my throat. He found it. Two woodcock! He found two woodcock! That I had shot! Me! I didn't believe it considering how my luck had been running that evening, but there they were in the torchlight.

"I felt a complete mixture of emotions that I find difficult to pin down: amazement, shock, pride, elation, perhaps a twinge of guilt at the feeling of triumph at the death of the two beautiful birds. I could hardly find my voice to shout to my dad that I had shot a right-and-left at woodcock. I thought I was going to choke on my excitement. I'm not sure he could believe it either."

Each of the 10 STWC members I interviewed has his special anecdote, with minute details of exactly where he was standing, which way the wind was blowing, who he was with and how he felt. I doubt many people could remember one right-and-left at pheasants with the same accuracy. That is what's so striking about the impact of woodcock.

Vinnie Jones achieved his right-and-left on his birthday. "I was on my dad's shoot in St Albans. I shot my woodcock in a wood called Cobbs Ash. I was on the number one peg. The two woodcock cut across the plantation that the beaters were coming through towards the wood. There were three flankers with flags to witness



Achieving a right-and-left at woodcock (above) is something to be marked, as William Skjott did by having his stuffed (below)

as well as Geoff Mathews, who has been beating on the estate for 60 years. It was a great buzz to do this. I have my woodcock mounted and they can be seen in our shoot lodge on shoot days at lunch."

Le Pelley was shooting with a Swedish gentleman in Guernsey. "He had a STWC form in his pocket. He really wanted to join. I shot the right-and-left directly in front of him and then nicked his form! He took it in good spirit but was probably a little peeved. We ate the birds and stuck the pin feathers in the brim of my hat."

A historic right-and-left was achieved by Robin Scott, editor of *Sporting Gun*. "I was on the Burton Constable Shoot in East Yorkshire. It happened in the last few days of December 1999 and proved to be the last right-and-left at woodcock of the millennium. I will probably have that notable (if not historic) fact chiselled on to my gravestone for the benefit of future generations!"

But a more prominent place in history awaits the first woman to shoot the sacred right-and-left. There's never been a female member of the STWC, and joining that would shut all chauvinist shots up forever.

