

# IN THE FIELD

MARCH 2020

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

## PIGEON CONTROL

On a late afternoon in mid-February, I was standing among the old beeches and Scot's pines on a ridge looking across the River Tweed to the fertile fields of the Merse, waiting for pigeons to flight in to roost in the conifer plantation behind. This is always a productive place to roost shoot; there is plenty of understory cover to camouflage a gun, with open sky above through the tall canopy and pigeons, bloated from feeding on early kale and rape, tend to drop in here before moving on to roost in the conifers.

I often reflect, when waiting for the flight to start, on what a remarkable and underrated bird a pigeon is: They provide tremendous sport when the game season finishes and a shooting challenge to test the most experienced shot. In fact, a really good shot very often becomes one because he has pigeons to practice on out of season – and what practice it is. A wood pigeon's phenomenal eyesight, speed of reaction and ability to fly at speeds of 50mph enable it to provide opportunities, which to be successful, require immense concentration and lightning fast hand and eye co-ordination. Whether coming in low and fast over a hedge like driven partridge to feed on young brassicas, dropping into decoys, or skimming the tree tops towards their roosting ground, pigeons are always extremely difficult to shoot. Not only that, but properly cooked, a pigeon competes with any game bird – try carpaccio of pigeon breast marinated in lemon juice and olive oil.

Furthermore, the sheer volume of pigeons in the UK provide ideal opportunities to teach the young gun safety, how to read the wind, keep out of sight, stay still and be focussed; there is no better discipline and farmers are only too pleased to have a serious agricultural pest shot. The British landscape, with its patchwork of woodland provides pigeons with roosting and nesting sites close to farmland and every agricultural improvement over the last 250 years seems, from a pigeon's point of view, to have been done entirely for their benefit. Particularly since the amount of autumn planted edible oilseed rape has soared from 75,000 hectares in 1979 to around 600,000 hectares, providing pigeons with a mid-winter food source and preventing a natural starvation check on a population today estimated to be 5.4 million pairs, capable of breeding three times a year.



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Sir Johnny (as he is better known) is an author, natural historian, broadcaster, columnist, countryside campaigner, artisan snuff manufacturer and retired hill farmer.

He wrote and co-presented the BBC2 series *Clarissa and the Countryman* with Clarissa Dickson Wright. He writes for a variety of magazines and periodicals on field sports, food, farming, travel, history and rural affairs.

A lifetime devotee of the countryside and its sports, he is currently:

- Joint Master, The North Pennine Hunt
- Regional Director, Vote OK.
- President, The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.
- President, The Tay Valley Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Newcastle Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Association of Working Lurchers / Longdogs.
- Centenary Patron and Honorary Life Member, British Association for Shooting and Conservation.
- Patron, The Sporting Lucas Terrier Association.
- Patron, The Wildlife Ark Trust.
- Patron, The National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up.
- Board member, The European Squirrel Initiative.

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Everything from a pea to a potato is fair game to a pigeon and it has been calculated that a thousand pigeons eat, every week, 10 tons of food intended for human consumption, at a cost to agricultural producers running into many tens of millions of pounds annually. Despite the ingenuity of farmers trying to protect their crops, pigeons eventually become immune to every form of deterrent and gas guns, scarecrows, revolving reflectors, hawk kites or banger rockets, all become ineffective. The only thing they never get used to, is being shot and the universally accepted method of controlling crop damage is to shoot them.

All the more astounding then, that in April 2019, the latest in a drearily long list of single-issue animal rights organisations masquerading as conservationists, attempted to ban the control of agricultural pest species and are actively seeking to ban grouse shooting and the rearing of gamebirds. Despite the platform given by the media to the ignorance and prejudice of outfits such as these, the interest in shooting continues to grow exponentially. One example is that last year, HOLTS analytical website data recorded 8 million page views by 157,000 users and their first auction held at Sandringham, was an unqualified success.

Shooting is a recreation enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of people of all ages and backgrounds. Shoots are involved in the management of two thirds of the British countryside, actively shaping the landscape with over £250 million of privately funded conservation effort spent annually, providing habitat which benefits all wildlife. We now have a Conservative government with a working majority and they must be made aware of the fragility of what remains of the beauty and antiquity of our natural heritage. The countryside should be seen as a force for good: the communities who live there, their customs, traditions and historic pastimes, valued as worth supporting and preserving intact for the benefit future generations.



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