

IN THE FIELD

JULY 2022

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

"THIS SEASON'S PROSPECTS"

After all the disruptions caused by Covid over the last three years, the sporting world was really looking forward to and desperately needed a decent, uninterrupted, disaster free season. Sadly, this now appears to be a forlorn hope. French game farmers who are responsible for supplying the UK with the vast majority of partridge and pheasant hatching eggs, day old chicks and seven week old poults, have been hit with the biggest outbreak of avian 'flu in living memory. When news of outbreaks in France reached us at the end of last season, there was every reason to believe that these were isolated incidents which could be quickly contained, but sadly, this was not to be the case. Avian 'flu continued to spread like wildfire through the epicentre of French game farming in the Vendee and Pays de Loire Atlantique regions leading to a freeze on the movement of all poultry including game, on which the UK depends so heavily. There was a period when it seemed the restrictions could be lifted in time for some late game arriving from France which would enable shoots to continue, albeit with the start of the season considerably delayed.

Unfortunately, this will not now be the case. Outbreaks of avian 'flu are still occurring in France and both EU and UK law restricts the movement of birds to 90 days following an outbreak and it has now been confirmed we can not expect any game from France for the coming season. Maddeningly, after Brexit was finalised, the EU introduced a law shortening the period for which restriction would apply to trade within the EU, but despite the efforts of DEFRA and the National Gamekeepers Organisation, the 90 day legislation remains in place for the UK.

As a consequence, it is estimated that more than a third of shoots will cancel this season, with a catastrophic impact on rural communities. Shooting generates £2.5billion annually, employs tens of thousands of people and is the bulwark industry in rural areas, supporting a whole range of ancillary businesses, such as pubs, hotels, gunsmiths and country sports shops, to name only a few. The industry sustains huge areas of the countryside through a yearly investment of £125million on conservation and the creation of game habitat, which benefits all biodiversity. The knock-on effect from a disastrous season affects the whole rural community and the countryside suffers. Those shoots that are continuing with limited days and reduced numbers are hit by the escalating costs of fuel and electricity, with the price of wheat driven to over £400 a ton by Putin's war in Ukraine and the global food crisis. Soaring costs are reflected in the price of poults available from the comparatively few UK game farms, and I have heard fantastic prices quoted - ten pounds for pheasant and more for a partridge - and that's if you are lucky enough to find any.



Sir (Walter) John Scott, Bt. MFH

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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Even without avian 'flu, the price of raw materials are likely to be with us for the foreseeable future and shooting is going to be even more expensive. Maybe now is the time for shoots to put down fewer birds and for the emphasis to be on appreciation of the day, rather than on numbers shot. John Henry Walsh, the editor of the Field magazine from 1857 to 1888, once remarked that it was a disgraceful thing when the quality of the day was measured by the weight of the bag and this rings as true today as it did then. Shooting should be about quality rather than quantity: a lower stocking rate inevitably means less disease, reduced mortality, higher welfare standards, a greater value for the bird once it reaches the food chain and ultimately, less for our detractors to agitate against. I think that perhaps now is the opportunity for the industry to consider an alternative way of charging for shooting; selling by the bird does not sit well with the general public and it would be much more appropriate to charge by the day. The future of shooting and our obligation to next generation is up to us. If we don't introduce change, as sure as night follows day, it will be imposed upon us.



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