

GUNDOGS: IS LIFE TOO SHORT TO HUNT WITH AN UGLY DOG?

SHOOTING TIMES[®]

The UK's leading weekly shooting title since 1882

& COUNTRY MAGAZINE

29th October 2014

ARE YOU A SHOOTING SAINT OR SINNER?

What makes the keeper
greet you with a grin
...or a grimace



The falcon & the pointer

A perfect pair perform
their moorland tango

MOUNT, MOVE, FIRE

CLEAN AND CONSISTENT:
How to hit the overhead
driven birds



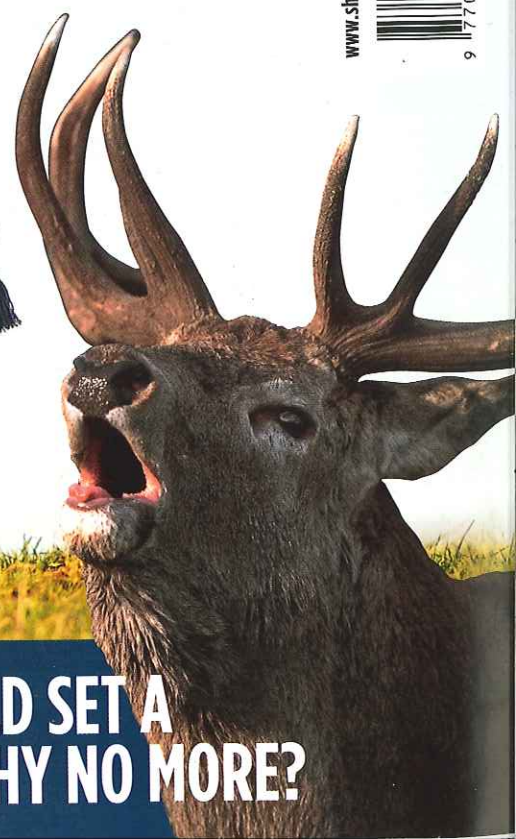
Plus

BEEFY BOTHAM
ATTACKS THE RSPB,
GERMANY'S OTHER
POINTER, AIRGUNS,
SPORTING Q&As
AND MORE...

NEW WOODS ON YOUR SHOOT

Need better cover?
Follow our guide

www.shootinguk.co.uk £2.40



THE LATE RUT

ONCE YOU COULD SET A
CLOCK BY IT. WHY NO MORE?

STRICTLY GAME HAWKING

For a compulsive Sunday night TV format, look no further than game hawking, says Lucy King

People love watching others learn new skills. Why else would our television schedules be so full of celebrities learning to dance, cook, or balance on trapezes? Part of the attraction has to be the comedic value of mistakes made early on, but there's just as much appeal in seeing the subjects progress from zero to hero.

It's something present in many forms of fieldsports, especially where training furred or feathered assistants is involved. It would be great subject matter for the Sunday night television schedule: imagine *The Ferret Factor* or *Britain's Got Talons*. But what has recently sent far more shivers down my spine than *Strictly Come Dancing* ever could is game hawking over pointers. No spike heels or thigh-high slit skirts, but there's still more than enough excitement to be had.

I joined falconer Stewart Miller at Tulchan of Glenisla in the Grampians, where he has been working with Lucie Boedts Kuhnle to develop a small game-hawking team. Lucie, whose husband's family has owned the estate since the 1990s, is now keen to add game hawking and falconry, both of which are popular

in her native Belgium, to its list of sporting activities.

Stewart has worked with birds of prey all over the world and is a founder and director of the UK-based charity International Raptor Research and Conservation (IRRC). IRRC rehabilitates birds of prey with the aim of releasing them back into the wild and undertakes research in Scotland and around the world. This year, it has rehabilitated and released peregrines, buzzards and kestrels, and in September it took in an injured juvenile golden eagle. During the week of my visit, however, Stewart's main focus was on peregrines, pointers and teaching them to hunt grouse together. Once fully trained, the dogs and falcons will work

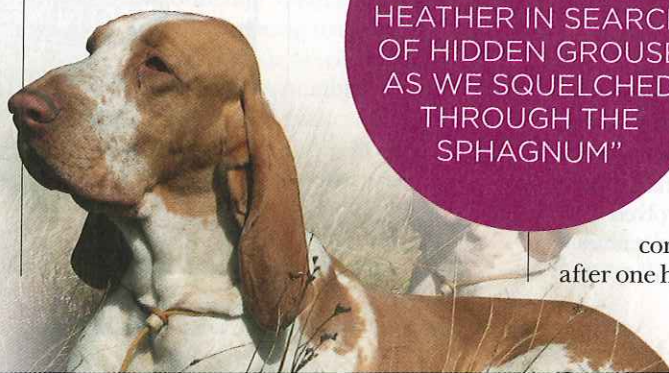
ABOVE: Dogs and falcons learn how to work as a team under Stewart's expert guidance

as a finely tuned machine. The dogs will point and hold grouse, at which point the falcon will be cast off. When it has achieved enough height, circling hundreds of feet above the hill, the dogs will flush the wary covey. The peregrine will go into a stoop — plummeting at up to 200mph to smack into or “bind to” its prey with breathtaking force.

Moorland moves

Stewart was starting almost from scratch with a young team. To master this awe-inspiring routine, the dancing partners would not only have to learn new moorland moves, but also how to trust and work with each other. The peregrine side of the partnership was a two-year-old female falcon, and a tiercel (male), aged 14 months. Confusingly, the female was named Donald; the tiercel, a little less confusingly, was named Weiss, after one half of Hartmann & Weiss, a

“THE DOGS PLOUGHED THROUGH THE HEATHER IN SEARCH OF HIDDEN GROUSE AS WE SQUELCHED THROUGH THE SPHAGNUM”





German gunmaker. They were both used to being handled by Stewart, but hadn't worked over dogs or hunted grouse before.

Their canine companions were a pair of Italian braccos, operatically named Diva and Gio, short for Giovanni, aged 22 months and 15 months respectively. Diva had just started working on the moors and was still learning to work with the falcons. This would be Gio's first working season, but that didn't dampen his enthusiasm.

As we took to the moor, the birds were kitted out in their glad rags — hoods to shield their eyes and keep them calm; jesses around their ankles to stop them from flying away at the wrong time; and telemetry tags, attached like ungainly radio microphones to their tails. The flamboyant feathery plume on one of the hoods would look right at home on a *Strictly* grand final. The pointers had to make do with less glamorous slip leads.

The first day was all about discovering the strengths and weaknesses and introducing the team to their task. The dogs took turns to plough through the heather in search of hidden grouse as we squelched through the sphagnum behind. Diva took the floor first while Gio — like a proper dancing partner — trod on my feet. In spite of some enthusiastic nose-work, neither bracco managed to hold a point for long enough for a peregrine to be brought into play, so the dogs were rested while Stewart gave the birds a chance to stretch their wings.

As with the pointers, it was ladies first and Stewart removed Donald's hood. After she had familiarised herself with her surroundings, Stewart cast her off. She flew in a low, wide circle then gained height, before Stewart brought her back down to earth with the lure of fresh meat. She ate with the dogs in close attendance, which Stewart said would help get her used to them and convince her that they weren't a threat.

When it came to Weiss the tiercel's turn, we had a glimpse of how impressive the spectacle would be when the team had gained more experience. He flew higher than his mews-mate and the impact as he hammered home into the lure was enough to make Stewart, who was swinging it on a string, stagger a step backwards.

Fast learners

The next day, on a different stretch of the moor, we could already see a few

"JUST AS WEISS'S HOOD CAME OFF, HIS WOULD-BE PREY GOT WISE AND SHOT AWAY OVER THE RIDGE"

improvements. The dogs were steadier and Diva had a couple of good points fairly quickly. As she held a group of grouse in tight, hopes were high for a real hunt. Unfortunately, just as Weiss's hood came off, his would-be prey shot away over the ridge. Weiss was cast off

ABOVE LEFT: The young dogs Diva and Gio became steadier as they got used to working with the birds
ABOVE: A feathery plume that would turn an orange-tanned contestant on *Strictly* green
LEFT: Donald came close, but the grouse got away

anyway. As before, Stewart swung a fresh-meat lure to bring him back once he'd stretched his wings and, remembering the previous day's impact, I braced myself to capture it on camera.

At an even greater height and with more purpose than before, the tiercel's stoop was stunningly fast. He came down directly behind me, passing within a foot of my head before cannoning into his target, so close that I could feel the turbulence in his wake on the back of my neck. The fact that my hat and even head had escaped unscathed made up for the fact that I didn't get a picture.

A little later, a hooded, quail-fed Weiss was calmly perched on my glove and the hunt was soon back on. Having studiously ignored a hare, Diva went on point, inched forward, and held it. Donald's hood and jesses were quickly off and she was on the verge of being ready to fly when the grouse made a bid for freedom.

Stewart let the falcon fly anyway, as he wanted to see what her reaction would be, and, though she didn't gain as much height as Weiss, her speed in the stoop was still sufficient to have her right on the grouse's tails as they swept over the horizon into the steep-sided glen below. Though she didn't catch anything, she was thrillingly close. Even unperfected, it was spectacular. *Strictly Come Dancing* can keep its fake tan fandangos; I'll take a grouse moor over a dance floor any day. **SY**

INTERNATIONAL RAPTOR RESEARCH & CONSERVATION

IRRC is involved in a conservation project to help the globally threatened imperial eagle. Survey trips to Siberia, Mongolia and China have taken place in collaboration with Russian and Chinese conservationists to monitor breeding populations and wintering areas.

The next phase — satellite tagging young Siberian Imperial eagles — is scheduled to start next year, but cannot take place without funding. Stewart has set up a crowd-funding campaign, which expires on 12 November. To find out more, or to make a donation, visit www.crowdfunder.co.uk/chasing-eagles/.

You can also follow the progress of Stewart's IRRC projects at home and abroad on the charity's Facebook page. Visit <http://po.st/IRRC>.