



Backing the right horse

This month, John Heagren talks about choosing the right bird when shooting in the field

I am sure that we have all, at some point, experienced the frustration that comes when the sky is full of birds, 'bang, bang' and yet there's nothing to show for it. However, there are ways of ensuring that an embarrassment of riches doesn't just become an embarrassment.

Take your pick

When stood on the peg it's very easy to get confused as to what bird to shoot, even more so if the birds are coming over in flushes. This can apply especially to partridge where coveys of 50

or more can be common early in the season. Once that confusion sets in, it's not uncommon to see a Gun line up on one bird, change to another and then onto another before firing a wildly aimed shot that has little or no effect. Instead, try to pick out a bird early on. Being a true sportsman or woman you will obviously have chosen a good bird that may have stood out from the crowd, perhaps by it being a little higher than the rest or being the leader of the pack. Your selection criteria should include whether or not it's curling off to the left or right of you. There's no point in

picking out a cracking bird only to shoot it over the head of your neighbour in the line, especially if the sky over their peg is relatively quiet while yours is proving to be the hot seat. Another thing to bear in mind is that you only have fractions of a second to consider whether there are going to be other birds nearby once you have taken the first shot. If there are three birds heading past on the left and one on the right and they are of similar quality, I would go to the left every time as it means that your transition for a second bird will be easier than if you have to swap sides.

Focus

Once you have chosen your bird, stare hard at it. Don't allow yourself to be distracted; try to ignore everything else around it. Don't try to rush your shot too much so that you can get onto another otherwise you will most likely make a poor job of your first shot and your second may not be any more successful. With your vision still locked firmly onto your target, take your shot, ensuring that you give it your full attention and making sure you finish the shot off properly. If the first hits the mark, make sure that you have done enough to bring it to earth, otherwise finish the job off with the second barrel.

Second shots

If the first shot has found its mark then now is the time to seek out another. Drop the gun out of the shoulder – you might not want to return it all the way back to your ready position, especially if

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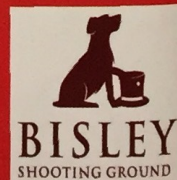
PICTURES: DON BRUNT

THE VENUE

Bisley has been the nation's 'Home of Shooting' since the 1800s and Bisley Shooting Ground has long been an integral

part of the shotgun shooting community. Set amidst 3,000 acres of stunning heathland and woodland, its two shooting locations, Long Siberia and Cottesloe Heath, offer a perfect environment in which to shoot. With targets that both educate, entertain and challenge shooters of all abilities, BSG offers tuition, guided practise, automated 'Pay and Play' and hosts popular competitions throughout the year.

For more information, visit www.bisleyshooting.co.uk or call 01483 797017.





Whilst being a quick thinker, a good shot waits to engage and doesn't mount on the bird too early.

It is easy to become confused when birds are coming over in flocks

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a covey is still overhead or on the way. In that case, bring the muzzles down slightly, though still pointing safely skywards, and at the same time bring the stock out of the shoulder by five or six inches. By doing this you shorten the process for your second shot and allow your head to come off the gun, giving yourself a wide field of vision to help your eyes pick out the destination for your next cartridge. If you are fortunate enough that you are able to make a choice before the sky clears, make sure that the work we did in our first article on footwork comes into play. If you are swapping from a bird out to your left onto one out to your right, then you will need to take a step around otherwise you will quickly run out of swing.

It's important not to get carried away with the idea of shooting a left and right. Nobody in the line will be impressed with your sporting prowess if you kill a good bird with your first shot and a low-level bird with all the pace of an overfed chicken with your second. If what remains in the sky wouldn't be good enough for you to shoot

with your first barrel, then why on earth would it be good enough for your second?

Wait for it...

Generally speaking there is more time to pick a bird when shooting pheasants, but the same basic thoughts apply. However, do not fall into the trap of spotting a bird heading your way and mount on it when it's still 200 yards away. Do that and it's almost inevitable that your eyes will dart from gun to target and back again, 'checking' the picture, making a miss almost guaranteed. Instead, wait until the bird is 20 or so yards from where you intend to take the shot and at that point start the process of moving onto the bird.

Target ID

It's not just on the peg where the need to pick the right bird applies. When out rough shooting it's not unusual for two or three birds to break cover together, whether it be pheasants or pigeons. When that happens your brain needs to work rapidly, identifying what bird represents the most technically straightforward shot. That said, there are times you might go for the harder shot first. For example, you find yourself walking a

hedgerow when two pigeons clatter out of the trees. One is heading back over your right shoulder and will soon disappear over a tree, while the other goes straight away in front of you. You could take the simpler going-away shot, but if that's successful, will the other bird still be in sight? If not, then you might want to go for the tougher shot first, though if you are a relatively inexperienced shot then I would say go after the going-away target and make sure of it.

Also, bear in mind how a bird will react to gunshot when you make your choice. If pigeons or corvids are your quarry then almost inevitably they will jink away at the sound of the gun, in which case if there are two potential targets for you to choose from it can make sense to pick the further of the two for your first shot, the closer one should, fingers crossed, still be in range even after it has jinked away, while if you shot them the other way round the far bird may well be beyond your reach.

These decisions are choices you must make very quickly and, inevitably, there are times you will make the wrong call. Just remember that your overriding concern when out with others should be their safety, so shoot accordingly. ■

THE COACH

John Heagren is well known in both the clay and game shooting community as a coach who gets results, with more than 25 years of experience as a full-time coach and a shooting career going back to his eighth birthday. Having returned to competitive shooting, in the last four years he has topped the FITASC rankings, represented England in international competition and last year won the prestigious Stratstone Super 7 Challenge. He is also a respected shot in the game field and spends much of the winter coaching on the peg.