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FIELDCRAFT FIRST

Pulling the trigger and delivering a carcass to the game dealer is just a small part of deer stalking. Will Pocklington looks at the bigger picture.

The hunter-gatherer instinct is still very much embedded in our make-up as human beings, an intrinsic part of our very nature that, I believe, drives us to hunt, shoot and fish.

Evolution is a slow process. Not so long ago we were actively pursuing our food with bows, arrows and spears, tracking beasts across a range of landscapes. To survive, one had to be proficient in fieldcraft, be aware of one’s surroundings and be able to read signs and indicators. And in many cultures, they still do.

A missed track was a potentially fatal mistake. We had to be in tune with the natural world, and while this primitive pull is still far from lost, the respect, knowledge and understanding that is so closely intertwined with fieldsports is in danger of fading.

In deer stalking lies the perfect example. It is widely regarded as one of the fastest growing fieldsports in the UK – the primary reason for which, I suspect, lies in our DNA. Whether budding novice or hardened veteran, the thrill of the stalk, pitting one’s wits

against a wild animal in its natural environment, satisfies our raw hunter-gatherer instincts. Pulling the trigger and delivering a carcass to the butchery block is the tip of the antler in a process that entails a sound familiarity with the quarry, its habitat and the fieldcraft that provides that imperative connection with the ecosystems in which we once, as humans, fitted in so much more naturally.

That stalking is becoming increasingly accessible to a wider demographic is great. But only if those looking to take up the sport

appreciate its finer nuances, all of which whittle down, eventually, to an utmost respect for the quarry and its environment and, subsequently, more fulfilling experiences in the field.

These are the foundations on which the Four Feathers rural courses are based. Run by Chris Wheatley-Hubbard and Dave Roderick, who I met recently in the rolling landscape of south Wiltshire, they combine a unique set of skills into one learning experience – tracking, woodland skills, stalking, butchery and more.

Having grown up on the family farm, Chris has always had an appreciation and enthusiasm for the outdoors, an interest fuelled by spending much of his childhood with the old keeper on their private shoot, learning the ropes and developing an understanding for how the countryside functions – something instilled long before he ever shot any live quarry. The way it should be.

Indeed, the sad demise of this old role model figure is the inspiration for the rural courses which Chris and Dave now run. Who is there nowadays to teach newcomers the ways of the countryside and introduce them to fieldsports, properly? Mentoring is fundamental in the teaching of natural practices, yet it has all but disappeared in the modern world, victim to modern practices, formalised education and high-speed lives. Those



individuals who, years ago, would have been available as mentors – gamekeepers, woodsmen, stalkers – have seen their rural enterprises commercialised, with little or no time for apprentices. Once a natural right of passage, the imperative introduction to stalking that many received a generation ago is on the slide.

And it’s not just about the ethics. People are bound to derive much more enjoyment and success from a day’s stalking if they understand what is going on, and there is no

substitute for first-hand experience.

Of course, there are shooting grounds, rifle ranges and game butchery courses where the newcomer can learn about marksmanship, rifle safety and carcass preparation, but it is the combination of practical skills in the field, understanding the environment, the tracking, the affinity with the quarry – the bigger picture – that appears to be missing. The Four Feathers rural courses fill this void, offering a holistic approach.

FIELD CRAFT

Fieldcraft as a subject is vast. Its many elements combine and fuse to form a medley of age-old skills, knowledge and an improved understanding of nature. Stalking without fieldcraft is like watching a musical in a foreign language – you may get by, but with less understanding, enjoyment and

overall fulfilment.

Sitting at the core of the Four Feathers philosophy is comfort and familiarity in the environment in which you will be pursuing your quarry. If you are comfortable and familiar with your surroundings, you pick things up more easily: slight movements, or a change in the background sound. As a stalker, one must be able to recognise any variation from what Chris and Dave refer to as ‘baseline’ – the typical conditions for an environment. This can be particularly useful for stalkers who have access to regular ground over many seasons, and highlights the value of spending time without the rifle in areas where one has stalking permission, until it becomes second nature.

One such task that anybody can practice is learning how to settle into an environment and recognise the baseline as it is without human

RURAL SKILLS

intrusion, in its natural state, with a mind clear of day-to-day clutter and any predatory aspects.

TRACKING

Tracking is all about awareness, linked strongly with one's commitment to know their stalking ground. Its uses are multi-faceted.

It is rarely as straightforward as obvious slots in pristine clay, and takes into account flagging (the lay of vegetation) and action indicators (birdsong and wildlife behaviour). But even the basics of tracking can heighten one's awareness of what is happening in a particular environment. A trained eye can pick up a deer's gait, cadence, hoof profile, patterns of movement – helping to indicate areas frequented by deer at different times of the day, the species present, their behaviour.

Such wisdom can also help to establish the best place to situate a high seat or the most suitable position from which to take a shot off sticks, standing, kneeling or prone. Slot patterns can signal areas where deer are stopping to look around, browsing at a slow pace – ideal positions for a shot. High seat positions are significantly less effective in areas where deer will only travel at speed – where they may feel exposed, under threat or in danger.

Fieldcraft can also bolster success for those stalking on new ground. Start in gateways, natural junctions in forest rides, habitat edges – natural channels where deer are most likely to be detected when undisturbed. Their baseline. Be mindful of a deer's essentials: water, food and shelter, and be aware of their reproductive cycles.

In the unfortunate event of wounding a deer, or when a bullet is placed correctly and yet the animal runs a hundred yards before expiring, tracking is invaluable.

“Not everyone has the luxury

of a deer-trained dog,” says Chris. “If a shot deer runs, with a little coaching and an awareness of what to look for, the stalker can pick up a blood trail, tracks or signs indicating a direction of travel, and determine if it is slowing down or speeding up.

“As simple a detail as looking at the colour and content of the blood at the point of impact can



A trained eye can glean a surprising amount of information from the natural environment

give an idea of the area of the body the bullet has penetrated: watery and flecked with green (intestine), bright pink (lung), dark red (liver), deep red (heart).

“Tracking is about collating details, to build a bigger picture. Imagine each sign as a letter of the alphabet, from which you create words, then sentences and eventually a story.”

This is smarter stalking.

TAKING NOTES

The volume of information generated during such outings can be of great use and interest to the stalker frequenting a specific patch of land. Keeping a diary that details each trip out, with or without the rifle, can help identify trends and accurately depict populations.

Larder records are kept by all responsible deer managers in the UK, typically documenting the species, gender, weight of carcass,

health, load/rifle used, but a diary of one's time out in the field can go so much further – maps of deer whereabouts, what the weather was like, the time of day/year, distinguishing characteristics; behaviour; where it came from; where it was heading.

From this, over time, one can build a clearer picture and understanding of the deer in an

area. Chris has in the past even named some of the deer on his ground, such is his familiarity with them, and has a good idea of where he is most likely to see individuals, if they are likely to be in company, and when. This knowledge is a natural bi-product of time spent in the field, observing.

THE THREE S'S

After fieldcraft, comes marksmanship. But this involves much more than just placing a bullet in the right spot.

Movement can determine whether a stalk culminates in success or failure. Footfalls should be light and carefully considered. Eyes should be on the surroundings – maintaining a wide field of vision is important – whilst quietly assessing the route ahead for obstacles.

“Deer will often take you by surprise, especially in new territory,” Chris acknowledges. “It's always advisable to consider every possibility when searching for them. Take nothing for granted and be prepared to adapt at any point.”

The main message behind the ‘Deer Run’ – Four Feathers’ simulated stalking exercise – is to be a safe, responsible, respectful Shot, following the three S's guideline: Is it safe? Is it sensible? Is it suitable?

The exercise itself sees the stalker cross obstacles safely, use binoculars correctly to scan areas and establish if wooden deer silhouettes are in a safe position to shoot; considering the lie of the land, bullet drop, obstacles obstructing the shot, other deer nearby, whether it is a suitable animal to take (age and gender) and the likelihood of achieving a safe, clean, ethical kill.

Targets can then be engaged if deemed suitable, and then discussed as part of the exercise.

The rear-side of the silhouettes are detailed with a proportionate diagram of that species' internal organs, which is invaluable for driving home the importance of bullet placement.

The fieldcraft, the safety and the marksmanship are all crucial elements and, if all goes well, each plays its part in the culmination of a successful stalk. But a stalk doesn't end there. Butchery is also a prominent part of the Four Feathers rural courses. Knowing how to handle and prepare a deer in the larder is undoubtedly a crucial part of affording it the respect that it deserves. And, of course, venison is a very special end product – who wouldn't want to make the most of it?



Learning in the field with an experienced stalker is invaluable

“IMAGINE EACH SIGN AS A LETTER OF THE ALPHABET, FROM WHICH YOU CREATE WORDS, THEN SENTENCES AND EVENTUALLY A STORY.”

CONTACT

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MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR DEER, WITH MIKE ROBINSON



Chefs who are preparing a deer for the restaurant have a real financial incentive to get the very most from a carcass. Here, I outline the primary and secondary cuts one can get from a beast, assuming that there is no major damage to the beast in question – any shot damage must be cut away since there will be lead fragments in the meat.

Assuming we are dealing with a fallow doe – a good middling-sized deer:

1) Remove the shoulders intact. Cut the shanks off the shoulders – it makes it easier to fit them in a casserole. Most people just mince the shoulders. I recommend you braise them slowly in red wine, garlic, onions and rosemary on a low heat for five hours. Then pull the meat to bits and do with it what you will – it makes great meat ragu.

2) Remove the haunches. Take off the shanks and freeze them for later braising – think Greek lamb shanks.

3) Bone out the haunches. Pull the primal muscles apart at the seams. Trim the sinew off with a boning knife. Cut the primals into steaks that we call pave. Off a fallow like this you should get 15 off each haunch –

about 180g each. I like to make a herb marinade from olive oil, thyme, oregano, garlic and black pepper (whizzed up in a blender). Place them with a spoon of marinade in freezer bags, two at a time and label clearly. Suck out the air before you freeze them.

4) Remove the backstraps, cutting cleanly along the spine on either side. The muscle extends to the base of the neck. Time off the sinew, as though you were skinning a fish. Cut the sirloins (for that is what they are) into four-inch steaks and treat like the pave above.

5) Remove the true fillets from under the ribs.

6) Take the large muscles from either side of the neck. Cut into small chunks for curry or casserole – the best braising cut on the animal. They will serve 4 – 6 people.

7) Take the time to trim all the bit and flank meat – basically everything that isn't sinew. Mince it all down and you have enough for maybe 10 big burgers.

8) From a 30kg beast you should get about 80 portions all told – pretty amazing considering the cost of a cartridge!



Taking your time will result in less wastage