

Mastering the king of gamebirds

The driven grouse presents a challenge rarely seen in other forms of shooting, but these five shots are all you need to succeed

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Ensuring your head is far enough forward and in the correct position on the stock will give you the best chance on a straight incoming grouse

The grouse is one of the most challenging quarry species to shoot. They vary from a 70-yard straight driven bird from a cliff face in the Derbyshire peaks to a covey of 30 swirling through the butts 20ft below you on a Scottish hillside. The Holy Grail is to shoot two birds in front, change guns and then shoot two behind out of the pack. But which shots do you need to master to take on the king of gamebirds successfully?

THE STRAIGHT INCOMING GROUSE (above) This is often a bogey target for many grouse Shots, and one I have scratched

many times. It is a bird that we rarely see in any other form of shooting, making it a challenge. First, establish your ranges to prevent shooting at the bird when out of range or not shooting when within range. A rangefinder and landmarks (burnt heather line or reed tussock) can give an outer perimeter that you can set according to ability. Set yourself up with a kill zone that allows you to know exactly where you need to engage the bird to make the shot more effective. This distance for me is 35 yards. This point is where to squeeze the first trigger, so one needs to mount on to the bird 10 yards or so before this point. This allows the chance of a second barrel at 25 yards or another grouse at 25 yards.

The key to the straight incoming shot is to make sure your head is far enough forward and in the correct position on the stock; nose over toes, bending from the hips. Assuming the gun fits, it is a matter of being decisive when choosing a bird. Stare at it, mount the gun just underneath the bird and squeeze the trigger instantly, making sure to watch the bird fold before moving on to the next. Any hesitation or delay will result in a miss, so be brave and avoid the temptation to allow the bird to come closer. Although it seems counter-intuitive, it will only make the bird harder to shoot. If you miss the bird out in front and there are more coming, resist the urge to turn and try to shoot the bird behind. →



THE GOING AWAY GROUSE (above)

Again, bird selection is everything. On the approach of the bird, decide which one you are going to shoot before it has moved through the line. Once you have selected your bird, make sure that you know which side of the butt it is going to pass, so are you turning left or are you turning right? This can be tricky if the grouse does not commit to a line until later than you would like. As a result, it is difficult to decide which side of the butt it is going to go and therefore which way you should turn.

Once the grouse is committed, you need to turn more quickly than the bird, so you are waiting for it to come through the line, keeping your eyes firmly locked on it. Meanwhile, the gun will now be pointing

out of the back of the butt at approximately the same height as to allow the bird to pass just over the top of the gun. It is vital you resist the urge to step to the back of the butt while doing this, as such an action will make your safety sticks useless.

As the bird passes through the line, start to move the gun slowly, predicting where the bird is going to be. The secret is to keep your eyes absolutely locked on to the bird and move your head in time with it. As the bird approaches, mount on its beak and push gently away, squeezing the

trigger at the same time. Be prepared to back up this first shot with a very quick second shot. Failure to do so will result in the bird quickly being too far away to result in a clean kill.

Carried out correctly, this should be one fluid motion from seeing the bird out in front, turning more quickly than the bird, getting the muzzle below the line of the bird and, as the bird approaches through the line, mounting on to its nose and instantly squeezing the trigger while keeping the gun moving all the time.

Top left: keep your eyes locked on to the going-away grouse. Left: maintain the line of the bird and increase gun speed to apply lead. Right: allow the upwind birds to come in closer

THE CROSSING GROUSE (below left)

As with the incoming bird, knowing your ranges is crucial to avoid shooting at birds that are out of range. If you haven't got a rangefinder, it is perfectly acceptable to walk out 25 or 30 yards in front of the butt. It is then easy to judge 50 or 60 yards and create a few markers. The first phase of the shot (once you have made the decision to shoot) is to choose your bird. Failing to choose a bird, particularly when a pack is coming, will lead to indecision and probably result in a miss. Once you have locked on to a bird, make sure to match gun speed to bird speed, mounting on or just behind the bird, whichever you are comfortable with. Be careful to maintain the line of the bird and increase the gun speed to apply lead and squeeze the trigger instinctively when the lead feels correct. Be sure to keep the gun moving and watch the bird fold over the top of the gun before

finishing the swing. Try to avoid lifting your head away from the stock until the bird has dropped.

I cannot stress enough that bird selection is everything. In these situations, I tend to shoot the lead bird out of a pack, simply because it always gives me one to go for and, as a result, I isolate it in my mind. If the bird is flying close and parallel to the front of the butt, then it should be shot early before it is in front of the butt. This changes the shot into a quartering incomer. Alternatively, let the bird pass and shoot it as a quartering going away. In both these situations, be careful not to overdo your lead on the bird.

THE UPWIND GROUSE AND THE DOWNWIND GROUSE (below)

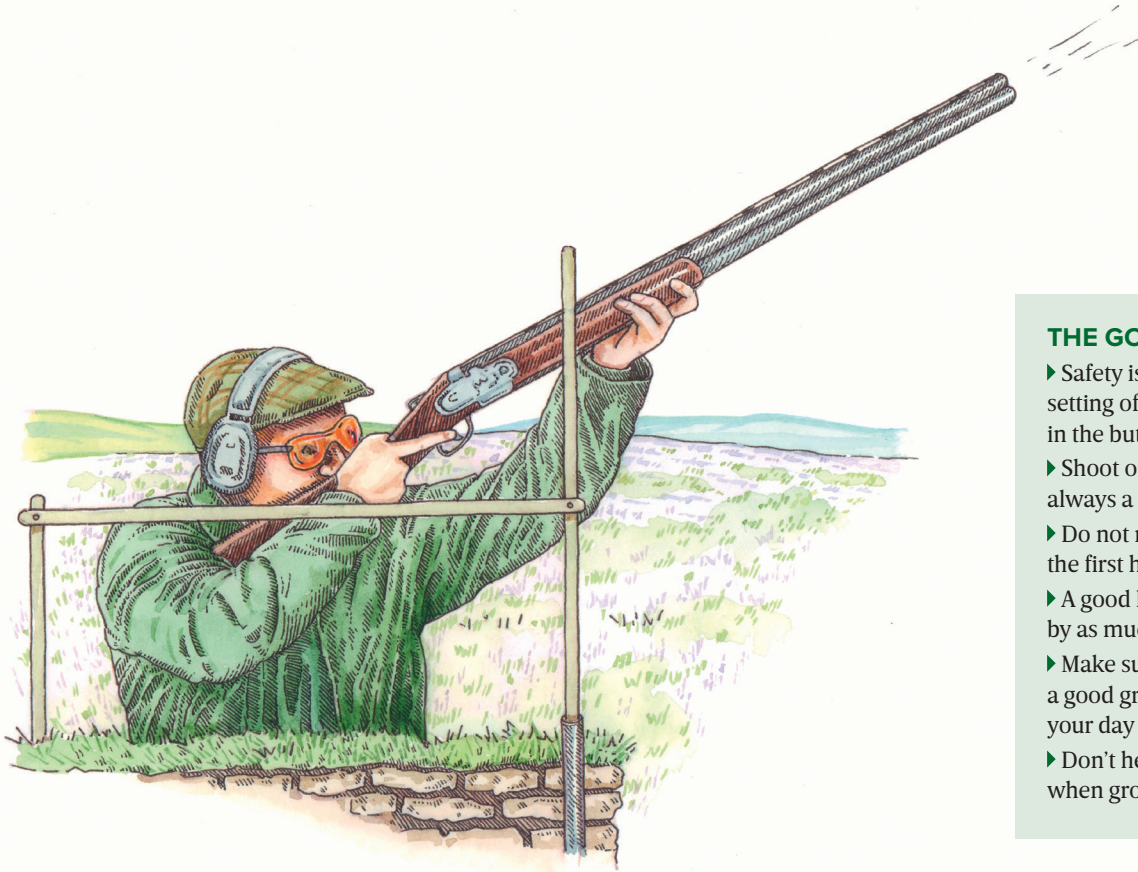
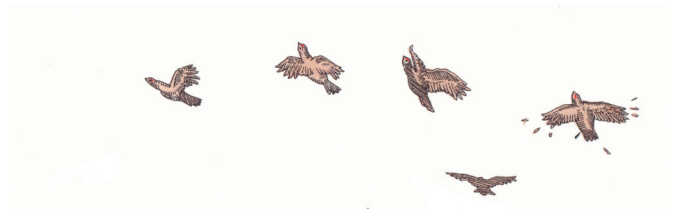
A grouse returning into the wind (upwind) needs to be dealt with carefully as it is easy to turn grouse away from the butts

by shooting too early. If it flies backwards away from the butts, it will most likely pass over the top of sitting birds and probably pick them up with it and take a big number straight out the back of the drive. This can ruin a drive. The secret is to let the birds come in much closer than you normally would. In big coveys, I will often let the first few birds through the line of butts, which will mean the rest are highly unlikely to turn backwards.

The shot itself is deceptively hard, as people tend to panic and think "grouse – lots of lead". In fact, the bird is travelling much more slowly than you think and it is simply a matter of aiming at its beak. In an upwind situation, mount the gun further behind the bird than normal and, as you accelerate the gun past the bird, squeeze the trigger on the bird's beak, but keep the gun moving. If the bird is further away, then it will obviously need more lead, →

“ The bird is travelling more slowly than you think and it is a matter of aiming at its beak ”





THE GOLDEN RULES

- ▶ Safety is paramount; the correct setting of butt sticks and your position in the butt are vital
- ▶ Shoot one bird; the second bird is always a bonus
- ▶ Do not move on to another bird until the first has folded
- ▶ A good loader can increase your bag by as much as 25%
- ▶ Make sure you are prepared; visit a good grouse instructor before your day
- ▶ Don't hesitate; it is your worst enemy when grouse shooting

but because the bird is travelling slowly, the temptation is to overdo the lead and stop the gun, missing the bird behind as a result. Keep in mind that a slow-moving bird will give you more time, so as soon as you have finished the second shot, change quickly to the second gun and repeat the same manoeuvre described above.

A downwind grouse requires a completely different approach. A fast grouse can touch nearly 80mph, which is roughly 40 yards per second. Select your bird early, ideally before the outer marker, and engage much earlier than you normally would. A bold, attacking shot is required. Be brave with the lead and be careful to finish the shot. I frequently back this shot straight up with a second. All too often I have seen packs of grouse break the line of Guns at top speed and only one shot is fired. If they are coming flat out, ignore the

second gun – this will be a salute to the departing birds at best.

OVERHEAD GROUSE BOTH IN FRONT AND BEHIND (above)

The overhead grouse or straight driven is a shot that occurs more commonly than most people think, especially in Scotland. The timing on this shot is everything. Most people tend to treat it like a pheasant or partridge and shoot too late. Remember, it is travelling more quickly than you think.

Shoot earlier than normal, somewhere between 10 and 11 o'clock. Boldness and commitment are required as the temptation will be to allow the bird in too close. This increases the gun movement required and, quite simply, the speed of the bird beats you, especially later on in the season. After the first horn has gone and the Gun has to shoot behind, the overhead grouse

Shooting the overhead grouse is tricky and the timing on this shot is everything; allow the bird to drop on to the top of the gun, keep the gun moving and shoot instinctively when it feels right

shot is quite rare, but particularly difficult if not dealt with correctly. The trick is to watch the bird carefully and make sure it is committed to come straight over the top of you. As soon as you know it is committed then you can set up to shoot it.

This is done by turning around totally so your back is now facing towards the bird and you are looking away from it. However, as soon as you are totally turned, tilt your head back in order to see the bird as quickly as possible. Be aware that the bird may have slightly deviated from its original course, so it may not be exactly where you expect it to be. Do not take the muzzle too high, and as soon as your eyes have connected with the bird, allow it to drop on to the top of the gun, keeping the gun moving all the time, and shoot instinctively when it feels right. Any delay or hesitation will result in a miss. ■

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