

Tired of that sinking feeling?



Start



A well used mud patten - top view



Mud patten - bottom view



Simultaneously pass the tie ends under the board loops from the outside

Age is no problem when it comes to crossing the mud if you're armed with a pair of pattens. NICK HORTEN extols their virtues and provides a step by step guide to making your own...

WALKING ON WATER

There was once a time, as a much younger and fitter wildfowler, that the rather scary idea of traversing miles of open tidal mudflats on foot held no terrors for me. As long as the mud didn't come over my knees I simply used the raw strength of youth to power through the mud to my favourite shooting spot. There's a knack to walking on soft mud, quickly acquired by the novice, the rules of which equate to something like, 'Whatever you do, keep moving. Rotate slightly on the ball of your foot to break the suction before pulling it out of the mud and, don't step in the other bloke's footprints.'

Following these loose guidelines, with thigh muscles like braced steel wires, lungs like a blacksmith's bellows and carrying not an ounce of fat, I regularly trotted across miles of mudflat with no ill effect and enjoyed some superb shooting into the bargain.

That was then. But what about now? Well that's a different story. I'm sorry to say that I now conform completely to the rather disturbing statistical profile of the modern fowler. I'm over 40. Well over it. My once muscular thighs seem now to be powered by slack knicker elastic. My lungs rasp and rattle, screaming for another Woodbine at the slightest exertion and my waistline is well insulated from the cold with a generous layer of lard.

By rights then, being old, fat and out of condition, I should not be enjoying the quality of sport that I once did, particularly evening wigeon flighting over the zoster beds, far out on the mud flats at low tide.

But, thanks to an almost forgotten piece of fowling equipment, the humble mud

patten, I continue to amble, now almost effortlessly, across the mud, reaching places visited by few fowlers.

So let's examine for a moment the mechanics of this blindingly simple but surprisingly little used piece of wildfowling history. The entire surface area of an average thigh boot sole is about 48 square inches - 96 for the pair. The surface area for a 12 inch square mud patten is 144 square inches - 288 for the pair. Already you can see that, with the tripling of the surface area across which to distribute one's weight, walking across the surface of the mud is now a viable proposition.

Talking of history, it's worth mentioning that the only classic wildfowling author who seems to have had first hand experience of effective mud pattens was Hawker. Of the others who touch upon the subject not a single one illustrates or describes a patten that actually works in practice. So, if you're of an adventurous disposition and have previously constructed pattens to the design of, say, Payne Galwey and found them to be expensive and complex-to-make death traps, read on and I'll describe how to make a cheap and simple pair of pattens that will considerably broaden your fowling horizon.

I could give you reams of measurements and plans for their construction, none of which is critical. The fact is that the real secret lies in how to position your foot on the board and how to tie them quickly and securely to your feet.

Cut two 12 inch square boards from suitable plywood of about 12mm thickness. Any thinner and they'll crack under your weight, any thicker and they

become too heavy. Round off the corners, affix hardwood battens underneath and bore holes for the securing ties as per the illustrations.

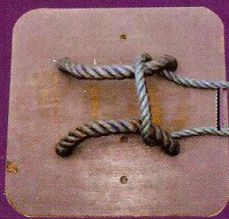
The rope loops on the board's upper surface should stand clear of it as shown and they should end in a figure-of-eight or stopper knot. Do not use any other knot or they will eventually pull through the holes.

Now for the secret stuff. Your toes should overlap the leading edge by a good inch. This overlap brings your heel nearer the centre and automatically helps break the pattens suction on the mud when you walk. Your board ties should measure a minimum of 54 inches. Simultaneously pass the tie ends under the board loops from the outside then follow the steps shown in the illustrations.

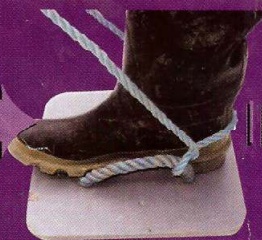
When lashing them on pull the ties as tight as you possibly can. The leverage exerted on them is considerable and they will loosen slightly as you walk, but never enough to come off. It really is as simple as that.

All that remains is for a little practice on the lawn to avoid stepping one patten upon the other, there's no special gait required, just a slight bending of the knees.

And finally, a few words on safety. Always carry a couple of spare ties and a sharp knife. If you do sink in further than intended, cut the tie and not the board loop. I'm an old hand at using pattens and I can tell pretty much by just looking at it, the consistency of the mud. If you can't, then keep well away from any that looks suspiciously slack. Always remember that pattens are not magic and there will always be mud too liquid upon which to walk.



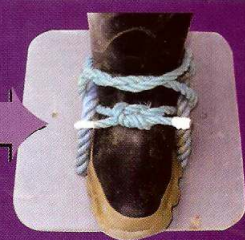
Pull the tie to the rear of the loops to form the heel strap



Place your foot on the board and ensure the rope is well up the heel



Bring the ends of the rope up over your instep and make a turn



Pass the rope ends under the loops and tie off over the instep with a reef knot