

Youth is not the answer

That wildfowling clubs depend on young blood is a myth, says club chairman **Nick Horten**, who claims clubs should be looking elsewhere for survival

A relatively small number of readers will have started their 'fowling careers as boys. Of those, some will have been introduced to the sport through family connections while others will have sought their own entry through the usual club admission procedure.

Bitten by the 'fowling bug' when I was 16 years old, I was soon regarded as something of an oddity in my wildfowling club. So desperately did I want to go 'fowling that, for the first four months of my first season on the marsh, I trotted along obediently behind my mentor, completely unarmed. At the time I possessed neither shotgun certificate nor gun, but so badly did I want to go that the lack of something so fundamental was a trifling inconvenience.

One rarely sees such single-mindedness among young people these days, which rather makes me wonder about the future of wildfowling. From the inception of most 'fowling clubs in the 1950s through to the late 1970s, the sport enjoyed a period of steady growth. Here was entry to the world of shooting at a modest price when clay grounds were fewer and farther between and gameshooting was beyond the reach of most. Relatively unrestricted and with a wide variety of quarry available, the only limits upon the growth of the sport seemed to be the volume of shooting the marsh was capable of absorbing.

In the early 1980s, the Wildlife & Countryside Act was the precursor of a landslide of legislation which triggered huge changes within the sport. The net effect of the introduction by club committees of a whole range of subtle management strategies quite rightly aimed at safeguarding the immediate welfare of the sport served insidiously to discourage the novice from entering a world of intimidating complexity. By the mid-1990s, the sport was seen by many to be a "closed shop", and the present wildfowling club membership crisis began to bite.

Not that clubs have been slow to react. In fact, it has never been easier to go 'fowling. Forward-thinking associations have slashed aside the red tape that threatened to strangle the sport from within and embraced new and innovative recruiting strategies. For many clubs, land purchase, with the financial burden that it brings, has meant that



member recruitment and most importantly member retention is top of their agenda.

I'm not sure that running a wildfowling club has ever been an easy task, but today's club manager needs to possess a degree of business acumen that would have amazed Stanley Duncan. Accountant, recruitment consultant, analyst and planner—he needs to be all this and more. The truth, of course, is that, like me, he is frequently none of these things, which could lead to problems when

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deciding where to direct precious resources. I have often heard it said that, without recruiting young people to the sport, it will surely die.

A number of clubs have run highly successful wildfowling courses specifically aimed at young people. So impressed was I with the philosophy behind the idea that I was sorely tempted to generate one through my own club. Until I analysed the reality of trying to recruit to the sport the youth without which it will allegedly wither.

▲ Weigh it up: is investing in young blood a good use of wildfowling clubs' precious resources?

Setting aside for one moment the problems associated with acting in loco parentis, insurance and health and safety issues, my research reveals some unexpected facts. The percentage of young people given easy access to the sport at an early age who stick with it appears to be disproportionately small. Such distractions as further education and, in the case of boys, the discovery of alcohol and girls suggests that investing time and effort into giving them an introduction is not necessarily the best use of precious time and money.

Thus far you may choose to disagree with me, but the other thing that my research suggests is that wildfowling has never relied on the entry of young people for its continued existence. Indeed, the average age at which people come to the sport seems to be in their mid- to late-20s, following an apprenticeship in rough- or clayshooting.

That wildfowling currently seems to be experiencing a recruitment and retention crisis is a very real worry for those concerned with the long-term management of the sport. That the strategy behind dealing with it is based upon fact and not supposition is even more important. ■

Nick Horten is chairman of Langstone Wildfowling