

# DON'T BE A STICK-IN-THE-MUD

**NICK HORTEN** has a few tips on negotiating the tidal expanses of glutinous gloop familiar to all coastal wildfowlers

If you are a purist wildfowler and you need to cross a large expanse of deep or sloppy intertidal mud flat then you might want to consider the use of mud pattens. These are stout wooden boards tied to the fowler's feet that help spread his weight over a larger surface area, thus stopping him sinking into the mud.

Great for use on wide open flats, pattens have their limitations, especially in areas of saltmarsh criss-crossed with steep-sided gutters. Although mud is ever synonymous with fowling it varies so much in depth, consistency and expanse from place to place that many fowlers will never have

recourse to use pattens. And here is a curious fact. Despite mud's ever-present association with coasts, and indeed anywhere the water content of the ground becomes excessive, I can find no meaningful guide to walking un-pattened through the stuff in the entire body of wildfowling literature.

So for all you budding fowlers, and indeed anyone who comes across an area of mud that needs crossing, from deep and treacherous saltmarsh gutter to muddy field gate entrance, here is another first from BASC that you might want to cut out and keep.





## HOW TO WALK IN THE MUD WITHOUT COMING UNSTUCK

Or getting stuck - you know what I mean.

Let's be honest, we've all been there before; you step into the stuff and your boot sticks fast, you keep on walking - straight out of the boot - and it just gets worse.

The following scenario plays out every year in my wildfowling club. It's something of a ritual. Early in the season a group of fowlers - a few old hands and a new member or two - meet up on the sea wall. We have to cross a steep-sided creek no more than 75 yards wide to reach the saltmarsh and the shooting that lies beyond. The mud at its deepest barely reaches one's knee. But that is deep enough.

First across is an old sweat. Knocking on 60 the old fellow has crossed this creek a thousand times and he makes it look effortless. Next across is a new boy, we'll call him Justin.

In fairness Justin has never attempted anything like this before and he gives it his best shot. He tries to match the speed of the first man across but finds after five or six steps that his forward momentum exceeds the speed at which he can unstick his feet and it all starts to go horribly wrong. As he topples forward he puts out his hands to break his fall which promptly sink up to his elbows. His gun slides forward in its slip and hits him in the back

of the head. His side bag also slips forward and becomes stuck under his leg so that he is kneeling on it, pinning himself down with the strap.

I'll leave the rest to your imagination. We extricate him from the mud and he behaves like the good sport that he is. We all fall about in hysterics and I laugh so much I wet myself. Fortunately I'm wearing neoprene chest waders and it is warm.

So what did we tell him, what secrets did we whisper in his ear knowing full well that, with no time to absorb the facts, information overload was inevitable?

### PREPARATION IS THE KEY

Part of the key to success, or the secret to

not embarrassing yourself, is preparation.

Negotiating the mud involves using muscle groups, mainly the thigh or quadriceps, which most of us don't use enough to build up any real strength in. Some gentle pre-season cycling or stair walking will pay real dividends, as will an exercise regime that gets the heart working. There is a real danger that the sudden and explosive strain on an unfit fowler's body caused by mud walking could trigger a heart attack. Estuary mud running is used as a training exercise by the Royal Marines because it is so physically demanding!

With your personal fitness sorted the next thing you'll need is a wading stick to help you keep your balance and test the

## HEALTH AND SAFETY DISCLAIMER



Before you blame me for getting stuck here's the 'elf and safety' disclaimer. Never, ever, try to cross estuarine mud of completely unknown depth and consistency. Always have a backup plan should things go wrong. This plan might include a suitable length of rope or a boat or whatever the circumstances dictate. Never experiment with mud walking on your own, always have a companion to hand just in case and remember that the coastguard is a last resort. Hopefully you'll learn enough here to keep out of trouble. If you do become inextricably stuck, decisive action may be called for. Spread your bag and slipped gun on the mud behind you and lie upon it on your back while simultaneously 'swimming' backwards out of the mud, with or without your boots. The above mostly applies to coastal mud lands rather than a sticky gate entrance.





depth of water and mud. Mark the stick at the point where the water will overtop your thigh or chest waders, a useful tip that will save you many a wetting.

Now let's look at the footwear itself. Be they thigh or chest waders, the important thing to know is how they will react when you try and pull them out of the mud. Rubber boots don't stretch but increasingly popular neoprene possesses an elasticity that can be problematic if not downright dangerous.

**“ The secret lies in what he does with his feet inside the boot ”**

It is perfectly possible to cope with stretchy neoprene once you've mastered the technique of mud walking but my advice would be to use some form of securing rope, as illustrated, until you've acquired the knack. Otherwise boots need to be a close, but not tight, fit when worn with enough socks to keep your feet warm.

You will also need to ensure that, when tug comes to pull very hard, you are not fighting against your own clothing. Wear trousers that fit loosely around the leg and allow for a bit of movement around the knees. One frequently has to raise one's leg higher than in normal walking and trousers that bind around the knee will add to your problems.

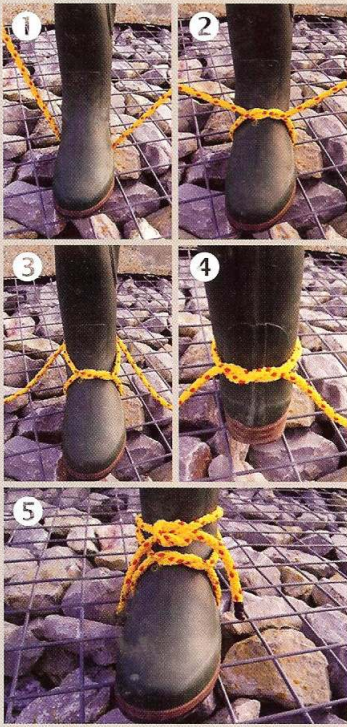
### UNDERSTAND THE MECHANICS

Okay then, we should now be just about ready to tackle the mud itself. But before we stride off into the unknown, an understanding of the mechanics of the problems you are about to face may be of some use.

### HOW NOT TO LOSE YOUR BOOTS IN THE MUD

Consider lightly abrading modern synthetic rope with fine grain sand paper to improve its non slip binding properties.

- 1) Centre a 62 inch (160cm) length of appropriate diameter rope under the boot sole, close up to the moulded heel.
- 2) Pass the ends over the instep and make a turn. Pull it tight, as with all the other knots.
- 3+4) Pass the rope ends around the heel of the boot and make a turn.
- 5) Bring the ends over the instep and tie off in a reef knot.



Mud is mostly water. The mud's liquidity forms a close seal around your boot and as you try to pull your foot out of it a vacuum is created under the boot sole into which is sucked more mud or water. It is this vacuum that causes all the problems and is a good reason never to step into the footprints of another mud walker.

As a novice you may well see the more experienced mud walker 'trot' across the mud, moving very quickly with piston-like leg movements; an excellent, if tiring, technique but one which needs to be worked up to by the novice. There is a real danger of one's forward momentum overtaking the speed of one's ability to

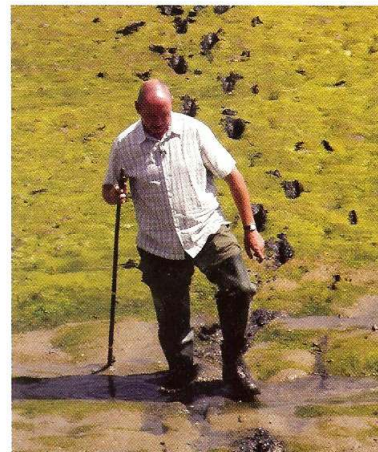
unstuck the feet. A nose dive into the mud will surely follow!

So, how exactly does the experienced fowler make crossing an expanse of mud look so easy? The secret lies in what he does with his feet inside the boot. He may employ some or all of the following and may even be unaware of how he does it. Upon requesting some instruction from his mentor, it doesn't really help the novice to be told that the secret is a rather vague, "practice".

Firstly, the speed at which you attempt to extract a stuck boot is critical. Pull too hard, too fast and the foot simply comes out of the boot. You need to develop a feel for the speed at which the vacuum is released and learn to work within it.

In order to stop the boot being pulled from the foot you can either bunch the toes forcing them hard against the boot's instep or angle the big toe steeply upwards and use it to hook inside the boot. Couple this with a slight rotation on the ball of the foot, a raising of the boot heel or sideways bending of the ankle to break the suction and the foot, still safely encased in the boot, can be slid magically from the mud's determined grip.

If you're a newcomer to the sport of wildfowling and don't want to risk the embarrassment of an inelegant belly-flop into the first expanse of rotten ooze you encounter, try these tips. They really do work.



### NICK'S TIPS

When you are crossing deep mud:

- Use your staff to gauge the depth
- Ball your foot in the wader to get better leverage
- At each step move your foot from side to side to prevent a vacuum forming under your boot
- Keep moving