

# Storm troopers

The intrepid coastal wildfowler knows high tides and bad weather can turn even the safest-seeming harbour into a hellmouth. **Nick Horten** braves the maelstrom

**T**he realisation struck as we gathered on the shore of the farthest island in the harbour: the voyage home across a mile of open water was going to be anything but plain sailing. Piling decoy sacks and guns in a heap, we peered out to our 13ft boat, dancing a lively jig at the end of its anchor rope. In the deepening gloom of a blustery late-November dusk, the wind had veered imperceptibly to a point a few degrees east of due south.

Earlier that day, Ian had struck out from the shore on his mud pattens for an epic footslog across the open mudflats to the most southerly island. He would get an extra three hours' shooting time before the tide rose sufficiently to allow me and his fiancée, my niece Maria, to follow him by boat. Having previously shown a genuine aptitude for capturing the excitement of driven pheasant and pigeon shooting on video, Maria was here to provide footage of some great coastal wildfowling.

Once on the island, my flotilla of decoys joined Ian's, and Maria plus video camera decamped to a second pit hide. Wigeon, teal and pintail obligingly worked the decoys, the dogs worked well and we all shot straight. As the afternoon wore on, though, the wind picked up. I developed a bad case of "boat-owner's twitch", the irresistible urge to check every 10 minutes that the boat hadn't dragged its anchor, but we'd been out in worse and I was not unduly worried by a wind that had now passed force six. Which was why, at the end of the day as we gathered on the far shore of the island, I got a nasty shock.

On a map, Langstone harbour looks

deceptively safe: a landlocked tidal boating lake with a narrow entrance to the sea and two narrower channels connecting it to Portsmouth and Chichester harbours. But with a strong wind just east of south, this seemingly placid inland sea becomes spitefully dangerous. With an unhindered fetch straight up the harbour from the open Solent outside, a shallow draught means large rolling waves, invisible from the

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shore, run up the main channel. Serious enough, but after three hours on the flood, the harbour starts to fill from the northern as well as the southern end. Water from Chichester harbour races under the Hayling Bridge and this dual flow meets at a point off the eastern end of Long Island. Here the sea boils in a confused and vicious maelstrom.

I knew we were in trouble the moment we tried to get off the shore. We struggled to get into water deep enough to run the outboard and, when eventually I got it started, there was no alternative but to reverse out blunt end first, amid stern-slapping waves and showers of spray.

By now in deeper waters and pitch darkness, the short steep seas gave way to a long, hissing swell. The maelstrom lay before us. Reviewing our situation I bawled above the rising wind to Ian to sit on the floor to lower the centre of

gravity and instructed Maria to wedge herself into the bow seat with her back to the sea. She was now effectively the raised coaming of the boat and all that stood between us and disaster.

Pitching and rolling in the oppressive darkness, I wrestled with the tiller in an attempt to prevent us broaching — being turned sideways and capsizing. Ian and Maria were open-mouthed, staring over my shoulder at a 6ft wave racing up behind us.

The towering wall of water rushed beneath the boat, raising the stern to a 45° angle. For a moment I thought she would bury her bow. With a malevolent hiss, the boat surged forward, the water held at bay only by a thoroughly drenched Maria. We rode this terrifying rollercoaster six more times before reaching slightly calmer water. We were past the worst. All that remained was to turn across the wind to the safety of the sheltered slipway.

But 100 yards out from the slip, with the gale side-on, the outboard suddenly began to vibrate alarmingly. I knew if I cut the power we would be blown past the slip on to the ironbound shore beyond, so I gunned it hard, past caring for the consequences. With an unseaman-like crash we rammied the concrete apron of the slipway. Ian contrived to stumble into the shallows and we dragged the boat out of the water, where we slumped to the ground.

It transpired that the engine's impeller had begun to disintegrate. Had it happened in the middle of the storm we would all undoubtedly have perished. With nothing to compare it to, Maria was unfazed by the switchback ride home. "That was exciting," she said. "When can we go again?" ■

