



Easy does it!

Sometimes, the fates allow an easy shot... and sometimes they conspire against the punt-gunner. **Nick Horten** remembers a morning when, just as it seemed the wigeon were as good as in the bag, everything began to go wrong

ABOUT 20 wigeon splashed and preened in the shallows 50 yards in front of us as the rising tide flooded them gently off the drowning mudflats. With an hour to go before dawn, we had come upon this unsuspecting bunch of flatbills "washing up" after a night spent feeding on the zostera.

The contour of the mudflats in this particular spot was such that a natural lagoon formed, first no bigger than a bathtub, but expanding as the tide advanced until it covered about half an acre. Experience told us it would last for about 45 minutes before the tide washed over its rim, drowning the lagoon and continuing its relentless advance across the flats.

More by luck than judgement, we had caught it just right. There was sufficient water to inch the punt forward along the slowly deepening crab-run through which the lagoon filled. The

punt crept along on the tide until we reached a position where the bow could be deftly swung either left or right to bring the gun to bear.

No point on the surface of the lagoon was out of range of the inch-bore muzzleloading punt-gun loaded with 10oz of No 1 shot. I lay silently behind the huge fowling piece, intently studying the dark shapes whistling and purring under the sweep of the big gun.

Nothing to lose

A SUCCESSFUL punt shot is often beset with difficulties. Getting your shot frequently requires hours of hard work and tremendous skill. Occasionally, though, the fates conspire to present the gunner with an easy opportunity – and this was one of those occasions.

Short of the birds suddenly leaving en masse or the gun misfiring, little could go wrong. Even as I watched, small bunches of wigeon and a few

single birds joined those on the water in front of the gun. Three mallard waddled across the mud and part slid, part fluttered down the soft bank of the lagoon to join the wigeon.

Things were looking better by the minute. I had nothing to lose by waiting a quarter of an hour. My puntsman, a highly skilled gunner with more than 40 years' experience, assured me it was safe to wait. In fact, many of the duck were too close, but as they seemed to favour the far edge of the expanding lagoon a few minutes more would place them at optimum range. Impatiently, I fingered the trigger lanyard – a dozen duck were as good as on board.

Suddenly there was a swish of pinions and a rush of water as a cock wigeon landed less than 3ft from the side of the punt. This was something of a problem. If we startled the bird, it would undoubtedly jump in panic and probably take all the others with it. If our luck held, it

might swim over to its mates without noticing us. All we had to do was remain silent and motionless in the darkness and trust to fortune.

At this point an unexpected problem arose. My puntsman, knowing I wanted to wait for the birds to present themselves in a better position, had pushed the setting stick into the mud and was holding us stationary. It required no great effort, as the tide was moving sluggishly. While holding the stick there, he had lowered his head for a few minutes to ease the strain on his neck and so had not seen the wigeon – which was by now some 5ft off the starboard bow. He hadn't even heard it land because he was almost completely deaf.

Our situation began to deteriorate rapidly. To degenerate into farce is probably a more apt description. As so often happens in such cases, there were several things happening at once.

The bulk of the duck in front of the gun were slightly to the right, but too far to traverse the gun. Now, being deaf and unable to judge the volume of his voice, my puntsman was inclined to speak in a sort of exaggerated stage whisper. Suddenly from behind me came, "How are we doing?" In the frosty pre-dawn darkness it sounded like a shout.

The main body of duck in front immediately fell silent. The single wigeon next to the punt sat bolt upright in the water and I waited for it to jump in panic. I still could not bring the gun to bear – but at that moment there was not a single bird in front of it anyway, because the main bunch had moved to the right. I had to stop my puntsman from speaking again.

I gave him a sharp dig in the ribs with my thigh-booted foot. Unfortunately, we had previously agreed that in circumstances such as these, requiring soundless communication, a single dig would mean turn to the left, two digs would mean turn to the right.

He didn't speak, but the bow of the punt

dutifully swung to the left, even further away from the 40-odd wigeon still within easy shot. He hadn't seen the sentry wigeon that still swam a few feet off the starboard quarter, which by now was getting ready to jump.

My puntsman quietly cleared his throat and inhaled – he was going to speak again. At this point I think I lost it altogether. I kicked him four times, bent up my right leg and put the sole of my boot where I thought his mouth was. I did

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this as delicately as I could, though he later complained that I had kicked him in the teeth. Whatever, he grasped the fact that silence was required and, apart from a low grunt when I caressed his face with my sole, spoke no more.

Join the other duck

THE SINGLE wigeon, probably as deaf as my puntsman, then decided it was time to go. However, instead of leaping up into the sky, it shot across the water to join the other duck on the far side of the lagoon.

The main pack was very restless – it was time to shoot. At that moment the tide flooding the mudflats met the water in the lagoon. I watched with sinking heart as the near-solid pack of wigeon began to break up into smaller bunches.

Two gentle prods with my boot and the punt was brought to bear. As I took aim along the

barrel, I tightened my grip on the trigger lanyard. At that point I did something I had never done before.

I reasoned that with the dawn beginning to break in front of us, we were in deep shadow and therefore invisible to the duck. Usually the gunner's view of a punt shot from this prone position is extremely restricted. I felt that this was an ideal opportunity to get a slightly different perspective. So, as I pulled the lanyard, I raised my head above the stock of the gun.

Whoomph went the gun and nine wigeon died in the shallows. However, what I hadn't taken into account was the fact that the gun, having been loaded about two weeks before, would pick this occasion to blow back through the percussion-cap nipple.

Normally, after firing a shot, the hammer would be found in the fallen position with the fractured remains of the cap still on the nipple. That it had picked this moment to blow the hammer back to full cock, disintegrate the cap and blow burning priming powder through the nipple hole was just my bad luck.

I suddenly felt an unaccountable burning sensation on the right side of my face. Fortunately, the copper-cap shrapnel had missed my eyes and my woolly hat had absorbed most of the flying fragments... but I still had burning powder in my right ear. It hurt a lot, so I decided the only obvious thing to do was stick my head, hat and all, over the side of the punt into the sea – which was extremely cold.

My puntsman thought that I had taken leave of my senses. First I had tried to kick him senseless for no apparent reason and then, as if to celebrate a modest punt shot, I was immersing my entire head in freezing salt water.

Later, when I was able to explain what had happened to me, he did seem understanding. Years after this event I still have the powder burns in my ear as a personal souvenir. Still, as I said, sometimes the fates conspire together to give the punt-gunner an easy opportunity – and when it happens I will be sure to let you know. ■

