

It may not be fowling, but woodland sport has brought new opportunities to one south coast club, says CLIVE ELLISTON

BRANCHING OUT

Land purchase is currently the Holy Grail for wildfowling clubs. Investing hard cash into a tangible asset that appreciates year-on-year and at the same time securing long-term wildfowling in the area – subject to consent from Natural England of course. This makes sound sense and must surely strengthen the hand of any 'fowling club'.

I strongly believe that other local stakeholders view landowning clubs in a totally different light. Land ownership is a statement of commitment and seriousness of purpose that is difficult to achieve in any other way. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, land ownership is not a viable option for every club.

Small clubs may well struggle to acquire the requisite finances, whilst a larger club may find that there is little or no suitable land available for purchase in their immediate area. Even a healthy bank balance cannot buy what is not available – or what has been purchased at inflated prices by other organisations with differing priorities and agendas.

Where does this leave a club that has

no immediate land purchase prospects? Are there other ways for a club to expand its shooting opportunity portfolio?

I have personal experience of two wildfowling clubs joining together in a land purchase venture. Both clubs had the foresight to work together, and now the memberships of both these clubs are enjoying the fruits of their joint efforts. I would also add that this particular venture was for inland shooting over an area of freshwater marsh. I feel certain that the two associations concerned would much rather have invested in an area of coastal wildfowling – but they reasoned, quite rightly in my book, that any shooting opportunity was well worth investigating. So far this joint venture has proved successful for both parties and they are currently investigating further joint opportunities.

I am currently the Honorary Secretary of the Langstone and District Wildfowling and Conservation Association. Langstone Harbour is situated on the Hampshire coast, sandwiched between the conurbation of Portsmouth to the west

and the popular holiday area of Hayling Island to the east. The harbour is host to fisherman and 'fowler, as it has ever been, but we now share the area with a plethora of other recreational users – water skiers, sailors, wind surfers and the ubiquitous personal watercraft user – the fancy name for jet skiers. The area is also popular with walkers both with and without dogs, joggers, mountain bikers and bird watchers.

LADWACA lease two areas within the harbour that are shot over, but a percentage of each area is also designated, by the association, as un-shot refuge areas. We also lease two areas of Crown Foreshore jointly with conservation bodies, and both of these areas are on conservation leases and not shot over. The bulk of the harbour that we don't already have a stake in is owned by a local authority, which, at present, has no desire, or need, to lease to us.

So, if we don't want to stagnate and eventually disappear, how do we expand our shooting opportunity, and in turn attract additional members? In the

immediate environs of Langstone Harbour there is unlikely to be any land purchase opportunity in the foreseeable future, so we began to cast our net wider. Were there other avenues that could be explored to increase shooting opportunities for our membership?

A little over a year ago the Forestry Commission advertised several areas of woodland for tender in the Shooting Times. We saw this as an ideal prospect of offering our membership additional shooting opportunities.

We investigated the available areas and submitted our tenders, then waited with bated breath to see if we would be successful. Eventually we were notified that our tenders had been accepted for two areas of woodland and, after successfully submitting management plans and risk assessments, we completed the negotiations and became the proud lessees of two areas of mixed woodland.

Incidentally, a neighbouring wildfowling club was also successful in its tender, and also acquired two areas of woodland – a case of like minds perhaps? It certainly showed a desire by the Forestry Commission to work with groups of sportsmen who had experience of managing shooting regimes that operated in areas to which the general public had access.

We have completed our first season of shooting in the woodland areas, where we can shoot game in season plus pigeon, rabbit and other pest species all year. Naturally we have self-imposed limits over how many guns may shoot at any one time, and we also restrict our shooting to early morning and late afternoon/evening



during the spring and summer months. We utilised our experiences of shooting in areas that the public have access to when writing our management plan.

It may not be wildfowling, but it is an opportunity for an 'armed ramble' with dog and gun that was never previously available to our membership. It is also available throughout the year, an ideal way to keep one's eye in with the gun and at the same time keep the dog fit and in training.

So far this venture has given a new lease of life to a couple of the club's elder statesmen who were unwilling to continue testing their fitness and stamina on the marsh. We have also recruited new members to the club who may otherwise have been dissuaded by the perceived hardships of the foreshore and the expense and mystique of non-toxic shot, all of which is far too esoteric for many would-be club members. But we may have the chance to bring them into the fold eventually!

Land purchase may remain the ideal for many wildfowling clubs, but don't turn a blind eye to other projects that may present themselves. Any shooting venture is worth exploring if it appeals to club members and can offer increased shooting opportunities. We have proved to ourselves at LADWACA that 'branching out' can work for us. Perhaps it can for you.

Membership of the Langstone and District Wildfowling and Conservation Association is currently available. Visit www.ladwaca.com