



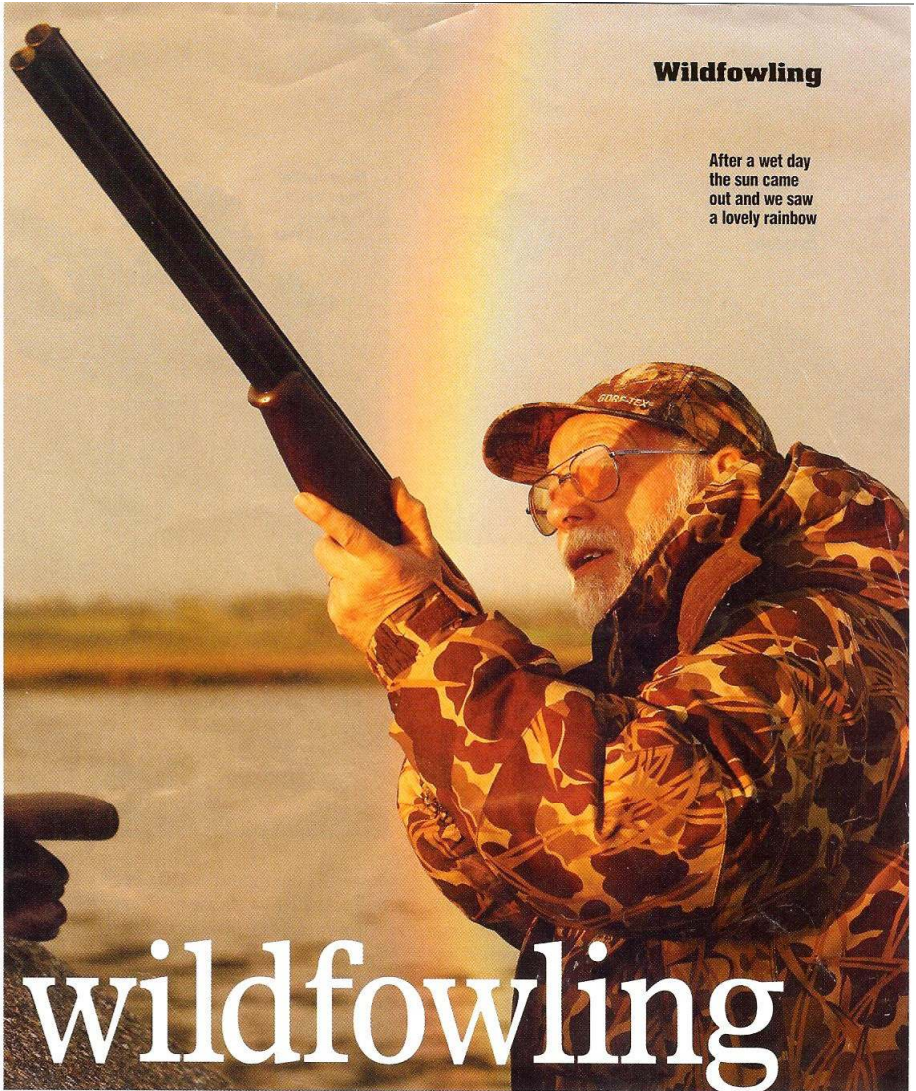
**NICK RIDLEY** gets his first taste of fowling just yards from a busy south coast commuter route

**T**he beauty of our sport of shooting is that it offers so many variations on the theme, whether you enjoy a day out walking the hedgerows with the dog or taking shots at pheasants that are scraping the stratosphere.

One thing that I believe we should all do is go back to basics now and again, and spend a day wildfowling. Just the word 'wildfowling' gets the imagination going: misty sunrises, the haunting call of the curlew, the hair-tlingling whistle of widgeon, skeins of geese flowing overhead and the feeling of comfort as your dog snuggles into your back to keep out of the wintry wind.

That said I do have a slight disadvantage in that I live just outside the most landlocked town in the UK. So despite my love of all things shooting, I had never been wildfowling. However, after a very interesting chat at the CLA with Clive Elliston, hon sec of the Langstone and District Wildfowling, a date was set in the diary and a couple of boxes of non-toxic shells were purchased.

There I was laying against the sea wall. The sun was just climbing above the horizon, my



After a wet day the sun came out and we saw a lovely rainbow

# Urban wildfowling



Clive Elliston and his two dogs wait in the gloom of the dawn flight

decoys were set and I could hear the distant sound of ducks and geese as they started to move up on the tide. What was that? An electronic bleeping sound... the alarm clock! It was 2am, time to get up – I had been dreaming of the day ahead.

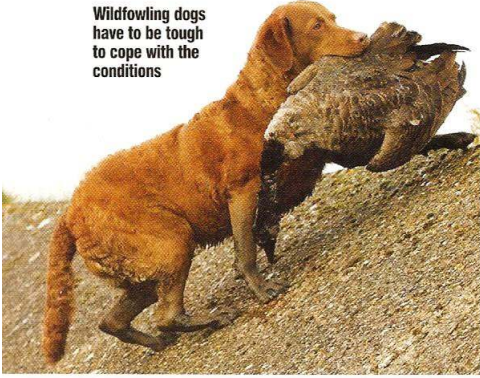
I crawled out of my bed and got ready for the three-hour drive, Clive had been insistent that we met at 5.15am so we could get in place before the sun came up. The Langstone & District Wildfowling and Conservation Association was formed in 1956 and currently leases two shooting areas in Langstone Harbour, near Portsmouth in Hampshire. One of these is leased from the RSPB, and the other from Havant Borough Council; they also lease two other areas on conservation leases.

A welcoming committee of dedicated members met me at the RSPB reserve and the first thing I noticed was the variety of dogs present: three chesapeake retrievers, two golden retrievers, a labrador and a curly coat. To go wildfowling without a dog is highly irresponsible and most wildfowling clubs make it a rule that you must have a dog with you when shooting. I have long been of the opinion that dogs



## Wildfowling

Wildfowling dogs have to be tough to cope with the conditions



Allan Musselwhite takes a shot at a lone Canada goose



**'Just as the sun set, a pair of mallard whipped across the darkening sky and Clive dropped one'**

used for this aspect of our sport are the SAS of the dog world. They sit stock-still, open to the elements in the worst of the winter weather in the most exposed locations possible. They are then expected to dive into tidal waters, swim in near darkness, find their retrieve with little or no command and return the duck or goose to hand. Then, soaking wet, they have to stay still again until their master succeeds in bringing down another bird. That is some dog and I take my hat off to them all.

Unlike the bright day of my dream, this morning was grey and drab. We heard some shooting along the sea-wall, but the dawn flight was not a great success in terms of the bag. Nevertheless it was exciting to be tucked into the marsh, waiting and hoping.

One of the other members had shot a lone Canada goose and club chairman Nick Horten sent his cheskie 'Willow' for the retrieve. You soon realise that wildfowling is not about big bags; it is about outwitting wild birds and shooting what you can take home and eat. It's about as close to the original form of hunting as we can get.

The odd thing about this location is that it's surrounded by main roads. While we hunkered

down the commuter traffic sped past only a few hundred yards away: if only they knew!

It was early in the season and Clive explained that the harbour is well known for the widgeon and at this time of the year they tend to feed in the harbour and then as they run out of food they flight out onto the marshes to feed. Langstone Harbour isn't what you would call remote but it does have a kind of urban-rural beauty. It also has its dangers. The mudflats around here are very glutinous and for the inexperienced could easily prove deadly. The Club operates a system where experienced fowlers take out new members until they have found their

'footing' and this is an invaluable scheme.

Later in the day we crossed a tidal race and walked to a small island. There are a number of these in the harbour that you can either walk to at low tide or access by rowing boat. I was told that these islands are perfect for ambushing ducks during the day, but as with the morning flight nothing showed so we retired for lunch and got ready for evening flight.

The weather had been pretty awful all day, with a wicked wind and heavy downpours, but as the evening drew on the sun came out and we were presented with a fantastic

rainbow. By now it was just me and Clive and his two goldies 'Tolley' and 'Tansey'. As we tucked ourselves in to the sea wall Clive explained that as part of the lease agreement we couldn't start shooting until 7.30pm. Sure enough a few birds showed themselves before

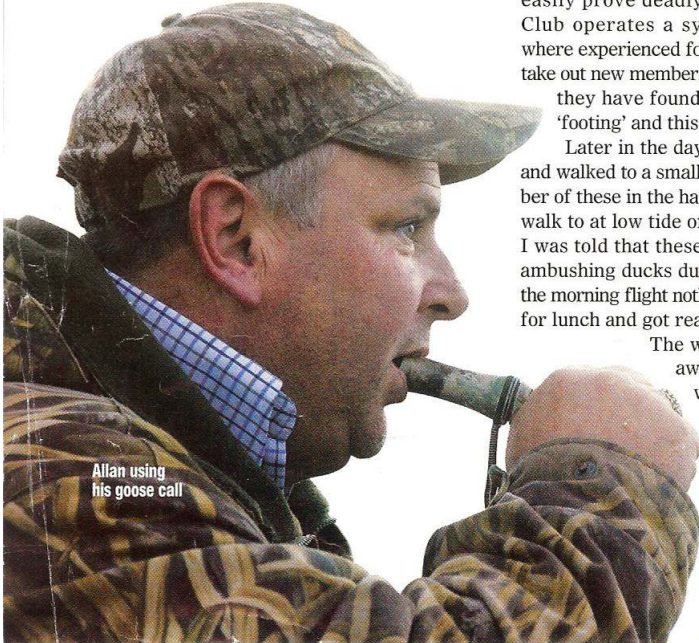
the deadline. Just as the sun started to set a pair of mallard whipped across the darkening sky and Clive dropped one. Without hesitation Tolley leaped into the rising tide and swam out in the freezing cold water. She found her bird and brought it back to Clive. Not bad considering she is 11 years old and had to have major surgery only a couple of years ago, leaving her with



Tolley & Tansey, Clive's two golden retrievers

a limited blood supply in her left leg. Shortly afterwards a pair of teal came screaming over us and I took a shot and missed. Did it matter? Not one bit – in truth I was too busy enjoying the sunset!

As I travelled back up the motorway I had plenty of time to contemplate my day. It had been a wonderful experience and one that I am already planning to repeat. The fact that we only had a couple of birds really didn't matter. What did matter was that I had spent another day in the countryside with some interesting people and first class gundogs – perfect! My thanks must go to all the members of Langstone Wildfowling who took the time to show me their sport. ●



Allan using his goose call