

Pushing the boat out

Going 'fowling by boat may be more civilised and less effort than walking, but it doesn't always turn out to be the dry, easy option, as **Nick Horten** has discovered



Using a boat it is possible to reach the most amazing 'fowling spots, but it doesn't always work out that way

For many of us, wildfowling is an essentially pedestrian activity. Park the car as close to one's favourite fighting spot as possible and from there on in, it's Shanks's pony. If you're very lucky you won't have to hoof it for more than a few hundred yards. But in some places you know that when you quit the soporific warmth of the car two hours before sunrise on a rain-and-gale-lashed December morning, what inevitably follows is the delight of a five-mile, head-down, teeth-gritted, forced march. Worse still, if the mad keen youngster in the group gets to the front of the line, the pace is likely to end up approaching something the light infantry would be proud of.

Which is why, as I get older, I am more than pleased that most of my 'fowling is accessed by boat — far more civilised than walking and much less effort. Though, not without its own particular brand of risk — you never heard of anyone drowning on a footpath, but if one ends up with one's heart pounding in one's chest, it is more likely to be through fear of sinking than exertion.

Reflecting on past boating adventures brings

a whole host of images to mind. Landing in near horizontal rain on the shingle beach of the furthest island in the harbour in a 14ft dory, captained by the redoubtable Welshman Mike. Tough, dour and dedicated is our Mike, not the sort to be put off by bad weather. The wind direction on this particular day meant that the anchor had to be heaved well offshore to

“I've shot in a three-quarter-length jacket before,” said Welshman Mike, “but never in three quarters of a jacket”

keep the boat from blowing back on to the beach. Having unloaded the dogs, guns and decoys, Mike picked up the heavy anchor and gave it an almighty heave seaward. Unbeknown to him though, one of the anchor flukes had caught in the pocket of his jacket and as the heavy, galvanised ground hook flew from his

hands it was accompanied by a dramatic ripping sound. Firmly snagged on the anchor, the entire front left-hand panel of his coat sailed through the air and disappeared beneath the waves.

“Bugger,” said Mike stoically. “I've shot in a three-quarter-length jacket before, but never in three quarters of a jacket.”

It would be nice to report that the fortitude he displayed by not packing up and going home immediately was rewarded by a memorable flight. Real life, however, just isn't like that. After six hours of sitting in a wet and muddy hole, I shot a single teal, while Mike's rain-induced chill later developed into severe bronchitis.

That is the problem with boats — even when one arrives safely at one's destination, events can still conspire together to prevent you from getting the gun out of its slip.

I do not know if this is universal, but in my neck of the woods it is an unwritten rule that the owner of the boat attends to the anchoring. That way, if something untoward happens and the boat goes adrift, friendships are not strained to breaking point. Misunderstandings, however,

can still arise, especially when the boat is jointly owned. Our wet Welshman Mike co-owned the dory with Danny in an inshore netting venture.

During the wildfowling season the dory's prodigious load-carrying capacity made it the ideal access boat. With a 45hp outboard, it flew across the water even after having swallowed four fowlers, two dogs, four guns and 70 decoys. I shot so often with Mike and Danny that launching and loading the boat from the slipway in the icy, pre-dawn darkness and landing and unloading at our destination became something we could almost do in our sleep. It was on one of those early-morning trips, when all of us were more asleep than awake, that Mike engineered another of his compelling reasons to return home duck-less.

Having landed and unloaded with the well-oiled speed and stealth of a commando raiding party, I was sorting the mountain of decoy bags on the beach when I heard a commotion coming from the boat. It appeared that Mike was just pushing the dory offshore to lay at anchor when Danny suddenly said, "I hope you've tied the anchor rope to the boat because I haven't".

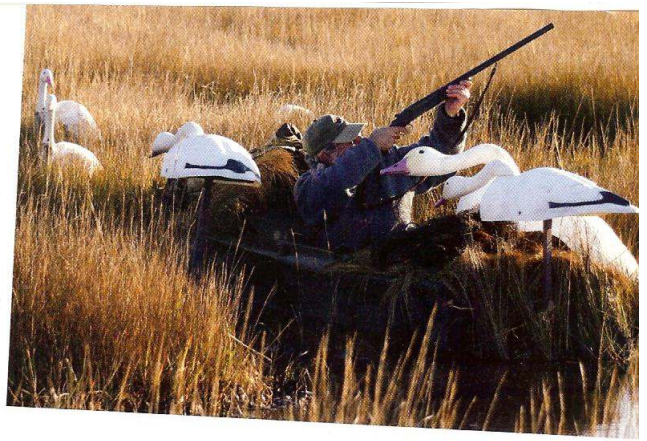
Mike's reaction was instantaneous. He leapt forward a couple of paces and lunged at the boat's painter, which he missed by a hair's

► **Boats can be very useful for transporting heavy decoys**

breadth. But on the steeply sloping beach he was already over the top of his thigh boots. With a salmon-like leap, by now up to his waist, he succeeded in grabbing hold of the square bow of the dory from which he hung momentarily, gasping at the shock of the cold water.

With his elbow over the front gunnel, Mike was clear of the water from the waist up, so, despite having removed his life jacket when we landed, he was not in immediate danger of drowning. But as he drifted further offshore we realised that, with his long boots full of water, he was having great difficulty in hauling himself aboard. By now, suspended over water more than 20ft deep, Mike was in real trouble. By immersing himself deeper in the water and lifting his right leg, Mike was able to drain his boot and hook his leg over the gunnel. Gathering his strength for a moment, he gave a superhuman heave and rolled over the gunnel and into the boat.

Once aboard he drained his boots and



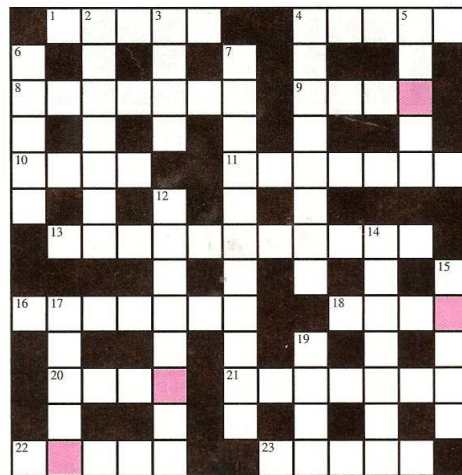
propelled the boat back to the beach where he tied on the anchor rope with a theatrical flourish. Danny in the meantime had shouldered his sack of decoys and his gunslip and was walking off towards his favourite spot on the other side of the island. Mike thought that, in view of his dampness, going home might be more appropriate.

Though we were grateful to the wet Welshman for having saved the rather expensive boat and engine, and the unpleasant prospect of a very long and arduous walk back to dry land across miles of treacherous mudflats, we resolved that next time out we would leave him at home. Or, God forbid, we would walk. At least that way we would actually get some shooting! ■

Crossword – 639

ACROSS

- 1 Shop inventory that includes a Monte Carlo gun part, perhaps (5)
- 4 The non-toxic lead sounds like a bargain buy! (5)
- 8 This downfall is all at sea (3,4)
- 9 Enjoy literature, so to speak, about the bunting bird (4)
- 10 The untainted Gold of a Gamebore cartridge (4)
- 11 Wounded birds escaping on foot from the athletes (7)
- 13 A dustman jets off to make them by changing a scope's windage, for example (11, anag)
- 16 A dog we might call "Cocker" (7)
- 18 Bird often following a turtle (4)
- 20 Small coarse fish caught by the head of the Roman Catholic church (4)
- 21 A pilot's escape seat reveals the cartridge remover (7)
- 22 Agricultural victims of a pigeon raid (5)
- 23 Gun safety feature seen in the playground? (5)



DOWN

- 2 Loomed like a fatally hit bird hovering (7)
- 3 Ammunition holder that may deliver a sharp blow around the ear (4)
- 4 The spaniel will leap in front of the Queen (8)
- 5 Duck from the deer I spooked (5, anag)

- 6 Loses footing where coursing greyhounds are released (5)
- 7 A stag-hunter should wear one (11)
- 12 The line of work in which a group of ferrets are involved? (8)
- 14 How a horse possibly paced itself (7)
- 15 "Blue" terrier from an Irish County (5)
- 17 This sand bird is a real musician! (5)
- 19 Is this duck a bit stealthy? (4)

SOLUTION TO 637, 3 June

ACROSS: 5. *Wisp* 7. *Arctic char* 8. *Covert* 9. *Pigeon* 10. *Teams* 11. *Beaters* 14. *Estates* 16. *Black* 19. *Woodie* 21. *Dunlin* 22. *All-weather* 23. *Rein*

Prize word: **WHITE**

DOWN: 1. *Brooders* 2. *Stream* 3. *Scott* 4. *Whippet* 5. *Wright* 6. *Sako* 12. *Receiver* 13. *Benelli* 15. *And-tan* 17. *Length* 18. *Adder* 20. *Ouse*

Winner: **MRS S. A. JAMES**, of Norwich, Norfolk

CROSSWORD

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