

Camo chameleon

His statistics prove that wearing camouflage on the foreshore may not lead to a bigger bag, but **Nick Horton** is not quite ready to reach for his Day-Glo jacket

The need to complete a bag return at the end of each day's shooting is now a fact of life for many coastal 'fowlers. Necessary chore that they are, is it likely that information gleaned about such disparate facts as shooting locations, species taken and the number of shots fired can tell us anything useful about what we should wear when wildfowling?

In 1979, my 'fowling club decided that its best long-term interests would be served by developing what was, in those far off days, a bag return system of unrivalled thoroughness. Almost 25 years ago, the concept of getting every individual in a 'fowling club to accurately and honestly record every bird they shot was pretty radical. Nonetheless, the management committee of the day set about the task with enthusiasm, and within a few seasons it had achieved its goal.

Recognising a useful regulating tool when they saw one, club managers, to their eternal credit, went far beyond the collection of a simple end-of-season total of birds taken. They quickly devised a user-friendly yet effective return form that enabled the collection and extraction of vast amounts of data about the nuts and bolts of 'fowling.

The club bag return, or Quarry Harvest Statistics (QHS), as I try to remember to call them in an effort to raise their status, is a vital tool in the promotion of the sport. The Langstone Wildfowling Association has what is probably the longest running and most comprehensive QHS scheme of any club in the country, so you won't mind if I call myself an expert on bag returns.

Much of the data that can be gleaned from QHS is fairly obvious, but hidden away among the figures is the shadowy outline, the merest suggestion of some other information—I hesitate to call it fact—about 'fowling. And yes, I know that an ex is a has-been, and a spurt is a drip under pressure.

So what has all this got to do with the clothing one wears when 'fowling? Many years ago when I started shooting, the only available outer garment suitable for the marsh was made from waxed cotton—19th-century technology whereby an essentially porous material is smeared with grease in a largely futile attempt to render it water-resistant. When cold and wet, waxed-cotton jackets stiffen to such an extent that they can affect gun mounting, and holes appear in the fabric at friction points. They require constant

maintenance and anyone who has had to walk any distance in wet but mild weather can testify to the fact that they most certainly do not "breathe".

When alternatives became available, I could not wait to inflict my old waxed-cotton jacket upon an impecunious beginner, so that he might better understand how a 'fowler needs to suffer for his sport. But worst of all was the fact that they were all manufactured in a shade of dark brown that did not blend in with any particular habitat. Scanning the marsh with a pair of binoculars would quickly reveal the crouching gunner as a dark brown lump that stuck out like a sore thumb. I really don't like waxed-cotton jackets. And yet, despite their totally unsuitable colour, wearers still bagged their fair share of duck, geese and waders.

Next on the scene were the first generation of the modern "breathable" waterproofs. Lightweight, truly water-resistant and low maintenance, many of these came in a shade

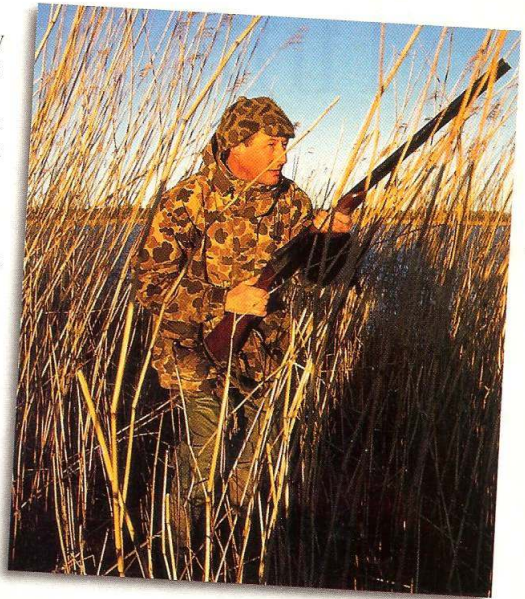
"I have long suspected that it is the wearer of modern camouflage clothing who is deceived, rather than the quarry"

of bottle green that provided even less concealment than their wax-smeared predecessors. Yet we wore them, kept dry, "breathed" and still shot duck and geese.

Gradually, the colour of waterproof clothing improved, to the human eye at least, until we reach today, when practically every 'fowler considers himself ill-equipped unless covered from head to toe in the latest photo-realistic camouflage pattern. I'm happy to admit that I am the proud wearer of a photo-realistic camouflage jacket, but I harbour no illusions that the concealment suggested by its pattern renders me more likely to bag my quarry. I wear it simply because it is a well-made, well-cut and waterproof shooting coat.

It would be outrageous to state outright that modern photo-realistic camouflage confers no real advantage to the wearer, but I am tempted to say something very much like that. I'll even take a stab at proving it. With access to almost 25 years' worth of information gleaned from the club's QHS, I set about investigating something that I and other commentators on the sport have long suspected that it is the wearer of modern camouflage clothing who is deceived, rather than the quarry.

◀ **Opposite page: now you see him, now you don't**
 ◀ **Quality clothes they are, but invisible?**



▲ **Who can say if camouflage on the foreshore makes any difference to the size of the bag?**

Taking a sample from the QHS of the keenest and most experienced 'fowlers, I selected individuals whose membership spanned the heyday of the majority of differing types and colours of shooting topcoat. With their co-operation and the use of their shooting diaries and photo albums, together we tied down the years in which they shot wearing a specific coat. This information was then cross-referred to the records of their bag for that season and their kill-to-cartridge ratio.

This is a bit of an over-simplification of the methodology, and, yes, it is open to criticism. But what it should have revealed is a measurable difference in the overall bag between a gunner wearing a coat that to human eyes at least afforded little or no camouflage, and one that purported, in the same human estimation, to provide considerable concealment. Depending on your viewpoint, you will be either disappointed or like me not surprised, to learn that, statistically speaking, the colour of your jacket appears to bear absolutely no relationship whatsoever to one's overall bag. That being the case, I am determined to prove my theory beyond doubt by carrying out an entire season's shoulder gunning wearing a fluorescent orange jacket and looking more like a road mender than a reedbed. Statistically speaking, it should make no difference to the amount I shoot. But it won't be this season. I know I'm right and that I should have the courage of my convictions, but the psychological step is just too big! ■

Nick Horten is chairman of Langstone Wildfowling Association.

TOP: P. QUAGLIANA

