

Grumpy old man

Dumb 'fowlers are winding up an ageing **Nick Horten** no end. And then there's the aching joints and expanding waistline to contend with. Still, every cloud...

There is no getting away from it — I'm getting old. But instead of growing old gracefully and acquiring the sort of serene patience and wisdom that comes to some with advancing years, I find that my tolerance of fools grows less by the day. If you're the wrong side of 50 do you also have to fight off the overpowering desire to slap the more idiot of your acquaintances around the back of their heads in order to focus their woolly minds? Or is it just me?

I recently had to thrust my hands deep in my pockets, bite my tongue and walk away from a 'fowling companion who, in a tearing rush to set out the decoys — my decoys — instead of taking them out a few at a time to prevent the anchor lines from tangling, simply inverted the sack and vigorously shook out its 30 teal decoys. With 9ft of lead-weighted monofilament attached to each, he spent the next two hours sorting out the knots and tangles in more than 270ft of anchor line. I let him get on with it and went for a walk.

When shooting from the islands in the harbour, I ensure that the boat lays well offshore by using a double-anchor rig. A light mud-anchor keeps the boat at the end of the main rope while a much heavier anchor secures the whole lot to the island. The big anchor came from a 25ft yacht so it holds my 13ft dinghy without too much bother. So there we are, lightly built fibreglass boat, ruddy great steel anchor. At the end of the day I asked the other bloke to go and get the main anchor. He returns with the anchor and, before I can stop him, he literally and unthinkingly hurls it into the boat. By opening the outboard throttle wide and moving all the weight off-centre towards the stern, we manage to crab our way back to the slip without taking in too much water through the gaping crack in the hull. I don't speak to him on the way back and he still believes that the sharp smack to the back of his head with an oar ("Oops, sorry!"), as I prepared to row the last few yards in the shallows, was an accident.

What is it about thigh boots and novice wildfowlers? Once upon a time, having given the beginner careful instruction on how to walk on soft mud, I would affect real concern when they contrived to walk out of their boots at the first opportunity. I would even provide a shoulder to



lean on while the mud-caked gunner struggled to squelch his way back into a mud-filled boot. They still get the instruction and the shoulder to lean on — it's just that I now take my time in coming to their rescue. Cruel, I know, but I'm getting too old to worry about their feelings and you must admit, watching somebody flounder about barefoot in freezing mud can be hilariously funny.

“Do you have to fight off the desire to slap the more idiot of your companions around the back of the head in order to focus their woolly minds?”

And what, I ask you, is happening to my body? Before I retired I could still do up the uniform tunic I was issued with almost 25 years before and all my shooting togs, at best, were sized large. Nowadays, a top coat in XXL is a snug fit and my cartridge belt has holes punched in it right to the very end of the strap. I also discovered the hard way that I needed reading glasses, scrambling about on my knees for 30 minutes with the combination lock to our duck-marsh gate 3in from my eyeballs.

There doesn't seem to be too much wrong with my circulation but the joints are definitely showing signs of wear and tear. Once upon a time I could row or scull a punt for hours. Now the arthritis in my elbows means I can propel it for about a mile, after which the level of discomfort increases in direct proportion to every extra 100 yards.

One of the more curious advantages of becoming a miserable old git is that, while my patience with people rapidly diminishes, so my patience with dogs seems to grow. Long gone is the young man's headlong rush to get the puppy on to retrieving while skimping on the more fundamental training to be replaced by a more thorough and laid-back approach, concentrating on the essentials of steadiness and control.

Still, there's no point in getting longer in the tooth without getting a bit crafty. Picture two bulls in a field, one old, one young. "Look!" says the younger bull. "The farmer has left the gate open, let's run down the road to that field of cows and serve one of them." "No," says the older bull. "Let's walk down there and serve them all!"

So if, like me, you're getting fat and going bald. If your eyesight is failing and your joints ache, look on the bright side — you're still alive! The shooting season is fast approaching and life's gate is open. Let's go for a walk. ■