

Welcome to the club

Gone are the days when new members were ridiculed and bullied as part of their initiation to wildfowling. **Nick Horten** explains the civilised new etiquette

For the old hands among the longshore gunning community, the start of a new season is a time of restrained enthusiasm tempered with a familiarity that brings with it a warm, comfortable feeling. The 'fowler is in his element. His gear is tried, tested and trusted; his choice of non-toxic shot works for him; his season is planned, and he knows where and when to go, and what to expect when he gets there.

So spare a thought for a small section of the shooting community to whom none of the above applies. Many of this year's crop of probationary recruits to wildfowling face the unfolding season with a great enthusiasm, darkly tainted with a hefty dose of trepidation. Should they buy thigh boots or chest waders? How do the tides work? What sort of gun is best suited to the marsh? What duck is that? Will my mentor's Chesapeake Bay Retriever eat my springer spaniel or simply maim it? The list is endless, and the learning curve almost vertical.

But times have changed, and most wildfowling clubs now try to make the transition from ignorant landlubbing novice to web-footed denizen of the saltmarsh as painless as possible. Recruiting people to the sport of wildfowling is the easy part. The real knack lies in keeping them. So if, as a new 'fowler, you are not receiving the customer care that you consider your due, and you are not being nurtured by your new club, draw this fact to the attention of the committee and get them to sort it out.

KEITH REYNOLDS

Did I really use the word "nurture" in a legitimate context about that last bastion of masculine tradition, the coastal wildfowling club? Goodness gracious, how times have changed. It is rumoured that, in some clubs, one can even express an opinion at the annual general meeting — having been a member for marginally less than 15 years — without some ancient gunner commenting loudly, "Bugger, what do 'ee know? Only been in the club for five minutes."

In the bad old days, when probationary members were considered to be expendable, they were thrown in at the deep end, where they sank or swam. Sometimes quite literally. Traditionally, keen newcomers could always be used to carry heavy weights to inaccessible corners of the marsh. Consider the following tale from a nameless correspondent on the Dee.

"We had this new bloke who was desperately keen. He kept pestering me to take him out to the far edge of the saltmarsh with the decoys.



Blow it, I thought — kill or cure. So I stuffed as many decoys as I could into the sack. God, he could barely lift it. I had previously explained to him that since he had chest waders and I didn't, he would have to wade the last creek, drop off the decks, come back, and give me a piggyback across. He agreed to this readily enough, and we set off with him bent double under the weight of the bag.

"As he waded across the final creek, with me on his back, he started to lose his footing in the mud and stumbled forward. He sank lower in the water, so I climbed higher up his back, ending up kneeling on his shoulders.

"We were almost at the far bank when his feet went out from underneath him altogether. Very quickly, I put one foot on his shoulders and the other on his head, which I pushed right under the water as I stepped neatly onto the bank without even getting my boots wet. Useful things new members."

This sort of thing wouldn't happen today. Well, not often anyway. A sense of humour is definitely an asset for the would-be wildfowler.

It might be worth pointing out to this season's new recruits that they are entering a world where, to many accomplished fowlers, their club and its marshes are the focal point of their lives.

Many will have fought long and hard to retain the shooting you are about to enjoy, and any advice they offer should be heeded. The world of wildfowling, despite my "nurturing", still contains enough "characters" to make life unexpectedly interesting.

The following cautionary tale, told by a long-standing member of an east-coast club, illustrates perfectly how not to behave in your first season.

"I had been asked to take out a new member, so I met this chap on the shore for morning flight. He seemed decent enough, but his attitude was that he had paid his money and he was going to fire off his gun regardless. It was late in the season, and the wigeon poured over the sea wall. Unfortunately, none

were closer than two gunshots high, but this bloke gave both barrels to everything that hove into sight.

I asked him not to keep shooting. I explained that they were out of range, and that if he did connect it would only wound the bird. I noticed, incidentally, that he was using a very nice English sidelock. It wasn't my choice for the marsh, but he seemed to have a bob or two.

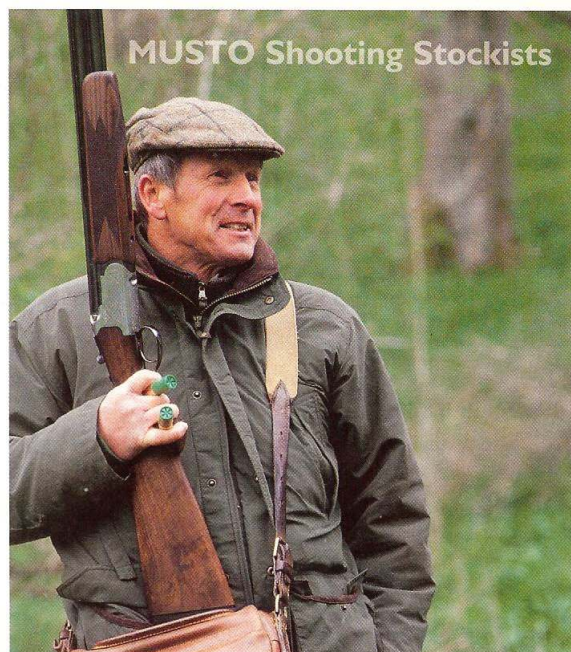
"It didn't take long for my patience to run out, and I thought how he really needed a lesson in range judging. I walked over to him

"He sank lower in the water, so I climbed higher up his back, ending up on his shoulders"

and asked if I could have a look at his gun. As I examined it, it 'accidentally' slipped from my hands and fell into the mud. I looked him straight in the eye as I dropped it. He wasn't going to get stropky, even though his face went white. So, as I went to pick it up, I 'accidentally' trod it further into the mud. 'Oops, sorry.' I fished it out, apologising profusely, and scraped off the worst of the mud. Lord, it was a mess. So I said to him, 'Before I accidentally dropped your gun, what were we saying about those wigeon?' Sheepishly, he replied, 'That they were too high.'

Congratulations, and good luck to those of you who have just taken your first tentative steps in the fascinating and addictive world of wildfowling, the pity being that, relatively speaking, there are so few of you. It has never been easier to go 'fowling — gone are the 10-year waiting lists, and gone are many of the hoops through which newcomers to the sport once had to jump. In fact, many clubs keep their books open for much longer than was previously the case, and it may not be too late to join.

With a little effort, you too could become one of shooting's elite, and, like me, smugly look down your nose at those outside the Brotherhood of the Coast. ■



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