

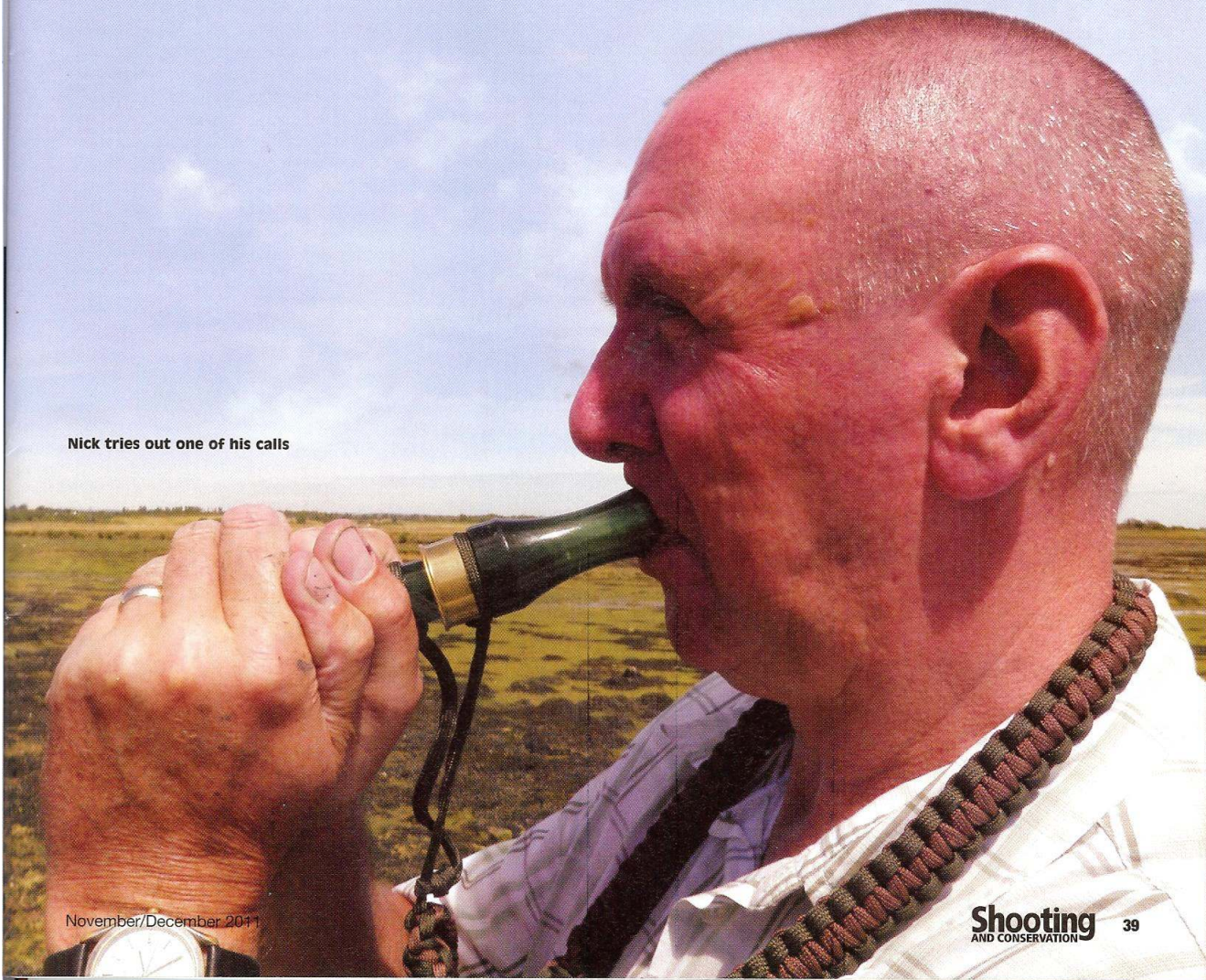
CALLING

all ducks



NICK HORTEN explains how duck and goose calls have become a valuable part of the British wildfowler's kit since they were introduced from America.

Nick tries out one of his calls



November/December 2011

Shooting
AND CONSERVATION 39

I first became interested in duck and goose calling way back in the late 1970s when I bought a trio of cut-price American 'waterfowling' books at a game fair. Calling is an exclusively American development of the wildfowler's art which has no UK historical equivalent.

Hawker makes no mention of it in the 1830s and neither does any other British author until the arrival of imported American calls in this country in the 1930s, when BASC's founding father Stanley Duncan begins to refer to them.

Almost every picture of a 'duck hunter' in those three books showed a chap not only knee-deep in dead ducks but, without fail, wearing a duck and goose call on a lanyard around his neck. Chapter after chapter extolled the virtues of calling - so how could it be that something so effective on one side of the pond was virtually unheard of on the other?

Now, I'm no Yankophile but I know a good idea when I hear one and so, apparently, do many other folk. Today, thanks to the internet, good quality, excellent value American-sourced wildfowling kit is the norm on most British coastal marshes.

But this is a fairly recent phenomenon and in the pre-internet 1970s things were very different.

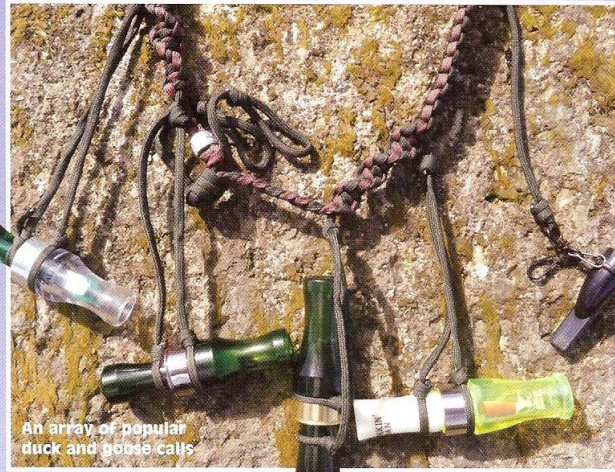
My first venture into calling, like a lot of British fowlers, was with a wooden Olt duck call, followed later by a plastic Olt Canada goose flute. Unbeknown to me,

is quite a bit of technique to be mastered with the blowing of a duck call of any sort and the problem in the '80s was, where did you acquire that knowledge? True, instructional records at first, then audio tapes, much later video tapes and finally CDs were available, but almost exclusively these had to be obtained on special order from the States since much of this instructional material was not even on sale in the UK.

So, unsurprisingly, my first attempts all those years ago on a duck call sounded more like Donald Duck than a mallard, and I know from some of the caterwauling and squawking I've heard around the foreshore that I'm not alone in suffering from a lack of instruction.

Fast-forward then to the 21st century and the internet is positively heaving with duck and goose calling instruction from dedicated websites, call manufacturers' websites and the ubiquitous YouTube.

Dusting off my old Olt duck call I went trawling on the internet for advice on how to use it. The first thing I discovered was that my wooden call was now seriously outdated, having been replaced by smaller, louder, more efficient plastic calls. These are made



An array of popular duck and goose calls

both were already technically obsolete by the early 1980s and the Olt company has now ceased trading. But the real question, of course was, did they work? The goose flute was simple enough to master and more than a few Canadas were enticed to the roasting pan with the smoky, sonorous honk of the flute.

The duck call was a bit different. There



from polycarbonate at the bottom end of the price scale to acrylic at the top end.

With a long standing interest in calling and a strong desire to put its efficiency to the test I settled on a couple of the products of US maker Buck Gardner whose range of calls is now readily available in the UK or direct from his website. Take it from me that his products represent technical excellence



at a very competitive price. Other makes of call are also available.

Armed now with some decent calls I put in a few months' worth of off-season practice in front of the computer, in particular following the advice given by Buck on his YouTube series "*Call Orientation*," something much enjoyed by the rest of the family - Not! I started the new season with rekindled calling interest and a new found confidence.

Now I'm not going to try and kid you that calling works every time you do a Dr Doolittle by talking to the birds. It doesn't. But when it does work the results can be spectacular.

Six late evening mallard flash over the sea wall from behind and fly out to sea. A series of, at first pleading, and then increasingly demanding come-back calls finally prove irresistible to the birds who turn and fly back towards the sound of my Buck Gardner 'Double Nasty 2' (I

don't make up the names!) the volume of which is quickly turned down to the occasional contented quack interspersed with a feeding chatter. I'm not using decoys but in the half-light the sound works its magic and the birds are completely deceived. Three fall to the Supernova and I am elated at my success.

That scenario was repeated often enough during the season with the ducks for me to be able to promise you that, once mastered, duck calling will put more birds in your bag. Especially effective when combined with a spread of decoys, the mallard call will work on most dabbling ducks.

Duck calls are pretty much of a muchness in design terms but goose calls are a little more complicated. All the goose calls originate in the US with most being intended to imitate either the Canada goose or the snow goose. First we have the resonant chamber call, simplest of all the calls. It is restricted to a basic 'honk' and, when retuned, is the starting point for our own domestically available greylag and pinkfoot calls. Next up is the flute, a Canada goose call with a distinctive hollow resonance to its note that is relatively easy to master.

Finally, we have the short-reed goose call. In skilled hands it can sound exactly like a real Canada with a tremendous

tonal and volume range. A design icon used at some point by a great many American waterfowlers is the Buck Gardner Canada Hammer 2 short-reed goose call. Once mastered it is truly deadly on the big black and white geese and can even be retuned to mimic the greylag.

Should you decide to give duck and goose calling a go for yourself there are a few ground rules of which you should be aware.

If the birds are flying straight at you then keep quiet. At these times calling is superfluous. Indeed, calling is only likely



to draw attention to your hiding place and actually hinder your chances.

Don't just call for the sake of it. There are few things more annoying on the foreshore than a novice squawking away on a call when there is not a bird in sight.

Do your practising away from the marsh and try not to inflict it upon other fowlers until you have reached at least a basic level of proficiency. Otherwise that red-faced, very annoyed-looking gunner stomping across the marsh towards you might be about to shove your call where you will be hard pressed to get any sound from it at all, let alone that of a duck!

See Nick in action
with his calls at
www.bascfilms.org.uk

