



# In the pinks

When Len Pycroft spotted a skein of pinkfeet geese winging their way across Chichester Harbour, he hoped to bag a few with his punt-gun. Nick Horten recounts the old wildfowler's wonderful tale

**O**F ALL the quarry geese, my personal favourite is the diminutive whitefront. Not that I've ever bagged one, but I have spent some memorable days on the shores of the Severn hoping that, against all the odds, one might be foolish enough to fly over me. Alas, it has not happened yet, though I can claim some modest success against the next bird on my list of favourite quarry species – the pinkfoot.

While the call of the whitefront and pinkfoot is the essence of fowling, the coarse “*Ung-ung*” of the greylag has an almost farmyard quality to it

that, for me, never quite touches the same nerve. Greylag fail the “spine-tingling” test, but beggars can't be choosers. I've enjoyed many an exiting encounter with them.

Living near the coast on the border between Hampshire and Sussex, encounters with grey geese of any description are few and far between – which is one of the penalties of living too far south. This part of the coast is a stronghold of the ubiquitous brent goose, which at least means that the winter skies are not completely devoid of the sight and sound of geese – even if they are undisciplined cronking mobs of protected black geese

rather than serried chevrons of shootable greys.

This dearth of grey geese in the harbours of the eastern Solent – you could count the number of fowlers who have shot a grey goose locally in the past 20 years on the fingers of one hand – may be a comparatively recent phenomenon. Perhaps the lack of refuge areas further up-country and hard weather until the mid-1950s led to a distribution pattern, particularly of pinkfeet, that you simply don't see any more.

What I did find, after speaking to the older gunners on this stretch of shore, was that many of them had shot grey geese with punt-guns and shoulder guns until about 1955. They never shot the geese in large numbers, but they shot them often enough for the novelty to have worn off.

Many years ago, I asked the late Len Pycroft to describe his most memorable punt-gun shot. I was surprised when, after taking another draw on his cigarette and another sip of whisky, he paused for a moment and instead of talking about wigeon or brent said, “Pinkfeet”. Easing his body forward in the armchair, he stared into the coal fire for a moment as if marshalling his thoughts.

“It must have been about 1938,” he said. “I was off Pilsea Sands in Chichester Harbour late in the season. It was bloody freezing and there was a lot





of wigeon about. I'd seen about a dozen of them pitch in the distance, so I laid down and started to scull into them."

As he spoke, he stared into the embers and his right arm unconsciously mimed the rhythmic backwards-and-forward action of the sculling oar. "I used to like to handle the big gun," he explained, "and I got pretty good at taking flying shots, if I say so myself. Lots of people asked me what the secret was, but I couldn't tell you. It was just a sort of knack I acquired over the years. I used to sit the big gun much further back in the crutch than was usual, which of course altered the point of aim for sitting shots, but it meant I could wave the muzzle about like a shoulder gun with minimal pressure on the stock."

Len rose stiffly and shuffled across the lounge in slipped feet to the drinks cabinet to pour two more heavy-handed tots of whisky. Returning to his armchair, he lit another cigarette. As he spoke, the intervening 50 years seemed to fall away and his movements became quicker and more precise.

Sculling his armchair, his eyes alight with excitement, he said, "I was just getting onto the wigeon when I saw this movement out of the

corner of my eye. At first I thought it was a bunch of brent flying from right to left and set to pass in front of me. That would have done me nicely, but when I looked closer I could see they were far too big to be brent. Blimey, I thought. Greys. They flew on without making a single sound until they got about 200 yards away when I could see that it was seven pinkfeet."

Len reached out his left arm and cupped his thick-fingered, calloused hand on top of the short

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stock of his imaginary punt-gun. "Trouble was," he admitted, "the punt was at a bit of an angle to their line of flight, so I gave an almighty great heave on the sculling oar to put me at right angles with 'em, countered the stroke to stop the punt dead in the water and then let go of the oar.

"Them geese flew past about 90 yards out and 30ft up. I thought I might get three or four if I was lucky, so I pushed the stock down almost to the floor and swung the gun right through them,

right out over the side of the foredeck and pulled off at 'em. *Boom!*"

Oblivious to my company, Len deftly repeated the complex series of actions he had described before relaxing back in his armchair, once more exhausted from the effort of sculling the punt and levering a 9ft-long, 120lb punt-gun. Fortified by a great gulp of whisky, he said, "Let me give you a tip. If you ever take a flying shot, remember to keep the pressure on the stock after you've fired.

I see a bloke in Langstone once pull off at some wigeon with the gun way off over the side of the punt. He got so excited he just let it drop. Bloody gun slid right over the side. Lucky for him the water was only about 1ft deep.

"As to the geese," he added wistfully, "I've never seen anything like it before. As the shot reached them they must have strung out in a perfect line. Remember, these were big birds a good way off.

"Starting with the nearest bird first, they dropped out one by one, stone dead, in quick succession right along the line. All seven of them. Over the years I must have fired hundreds of shots with the punt-gun, but I remember that one as if it was yesterday." ■

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