



COAST TO COAST



Postage-stamp paradise

Kate Gatacre joins Nick Horten at Langstone Harbour, a tiny enclave on the south coast, where twitchers and fowlers enjoy the mutual benefits of their passions

When I visited the Langstone and District Wildfowling and Conservation Association (LADWACA), for a morning flight with its chairman Nick Horten, I was somewhat surprised that we wouldn't be meeting until 6.30. "We have restrictions on the times we shoot," was his explanation, "I'll tell you about it when we meet." That wasn't the only restriction we could expect. Nick warned that the weather forecast wasn't doing us any favours either, with

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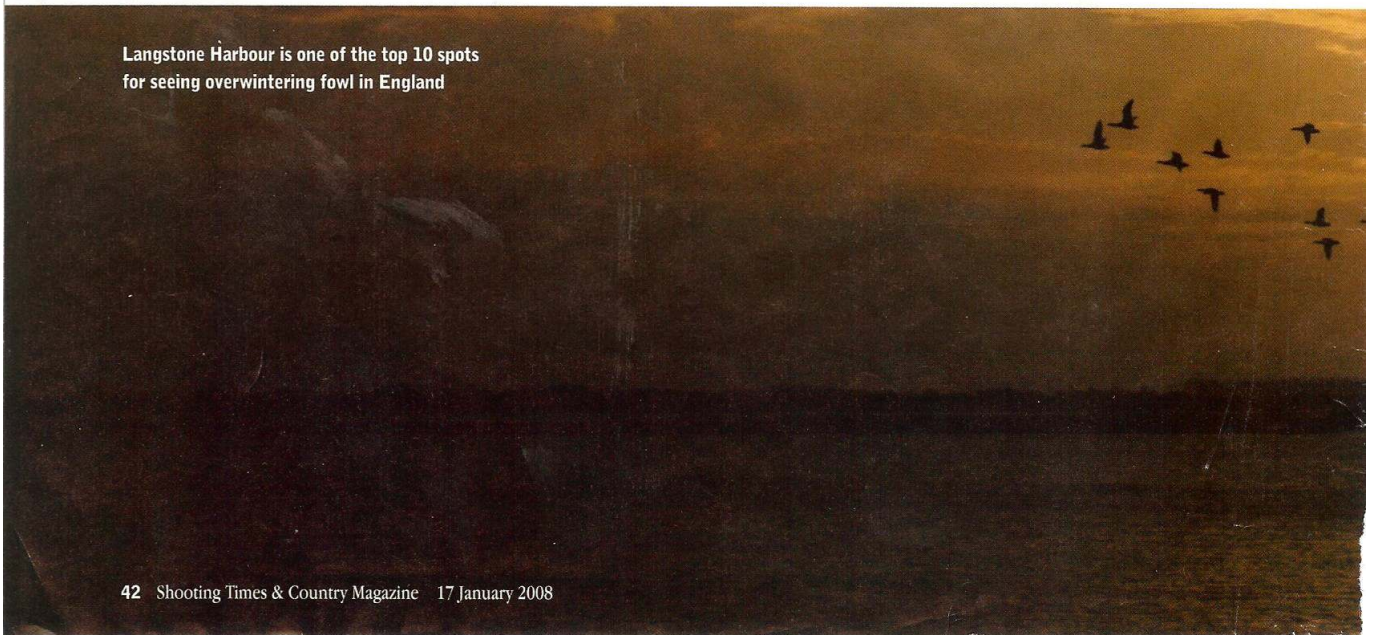
blue skies in the offing for the day ahead.

Tucked between Portsmouth and Chichester harbours, Langstone may be overshadowed by the M27 motorway, but this does not seem to have deterred either fowlers or their quarry, not to mention myriad other coastal bird species. As I arrived, Nick was unlocking a gate, "It is the association board's privilege to drive up here — the rest must walk." I followed him through and we drove towards the sea wall. After another gate and more

unlocking, we stopped as the road narrowed to become a footpath towards the harbour. Nick's dog, a Chesapeake retriever named Willow, jumped out of the van and came barking towards me. "She can be a bit protective — Willow's never that friendly to strangers, but she won't do anything," he reassured me.

Even in the dark, I could see the shelter given by the natural harbour, though Nick explained that Langstone had always been too enclosed and difficult to access for commercial

Langstone Harbour is one of the top 10 spots for seeing overwintering fowl in England





◀ Nick said, "You name the designation, and Langstone has it — this is one of the top 10 places for overwintering fowl in England. There are always twitchers about and they are looking for dunlin, black-tailed godwits and terns, to name but a few. There was a major twitch on when a Cetti's warbler was spotted, a bird that normally only breeds in southern Europe."

As the light increased, the islands in the harbour became visible. "They look deceptively close, but that furthest one is a good mile away. We keep down the foxes on the islands. They swim across during low tide and then plough through the nesting terns," Nick said. There are plenty of gulls nesting on the island too, "but they are big and gobby, so invariably the terns are the ones that suffer."

By now the sun had risen and shone across the water, outlining silhouettes of wigeon and Canadas as they made their way across the islands towards their daytime habitat. "See, I told you we'd have had a good flight on

the island. Next time, maybe." A head appeared on the sea wall, and Nick stood up to see who it was. A jogger — Willow, who took her guarding duties just as seriously as her retrieving, growled and barked at the man. A few minutes later and another figure could be seen approaching. This time it was a warden, but Nick decided it was time to call it a day. "There's no wind anyway, and now that people are starting to move, we are better off stopping," he said.

We put away our gear and Willow, by now well-acquainted, sat next to me. Scrambling up the sea wall, the scene behind us was revealed. The M27, from which a constant hum emerged, loomed large, but between us and it were marshy fields, over which the association never shoots. In the distance, an oyster dredger was starting its day. "It is near the end of their season now, and I'm always amazed that the seabed recovers so well from it here. This area was known as a Roman oyster bed, too." History obviously runs deep in Langstone Harbour. Nick told

me of the discovery of a Saxon ship, and that he had seen its wooden hull emerging from the mud, never thinking what it might be, and of an archeological dig finding a Bronze-Age pot. "Then there is the sea wall, which was built by French prisoners of war.

"I'll just show you how many birds there can be," Nick led the way along the wall to the west. As we rounded a corner, splashes filled to the brim with Brent, Canadas and wigeon were revealed. The wind had got up, and as we glanced back towards our position, we could see groups of fowl winging their way over our spot. "Typical," said Nick. I nodded in agreement, "It's always the way." However, the view to the west was spectacular, with the sun shining golden on the splashes and the cacophony of birds drowning out the sound of the motorway. ■

For more information about the Langstone and District Wildfowling and Conservation Association, visit www.LADWACA.com

MUD PATTEENS

The harbours of Portsmouth, Langstone and Chichester contain a particularly viscous brand of sediment. Many years ago those with business about the harbours — cocklers, bait-diggers, flight shooters and punt-gunners — perfected the design of their mud patten. The boards themselves are nothing revolutionary: 12in square, with rounded corners. The secret lies not so much in the board's dimensions, but in the positioning of the foot and the method of fastening. Two rope loops secured under the board with a figure-of-eight or stopper-knot provide the anchor points for the rope ties. Place the foot between, and parallel to, the fixed loops, with the toe level with the leading edge. Once fastened, it is possible to walk normally.



Nick Horten and Willow head for home in Langstone Harbour as twitchers and joggers start emerging





shipping, "Perfect for pirates and smugglers, though, and there used to be plenty of them in this place." We walked east along the sea wall and the little water there — the tide was set to start coming in — glistened silver in the pre-dawn glow. As we rounded a bend, Nick pointed out another sheltered spot. "That is where the wigeon normally sit — there are often as many as 400 or so there." I tried to catch a sound of them, but with the M27 whirring in the background, I couldn't hear any gabbling. "If I'd had the time, we could have gone to one of the islands. They are sure to fly over you there, but that means staying out for the tide. We may get a few over us, though," Nick said.

We came to the spot Nick thought would be best to wait at and clambered down the rough grass. There, just in the shelter of the sea wall, we found two sitting-sized rocks. The shoreline seemed to be covered in rubble. "It is all building rubble, so I've ruined a fair few pairs of waders here. Watch out for sharp bits of metal." Nick obviously came well-prepared for his fowling, as he opened his gamebag and pulled out a gardener's kneeler. "I recommend you get one of these — they only cost 99p and give you a much more comfortable time." Willow settled down beside him as Nick poured himself a cup of coffee from his flask and told me a little of the background of the association.

All the shore that the club shoots over is, amazingly enough, owned by the RSPB. The LADWACA started in 1956 and, when the land came up for sale in 1979, the landowner assumed that the association would not be able to afford to buy it. "Of course, we would have found a way," Nick said, "one member was even prepared to remortgage his house to pay for it, but by the time the landowner realised that, it

was too late." The first few years saw something of a stand-off between the two associations, but the RSPB soon realised that the LADWACA had a very proactive attitude to conservation and could help with all sorts of problems such as poachers and pests. "Let's face it, birdwatchers aren't interested when it comes to digging out ditches, building fences or getting their hands dirty," Nick commented. The two associations now enjoy an excellent relationship.

Unsurprisingly, this partnership comes with certain conditions and fowling is not as free and easy as it is in many other places in the UK. There are strict bag limits — now set at 10 birds a day. It used to be five, but the RSPB realised that the fowlers were not over-shooting and so allowed an increase. However, as Nick pointed out, in such a small area as Langstone, a restriction on numbers is no bad thing. There are also controls on shooting times — shooting should not start until it is light and should stop before dark. Despite Langstone being below the high-water mark, the club does not shoot the extra 20 days in February, either.

The light was increasing and the sickle moon fading, and we heard the *Weeooo* of wigeon on the move. "There, to your left," Nick whispered. Six wigeon, still just in front of me were heading to the west. I swung through and fired behind the birds, caught out by their speed. "They may start coming out in groups now, but with so little wind..." Nick left the last part of his sentence unsaid, but I knew what he meant.

I asked what the wigeon ate. "This is where spartina was first established in the UK and it affected this harbour by plugging it up with more mud than before. However, as it has a natural cycle, it is also the first area where the



▲ Nick always has calls with him and he recommends clearing them out before the flight

spartina is actually dying back, releasing the accumulated mud and allowing other species to flourish. There is plenty of *zostera*, which makes the wigeon taste really sweet. They only clip the fronds, but the Brent dig it up completely, and there are lots of them about," Nick explained. "At this time of year, the *zostera* is mostly gone and the wigeon eat *enteromorpha*, which gives them a less nice taste. If we get one, you'll need to add plenty of other flavours to make it more palatable," he said, hopefully.

I asked Nick what other quarry we would be likely to see. Canadas, teal and mallard among others for fowling — but what Langstone is really known for is its amazing variety of birdlife. ▶

