

WILDLIFE, both animals and birds, is always more obvious, seems tamer, and ventures nearer to the houses of humans in a prolonged spell of hard weather, in winter, than at any other time, and in this winter there certainly was every excuse to prove this. The obvious example of course is the robin so apparently tame each winter, a regular at the bird table, waiting to pick up the food even as one is putting it out and sometimes invading the house itself. Yet in spring, at the nesting time, this same robin is exceedingly unobtrusive and downright shy of humans.

This "tameness" or boldness is probably a combination of necessity, the driving force of hunger when one has to eat to survive, and the fact that village houses and gardens are usually in sheltered positions. Both food and shelter become of paramount importance in severe weather and animals and birds which have little reason to put any trust in the goodwill of man are, perforce, forced to risk it. I have already written of the redwing which became a regular visitor to our bird table and was eventually almost as bold as our robin. Other folk, too, in the Highlands in the snowy spell, had the thrill of watching this handsome member of the thrush family at their bird tables.

More dramatic was the flushing out of a large wildcat from the shrubs in a local garden. The cat sprang up the nearest tree which would undoubtedly have proved fatal to it, as it peered down from a comfortable crotch, in nine cases out of 10, for the immediate reaction to the appearance of a wildcat in the Highlands is, regrettably, to try to kill it. Luckily for the wildcat, in this case, the owner of the garden ran for a camera rather than a shotgun and the only gauntlet the cat had to run was the click of a camera shutter, before being left in peace. There are not many wildcats in this area and this sort of toleration is, I believe, the right attitude and I wish it were more widespread. It is much more admirable than the flamboyant boasting, in the local pub, of the character who has encountered a wildcat and has "courageously" killed it.

Feral or semi-feral house cats are quite another matter. I have little toleration for them. How often does one hear a proud owner say, "I hardly need to feed my pussy; she catches most of her own food"? How many people keep both a cat and a well-stocked bird-table, a contradiction if ever there was one? I found one such house pet, this winter, crouched demurely over the body of a mole, freshly killed. A minor mystery here was what this mole was doing above ground on a January morning when a spell of severe frost had the ground iron-hard.

On another occasion, this time after the thaw had arrived, I was talking to a neighbour when from a boggy patch by her garden (a patch overgrown by foot-high young rhododendrons) there erupted an apparition which seemed half bird, half animal. A good couple of feet above the rhododendrons the object separated into component parts while a puff of feathers floated away. The "parts" were then revealed as the house cat, momentarily frozen vertically upright, fore-feet and reaching claws now only clutching air, only air, and her intended prey, a woodcock, which flew flutteringly away just over our heads. Here was a bird, having managed to scrape through a long period of hard frost which had rendered its feeding areas impenetrable, almost to falling prey to the hunting instincts of a well-fed house cat.

I wonder just how many semi-starved birds, their reactions slowed just that little fatal bit by



FROM THE HIGHLANDS



Lea MacNally

privation, fall victim to these same hunting instincts of semi-feral house cats. Many more than to the true wildcat, even though it is killing to survive.

When I first came to Torridon it was to be told that stoats and weasels were rare and that any sightings were worth recording. I now know from my own observations that they are not so rare but rather so unobtrusive that one seldom sees them. In the severe weather of this winter they have been more obvious than in all the years I have been here. I wrote already of seeing a "winter" stoat, magnificent in ermine coat, full white apart from the long black tag to its white tail. On the same day I had an eye-witness report of another stoat near a village house which was half and half ie white and brown in coat. This difference in winter stoats is not unduly rare of course, but why does it occur? Here were two stoats, in the same area, at the same time of year, yet one was in full winter white while the other was only half and half. Another minor mystery!

Why the stoats were about the habitations had, again, probably a twofold reason; the presence of some rabbits and also of the rats

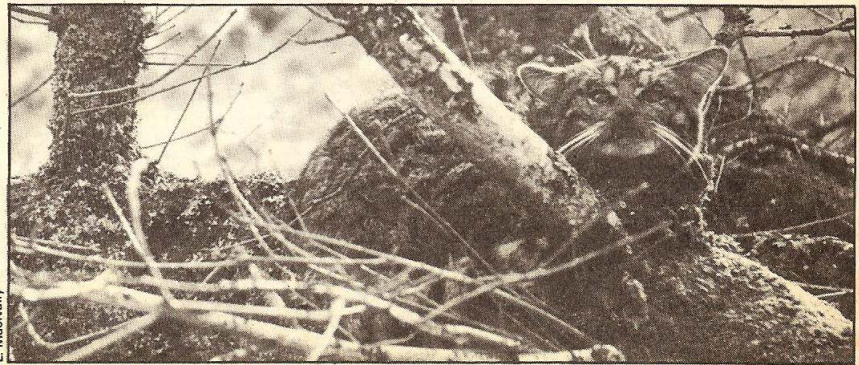
which make for the shelter of houses (and their bird-tables) and crofting outbuildings each winter, from their "out of doors" summer quarters. Stupid is the man with rat-inhabited outbuildings who tries to kill a stoat then, for it, and the weasel, are the surest enemies of rats one could find. Silly and illogical it may be but then that does not debar *Homo sapiens* from doing so. I remember the farm griever who had a rat problem in the farmstead but who, on seeing a stoat hunting them, came to me and asked how best to trap it. We are not talking of pheasant rearing areas here, but of hard north-west mountain and rock. Incidentally, this was the same griever (appropriate name for he seemed always to have a grievance) who complained bitterly of the number of rabbits in the farm fields and later came to me in a state of great excitement and urged me to shoot a fox which was *hunting rabbits* early one morning. Human logic!

Of weasels I have seen more this winter than ever before, here or in Inverness-shire. There are still folk, indeed I would hazard a guess that this means a majority of the public, who confuse stoat and weasel. On the one hand you have the school of thought which call both species "stoat", on the other those who call them "weasel". Then there are those who, aware that there are two distinct species, are not sure which is the larger or which has a black tip to its tail. It is the weasel of course which is much the smaller of the two, and has a mere wisp of a tail relative to its body size, compared to the stoat, and also lacks the bold black terminal tag of the stoat's tail which makes up half its tail length.

How tiny the weasel can be I got first-hand evidence of when I found one, a female or bitch weasel, car-killed on the road here in late December. She weighed only 3oz and in length was 10½ in of which 2in was wispy tail. Looking at the slender, lithe body I no longer marvelled at weasels being able to follow vole and mole runs or, as sometimes quoted, go through the circlet of an average size wedding ring. Her fur was, on her upperparts, a richer red brown than that of a summer stoat and the white underparts were of a much "whiter" white than that of a stoat's under parts which sometimes show very distinct tinges of yellow.

As to the average weight and length of a stoat, I measured and also weighed one which I found, similarly car-killed, in the autumn. A male or dog stoat, it weighed 9oz and was 19in in length of which 5in was tail. Size for size, both weasel and stoat must be our most efficient predators on voles, mice, rats and rabbits. Indeed the mind boggles at the idea of a 3-oz weasel tackling a 3-lb adult rabbit, yet this is said to occur. One has secretly to admire such dauntlessness.

Wildcat in winter



L. MacNally

A wildcat tree'd in a garden.



Club members — (l to r) — Jim Eade, Jill Harris, Ian Bath, Nick Horten, Mick Beynon, George Harris.



Early reconnaissance.



Ian Bath getting down to it.

STEEPED IN Portsmouth's centuries of naval heritage to the west, bustling with the tourist mecca of Hayling Island to the east, and contained by the sea-wall drone of the M27 motorway to the north, Langstone Harbour retains the ancient tradition of wildfowling, though in a form born of compromise. Here, just 80 members, drawn largely from surrounding towns, cling to a strand of defiance against pre-cast Britain and sport the hunter's spirit which is latent in every citizen.

However, the many restrictions imposed on the Association in recent years have been accepted by the members at every step because there has always been local concern here for what is undoubtedly one of the most important wetlands on the south coast. With about 3,950 acres of rich mud and sand flats and extensive beds of all three species of *Zostera* as well as *Enteromorpha*, plus about 350 acres of saltmarsh, this is home to vast numbers of passage, wintering and breeding birds including both quarry and non-quarry species.

The Association recognised that if sport were to survive at all many concessions would have to be made to the enormous birdwatching interest which has developed largely since the Association's inception in 1956, the year in which they became affiliated to WAGBI (the BASC). Thankfully, today they enjoy extremely good relations with the local RSPB warden, and the strength of wardening at the famous Farlington Marshes local nature reserve (owned by Portsmouth City Council and administered by the Hants & IOW Naturalists' Trust) is due to the assistance of the wildfowlers. Indeed, they take it upon themselves to police the entire harbour and it would be a sad day if "official" shooting were ever to be stopped entirely for the "cowboys" would move in. Every member is required to share the wardening duties.

When Lewis Clement, the first editor of *Shooting Times*, visited the area in the 1870s on a shooting and fishing trip he remarked on the Hayling shore "... as the place is not safe for large vessels to sail either in or near, we felt certain that unless some shooters had been there before we should find some birds safely sheltered therein." Subsequently he, and his companions, had a fine catch of codling, gurnard, dogfish, conger etc, all commonly caught today, and among the birds taken were curlew, sandpiper, redshank, grebe and oystercatcher.

Clement also noticed great companies of wigeon and today these remain in numbers up to 2,500 (the count this January revealed 2,000). Shelduck reach 2,500, teal 1,000 and mallard and pintail are common. Wader numbers are very high, particularly dunlin (nearly 20,000), the birds concentrating on the high salting islands at

LANGSTONE AND DISTRICT WILDFOWLERS AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Surviving with

Report and Photos
Brian Martin

full tide. Over 40 species of wader have been recorded over the last 20 years. There is something of interest to see throughout the year — goldeneye, merganser, blacktailed godwit, buntings, chats and even the occasional short-eared owl. On my last visit, to take the photographs reproduced here, we were lucky enough to see a hen harrier, a species which continues to regain ground in the south. One of the greatest treasures is the small breeding colony of little terns.

But the recovery of another species has brought mixed blessings for the Langstone fowler. The important saltmarsh botanical community here, which includes sea aster, sea wormwood, golden samphire, sea lavender and sea pink, also holds beds of eelgrass, beloved by the brent goose. Up to 6,000 of the dark-bellied race of this goose spend the winter here. The species, as most fowlers will know, has shown a dramatic national increase over the last 10 years, though in Langstone, as in the neighbouring Chichester Harbour (up to 10,000 birds), the increase has been greater than average.

The brent is of course still protected because the species is particularly vulnerable to weather extremes and accordingly the population will fluctuate considerably. But many fowlers believe that the increase in brent has meant less food for quarry species, in particular the wigeon. The erosion aspect of many puddling goose feet may also be significant.

Nonetheless Langstone fowlers have observed a steady increase in their main quarry, wigeon and teal, over the last 15 years. The teal is the most important quarry in September and October before the wigeon arrive in large numbers. Next in importance comes mallard, pintail and shoveler.

Today only about 10% of the harbour is shot over and there is a bag limit of five duck per day but no restriction on the number of days. Waders and sea-duck may not be shot but Canada geese are. And with the bag limit there was a great deal of local dissatisfaction with this season's national cold weather ban, especially when this coastal strip is well-known for a peculiarly mild climate. It was the lack of trust in wildfowlers, in questioning their ability to put their own houses in order that was most hurtful. But that is a deep subject fully discussed by John Swift on pages 5 and 7 of this issue.



Has the tide gone down enough.

The WAs of Chichester, Langstone and Pagham recently formed the Three Harbours Joint Council.

compromise

As with many fowling clubs, membership here remains very cheap at £16 per annum considering the amount of sport on offer. Most members are local men and probably 90% are involved in sea-fishing on a professional or semi-professional basis. Particular attention is paid to educating the young entry in the whole spectrum of field sports and some are engaged in beagling or following foxhounds on foot. There are very good relations with the local BFSS.

A new member, and there is a waiting list to join this popular club, must clearly demonstrate his ability and dedication. He must be able to recognise all the quarry and non-quarry species which he is likely to encounter, know the law, be familiar with all local restrictions, be aware of safety aspects, know the boundaries and practise sporting behaviour in avoiding noise, late arrival for flight, shooting beyond effective range, firing an excessive number of cartridges, etc etc. He will be proposed by an existing member and seconded by another and may shoot only with one of these two during his probationary year. He must also attend conservation work parties when required.

The Association does not operate a rearing and release scheme but is very involved with habitat improvement. A large, local gravel-pit has been continually improved over the last 14 years and work is just starting on a project to develop the fowl-holding potential of some local oyster beds. Generally the whole harbour is regarded as something to be cherished and safeguarded. On one recent litter clearing party over 40 members turned out. All members must make annual bag returns.

The Association founded the Langstone Harbour Conservation Group which includes the RSPB, Wildfowl Trust, Nature Conservancy Council and the Hants & IOW Naturalists' Trust. They have a representative on the Langstone Harbour Advisory Committee and local BFSS committee, as well as being partners with Chichester Harbour WA and Pagham Harbour WA in the recently formed Three Harbours Joint Council.

There has been a special interest in trying to "educate" the local public towards a better understanding of fowling through newspaper editorials, radio spots and involvement with shows such as the very popular Sportsman's Day at Liphook where the Association put on a



Sticky going.



Jim Eade at the ready.



Jim Atkin (left) returning from morning flight.

very successful, but in some eyes controversial, puntgunning demonstration. At Havant Museum a permanent fowling display is being set up, to include a gunning punt and mounted quarry species. With a regular newsletter everyone is kept in the picture, though with a small membership it is not too expensive to telephone everyone during a real emergency such as the imposition of a hard weather ban.

Following in the footsteps of the Association's first two secretaries, Eric Slape and Ted Sellers, both of whom set very high standards during their tenures, comes today's flight of very responsible officers. There is hardly a day goes by when the present secretary, local policeman Nick Horten, does not look in on the marsh to see that everything is in order. Dave Barnes is the tireless organiser of monthly clay shoots and Martin Stride is his hardworking assistant. Mick Beynon is the wardening secretary, assisted by Danny Warren, Brian Whitehouse an excellent chairman, Mary Bath a remarkable minute secretary, and the infectious enthusiastic Jim Eade is the local BFSS link. Tony Taylor has succeeded Phil Grant in the ex-

acting post of treasurer. Then there is the conservation officer George Harris, a leading ambulanceman and a JP who is the longest serving committee member — 14 years. It was George's interest in fowling and natural history that led to his wife Jill's success as a sporting and wildlife artist. (Some of Jill's watercolours are in the current exhibition by many popular painters which continues till March 6 at the Arun Art Centre, Arundel).

Recently there was a disgraceful episode in which antis set off a number of very loud fireworks at dawn all across the Langstone marsh, but their irresponsible actions did more to disturb the birds in reserved as well as shooting areas than thwart the fowlers. This is the idiocy of their priorities — people before birds — the direct opposite of the fowler's creed. Such was the impression of these pyrotechnics that later, one distant fowler was heard to remark "Old — was certainly blazin' away with his black powder this morning'."

Long may this fine Association of true sportsmen continue in their ancient and considerate ways.

Country scene



Rusticus

AFTER THE second cold weather wildfowling ban was lifted late in January there were only a few days of the inland duck shooting season left but thanks to an unexpected invitation to somewhere in Southern England, within a few miles of the coast, I was among the lucky ones to be in the right place at the right time. Such a day comes rarely but is enough to sustain the fowling spirit for several seasons.

Last year this bird haven was a water-meadow of little use to agriculture but now the eight or nine acres of lake and islands is a year-round home for many more species. At enormous cost to the owner, this water, to 14 feet deep in mid-channel, was dug and filled just last September. The valuable topsoil was used to improve an adjoining field. But this place will not only benefit the quarry species but also many other water birds as well as sustain particular animal, plant and insect communities. Altogether it is a valuable addition to Britain's rapidly decreasing wetland habitat, and when the Game Conservancy's planting programme is established it will also be a delight to the eye. In such ways the shooting community continues to play an underestimated and important role in maintaining and improving an important variety of habitats.

I wouldn't like to begin to calculate the cost of feed put out here throughout the winter and right through the severe weather of December and January when a very wide variety of non-shootables mingled with mallard, pintail, teal, tufted duck, pochard, wigeon, shoveler and geese. In addition a considerable number of mallard were put down and when one balances the cropping of a reasonable number of quarry against the provision of habitat and food for non-quarry as well as quarry species the benefit to conservation must be enormous. Keeper Michael is to be applauded on his dedication during the big freeze, with regular feeding rounds often at an hour when many conservationists are still abed. Indeed, on one visit he nearly lost his life when he misjudged the degree of shelving of an island bank when stepping from the boat and only just managed to grab the dinghy's edge before disappearing right under the ice sheet.

The morning was mild and dry with only a light breeze as, under cover of darkness, our small party slipped into the slatted wooden hides around the lake. As we waited for companions to push the fowl off, two partridges skulked across the track to my front, a moorhen scolded indignantly on the shadowy rife down the bank behind me and a tawny owl wooed his breakfast. Within minutes the restless duck voiced unease and, with human depth of field still very limited, my ears searched the gathering wind for the first rush of wings.

Only geese were to be taken on the short outward flight for a few shots at the duck were not worth the sacrifice of fine, steady sport later. "And watch out for the barnies." A small party of these scarce wandering geese had recently adopted the water. We were interested in the ever-growing number of Canadas in the area.

Then came the expected tremendous fly-past with call, silhouette and flying "style" being the chief means of quarry identification in the gloom. With the first wave came that

haunting whistle of wigeon and the *krit krit* of teal mingling with the warning quacks of mallard. Then the exciting clamour of geese, the resonant trumpets of Canadas *aahonking* down the line.

On the first report I turned to see the clarion caller swirling down and down into daybreak, and even before the great bird grounded Michael's dog was off the mark. Immediately a larger skein loomed towards me accompanied by many duck, like bombers with a fighter escort. Highly conscious of their deceptive range, I let them pass but they swung right, within range of Bob who snapped up the opportunity efficiently.

Another skein passed just out of my range, and then another, save one trailing bird which obligingly tanked towards me then swung left. My first side-on charge of BB knocked out only his port engine but the second, a going-away shot, tucked in behind his armoury and tumbled the gander.

With the light up, my companions emerged from their emplacements, some trailing geese, others a temporary disappointment which would soon dispel in the day ahead.

From there we rowed out to hides on the islands and completed our goose bag to the desired level, stopping far short of greediness. With mallard, pintail, shoveler and teal in the bag we adjourned for a mighty breakfast cooked with a keeper's understanding of appetite.

In the afternoon we returned to tidy up and re-position one or two hides as the spring-like weather passed before a strengthening wind that had us quite chilled before the vigour of evening flight.

When the cold penetrates all those carefully applied layers of quilted and waterproof materials and it seems as if the duck will never come one can easily slip into such a wild reverie that the first fleeting form does not register until long gone. But on that occasion I was alert, and in a magnificent half-hour of snap-shooting, when the cream of duck

FOWL AND FOUL



shooting came our way, thankfully I shot unusually well to match the form of my companions and do justice to the sport presented.

From that almost pure water sadly my attention was drawn to a tragic pollution incident in which the victim was one of the fine shots very recently featured in this magazine. Following a fracture in one of the chlorine supply pipes to my local indoor swimming pool at Haslemere a seven-mile stretch of the River Wey was declared "dead" and 325,000 trout — worth over £200,000 at market value — perished at Chris Moller's Hammer Trout Hatchery. The fish were in 17 river-water pools. Only the few fish in pools fed by freshwater springs were saved. Chris estimates that it will take 18 months to return to normal.

Among the life which perished in the river were some young salmon being bred there as part of a Thames Water Authority experiment.

This tragedy could hardly have happened to a more popular and enthusiastic sportsman whose company is indeed a pleasure. We should all heed this reminder not to take our local environment for granted as being generally safe. Look around for potential sources of pollution. This case was apparently an accident but there are many other foul examples of illegal discharge of industrial effluent and dumping of toxic waste. Council officers need all the help they can get in bringing successful prosecutions.

On top of this one cannot help wondering about the effects on waterways of the chemicals washed from agricultural land.

Then there is the great lead debate. Is lead from angling and shooting really significant in poisoning wildfowl? Some blame the lead in petrol used by greatly increased boat traffic.

When it comes to the land we hear that in Britain about 7,000 tons of lead fall from exhaust fumes each year. Russia banned lead in petrol in 1959 and later other countries such as Australia, Japan and the USA followed suit. On the one hand we are told that a total ban on lead in petrol would add £300 million to Britain's energy bill and on the other it is now claimed that there is no safe low level and that a reduction in our children's IQ is in direct proportion to lead ingestion.

Returning to deliberate pollution to make a fast buck the illegal discharge of oil at sea continues despite the great efforts of the RSPB in particular to publicise the resultant great loss of bird life. Surely there is a way around this with close inspection of ships in port. In the meantime penalties should be much more severe with automatic imprisonment, and endorsement, suspension or withdrawal of the offending master's certificate.

Back on terra firma driving around some old haunts recently I noticed a large sign nailed to a tree at the front of a farmhouse and adjacent to a layby. It proclaimed "This area is not a public toilet." Obviously the aggrieved is not a sportsman for it might have read "Dangle at your peril" or "Dangling reserved."

What is the country coming to with rubbish dumped in every other pull-in — especially during the heavy snow when the dustmen missed a week and the put-out residents preferred to despoil the countryside rather than their own back yards. Where is the custodial attitude that we hear so much about?