

Rolling with the punches

Far from sounding the death knell for shooting, legislating against lead shot has caused coastal gunning groups to close ranks, says **Nick Horten** after his worse season ever

The experienced gunners among you will recognise that the degree of enjoyment or satisfaction derived from the 'fowling season past has absolutely nothing to do with the size of the bag. Were that the case, this season would go down as the worst I have experienced in more than 30 years of coastal gunning.

Not that this lack of birds in the bag has anything to do with quarry numbers — the harbours I regularly shoot are literally heaving with duck and geese. No, this season it has been my turn to suffer from the inexplicable affliction that strikes keen wildfowlers without warning and for which there is no known cure.

I refer, of course, to the phenomenon whereby duck and geese seem to detect your presence by some unexplained sixth sense and veer off out of range. Annoyingly they then proceed to fly straight over the head of another Gun who knocks them down in fine style.

I had an inkling that it would be my turn early in the season when the Canada geese lifted off the freshwater marsh behind the sea wall in a huge gaggle that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. Instead of crossing the sea wall they elected to fly along its entire length. There must have been five other 'fowlers on the sea wall that October morning and as the great aerial armada advanced it periodically rained dead geese as it flew over the hidden Guns until it began to pick up the warning rays that I seem to have been emitting all season and drifted back over the sea wall to settle in the marsh behind, no geese having come closer than 100 yards. I packed up in disgust, only to be treated to the spectacle of the entire mob of geese lifting off and flying directly over the spot I had just vacated. Do you recognise the affliction?

As if being encapsulated in a bird-repelling force field wasn't bad enough, we also have the weather to contend with. I want a gale to go flight shooting and I get a glassy calm. I want calm weather to go punt-gunning and I get a gale. Mostly this refusal of the weather to co-operate just leads to wasted time. During my last punting trip half a gale sprang up while we were actually out in the punt and things can get far more serious when that happens.

We had to row double-handed, one pushing



Geese giving him the slip and bad weather have made Nick Horten's season the worst ever

the other pulling on the same pair of oars, to negotiate an extremely lumpy main channel. Usually the punt-gun sits well clear of all but the most adventurous wave. On this occasion it resembled a submarine torpedo tube as we punched through a heavy lop with green waves rolling up the foredeck.

What part of wildfowling then was it that

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gave me so much enjoyment during such a dire season? Steel shot. I've never been happy with the performance of factory-loaded steel but I've been equally unhappy about the price of some of the alternatives, even if they do work well. So I bit the bullet, bought a 3½in chambered 12-bore and started homeloading. Large steel pellets travelling at speeds well outside the CIP parameters are extremely efficient and relatively cheap.

That in itself would be satisfying enough

for a tight-fisted old codger like me, but what I do enjoy is the fact that the wildfowling community is beginning to shake off the depression induced by the introduction of non-toxic shot. Were you to have attended a meeting of 'fowlers a few years ago they would have been weeping into their beer and cursing BASC. Now the talk is of starting up homeloading syndicates, experimenting with new powders and discussing the merits of the latest ultra-long chambered 12-bore. Gunners are communicating with each other on a scale rarely seen in recent years, and that can't be a bad thing.

Every time I make the final crimp on a steel shot cartridge on my loading machine I allow myself a satisfied grin. It is directed at those people who might have hoped that legislating against lead shot would sound the death knell for 'fowling. They might have sent us reeling on the ropes for a moment, but we've shaken it off, our guard is up and we're still punching. It is strange to think the problem that so recently looked set to destroy coastal gunning has brought its devotees closer together and raised the degree of interest, absorption and investment in the sport to previously unheard of levels. ■