

# Muddy walkers

Make wildfowling easier by constructing your very own pair of mud pattens. South-coast mud lover **Nick Horten** reveals an age-old skill

**T**o a longshore gunner in the west of England, the word wildfowling might conjure up a mental picture of the rocky, almost lunar landscape of the lower reaches of the mighty river Severn. A 'fowler from our eastern seaboard might be put in mind of the endless saltmarshes of The Wash, while a wildfowler from the north west might see the vast sand flats of Morecambe Bay in his mind's eye. But, to the gunner on the south coast, wildfowling means only one thing — mud. And lots of it.

All-pervading, glorious-smelling, thick, black and glutinous. In the harbours of the eastern Solent, you can't get away from the

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stuff, sometimes quite literally. Many a 'fowler can spin hair-raising yarns of a desperate race to extricate themselves from the mud's cloying grip. “Stay with me,” whispers the mud as her cold black fingers tighten their lethal grip around the 'fowler's thigh-booted ankle, calf and knee. With soft, soothing, sucking noises, she slowly drains away the gunner's energy as she waits for the arrival of her accomplice, the cold, unforgiving sea.

Scary stuff. But, for the hard-bitten 'fowlers among you, who eagerly devour every word written on the subject, and who possess an encyclopaedic knowledge of the sport, a bell is already ringing in the back of your mind. “Mud pattens,” I hear you say. Why risk death by heart attack or drowning from ploughing

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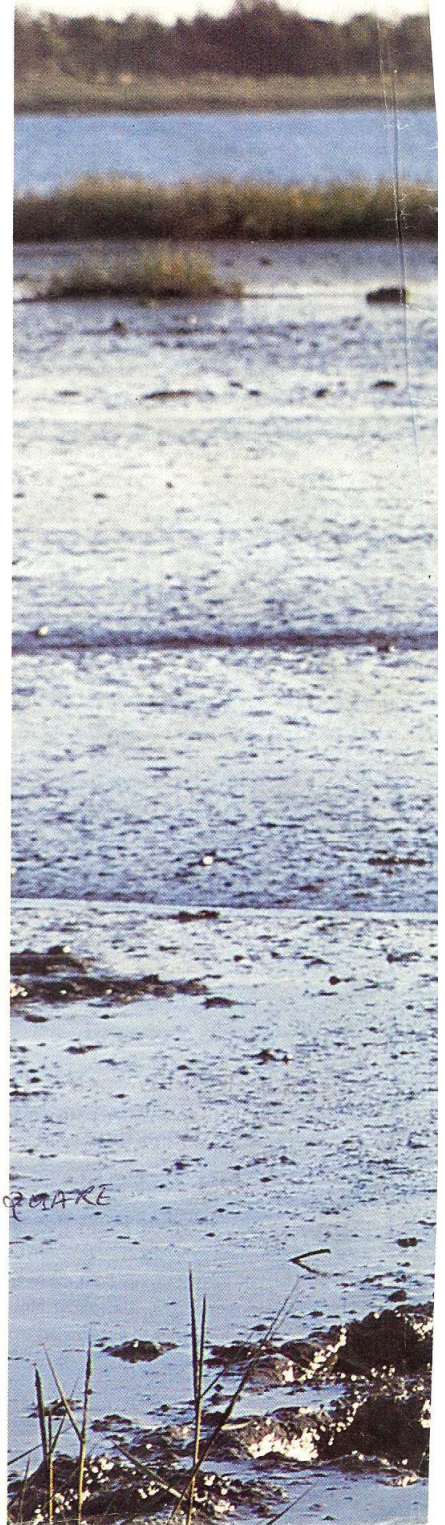
through the stuff when mud pattens enable one to walk safely across its surface? Why, indeed? The principle of pattens is well known, and they have been in use for probably thousands of years. And yet, their treatment in wildfowling literature is rather curious.

Hawker describes a shape of patten and a method of fastening it to the foot that works, but is unnecessarily complex, while no other author comes even remotely close to cracking the conundrum. The essence of which is how to tie them quickly and securely to your feet. This secret was revealed to me many years ago by a grizzled veteran of the tideline, who gripped me by the arm and in a melodramatic whisper said, “There is only one way to tie a patten to your foot.” “Oh yeah,” thought I, with the arrogance of youth, “there must be at least a dozen.” But, after much experimentation, I was forced to conclude that he was right and I was wrong.

So let's step back for a moment and examine the mechanics of the mud patten. The entire surface area of an average size thigh boot sole is about 48 square inches — 96sq in for the pair. The surface area of a 12-inch-square mud board is 144sq in — 288 for the pair. Already you can see that, with the tripling of the surface area across which to distribute one's weight, walking across the surface of the mud is now a viable proposition.

So much for the theory. What about the practicalities of construction? Cut a 12in square of 12mm exterior or marine-grade plywood and round off the corners. Glue and screw 2x4 hardwood strips the length of the patten sole, inset about an inch from the edge. Glue and screw a short length of the batten across the centre of the sole of the board to form an H running lengthways. ~~Now~~ leave a gap of about ▶

▶ **Sturdy, well-secured mud pattens can extend a wildfowler's mobility in difficult conditions**





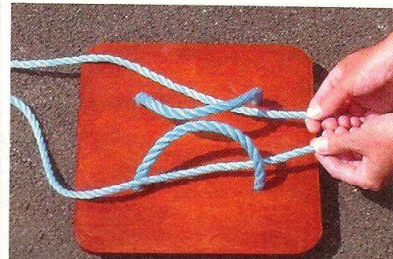
## FEATURE MUD PATTEENS



1. Mud patten — top view



2. Mud patten — bottom view



3. Simultaneously pass the tie ends under the board loops from the outside



4. Pull the tie to the rear of the loops to form the heel strap



5. Place your foot on the board and ensure the bight of the rope is well up the heel



6. Bring the ends of the rope up over your instep and make a turn



7. Pass the rope ends under the loops and tie off over the instep with a reef knot

awkward. Too long, and they will overlap each other across the instep. Use only a figure-of-eight or stopper knot, nothing else will do.

Getting the size of each loop as near identical as possible is a fiddly task. It causes me to curse gently under my breath, even after having made dozens of pairs. I guarantee you will swear loudly and throw them across the workshop, but you must persist or the patten

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will skew on your foot as you walk. Repeat the process to make the pair.

Before I explain how to tie them on, a few words about positioning the foot. Your toes must overlap the leading edge by at least an inch. This brings the heel slightly nearer the centre, allowing for maximum weight distribution when walking. The overlap also assists in breaking a patten's suction to the mud by applying leverage to the front edge. It also

**▲ To secure your pattens correctly, carefully follow the seven-step tying guide above**

permits kneeling, and the climbing of creek banks by simply kicking the toes into the mud.

Now, let's lash them on. Take your board tie, a 54in length of  $\frac{1}{2}$ in polypropylene rope, and simultaneously pass each end of the rope under the board loops from the outside. Then follow the steps shown in the illustrations above. It really is as simple as that. Now go and look in all your other books on wildfowling and see how complicated all the other authors make it.

This method makes simple yet strong mud pattens. You do need to tie them on tightly, and I mean tightly, because the leverage exerted on the fastening is considerable, and they will slacken slightly as you walk, but never enough to fall off if you've tied them correctly.

With a little practice on the lawn, you will soon be ready to extend your wildfowling horizon. These traditional south-coast pattens require no special gait, just walk normally with knees slightly bent. Remember, however, that they cannot defy the laws of physics, and there will always be mud too liquid to walk upon. ■

For more information, visit the Langstone Wildfowling website at [www.ladwaca.com](http://www.ladwaca.com)

◀ an inch at either end. This helps to prevent the mud sticking to the patten in an impacted cake. The battens themselves will obviously help prevent you from slipping about on the surface of the mud.

Next, bore four  $\frac{1}{2}$ in holes through the board, each 3in in from the leading and trailing edges respectively, and  $3\frac{1}{2}$ in from the side of the board. Using cheap  $\frac{1}{2}$ in polypropylene rope with a figure-of-eight knot at either end, make the loops along the length of the board. The height of the semicircular loop should be  $3\frac{1}{2}$ in measured from board surface to the inside of the loop. The dimension of the loop is quite important. If it's too short, tying on becomes