

Prepare to grab a Macnab

Timing is critical, practice essential, fitness invaluable, says **Graham Downing**, although you'll still need Lady Luck's goodwill to land that Classic Macnab

LADY Luck has a starring role in any sporting endeavour that involves wild quarry. Will the fish take? Is there a stag on the hill and, if so, will he be in a place that allows an approach to within shootable range? Perhaps all will be well but a goodly slice of luck is always necessary – and when the hope is to complete a Macnab, then it is required in triplicate.

Fate and good fortune aside, there is a lot prospective Macnabbers can do to improve their chances by way of basic planning and preparation. Let's start with timing. You may book your Scottish holiday around the prospect of a marvellous summer run of fish and perhaps even a July stag, but there's no possibility of a "classic" Macnab until the 12th of August, when grouse come on to the menu.

While chances of achieving success with the rifle will probably not diminish during late summer and could improve with the onset of

the rut at the back end of September and into October, grouse prospects will almost certainly do the opposite. Most Macnabbers will be walking-up or dogging their birds, and there is no doubt that the later in the season you try to shoot going-away grouse, the harder it becomes. By September, walked-up birds will probably be flushing at the limit of shotgun range, giving you only moments to get on to your target and take the shot. So plan to start your Macnabbing early in the season.

The key to everything is catching a salmon, probably the hardest and least reliable element of the triple. "On the Naver, Findhorn, Oykel or Carron, or anywhere on the west coast, you're pretty dependent on rainfall," advises Charles Rangeley-Wilson. "Go on the back of a spate and you can get a lot of sport crammed into a period of very few hours, which could occur up to a day after the rain stops. I hardly ever catch a fish on a rising river, and if I was a betting man I'd choose to

get up indecently early and go out at five o'clock as the water starts dropping."

That's exactly the tactic that worked for Captain Charlie Lyne-Pirkis, a guest in my party at Kyllachy, who Macnabbed after landing two fish before breakfast on the first possible day in 2011. "There had been a lot of rain for two days, water levels started dropping late on 11th August and I made sure I was on the river at first light the following morning. I chose the pool I thought would be most productive, where there had been action earlier in the week. I used a 13ft rod appropriate to the Findhorn and a size 8 Stoa's Tail, which is what people had been having interest on," says Lyne-Pirkis. "Use the flies that have been successful, or are recommended by people who fish there all the time. If you fail, then follow your instincts. There's nothing to lose."

It is wise to be creative and take whatever advice is available. On one occasion, I recall Lyne-Pirkis and my son, George, having real

difficulty in getting interest from semi-comatose fish in a stale pool. I got on the phone to my good friend, salmon fisherman Mark Johnson, who advised stripping a Sunray Shadow across the surface. Within moments the boys were at their laptops checking out the pattern and Lyne-Pirkis had a couple of the flies tied within the hour. The first fish was landed on the third cast.

Most authorities recommend cracking the fishing leg first. "We encourage a very early start on the salmon. The most important thing is to put the fish in the bag first, so be on the river by six o'clock and get a couple of hours in before breakfast," says Allan Hemmings, whose Gannochy estate on the North Esk has become the epicentre of Macnabbery.

"Most of our guests are here for two or three days of walked-up grouse, but if somebody really makes the effort and catches an early fish, we'll ring the keeper, make sure we go on the grouse moor and if he shoots his brace, then one keeper will peel off with him and go and spy for a stag," says Hemmings.

Gannochy has chalked up more than 20 Macnabs since 2004, so its system works. On other properties, the order of play may be different. "We feel that the stag is the hardest part of the job," says Robert Paterson, headkeeper on the Forest of Birse estate in Aberdeenshire. "We go out for a stag at first light, usually in the rut at the end of September or early October, and we'll spend as long as it takes. If we're not successful by 10 o'clock, then we'll go to the hill, shoot a brace of grouse and then to the river. If the guest doesn't

catch his salmon then there's no point in going again for a stag, but if he does then we'll be on the hill again in the evening."

There is a good deal to be said for stalking your stag before shooting a brace, especially where ground is limited. "If you're stalking carefully, then you'll not move the grouse off the hill, but if you're dogging or walking-up, then you will definitely move the stags," says Mike Holliday, headkeeper/manager at

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Glenample, Perthshire, and a consummate pointer man. "The deer are still drifting up the hill here mid-morning. If you've done your spying right and made your height by then, shooting a stag at one or two o'clock would give you the best chance to shoot your grouse when the scent starts improving for the dogs. Hopefully, there will still be daylight until eight or nine o'clock, which gives you a couple of hours on the river if you haven't already cracked the salmon."

If there are two words that should be borne in mind for the shooting elements of the Macnab, then they are fitness and focus. Whether walking or stalking, you are not going to get far on the hill if you are unfit. Though I count myself as being pretty fit, even I step up my exercise levels in the weeks prior to the Twelfth. It is pointless spending months looking forward to those few days of walked-up shooting in Scotland only to find that you're not physically prepared.

"Fitness is very important when you've got to stalk a deer or shoot grouse," agrees Paterson. "We've been fortunate in that the guests who've been here to achieve a Macnab have mostly been quite fit. Some of my friends have not been so lucky. There's also a fair level of competency involved in how well you can use a shotgun or a rifle, and we've had people take 20 or 30 shots before they get their grouse."

I have at least a couple of sessions on the clay ground at home before the second week in August. I shoot lots of low going-away clays and rehearse gun mount and swing, getting the practice in at artificial targets instead of wasting precious opportunities at the real ones. When my party arrives in Scotland, we always spend an afternoon clay-shooting before our first day at the grouse.

A light, fast-handling gun is what is required, and light loads will help with ➤

Try for the salmon as early as possible, preferably on a falling river after a spate



KIRSTEN SCHEIBEL



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bipod fitted. For the hill, when shots will invariably be taken prone and at longer ranges than are customary in woodland, a bipod really does make a big difference, and certainly beats the traditional rolled-up rifle slip under the forestock. If you have a variable scope, then it is also a good plan to wind up the power ring to around 8-10, making it easier to see those more distant targets.

Less-experienced stalkers will probably be relying upon the estate rifle, which will invariably be fitted with a bipod and sound moderator, and will be properly zeroed. If there is time, take a shot at the iron stag before heading up the hill, and don't squeeze off that trigger until you can see the selected beast through a clear, bright and unfogged scope. If the lenses are wet or misted, hold your fire and tell the stalker, who will have to hand the means to remedy the situation.

For most sportsmen and women, the Macnab will be a once-in-a-lifetime event, so don't forget the means by which to record and remember the occasion.

"One of my list of things to do is to put my skull mount on a shield with two grouse feathers and the fly encased in Perspex," says Lyne-Pirkis. "I got a photo of the fish and one of the stag, but not one of me with the birds. It would have been nice to do that. And I also regret not having marked that first brace, so that I could identify the feathers from them when I got home." ■

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target acquisition on the second bird. I never use anything more than 28 grams of 7s in my 12-bore – August grouse are easy to kill, provided that you hit them in the first place. I have even used a 28-bore to deadly effect at walked-up grouse, and my wife now swears by her Rizzini 28.

Focus is all-important, whether walking-up or dogging. Watch the dogs, keep your balance and be prepared to get on to that bird the split second it flushes – advice that was not lost on Lyne-Pirkis when, with two fish in the bag, he took to the grouse moor. "With the chance of a Macnab I was very much more focused, really paying attention. The pressure meant that when the first covey got up, I took the first bird of the day with my second barrel – though it should have been a left-and-right. Then I could see a bird's head moving in front, so I knew that the second covey was about to

get up and there was a chance to make it a brace. By focusing on it, watching the dogs and listening out for the birds, you've got a much better chance."

Fitness is, if anything, of even more consequence when stalking. Many a stag has been lost by the gun who is out of breath upon reaching the firing point after a long crawl, or whose pounding heart rate sends the bullet thumping harmlessly into the heather.

Macnabbers who are using their own rifles will, in most cases, be practised at settling in to the shot, quickly picking up the beast they are instructed by the stalker to shoot at, and then selecting the best point of aim for the way in which the stag is positioned. Even so, those from south of the Border who stalk mostly in woodland and usually shoot off sticks or from a high seat may not have a



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TARQUIN WILLINGTON-DRAKE