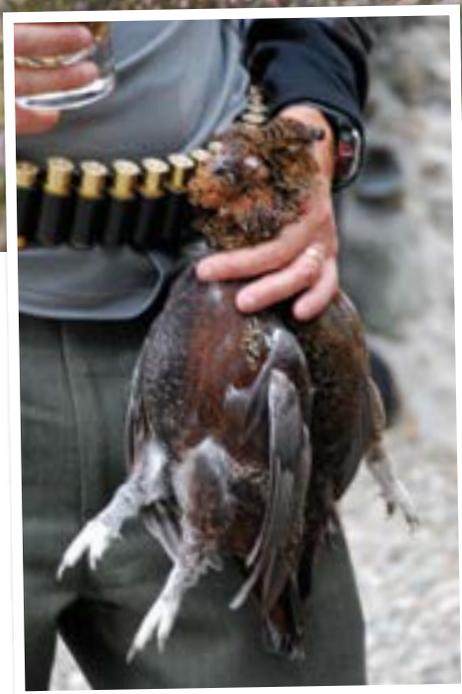




MACNAB *in the bag*

Alexandra Henton speaks to this year's triumphant Macnabbers about their exploits in the field



THE *Field* and Hunter Balmoral Macnab Challenge 2011 secured another set of gripping tales from Buchaneers who took to hill and river in search of sporting glory. Some set out with only the Macnab in mind. Some happened upon one for the first time; others revisited the triumphs of last year.

Our Editor bagged his with a Royal to boot, and no matter how many times these stories were told, one thing was for sure: Macnabs still make grown men giddy. It is a sporting achievement on most fieldsports enthusiasts'

John Fields Jr (above) aims for his grouse – the final part of his Macnab; success (left)

bucket list, and he is a very cool customer who shrugs his shoulders at the chance.

The Gannochy estate provided the lion's share of successful Macnabs again this year. Arwyn Davies was one such Macnabber. He started with a rather late 6lb grilse, hooked at 11.30am, followed by a right-and-left of grouse. Davies is not a novice with a shotgun and he revealed his next sporting goal: "This year, myself and my friend Chris Cook shot ➤



“ ‘It was the rut and the stags roaring across the glen that made the whole thing so special’ ”



Clockwise from above: deer at Gannochy; Paul Martland's triple-stag bag; Janek Wichtowski's salmon; and from left to right, Arwyn Davies, Allan Hemmings and Chris Cook

grouse in Wales, England and Scotland. Next year, I plan to shoot a right-and-left of grouse in Wales, England and Scotland." An admirable follow-on from the Macnab Challenge. It seems the stag was the toughest element. "The only rifle experience I had was on rabbits with a .22. But I had also practised on the range and the grouping was good, so I was reasonably confident," Davies says. "It was to be my first stag and I was fully prepared to come down without taking the shot," he continues. "But an oldish beast, a 10-pointer, was found at about 5.30pm, and he was despatched cleanly from about 190yd. He ran about 50yd and I didn't believe he was dead until we found him."

Chris Cook was a member of the same shooting party as Davies and he had bagged his Macnab three days before. "It was the first time I had been up to Gannochy," he says.

"And I wasn't quite sure about the Macnab, but in the first half hour on the first day I managed to hook an 8lb salmon. The river was very low, so it was tricky and even the best fisherman there did not catch one."

From the river-bank at Gannochy you can often see the deer on the hills. "It was the rut and the stags roaring across the glen that made the whole thing so special," reveals Cook. "I had shot a stag before but clambering across the gulleys is very hard going. We didn't just shoot the first one we saw; instead, the stalker picked the one we needed to aim for." He admits that headkeeper David Clement was a little surprised when he confessed his shooting wasn't great. "Why didn't you tell me before?" was his reaction. Nonetheless, the pointers did their job and soon he brought down a pair of grouse. Cue for

whisky-led celebrations, which were all the more raucous for Cook's having climbed the hill on an empty stomach.

Janek Wichtowski is a trout fisherman, and Gannochy offered his first chance at a salmon as well as the opportunity to shoot grouse over pointers. "I was thrilled to accompany Peter Bond, a long-standing friend of owner Allan Hemmings, up to Gannochy," he says. The first to catch a fish was on for the Macnab but it had to be caught before breakfast.

Wichtowski set out at 5am and – "after a nervy 20 minutes" – got a 7lb cock salmon in the net. Then it was time for breakfast. He recalls, "Next, headkeeper David Clement took me to the range to make sure I could use the estate rifle, a moderated .270 Winchester, and then we took to the hill." After the stags were located and one was shot, it was time to

take the grouse. "My friend Peter accompanied us with his setter Mac, short for Macnab," says Wichtowski. "I shot my first bird over him and then, a few minutes later, my second." It was a great achievement but Wichtowski sees it as part of a much larger picture. "My role in the Macnab was inconsequential," he says. "Allan Hemmings' vision, headkeeper David Clement and all those at Gannochy really deserve the accolade. I was just the chap with my finger on the trigger."

A friend's 40th birthday trip to Pitlochry with Macnabbing in mind was the starting point for Paul Martland's first attempt. "We were fishing the Dalmarnock beat of the River Tay opposite where we were staying," says Martland. "And at 8.10am I caught a grilse, which I put back." It was the end of September and unseasonably warm, so a quick kit change was called for before heading up on to the moor, part of the Edradour estate. "Them that are fit enough cannot afford to do it, and them that aren't are," he laughs.

He says, "I got the stag at about 2pm but we thought he'd got up again, so we had to take another shot – it turned out to be another stag." He also took a third. An attack of cramp in the middle of the moor put the second grouse in jeopardy. "I could not get the last grouse," says Martland, "but at 4.55pm I finally shot it and fell back into the heather with relief. The birthday boy had been fishing all night to no avail but, as he had taken the vehicles, we had to make our way back on foot after I'd shot the grouse." What was the first thing you did to celebrate? "Go straight into Pitlochry looking for salts," he replies.

Campbell Whyte's success at a silent auction in Edinburgh held by the GWCT for the chance at a Macnab led to success on the hill. He says, "I must have had more claret than I thought but I had always wanted to experience stalking a stag – and this seemed like the perfect opportunity. I am a salmon fisherman, so was hopeful about the salmon but nervous about the grouse and stag, having never attempted either before," he reveals.

The Dunecht estate had donated the lot for the GWCT annual dinner, and the Forest of Birse – which is part of the estate – was the location for the attempt. "I met Alistair Brown,

the assistant gamekeeper, who was a great support," says Whyte, "and took my great friend Andrew Miller along, too. He'd introduced me to fishing many years ago. At first light, on the way to the forest, we saw a stag and hinds silhouetted against a bright-red dawn sky and hoped it was a good omen." The stag was shot on the edge of Birsemohr Hill at about 8am. Although the wind on the moor added to nerves about the grouse, they were both shot by noon, one on Gannoch Hill and the other on Sands of Gannoch.

"Then it was just the salmon to go, which is the lottery part of the day," says Whyte. "Once on the Birse Water of the River Dee I fished a long pool from above the hut. Only as we got to the end of the pool and its last promising ripples at 2.35pm did I finally hook a salmon, which I returned. It was my first Macnab and the first that Ali had witnessed; it was also my first stag and first grouse – a great day for both of us, and made even more enjoyable by the company of Andrew," he says.

Andrew MacInnes also obtained his chance at an auction. "Anson MacAuslan, a friend who is the factor at the Welbeck Estates, had donated the opportunity to go after a Macnab, so I bought it as a birthday ➤



present to myself.” MacInnes is an experienced stalker and walked-up grouse shot but started salmon fishing only two years ago. “Anson is a fantastic fisherman and he told me to do the fish first but the tail-end of Hurricane Katia meant the first day was cancelled. The salmon were jumping and that is not a good sign,” he cautions.

The following day, after 10 minutes at the pool, a 4lb cock salmon gave the green light for the Macnab attempt at just 8.50am. “I met with the stalker and we stumbled across a lone stag. We couldn’t move as he would have alerted the others, so I shot him. He weighed about 260lb and was a 10-pointer.” On to the

the beginning of the summer so that I was fit enough. Allan Hemmings walks everyone into the ground and I was determined to try and keep up,” he says, then continues, “This year was fantastic as there was no pressure at all and the entire day was fabulous. Some advice from Allan helped me with the fish, then a great stalk was followed by a single grouse and then a right-and-left.” And what of next year? Another Macnab? “I think next year I’ll make up my own,” he says.

John Fields Jr accompanied Thompson last year and successfully bagged his first Macnab then. He got his second one this year. It started at 2pm with a 10lb salmon. “It was a scramble

“ We saw a stag and hinds silhouetted against a bright dawn sky and hoped it was a good omen ”



grouse. “The first covey went up, and the pointer put up a group of three. With my first shot I took a grouse but I missed the second.” Two birds out of the last covey and the Macnab was completed by 1.35pm. “After lunch I went back to the river and landed another three salmon,” MacInnes reveals.

A brace of American gentlemen got a brace of Macnabs in a repeat performance of their success at Gannochy last year. Joe Thompson did it with a brace of new guns, too. “Last year a loader said to me, ‘Is it just the one gun, sir?’ which prompted me to buy the pair of 12-bore Henry Atkins I now have,” laughs Thompson, whose wife Alison was the official trip photographer. “I took my return trip to Gannochy very seriously this year and started training at

as we only really had until about 4pm to bag the stag to leave enough time for grouse-hunting,” Fields recalls. “We had to take some chances and the deer could have gone a different way but we were lucky.”

“After missing four shots on the grouse, headkeeper David Clement’s warning that ‘we could still mess this up’ brought some focus, and I got my brace,” he continues. “Gannochy is a great place. Our visits there began with our friend Bill Mayfield’s birthday. Bill wanted to shoot grouse and he’d read an article about grouse-shooting at Gannochy. Even though it was a private estate, he organised an invitation through a friend of Allan Hemmings.”

Mayfield himself is still waiting to get his Macnab. “I was on for my Macnab this year after catching the salmon,” he says, “but rolled my BMW into a ditch on the way back from the river. I shot the grouse but not the stag.” He’s now researching 4x4s for his next trip. ■

Above left: left to right, Campbell Whyte and Alistair Brown with their gillie Doug. Left: Andrew MacInnes. Below: Joe Thompson

