

MACNEARLY or Macnab?

Jonathan Young accompanies a sextet of Macwillings whose odds range from 2/1 to 33/1. Photographs Jake Eastham



THEY met at the club, where Leithen sighed, "I used to be fond enough of sport, but I wouldn't stir a foot to catch a sixty-pound salmon or kill a fourteen pointer. I don't want to. I see no fun in it. I'm blasé. It's too easy." This was too much for Archie. "Too easy, you say?" he repeated. "I call that pretty fair conceit. I've seen you miss birds often enough, old fellow." And so the plot was laid in 1924 for John Buchan's original Macnab.

Ninety years later, another group of men met at The Rag "to confess their ennui" and lay down the stratagem for *The Field's* Macnab Challenge: a salmon, a stag and a brace of grouse taken in a day. None of the party had

killed a 14-pointer but Nick James had landed a 60-pounder on the fly. It's a feat worthy of champagne and that was in spate thanks to this year's new sponsors, Pol Roger, Glenfarclas and Hine. Such were the supplies we debated a drinking Macnab – a bottle of each of the splendid triumvirate to be drunk in a day. "Not quite right," said one of the party, under the portrait of a long-dead general. "Not quite testing enough," said another, of Scottish blood.

Paul Graham, associate director of Pol Roger Champagne, called us to order. For months he had been planning this *coup de cuvée* in the Highlands. "At 8pm precisely we leave for Euston," he commanded, "where we will board the night sleeper, take dinner and awake



Three men in a gloat: Tom Lewis holds aloft the first fish of the day, a goodish grilse

in the foothills of the Trossachs to the sound of bagpipes and the waft of kippers."

To huzzahs and clinking of glasses (no ice with single malts, please) we climbed aboard taxis and found the charming mistress of ➤



Hunting down the Macnab trinity with team captain Paul Graham (below)



the sleepers, a certain contender for Miss ScotRail 2014. I produced my ticket, she produced her list. "So, are you Mr Hardy?" she asked. "No, but here's my ticket and it's tickety boo," I replied. "Indeed it is, Mr Young - for tomorrow. Never mind, we'll squeeze you in."

Sporting companions adopt a wolf-pack approach to the weak and while I negotiated with Miss ScotRail they piled into the dining-car to find every berth taken by old buzzards on their weekly commute north. Undeterred, they were picnicking in the adjacent carriage, the bottles of Pol Roger and Glenfarclas lined up like skittles next to a pile of brown boxes. We opened one. "Haggis and bashed neeps, fresh from the train microwave," proclaimed Graham. "A feast worthy of John Macnab."

After such a Caledonian collation we retired to our bunks and kipped through Crewe, dozed through Dalmeir and clambered out at Crianlarich, where we waved hankies to the departing Miss ScotRail. Our base for the expedition was the Monachyle Mhor or perhaps, having met the owners, More Maniacal. Tom and Dick Lewis bought the hotel, anchored on the banks of Loch Voil, from their parents and turned it into the centre of a food empire that's won a string of gongs and now embraces the hotel, a bakery, a wet-fish business, a chippie and a café-cum-motel. A normal person would struggle to run such an endeavour but Tom Lewis isn't normal. He's a giant Duracell bunny wired up to the mains.

Above: just one more grouse and then we really must go home. Right: Tay for two. The previous day that part of the river had yielded 40 fish

"So, you're all here," he boomed, in an accent that seemed a blitzed-up mix of Scouse, Scottish and north. "Excellent, we can eat."

Over breakfast and a haggis refuelling, we made a book on the Macnabbers' chances. William Parry, ex-cavalry, ex-right-hand man for Jackie Stewart, founder of the Wessex Wild Plum Company - 4/1. Richard Duncan, sponsorship and partnership manager for Land Rover, youthful, handy with rod - 7/1. Daryl Greatrex, MD of Holland & Holland, very useful with gun and rifle, less so with rod - 9/1. Tom Lewis, owner of gaff and therefore inside knowledge, 3/1. Paul Graham, decent shot, no known fishing form, 33/1. Nick James, head boy of Pol Roger Champagne and with enough shooting and fishing experience to make Lord Ripon look amateurish - 2/1 favourite.

We split the runners into three teams, with one heading for the hills the following day, the other to the silvery (actually brownish) Tay, the teams to swap rods for firearms at noon.

Generally, Scottish salmon catches were disappointing in 2014 and so we set forth with more hope than expectation. After an hour's hard driving and a medley of some of the worst Eighties disco hits we arrived at the Luncarty beat of the lower Tay, where she elbows herself through a collection of small houses of the sort



harbouring gnomes and called "Dunroamin". There we met our gillies, John McCallum, who won individual gold in the 2008 Commonwealth Fly Fishing Championships, Morris Meikle and Jimmy Chin, who announced he was "just there to make the tea" but nevertheless carried a forest of spinning rods rigged with Flying Condoms, Bouncing Bettys and enough heavy metal to make Black Sabbath take up the harpsichord in sheer chagrin.

Chin's chin was lifted. "Yesterday this part of the river produced 40 fish, with 100 being taken from the Tay as a whole. So there's every chance of a salmon," he said as two rods

boarded his boat while the other two started fishing the opposite bank. It was 9.15am and fish were showing all down the beat. "It was a fair bit colder last night," said McCallum. "That makes the cock fish realise it's time to spawn and makes them more aggressive and willing to take." Sound travels better in water and somewhere in the Tay's depths a fish was prompted. There was a bellow of triumph, a splash of net, a flash of silver. Tom Lewis, who'd never caught a salmon, had one on his second chuck. Thirty minutes later Daryl Greatrex followed suit. For two of the party, the least experienced fishermen, the Macnab was on. ➤



Stopping to collect Jake Eastham, our photographer, we raced back to the Glenample estate to meet Alan Sneddon, the stalker, and Roger Prigmore, the dogman. Hopes were high. It's a thriving deer forest and though the grouse are now sparse, they were in drivable numbers in the Seventies and are still present on the estate's highest ground. "We haven't shot that patch for 10 years," said Prigmore. "But they're there. We just need to find them."

Half an hour later, having survived the ascent of Heartbreak Ridge, we lined up on the moor and started the trek over leggy heather and peat hag, Prigmore's cockers bouncing through the cover with all the excitement of a toddler on Christmas Eve. I looked for grouse droppings in the usual places. Nothing, perhaps unsurprisingly, with buzzards and ravens constantly scouting from the skies and the dark forest filled with foxes and other wild wooders. But grouse are tough beggars and 20 minutes into the beat the cockers started working with serious intent, just as the guns were negotiating an especially slippery slope and losing concentration for a few moments.

A singleton rose in front of Greatrex and Lewis, a long shot but on. The bird continued unperturbed. The line was now wide awake but as we trudged on it seemed that was the only bird on the moor – before a trio rose at Lewis's feet. He'd been resting his gun over his shoulder and by the time he fired the birds were only in range of his volley of oaths. And so it continued, the birds sensing uncannily when the guns were distracted or scrambling over the hags. After a while Prigmore's cockers were so frustrated they were pleading with their owner to let them use the guns but then Greatrex dropped a bird. Since he already had the salmon all he needed was a second grouse and a stag and the Macnab would be nabbed.

We continued the beat, swinging over to the far side of the moor, the guns marching

From above: the grouse hunt continues; stag party No 1; stag party No 2, rather less of a slog

with fixed-bayonet intent. But the grouse were enjoying themselves, rising in front of the unarmed members of the party or waiting until our guns were scuttling down a hag. In all, we rose 21 grouse but ran out of moor before Greatrex could take the remaining half brace.

By now the weather had changed from shirtsleeve sunshine to sleet rain. Gamely, Greatrex decided to stay on the hill with Sneddon and try for a stag while the rest of us hightailed home for tumbler of Glenfarclas round a log fire.

Our fellow Macnabbers reported mixed fortunes. Messrs James and Duncan hadn't touched fin, fur or feather. Parry had also failed to trouble the scorer. But the fates do like to amuse and Graham, while failing on grouse and deer, had taken a burnished 20-pounder – his first-ever salmon.

A door then banged as a sodden figure splashed over the flagstones towards the bar. Greatrex was home from the hill having bagged not one stag but a brace. He and Sneddon had hunkered down in the heather close to a forestry ride, hoping the resident stags would emerge to duel for hinds. At dusk a knobber had shimmied out of the sheeting rain, a mere 30yd away, and Greatrex dropped him with a single shot, a feat he repeated 10 minutes later with a staggie that had trotted out of the woodland 200yd out. "Just my luck," groaned Greatrex. "I miss the second grouse, which I should have had, then pull off a good shot at a distant stag. So I got my brace, just the wrong one."

In the end, it was a Macnearly but done to the splendid accompaniment of Tom Lewis's amazing cooking, Pol Roger fizz, Glenfarclas malt and Hine cognac. And in the morning there wasn't a trace of hangover. Or ennui. ■

