

Adrian Dangar takes the Macnab challenge. Salmon and right-and-left in the bag, he's still stalking his stag as the light is fading

HAVING accepted the Editor's dream commission, the challenges of bagging a modern Macnab – poaching on behalf of *The Field* clearly being out of the question – soon become apparent. Scotland is bursting at the seams with magnificent deer forests, fine grouse moors and prolific salmon rivers but few estates offer a realistic chance of all three species in a single day. So much can conspire against a Macnab – rivers need water, already scarce grouse can fail to materialise, and hillwalkers inadvertently ruin hours of careful stalking in an instant. Furthermore, the emblematic quarry species are wild – they can seldom be manoeuvred, driven or persuaded to take part in the game, and man must be at his razor-sharp best to outwit them.

IN THE NICK OF TIME

For this story, Scotland was my oyster but I knew success would hinge on being able to catch a salmon early on in the day. My thoughts turned immediately to the vast and remote Loch Choire in Sutherland, whose beguiling River Mallart I have grown to know and love. Salmon are caught there on a skated fly in the lowest of water and, when the river is full, fish on the bank are almost guaranteed. Furthermore, its 32,500 acres, straddling both Helmsdale and Naver watersheds, comprise one of the most consistent stag forests in Scotland and the head stalker, Neil McKie, has begun rigorous efforts to increase grouse. I was also encouraged by Derek Knowle's astonishing record of 13 separate Macnabs, all taken at Loch Choire. Mr Knowles agrees with my theory that most Macnabs just happen, they are not planned beforehand. "All mine fell into place through a lucky combination of circumstances," he recalls. "It usually starts with catching a fish before breakfast and taking things from there."

I have been in that pole position a few times and, having caught a fish early one August morning, remember suggesting a Macnab to Loch Choire's late and great stalker, Albert Grant. Albert merely looked up from his seat on the gunroom bench and told me, "I've been here 30 years and not got one yet." In my experience his reaction was fairly typical, not because he ever shirked a challenge but, rather, he ➤



Playing a fish on Corrieveuran, the writer's favourite pool on the River Mallart. Below left: a silver grilse is caught with 90 minutes to spare

Highland STAG NIGHT



deplored the thought of a shotgun frightening a single one of his treasured beasts across the march. Albert's gruff manner concealed a kind soul but I had already resolved to continue fishing when he relented 10 minutes later, and my chance was gone. This time there was enthusiasm from the estate's owners but, remembering that gunroom conversation, I next telephoned Neil McKie, who left me in no doubt that he was willing and able to assist.

Walking into the covey of grouse (above); retrieving the grouse (above right); the writer was particularly relieved by his right-and-left (right); sighting up the .243 rifle (below); Neil and Ronald spying for a stag (bottom)

So here I am, a few weeks later, appraising the River Mallart in Sutherland, the time a little after 7.30 on an overcast August morning. My dilemma is whether to cherry-pick the best pools or work my way methodically downstream. As it is flowing at a good height, I decide on the latter. Although a couple of inches above summer level, the water is clear enough to demand absolute concealment and I move slowly downstream taking care to keep my silhouette low, while Neil's wife Sue takes photographs from a discreet distance. I pass fishless through some of the best pools in the upper reaches - Private Water, Jock's and Lower Alt Fearn among them - with only a golden spotted trout for my efforts. Several hours have been squandered by the time I reach Corrieveuran.

Many an angler must have hurried past this short run of broken water in favour of better things but, for me, Corrieveuran is the best pool



on the river. When the line pulls taut and starts to cut its way upstream, the overwhelming sensation is one of relief and not surprise. There can be no standing on ceremony when a Macnab is at stake and the fish - a lovely silver grilse that must have streamed up the Naver in double-quick time - is soon beached. The previous evening we had agreed to postpone my attempt to the following day had I remained fishless by 2pm. I caught my fish with just 90 minutes to spare.

LUCKY, AGAIN

Twenty minutes later I am lying on the ground taking a shot at the target and then we are off to the hill - the party now joined by Ronald McDonald, who has stalked this territory for more than 40 years and has spied a small group of stags on the shoulder of Meall Ard. We have spoken little of grouse, for we believe they comprise the most difficult part of the challenge. Although my 12-bore accompanies us, there is an underlying apprehension that it may remain in its sleeve. But we are about to get lucky, in that seriously lucky way that just occasionally visits sportsmen who pursue the truly wild.

At Double Burns a cock grouse explodes from the heather and, as he wings away, a curious black head pops up and back down again as quick as a fisherman's float. Gun pressed into my hand, I am out of the Argocat in an instant, sinking the wind until I am a good 100yd below where the covey lies hidden. I creep back into the breeze, praying that their nerve holds until I am within range, and for once the grouse oblige, lifting well within shot in a whirr of flashing brown wings. Two birds - one young, one old - tumble on to the heather.

With the most difficult parts of the challenge behind us there are smiles of jubilation all round - although had any of us been able to canvas the deer's opinion on that assumption, he may have been somewhat surprised. To have managed a right-and-left was a relief, for only a brace of grouse will do for a true Macnab. We ditch the Argocat on the summit of Creag nah iolaire and begin the walk towards Ronald's stags,



Above: at the start of the marathon stalk. Left: Loch Choir fishing map. Below: the writer proudly shows off his Macnab

“ We have spoken little of grouse, for we believe they comprise the most difficult part of the challenge ”

but the stalk is soon threatened by the appearance of a lone hillwalker, as conspicuous as a snowflake on a pile of soot. Neil stifles an expletive, but when we next see the walker she is scrambling back down the scree face. Hoping they have remained undisturbed, we crawl on to a brow overlooking the beasts but they are clearly restless and the sudden appearance of spooky hinds sees them pouring out of the glen, and with them any chance of a shot.

There is another larger group of stags grazing and resting a mile ahead on the Eagle Face but the ground between them and us looks as bare as a newly mown meadow. The wind may be good, but although the approach looks near impossible there is little alternative but to try. Thus begins one of the longest, wettest and toughest crawls I have ever undertaken, the early stages plagued by midges that breach thick tweed with impunity and are vanquished only when we crawl out from the lee of a hill into deteriorating weather. Eventually we are within 500yd of the herd. However, these are not October deer preoccupied with the rut, but summer

stags protected by the vigilance of wise and nervous hinds.

There are several shootable beasts among the 30-odd, some clean, some still in velvet and others sporting ragged strips. Having got this far I am reluctant to take a very long shot and insist we crawl ever closer. Progress is painfully slow but sure - that is until a meandering line of twitchy hinds pauses to look with cupped ears straight down the hill towards us. When one old hind barks like a guard dog I am sure the game is up. But we get lucky for the second time today and watch them through squinted eyes, drifting like mist over the horizon. Moments later we hear the distant chortle of an alarmed cock grouse. "They must have disturbed him," Neil whispers, and we set off like worms once more.

RIGHT TO THE WIRE

With the hinds gone, we make steady progress until reaching a point when it would be folly to attempt to crawl any closer. The deer are still well over 200yd distant, and we have been on our stomachs for the best part of three hours. With the light fading, it is now or never. Most of the stags are on their feet, feeding into the wind with only their backsides showing. Neil identifies one suitable beast after another but none co-operates until an in velvet 10-pointer, his attention caught by some particularly succulent patch of grass, shifts sideways to present a shot. The rifle's roar rolls out through the empty hills, the herd flees, and Neil says simply, "That'll do." We watch the stag walk off slowly through the gloaming to sink into a peat hag from which he never gets up.

The Macnab may have taken nearly 12 hours to achieve but thanks to the support of three determined individuals I managed it on the first day of trying - and I feel as if I could walk to John O'Groats and back. Neil feels the same way and together we stride homewards. Mine is only the latest in a long line of Macnabs provided by Loch Choir, but none of the photographs depicting these triumphs was snapped after the light had drained from the hills - a fact not lost on Ronald, who says the day has been enhanced by being taken right to the wire. With rain lashing down on the game larder, we drink to that - and to the estate's Macnabs of the future.

