



TIME TO GRAB A MACNAB

With our annual challenge beginning on the Twelfth, the experts suggest how best to bag a Macnab.

By **Alexandra Henton**

THE FIELD's Macnab Challenge returns for its fifth year, now sponsored by the Pol Roger portfolio. The Macnab's trio of sporting challenges – taking a salmon, a stag and a brace of grouse in one day – is echoed by Pol Roger's impeccable triumvirate. Glenfarclas Whisky, Hine Cognac and Pol Roger Champagne all have unimpeachable sporting credentials and will often be found on hill, stream and moor when sporting feats are afoot.

MURTEW SCHUBERL

John Buchan's tale of sporting prowess, the sloughing off of ennui for the exhilaration of the Highlands, still fizzes with excitement when read by those of a sporting bent. By recreating the derring-do of Palliser-Yeates and company, *The Field's* Macnab Challenge, in association with Pol Roger, retains something for the doughtiest of sportsmen. The task, should you choose to accept it, must be undertaken with skill and a definite plan. There will always be the lucky few – those whose Macnab comes by chance – but there is nothing amiss

in tipping the sporting scales in your favour. This year, three experts give their tips on how to master the ultimate sporting challenge.

Lindsay Waddell has been headkeeper for Lord Barnard in Upper Teesdale since 1976. If you want to guarantee your brace of grouse, heed his advice. "I've done all three elements of the Macnab but never together or in the same day. I just haven't put my mind to it," he says. But for those set on the challenge: "success with the grouse depends hugely on location. Generally, on estates where you ➤

attempt a Macnab, grouse will not be plentiful. That can be useful as birds won't be as wily as on a driven moor, or around the edges of one."

The part of the moor you choose is crucial. "Walk a little corner of a moor with lots of edges to walk over and keep to undulating ground. The grouse won't see you approach," Waddell counsels. And walking into the wind can be useful. "If you are walking with someone else, get them to walk higher on the hillside and 200yd to 300yd in front of you and to the side. If they put up any birds they will lift and curl back over in front of you, almost like shooting driven grouse. Brace done."

When it comes to dogs on the moor for the Macnab, "If you don't have a pointer don't have a dog quartering in front of you. It can make birds twitchy. And if you are walking a line the birds will get up anyway. But I would have a lab or spaniel on hand to pick-up. It would be a disaster to fall short just because you were unable to pick one." Time is tight when setting your cap at a Macnab. "Have visual access to the ground to do a little bit of spotting and plan your walk accordingly. Even scanning in front when you are already walking can save valuable time if you can spot the grouse."

And the difficulty factor for the grouse part of the Macnab? "I give it five out of 10," says

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Waddell. "The grouse isn't dependent on time and the salmon must be 10 as it is so unpredictable. But, of course, if it's your end goal it will always seem more difficult. The important part is the glass of Glenfarclas after the deed is done, not before," he says.

The Field's stalking columnist and deer consultant, Dominic Griffith, also gives the stag a five out of 10 difficulty rating. "The salmon is the limiting factor," he says. "You usually can't see them and so are often fishing blind."

In these circumstances, corners can be cut if you know your fieldcraft. "Lying snugly in bed at the lodge one often hears roaring stag. That's not because they are on the tops but because they are low down. Getting up at dawn is something our Continental cousins do because that is when deer are most accessible." During the day, the red deer make their way to the tops, especially in good weather conditions, to avoid mosquitos and midges.

"But during the last two hours of the day they will make their way down." Stalking in the traditional way will see you out at 10am and taking your shot about 2pm, the most difficult part of the day. So look to first or last thing for the stag.

Once you are in shot missing on a Macnab day is not an option. "Make sure you have the range right. Check the wind, account for any bullet movements and then keep your head down. Even in the excitement of the moment follow through," he repeats. "Keep your head down on the stock looking through the scope after you have squeezed the trigger and the shot will hit home."

Ensure you manage your time. "If you still have one or two parts of the Macnab to do make sure someone else drags the beast down, although if it's your last element you should jolly well help." And once the last scurry down the hill is completed? "Then it's time for champagne to celebrate," he says.

Michael Evans – who has been a full-time fly-fishing instructor for 25 years – caught his first salmon at the age of eight and understands the difficulty the Macnab salmon poses. "There is a limited amount of time between 12 August and the close of the season," he says. "You can catch a salmon on a



ALAMY

number of rivers from mid August until the end of November but not a great many that have grouse moors around. The Spey should offer a good chance as could Tweed, if you can get to shoot a grouse up in the Lammermuirs on the same day. There must also be a number of opportunities in the Highlands and Islands but you will need to make sure the estate has a run of fish at that time."

If you are staking your challenge on a river that has a spring run no amount of clever fishing will help you catch something fresh. "For summer fishing, first thing in the morning or last thing is best as in the heat of the day the fish will sink to the bottom of the pool or conceal themselves in fast-moving rapids. They have no eyelids so bright sun blinds them. If you go when the conditions are right you stand a great chance."

For the Macnab, salmon tactics are vital. "If you are on a spate river wait for fresh water coming down and wait for the river to rise," says Evans. But for those times when you just need salmon on hook it is often best to subvert the received Macnab wisdom and wait until the end of the day to fish. A nerve-racking option.

"Stale fish that have been stuck in the pool will only rise in the evening," Evans says. "Remember that this isn't like your usual salmon week. For fresh fish a full floating line works as the fish are in shallower water running

through the pools nearer the surface. For the stale fish when there has been no water for several days, put on a fast-sinking line with a big fly that can penetrate the depths and aggravate the old salmon."

Once you have the salmon in sight it is essential you can deliver the bait to the target. "Learn to cast first," Evans says. "If the salmon is the hardest part you are at a distinct disadvantage if you struggle getting fly to fish." Evans is based on the Kent/Sussex border and holds one-day crash courses on Speycasting or three-day courses on Tweed and the Tay. "For a high-banked, rocky river near a grouse moor you need to be able to Speycast," he says.

When it comes to difficulty, Evans disagrees with the received wisdom. "If you are there at the right time, catching a salmon is dead easy, five out of 10," he says. "I only drink whisky so at the end of the day it would have to be a large quantity of Glenfarclas, unless I was going for the Royal Macnab, in which case I might save it until afterwards." I might suggest a good dose beforehand, too.

When you do head north to try your luck on hill, stream and moor, heed the advice of our experts. Know your terrain, do your research and ensure your skills are up to scratch.

Then muster provisions and hope for a dollop of luck. With Glenfarclas Whisky, Hine Cognac and Pol Roger Champagne in the hamper, the expedition will go with a bang. ■



MACHINATIONS

■ **THE MACNAB** must be completed within one day.

■ **THE ORIGINAL MACNAB** A salmon on the fly, a stag and a brace of grouse.

■ **THE REAL MACNAB** A salmon on the fly and a stag, as the trio did in John Buchan's novel *John Macnab*. They must be "poached" in a legal sporting manner from a pre-warned owner who accepts the challenge.

■ **THE SOUTHERN MACNAB** A couple of snipe, a sea-trout and a roe buck.

■ **THE MACMARSH** A foreshore goose, a pike and a fallow buck.

■ **THE MACVERMIN** An impressive rat, a pike on the fly and a brace of magpies (to be shot).

■ **THE MACSCANDI** A moose, a capercaillie and a trout on the fly.

■ **THE MACARGENTINIAN** A golden dorado, 100 brace of doves and a wild pig. This is the northern Argentinian Macnab.

■ **THE MACAFRICAN** A brace of sandgrouse, an impala and a tigerfish.

■ **THE MACCHARLIE** Riding to foxhounds, harriers and staghounds.

■ **THE CORINTHIAN MACNAB** Riding to hounds in the morning, shooting a brace of partridges in the afternoon and then catching a trout on the fly.

■ **THE MACNORFOLK** A brace of wild greys, a fallow buck and a bass on the fly.

For rules and details of how to enter, go to www.macnabchallenge.co.uk.



KIRSTEN SCHEUER

