

# ONCE MORE UNTO THE HILL...

Readers tell **Alexandra Henton** how they rose to *The Field* and Hunter Balmoral Macnab Challenge in 2012



**T**HIS, the third year of *The Field* and Hunter Balmoral Macnab Challenge, has seen more triumphs than previously. Eighteen Macnabbers successfully took to the field to tackle the ultimate sporting challenge. We had a take on the Macafrican, a single Macnorfolk, a Classic featuring a brace of ptarmigan, a 13-year-old Macnabber and one sporting lady. Seven of the Macnabs were taken from the Gannochy estate and there were four repeat performers, with American Joe Thompson making it three out of three.

"I'm fortunate to have been able to pursue a Macnab three years in a row at Gannochy," he says. "Allan Hemmings' hospitality and head-keeper David Clement's and Colin Lanyon's guidance are exceptional. I had high hopes – but no realistic expectations – for 2012."

The day began with fishing over extremely low water but after 30 minutes a salmon was landed at Dalforth Pool. "Unfortunately, in turning my iPhone to line up the picture, I lost the phone into the river. Faced with the decision of freeing the fish or finding the phone, I chose to keep the fish," he says. A difficult shot at the stag required a second bullet to ensure the kill but "fortunately, the grouse were more agreeable than the river or the stag" and the final part was straightforward, although on steep terrain. "It was a memorable day despite the difficulties. And now I can claim to have earned both a Macnab and a new iPhone 5 in one day."

Graham Bonham-Carter had started the Gannochy gold rush on 28 August with his Classic Macnab. "It was my second visit to

**Graham Bonham-Carter (far left) started his Macnab with a salmon at 7.46am (below)**



Gannochy and I was well reminded about the 'catch your salmon early' rule. On a rising river I got a 3lb salmon at 7.46am," he says. "Allan had given me some tips on where to cast the day before and it worked." The grouse were shot at 11.15am and they were on the hill by 12.15pm. "But it took until 6.15pm to find the stag," he says. "We had nearly given up hope when we saw a group of five on the hill, but they were startled and so it was another two hours on our tummies. But then a Royal came into view and, after a brief consultation, the keeper said if it was old to go ahead. The stag came down and when we got up to it we realised it was an Imperial." After a few nervous moments consensus was reached that it was one to take before winter. "It was absolutely amazing, and I kept the fly, cartridges and rifle shell to frame," Bonham-Carter says.

Dr John Davies, a 2010 Macnabber, Rob Savage and Keith Trenter all took the spoils in the same week at Gannochy. "It was just as exciting as my first one," says Davies. With two salmon in the bag, a 6lb and a 9lb fish, it was a swift stag before lunch and a brace of grouse afterwards. "It was all done by 3pm," he says, "and I have Colin preparing the head for me, to go in my study in Wales."

Stuart Hudson, another Gannochy regular and 2010 Macnabber, proved his worth again. "Having taken a 15lb salmon from Gannochy's renowned Witches' Pool earlier in the week, I decided to fish a quiet piece of water called Alders," he says. "After fishing for half an hour with a small Conehead in beautiful sunshine, thinking it was far too bright, the line went tight and a 3lb silver fish was on the bank." Time was at a premium, so Hudson stalked a covey of grouse on foot, and picked one off. A thistle-ridden stalk finally resulted in a mature stag from about 250yd, and then the race was on for the second grouse. "From the top of the corrie, within a minute a single bird burst from the heather, curled round to my left out over the valley, and one shot completed the bag. As I shook David [the headkeeper] by the hand I knew how privileged I was to have completed my third Macnab," Hudson recalls.

Gannochy's owner, Allan Hemmings, had a particular reason to be proud, as his daughter, Helen, completed the family hat trick (Allan's Macnab had started the Gannochy run and his son, Dean, is also a member of the club.) "Helen lives in America and visits Gannochy every couple of years," explains Dean. "I thought it would be easy as everybody else seemed to have got one," says Helen. "But I didn't catch my salmon until midday Saturday, bearing in mind I'd been trying all week. My father had threatened me with a 12.30 deadline as then it would be his turn >



to try his luck." Helen's next stage was a brace of grouse, which took about three hours, so it was already 3.30pm when she was advised to head for the Golden Stairs, not far away, and a couple of hours later she shot her first stag. No longer regarding her feat as "easy", Helen says, "I've completed two Ironman competitions, but this took a lot longer and in some ways was harder. It would not have been possible without the help of the keepers, David Clement and Colin Lanyon."

"In 2002 my father and I bagged a double Macnab in consecutive days," says Edward Thompson. Every year the family returns to the same 37,000-acre estate. "This year with all the rain, the river was falling after a spate, which couldn't have been better," he says, and a cock salmon was caught on a Cascade fly by 10am. A five-minute trip up the road took him to the grouse. "We opted to use the keeper's German wirehaired and English pointers and

**The youngest Macnabber to date: George Bourne-Arton (left and below) is 13 years old**



both my father and I were suffering from woolly heads with 'bang, bang, bugger' following the first shots. Fortunately, we were more successful with later coveys." Then came a stalk for an 11-point stag, navigating wind rolling around high hills ("unusual" for Caithness as it is generally flat country") and several groups of hinds. The stalk ended in triumph. The Macnab took four hours and 55 minutes.

"Capturing three very different wild species in a short space of time is one of the greatest multidisciplinary challenges in our sport," says Thompson. "Two days later my father banked a fish in the morning but while he was fiddling around it flipped back into the water. He had his grouse and stag by 1pm and was kicking himself over the one that got away." Another father-and-son team, Gerd and Frans Kemkens from the Netherlands, completed their Macnab at Scone Palace.

A bravura performance was put in by 13-year-old George Bourne-Arton on the Innischoarach estate. After catching a salmon at 9.30am, the stag, "an old 10-pointer", was taken at 1.30pm about 600 metres up. "He then walked for about four hours to find a grouse - including dragging his stag most of the way down the hill," says his father, Richard, "and eventually getting a left-and-right at 6.30pm on the only covey we saw." Our youngest Macnabber, George has earned his laurels: "I was thrilled to get the Macnab. It was my first stag, which was special, and then I almost gave up hope of finding a grouse - we walked for miles - but it was worth it in the end."

"It was something I had daydreamed about but not planned," says Thomas van Straubenzee of his Macnab, taken at Badanloch in September. "I was lucky to be invited up by a great friend," he says. "On the second day the first fish for our week [a 10lb hen salmon in the Chancellor Pool on the Helmsdale at 11.30am] led to my Macnab. Grouse were scarce but Brian, the headkeeper, me and his 10-year-old labrador found a covey of five, got two, and decided to try for the stag. By the third stalk we found a shootable stag to finish the day and complete the Macnab. It was a fantastic day."

Pelle Forss from Sweden managed his Macnab on the sixth attempt on the Glenprosen estate, "and it was the easiest of them all," he says. "Everything went to plan. We changed tactics and went up for the stag, which was shot just before eight o'clock. Straight after the stag, I just walked down the hill and had two successful 30yd shots and the grouse was bagged." The 7lb salmon was caught at Kerkock on the Tay after an hour. "It was a great feeling after such hard work. On my second attempt I went after the grouse for six hours to no avail," he recalls.



**Stuart Hudson's 3lb salmon (above) preceded a thistle-strewn stalk (top) for a mature stag**

Friends Tony Rawlings and Mike Barnes took their Macnabs on consecutive days at Inverpoll estate above Ullapool. Barnes shot a stag mid morning and decided to try fishing a favourite pool. "The fish took midway down the pool. I had no net and no easy spot to beach it, so I jumped in and scooped rod, reel and fish on to the bank - a 5lb fish at about 1pm," he recalls. In rain and wind, with the estate owner, a spaniel and a pointer, he was away on the trail of grouse. "They are very scarce up there but I saw two brace and shot one from each, the last as the light was fading fast

around 5.30pm. Just before the sun set I tried to explain the historical, important and equally scarce Royal Macnab to the cook but just got a slap around the head."

There were variations on the Macnab theme. Chris Dewbury of Hunter Boots got a Macnorfolk (see *Norfolk's mutable Macnab*, December issue); Dr Kevin Robertson pursued a variation on the Macafrican; and Wes Stanton did the classic Macnab but with ptarmigan at Glen Etive. "I had taken a week, and everyone but me had managed to catch an Atlantic salmon," he says, "so it was looking a little embarrassing. Luckily, I had a 4lb salmon at 7.59am on 12 September and the challenge was on." A tough climb up to 2,700ft followed, with ptarmigan seeming scarce, and then, "I saw one on the ground about 20yd in front of me. A bird behind it took off and flushed the

**Clockwise from below: Mike Barnes, Inverpoll owner David Davies and Tony Rawlings; Thomas van Straubenzee; gillie Gary Harkin, Pelle Forss and keeper Bruce Cooper; Helen Hemmings; keeper David Clement with Keith Trenter**

