

NORFOLK'S *mutable Macnab*

Roebuck, wild greys and bass or a pike: which element will decide **Jonathan Young's** fate? Photographs by **Charles Sainsbury-Plaice**



A SMUDGE of brown glared at two figures snaking along a Norfolk hedgerow in the soft September pre-dawn. Had we been busted by Bambi? Seemingly not, for our quarry remained suspicious but still. But was that blur a buck or doe? Girls were of no use – only a cervine chap would do for our Norfolk Macnab (Macnorfolk) attempt. With sloth-like stealth I raised the binoculars – and found a feed-hopper staring back at me.

“We’ll wait here for a bit,” whispered Nick Yarham, the gamekeeper, as we approached

the edge of Tyburn Copse. “He’s been coming out of there for the past two mornings, and there’s always the chance of a muntjac.”

But it was still a no-show as the grey grew into the splendour of red-streaked dawn, so we tippy-toed into the copse, treading carefully over the dry sticks to avoid the faint snap as fatal to our chances as a mortar explosion.

Halfway through, Yarham gestured to a slot the size of a woman’s hand. Not all monarchs live in glens and Norfolk is home to some of the biggest stags in the world, carrying a weight of antler that makes their

Above: Cogger, the German wirehaired pointer, leads the way through sugar beet

Caledonian cousins’ headgear look like tooth-picks. “If we see one, take him,” muttered Yarham. “The rut’s only a week away and this place is a favourite for travellers.”

Grasping the rifle tighter, I slid through the last of the woodland but to no avail. The only movement was a skein of feral greylags, their chatter cut with the sweeter notes of a pair of pinkfeet, the first of the many thousands that would arrive by the end of the month. ➤



“ If you haven't fly-fished for pike, try it. In the right circumstances, they take indecently ”

We drove back into the farmyard to rendezvous with the rest of the team and have a gulp of coffee, badly needed after a 4.15am start.

This little foray had been planned months before, with the assistance of two local sportsmen-naturalists, Nick Zoll and David “Digs” Diggens, both of whom possess an impressive CV in wild sport. Zoll spent 14 years establishing and running fishing lodges in South America and the Caribbean with his wife, Monica, and is a formidable fisherman in his own right. He now runs the UK offices of Nervous Waters and David Denies, companies that own and operate lodges specialising in shooting, fishing and stalking holidays in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and the Bahamas. His friend, Diggens, a former Army officer, expert wildfowler and bass fisherman, now shares his love of the county and its wildlife through his company, Hidden Norfolk.

Somehow we'd cajoled them into letting us attempt a Macnorfolk: a roebuck, a brace of wild English greys and a pike or bass on the fly, all to be achieved in one day.

My partner was Chris Dewbury, sales director of Hunter Boot, the sponsor of *The Field* Macnab Challenge. Last year we'd successfully completed the Classic Macnab – a salmon, stag and brace of grouse – and I'd had the pleasure of achieving it first, leaving Dewbury to do the sweating. But there he was with a roebuck in the back of the pick-up and wearing the look of a labrador that's snaffled a dropped sausage.

“When we approached our bit of wood there were three bucks in the open, about 200yd away, two sparring with the other,” said Dewbury. “When they'd finished sparring, the biggest was trotting back into cover when Digs gave him a bark, which stopped him in his tracks and allowed me to take the shot.”

So, 15-love to the Dewbury as we went into the next phase, the wild greys. English partridges have taken a thumping this year due to the wettest summer for a century, but the keeper said there were enough to spare us a couple of brace. In order to bag them, Zoll had called in reinforcements in the shape of Steve Polley, a local picker-up, and Mark Clark, whose van proclaimed him “the traditional mole catcher”. But when he's not bumping off gentlemen in velvet (“no mole, no fee”) Clark runs pointers, mostly for falconers. So, armed with Cogger, his five-year-old German wire-haired pointer, and Polley's squad of labs and cockers, we were pretty sure that securing the brace of partridges would be the easiest part of the Macnorfolk.

Half an hour later, as we continuously swept up a field of sugar beet, that confidence had wilted. Cogger had gone to point brilliantly but the resulting flush of rabbits, hares and, once, an impressive rat wasn't quite what we'd ordered. Finally, at the edge of range, a pair rose. I dropped the first, and the second peeled off downwind past Dewbury, which somehow he missed. From the way it dropped, it was obvious my bird was a runner but we

marked it carefully and Polley soon had his team on the hunt. Fifteen minutes later, he was still searching; beet is a notoriously hard crop for holding scent. But eventually his seasoned labrador delivered one half of my required brace.

Another 20 minutes, and still no greys until one flushed from under my feet. This time I made no mistake, giving it just enough law to be decent before folding it with a single shot. It was now 10.30am. “Right, we've got to make the tide so you come with me to try for the bass,” ordered Digs, “and we'll leave Dewbury to bag his brace.”



Boys in tweeds aren't a common sight at the Blakeney National Trust café, but since it does a fine trade in home-made pork pies and sausage rolls, we ignored the bemused looks and grabbed a bucketload of calories, our first bite of the day, while Digs fetched his tender.

Rigging up the rods as we steamed, we were soon aboard the *Auntie Pam*, Digs's 22ft Norfolk Crabber fitted with a 2.5 litre marine diesel inboard that chugged with the reassuring cadence of a giant's heartbeat. “We've got one-and-a-half hour's of water,” shouted Digs. “After that, it's back to harbour or a 26-mile walk back along the coast.”

Nick Zoll takes Chris Dewbury fishing for pike (above) to land the world's smallest (right). Later, another five were boated (above left)

He regularly catches bass to 5lb from the shoals as the tide ebbs and flows over the sandbanks, but after an hour our only offer was a collection of fragile red seaweeds. I'd just about decided on replacing my Chartreuse Clouser fly with something more effective – such as a semi-masticated pork pie or the boat's anchor – when Digs changed the drift, talking us 20yd off a sandbank populated by some hundred seals on its northern point. ➤



While they lazily waved flippers in our general direction, Digs chucked a Toby spoon to try and locate a shoal. Twenty yards into the retrieve and a fish nailed the bait. He'd found them. Steaming upstream, we repeated the drift and a bass swirled at my fly. All we needed now was 10 minutes in the same spot. "There's no time!" yelled Digs. "If we don't go right now we won't get the boat back in."

Chugging hard against the ebb, we raced past whimbrel, immature oystercatchers and turnstones primping over the newly exposed mud-flats and just made the hard standing at Blakeney. As we sailed, we received an update from the Zoll and Dewbury team. Two-and-half hours after we'd left them, Dewbury had managed to bag two partridges. "In a normal year it would have been sorted in half an hour," said Zoll. "But, because these are old birds, they knew the game and just kept rolling back out of range."

The team had now scorched off to a private lake, its location shrouded in MI5-level secrecy, for the pike part of the challenge.

It was the perfect place to hide a body. Invisible, even when we'd parked next to it, thanks to its shrouding of trees, the water lurked in a small dip. Rhododendrons spread their octopus arms right to the shore, the only access being via one small gap where a dinghy shoved its tentative nose through bilious duckweed.

"Sorry to be an arse," said Zoll, as he rigged up a canary-sized fly on a wire-traced leader "But Dewbury had better go first, as he's got two-thirds of the Macnorfolk."

Casting close to the lily-coated fringes, they hit the first pike after 10 minutes, a specimen slightly bigger than a body-building minnow. But in this game size does not matter and Dewbury had achieved the Macnorfolk. An hour later, the pair of us had boated six between us and lost another four. Anyone who's not tried fly-fishing for pike should do so. In the right circumstances, they take indecently.

As usual with wild quarry, they had surprised us. The partridges, not the pike, were supposed to be the easy bit.

“ The fish surprised us. The partridges, not the pike, were supposed to be the easy bit ”

That still left me incomplete, so Digs and I stopped briefly for a cuppa before heading back to the woods to try and secure my roebuck. That this was a serious attempt was underlined by his donning of a special stalking hat of the type once sported by Bill and Ben, the flowerpot men.

Stepping into the lush murk of the wood, he halted within yards, set up the shooting sticks and told me to ready the rifle. "I was here last week, gave a couple of peeps and two muntjac bowled into the clearing within 30 seconds." He gave his call a squeeze, producing a squeak like a castrated whoopee-cushion. Nothing happened. We crept farther. More whoopee cushioning. Still no deer.

Edging out of the wood into the draining light, we spotted a single roe feeding quarter of a mile away. It was a she.

Another 200yd of softly, softly and Digs spots a group of three. These are stalkable. But again, they're girls. Twenty minutes later, a singleton within easy shot of a high seat and, yes, it's a female. Somewhere along the line we've obviously missed the posters proclaiming, "Tuesday Night is Ladies' Night".

At 9.15 we return to Zoll's farmhouse empty handed. Young has fallen at the last fence, leaving Dewbury to parade in the winner's enclosure. And that is how it should be.

When we first dreamt up the Macnab Challenge, the determining factor was that it would always be a true test of rod, rifle and gun against the survival instincts of truly wild quarry. Last year, the dice rolled sixes and both Dewbury and myself were privileged to bag a salmon, stag and brace of grouse. This time, I threw a five but was still rewarded with a day of extraordinary sport in generous and knowledgeable company.

There is a drawback with Macnabbing, however: it's horribly addictive. Sitting in the kitchen, swallowing a sandwich prior to the long haul home, we are already pondering the next variant for ourselves and others, as Diggins and Zoll are blisteringly keen to introduce more people to the charms of wild Norfolk sport. "Tell you what," volunteers Zoll. "How about a winter cod, a couple of pinkfeet off the foreshore and a Chinese water deer? Now that would be a challenge. What are you doing in December?" ■

DO IT YOURSELF, NAB A MACNAB

■ To find out more about *The Field's* Macnab Challenge, in association with Hunter Boot, go to www.macnabchallenge.co.uk.

■ To try a Macnorfolk, contact either Zoll or Diggins.

■ Contact Nick Zoll at Choseley Farmhouse Docking, Kings Lynn, Norfolk PE31 8PQ, tel 01485 512046, email nickmonica@nervouswaters.com; www.nervouswaters.com.

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