

Macnab a double?

Jonathan Young and friend set out to nab a Classic. First one to catch a salmon gets the chance of a stag. “The river’s in perfect condition,” announces the keeper. As curses go, it’s on a par with an actor naming *The Scottish Play*. Will our heroes be defeated by time, clumsiness or nerves? Photographs by **Kirsten Scheuerl**



As curses go, it was worse than mentioning the *Scottish Play* at Stratford. One casual sentence had transformed our Macnab into *Macbeth*. But it was a little late to ward off with rituals. No amount of thrice-turning, spitting or even flourishing of white heather would undo David Clement’s fatal pronouncement, “The river is in perfect condition, it’s full of fish and you’ll have no problem catching one.” I looked at Chris Dewbury and saw the hope fade from his eyes. We were doomed, doomed.

We’d spent months planning this expedition to try to achieve *The Field’s* Classic Macnab Challenge, defined in the rules as a salmon, a stag and a brace of grouse to be taken in one day. Chris Dewbury, sales director of Hunter Boot, the Macnab Challenge’s sponsor, was keener than a starved stoat on a fat rabbit but enthusiasm was not enough. We needed help and it arrived in the form of a generous invitation from Allan Hemmings, owner of the 7,000-acre Gannochy estate in the Angus glens.

Following a successful career in business he bought it seven years ago after a heavy nudge from David Clement, his headkeeper and friend. “I said to the boss, ‘Well, you’ve always wanted an estate like this, so what are you waiting for?’” recalls David.

Gannochy is highly unusual in being ideal for Macnabs. Neighbouring landowners have turned their estates into grouse moors by fencing out the deer and so minimising tick. It was an option open to Allan Hemmings – in the

Stalker Colin Lanyon precedes the writer up the hill (left), where the Royal (below right) was shot, after landing a 10lb hen fish (below)



Thirties Gannochy was shooting bags of 5,000 brace – but he wanted a place where Scotland’s iconic species, the salmon, red deer and grouse, could flourish and offer a different sort of sporting challenge.

“We love shooting over dogs, and this year one of our English setters, Paris, won the Patiala Challenge Cup for winning the International Gundog League Pointer & Setter Open Stake. Last year we shot 250 brace,

“AT MY VERY FIRST CAST I MANAGED TO CATCH A TREE AND LOSE MY CAP”

mostly over pointers, and we’re aiming for about 15 such days a year, plus a couple of driven ones,” says Allan. “As for the red deer, the Angus Glens used to be alive with them and in one year Gannochy took off over 200 stags. But today we have a resident population of about 150 stags and hinds, of which we shoot 12-15 stags annually, nearly all of them taken as part of a Macnab.”

Allan steered us over to the lodge’s board of honour, the sort that commemorates head boys in neat capitals blocked in gold. It’s a form of sporting immortality and I sensed Dewbury quiver like a scenting setter. “There are 18 names in total, and the Gannochy rule is that you must grass a salmon before breakfast. But because you’re here specifically to try for a Macnab we’ve extended that to 2pm. Any later and there won’t be enough light for the stag and grouse,” he said.

So, would fortune favour Chris or me – or turn her back on the pair of us? We’d discussed it at length on the drive up. To maximise our chances, we’d both fish, and the first one to land the salmon would try for the Macnab, leaving the other to spectate.

Outside the lodge, a couple of Land Rovers rumbled up, one carrying David, the other his fellow keeper, Colin Lanyon. We divided up the kit carefully, so each had a full set of rod, rifle and gun, then headed our separate ways. The estate has five miles of the North Esk, and a little rain two days previously had left it at the perfect height and clarity. Colin seemed worryingly optimistic, a view that soon changed when he saw me assemble my rod, a 9ft #9 bonefishing rod. I’d reasoned that the river wouldn’t be that big, that I’d easily cover it by double-haul casting and that it would be better to fish effectively with a rod I knew well rather than fiddle about trying to relearn my speycasting. But I’d forgotten that the river might be lined with trees. And it was. At my very first cast down the Craigoshina Pool I succeeded in catching a tree, knocking my cap into the water and almost sending my Polaroids following. Colin forced a smile.

It didn’t improve. To fish at the right depth he’d selected a Willie Gunn variant, tied on a brass tube with Temple Dog fur and a metal conehead. About every third chuck I’d let the heavy fly catch on the grass bank and present the invisible salmon with yet another bunch of grass. Colin’s grin became more fixed as the hours ticked past.

At half-past one he decided to have his piece in the sunshine but I could now hear those minutes booming past. I swallowed two bites of a ham roll and got back into the river, covering the tail of the pool, which has no ➤





eight stags, some shootable. They were on a piece of broken country that permitted an approach and the wind was on our faces. Colin was optimistic until the beasts mooched over to level ground, with a flock of sheep on the higher ground to our left and another flock below us on our right. If the left-hand flock stayed put, we'd be OK, so we started wriggling down the hill. One by one, the cursed ewes spotted us and 15 minutes later they shambled down the hill to join the flock on our right, taking the deer with them.

It was now 5pm and the Macnab attempt seemed to have fallen at the second hurdle. "I think they've all cleared off to the birch wood



“ AT 5PM IT SEEMED AS IF THE ATTEMPT HAD FALLEN AT THE SECOND HURDLE ”

but there's a piece of high bracken in front of us, so we might be lucky," said Colin, with the resigned air of one who thinks anything but. With heavy boots and hearts we crept down the hill in single file. Two hundred yards on, Colin braked suddenly. He's spied movement. Wordlessly, he got down on his belly and together we slithered for 100yd down a 40-degree slope, stopping 5yd short of a granite knoll. "When we reach that, we'll be sky-lined," he whispered. "I'll go first and pass the rifle to you on my left. Move like a snail. Any sharp movement now and it'll all be over."

Inching forward, he reached the knoll and signalled me over. "See them?" he whispered. Through the binoculars I saw three beasts, or at least bits of them, 130yd below. On the right was a flicker of ears from a staggie. In the

Colin Lanyon nets Chris Dewbury's 7lb salmon (below), caught on a special Gannochy fly (left) three minutes before the noon deadline

middle emerged the long curves of a switch. And on the left was a mature beast with a better head. All were couched in high bracken and the light was leaching from the sky. "They're too near the wood and it's too late in the day to risk a neck shot. We'll go for a broad-side-on shot," said Colin, to my huge relief. "Because we're shooting downhill, don't go for the usual shot on the crease. Aim halfway up, so that the bullet trajectory passes through the vital organs."

The minutes, precious minutes, sped along and our boys were happy in their bracken bed. Then the stag on the left hefted himself up. "He's a nine-pointer, a shootable stag," muttered Colin. By now I had my arms resting on my knoll, rifle in hand. We were too sky-lined to use a bipod. "If he moves to the right and you get a clear shot, take him," whispered Colin. Thirty seconds later he did. Thirty-two seconds later, Colin said, "Good reaction to the shot," as the .243's boom echoed down the glen. ➤

bankside trees. "Go down it fast, Jonathan," Colin called. "And then go down again."

Nothing moved. I trundled back and it was now 1.55pm. "We'll just try a change of fly," said Colin, producing the same pattern but with a plastic tube and conehead. Unhindered by the weight, the line now zapped out and at the third cast there was the unmistakable thud-thud of a taking fish. Years ago Hugh Matheson, then head gillie on the Lower Beauly, had drilled me never to strike with a salmon but to let the fish just take the hook and then lift the rod gently. Following Hugh's

advice to the letter, the line peeled off the reel and 10 minutes later I steered a 10lb coloured hen into Colin's waiting net. It was 2.05pm.

Returning her carefully to the water, we scorched off to the rifle range, fired three .243 100-grain rounds to Colin's satisfaction and then went to find the others.

At first I thought Chris had not heard our Landie trundle past the fishing hut; then it became obvious that he was refusing to believe the inevitable. He and David had not had a happy time. Chris, too, had brought a single-handed rod but it was impossible to use on



The writer shoots grouse (top), safely retrieved (above). Team spirit: Chris Dewbury, the writer, Allan Hemmings and David Clement (left)

Gull's Pool and David had rapidly replaced it with a 15-footer and a crash course in spey-casting. And it had worked. Seeing a big fish boil at the tail of the pool, on the very third cast Chris hooked it. Then came disaster. On the way down to the river, David had pretty much threatened Chris with a gralloching if he connected with a salmon but struck like a trout fisherman. Chris, of course, had done exactly that, pulling the fly straight out of the salmon's jaws. Another fish had taken the fly as David was laying. They'd failed to set the hook. And a third fish had also taken but come off.

So that explained the dearth of jollity at our arrival. Chris, in particular, looked as though he'd swallowed a wasp. Undeterred, and waving cheery goodbyes, Colin and I headed for the hills. As we came down the high ground of Colmeallie, we spotted a group of





Chris Dewbury with his hard-earned 10-pointer (above) . After the shot at 5.27pm, it was a scramble to bag the grouse before dark (right)

I stumbled down the boulder-strewn hill and saw the antlers thrusting through the bracken. The beast was dead but no nine-pointer. He was a Royal, my first. As ever when stalking, my admiration for the beast was spiked with sadness for its demise but there was little time for contemplation. It was now 5.40pm. "I'll sort out the beast," said Colin. "Head down the hill, pick up the track and David will meet you on the road with the dogs."

Five minutes later, a Landie bombed round the corner with a host of eager noses pressed through the back grille. As we bumped up to Crannel Moor, we were joined by the other Landie carrying Allan Hemmings, Chris Dewbury and Kirsten Scheuerl, our photographer. It was now past 6pm.

"Now, I want you to relax," said David. "So many people screw it up on the grouse. Don't feel under pressure, but we've got 40 minutes of light left, and you'll probably have a maximum of two 'lifts' of grouse." Thanks, Dave.

As we bumped along, he eased on the brakes. A head was eyeballing us through the leggy heather at the top of the track. "Get out of the car, cut round the back, and approach him through the dip on the right." Grabbing shotgun and cartridges, I bolted out the passenger door and crept like a Mohican towards the mark. The grouse lifted and took with him a covey, from which I dropped one. There was now less than 30 minutes of shootable light. The pointers and setters were working crosswind, and one of them lifted a singleton on my far right. It was a long shot, and I missed.

“AFTER ALL THIS EFFORT IT LOOKED AS IF I'D MISS THE MACNAB BY HALF A BRACE”

Hell's teeth. After all this effort it looked as though I was going to scuff the Macnab by half a brace of grouse. We trudged on silently and 120yd later the dogs bumped a covey that swung round to my right. I dropped a bird with the first barrel and didn't attempt a second - I wanted to keep the shot in reserve in case, Lazarus-like, my grouse recovered. But all was well, the bird was retrieved and the Macnab, amazingly, was nabbed.

Chris, sporting as ever, was the first to shake my hand and we retired to the lodge where Allan produced a brace of Balvenie bottles. Using the old gillie's toast, "Here's to blood," we raised our tumblers to the most splendid quarry species in the world.

Allan Hemmings then made an announcement. "Gentlemen, I'm going to give you the chance of doing the double. Chris, there's only one condition. You must grass the salmon by noon tomorrow. You can use my 13½ft Sage rod and Hardy Perfect reel."

I spent the next morning writing up my notes and having the occasional chuck. Fish were moving but there was no sign of the other team and Allan had been adamant about the deadline. It was now 11.55am. Chris was driving me south and it was going to be a very long journey...

At 12.12 the Land Rover arrived full of grinning faces. At 11.57am precisely, Chris had



connected with a 7lb salmon on the special Gannochy fly and the second Macnab was on.

We raced to the lodge and bundled Chris, Colin and Kirsten into the Argo, which wended its way up to a large natural bowl where Colin had spied a big herd of mixed hinds and stags. Meanwhile, David and I took the Landie to reach the high ground above and watch proceedings. As we turned a corner, David spotted four mature stags browsing no more than 60yd from the road. They offered a real chance so he spun round to catch the Argo before it headed over the brow of the hill and out of radio range. Too late. Despite buzzing them on the radio, flashing our lights and waving caps, no one heard us over the Argo's roar and all eyes were glued to the hill ahead.

Taking a track, we parked way above the natural amphitheatre where drama was about to unfold. On a ridge to our right was a mixed herd of 114 hinds and stags grazing contentedly, though the stags were beginning to spar

prior to the true rut in three weeks' time. Creeping upwind of them were three tiny figures: Chris, Colin and Kirsten. They reached a rubble stone dyke only to be trapped 280yd from the deer lying over the crest of the ridge. If they went farther, they risked their scent being funnelled up the dip below the ridge. If they moved any more to the left, they'd risk spooking yet another flock of sentinel sheep.

For two hours they remained frozen to their position until a slight shift of wind alerted the deer. They sensed someone was close and 114 pairs of eyes and ears swivelled, trying to pinpoint the danger, but our people were still invisible. The stalking party could have moved to the left but in this prey-and-predator chess the sheep played the part of lowly but significant pawns. Alert them and it was checkmate.

Still uneasy, the deer drifted up the opposite hill, anchoring themselves halfway up it, a flock of sheep to the left, another to the right.

From here, they could spot any approach from above or below. The game was over.

Colin and the team struggled up the hill towards us, perspiring heavily. Quickly, we told them about the four stags we'd spotted in the woods of the Park of the Clune, and they hustled down the hill, leaving Kirsten, David and me to follow. It was now 5.05pm.

"They've gone to a very bad place," said David, as a dozen blackcock sailed majestically over our heads and down the glen. "It's boggy there, the bracken's crisp and the deer have all the advantages of sound and scent."

We were watching more blackgame and preparing our commiserations when Donald, the trainee keeper, piped up, "That was a shot." It was now 5.27pm.

Heading towards it, we found Chris and Colin with a 10-pointer.

"It was just amazing," said Chris. "We were moving through the wood, trying our best to avoid making noise, when Colin spotted him 40yd away. I took the shot resting the rifle against a tree."

For the second time, a Land Rover hurtled towards the moors, heading to Corathro in search of grouse.

Chris Dewbury can shoot and I had no doubt he'd bag his brace if we could find them - and he remained unflustered.

Almost immediately the setter sent a single grouse arrowing away in front of Chris. Normally a simple shot for him, he missed. Nerves were kicking in. Ten minutes later the dogs bumped another single bird, which hurtled down the hill. It was a long shot, a good 45yd, but Chris loves a left-to-right crosser and it fell as dead as Socrates.

One more grouse to go, but now we were route-marching up the hill. It was well past six and dusk beckoned. Alerted by the shots, the grouse were wary and we watched a couple of coveys lift and head out to the moor.

And then, "There. On the top of the ridge? See them?" Chris spotted a covey and tacked round to the left, hoping the dip in the moor would give him enough cover. But at 40yd, they rose and he missed with his first barrel but then dropped a pair with a second, a "cannon" shot. It was 6.21pm.

Back in the lodge, fire blazing, the Balvenie received yet another beasting as we celebrated the amazing fortune of a double Macnab in two days. None of it would have been possible without the wholehearted generosity of Allan Hemmings coupled with the extraordinary fieldcraft and lifelong experience of David Clement and Colin Lanyon, outstanding examples of the blend of skills needed to be an upland keeper.

But the true debt remained, as ever, to our quarry species. Sportsmen may roam the world looking for a challenge but little can match that offered by that glorious Scottish trio: the salmon, stag and red grouse ■

