

HIGH HOPES

Mick Garvey changes his 'perfect' plan to earn himself a mixed bag

My job has recently seen me travelling to Newcastle via the A1. This main artery road is adjacent to farmland and so much of it has rapeseed growing. The number of pigeons attacking these fields is alarming and seeing as I was being chauffeured by one of my lads, I had plenty of time to study the devastating effect the birds were having on this popular crop. In fact, the damage could be measured easily by sight. Between driving up on the Monday and returning on the Tuesday, I witnessed the ever-growing fringe around the crop getting larger by the day – and by 'growing' I am referring to its expanding baldness. The flocks could easily have been in the mid-hundreds and at times resembled starlings in murmuration – well almost. With plenty of time on my hands I planned my attack on the couple of rapeseed fields I had on my permissions back home, and

a call to my farmer had him confirming that he had the same problem as his northern counterparts. "There's hundreds of them, Mick," was his comment.

By the time we were heading south, I had formulated a plan and I had high hopes for my next outing. I planned an early start to get set up alongside one of the small woods that line the crop fields, then set out a few decoys along the fringe, along with a few peckers and a couple of bouncers for additional movement. I could either set up my hide within the woods, or if the predicted bad weather materialised then I could shoot from the Hilux – sorted!

PERFECT SPOT

A beautiful clear day greeted me as I made my way to the farm, with blue skies, no wind – just a very slight breeze that would die off later that

morning according to the met office. It was cooler than earlier in the week but nothing drastic. First impressions were good as a large flock of woodpigeons took flight and dropped down in the centre of the field as I entered the field through the open gate. This didn't impress me though because the land was pretty much waterlogged, so getting close to them was off the cards because my standard tyres wouldn't stand a chance if I got bogged down.

After making a full circuit of the field, I decided on a perfect spot for my plan, where I could park behind a holly bush that was sticking out proud from the wood, and set up just inside the tree line. First job was set the decoys out and with the slight breeze coming over the top of me from behind and slightly from the right, I opted for a one side, open pattern in a 'tick' shape, with the peckers



The office for the second half of the day.



MICK GARVEY

taking up position at the front and the bouncers bringing up the rear. I was pleased with the effect of my handiwork – how could they resist?

Second impressions were not so good, the rapeseed was now so advanced in growth that making spotting the feeding birds was near on impossible, so any birds beyond the short, eaten fringe couldn't be taken safely. My efforts would now be concentrated on bringing the pigeons to me, but this proved difficult because they seemed to be content with sitting out in the field some 80 yards away, and even when one of the local buzzards turned up and spooked them they returned to the centre.

BEAUTY OF NATURE

I had plenty of time and my mind drifted to the beauty of these areas that we have, and although not a big poetry person, I could see how the poets were moved to pen their verses. I have said before how lucky I am to be able to stand here and admire this natural splendour; the rolling hills lined with small wooded areas pushing out to the crop fields, and the whole endless scene never ceases to stagger me. Next time you're out, just take a minute to stand back and admire what you have – it is amazing. I had to snap myself back to the job in hand and although I like to make a plan and give it my best, sometimes you just have to admit defeat and turn to plan B. Over the valley from where I was, I could see another favoured woodland of mine and I could make out the distant shapes of roosting woodpigeons, it was time to make that move!

This little area had provided well in the past, and if the winds weren't too high, then a good day's sport could be had from the high beech trees. Approaching the wood was always precarious because you have to

It's 45 yards to this feeder – if you can see it.



cross open land and so leave yourself open to being spotted. I tend to keep as close to the hedge line as possible, and even on the other side of the hawthorn hedge when I can. This worked to an extent with only around half the woodpigeons taking flight, but once into the wood I met up with my first dilemma.

I had totally committed to being 'on' the pigeons this day, but scampering away from me was a pair of well-fed squirrels. Now, should I pursue them, or stick to my plan? Chasing or stalking greys is a two-man job to do it right, and that single thought set me straight back to my plan. I have a hide set up quite central to the wood and I also have a few squirrel feeders set up, but these haven't been attended to recently and so offered no loose feed for the squirrels, which was another reason for sticking to plan.



I'm always happy to be out in the countryside.

FEEDER MOVEMENT

Within minutes of setting up and taking stock of what was around me, I spotted a group of around six woodies sitting up high at around 30 yards away. I had made it to my hide without spooking them, which pleased me no end. So, the first shot of the day for the FAC 'Cat was a pretty straightforward one, and the sound of the bird thumping to earth had me off the mark. I have noticed that I get a single pigeon come flying by, followed by a small group of between 10 and 20, which is then followed by the main group of anything up to 100 birds, which always seem to fly by and return immediately and flap and crash their way into the treetops. It's then just a case of finding the best positioned bird for a shot, take the shot, and then wait for them to return – sometimes they come back immediately,

sometimes not, as was the case this time.

With two in the bag, my eye caught movement over in the little valley that runs to one side of this wood. The pheasant guys had left a feeder in a new position at 45 yards, according to my Hawke rangefinder. Well, this is when I diverted from my plan; the squirrels head was hidden by the feeder's spring, so a throat shot had to be taken, and his proved to have as good a result as a headshot when the squirrel dropped instantly lifeless. I had no sooner checked the treetops than I detected movement at the feeder once more. Another skinny was checking out its fallen mate, and with his head down this one received the full headshot treatment. Two of each now, and only been there half the time I had spent on the rapeseed – so much for my high hopes.



Pigeons were my target, so I was going to leave the squirrels, but ...



Not a bad day's work.

UP TO ME

The slight breeze did die off later in the day and the flocks of woodies dried up somewhat, but I wasn't going to admit defeat twice in one day and my perseverance paid off. I ended up sending five woodpigeons earthbound and took a further four skinnies from the feeder, all at 45 yards, and all headshots except the first one. Eleven in the bag is a good day's shooting, but I knew the farmers are keen to keep the numbers down and with the shotgun guys from the resident syndicate not showing enough interest in getting out on anything other than their pheasants, I feel it's up to me to at least try to make the difference. My plan was to be back later in the week and try again on the rapeseed fields, even though the forecast wasn't favourable.

Well, I had said it wasn't favourable and that »



Virgin snow – apart from the rabbits etc.

was an understatement at the very least. The worst winter in ten years hit us and we even lost a few days' work, it was that bad. With my local roads closed or impassable, I decided to try to walk to my permission, albeit without the gun, just for a check-up, and to give my new Ashcombe gear from Jack Pyke a run out. I had been doing paperwork all week and was going stir crazy and the five-mile walk to my permission seemed like a good idea. 'What could possibly go wrong?' I asked myself, in typical Jeremy Clarkson style. All I needed was my Ashcombe gear, my old binoculars, Hawke Pro 1000 rangefinder and my camera – oh yeah, and a warm drink.

THERE AND BACK

Well, I made it easily and didn't see one car all the way there and back. The Ashcombe worked a treat; at no stage did I feel cold or uncomfortable, and all I had on underneath was a pair of shorts, T-shirt and a JP fleece pullover. I did have a slide and a fall, but that was down to my wellies – next time it'll be the Tundra boots. Fair enough, I was moving all the time and the temperature was about -3° to -4°, so it wasn't as bad as some areas. I have to say right now that the views, and scenery were absolutely stunning and the tracks from rabbits, pheasants and foxes, showed how much activity there is when you're not there. One problem I had was that the rangefinder was bouncing the signal back and couldn't get a true distance. Maybe it's time for a new one, along with some new binos to replace the antique Nikon ones. Whatever happens, I'll be doing my damndest to get out there. See you next month. ■



This was all I was taking today.



Always check the treetops.



The old bino's are ready for replacing, but served well today.