

How to be asked again by being the perfect shooting guest

Improve your chances of being invited back to a shoot by following **Rosie Nickerson's** advice in this edited extract of her new book. Illustrations by **Oliver Preston**



UNLESS you own your own shoot or belong to a good syndicate, your only hope of shooting regularly is to buy a day of your own, invite all your chums and then hope to be invited back as a guest. If you are lucky enough to know people with plenty of shooting, though, you may be invited again and again purely because you are good company and know the form. There are some fortunate people like this, who travel all over the country from 12 August to 1 February, flitting from shoot to shoot with the ease and grace of a butterfly. They arrive on time with the right kit, shoot straight, greet the beaters, charm the keeper, dispense encouragement to novice shots and keep everyone entertained. They are always appreciative of their host, never moaning if they aren't in the thick of it, shoot consistently and well, never being too greedy, and mark and pick their own birds as well as helping others pick theirs. These perfect guests do not get plastered at lunch-time and they always remember to tip the keeper generously at the end of the day.

"The perfect guest is someone who is fun, someone who brings something to the party; this is more important than if they are a good shot," says Sir Edward Dashwood, top shot and shoot host.

As a shooting guest, if you are fraught with nerves and terrified of cocking up, you don't have a hope of being charming or entertaining. And if you don't care enough about the courtesies to want get them right, then your diary is destined to be a snowscape come the shooting season.

For any shooting host, it is immensely relaxing to know that at least one gun in the team can be trusted to be the perfect guest: someone on whom he can rely at all times. He would probably gladly invite that person year after year,

Respond to an invitation quickly and, if you have accepted, don't duck out of it

regardless of what shooting was offered in return. The only guns I've ever come across who fit in to this category have invariably been out shooting since they were very young and so have had a long apprenticeship: following the keepers, going beating, and eventually earning the right to stalk the hedgerows with a single-barrel .410. While this might have been a slow process the gun will have absorbed all that goes into a shooting day and had the chance to learn about every aspect of fieldcraft, including marking birds and picking-up. If proper respect for safety and shooting etiquette is drilled into you from the cradle it becomes second nature. Few may have had the benefit of an upbringing like this, but anyone can learn the ropes as an adult.

The shooting invitation

Regardless of how you are invited, respond quickly. If you have to refuse, your host can invite someone else and with any luck the substitute won't realise that he is second choice.

On accepting

Once you've accepted, check the location of the shoot if you have not been there before and beware of sat navs as some estates share their names with totally unrelated towns. Unless you have the correct postcode, you could, as one of our guests did, end up in Rothwell, Leeds, rather than in Rothwell, Lincolnshire; he has never been allowed to forget the blunder.

Once you have accepted, don't duck out

Only death – your own or a close family member's – should stop you attending on the day. Having said that my father's view, which he states in his book *A Shooting Man's Creed*, was

that a streaming cold could be an acceptable reason for a no-show: "Nobody will thank you for turning up at a shoot with a highly infectious cold and this is especially true when some of the guests are elderly, because what may be only seven days of snuffles for a young man may be six weeks of bronchitis for an older person."

A very well-known shot gained a reputation for accepting an invitation and then declining if a better one came up. He was caught out when he turned up on the preferred day to find that all the other guns, whose shoots he had declined one by one for this big day, were shooting there, too, and the whole thing had been planned to teach him a lesson.

Shooting couples

If you are inviting a couple who both shoot, and you have only one place in the line to offer, don't feel it is rude to ask them to share a peg. Speaking from experience (as one half of a shooting couple) both will be delighted to be included. Offering a shared peg is far more diplomatic than to ask only one or the other, or worse, to ask the other to come just for lunch. Shooting couples know only too well that taking up two spaces in the line will be difficult for the shoot host who has plenty of people to invite.

However, never assume that this means you will both be shooting at the same time from the same peg. Either shoot on alternate drives or have a system of, say, 10 shots each and then swap.

Slide in a slab

It is best not to ask how many cartridges to bring, or who is going to be there; this is like asking what you are having for dinner and who is coming when invited to a dinner party.

Assuming that you are driving to the shoot, not going by train, it really makes no odds to just slide in a slab of 250. Running short of cartridges can be deemed rather rude, as though you are not expecting much of a day. In the past shoot owners would have sent you home for such impertinence.

Allow plenty of time

When the host says, "We will meet at 9.15 and move off at 9.30," that is what he means. Be there at 9am, or at the latest 9.10am. If you arrive at 9.30am your lateness will affect the whole team. Apologise profusely and don't delay the draw any further messing about with your kit. If you arrive later than half an hour after the meeting time, be warned, it is quite normal for everyone to carry on, leaving you to make your own way to the line.

Nick Wilson told me about a gun who kept everyone waiting at his father's shoot. It was freezing and the driveway was covered in ice. When the latecomer saw everyone gathered, he sped down the drive, lost control and skidded straight into another guest's 4x4. Nick's father didn't bat an eyelid. He just said, "Ah, Bob, now I don't believe you've met Fred Smith," whose car it was that he'd just smashed into.



Respect the quarry (above). Shooting couples (below) are usually happy to share a peg

Bring a present

It's a good idea to bring a present for your host. Neither traditional nor expected, a thoughtful present nevertheless makes you stand out from the crowd, and sets you well on the way to becoming a perfect guest.

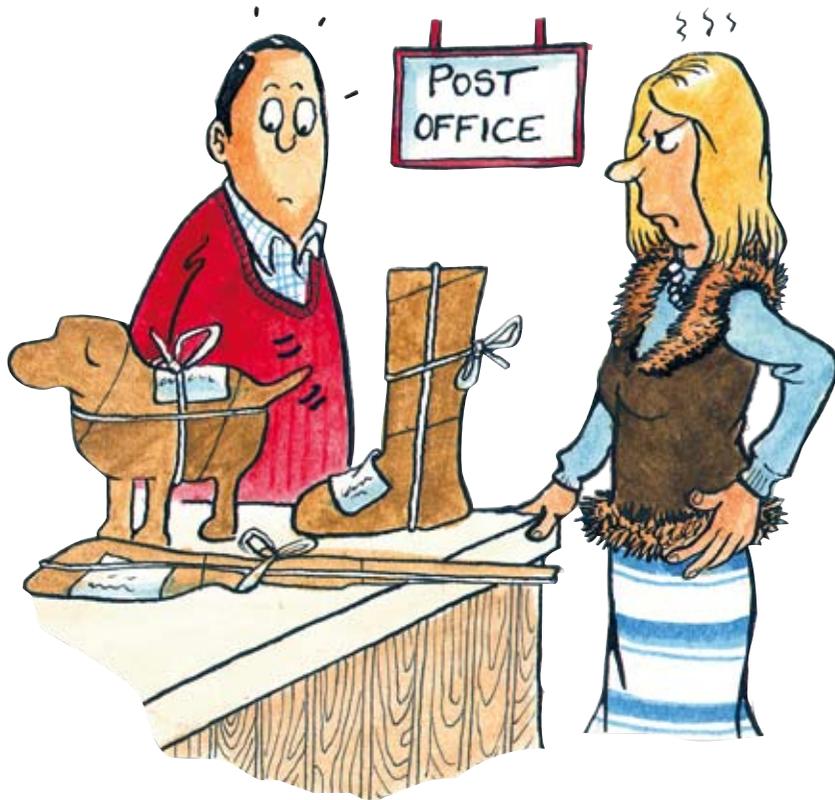
No dogs in the house

Don't automatically expect to bring your gundog into the house. Always ask permission from your host well ahead of time. Just because the place is crawling with dogs it doesn't mean that yours will be welcome. A good guest will leave his dog in his car, or if there are kennels provided, use one of them. A guest in my small Lincolnshire cottage asked whether his labrador could sleep in the little porch which also served as the coat and gumboot area as he was worried that his dog would get cold in the car. The next morning the dog had chewed his way through three shooting coats.

The ins and outs of poaching

Some of Britain's best shots are also the most polite people to be drawn beside. Being caught in a "Percy sandwich", that is, pegged between the Duke of Northumberland and his brother Lord James Percy, is a position most guns would regard with awe – and a little horror. But neither will pile into his neighbours' birds. James Percy says: "Never be greedy, as this is the worst fault after being dangerous. If in doubt, leave a bird to your neighbour. There is nothing worse than someone constantly letting fly at his and his neighbours' birds." ➤





“ Pack your things so your room can be made ready for the next lot of guests ”

use when they believe they've been sent off after a "mythical" bird is to have one in a pocket which can then be brandished triumphantly to bring the whole episode to an end.

Keep count, but never reveal your personal tally

The key to efficient picking-up is marking the birds correctly. If you truly cannot master the art, at least keep count of birds down. This is not so you can brag about it later. I was once surprised, on enquiring how a day's grouse-shooting went, to be told "I got 20 brace," - no mention of the total bag at all, which is what I'd meant. The only person to tell how many you shoot is the picker-up. If you have lost count and say breezily: "I got loads - no idea how many or where they fell," expect a steely glare. Having no clue where your birds have landed is seriously irresponsible and separates the true sportsman from an ill-educated slayer. True sportsmen are above all humane; leaving wounded birds is not something anybody would want.

If the excitement of the drive and the number of birds means that you completely lose count, whatever you do, remember the location of any wounded birds.

Clear your room and tip

Pack your things if you are leaving after shooting so that your room can be made ready for the next lot of guests. You also need to remember to tip the staff before you leave, preferably before you go out shooting.

All staff who have helped you should be tipped, such as the cleaner, whom you no doubt won't have seen but has obviously contributed to your comfort. The easiest thing to do is to leave an appropriate amount in your room.

If you are leaving after shooting, don't linger after tea. Your host might be expecting another lot of guests, and probably needs some time to unwind after what was no doubt an exhausting day for him.

When you get home

A shooting invitation is very special. Regardless of how much shooting your host may have at his disposal, it is still a great honour to have been included. The least you can do is to write a decent thank-you letter. Piffa Schroder insists: "You should always write your thank-you letter so that it catches the next day's post - manners apart, it makes an indelible impression." ■

Ralph Northumberland agrees: "Don't land birds in your host's butt or wipe his eye too often. Also, tell him how beautifully he shot that drive."

Jonathan Kennedy says: "If you are in any doubt err on the side of caution and be generous. It is an essential courtesy and part of the unspoken code. Occasionally you might make a mistake and take a bird nearer your neighbour. Immediately apologise and acknowledge the act, even in a marginal situation. Competitiveness has no place on the shooting field."

To be a good and considerate shot should be your aim as the perfect guest.

Noticing your neighbour's good shots

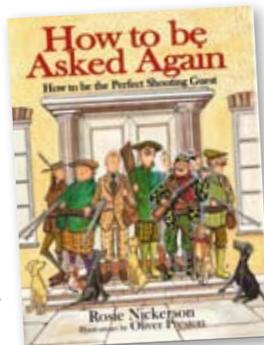
If you see your neighbour shoot a really high bird, it's perfectly acceptable to shout out during the drive "Good shot," or "Well done!" These little acts of courtesy are much appreciated.

Shooting dangerously

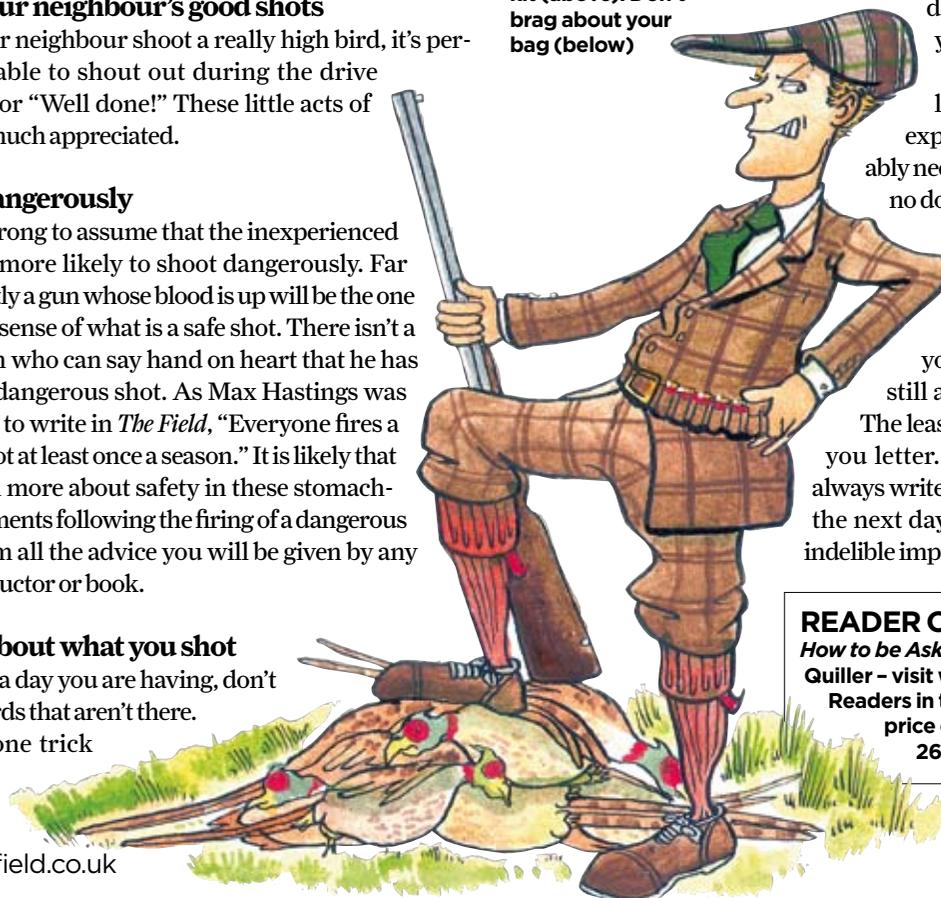
It would be wrong to assume that the inexperienced or young are more likely to shoot dangerously. Far more frequently a gun whose blood is up will be the one who loses his sense of what is a safe shot. There isn't a shot in Britain who can say hand on heart that he has never fired a dangerous shot. As Max Hastings was brave enough to write in *The Field*, "Everyone fires a dangerous shot at least once a season." It is likely that you will learn more about safety in these stomach-churning moments following the firing of a dangerous shot than from all the advice you will be given by any shooting instructor or book.

Be honest about what you shot

However bad a day you are having, don't ever invent birds that aren't there. Apparently one trick pickers-up



Try to remember to pack all of your kit (above). Don't brag about your bag (below)



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