

# A right royal caper



To stalk and shoot a capercaillie is a once-in-a-lifetime privilege, with only a few guns ever getting the chance to aim at this most majestic of gamebirds

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**H**unting capercaillie Austrian-style is a bit like an elaborate game of grandmother's footsteps. One of the most timid gamebirds of all, it is notoriously tricky to approach, except in the rutting season, or *balz*, during the first 10 days of May. For a brief moment, right at the end of his four-part guttural aria, the cock bird becomes temporarily deaf and blind. It is only at this exact point that the hunter can take another step or two towards his prey.

The capercaillie is a huge and majestic bird. Weighing in at around four to five kilos, it looks like a super-sized version of its distant cousin the blackcock. It has been on the endangered list here in the UK since 2001,

the GWCT report stating: "There are just 1,300 male capercaillie left in the UK, a 42% decline in 17 years." During the 1970s, the population was estimated at 20,000. Deer fencing, modern forestry and predators, such as the pine marten, are thought to be behind their decline. But they can be found in healthy numbers in Scandinavia, Romania and Russia as well as in parts of Europe, such as the Alps and the Pyrenees. In Scandinavia and Russia, they are hunted in the autumn, usually with German pointers or sometimes with a small husky. However, in Austria, hunters only stalk them during the rutting season, taking just one per year from areas where there is a shootable surplus. To be invited to stalk a capercaillie is one of the highlights of a keen shot's life.

In remote parts of the Austrian Alps, mostly in Styria, Carinthia and Tirol, deep in ancient Alpine woodland and habitat undisturbed by modern forestry or human encroachment, these birds thrive, existing in such healthy populations that Austria is one of the few EU countries where they are a legal species to shoot. Numbers are, of course, heavily limited and correct procedure and licences must be adhered to. Interestingly, it is compulsory to get the keeper from the neighbouring estate (not your own keeper) to come and do the spring counts, so there is no room for exaggerating stock levels.

Above: stalkers can inch closer to the male caper during the final part of his mating aria



Clockwise from left: Arno von Wimpffen on the Roetz estate in Trofaiach, Styria, Austria; males like to display from larch trees; the keeper and stalker examining the trophy



“You wait quietly until you begin to hear their mating song at around 5am”

The keeper will then report his findings to the district official. If the estate in question is found to have 15 to 20 cock birds and a similar amount of hens in each rutting area, the young stock that year is predicted to be about 100. Only then is the owner granted a licence entitling him to shoot 1% of his stock: an old male. You can see why being invited to shoot a capercaillie is considered a huge honour and a once-in-a-lifetime occasion.

The beauty of stalking these magnificent birds Austrian-style is that the stalker can get very close to them and enjoy the spectacle of the marvellous scene of their courtship display. It is also possible to sit in a hide and watch for hours and then just use a camera rather than a rifle. Many mountain estate owners, who might be managing between 1,000 to 2,000 hectares for capercaillie, blackcock, red deer, roe deer and chamoix, are just as delighted to stalk and watch this elaborate courtship rather than shoot a bird.

Philipp Harmer, head of Austria's CIC (Conseil International de la Chasse et de la Conservation du Gibier), has successfully guided 20 capercaillie stalks; he shot his first one aged 26, a gift from his father on obtaining his PhD. Since 2000, he has leased 2,500 hectares of forestry in Trofaiach in the Austrian Alps, where he also stalks chamoix.

He describes an early morning capercaillie stalk: "You leave the chalet at 3am and walk up the mountain in darkness with a torch; there may still be snow at that time of year. As you get closer to the rutting ground, you wait quietly until you begin to hear their mating song at around 5am. You can only move forward one pace at the point in their mating song where they go deaf and blind

for a few seconds and you may need to take 50 such steps. This can take over two hours. The birds make a clicking with their tongue and at the end they make a different noise, like a kind of grinding, it sounds prehistoric, and at exactly that point you can move one pace closer. They are a very timid bird. At first light, you can see them sitting high up in larch trees, outlined against the sky and he makes a fan of his tail, he is displaying to the females on the ground below."

Once near the mating area, you need to keep incredibly still and totally quiet. Your heart might be hammering out of your chest but it is imperative to keep as still as possible. One sneeze or cough and it's all over. The skill is in the stalking rather than the actual shot.

At this point, if you manage to get close enough to get a clear shot, you could pick out an old cock bird up on the branch with a shotgun or small calibre rifle, or you could choose to sit in a hide and wait for the birds to

## “You must set aside 10 hectare pieces of the estate for special rutting places”

come down to the ground at around 6am. It is apparently quite a sight, seeing them fight off other cock birds, sparring and sometimes jumping up to one metre in the air.

Harmer explains how he set about increasing capercaillie numbers on hunting estates: "You must set aside pieces of the estate for special rutting places, 10 hectares here and there, in not too dense woodland. Modern forestry doesn't allow for this as the trees are planted too close together."

The capercaillie is a ground-nesting bird so its enemies are wild boar, the fox and the badger. Extremely flighty, this majestic bird apparently only feels safe when it can fly low between the trees to escape predators. As the cock bird's wingspan can measure up to 1.25 metres, the forest must be managed accordingly to allow for this. The capercaillie's favourite trees are the pine and the larch; in winter, the bird's diet is rich in conifer needles but a male prefers the larch at rutting time so he can strut along its horizontal branches. For the rest of the year, they will eat buds, leaves, berries, insects and grasses but their favourite food is the bilberry.



Of all the gamebird species, the capercaillie is blessed with incredible hearing and eyesight. In-depth knowledge of the bird's habits and habitat are vital to know how to approach their rutting grounds. Great patience and skill are required to get near enough to them so that the stalker can take a shot. Prospective stalkers will listen to recordings of the famous mating song so they can learn to anticipate exactly when they can move forwards; sometimes they imitate the song, which helps them confuse the bird so they can move closer still.

If the stalker is successful and manages to shoot a bird, it's a huge cause for celebration as it will certainly be the only bird that year to be shot from this particular estate. The trophy will be carefully carried down the mountain and laid down on a bed of pine branches, with the gentle reverence usually reserved for a newborn baby, lest one feather be damaged. It is a beautiful bird, the deep, metallic, greeny-black feathers, the pure white of its curly tail feathers and the deep red of its "rose", the naked flesh above its eye. A stuffed, mounted capercaillie, with



its tail fanned out and head held high, is considered to be the ultimate show-off trophy.

In Russia and Scandinavian countries, capercaillies thrive and their numbers give no cause for concern; the temperature, remote habitat and undisturbed tracts of conifer and pine forest suit them perfectly. Hunting them is popular and takes place only in the autumn, not during the rut as in Austria. The most usual way is to walk them up with German pointers or with a small husky, which surrounds the tree and barks incessantly until the hunter catches up.

### DRIVEN DAYS

Far more rare are driven capercaillie days. In Sweden, these take place just once a year with His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden among the guests. He is patron of The King's Shooting Club in Sweden, which was founded in 1863 and has 200 members, who shoot up to 10 days a season on each other's estates. Their quarry includes moose and wild boar as well as pheasants, partridges, duck, caper and blackgame. Just once a year they come together to shoot

driven caper, in a remote area around Farna in the mountain range of Bergslagen, about two hours west of Stockholm. The best day ever was in 2010, when they accounted for 16, a mix of caper and blackgame.

Count Jan Lewenhaupt, a member of the Shooting Club and owner of Claestorp estate near Katrineholm in Sweden, is the only man I know who's shot a right-and-left of blackcock. He describes the annual driven capercaillie day: "You set off at 8.45am, the aim is to do eight drives. There are usually 14 guns and the beaters' line is one-and-a-half kilometres long. You wait maybe 30 to 40 minutes each drive. Your neck starts to ache just staring up at the trees all this time. And then, when they come, they deceive you because they look slow, like geese, it's easy to get tricked, there's no wing beat, they just glide. It is a big event, HM the King of Sweden usually comes, all the beaters, who are usually young trainee keepers, are given a special royal badge and everyone is very happy."

Despite having a wing span of up to 1.25 metres, caper are notoriously tricky to shoot



From far left: birds are laid out on a bed of pine; male capers during the rut; on capercaillie estates in Austria just one cock bird is shot per season; Count Manfred Attems (left) was invited to shoot a capercaillie for his 80th birthday by his nephew, Philipp Harmer (right)

in flight. I imagine it must be like a feathery cannon ball of pure muscle, feather and sinew hurtling silently towards you above the tree canopy – you may only have four seconds to spot it, raise your gun and fire.

As a gamebird species, the capercaillie is held in particular reverence by all who know it. In Scandinavia, where shooting them is more commonplace, they do find their way onto the table, although opinions differ about their taste and texture. With a male weighing in at around five kilos, you could feed 10 guests with just one bird so you can see why some don't end up as trophies. But while a young bird may be fairly succulent and, I'm told, tastes a lot like grouse, an old cock bird is apparently as tough as old boots and tastes strongly of pine needles. I think I will pass. ■