

# SHOOTING GALLERY

Spectators can enhance a shoot day, says **Rosie Nickerson**. They lighten the atmosphere and give the guns someone to talk to – and maybe about



ANN CURTIS

**S**PECTATORS on a shoot day add a certain *frisson*. Often female, they make the day much more social, ensuring a lively buzz of conversation both on the field and at the lunch table. Youngsters on the field also add an extra dimension, especially if they shoot their first bird or their first right-and-left. It's impossible not to be buoyed by their excitement. And when 20 or so are gathered round the table for the shoot lunch, for sheer fun and enjoyment it rivals Christmas Day. In fact, measured on the stress Richter scale, big shoot lunches are much better than the turkey fest.

The sheer presence of spectators both spices things up and dilutes the “seriousness” of purpose which, I believe, is a good thing. Too much focus on the actual skill of shooting

**At the peg spectators should keep shtoom but count and mark birds down**

and you could find yourself trying too hard and actually missing everything or becoming a bit of a shoot bore. Although you are invited to shoot, meeting new people and making new friends of both sexes are also important ingredients. The occasions that stand out in my gamebook are not the big-bag days but the ones with crowded lunch tables.

Yet how many times have you turned up at a shoot to find no spectators – youngsters, wives or girlfriends? Eight or nine of you sit solemnly at lunch discussing the last few drives and how the birds flew. Chances are you will already have exhausted other topics of conversation, what with morning coffee followed by the grog-stop. You've probably shared the same shoot wagon so by lunch-time, without the addition of spectators, you run out of people to talk to. ➤

“ ‘I fell over three times, could just about wave my flag, but couldn’t shout as well’ ”

I realise, of course, that shooting doesn’t have much pulling-power when it comes to attracting spectators. But it does seem strange that there aren’t more shoot supporters on shoot days. In the Edwardian era there were literally hundreds, which was perhaps taking it too far.

There is actually a huge amount on offer for the spectator to participate in on a shoot day. I don’t just mean standing at the peg watching admiringly while their other half blazes away. He or she can usually choose to do a bit of everything, from joining the beaters for a modicum of exercise or stress release (all that shouting and belting trees with sticks) or going off with the flankers for a long walk with a great view of the drive to offering to be a “stop” for a drive and gossiping with the locals. Or they could choose to sit with the pickers-up right at the back and watch the whole drive, enjoying the spectacle of the shoot and the skill of the dogs retrieving. There are so many different sides to the sport. Plus, with regular stops for food and alcohol, punctuated by a huge lunch and rounded off by a mouth-watering shoot tea, it’s really a great day out.

#### BRAVE THE COLD

I asked a few of my non-shooting friends why they never come out with the guns. First, they replied, there’s the cold. And the rain. Then the long wait for the birds. The mud. The blood. The curious change which overcomes husband, friend or boyfriend the moment he faces his quarry, gun in hand. “Shush!” “Stop Talking!” “It’s not that cold” or “Down!” as he shoves his beloved’s face down in the peat to take an oncoming grouse. Then there are unwelcoming shoot hosts, who don’t bother to invite them along, even for lunch. Not to mention the fact they have to put up with being barked at and bossed around by their husband or anyone else they dare go and stand with for a drive. “Now if you just sit over there and keep quiet,” they are told, by the chap they thought was rather charming at lunch. Not quite what they had in mind when invited to join him at his peg.

Despite all this, a few spectators can still be persuaded to come out. Fenella Gray accompanies her husband several times a year. “I’m not going to just stand at his peg all day saying, ‘How marvellous, Dear’, I love to walk with the beaters,” she says. At Rothwell she couldn’t wait to clamber into the beating wagon and was next seen at lunch by which time she had made friends with an ex-servicewoman who had served in Iraq and had plenty of stories to regale us with, too.

Another friend, Margaret Hicks, on her first time on a grouse moor, announced that she’d like to join the beaters. We tried to persuade her that it wasn’t quite the same as beating at a pheasant-shoot. It might be rather hard work – at least a four-mile walk through high heather – and she had a 10-week-old baby at home and wasn’t as fit as she usually was. But Margaret wasn’t having any of it. In her southern Florida accent she drawled: “How hard can it be? I mean you just walk and wave a flag – right?” We left her in the care of the underkeeper and didn’t see her again until the drive was over, about an hour and a half later, when by amazing coincidence she managed to appear opposite her husband’s butt,



where she collapsed in a heap in the heather, elated but exhausted: “I couldn’t believe how fast they walked. I fell over three times, could just about wave my flag, but couldn’t shout as well.” We all agreed she was one game girl.

Some shoots positively encourage wives, girlfriends and children – the more the merrier. At one grouse-shoot I was invited to there were more than 25 people round the table in the lunch hut and others camped outside. The atmosphere was like a very large and loud garden-party moving among the heather and streams from butt to butt to lunch hut.

Not every shoot is this welcoming to shoot supporters. At the extreme end there are still shoots that actively ban the presence of women in the field. I am sure every gun has heard of at least one, real or apocryphal. Nearly 15 years ago a friend of mine found himself in an awkward situation when staying with a mate for a shoot. Not realising how strict the rules were, he took his girlfriend, a 6ft blonde honey, along. Most shoot hosts would have been delighted to have her on their peg. After dinner the night before the shoot, he was taken aside and told in no uncertain terms that his girlfriend would not be able to join the guns the next day. Astonished and indignant, he packed their bags and left immediately.

Even on shoots where the host is certainly no misogynist, you often find that the guns’ wives and girlfriends have simply not been included. I am sure this has less to do with the fact the host doesn’t like spectators around than because on a shoot day they effectively double the cost of lunch. Or maybe I’m being too cynical. It could also be because some lunch venues are simply not large enough to accommodate more than about 10. So it just seems easier for hosts to avoid the issue altogether.

**It is helpful to pick up birds, but carry them by their heads (left) not by their feet, as there is a chance of catching Weil’s disease. Spectators increase numbers and may enhance conversation round the lunch table (above)**

It’s not just lunch that causes the host problems. Without wishing to give spectators a bad name, it has to be said that sometimes – speaking as an occasional shoot host myself – some of them are a bit of a pain. The frequent demands to join the day later or leave early can be an absolute nightmare. Vehicles have to be left specifically for their use so they can join the guns after a little lie-in. They seem to have a penchant for wearing pale suede, and nearly faint when a muddy dog jumps up at them. After lunch they announce they’d rather like to go antiques hunting. The fact they are 20 miles up a rough track, high on a grouse moor, doesn’t daunt them.

#### UNWANTED ADVICE

The worst spectator sin of all is when they invite themselves to stand with different guns each drive, during which they either talk loudly or shout out what they think are useful instructions: “Right! Right!” They shriek, when in fact you were honing in on a nice little covey on your left. There is no polite way to say, “Sit down and be quiet.” You’d think that at lunch they’ll know the form but we had one guest launch into a full-blown attack on all fieldsports while enjoying a hearty stew with us in the lunch hut on the grouse moor. We still talk about her although it was years ago.

Saying the wrong thing is a classic speciality of spectators. “So how many grouse do you rear, Your Grace?” is an all time great. It is also rather amusing to observe the host’s discomfiture when asked how many acres he owns and what his keeper earns. A friend of mine, Maggie Cracroft-Eley, remembers trying desperately hard to say and do the right thing when she attended a shoot some years ago in Suffolk, when she was newly married. “After one of the drives,

## HOW TO BE THE PERFECT SPECTATOR

- Bring the right kit – don't expect to borrow gloves, waterproofs or ear-defenders.
- Don't wear much fur or *any* feathers.
- Keep quiet during the safety drill and draw. You could help your gun remember his number.
- Never complain about the cold or wet.
- If standing with a gun, stay silent except to offer encouraging remarks occasionally and notice any good shots. Don't remark on a disastrous drive.
- Don't invite yourself to stand with a gun, wait to be asked.
- Don't criticise anyone's shooting in public – or in private.
- Help keep count, mark and pick-up birds after the drive.
- Expect to be bossed around and told where you may or may not sit or stand at the peg.
- Remember at least some of the other guns' names and chat to them between drives
- Don't pick-up or carry the birds by their feet – you may catch Weil's disease.
- Don't expect special treatment or ask to borrow vehicles to arrive late or leave early.
- Don't embarrass the host by asking impertinent questions about acreages and the number of birds they rear.
- Offer to take the birds to the butcher or pluck them and cook them yourself.



ALAMY

I walked up to the guns, who were huddled together in rather a stony silence, and I said brightly to one of them: 'Great mixed bag you've got there!' I'd seen him shoot a hare, and thought he would be pleased to hear me say that. I'll never forget the look of horror on everyone's faces and suddenly realising that the gun in question was looking rather green. I didn't know this, but his mixed bag also included a beater he'd peppered, who had just confronted him, blood still trickling."

### INVITE SPECTATORS

We mustn't forget the novice spectator's emotional turmoil. Some may never have seen at close hand any animal being killed. It can take a long time to become used to the notion of killing. Most people are sheltered from the everyday realities of animal slaughter by smart supermarket packaging. For some people, their first experience of shooting can be shocking.

One spectator, Sarah Robertson, was out for the first time and seemed to be enjoying the day, but in fact was wrestling with the killing aspect and praying for each pheasant to survive. At the end of the day she was handed a brace of birds. She later admitted to me that they spent

“ ‘Great mixed bag you've got there,’ I said, not knowing that he'd just peppered a beater ”

two weeks hanging on a tree outside her house as she couldn't bear to eat "such beautiful birds". She buried them in a flower-bed in her garden in Wandsworth.

Despite the organisational hassle spectators entail, I would rather be on a shoot with them than without. They add to the day and even their misdemeanours end up being rather amusing. I believe that all shoot hosts should, wherever possible, extend an invitation to include the gun's wife, girlfriend, son or daughter. Whether they choose to accept is up to them, but let them make that choice. To do otherwise is to perpetuate the myth that shooting is not a spectator sport. You could go one step further and include a youngster or two on the end of the line. The more people we have on shoots, and enjoying it, the more we do for the future of shooting.

*Rosie Nickerson's new book, How To Be Asked Again, is published by Quiller; price £20, [www.countrybooksdirect.com](http://www.countrybooksdirect.com).* ■



Shooting spectators do still get involved (top). Margaret Hicks (above) was elated but exhausted after beating at a grouse-shoot. There is plenty of socialising (right)



ALAMY