

ROSIE NICKERSON reflects on her introduction to grouse

I was about two years old when I ventured onto the moors for the first time. I remember joining the Guns at the wooden lunch hut at Wemmergill in County Durham, where my father, Sir Joseph Nickerson, first became tenant in 1952 and leased the moor for 36 years from the Strathmore family. What I recall mostly about my first forays onto the moors were the caterpillar tractor and trailer rides to the line of butts – the ground was so marshy that normal four wheel drives or even a tractor couldn't manage it. We'd have to dodge the mud being churned up by the tractor pulling us along behind it, and have to grip on tightly as the wooden trailer swayed and bumped across the vast expanse of moorland. Sometimes a dog would be forgotten and have to race to jump up and join us with everyone shouting and screaming for it to run faster. It all seemed very exciting to us as children.

When I got older, I went out with the Guns for the whole day. Sniffing spent cartridges in my father's grouse butt is a particularly strong memory. My sisters and I used to try and catch them as they popped out of his gun and we made patterns with them to while away the time until the drive was over and we could scamper off to find the birds. But I hated seeing wounded grouse and would try and refuse to hand them over, insisting they should go to the vet's to be 'made better'.

Shipka Pass was a favourite childhood place of ours at Wemmergill. It is renowned as one of the most famous line of butts in the world: the birds are driven high above the Guns across a very deep and wide ghyll. But we children loved it because of the wide stream with water the colour of caramel, which snaked its way along the valley bottom. We built dams and paddled barefoot in it between drives, picking thin reeds to plait during the long wait for the birds to come over. It was almost always

sunny at Wemmergill and the moor was beautiful, purple and inviting. But we also knew how forbidding a place it could be and there lurked an ever-present sense of danger. We were warned that we could get stuck or drown in a bog if we trusted the bright green moss, which grew over them. The many disused mine shafts – some fenced off, others not, were spooky and we heard tales of beaters literally falling through the ground where it was worn so thin from the days when the moors were teeming below with lead and tin miners. And on days when the fog came down, the moor became a very eerie place indeed.

For such a fanatical Shot as my father, to have little girls endlessly chattering on during the drives must have been very distracting. So as soon as we were strong enough to hold a flag, aged around seven or eight, he sent us off with the flankers. Our French governess helped us make and embroider our own flags out of old pillow cases which were highly decorative but never saw much use as we would chat away with some of the ancient flankers we'd got to know, who'd started coming out as beaters at the turn of the century! I don't think we ever did much actual flanking, because all I can remember is playing chess and chequers with tiny plastic pieces, which were permanently getting lost deep in the heather.

I didn't fire a shot on the moors until I was almost ten years old and it must have been a particularly unlucky grouse as I'd been using a single barrel .410 to no great effect for several days. But the feeling of excitement (and relief!) to have actually connected with a grouse has never left me

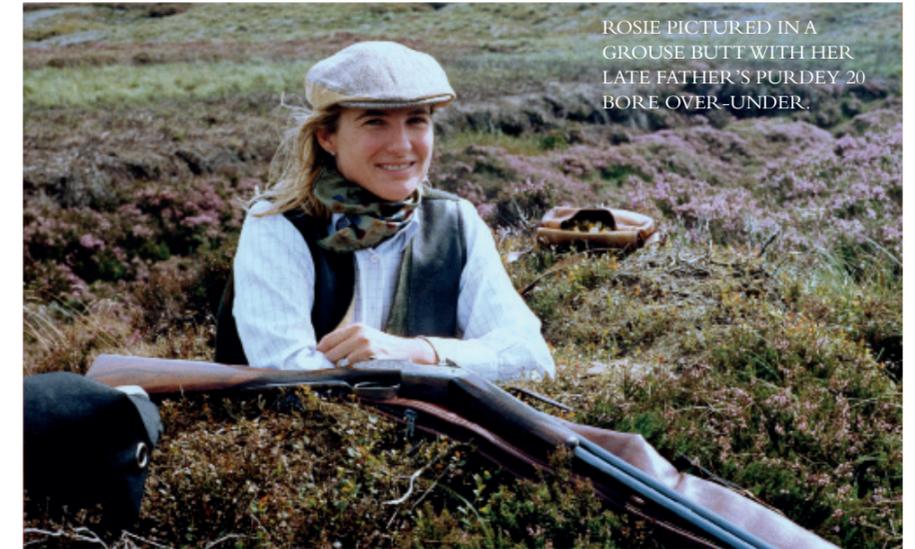
shooting and why she remains so passionate about the moors.

and each time I repeat the feat, I feel just as excited. The grouse I shot aged nine presides over our kitchen from his glass box on top of a bookshelf, a wonderful reminder of that epic moment.

It took a very long time for me to become a half way decent grouse shot. My game book entries for that time are littered with long descriptions of how my springer spaniel Janey picked up 12 birds a drive and as to my own tally, all that was written was: '2 and a half'. The 'half' was no doubt shared with one of my sisters and neither of us would be willing to let the other count it as theirs! There were days when I missed virtually every bird and I suspect my father came very close to suggesting some alternative sport for me! But with his encouragement, eventually, around the age of 15, with my lovely English 28 bore side-by-side, I finally got into my stride. For my 18th birthday I received a pair of beautiful AYA 20 bores and I remember shooting over 30 birds with them on one drive at Reeth soon after my father bought it.

Grouse are an immensely challenging bird to shoot. They can come at you from almost every angle and height and just when you think you've got the knack, the very next bird will flummox you. Proud and fearless, they deserve our respect. They have not been hand reared, fed twice a day and kept in pens to protect them, but have survived on their own wits and merits, nested on the ground, withstood predators and parasites to make it to August 12.

Early season August grouse are a totally different bird to November grouse, which fly like bullets. These early birds come at you low, hugging the contours of the land, often in ones and twos and are eminently shootable. August and early



ROSIE PICTURED IN A GROUSE BUTT WITH HER LATE FATHER'S PURDEY 20 BORE OVER-UNDER.

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September are when some of the biggest bags are shot. The old saying: 'Shoot half the season's bag in August' holds true because once you are into September, it becomes a very different type of shooting. The birds are stronger, fly faster, and are savvier about where the butts are, swerving and jinxing at the last minute when they catch sight of the barrels. After mid-September, the weather deteriorates and strong winds can make the grouse impossible to drive over the line of butts. The grouse's propensity to 'pack up',

which on some moors can happen as early as mid-September, serves to protect them. It seems like they have devised a natural system of safety in numbers! The adrenaline rush you get when you see hundreds of grouse all bearing down on you at speed is unbelievable, and even the best Shots find it unnerving and as a result fluff their chances!

To have any grouse at all on a moor would not be possible without the unrelenting hard grind from a good keeper and his team. Sometimes, despite the keeper's best efforts, there may be years when a moor will crash completely. A hailstorm during hatching week can decimate all the newly hatched grouse, while a very wet and cold May/ June can cause brood sizes to shrink considerably. The sheer unpredictability of grouse stocks makes a good grouse year something to really rejoice about. The challenge of shooting grouse, twinned with the knowledge and understanding of all the effort and commitment which goes into creating a healthy stock, is what makes a day on the moors so special.



FROM AN EARLY AGE...