



What is the most difficult shot?

At the turn of the last century shooting legends cited the pheasant in all its guises as the most challenging bird, but is this still the case? **Rosie Nickerson** finds out what tests today's stellar shots

IN 1905, the editor of *The Badminton Magazine*, AET Watson, Esq, gathered together a “chosen gallery of recognised game shots” – rather an understatement when you consider that it included such luminaries as the Marquess of Granby, the Marquess of Ripon, Lord Walsingham, Prince Victor Duleep Singh and 11 other heaven-born stars of the coverts. Each was asked this deceptively simple question: “What is the most difficult shot?”

Almost all of these shooting legends cited the pheasant in its various guises, be it “sailing”, “crossing” or “curling”. This was very much the era of the pheasant, when four-figure bags were the order of the day, though it was often quantity, not quality, that counted. Most of the pheasants shown then would be considered low by today's standards. High-bird shoots were a rarity and light game-guns the norm, often very lightly choked, so it's not

surprising that a genuine cloud-scraper would be considered so tricky. Only two respondents named other gamebirds – the partridge received a mention in despatches, as did the ptarmigan. Curiously absent from the entire article was any mention of grouse. Not one syllable on these speed fiends. Perhaps it's because gentlemen of the era shot them mostly in August (when they are not so demanding) then departed south in September for the then-abundant wild partridges.

Thirty years later, another editor undertook the same exercise and although we don't have as many details about this piece we do know that a far broader range of birds was mentioned by the top shots, highlighting the changing times, with the First World War and subsequent hardships radically altering the course of shooting. Huge pheasant bags were no longer the norm and this in turn encouraged a new focus on our resident gamebird,

Is it the pheasant (above) or the pigeon (overleaf) that provides the most testing shot for today's artists with a gun?

the grey partridge. It seems that though we may dress in a similar fashion, shooting itself changes with every generation.

Fast forward to 2012 and *The Field* has undertaken the same exercise with a similarly impressive panel of stellar shots. The high pheasant is still up there, but with the growing availability of late-season grouse and the lack of the wild partridge's siren call, it's the king of the moors that's most cited as the most revered bird, with its ability to outwit, baffle, and generally make great shots look like beginners. Here's what the panel had to say:

Sir Edward Dashwood “I know pheasants are large and fat and generally considered to be fairly easy, but I think, all in all, they can prove to be the most challenging. A really >

For Will Garfit, the real tester is the second bird of a potential right-and-left at pigeon



powerful, big, strong cock pheasant on a high wind late in the season needs killing properly and you have to be spot on to get this right. A couple of pellets is not enough unless you get lucky. Unlike partridges, which tend to flatter your shooting, you have to put the whole pattern in the right place. I think the hardest technical shot is the really high pheasant that is dropping and sliding directly overhead.”

Will Garfit “The French have a saying which translates as *The man who never misses is yet to be born*. For me there are two shots that I miss too often. One is the second pigeon of a potential right-and-left, which, having heard the first bang, turns 180 degrees and skittles off downwind. The second is a bird on a driven shoot which has crossed the line and is disappearing behind as an ‘out-swing’, in cricketing terms. It is a difficult bird to read the speed and line in what seems to be four dimensions. Other often missed birds are the easy ones you dither over as to whether or not to shoot. They’re best left, as they give little pleasure to kill and frustration to miss. But every bird gives pleasure: those you kill give pleasure to you, those you miss delight everyone else!”

William Van Cutsem “I think that almost every bird is more difficult if it is in a large

“The hardest shot of all, technically, has to be a high downwind grouse.” With one tilt of the wings they can confound the best

“ ‘In a crosswind Linhope partridges are sensational; like ballistic missiles downwind’ ”

group, as it introduces another decision that has to be made in a short space of time. If it is assumed there is only one bird in the air then probably the bird that takes the greatest technique is a really high pheasant in a strong crosswind. You have to get your feet in the right position, and judge so many different things. Often you are looking at them against sky, so judging speed becomes more difficult.”

Sally Cannon “The hardest shot for me is a grouse coming straight 12 o’clock at butt/eye level. The crucial decision is when to shoot out in front so the bird drops in front of – not in – the butt. It is difficult for gun and loader to manoeuvre in wind when they are closing fast. The answer is to learn the distances in front and have the confidence to shoot.”

Nigel Hawkins “A fast-dropping grouse crossing into or behind your neighbour is the most difficult shot, I find. With birds coming straight at you or crossing, you need to underline; with birds going away, you need to shoot more directly at them because you have a built-in lead and it’s the same for overhead

birds. However, when you have a dropping bird coming down the side of a hill or dropping into a gully it is almost impossible to get far enough under them – you are already shooting almost a foot under and then you have to add at least another foot or two. Once you start seeing that sort of gap, the brain kicks in and says this is not right and you then shoot over the top... again and again!”

Lord Stafford “My most difficult bird is the Linhope partridge at James Percy’s estate in Northumberland. He drives them like grouse, off the side of the moor, about 500-600ft high. They don’t bat their wings and so you can’t gauge their speed. In a crosswind they are simply sensational; just like ballistic missiles downwind. I was shooting there recently in a 30mph wind and they were just fantastic. Some were ridiculously difficult – they were on a curl and you couldn’t get a line on them. Even with a top team of guns, the cartridge-to-kill ratio was very high.”

Robert Jolly “Driven grouse-shooting is one of my passions and without doubt the hardest shot for me is the single grouse that flushes after the horn for no more shooting in front and then takes a high line directly over your head. You attempt to turn to have the correct foot position while continuing to keep your eyes fixed on the bird. The shot presented is a straight going away and what appears to be dropping bird, whereas in reality it can ➤



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“A really powerful, big cock pheasant needs killing properly. You have to put the whole pattern in the right place”

actually still be rising. In all the years that I have been shooting grouse I still haven't been able to master that shot, but it continues to be a great pleasure trying.

“My greatest-ever memory of difficult shots stems from an icy early December day about eight years ago at Weardale in a raging gale. A huge pack of grouse strung out about 200yd into the distance came head on with all its members rising and falling and changing positions at a considerable rate of knots. Four shots in front and two behind into the same pack had me comment excitedly to my loader, ‘That was absolutely fantastic!’ He replied, ‘But you didn't f***ing hit anything!’ I said, ‘Yes – but wasn't it fantastic!’ To me, being humbled by the king of gamebirds in those conditions shouldn't be looked upon as an embarrassment, but a privilege.”

Jamie Lee “I was shooting around 40-50 days a year on the grouse and thought I was pretty ‘hot’, averaging inside 2:1 before October and November. The hardest shot of

all, technically, has to be a high downwind grouse. Obviously the stronger the wind and the later in the season the harder they get. With one tilt of their wings they could make themselves drop or go sideways by yards, making it almost impossible to get a proper line on them. For me, it was a case of just throwing the gun into space and hoping for the best – not conducive to consistent shooting. I think I managed to kill one and drag down another for about 30 shots. The problem was their sheer speed and the fact that as soon as you raised the gun they would see you and react to your movement. Every one of those birds was well within range but I can honestly say that if I went and shot the same drive again I don't think I would do any better. The birds were just too good for me.”

Paul Portz “I think that the hardest grouse shot is a long grouse behind your neighbour's butt. When it is downwind and the grouse is dropping – especially if the land falls away and the grouse dives lower, following the contour. You must push your gun way in front and *down* into the ground. It's counter-intuitive but hugely satisfying when you occasionally pull it off.”

Jonathan Kennedy “My hardest shots are on the grouse moor in wild October weather. The grouse seem to become harder, taking more ‘hitting’ than earlier in the season. Some

people have described this as the time when they seem to acquire bullet-proof vests! Even so, a straight shot in the head makes a clean kill. The bogey shot for me is the bird going straight away with no angle, possibly dropping or heading downhill – no head in sight. Also, more generally, the gully drive downwind, where it is wide enough for the birds to drop into it and then climb out. It is not always easy to tell in advance which drives they might do this on, but they seem to do it consistently on particular drives.”

Gerwyn Jones “The most difficult birds are high pheasants with their wings set, flying very high but dropping. It looks as though they're flying straight but in fact they are at a 45-degree angle. But my real Achilles heel is when I've been shooting at downwind grouse coming like the clappers. With a bit of luck, I can usually hit them, then we do a return drive and shoot them upwind – you fire a shot and maybe get the first bird, but then the rest starburst as they turn back into the wind, dropping and curling and I can't get on to them at all, so I just shoot through them. We did exactly this recently at Holwick and it was our worst cartridge ratio of the whole day.” ■

Readers are invited to nominate their most difficult shots. You can go to our Facebook page, or to our website, www.thefield.co.uk, or beam it over to field_secretary@ipcmedia.com.

