



# the beautiful game

By Nick Harman

It's 6 a.m. It's dark, it's freezing and Nick Harman is perched halfway up a tree with an armed man at his side. Somewhere out there wild deer are beginning to wake up and, with any luck, one is destined to be dinner. Venison is just one of the natural, organic and free-range meats we wastefully ignore in this country. We explore more of what game has got going for it.

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It all looks rather different in the dark,' says Barry apologetically as we once again, and with great difficulty, back our way out of a dense thicket, boots crunching on the heavily frosted grass. He may be a fully licensed and highly skilled deer manager, but he's not so good at finding his own 'high seat' at 6 a.m.

A high seat is a platform up a tree from where wild deer are shot. The idea is that, owing to the angle, any misses will go into the ground and not into the nearest town. To get up to the seat, which we do eventually find, you clamber up a simple ladder with the rifle over your shoulder and as quietly as you possibly can. 'Deer are crepuscular', Barry whispers as we sit aloft trying to see into the pitch black and with our toes freezing off in the minus 2 degrees temperature.

Crepuscular means active at dawn and dusk and slowly we begin to make out the field below us. Small bundles, black against the frost-rimed grass, reveal themselves to be waking partridges and from out of the treeline a fox emerges to slowly prowls the length of his domain. Barry takes up his powerful binoculars and looks for signs of deer while I enjoy the wonder of simply being here as soft light breaks over the beautiful South Downs.

Barry is no Hemingway-esque hunter; he's not here for fun. The simple truth is that deer need to be culled to contain their growing numbers. 'They have no predators,' he explains as he loads .243 calibre soft nosed bullets into his 'scoped rifle. "Humans killed off wolves and now all the wild deer do is breed and they do it very successfully.'

The problem is that deer are destructive with ferocious appetites. They strip bark from trees, destroy nesting sites of nightingales and dormice and trample crops. Every year there are also up to 74,000 accidents involving deer hit by cars, accidents that can often prove fatal for both deer and drivers.

So they have to be controlled. 'What we do isn't cruel,' Barry says, scanning the field as the light slowly intensifies. 'Farmers used to control deer by

poison, snares and even shotguns! That was quite inhumane.' As a result the Deer Act was passed in 1963, stating said deer could only legally be culled by high-powered rifles used by trained experts possessing a DSC (Deer Stalking Certificate). 'When we shoot a deer it's dead instantaneously,' Barry stresses, 'it doesn't suffer at all and has led a free life up until the last second.' There are now, as he points out, also close seasons during which it is illegal to shoot female deer so as to avoid leaving orphaned fawns.

Across the way a movement catches his eye and with Barry's binoculars I can see a young male roe deer close to the fence. He's skittish, as this is the rutting season, and instead of eating grass he is walking and running around, seemingly with no purpose. Barry uses a rangefinder to check the distance. 'Over 300 yards,' he reports. 'We don't take a shot at that range as we might only wound the deer and we don't want that.' Even so he picks up his rifle, resting it on the wooden seat frame as he tracks the deer through his scope in case it decides to come closer.

It doesn't and suddenly Barry seems to have a fit, making noises that suggest either demonic possession or a large bone in his throat. 'I'm imitating a deer,' he explains. 'Sometimes they'll come over to see what's going on.' This deer doesn't, although he does peer in our direction with vague curiosity.

We watch it for almost an hour. It never comes close enough and finally at 8 a.m. we call it a day and trudge back to where we left the 4x4s. The other teams have had more luck though and there's a dead deer waiting for us. It's cleaned on the spot, 'gralloched' by gamekeeper Jack in a way that is perhaps gruesome to behold but matter of fact and avoids any bacteria from the gut tainting the meat.

It's a precise and tricky process that requires great skill and experience. The entrails and other bits are left for the foxes, rooks, badgers, hedgehogs and a host of other creatures, who will make short work of the mess and clean up totally and organically. Our deer is taken off to be hung, scheduled to appear on a local menu in around 14 days time.





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And this is the point. Game is good. Venison is a fine meat, low in fat and relatively inexpensive and yet few people eat it outside of those who live in the country, and who are connected to the deer conservationists and gamekeepers. To put it bluntly we seem scared of our country's own locally sourced, and organic meat options, which is such a waste.

It's the same story with partridge and grouse and other game which is why this experience had been organised by Game-to-Eat, the campaign dedicated to increasing the enjoyment of British bounty. After a lunch of, what else but, game at the idyllically located Duke of Cumberland Arms, cooked by their very talented chef Simon Goodman, who has created a real dining destination in this ancient pub, we go to watch a pheasant shoot.

The men are dressed classically, one even has yellow stockings, and there's no denying they are from a different class to the people doing the 'beating', which is to say walking and driving the birds ahead of them so that they fly out of the woods and over the waiting guns. Shooting is a posh sport and, unless you know a farmer, an expensive one too. It is very social though and beaters and guns enjoy

themselves almost as much as the dogs, who clearly love their task of retrieving downed birds.

Most birds get away today, the ones that are hit by the cloud of shot fold up in mid-air and drop in a curve to the ground where they bounce once with a soft thump before being seized by a dog. For minutes afterward feathers drift down like snow and settle on the grass. Soon the beaters appear through the trees, the 'drive' is over and everyone walks back, joshing and laughing and carting shot birds destined for the table.

It's been an instructive and delicious day. Deer management is a vital part of the maintenance process of the English countryside. Some estimates say that 500,000 deer need to be culled to bring numbers back to sustainable proportions, at the moment the figure is more like 350,000 but a spate of mild winters have seen deer numbers go up.

It has to be done and it is done. The real tragedy would be to see the resulting meat go to waste or to be pet food. So seek out game in the supermarkets, because even Lidl's stocks venison, pester your butcher and enjoy the UK's wonderful range of local, organic, sustainable and healthy meats. ■



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