



**The moor: Inchorry, Glenavon, Tomintoul, Scotland**

# Grouse Shooting Scotland

by  
Blanton Belk

**T**he 12th of August is almost a holy day in the British Isles. Known as the Glorious Twelfth, it marks the opening of grouse season. For my wife Betty and me, the first day of our first grouse season in Scotland was indeed the beginning of a glorious experience. By the end of that day, the first pair of grouse shot had already left by train for the Queen at Buckingham Palace.

The shoot would last five days, and that first day was typical of summer in Scotland: spitting rain, cold wind, and then glorious sunshine breaking through and



**Seaton Wills (left), the owner of the moor, and head gamekeeper John MacDonald.**

lighting up the colors of the Scottish moor, pink heather, the occasional white heather, and a salmon river running through the valley. We were in Scotland at the invitation of old friends from Belgium, Baron Stanislas Emsens and Madame Beatrice Wittouk Lunt. This was my first grouse

shoot, and I was tense. The eight members, or “guns,” of our Belgian shooting party were also somewhat tense with this “American gun” on the line. I am sure they expected me to arrive with automatics or pump guns and shoot their birds as well as mine—or, even worse, shoot them.

The long-established butts stood only 40 yards apart in a straight line and had been in place since the days when King Edward VII had pioneered “driven shooting” in the British Isles. In driven shooting, you only shoot a 45-degree cone in front of you, never shooting over the line, and then you shoot a cone to the rear. You never poach a neighbor’s bird. The butts were dug in and reinforced with rock and covered in lichen that attested to their age. They were shoulder high so that you could stand in the butt and rest your arms and gun on the top.

A good gun is a safe gun, and in the grouse shoot, you are judged not only by how well you shoot, but also on how well you behave. Adding to my uptight desire to shoot well (and behave well) was the towering figure of MacDonald, the gamekeeper, who perched on the side of the hills in each of the five drives with his binoculars fixed on me. His intimidating presence was, to say the least, distracting.

Betty and I were staying with the shooting party in a charming lodge in the village of Glenlivet. In the evening one could open the window and take a deep breath of the fumes of the nearby Glenlivet distillery and have a good night’s sleep. We enjoyed a civilized start to the day: eight o’clock breakfast with everyone dressed for shooting in tweed coats and ties, brightly colored sweaters, knickers, scarves and tassels. We greeted each other with a hearty good morning, and the ladies waited for a kiss on both cheeks—a very nice custom! We gathered around one big table where a charming Scottish lass took our orders. Then came a sumptuous Scottish breakfast: fruit juice, oatmeal, eggs, bacon, broiled tomatoes and mushrooms, toast, tea and coffee. (If you are going to test the Scottish oatmeal, it is proper to stand and eat it at the side table, since the Scots say it goes instantly to your toes.)

At nine o’clock sharp—and I emphasize *sharp*—we were on hand at the



The “picker-uppers” with their retrievers

Butt #4 on the first day’s drive, with the author and his wife



front gate with all our gear and were ushered into jeeps and vans for the trip to the moor. Upon arrival there was another short ceremony as we shook hands and were formally introduced to the owner of the moor and his head gamekeeper and any other guest “guns” who had been invited for the day. Then a circle formed, and each shooter drew his or her peg, which contained a number for the shoot.

The host or gamekeeper gave a brief but detailed talk on what you could and could not shoot, with a general outline of the number of drives and the terrain, and a reiteration of the absolute rules of gun safety.

Grouse are wild birds, and the shooting each year is determined by the hatch. This had been a good year. The drive started with one blast of the horn;

two blasts means that the “beaters” are approaching the line and there will be no more shooting out front. One long horn means that all guns must be unloaded and handed to your loader at the end of each beat.

Because everyone was shooting a matched pair of guns, a loader was assigned to each person. Fortunately, when Betty and I lived in Brussels, I had acquired a beautiful matched pair of Fabrique Nationale twelve-gauge over-and-under guns, with lovely engraving from the well-known engraver Vranken. My loader was called Jack the Pole. He owned and ran the local pub, and was a loader, teacher, confidant—and, I quickly discovered, a critic.

“Sir, ye were a bit behind that birrd. Take ‘em furrther oot,” he admonished me.

As water poured off my hat, I observed that it was raining. “Nay, it’s not raining,” he replied. “Tis only a fine mist.”

“By the way, sir, we tried your Amerriican bourrbon whiskey,” he announced. “Frrankly, I am sad to say, it tastes quite a bit like cough medicine.”

A driven grouse shoot is organized with military precision. Somewhere out front, over the hills and valleys, was a platoon of 40 or 50 “beaters” (many high school students on summer holiday) with white flags on long poles popping in the wind, attempting to flush and move the hard-flying red grouse across the line of guns. The head gamekeeper was the general, directing the whole operation with his walkie-talkie. Suddenly in the distance we saw a line of black dots streaking across the heather ahead of the beaters, a large group of grouse called a “pack” by the Scots.

Jack said, “Be rready, sir. They’re comin’ your way. Good luck.”

I positioned myself with my gun at ready. The pack came downwind hugging the terrain, burst over the rise, and exploded in my face. I blotted out a black

projectile and pulled the trigger. The grouse crashed just in front of the butt as I swung on another. This one exploded in a cloud of feathers and I grabbed for my second gun. Two clean misses to the rear.

My exchange of guns with Jack had not been smooth. You are supposed to hand the gun to your loader with your right hand, and take the other gun in the left hand, never taking your eyes off the birds. There was no time to practice the exchange since the shooting was quickly intensifying down the line, and an occasional grouse or pack would pass my way.

“There’s one at eleven o’clock, sirr, comin’ strrong,” Jack reported.

With a quick swing through, I killed the bird just as another appeared on my left. A clean miss—but I was getting the swing of it.

I was not in the hottest corner of the beat, but I ended the first drive with four and a half brace of birds—nine grouse—and Jack was pleased. Even though I could not see far down the line, I

Dividing the grouse between young and old. The owner’s house, called a “shooting box”.





Another line of butts

Gamekeeper with his retriever



was in clear view of the other guns and loads, and, of course, MacDonald's eagle eye. The handlers with their retrievers came along, and Jack directed them to where my grouse had fallen. It is almost impossible to find a downed bird in heavy heather without good dogs, and the Scots have good dogs: Labs, Brittanys, Wire-Haired Pointers, and even a few Jack Russells.

The birds were left neatly stacked next to the butt and all empty cartridges were collected. The guns were loaded into my double leather gun case, and Jack and I started the walk down the line. The loaders had been talking among themselves, and one said, with his Scottish burr, "I say, sirr, you shot quite well for your first

grouse shoot."

You normally move up two pegs after each drive. Since I had been at the end of the line at eight, I moved up to the number two butt. Jack said, "If ye do nae like the weather here, go over the next hill." Wind on the moors is essential, and 90 percent of the time it is there. But when it is still, the midges come out of the heather and cover your face, your hands, your shooting glasses, even your eyes. At that point, the head gamekeeper calls off the drive.

On the third beat before lunch, I had the number four post, the middle of the line. Since the number four butt stood on a sloping, rocky hillside, it protruded quite some distance above ground. But because the hill rose steeply behind, it was well camouflaged, and covered with lichen and moss. "Sirr, ye will have birrds here," Jack assured me.

At this point, our friend, Countess June Goblet, the English lady who was married to Count Jean Goblet, one of our Belgian friends, asked if she could join Betty and me in the butt. The whole party socialized this way. June was a fine gun herself, especially on big game at their estate in the Ardennes. June and Betty sat on shooting sticks directly behind Jack and me. In this position, they were safe, and I could turn easily and take birds that passed over the butt.

When the sun finally broke through, we had a wonderful vista looking across the Grampian Mountains to the far hills. Off in the distance to the left we could see the sparkling salmon river. Suddenly, before the shoot started, we saw a herd of red deer moving up the hillside half a mile away. The antlers of the great stags shone in the sun.

The horn sounded, and the Countess exclaimed, "There is one coming from the left!" I swung and made a clean kill. Instantly she called, "Another from the right!"

This was a much higher bird. My

first shot was below, and I swung swiftly through. The bird folded overhead. It was a prime spot, and birds were coming hot and heavy. A pack of 15 or 20 grouse were suddenly upon us. I killed a left and a right out front, exchanged guns, and missed one behind but killed it with my second shot. Jack said, "Brravo!"

A few moments later, Jack touched me on the shoulder and said in a whisper, "Sirr, here comes a verry high bird." He pointed out a single grouse some 40 yards up and bearing down, coming off the far ridge at about 45 degrees out front. I swung the barrel under the bird, and swinging quite a ways forward, I squeezed the trigger. To my surprise, the grouse crumpled in the air and fell some hundred yards down the hill behind. This was by far my best shot of the day. The Countess paid a high compliment: "You could shoot in any good English line."

When the drive ended, Nicky Emsens, my neighbor to the right, sauntered over as the dogs were retrieving the birds, and casually remarked, "Well done. It was great sport to shoot that high bird together."

Deflated, I was completely taken aback. As Nicky turned to gather his things, Jack said with a sly smile, "It's all right, sirr. He never fired his gun."

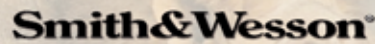
That small incident points up the humor, joking and camaraderie within the Belgian group. They had grown up together, gone off to college and wars together, attended each other's weddings. Their children were friends, just as their parents had all known one another. It was a tight-knit society, and if it had not been for our dear friend, Beatrice Lunt, we would never have been included and welcomed with such warmth and friendship. We were lucky Americans, and we were careful not to take things for granted or to overstep our bounds.

It had been an exhilarating and challenging day. Because there is great respect for fallen game, the birds were

# THE TROPHY ROOM

## Hunting & Fly Fishing Outfitters

210 King Street, Old Town Alexandria, VA  
703-837-8215 \* [www.TrophyRoomOnline.com](http://www.TrophyRoomOnline.com)



Now Booking Worldwide

Hunting, Fly Fishing, and Photographic Adventures

**Africa - Australia - British Columbia - New Zealand**  
**South America - Saskatchewan - Spain - Texas**

carefully laid out on the grass in a traditional game tableau. The keepers hold the grouse by the beak and if the beak doesn't break, they know this is an old bird. If the beak does break, it is a yearling. The grouse were appointed accordingly on the ground, with feathers flattened out. When the bag was all properly laid out, MacDonald stepped forward, hat in hand, and announced the count: 125 brace—250 grouse. Afterwards, my loader came to me to report that I had shot nineteen and a half brace—39 grouse—and had expended 74 cartridges. I was extremely pleased.

Then we were off to the lodge for tea and crumpets, welcomed by a roaring fire in the wide fireplace; large, deeply cushioned chairs and couches; and hot, hot tea with sugar and clotted cream and platters of cakes, biscuits and jams. High octane camaraderie. Many shooting tales unfolded, quite a few of them true. Then off for steaming hot baths in great tubs,

and then to dress for drinks and dinner. Perhaps, if you were Americans, one ice cube in your drink, but no more; but if you were Scots, then no ice at all, please. Why would anyone dilute such a marvelous concoction as pure malt whiskey?

The large dinner table was beautifully appointed, with a carefully placed seating arrangement. Since we would be together for five days, everyone was given a chance to visit. The four-course meal with choice wines ended with a round of Stilton cheese and a well-preserved bottle of port. Always, you must take the port bottle with your left hand from the neighbor on the right, and pour it into your own glass, never into another's. Then you pass the bottle on to your neighbor on the left with your left hand. Failure to adhere to this ritual is quite frowned upon.

Since that first glorious grouse shoot, all eight Belgian guns have remained close friends of ours, and we

have had the privilege of shooting together many times. The first shoot was memorable in many ways, but the moment that most remains in my memory is overhearing MacDonald, the gamekeeper, say to our host in his very strong brogue, "I have watched Mr. Belk carefully for five days. I can honestly say the American can come back again."

---

J. Blanton Belk was raised in Richmond, Virginia. He graduated from St. Christopher's School, attended Davidson College and then the Navy V-12 program at the University of North Carolina. He served as a naval officer on a PT boat in the Philippines during World War II. Blanton is the founder and chairman emeritus of Up With People, the international educational and leadership program. For his work in encouraging peace through understanding, he has been decorated by the Government of Belgium and the Government of Panama, named an Outstanding Educator of America, and nominated by a bipartisan committee of US senators and congressmen for the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Most recently he received an Honorary Doctor of Human Letters degree from Carroll College. From his youth he has always had a passion for the outdoors and has recently focused his attention on the preservation of the environment and the future of wildlife. He and his wife Betty have resided in Tucson, Arizona since 1957.