

The *Anser* to their prayers

Fowlers are giving Orkney farmers beset by greylags a fighting chance, says J R Patterson

In the chill of a late January morning, Ursa Major lay sprinkled against the veil of darkness like salt crystals on a black tablecloth. Orkney is a land of early risers and go-getters, and across the hilltops, yellow squares of light brought to mind the smell of coffee and warm kitchens. The sun, still an hour below the North Sea, was already cutting through an eastern umbra of cloud with a salvo of thin turquoise beams. The lapping hush of Inganess Bay, the water still invisible in the darkness, mingled with the murmur of greylag geese at rest.

that the enemy of game are the joint dizzards of land development and sinful chemicals. Orkney is low on both and is a birders' paradise in recompense. Most people who come to Orkney with birds on the brain do so to catalogue them, not eat them, let alone shoot them. But after six months, I'd had my fill of smoked cheddar, smoked fish and smoked whisky.

I was due to leave the island and my time to pull from Orkney's larder was running low. Unfulfilled desires relating to food are not grand-scale worries but there again, I thought of McGuane, who said "a world in which

"The young and eager fox-red labrador retriever twitched with every raspy buzz"

It was cold and the snow-covered grass crackled underfoot as we set a spread of decoys, occasionally giving way to reveal the soft field mud below. Even in midwinter, Orkney's sward is a lush, vibrant green. With the decoys set and bobbing in a light wind, we fell back to hunker in a steep ditch, rub our hands together and wait for the light.

It was the American writer and hunter Thomas McGuane who noted

a sacramental portion of food can be taken in an old way – hunting, fishing, farming and gathering – has as much to do with societal sanity as a day's work for a day's pay".

Eating greylag is all well and good, but shooting them serves a greater purpose in Orkney. The birds have a population density high enough to impact local agriculture and edge out competing species, and have become a local bane. Shooting them is thus a combined form of pest control and conservation, a two-pronged effort praised by local politicians and agriculturalists alike.

I was the guest of Orkney Islands Goose Shooting, whose head guide Raymond Shearer knelt beside me on the snow, a collection of birdcalls around his neck like a talisman. He learned the guiding trade under the late Richard Zawadski, who pioneered gamebird shooting in Orkney. Now Raymond

Today, Orkney's wintering greylag population is over 60,000 – a marked rise since the 1980s



SIMON TRINDER



The skein pivoted into the hail call, swooping low over the field

is the islands' fowling guru, running his outfit with guide Shane Farquhar.

Under normal circumstances, in the winter they'd be busy with clients every morning and evening, with the time between spent patrolling the island looking for fields filled with greylag and pink-footed geese, and ponds of wigeon, mallard and teal. The lockdown has tempered incoming Guns, bringing shooting to a standstill.

A scutch of snow blew in, dusting the decoys with a touch of white.



Nevertheless, the greylags were soon to wing, black forms moving across the land in ones, in pairs, in skeins of six and seven, looking for a fresh field to graze. Spotting a small wedge against the lightening horizon, Raymond blew a sore-throated honk on his call. Unsatisfied with the off-the-shelf varieties, his calls are custom made in New Zealand.

Crouched low, the muscles of his young fox-red labrador retriever twitched with every raspy buzz.

The skein pivoted into the hail call, swooping low. They came in cupped up and a volley sent two to ground.

Dramatic rise

During the 1980s, greylag geese were quite scarce visitors to Orkney. In autumn migrating flocks passed over the islands on their way south from their Icelandic breeding grounds to winter on the barley fields of Perthshire and Aberdeenshire on mainland Scotland. Only some

500 birds then wintered in Orkney. Numbers began to rise dramatically in the early 1990s and today the population is somewhere north of 60,000, still well over half of Britain's wintering greylag population.

There's some speculation as to why the greylags chose to settle in Orkney, with some blaming an increase in shooting in Iceland in a programme designed to ease the pressure of that island's own high greylag population. But the speculation seems moot. ➔

Goose shooting

There's little question why any bird chooses Orkney: the winters are generally frost-free and pastures abound with high-quality grass to feed the high-quality cattle. With such an abundance of food, greylags have no need to head further south. Ringing has indicated that birds have even moved up to Orkney midwinter from their traditional eastern Scottish wintering grounds.

Roving flocks

Orkney remains deeply seasonal, a place where the distinct seasons bring about as much change in the birdlife as they do the landscape. Thirty years ago, the annual autumnal arrival of the greylags to empty pastures and harvested barley fields was simply a part of that seasonal shift. But with at least 25,000 resident birds, every day is like a grand passage, as gaggles make their way across the islands, chewing through the fields. While some revel in the 'wildlife spectacle', local agrarians are struggling to manage the damage incurred by roving flocks.

I'd learned what damage they could do. A farmer described the ruinous effect the flocks had dealt his field of barley during the previous harvest season. "Between them and the wend, I doona ken which were worse. The geese got intae it 'fore I did and picked it clean. I'm not even sure it's worth harvesting it noo."

As numbers grew, Orcadian farmers and crofters have come

to regard the greylags as permanent agricultural pests, as much a vocational and environmental nuisance as the stoats that plague the archipelago. In some cases, the geese were forcing farmers to delay crop sowing, resow entire fields and keep cattle inside to allow pasture grass time to recuperate.

While this isn't a problem unique to Orkney – farmers as far away as Islay have raised similar complaints of ruined crops – the island's location between the mainland and Iceland means the problem is at its worst here.

Orkney is far from anti-geese. The islands remain a refuge for several

"Shooting has played a major role in keeping the population under control"

rare breeds, including Greenland barnacle and Greenland white-fronted geese. There are interspecies considerations too – a landscape dominated by greylags leaves less room for traditional Orkney farmland species, such as corncrakes, lapwings, curlew, oystercatchers, redshanks and skylarks, to name but a few.

There is no bloodthirst in the farmer's dislike of greylags. Landowners can still shoot the birds under the general licence to prevent agricultural damage, but most farmers are too busy to deal with the geese themselves. While some employ non-lethal scare tactics such as gas-guns and flags to move the flocks

on, many would rather shop out the problem to outfits such as Raymond's.

Of course, shooting alone won't bring the greylag under control, as Raymond admits. "Hunting by itself won't make a dent in the population," he said, his face rosy in a moment's glow of a cigarette bead. "Egg-oiling and nest breaking are what make the difference."

Volunteer shooters

Since 2012 the Orkney Greylag Goose Management Group has used volunteer shooters in autumn to help control geese. "While the shooting carried out by the volunteers since

2012 has not reduced the population," says Daniel Brazier, NatureScot's operations manager for the Northern Isles, "it has played a major role in keeping the population under control and is a necessary part of controlling Orkney's greylag geese population."

Without this effort to control numbers of resident greylags, Daniel reckons the resident population would now be double the current population, somewhere in the region of 50,000.

The Orkney Greylag Goose Management Group also provides a way of ensuring any birds which are taken can be used. Land managers are currently able to sell the greylag carcasses they generate, though the combination of COVID-19 and Brexit has added confusion about whether this sale of meat will continue.

As for me, my supper was set. Nearing the end of our time in the ditch, a single glided in. Spotting us, she locked up and shirked away. Shifting his weight, Shane zeroed in and landed a remarkable pot shot. Our three bags were a small taking for Orkney, but satisfactory – three fewer to trod the barley. More birds filled the bluing sky – crows and starlings dipping over the fields, gulls and cormorants heading out to sea, filling the air with their squawks and caws. And, always on the wind, the throaty call of *Anser anser*. 🦆

The greylag geese came in cupped up and a volley sent two to ground



For more on the wildfowling and duck shooting opportunities offered by Orkney Islands Goose Shooting, visit orkneyislandsgooseshooting.co.uk