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The Place of Ambush

In approaching the place selected for an ambush it is essential to take a route that will not disturb the game. The habit of suspicion is so inherent in wild creatures that it is necessary to credit them with a defensive cunning equal to the skill brought against them, to rule every motion as if they were actually observing it. Though the hare may crouch in her form apparently heedless of the passing footsteps, her eyes are on the watch, and the ears, and especially the nostrils absorbing every indication. When she leaves the form she will not go in the direction the footsteps have taken nor will the partridge cowering in the furrow nearest the dangerous neighbourhood. The rabbits in their burrows, though they can neither see nor be seen, are perfectly conscious of what is proceeding in their immediate vicinity, for long experience underground has taught them the meaning of every sound, and vibration of the earth. If anyone walks across the entrance to their holes they remain concealed for a length of time: if a person only crosses the centre of the meadow they are soon out again, but let him come up beside the hedge and their caution is doubled.

To avoid anything unusual is the secret – it holds good also in simply observing the ways of bird or animal: they soon become accustomed to anything regularly repeated. So the shepherd strolls about among his sheep and the hare does not move though he can see her eye, the fogger carries out the hay at dawn to the cattle and the rabbit in the grass sits still almost under his heavy shoes, and the wild wood-pigeon contently perches on the elm over the yard when the milkers are busy. The labourer going home from his work in the evening gets through a gap in the hedge and the rabbits scarcely notice him. The crunching and grinding of the flints under the heavy wagon wheels in the lane alarms nothing. But the slightest deviation from the established course of things produces an instant effect: if the grinding and crunching cease, and the carter looks over the gate every ear is perked up. The place of ambush, therefore, whether a ditch or a tree, must be approached as much as possible by the ordinary footpaths, and not by stealthily gliding along beside the hedges.

The Place of Ambush

Crossing a mound is certain to warn every rabbit near, for the hollow soil tunnelled beneath conveys the least jar, and there is sure to be a brushing noise against the parted bushes, and the rustle of dead leaves under foot. This adds to the poacher's difficulties because for the sake of concealment it is in his interest to keep near cover, and while with the background of a hedge he may be invisible, in the open he would at once be perceived. When it is not possible to get any nearer to the tree by the footpath, or by the well-worn track which the cows make going down to water, walking regularly as if drilled the one behind the other and cutting quite a groove in the turf with their hoofs then, instead of following the hedge, strike straight across the open field for it. Keep away too from the furrows, and avoid the bunches of grass in which there may be a form. The tree must be chosen beforehand, and indeed to previously reconnoitre the ground is the constant habit of the poacher and often exposes him to suspicion when found or seen from a distance rambling away from the beaten path, though a search may not reveal a wire or ferret in his pocket. It should of course stand within range of a place frequented by game, and must not present much difficulty in climbing. For most of our trees are bare of boughs to some height, and are not easily ascended when carrying a gun.

A fine horse-chestnut tree stood by the side of a hedge in some secluded meadow lands. It grew on the 'shore' of a wide deep ditch – the 'shore' is the edge towards the field opposite to the bank – which bounded a great double mound. There were many oaks in the hedge, but the advantage of the chestnut was that like a bastion it permitted a flanking fire along the green curtain wall, and was so situated near the corner that a view could be obtained into three meadows at once. The trunk was smooth – the horses rubbing against it and leaving stray hairs adhering to the bark – but the means of ascent were close at hand. An old hurdle which had been used to stop a gap close by was conveniently lying in the ditch, and had only to be quietly pulled out and 'pitched' against the tree behind the shelter of a hawthorn bush.

Placing one foot on this, the left hand could easily grasp the first bough while the right carefully laid the gun on two other

Wild-Fowling

About the middle of October, each year, large quantities of wild-fowl, ranging from wild swans to ducks, that have migrated from cold northern latitudes, visit our shores, and remain with us until the end of March, experiencing during the intervening period a pretty hard time of it. First they are exposed to the attack of the professional puntsmen, with whom wild-fowling is a special occupation from the time the first flights arrive until the main body take their departure in the early spring. Then there is an army of sportsmen gunners, and the shore-shooters, to many of whom the only chance of a day's sport is amongst the unpreserved fens and saltings or along the numerous creeks and rivers in the immediate vicinity of the seashore. Such localities are at all times a more or less sure find for wild-fowl of one sort or another.

Although the 'professionals' and certain amateur puntsmen have been busy for some weeks past, the majority of shore-shooters defer operations until the appearance of the first hard frost. At such times the birds are more scattered about the fens and marshes, electing during the daytime – their period of repose – to seek shelter in the creeks and ditches rather than betake themselves to the open sea at the break of day, as is their usual custom. On the other hand, during periods of prolonged frost or in boisterous weather wild-fowl on the open sea are more than usually alert, and consequently more difficult to approach in a gunning punt; so that the puntsmen fare but badly; whilst the shore-shooter's chances of making good bags are much enhanced.

It is the opinion of most wild-fowlers that in severe winters quite as many wild-fowl visit our shores as formerly; although it is certain that the continuous shooting to which they are exposed, added to an enormous increase of stream and maritime traffic, renders them each succeeding season more and more wary and difficult to approach even under the most favourable conditions. Moreover, the drainage operations carried out in the various Fen districts – formerly sanctuary of countless geese, ducks, widgeon, teal, grebes, dunbirds,

curlew, plover, etc. — have done much to diminish the shore-shooter's chance of success. Apart, however from punt-shooting or traversing the various flats and saltings on foot, there remains to the wild-fowler one branch of his sport which has hardly been injured by the keener vigilance of the birds themselves or the reclamation of their feeding grounds. A vast area of marsh-land still borders certain parts of the eastern coast; and to such places the birds repair night after night to seek their food-supplies, returning to sea again with the first break of returning day if the weather be frosty or tempestuous. Just as the twilight is merging into gloom flocks of wild-fowl of every description wend their way inland to their accustomed haunts, hardly deviating a yard from their regular course. Accurate knowledge of their habits in this respect enables the 'flight' shooter to lay his plans accordingly. Having from some convenient coign of vantage observed for two or three evenings the exact direction the birds take, his next step is to find a suitable shelter directly in the line of flight, behind which he can lie concealed and await their arrival.

As a rule the birds when proceeding to or returning from their feeding-grounds, do not fly at a greater altitude than six or seven yards; and if there be a fall of snow, or the atmosphere changes to be hazy, this distance is often much reduced, so that the birds as they speed onward come within easy range of the ambushed gunner. Important as this advantage is, however, it is by no means conclusive. The velocity of flight is well-nigh incredible; and unless the gunner is aware of the birds' approach before they are close upon him, they will have passed over his head and out of range before he will have time to get his gun to his shoulder. The practised 'flight' shooter, however, will seldom be caught napping; his quick ears will have detected the whistling sound caused by the rapidly beating wings when the birds are still a hundred yards or so distant, and the gun will be levelled and the finger ready to press the trigger the instant the first 'skein' of geese or 'team' of ducks comes in sight. The aim must be well ahead of the bird or birds fired at; otherwise the charge will be expended far in rear of the hindermost feathers.

After all there is no certainty of success about 'fighting', as this