

Drumlanrig deliverance



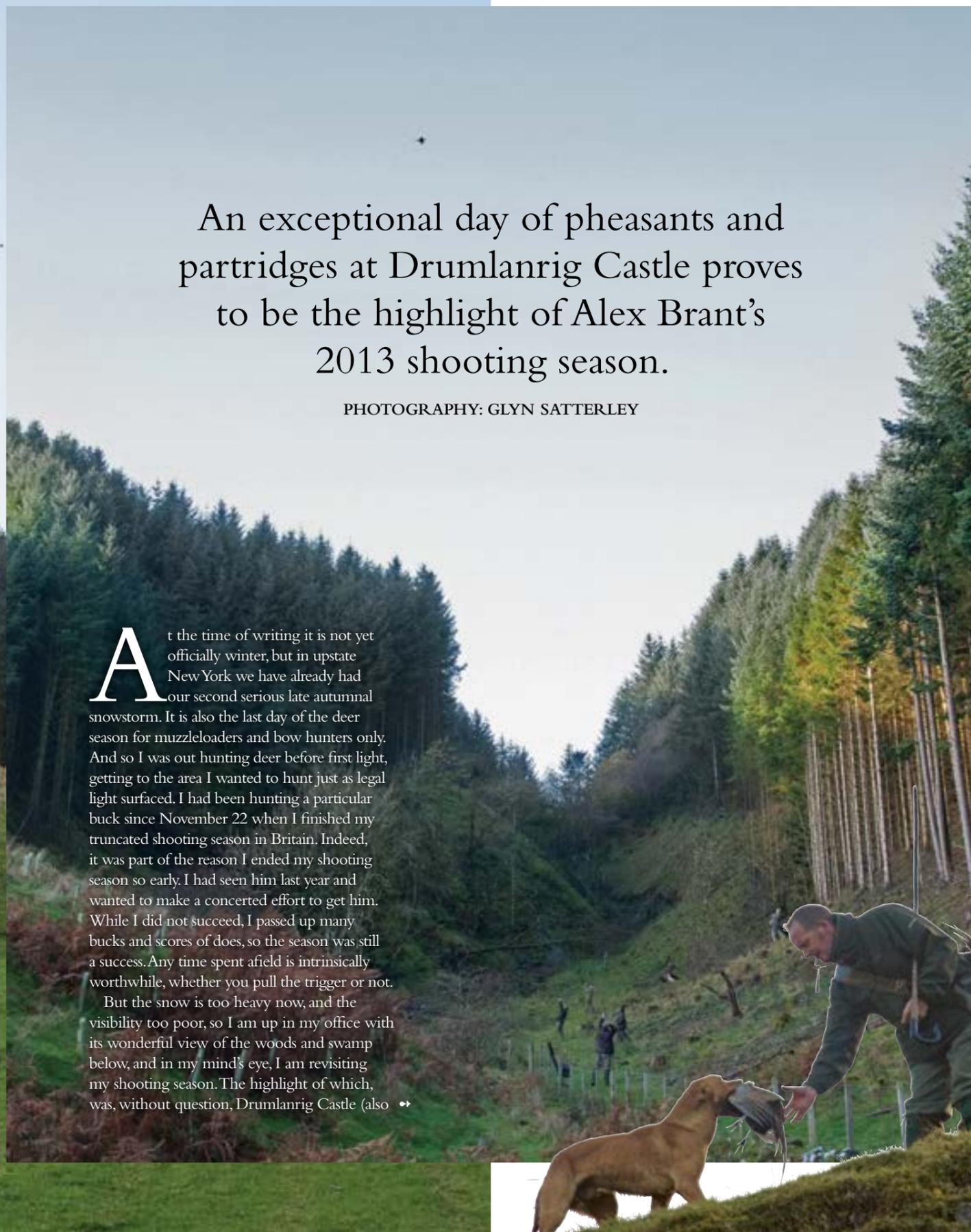
Great sport at Corfardine, despite difficult conditions

An exceptional day of pheasants and partridges at Drumlanrig Castle proves to be the highlight of Alex Brant's 2013 shooting season.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GLYN SATTERLEY

At the time of writing it is not yet officially winter, but in upstate New York we have already had our second serious late autumnal snowstorm. It is also the last day of the deer season for muzzleloaders and bow hunters only. And so I was out hunting deer before first light, getting to the area I wanted to hunt just as legal light surfaced. I had been hunting a particular buck since November 22 when I finished my truncated shooting season in Britain. Indeed, it was part of the reason I ended my shooting season so early. I had seen him last year and wanted to make a concerted effort to get him. While I did not succeed, I passed up many bucks and scores of does, so the season was still a success. Any time spent afield is intrinsically worthwhile, whether you pull the trigger or not.

But the snow is too heavy now, and the visibility too poor, so I am up in my office with its wonderful view of the woods and swamp below, and in my mind's eye, I am revisiting my shooting season. The highlight of which, was, without question, Drumlanrig Castle (also →



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known as Queensberry estate).

For some unknown reason, no matter how much one shoots during the season, be it six days or 60, it is a small percentage of days, perhaps a handful for those of us who shoot a lot, that stand out above the others. I have had brilliant days on ducks at our own shoot in Ireland, and great days on pheasants and ducks at Ireland's Castle Howard. I've had superlative days at Castle Hill, and four other shoots in the West Country. I've had tremendous shoots in Wales, and in Scotland, but nothing in Scotland any year, and nothing in Britain this year, came close to the greatness that was Drumlanrig.

We arrived late at our hotel, the Buccleuch and Queensberry Arms, as we had the great misfortune of having a flat tyre on the M40. Normally, I don't mention my favourite hotels and places to stay as I don't want to create additional competition for myself. However, for anyone contemplating staying in the area while shooting Drumlanrig, I recommend this highly and without reservation. As the staff and I unpacked our overburdened car, Renata took our dogs for a walk and, when I came down I almost needed to do a double take, for the owner of the hotel, Dolf Sweerts, had a similar yellow lab and brown spaniel to ours. We started to chat and he suggested a drink. Rarely had I needed one more. What should have been a seven-hour drive had taken more. C'est la vie.

The next morning I was picked up along with Lawrence Tomlinson and Carl Brewins from the hotel by John Duncan, our most amiable and amicable host from *Roxtons*. John runs the shooting and the bookings for Drumlanrig. He does a splendid job – as well as anyone I know. And his right-hand man, Rab Clark, is an extraordinary gamekeeper and mixologist. I had met Lawrence and Carl briefly as they were retiring to their rooms for the night as I was descending the stairs for a very late, very delicious dinner.

It was a short, easy drive to the magnificent



John Duncan & headkeeper Rab Clark



There was some impressive shooting from the team at Tinkers

Drumlanrig Castle. Here I quickly spotted Bill Anderson, with whom I have shot a couple of times elsewhere in Scotland. Indeed, it was Bill whose roving syndicate made up the majority of the team. They were all from Scotland or the Borders and shoot together often. They are planning on shooting Drumlanrig every couple of weeks next year, simply because it is so good.

Basically, the majority of Drumlanrig's drives are strategically positioned along a glen, transected by the river Scar, a tributary of the River Nith, that goes on for 15 miles. This is one of three pheasant beats, the other two being Marbanks and Holstene. This gives them 28 main drives for pheasants. In addition to the pheasant drives which we shot, other signature drives include Muckle Wood, Honey Hole, Burnmouth, Coshogle, Humby Holm, Slate Quarry and McDuff. Many of the drives

take place from woods that were laid out for pheasant shooting over 80 years ago.

For the last two years, John and Rab have added many miles of wire to keep the sheep off the hill. This allows heather, bracken and natural regeneration of native woodlands to grow in peace. They have also created five new drives over the last couple of years. John Duncan told me: "We normally shoot four days a week and can offer a vast array of sport. As you hopefully saw, we go out of our way to create a fun and relaxed atmosphere that everyone seems to enjoy." Continuing, he adds: "The estate employs eight keepers including Rab. We (*Roxtons*) got involved in February 2012 and handle all of the lettings."

The first drive that we shot was Corfardine. Rab, being the brave and knowledgeable man that he is, actually pushes the birds up the hill



“Many of the drives take place from woods that were laid out for pheasant shooting over 80 years ago.”

With a strong tailwind, the birds at McDuff produced testing shooting for the line



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and then flushes them back, with flankers at the top awaiting the birds' arrival. The wind was too strong for them to use their normal flushing point. The typical bird was 35 to 50 yards up – sporting in any man's vocabulary, and made much more so by the extreme wind. Indeed, Rab told me after the drive that the birds are normally 20 yards taller, but the wind was so strong that it was pushing them down. That said, they were cracking birds. And I had drawn a good peg with plenty of action.

The first bird of the drive came over me, quite a good hen, and with everyone looking I killed it with the first barrel. The only bad thing about being known as a pretty good Shot, is that if one is having an off day or an off drive, jibes tend to fly.

At the end of this drive, I went over and congratulated Rab on his performance. I knew how difficult the conditions were. Rab's dad was a beatkeeper on the estate for 44 years and Rab started going out with him when he was about four years old. He has now been working on the estate for 31 years and was made head grouse keeper in 1999 at the age of 33. In 2004 he became headkeeper for the entire estate. At some point he said to me: "If you can drive grouse, you can drive anything."

Arkland was the second drive and, unfortunately for me, I was back-gunning behind Lawrence who was shooting exceptionally well. One interesting aspect here was that I don't think I've ever seen birds fly faster anywhere. The tailwind was extreme. Luckily, as a back Gun, I was able to view a few birds passing over the woods to my left. By viewing just how fast they were passing the trees I was able to quickly assess their speed. That didn't mean I could kill them all, but I knew that they needed almost twice the lead of a normal pheasant at the same distance plus plenty of 'finish'. Barry Jeal, my stuffer, was a wonderful companion. A gunsmith by profession, he retired and moved to Scotland. He is a real boon at Drumlanrig as, on more than one occasion, when a client has had gun problems, he's been able to fix it during elevenses. He also had a great sense of humour and was very quick as a loader. We made a great team.

McDuff had me at the wrong end of the line on peg number one. The birds were primarily



The author
& Barry Jeal,
his loader for the day

flying towards the higher numbers as they number from right to left, which is also the direction in which the wind blew. That said, I did have enough shooting. However, even before I got out to my peg I turned to Barry and told him I wished we were back-gunning at the other side. My conclusion proved correct – it would have been brilliant. In truth, keepers can modify things when the elements go against them, but birds are going to fly to the area of least resistance, i.e. as pushed by the wind. Drumlanrig has such magnificent terrain, that it actually shoots best in no or minimal wind, for in that case, Rab can keep the birds over all the Guns most of the time.

There was some excellent shooting from many members of the team. These were conditions that would try and test the best of Shots. They rose to the occasion.

Tinkers was a drive thrown in at last minute. We were possibly a bit light on pheasants but Renata was to meet us at lunch and Rab was concerned that we would keep her waiting if we threw in the fourth drive. Being philosophical, I told Rab that lunch was of no importance; we were here to shoot. So we stopped at Tinkers, and the super-strong wind again pushed the birds to the higher numbers. At three, I was sort of on the cusp of okay. Guns one and two had little shooting and everyone from four up to nine had excellent sport; the tallest birds definitely going to the highest numbers.

Back at Drumlanrig, we quickly deboted and went to be fortified. Rab, who seemed to be everywhere at all times, acted as bartender. Lunch itself was delicious. I will not linger as

“It is called Whirlpool as birds come from both sides, in front and behind.”



we did not, though to follow we had the best partridge drive that I've ever seen in Britain.

To get there it was perhaps 15 minutes to another part of the estate, very hilly moorland with deep ravines and gullies. I was positioned in the middle of the line, in the perfect spot

and with enough first-rate shooting to last anyone for a season. I probably killed the first bird of the drive, a very long crosser over the top of the hill that needed a bus and a half length of lead. The partridge was stone dead somersaulting in the air. In normal conditions, I find an extreme partridge needs about half the lead, or at least the perceived lead, of an extreme pheasant. These were not normal conditions. A lovely and satisfying sight.

One needed eyes in the back of one's head for this drive. It is called Whirlpool as birds come from both sides, in front and behind. One could have a perfect driven bird followed by a crosser or a bird going away – exciting stuff.

I doubt many birds were under 40 yards up, and some were about double that.

Other great partridge drives at Drumlanrig include Scud Law, Gateslack, Garroch, Dalveen and Cample Cleuch.

Back at the castle, after using the wellie washer, and showing our respects to the keeper and my stuffer, we had a quick spot of tea and a nice chat with the other Guns. Unfortunately, it ended all too quickly as we all had places to go to. Renata and I were driving to Port Logan (see current issue of *The Scottish Sporting Gazette*), Carl and Lawrence were zooming back to Yorkshire, and I'm sure Bill and others had other shoots to go to on the Saturday

GUNS

Bill Anderson, Alan Grieve, Eric Taylor, Stephen Cullis, brothers Steven and Billy Lynch, Lawrence Tomlinson, Carl Brewins & Alex Brant

BAG

349 extraordinary birds: 266 pheasants & 83 redleg partridges

→ Drumlanrig Shoot

E. John.Duncan@roxtons.com
Tel. +44 (0)1488 683 222

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e. arthur_sweerts@me.com, www.bqahotel.com



Drumlanrig Castle

Drumlanrig Castle, Dumfriesshire, is the ancestral seat of the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch and Queensberry. Pretty impressive, too, with art by Rembrandt, Gainsborough and others, plus significant antiques in the main rooms. Occasionally, the castle can be rented by shooting parties.

The price is steep, as can be expected from such top quality accommodation, with the main rooms, both grand and great, having recently undergone major upgrading and renovating. The 90,000-acre estate, though only about a quarter of it is used for pheasant and partridge shooting, has miles of beautiful walks and acres of elegant gardens.

The Buccleuch family has, for many generations, overseen foresters who currently manage approximately 25,000 acres of woodland, of which Drumlanrig covers about a third. Regrettably, the Larch trees on the estate are succumbing to a very destructive disease, *Phytophthora ramorum*, which afflicts several conifer tree species. If the disease spreads to the bilberry then many sensitive habitats and species could be very gravely affected, including black game. The disease forced the dramatic felling of the larch plantations. Ultimately, more pheasant drives might develop from this.

Whirlpool, described by the author as the best partridge drive he has ever experienced in Britain