

SIMPLE PLEASURES

MAT MANNING swaps his usual hi-tech hardware for a trusty spring-powered airgun and enjoys a back-to-basics evening in the woods

PHOTOGRAPHY **JOE BRANSTON**

With all the sophisticated modern kit we have to choose from these days, it can be easy to overlook the simple pleasure of just being out in the countryside with your airgun. Of course, there are plenty of times when technically advanced equipment will help to put more pests in the bag, but there is more to enjoying our sport than simply notching up big tallies every time we head out.

I'm as guilty as anyone, and probably more guilty than most, when it comes to falling for the trappings of cutting-edge kit, and I make no apology for that. Much of my shooting time is spent controlling pests, often during very unsociable hours, so I will happily exploit the technical advantage provided by modern gear, such as thermal spotters and super-accurate pre-charged air rifles. This equipment enables me to optimise my time and do the best job I can. There are times, though, when I am happier to employ a

more basic approach and embrace the simple joy of just being out there rather than always playing the numbers game.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

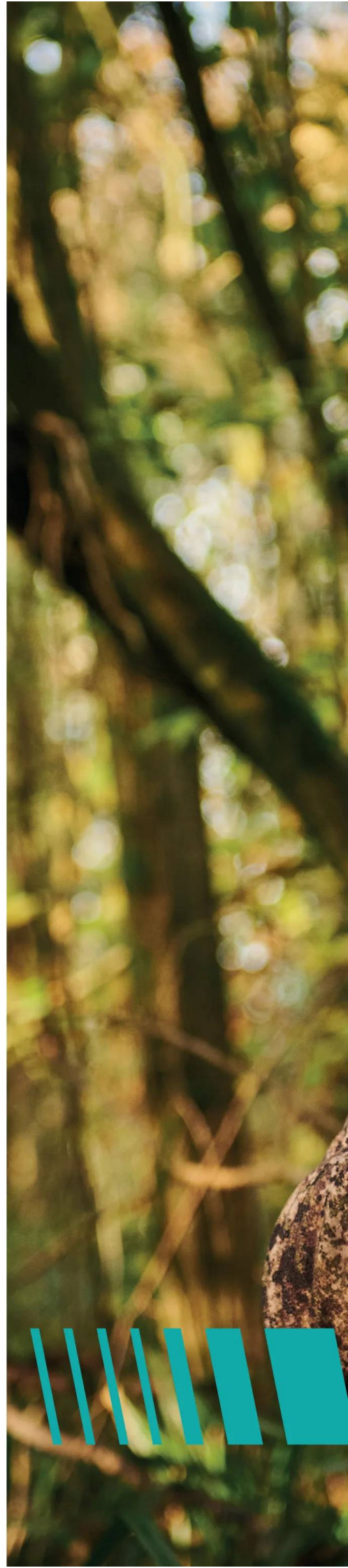
Fieldcraft skills play an even more important role in successful shooting than hi-tech equipment, as far too many shooters have discovered after splashing out on expensive kit, instead of striving to grasp the fundamentals. Even those of us who have been shooting for decades can raise our fieldcraft game by going back to simpler kit from time to time, and an outing with a spring-powered air rifle is a great way to do just that.

Finding myself in the rare position of having a couple of hours to myself on a crisp winter's afternoon, I decided to spend it wandering the woods with my trusty Weihrauch HW95K. A lot of shooters start out with basic break-barrel airguns like this, and the canny ones among us hang on to them. Requiring very little maintenance and unfettered by the rigmarole of air tanks, pumps and compressors, guns like this make shooting not only affordable, but also very straightforward.

Topped with a compact 2-7 x 32 Hawke Airmax scope, my HW95 isn't too heavy to carry on a roving foray. The only other kit I took with me was a game bag and pellets, plus a few odds and ends stuffed into my pockets. I must confess that it felt very good to be free of the cumbersome gear and accessories that I usually lug around when I'm out on my airgun rounds.

Another pellet is quickly thumbled into the Weihrauch's breech after Mat drops the first squirrel of the session.

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"Fieldcraft skills play an even more important role in successful shooting than hi-tech equipment, as far too many shooters have discovered after splashing out on expensive kit, instead of striving to grasp the fundamentals"



A close-range shot ends in success and Mat makes a very welcome addition to the game bag.

PROS AND CONS

I trundled my way through the woods and it wasn't long before I was reminded of some of the disadvantages of adopting a simpler approach. The first squirrel I spotted was high up on a towering oak, about 35 metres from me. In the windless conditions, the shot would have been a mere formality with a recoilless PCP. Not so with a recoiling spring-gun, though – not for me, anyway.

Although I often shoot my HW95 on the range, my lack of field experience with it over recent months meant that I

wanted to be at least ten metres closer before attempting a shot at live quarry. Unfortunately, the squirrel wasn't impressed by my clumsy approach and scabbled away through the treetops as I tried to close in – a clear reminder of the importance of good fieldcraft skills.

My next encounter was with a much more obliging squirrel. Rather than bolting, this one adopted the 'sit still and hope he fails to notice me' strategy. It proved to be a costly mistake because I managed to creep to within about 20 metres of it before

settling down on my knees for the shot. At such close range, this was an easy shot, even for me, and a direct hit to the skull sent the squirrel tumbling down from its perch.

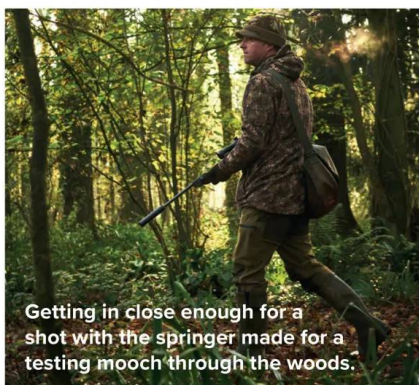
Instinctively, I slapped down on the silencer to unlock the Weihrauch's barrel-retaining mechanism before drawing it down to cock the spring and reset the automatic safety catch with a gratifying 'click'. After thumbing a .177 pellet straight into the breech, I snapped the barrel back up into the closed position before clambering through the undergrowth to collect my prize. The first squirrel of the afternoon went into the bag, and I continued on my way.

PIGEON TIME!

As I strolled along the rides, I could hear the occasional distant 'pop' from the far side of an adjacent field, where my friend was out decoying pigeons over a rape crop. He had already sent me a text to say that a few birds had fallen to his shotgun, and judging by the activity along that side of the woods, I reckoned I had a good chance of accounting for one or two with my airgun.

I arrived where the woods flank the rape crop, picked a spot that gave me a comparatively clear view of the surrounding treetops, and settled in next to the broad trunk of an old oak tree. Pulling on my headnet in an effort to keep my face hidden from incoming birds, I felt that the spot also held the chance of another squirrel or two. Dense patches of ivy seemed to provide the perfect places for the bushy-tailed rodents to construct their dreys and also offered cosy shelter for roosting pigeons.

The calm conditions were far from ideal for my mate's decoying exploits, but the lack of wind and ambient noise made it easy for me to tune in to the woodland sounds. I soon heard the flicker of wings and looked up to see a flock of six or



Getting in close enough for a shot with the springer made for a testing mooch through the woods.



Mat pulls on his headnet to improve his chances of going unnoticed as he turns his attention to pigeons.



The thick trunk of an old oak tree provides welcome cover and support as Mat lines up on a woodie.

seven woodpigeon passing over the treetops, with no intention of dropping in anywhere close to me, but it was a very welcome sign.

PERFECT SHOT!

There were only three pigeons in the next squadron, which made a significantly lower approach, circling over the treetops before fluttering down to settle in the uppermost branches. The two birds furthest away were beyond my effective striking distance, but the nearest one was only about 25 metres and clearly presented. Very slowly, I raised the Weihrauch up into my shoulder and leaned into the oak for added support. Whilst it's fine to support your body when using a springer, it's important not to rest the actual gun because hard surfaces can cause harsh and unpredictable recoil, flinging pellets way off target.

Bringing the crosshairs to rest just beneath the fold of the unsuspecting pigeon's wing, I touched off the trigger and the pellet hit home with a wallop. It was a direct hit to the engine room, sending the bird thudding down onto the deck. Once again, I drew down the Weihrauch's barrel until the cocking stroke reached its end with a pleasing click, then popped in another pellet and swung it back home with a solid clunk.

I never used to notice the sounds of the cocking and loading procedure when shooting a spring gun as a teenager, and even if I did, I probably regarded it as an irritating reminder of the fact that I couldn't afford a super-slick, pre-charged model.

SATISFYING SESSION

Over the next 20 minutes, or so, I left a couple of longer birds and clean missed a closer one before adding another to the tally. The woodland floor around me was a tangle of brambles and sedges, so I broke off to collect the two shot birds



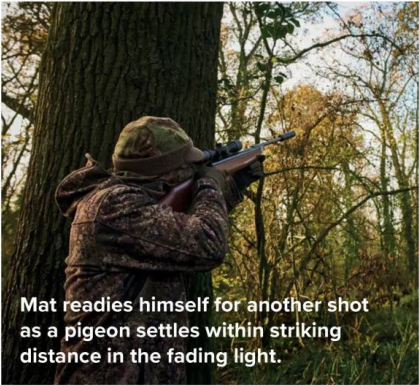
The first two woodies of the evening are gathered up as dusk begins to set in.

before the fading light made it tricky to find them. With both pigeons accounted for and safely tucked in my game bag, I returned to my post of the foot of the oak.

A halt to the sound of distant gunshots suggested that my mate's shotgun session had drawn to a close. He was now no doubt gathering up his decoys and packing away his hide in the fading light. I was surprised not to have seen any squirrels

on the move as dusk closed in, but I did manage to add one more pigeon to the bag before I also decided to head for home.

That short outing was one of the most enjoyable shooting trips I have had in a long time, and I can clearly recall every shot I took – including that annoying miss. I am sure that I could have shot more with my usual kit, but I doubt that it would have been quite as gratifying.✕



Mat readies himself for another shot as a pigeon settles within striking distance in the fading light.

MAT'S KIT

- GUN: Weihrauch HW95K weihrauch.co.uk
- SCOPE: Hawke Airmax 2-7 x 32 hawkeoptics.com
- AMMO: QYS Domed 9.56 grain.....shootingparty.uk
- JACKET: Ridgeline Grizzly III ridgelineclothing.co.uk