

SCORING IN EXTRA TIME

MAT MANNING makes the most of the lengthening days to spend an evening in pursuit of rabbits and squirrels

PHOTOGRAPHY **JOE BRANSTON**

Late spring going into early summer can be a very interesting season for airgun hunting, but it can also be challenging. One of the biggest problems at this time of year is the fact that the prime times of dawn and dusk are so far apart, which means there can be long unproductive periods between them. The longer days do have their advantages, though, and the main one is that there is often time to squeeze in evening sessions after work. These few precious hours between dinner and darkness can be very productive for hunting, and potentially just as valuable for simply spending time out and about, getting to know your ground.

A lot of my evenings are spent doing both those things. I love to be out observing activity and carrying out odd jobs around my permissions, but I usually carry an airgun just in case I get the chance of a shot or two whilst I'm there.

One of my recent forays kicked off with a stroll around the edge of a large block of woodland. It was a lovely sunny evening, which suggested to me that the rabbits that inhabit the meadows flanking the plantation could well be out enjoying the last of the warming rays. With that in mind, I did my best to move with stealth; hugging the cover and trying to stay in the shadows as I made my way around.

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Mat kicked off the session with a mobile approach in the hope of encountering a bonus bunny.



The stealthy approach pays off and Mat is rewarded with a shot at an unsuspecting rabbit.

COME CLOSER!

My cautious approach was rewarded less than 15 minutes after I'd left the car. Rounding a trackway where the woodland margin meets with lush grass, I happened across a solitary rabbit nibbling at the fresh green shoots. It was about 40 metres away and completely oblivious to my presence, so I decided to creep in a little closer in the hope of setting up a nice, straightforward shot.

The gentle breeze was in my face, pushing any scent I was carrying from the human world behind me and away from my quarry's twitching nostrils. At around 30 metres, the bunny was still unconcerned, and I decided I was well close enough for the shot. As I dropped down for extra stability, my old knees made a click which was promptly detected by the bunny's keen ears. It still wasn't spooked, though, and simply raised its head for a moment before settling back down to feed.

As the rabbit gnawed at the stems, I very slowly raised my HW100 and tucked its butt into my shoulder. Peering through the scope, I brought the crosshairs on to the oblivious bunny's skull and watched them come to rest as my breathing settled. I pushed through the trigger and the 'phut' from the Weihrauch's muzzle was followed by a piercing crack as the pellet connecting with the rabbit's skull, sending it into a cartwheel before it flopped back on to the ride and expired with little more than a kick of the leg.

A GREAT START

Rabbits are slowly beginning to make a comeback on much of my ground after

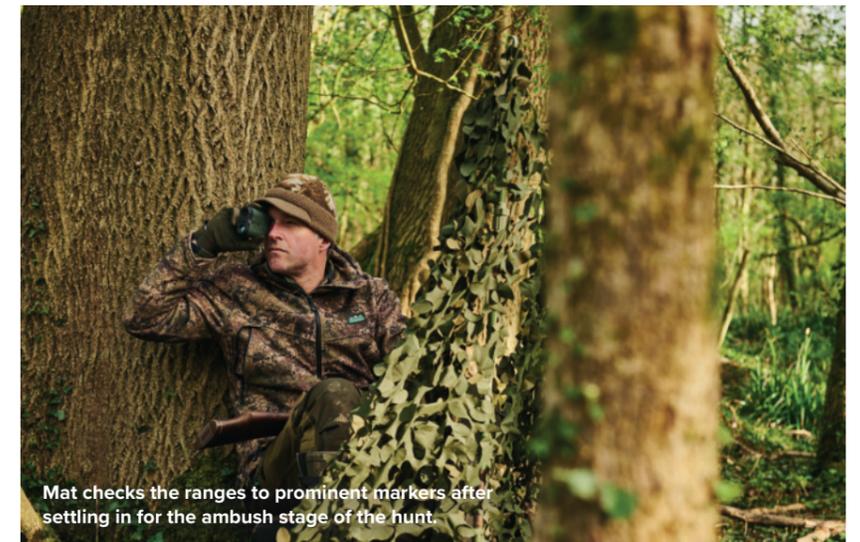


A rabbit in the bag makes for a great start to the evening's proceedings.

being hammered by viral haemorrhagic disease over the past few years, and I only shoot them lightly on this particular patch of ground at present. It's a different story around pony paddocks and other places where burrowing can pose a danger to livestock, but I was happy to simply bag one for the pot on this occasion – it certainly was a great start to the session.

The main purpose of this outing was actually to check up on a feed hopper, and that was where I headed next. The primary role of this drum feeder is to nourish pheasants during the game shooting season, but as I have mentioned before, it has been attracting so many grey squirrels that the gamekeeper and I have decided to keep it going right through the summer. The cost of a few extra sacks of corn is more than justified by the boost it is bringing to my squirrel control efforts, and it's much cheaper than my usual approach with peanut feeders.

I settled into the semi-permanent hide and set up about 25m from the hopper, then had a quick ping around with my laser rangefinder. After spending so many hours in this hide, I really should know the ranges to prominent trees off



Mat checks the ranges to prominent markers after settling in for the ambush stage of the hunt.

by heart by now, but I don't suppose there is any harm in double-checking.

TAKE YOUR TIME

My reasoning for confirming ranges to obvious markers is that it saves me from having to reach for the rangefinder and wave it around when sharp-eyed quarry is in the vicinity. Instead, I simply use the trees and other features I have ranged as gauges that can be used to estimate

the distance to squirrels, should they present me with a shot anywhere other than beneath the feeder.

Taking time to check ranges soon proved its worth when a squirrel ventured out on to a lofty branch that I was able to estimate at just under 30m. I had to take this one with a shot over the top of the hide net and would have appreciated the support of my tripod, which I had left in the boot so as not



Action comes quickly in the hide and Mat lines up on a bark-stripping bushy-tail.



The ever-dependable feed hopper works its magic again and Mat lines up on another squirrel.

to feel overburdened with kit during the initial roving stage of my outing. Thankfully, my stable sitting position and the calm conditions made for a comparatively straightforward shot and the first squirrel of the session soon crashed into the leaf litter with a wallop.

COSTLY MISTAKE

That squirrel was another clean kill to the QYS pellets that so many of my .177 air rifles absolutely love. The Weihrauch has a particular liking for the heavy version of the Domed design, which weighs 9.56 grains and really packs a punch. My FX Dreamline and several other guns are also very accurate with QYS ammo, which is really cleanly manufactured and has excellent weight consistency. Matching an airgun with the right pellets

is something of a dark art, but I would certainly recommend giving these a try if you haven't already.

I didn't have to wait very long before the every-reliable blue drum worked its magic and lured in a greedy squirrel. Confidently nibbling away at the grains beneath the hopper, this one offered an easy shot and was promptly snuffed out with a smack to the head.

Evening is usually a productive time for grey squirrel control around food sources because the rodents like to have a late munch before they settle down for the night. To prove that point, another squirrel showed up at the hopper just as the light was beginning to fade. This one was more fidgety, no doubt unsettled by the presence of the first unfortunate diner. After darting between the undergrowth and the base of the hopper

to make hasty grain raids, it eventually dropped its guard and settled down to feed. That proved to be a costly mistake because it gave me time to line up and roll it over.

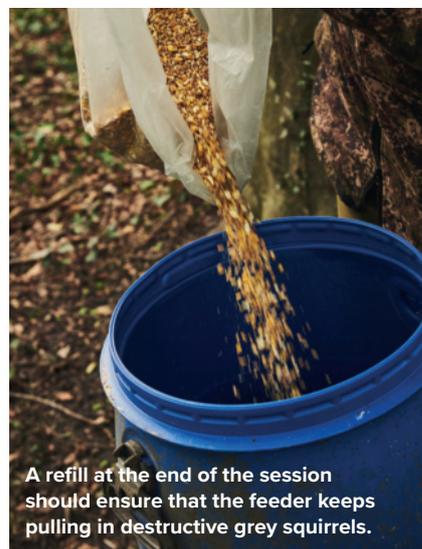
There may have just been enough time to bag another, but I decided to make that squirrel the last one because I wanted to pick up, top up the feeder and head back through the woods before darkness closed in. It is vital to ensure that feeders never run empty, not just because squirrels will back away and find another food source, but also because they are likely to chew them to pieces out of sheer frustration. The sack I tipped into the hopper before my departure should ensure that there are more squirrels to be had the next time I visit.✕



Heavyweight QYS pellets have been doing the business through several of Mat's guns, including his HW100.



Another productive session by the blue drum means fewer squirrels damaging trees and raiding nests.



A refill at the end of the session should ensure that the feeder keeps pulling in destructive grey squirrels.

MAT'S KIT

- GUN:** Weihrauch HW100K..... weihrauch.co.uk
- SCOPE:** Zeiss Conquest V4..... zeiss.co.uk
- MOUNT:** Sportsmatch Two-piece sportsmatch-uk.com
- AMMO:** QYS Domed Heavy shootingparty.uk
- RANGEFINDER:** Hawke LRF 400 hawkeoptics.com