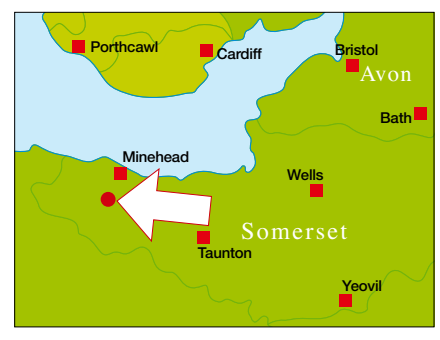


A day on the... Withycombe Farm shoot

Selena Masson visits a shoot in Somerset where the county's steep valleys and combs always provide a reliable source of challenging sport

i Shoot information

Where: Winsford, Somerset
When: 11 January 2011



Meet the keeper

Chris Jones: "Looking after Withycombe Farm shoot is incredibly rewarding, once you have learned how the birds respond to the dramatic topography. Picking the right breed of pheasant is also important — get it wrong and they will hug the contours, rather than fly over the line of Guns. I favour Michigan Blueback/Chinese ringneck crosses as they are a lighter-framed bird with a bit of lift."



crucial on West Country terrain. "Today we probably have 30 or so dogs," said Nick. "The army of beaters is also split into three teams, headed up by myself, Chris and Mike Hillier. This is so that the birds can be carefully corralled towards designated flushing points." Chris added that after 10 seasons on the shoot, he has now refined the set-up: "I cut my teeth as an Exmoor keeper at Miltons. I'd like to think we now know how to get the most from the birds we release."

West Country shooting

Hotelier John Puddepha and his loader, professional stalker Morgan Andrews, were on peg three for the first drive, Red Linney. Pegged out in a gentle arc, the line stood into the wind with their backs to the River Winn. "I'm anticipating the birds to race off that bank," whispered John as he closed his Beretta Jubilee and lifted the barrels upright. The line fell silent as we waited for the first wave of pheasants to flush from the maize in front of us. For the entire drive, John elegantly wielded his over-and-under and demonstrated a real flair for the sport. The drive had been designed with foresight; birds missed by the Guns ended up in Burrow Wood for later in the day.

Guest Gun Caleb Sutton is Bettws Hall's shooting manager for the West Country, and has been fortunate enough

Driven shooting on Exmoor is one of the area's most important industries.

According to research conducted by the Greater Exmoor Shooting Association (GESA) in 2008, 65 different shoots generated more than £32million annually for the local economy. In January of this year, I visited the 1,500-acre Withycombe Farm shoot in Somerset, which is part of the family-run Phoines Estates group that also looks after Phoines Lodge in Inverness-shire and Mells Park in Somerset. Withycombe was started in 2000 and is situated on the

eastern edge of Exmoor National Park, next door to the renowned Miltons shoot.

On arrival I was drawn by the smell of fresh coffee to the pretty sandstone shooting lodge, which is nestled below the daunting Burrow Wood drive. As gamekeeper Chris Jones poured me a cup, he told me that the shoot's plunging valleys and combs make it necessary to have a larger than usual team backstage. "We have three separate picking-up teams made up of nine people," he explained. Underkeeper Nick Porter interjected that pickers-up with experienced gundogs are particularly



◀ Top to bottom: Bob Bishop's Tilly retrieving a pheasant; Paul Cozzey on Red Linney drive; Mike Hillier (left) and Nick Porter (right); beater Peter Ash at Springfield/Dashel Park drive
▼ Andrew Waygoode (loader) and Jeremy Hobbs (Gun) at Riddler's Garden drive

Dozens of pheasants poured from a narrow flushing point and fanned out the full length of the line



◀ Shoot captain Richard Williams



L-r: Caleb Sutton, Simon Pollock, Martyn Lewis, Arthur Wardman, Jeremy Hobbs

SHOOT REPORT

to visit most shoots on Exmoor. "I've probably shot on every shoot on the moor over the years. Since Phoines Estates took over running Withycombe, the shoot has improved considerably and become a reliable source of challenging sport," he confirmed just before neatly dropping a right-and-left on the riverbank behind. After the drive, Caleb stressed how vital fieldsports are to Exmoor's remote villages. "Shooting is an integral part of life here — it generates jobs, fills B&Bs and is an essential source of income to many estates," he explained. "In fact, GESA's research showed that 1,600 full and part-time jobs in the Greater Exmoor area are a direct result of shooting."

After sipping some home-made sloe gin and deciphering peg numbers, the Guns were transported by the Hagglund ATV to one of the shoot's signature drives, Riddler's Garden. Shoot captain and driver Richard Williams explained that the Hagglund played a key role on the shoot. "During the winter months the lowland ground becomes waterlogged as rainwater collects at the bottom of the valleys," he said as we passed one of the vast release pens. Chris revealed that there are two pens in total, the biggest of which is 30 acres. "With more than a mile of fencing, it can be quite time consuming to walk the perimeter every night when the poults are young," he observed.

Chris holds a total of 30 days' shooting through the season. "Unlike some estates that only shoot on particular days of the week, we try to be as flexible as possible and work around Guns' requirements. I think one of the big draws to Withycombe is that there is absolutely no mobile signal, so Guns are undisturbed for the duration of their visit," said Chris before he rushed after his beating team.

At the end of the line, Simon Pollock was on a lonely peg halfway up the hill

SHOOTING TIMES SHOOT CARD

SHOOT SIZE
1,500 acres

WEATHER CONDITIONS
Clear skies early on with a gentle breeze

NUMBER OF SHOOT DAYS
30

TERRAIN
Steep West Country valleys that guarantee plenty of exercise for Guns and beaters alike

THE DRIVES
Red Linney
Riddler's Garden
Burrow Wood
Little Wood
Springfield / Dashed Park

LUNCH VENUE
The Sandstone shooting lodge back at the farm

BEST RETRIEVE
Bob Bishop's Tilly on Burrow's Wood

BEST SHOT
Simon Pollock on Riddler's Garden.

THE BAG
207 pheasant and one pigeon

away from the other Guns. "Some of the canner birds will peel away to the side rather than risk flying over the line," he explained, adding that this was his 10th time shooting at Withycombe. "I relish the challenge of flighty crossers, but I'll need to react quickly." I witnessed Simon demonstrate natural sportsmanship throughout the drive, shooting birds dead in the air consistently. On our way back to the Hagglund, newest syndicate member John Yeomans was collecting a couple of spent cartridges left by a previous party. "I am always interested to see what other Guns have shot with on this terrain," he said. "The most popular combination seems to be a simple 32g of No. 5s."

The shoot owns 300 acres and leases the remaining 1,200 acres from surrounding landowners, and for the next drive the beating team pushed through several miles of deciduous woodland before carefully flushing the birds at the top of Burrow Wood. On peg six, syndicate secretary Martyn Lewis stood with his old golden retriever, Monty. "I always think West Country

gamekeepers have to work that bit harder to achieve their intended bag. Yes, the terrain produces wonderfully sporting birds, but the high hills do not make beating easy," added Martyn before dry mounting his Alex Martin 12-bore. Once again, the line fell silent. To Martyn's left, Peter Dunford took a lone cock bird before dozens of pheasants poured from a narrow flushing point and fanned out the full length of the line. Once the drive was in full swing, every peg was awarded plenty of sport, under the ever watchful eye of shoot captain Richard Williams.

Wily, late birds

The fourth drive, known as Little Wood, was held on Great Nurcott farm. "This drive has not been shot for four weeks, so we have high expectations," explained Richard as he dropped each of the Guns off at their pegs. With their backs to a steep-sided, dense pinetum, the picking-up team had their work cut out. The experienced spaniels knew to mark where the birds crashed through the canopy before being sent to retrieve them.



L-r: John Puddepha, Simon Pollock, Jeremy Hobbs, Arthur Wardman, Martyn Lewis, Peter Dunford, Caleb Sutton, John Yeoman



As the drive progressed, Richard moved the Guns up a peg to ensure everyone had plenty of sport. "Now that the wind has become slightly stronger, it is making the birds pull off to the right — I am always monitoring drives and sometimes slight amendments are needed," he explained.

The grand finale of the day was Springfield. "This is a great drive to end on," said Chris as he rallied together his beating team. The Guns lined out in the larger of the two release pens, just a stone's throw from the shooting lodge. Like every other drive on Withycombe, it produced consistently sporting birds for the entire line. After five exceptional drives, the weary team headed back to the lodge for a late lunch, just in time to miss an afternoon rain shower.

As today was the last day of the season for Chris, he was thrilled to end on such a successful note. "After a season of being shot at, the birds are much more wily than in October. To take this into consideration, we have to adjust the way we beat across the hills as the season progresses. West Country keeping is incredibly challenging — you have to be extremely fit to keep running up the hills — but with the right team behind you it is also tremendously rewarding." ■

For more information, tel Natasha Ascott on 07834 489343 or Chris Jones on 01643 851287 or visit www.phoinesestates.com.

▲ The challenging terrain at Withycombe requires a large team of beaters and gundogs

BRUNTON'S AWARD-WINNING EPOCH FULL SIZE



It began several years ago with a goal to build the best binocular and a world-wide search for the highest grade, most advanced glass available. This resulted in Brunton becoming the only manufacturer to use SF glass in a binocular. To protect that vital investment, we engineered a magnesium alloy frame so durable it can withstand our most rigorous tests. Our most unique development though, is the Variable Speed Focus System. Watch wildlife from 9 metres to infinity with a minimal turn of the focus wheel and be amazed by 91cms of near focus. Those building blocks, along with a multitude of other innovations, have taken the award-winning Epoch to critical acclaim.

Epoch X75 Full Size [7.5X43]

Locking, multi-step eye relief system [glasses compatible] and locking diopter adjustment.

91cm close focus

SF prism glass

Variable Speed Focus

State of the art phase coating, AL-HR reflective coating, FlatLight® full multi-coating and anti-fog lens coating.

Waterproof/fogproof

Nitrogen-filled

Tough magnesium alloy frame with ergonomic body armour

Tripod/monopod compatible [with tripod adapter]



BRUNTON

Epoch X75 Full Size [pictured above] SRP £1350
Includes leather soft case and holster, neck-strap, tripod adapter and removable OptiVisors.
HALO™ Unconditional lifetime warranty



For more information visit: www.bruntoneurope.com; for stockists call 023 9252 8711

Martyn Lewis shooting on Red Linney drive with his Alex Martin 12-bore