

Having come to wildfowling relatively late in life I will confess to a sneaking envy of the youngsters who seem to be offered numerous opportunities to gain experience in the mysterious arts of estuary shooting. Mentoring schemes seem to be the norm for those under sixteen and as a means to encourage new blood into the sport I fully support the initiatives even if it seems a little tough on those of us old enough to be their fathers. I've been goose shooting over stubble fields but wildfowling below the high water mark has a certain mystique, not to mention well documented risks for the unwary. Having moved to Newburgh, with tantalising views of the Tay, I joined the Tay Valley Wildfowlers but still wasn't confident about my ventures onto the foreshore.

The stalemate might have continued had not Stuart, the TVWA secretary, called me to ask if I was interested in a mentoring day. My initial reaction was to refuse, explaining that I really didn't have enough experience to be a mentor – until I realised that what was being offered was a club mentoring day for *adult* newcomers to the sport. Count me in.

We met up by the piers in Newburgh on a depressingly bright, still day in February. TVWA stalwarts Kenny Willmitt from BASC and Scott Paterson arrived with two boats and while waiting for the tide gave the newbies - myself, Adrian from Dundee and Grant from Queensferry – a comprehensive briefing on safety, quarry identification and what to expect from the day. Then we split into the two boats and headed out onto the river. Scott and Adrian surged off over the waves. Kenny, after a brief warning that his was a 'wet boat', followed suit. Grant and I exchanged glances, each clearly wondering what a 'wet boat' was. The first wave provided the answer as we surged through, rather than over, it and continued to plough our way to the eastern end of Mugdrum island where we turned to run with the tide and could finally see where we were going.

Scott and Adrian nosed into a small inlet on the north of the island while we continued for half a mile on to a reed covered mud bank and after setting some mallard decoys settled into cover looking out towards the mouth of the river. With some supports and camo netting in place we hunkered down to wait. The weather wasn't promising but there could be no complaints about the visibility. So there was no excuse for Grant and myself being caught completely unprepared as the first flush of teal shot across barely ten yards in front of us. Kenny neatly dropped the back marker and we retrieved this from the boat before the tide claimed it.

After that we saw plenty of teal but all coming down the side of the island and tantalisingly out of range. The occasional flurry of shots from across the river suggested that Scott and Adrian were having more success. "Time for the duck magnet then," said Kenny reaching for his flask. I joined him but sure enough before he had swallowed much more than a mouthful another couple of teal dropped neatly into the pattern. Grant picked one out with his second barrel. I could have thrown a pie at them I suppose. After another watery retrieve it all went very quiet again. "OK, time to split up I think" Kenny announced. Grant and I looked at each other – we were after all in a boat in the middle of the river. Splitting seemed unlikely. "One of you get out." Kenny explained. "We'll take the boat round the corner."

Grant looked even less sure than I did about standing in the middle of the river so I slid gingerly over the edge and found surprising firm mud under the water. "The tides nearly on the turn – shout if you've any problems, otherwise we'll be back in an hour or so." With that they left me, thigh deep in the Tay with a screen of reeds between me and the decoys.

It's very quiet on the river when you're just standing there. I could hear every bird for miles around and the subdued rattling of the reeds as the breeze and the tide moved them was faintly

hypnotic. However after my less than impressive showing so far I kept scanning the horizon. At river level it was much easier to pick out the ducks as they beat their way up the estuary just a few feet from the water. A few speculative shots yielded nothing. Behind every time.

From over the way I could still hear Scott and Adrian popping away. The occasional muted laugh reassured me that Grant and Kenny hadn't just headed for the pub. More than an hour after I first settled into the mud, and with the water level starting to drop at an almost visible rate, another three teal decided to chance their luck in the decoys. Keeping the gun moving I swung neatly through and the middle one folded and dropped right into the middle of the pattern. I was so focused on watching it fall it didn't occur to me that I still had two cartridges left. The remaining pair swung smartly away round the corner. Bang. And then there was one. It's probably still flying.

The boat re-emerged and went to pick my teal first. Kenny had downed the other one but although they spent half an hour cruising up and down it wasn't to be found.

Another very quiet hour and the call from the other boat suggested we call it a day. The decoys were resting on the mud by this time so it made sense. A muddy scramble to collect them and back to the piers where we found Adrian and Scott happy with six teal. Nine between five doesn't quite go, but I accepted the rounding error and made off happily with my two. It had been a superb day thanks to Kenny and Scott. Mentoring – not just for the kids!