

The weatherwise fowler

BB recalls a tactical error

THE long-held belief that very hard snowy weather is ideal for wildfowling may apply to duck, but really savage cold, such as we had early in December, drives the geese from their usual wintering and grazing grounds and many move south.

If I were asked what was the ideal weather for goose shooters I would say wind, and plenty of it, and no severe frost. Had I studied the weather more on my last goose hunt north of the Border I would have had at least one more successful morning. There was an incident which I did not describe in my last article and recently thinking over that particular morning, I realised there was a valuable lesson to be learnt.

Let me tell of the whole episode. On one of our scouting forays into the hinterland, far from the flat fields near the estuary, we came upon a wide and lonely strathe which was new to me. We came upon it in the early afternoon when the surrounding hills were bathed in a golden light and snow gleamed afar off on the high ground. There was a hint of frost in the air and on northern-facing pastures white rime promised a cold night.

In the centre of this wide strathe were two long pastures bounded by a burn and at the eastern end was a 'tatey bottom. Many sheep were grazing, and among them, on both sides and on the 'tatey bottom, were geese in large numbers. We had not seen many that day and this sunlit pasture bathed in the golden light of the setting sun gave us hope.

At these times Tom is our spokesman; it is he who sometimes manages to wrangle permission. In short order he soon found out the name of the owner who lived some 12 miles distant up a glen. It was too chancy to go and hunt him down so that night Tom got on the phone, and by his great persuasive powers got permission to go on the following morning.

That night we studied the map and the lie of the land and it seemed that in all probability we should be in for a party, for the griever had told us the geese had been working the grass and 'tatey bottom for some days and had got what we call a "Say" in fowling parlance. I made a sketch map of the actual locality and the positions we intended to take up on the following morning.

Tom was to go to point A, Mac to B, and I to C beyond Tom, so as to flank the 'tatey bottom. On paper it looked a good scheme and early next morning we were on the ground well before sunrise. The muddy lane was frosty and so was the grass field and a



There were geese among the sheep . . .

long slog it proved to be for we took with us Mac's decoys, stuffed geese, six if I remember rightly. I am never keen on decoying geese but this field was so large that we thought they might pull in the greys when they arrived.

I found Tom's burn, a horrid place with steep sides and there was no cover whatsoever apart from the almost sheer bank of the burn. So I moved across to point D above Mac in the angle of the fence where it met another. Here I was able to set up my portable hide with the scrim netting and telescopic rods. I felt much happier as I settled down to await our customers.

Geese began moving early, soon after we had got in position, calling birds and nearly always singles, probably geese calling for lost mates. The frosty sun soon began to show and with its first rays the geese began to come up the valley in force. They were high and flew over the 'tatey bottom (ignoring it on account of the frost I suppose) and many passed over Mac who tried some shots with his big 8-bore to no effect.

Soon a small bunch came past me following the line the rest of the skeins were taking, which was towards a hill on my left where the first rays of the sun had begun to melt the white hoar frost. I had one down out of this party and it fell over the fence quite dead, tummy upwards, but I kept a close watch on it in case of resurrection.

Now the flight was developing strongly, party after party of geese swinging high and left-handed over Mac and myself and all coming down on the hill grass. Then I saw what we should have done, in the first place, bearing in mind the weather conditions. We all should have lined the wall which ran up the hillside so as to cover the thawing grass. As soon as we had seen the first lots head for the grass we should have upped stakes and got to the wall. It should have been clear to us that the sunrise would be free of cloud and to have realised that the geese would not come to the low frozen fields as long as the ground was white.

However, I tried to make amends by setting off across the field to reach the cover of the wall. I succeeded in doing this and

peeping through a chink in the stones I saw about 700 or 800 geese all feeding in the middle of a flock of sheep. Had the sheep not been there it would have been a gift of a stalk but I dared not try one because of the stock. So I showed myself over the wall and the whole lot got up with a noise like thunder which set the sheep running in all directions. The skeins came wheeling by, at a possible range. I took two shots but failed to connect and away they went to all points of the compass.

So what had promised to be an excellent flight turned out a failure, and as for poor Tom in the burn—he had only one despairing shot.

There was nothing to do then but to pack up our traps and trudge back to the farm where I met the griever by his cottage door. At his question "any luck?" I shook my head. "Only one." "Aye they're verra canny, aie! aie!"

We thought we should have another chance at the big flocks on that ground but subsequent visits revealed empty pastures and, indeed, for the rest of our stay, we never saw another goose in that particular valley. We heard later that they had been shot up higher up the strathe and this may have been the cause of their non-appearance.

This little episode taught me a lesson I should have remembered, that with hard frost on the lowland fields the geese, if they came at all, would certainly make for the high ground so as to catch the first rays of the rising sun.

Had we all been in position by the stone wall in the first instance we should have had a great flight for the geese kept coming in nice little lots over a period of half an hour.

But after all, it's these little episodes that make the whole game so interesting and enjoyable. Even being out of doors on a cold winter's morning is grand; one can watch lights spring up in distant farm buildings, and the stuttering tractors setting out for the day's work, like fishing smacks leaving harbour. And who can not feel a thrill of excitement when, in the far distance, you hear the first wild call of a wandering gander.

A dawn flight can never be really blank.