

Memories

A swallow flipped past me, seemingly reluctant to follow its brethren to Africa. As I walked along with the dogs on a balmy September afternoon on a local estuary it was a reminder to me that summer was slipping into autumn and our migratory birds would be either starting or getting restless to begin their journey to our shores. The heat of the day made me think of the cooler days that I love so much that are coming, and as such my mind was cast back to last December when 3 flights over consecutive days were enjoyed over a brief freeze up....



FLIGHT ONE,

My excitement mirrored the dogs as I released them in to an inch of snow in the garden. The morning sky was clear and it felt cold, the moon was not quite full but it was big and it filled the sky. That tempered my excitement, perhaps the birds would have done all their moving and feeding through the night. No matter I was committed to going out. The drive to the estuary was completed in good order, unfortunately the snow had cleared away on the coast, however it was very cold and frosty.

The main estuary car park was reached with another 2 Fowler's present. As is custom small talk ensued until the big question was asked of who was going where!!! All worked out as we all had different areas in mind! Perfect! To be honest the low tide conditions meant regardless of who went where plenty of hiding spots could easily be found. I didn't tarry long as my destination was further away.

Despite the cool conditions I was rather hot upon reaching my spot, so much so the jacket was taken off. However with the cold beginning to bite down hard it was promptly put back on.

Dawn wasn't far away and it wasn't as defined given the clear conditions provided by the full moon. I didn't hear geese far out on the sands, nor were any wigeon heard. Then all of a sudden there was a flurry of shots further up the estuary before I knew it there was a pack of

wigeon rushing over me, 2 shots later and one lay beside me. More shots sounded up the river, more wigeon over my position, more shots by me were fired. This happy situation continued so by the end of the flight 5 wigeon and a pintail were carefully packed in to the game bag.



Back at the car park I met the other Fowler's who had been equally successful. We excitedly swapped stories about the flight. It transpired that another 2 Fowler's has been on the north shore. The flight for all had been a great success, given we were all spaced well out across the mud we had kept the ducks going and reaped the rewards. Without wanting to view things with rose tinted spectacles, this was how I remembered things from when I started fowling when all the Fowler's would be out on the low tide conditions. However times and things change!

FLIGHT 2,

The full moon played on my mind for the rest of that day. Then come night time as I let the dogs out in to the garden before bed I looked up in to the night sky. The most perfect moonlighting conditions looked back me, high fleecy clouds illuminating the night sky. Resistance was futile I had to go.

A little after 11pm I pulled in to the car park and noted with an element of selfish satisfaction that no other Fowler was out. Again the same as that morning it was bitterly cold, some small patches of snow lay here and there above the high water mark. A line of ice lay like cluttered jewels showing where the tide has risen to previously and left water to freeze.

A 5 minute walk and I was at my chosen flighting spot. The dogs where called back in from their cavorting on the hard sand and we sat in the marram grass which aided our attempt at camouflage. Way out on the advancing tide Teal, Wigeon and Pintail were heard. However no sound of any geese.

At length into the wee small hours the tide was fully packed out with duck in front of me. Greedily they grazed on the titbits the tide was throwing up to then. Little squabbles were heard here and there as disputes ensued over the most succulent titbits on this bitter night. All of a sudden there was the whicker of wings and in front of me a pair of teal swept by. To my astonishment a single shot secured them both. The tide erupted with duck going this way and that, more shots could've been had but I had my young dog with me and I wished to concentrate on him retrieving the shot birds. What the dog lacked in experience and skill he made up for in speed. Both duck were brought to hand (well feet, more work to do!).



The ducks were thoroughly upset and they continue to range up and down the estuary and as such more shots were had and a Wigeon and Pintail followed the Teal in to the game bag. The action lasted 10 minutes at most and the duck settled down else where on the tide. I waited another hour and saw no more duck so my bed beckoned and I retired home a little before 2 am.

FLIGHT 3,

I awoke late next morning and parental duties lay in the promise of taking the children sledging, it's a hard life sometimes.

Again as I let the dogs out later that night the moon shone brightly as the previous night and I swithered on should I go out again. I reminded myself of all the self recrimination over the course of the close season that I would have if I didn't go. My wife shook her head as I announced I was heading out again....

I was astonished to find no other Fowler out again as I parked the truck up. I whistled the dogs up and began the short walk to the dunes and my chosen flighting spot.

The night sky was clear and to be honest not the greatest for moon flighting but as I reasoned earlier it is long close season and a cold snap for a fowler is to be welcomed so I decided to give it a few hours.

Very little happened and as such my mind drifted towards sleep and I found myself nodding off. A wink wink in the distance brought me to full attention. I replied in kind with my Archie Jordan mark 3 pink call. However many geese there were I did not know but they answered me. A few more calls from them revealed they had changed course and they were likely to pass by fairly close. I sunk lower in to the marram grass and keenly gripped my gun. It felt like a lifetime before they called again, they were so close I actually got a fright. Then to my right I saw them, a skein of 7 passing perhaps the only cloud in the southern sky, perfectly I saw them for me to have time to raise the gun, fire a single shot and have one hit the mud with a tremendous whack! I gratefully took the goose from the dog and I pondered it's wild and free life.

I reloaded the shotgun and cooried back in to the grass with the dogs. A great tiredness came over me and I awoke with a jolt. The coldness of the night was right through me. The 3 flights had caught up with me. The tide couldn't even be seen but my bed was calling and I had to go



As I drove home under the light of the moon I reflected on the last few flights and realised how privileged I am to enjoy this wonderful sport of wildfowling.

SW (TVWA member)