

One morning flight

The car stops and looking out the window the beech trees are swaying like the trees at home. Getting out in to the orange light from the street lights you get your gear together. The dog is like a coiled spring desperately awaiting you being ready so he can get out. Once ready the dog is slipped on the lead and you head towards the estuary.

Once onto the main path the dog is slipped off his lead and with immense enthusiasm he charges off into the dark of the morning, hopefully burning off his excess energy. You follow the path by instinct even when you go through a dense patch of firs there is no need for a torch as your night vision has adjusted. To your left the dog crashes and snorts through the undergrowth evidently enjoying himself. Before long the trees begin to thin and you see the mud flats. You whistle the dog up, it's serious now.

Far out on the mud flats there is the murmur of pink footed geese, it gladdens the heart. It is a short climb down the bank over slippery slabs to the mud flats but no you don't take that route, years of experience has shown you to stay to the top of the bank to avoid the worst of the glutinous mud. On you walk for another 100 yards or so to walk safely down the grassy bank, over a short section of salt marsh then on to the special muds.

Your eyes scour the muds to see if you can pick up footprints. And you do but these are old ones not fresh dark ones from a fellow fowler also out this morning, selfishly you are pleased and on you walk. Another good sign is the curlew and redshank you disturb as you walk, you satisfy yourself that they wouldn't be here if someone else had come this way. The flighting position is approached, you can see one of the stone butts, as you near it you see a head sticking out of it. Your heart sinks, how on earth has he managed that? Has he spent the night out here? You call out good morning and get no answer. Fully embarrassed but relieved you discover that the fowler is a branch that the tide has washed up. You quickly knock the branch from its perch lest it fool you again another morning.

The game bag is left by the bank and you walk easily to begin with then the mud thickens, requiring extra effort to pull your waders free from it. Before long the gravel bank which you have chosen to flight from this morning is reached and the walking eases. The river to your right flows downstream, the tide hasn't begin to flow yet. Directly in front of you to the east dawn is beginning.

As you get the shotgun from its slip there is a rushing of wings but you relax, it's a sound you've heard many times, it's a pack of Dunlin, still you peer in to the gloom and try to pick them out. You don't see them but it focuses the mind. A pair of bright blue cartridge cases are slipped in to the chambers and the gun closes with a sweet click. You are ready for the ducks.

As you wait you hear a Pinkfooted goose call which appears to be very close, you put your call to your mouth but hesitate. It is very likely to be a single bird which will fly high and aimlessly over the estuary this often happens on the estuaries and you've witnessed it many times over the years. And yes there it is at least 4 gunshots high. The dog sees it too and quivers with excitement. As you both follow it flying west wards over the main roost a rush of wings behind you has both your and the dogs neck snapping around to see a small pack of 4 teal bustling by to quick for you. Morning flight has started.

Focusing to your front, dawn streams through the clouds. Fantastic colours are witnessed, it gladdens the heart. Many ducks are seen but they are high and wide. As the tide pushes you are forced further from the river and frustratingly a grand flight of teal develops just out of range. At length the flight slackens off. However as thoughts turn to home a single black speck catches your eye. It's a late mallard. You try to make yourself as small as you can. You hiss at the dog to do the same, the mallard catches a movement from yourself or the dog and begins to rise higher. Over it comes, you raise the gun but in your heart you know it's too high for you, to fire and miss would only cause self-recrimination for the rest of the day so you lower the gun. You sense the side ward glance from the dog. He had hoped for some work. The tide is in amongst your feet, there is no where else for you to hide, the duck flight has dried up. It dawns on you the 4 teal you has seen first thing represented your best chance, however you'd been looking the wrong way. Morning flight is over.

Back at the bank the gun is unloaded and made safe. The home loaded cartridges are put back in to the box. Heading back to the car you stay on the mud flats. Sure you could climb up on to the bank and have an easier walk but another fowler could be watching you, you don't want to show anyone what has taken you a long time to learn. A true fowler you have learnt things the hard way, the correct way. You've learnt from your mistakes and successes, it's what makes you the fowler you are.

You clamber up the slippery slabs safely. The beauty of the sliver birch trees are witnessed which you didn't see in dark of the morning. The dog, bless him flushes a cock pheasant out of the brambles, his face a picture as he looks at you, suggesting he has done his bit why didn't you do yours. Finally the van is reached.

Pulling away from the car park and driving through the village the day has begun for normal people, they wait on buses, they go to work and they go to the local convenience store for their messages.

Arriving at home the bag is hung in the shed. The dog is cleaned, dried then fed. The gun is wiped down and safely locked away in the cabinet. A cup of tea and some toast is made. Sitting on your favorite seat in the living room the game book is filled out. Your wife asks you how did you get on, looking up you see the expectant faces of your wife, daughter and son. You say I didn't get anything I didn't fire a shot. A look of disbelief comes over their faces. You mean you've been away 3 hours and you didn't get anything. Inwardly you smile, they don't know what you've been through, what you've seen nobody can understand what wildfowling means to you whether pulling the trigger or not. How can they? They don't understand the call and enjoyment of the estuary which will call you back time and time again for as long as health and life lasts.

It's been a perfect morning flight.

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In loving memory of Mal the gundog of a lifetime.