

In tune with the stalk

Claire Zambuni tries a simulated stalk and asks whether newcomers and novices should be put through their paces before stalking live quarry



Living in London, fieldsports provide me with a welcome escape to the countryside. In particular, I find the fieldcraft that is required to stalk a deer as calming as meditation. The relative quiet and solitude appeals, as does the knowledge that I am providing meat for the freezer.

I have acquired access to some land a half-hour's drive from where I live in London, where the owner needs deer control. I've been stalking for a few years now and am just about to apply for my firearms certificate, but I'm not as confident with a rifle as I am with my shotgun. Asking advice from someone on a simple subject such as what calibre or ammunition you should use can sometimes provoke

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a string of complicated answers, so I decided to learn for myself.

My friend, JB Gill – formerly a member of boy band JLS and now living on a farm in Kent – is working on launching his own venison brand. We have been out stalking together before but only as observers and we both wanted to learn more and gain confidence in the stalking field.

We booked a one-day deer stalking course run by Paul Gendall at the West London Shooting School. The course is held at a farm in Oxfordshire and the classroom is in a barn. Paul is both approachable and knowledgeable: born in Cornwall, he was introduced to shooting by his father at a young age and introduced to stalking by a friend in 2000. He was instantly hooked, and set about putting himself on every available deer course he could. ➔

**Gaining confidence:
Claire Zambuni takes
a shot off sticks**

Stalking

In 2007 he left Cornwall to take up a career in deer management. He worked as a deer manager with the Crown Estate at Windsor Great Park and now teaches shooting at the West London Shooting School, where he has helped to develop the Introduction to Deer Stalking Course to cover the basics.

“Deer stalking is unlike any other form of shooting in the UK,” he said. “With six species of deer and legislation relating to each type, it can be mind-boggling – not forgetting that the laws relating to minimum calibre required to shoot deer differ in England and Scotland. Courses are a must, whether you are a recreational stalker or semi-professional.”

Paul’s delight in taking the courses is evident. “I enjoy meeting people; you never know who will pop up on these courses,” he said. “And I like passing on my knowledge, not just the legal side, but also tried-and-tested practical methods of stalking.”

“It felt like a genuine scenario and I was as focused as I would be when in the field”

The course he offers is unique. As well as providing all the relevant information regarding deer in the UK, it also offers simulated stalking on deer silhouettes. These show people not only how to carry and use their equipment safely while stalking, but also how to judge distance so that they make clean kill shots.

“It serves to highlight that we all have our limitations so that people aren’t tempted to take risks out in the



Paul Gendall explains how to line up the deer in the V of the sticks before taking the shot



Claire takes a shot during the practical part of the course

field and shoot beyond their ability or their rifle’s,” said Paul.

It was this part of the course that I definitely gained the most from. Carrying the equipment myself and looking for the strategically – and realistically – placed deer silhouettes, really did feel like a genuine scenario and I was as focused as I would be when hunting in the field. I am still quite clumsy with the sticks and



Deer silhouettes, depicting each species, are placed strategically and realistically

despite this, I was still keen to develop my knowledge on deer management and decided to complete my Deer Stalking Certificate (DSC) 1 and 2.”

BASC is a founding member of Deer Management Qualifications, a partnership of organisations that operate as the awarding body for the DSC 1 and 2. To date, more than 23,700 people in the UK have undertaken level one of this voluntary qualification, which covers theoretical knowledge of deer, the law, rifle ballistics and safety. There are further practical sessions on rifle shooting, safety and meat hygiene.

Reflecting on the course, JB and I both agreed it had been extremely informative and we had gained a huge amount from it. It had certainly given me more confidence with the rifle, safety, species recognition and seasons. Most importantly for me, I was now more comfortable shooting over sticks and in the prone position.

While the DSC 1 is a significant investment of time and money, it is definitely next on my list. 🐾

slow with my rifle, so it was also a blessing that the targets were static when I came to make my shot. There were several deer silhouettes placed in areas where it was not safe to shoot, which reinforced what we had learned.

No compulsory training

We “stalked” in a woodland scenario where we shot a muntjac silhouette after passing several that were not in a shootable position, and we were taught how to shoot one of the roe silhouettes in the prone position. It made me wonder: should a course like this be a compulsory prerequisite for novices and anyone who wants to take up stalking? I put the question to Sam Walker, deer officer at BASC.

“BASC is absolutely opposed to mandatory testing but it is important that people who are new to the sport accept that the onus is on them to develop the knowledge and skills that are required to do it,” he said. “Any training that gives people the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge can only be a good thing; it is a case of each individual finding a course that suits them.

“As a gamekeeper’s son, I was lucky to have learnt about deer population management while growing up. But

The West London Shooting School course is held at Showell Farm, Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire OX7 5TH and costs £175, which includes all ammunition, breakfast and lunch. Visit www.shootingschool.co.uk or tel 020 88451377.