

HIGHLAND EDUCATION

A lucky group of Sparsholt's Game Management students travel the long journey north to Mar Lodge, to learn their trade first hand and have a go at deer stalking in the snow. Lecturer Rod Greenwood reports

Sparsholt College and its Game Management students have been lucky enough to be coming up to Mar Lodge – a glorious 72,000-acre estate – for a number of years, and more often than not, whether it is before or after Christmas, we bring the snow. With the snow gates shut and roads closed due to high winds, the students and staff had a long drive north from Hampshire, taking 16 hours in total and having to stop off for provisions

for the week, too. Mar Lodge is just over four miles from the Braemar, situated in the east of the Cairngorms National Park. The estate has four of the highest mountains in the UK within its boundaries, and nearly half of it is covered by national and international conservation designations.

The college promotes this type of study tour to our second-year Level 3 Game and Wildlife Management students, to offer them opportunities which are not easily

accessible in the southern counties. In their first year they will have also been away, either to the grouse moors of Teesdale, Wemmergill and Holwick estates, or to the prestigious shoots of Norfolk (Hilborough, Sandringham, Houghton Hall and Holkham), looking primarily at wild gamebird production on both such tours.

Deer management is incorporated into the Norfolk study tour by visiting

Many highland estates are reducing their deer numbers to 18 deer per square kilometre

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PICTURE: LAURIE CAMPBELL

“WITH THE FIRST FALL OF SNOW, THE DEER HAD GROUPED TOGETHER INTO NUMEROUS LARGE PACKS”

Chris Rogers and Paul Mason, both ex-students, at Euston and the Forestry Commission Thetford, respectively. However, on visiting Mar, the students are immersed in the world of upland deer management for four full days, learning everything from the understanding of deer management principles on the estate, through to hill stalking, carcass extraction and larder work. This relates to the Deer Management units studied on their course in the first year, following on with the Stalk and Shoot Deer and Commercial Deer Management units in their second year. They will also have had the opportunity to take their Deer Stalking Certificate Level 1 before they arrive at Mar Lodge, and will have had extensive training and use of the college's 25-metre indoor .22 rifle



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range, along with numerous trips out to the local full-bore ranges, which will hopefully cease when our own on-site 100-metre range is finished.

Approximately half of the Mar Lodge estate is set aside for sporting activities, while the lower slopes and more secluded valleys of the Quoich and Derry beats are left for the regeneration of the natural Scottish Pine woodland along the existing remnants of ancient Caledonian pine forests. Here, in the past, the college has helped to survey the black grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*), the numbers of which presently stand at around 100 displaying males. They can be seen on their leks (their traditional display sites) during the mating season.

For the four days that the students were at Mar Lodge working with the

ABOVE: Deer extraction is made a lot easier with the help of Argocats

stalkers, they had the opportunity to observe numerous species, other than the red deer they had come up to stalk and manage. With the first fall of snow, the red grouse, along with the deer, had grouped together into numerous large packs. Golden eagles were seen soaring aloft, along with sea eagles actively chasing red calves. The ravens had found a carcass to feed on, and a goosander was seen on the Dee. Mar Lodge is one of those places where you will also see the brown hare interacting with its more diminutive cousin, the mountain (or blue) hare. It was a luxury for the students to have such magnificent scenery to stalk in, and to be surrounded by so many spectacular birds and animals.

The stalkers, who carry out many keeping tasks too, also manage the covid numbers with the use of large ladder traps that can be seen around the lower slopes of their beats. A lot of hard work also goes into managing the red fox, using lamping, terrier work, and small drives. All this hard work is certainly noticeable by the numbers of grouse that have multiplied, season upon season, under the watchful eye of Chris Murphy, the head stalker. They recently had their largest bag for 15 years – 42 brace on a walked-up day.

The general belief on many of the highland estates at the present time is

that deer numbers should be reduced to only 18 deer per square kilometre. Some estates already have their numbers much lower than this. If this comes about, the emphasis for any client stalking outing will be on the hunt and the fieldcraft involved in finding and potentially shooting an animal, rather than on the assumption that if you pay your money you will return from the hill successful. So, after the long drive on the Sunday, the second-years were all keen to meet the team of four stalkers the following morning. They would then organise themselves into groups, head to the target, and familiarise themselves with their stalker's rifle. This also helped build their confidence in preparation for helping manage the Mar Lodge red deer herds.

The first morning was a new experience for the majority of the students, having to ready themselves for stalking in such snowy conditions. Some had been prudent enough to bring agricultural spray suits to aid their camouflage, while others were provided with ex-military smocks, which made a vast difference in the open, brilliant-white landscape. Once the students had practised shooting the metal stag target, the groups split up and headed off for the 30-minute drive along the River Dee to the hill beats.

BELOW: It was a long drag back to the vehicle for Carl



The students brought, or were supplied with, snowsuits or agricultural spray suits to aid camouflage in the white landscape.



This being the first real heavy snowfall of the winter, it was going to localise the deer. This meant they would be found lower down the mountainsides, and in and around shelter, rocky outcrops, gulleys or, as on James's beat, the weather-beaten coniferous plantations. As we drove the almost impassable single track out over White Bridge and onto Geldie Lodge, we could see a mixed herd of 80-plus animals, caught in the valley bottom. On pulling up behind a rocky outcrop, the herd were allowed to settle. Once they had cleared the valley bottom, the three students organised themselves and slowly waded off after the deer. By 10.30am student Liam had shot his first deer – a red hind at 110m just above the conifer wood.

Liam described the experience: "You had to be so quick, you didn't get a lot of time to think about the shot. As soon as we got into position it was like, 'Do you see the hind on the right?' 'Yeah.' 'Okay, take the shot.'"

Once the animal was shot and had been found, the stalker happily indoctrinated the students into the highland traditions of shooting your first deer, along with how to gralloch the beast on the hill. The other groups had mixed success on the first day.

The second day, still with a good covering of snow, was again successful. James led his student group into the same river valley and they blatantly walked up the middle of it in a minor blizzard, while the deer stood and watched from above. The group dropped to the prone position, and another hind was shot as she looked on at 180m. A very pleased Jamie happily trudged up the valley side to drag her back down to the waiting Land Rover. When all the groups were back at the end of the day there were seven animals to larder, three of which had been shot by one lucky student.

Student Jamie describes taking his first hind. He said: "James, the stalker, turned round and said, 'There's no way to get into these reds other than walking straight in and hoping the snowsuits do the job!' With that, we simply walked straight into the middle of the deer. The reds knew something was up and started to move over the brow, but there was still a couple left. We dropped to the floor and James handed me the rifle and

said to take the calf at the back. Then it moved behind another hind, so he said to take the other hind, straight in the chest. I took the shot and she dropped. He said to wait for the calf, but it just carried on walking."

Waking on Wednesday morning we found the snow had melted and, with the continuous rain through the night, the River Dee was so swollen it was impossible to cross onto the other beats. A decision was made to spend the morning skinning animals in preparation for butchery. This was, again, a good insight into a

different technique, with the carcass remaining in the cradle, rather than being hung up, and the skin being peeled off using your fist to separate it from the flesh.

After prepping the carcasses all morning, the afternoon was used to walk, in glorious sunshine, along the conifer blocks out to waiting rifles, lying prone in the heather. This afforded the chance to catch up with a number of orphaned calves along with another couple of hinds; again, this was a new experience for many of the Sparsholt students.

By the fourth day the river was much less treacherous and the groups managed to return to their chosen stalker's beats. Our group travelled further out to Geldie Lodge and towards the march with a neighbouring estate. Once it had been spotted on some tricky black-and-white ground, Carl eventually shot a hind at over

For information about sporting activities at Mar Lodge, contact the Estate Office on 01339 720163.




ABOVE: Deer tracks left in the snow around the plantations

PICTURES: ROD GREENWOOD

200m. As the snow now remained in large icy patches, it was a long, awkward drag.

Carl shared his thoughts on the experience: "I didn't really enjoy the 16-hour journey up there in a cramped minibus but, once we got there, it was great. It didn't look too good as there weren't that many deer about, but Rod and Curtis spotted some which we then decided to stalk. In all honesty, I didn't have a clue where the deer were. Once in range, we had to wait for about 45 minutes because they were all lying down. Four stags got up, and then three hinds, and the stalker told me to shoot the one in the middle, so I did."

In the four days they were there, the 13 students accounted for 20 red hinds and calves. A big thank you must go to Chris Murphy and his team of James, Dan and Davey for allowing the students this great opportunity to experience their job role at first hand.

For more information, about Sparsholt College and the courses on offer, visit www.sparsholt.ac.uk. 

BELOW: The Level 3 Game and Wildlife Management Students at Mar Lodge

