

Shane Mullins in action on
the Top Glenmore drive.

Tulchan, Morayshire

Tulchan is a famous name in salmon fishing but,
as **Will Hetherington** discovers, it also offers
superb pheasant shooting.

Photography: **Glyn Satterley**



SHOOT REPORT

Lying north east of Grantown-on-Spey, way up in the north east of Scotland, the Tulchan beats on the magnificent River Spey have long been revered as prime salmon fishing territory. But this forward-thinking 26,000 acre estate also has a tremendous amount to offer to the game shooter. I visited in late November and witnessed first-class presentation of strong flying birds on four expertly managed drives.

Headkeeper Les Mallinson is now into his 30th year here and he clearly knows every flushing point and potential pitfall on the estate. Rarely have I seen such a well-regulated flow of testing birds. Les is assisted in his role by three underkeepers: Mark McPherson, Bryce Coutts and Michael Robinson. Bryce also has responsibility for the on-site game farm where all the estate's birds are reared. Birds are also reared here for the Bowland estate near Galashiels, which also belongs to Tulchan's proprietors, the Litchfield family.

With 35 driven days a year and a further 10-12 walked up days, the emphasis here is on quality rather than quantity both in the number of days provided and bag sizes. And estate factor Michael Mole is keen to emphasise the overall package: "Tulchan is a true escape. You can let pheasant shooting anywhere but it is rare to find the combination of first class sport, indulgent accommodation and a typical Highland setting of deep wooded glens and moorland. Tulchan Lodge is a classic Highland sporting lodge and offers visiting teams everything they could ask for in the greatest of luxury. And with both



Matt Randall latches on to one of Tulchan's high-flying pheasants.



The guns and beaters on this November day.

Inverness and Aberdeen airports within an hour-and-a-half's drive, it's not quite as far away as one might think."

I can certainly vouch for the quality of the lodge. I arrived the night before the shoot in heavy rain and was met as I opened the car door by ever-present butler Frank Harrison. Within minutes of crossing the threshold a gin & tonic was on hand to aid my post-drive relaxation. Also assisting that process was the presence of James Litchfield, whose father Leon bought the estate in 1993, and who would also be shooting the following day. His easy charm clearly pervades through the whole team here. The lodge has enough luxurious rooms to



Headkeeper Les Mallinson is now in his 30th year at Tulchan.

sleep a full team and can be taken as a whole or on a room by room basis. And with excellent food, a laid-back atmosphere and a purpose built gun room, it really is the perfect base for a day or two's shooting

A grand estate

It is difficult to convey the majesty of this estate with the written word but, as an infrequent visitor to such northerly climes, I can testify to the irresistible charm of the stately river as it marches through the countryside. Whether by day or night it clearly helps define the character of the land, and its reputation as one of the great salmon rivers goes before it.

But part of the charm of this part of Scotland is in the journey there. And the A9 really has to be one of the great British roads. As it winds its way up from Perth past Pitlochry, Blair Atholl and Kingussie, the passage of time seems to slow down and the frenetic pace of urban life becomes more and more distant. One of the charms of shooting up here is the chance to see a more remote side of life in the UK.

But one of the downsides of the northern extremity is the severity of the winter when it grabs, as it did this year.

The history of the estate and lodge

TULCHAN LODGE was completed in 1906 to the order of George McCorquodale. Originally he came to know Strathspey as a guest of the banker Sir Phillip Sassoon, a close friend and financial adviser to HM King Edward VII. Sir Phillip was the sporting tenant at the original Tulchan Lodge, situated two miles to the west of the present house.

Mr McCorquodale died in 1938 and is buried with his wife and only son in the graveyard overlooking the Churchyard Pool on 'D' Beat of the River Spey. Having no surviving male heir, his tenancy reverted to the Seafeld estates.

During both world wars the houses and cottages adjacent to the lodge were used as convalescent homes, and apart from some local use no formal fishing or shooting

took place. Between 1940 and 1945 the grouse moors and woods were used for training infantry, commandos and special forces.

The Tulchan and Cromdale grouse moors were known as some of the best in the UK. Royal guests

who shot on them include King Edward VII (as the Prince of Wales and King), King George V and King George VI (as the Duke of York).

In 1898 the Prince of Wales once shot 17.5 brace of grouse on the hill above Tom Mor in one

drive, a personal record for a single drive. And at present the grouse moors are undergoing extensive regeneration, just another example of the progressive nature of the management here.

In 1945 fishing and shooting was resumed on a tenancy basis. For five years HRH Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, brother of King George VI and uncle of Queen Elizabeth II was the shooting tenant and part fishing tenant on the Tulchan Water. He and other members of the Royal Family were regular visitors, either staying in the lodge or motoring over from Deeside on shoot days.

In 1969 the Countess of Seafeld died and in 1971 the lodge and surrounding lands came into ownership of a London-based financial institution. This was when



Tulchan Lodge provides luxury accommodation and catering.

Charles Chamberlain stretches for a high one on the Top Glenmore drive.



Babbling burns are just some of the features which make shooting at Tulchan a memorable experience for all the right reasons.

meant shirtsleeves were in order. And with almost no wind as we set out in the morning it was hard to imagine the birds flying as well as they did.

The first of the four drives was Top Glenmore and here the guns line out on the far side of a typically pretty burn as it passes through the deciduous woodland. With each gun reasonably well isolated by the trees it was hard to see the action up and down the line, but a steady stream of good birds were enjoyed. I was up on the right hand side of the line with retired estate factor Chris Excell and not only did he shoot straight but his presence was also another indicator of the harmonious nature of the team behind the scenes at Tulchan. The retired factor was shooting while the present incumbent worked his dogs in the picking-up line.

For the second drive we moved to the Flagpole, which is based around another wooded glen and, for the middle of the

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line, is an absolute cracker. The birds appear high above the treeline in front and curl right, following the contours down, presenting either long crossers or classic overhead driven shots. Shane Mullins and Christian Marr enjoyed two of the top pegs here and they both did justice to the pheasants. Shane said afterwards: “I thought the birds showed particularly well, bearing in mind the weather wasn’t exactly the keeper’s best friend on the day. There wasn’t a breath of wind and taking one or two of those high pheasants certainly got the blood up. The way the birds were presented was also impressive – drip, drip, drip with no shouting and wailing up and down the beating line. It was great to see shooting spread across the line of guns, which isn’t always easy to do but is a real pleasure to witness when done well.”

The third drive was Top Game, one of a number in Tulchan Glen, and, like the previous two, it is in a beautiful setting by a babbling burn. I think I was probably lucky enough to enjoy the hot seat here. I could see the birds rising from the



The nature of the ground at Tulchan means the pickers-up all have to be excellent, which they demonstrably are.



Estate factor Michael Mole was picking-up on this day.

Michael explained some of the difficulties which the shoot faced: “It was as bad as anyone here had ever seen it and the real problem was the length of time it lasted. There have been times when we have had more snow or stronger winds, but never for so long. For five weeks from December 18 onwards we had several feet of snow on the ground, and it made day-to-day shoot and estate management very challenging – to the extent we had to cancel the shooting in that period. It was very difficult to even get to the drives to feed the birds. Apart from the problems with feeding, shoot days would have been almost impossible with beaters walking through waist-high snow – just getting the guns to their pegs would have been an expedition!

“However we managed to rearrange some of the cancelled days for the end of January and, after we used a mini-digger to clear stands in the glens, the days went ahead and were excellent.”

Top quality presentation

But at the time of my visit in late November the heavy winter was still a long way off. In fact, the mild conditions on the day



The guns lined out in front of Tulchan Lodge, from left: Will Hetherington, Matt Randall, Christian Marr, Shane Mullins, estate factor Michael Mole, Charles Chamberlain, Mr & Mrs John Harcourt, Mrs Charles Chamberlain, Andrew Swards, Chris Excell, headkeeper Les Mallinson & James Litchfield.

Top drive: Flagpole

THE GUNS walk into the drive from the forest track, over a bridge and are lined along the side of the Glenmore Burn with steep, Scots Pine clad banks both to the front and rear.

The beaters are split into three main groups, one each lining out to the north east and north west of a tall stand of Scots Pine and the third smaller group first walking the bottom of the bank up into the drive and thereafter acting as stops.

The birds are walked towards a flushing point from the north, some breaking cover from the very back of the wood and giving early opportunities to those guns at the top of the line. As the drive progresses, under the watchful eye and guidance of headkeeper Les Mallinson who stands high behind the guns overlooking the drive, some birds break and fly straight over the valley at 40-50 yards, heading for the tall Larches in Tomnalay Wood. Simultaneously other birds fly out over the Scots Pine and curl, often with the wind, down the glen, covering the whole line and offering eye-wiping opportunities for those good enough to connect. ■



Lunch was taken in the 'C' Beat fishing hut, a venue which is much grander than it sounds!

flushing point some 100 yards ahead and from there they had clear ground to cover before the line of guns. But rather than keep low they all wanted to soar high, which made for superb shooting. A real pleasure.

The fourth and final drive of the day saw the team pegged out on pastures around a conifer plantation above Knocktulchan with Tulchan moor in the background. The birds were tall and sliding and provided a different challenge to end the day.

On the day we shot through before stopping for lunch, which is another event which sets Tulchan apart. We ate in the 'C' Beat fishing hut, which is considerably grander than it may sound at first. And what could be better after four classic drives than a relaxing drink by the River Spey as it makes its awesome way through the stunning Scottish countryside? As with all the other meals at Tulchan, the food was excellent and the service perfectly pitched. 🦋

At £33 per bird the shooting is sensibly priced and you could pay a lot more for the same challenge in other areas of the country. But beyond that the whole experience is designed to deliver pure pleasure, which it certainly does. For further information contact Tulchan Estates by contacting 01807 510200 or visit www.tulchan.com