



Coast to Coast – Alde & Ore Wildfowlers Association

SHOOTING TIMES

Gale force winds sweeping up the Suffolk coast: that is what the weather man predicted, and judging by the packed isobars on the pressure chart, it was well worth a telephone call to Bryan Upson, chairman of the Alde & Ore Wildfowlers Association to check out the prospect of a morning flight. “I’ve seen the forecast, and I was actually thinking of going out myself anyway,” said Bryan when I made the enquiry. We agreed to speak again the following evening to finalise our plans.

When we did so, the Atlantic depression was deepening and a big blow seemed imminent. By now the idea of a forty minute row in my gunning punt to Stanny saltings against a headwind and mountainous seas did not appeal, but Bryan runs the boatyard at Slaughden Quay, Aldeburgh, and his big motor launch would be just perfect for the job.

I met him at 5.45am at the quay, and as I pulled up in my Land Rover, the gutsy marine diesel was already warming up. Slaughden Quay is an odd place, geographically speaking. As the wigeon flies, it is only about seventy five yards from Aldeburgh beach and the grey waters of the North Sea. However, thanks to the vast shingle spit of Orford Ness, curving away to the south, a boat launched into the River Alde at Slaughden must sail or motor some ten miles before reaching the mouth of the estuary, and that means that high water there is a good hour later than at Aldeburgh.

We were planning to head up-river, however, and by the hazy light of a waning moon Bryan and I stowed guns and gamebags, and I lifted Pintail down from the quay into the launch. But of the gale there was as yet no sign. Yes, there was a bit of a chop on the water as we motored upstream in the dark, but not the howling, hair-tugging, spume-spitting storm which had been forecast. Perhaps, we mused, it would arrive at daybreak to coincide with morning flight.

Stanny is one of the favourite fowling spots amongst the 120 members of the Alde & Ore club. While the saltings themselves, forming a sharp nose around which snakes the river Alde on its journey from Snape to Aldeburgh, are privately owned, the club has the sporting rights over the Crown foreshore which surrounds them, enabling members to shoot there from a boat at high water or, as the tide drops, from the mud. Indeed, the club’s Crown foreshore shooting runs from Orford ness right the way up to within sight of the famous concert hall at Snape maltings, some 14 miles in total. To this may be added Lantern marshes on Orford ness itself – a fabulous place for ducks in a north-easterly blow, Aldeburgh town marsh, Barthorpes creek in the lower reaches of the Ore, and the freshwater marshes in the Waveney valley at Geldeston. There is plenty of fowling for those that want it, and there are plenty of fowl too.

Brian dropped me on the edge of the saltings and went off to anchor the big boat in the main channel. As the noise of the engine receded, I could hear the sound of wildfowl above the sea wall. Wigeon whistled in the darkness, and there was the far-off nervous muttering of geese. Perhaps they too were sensing a coming storm, and if so, then perhaps they would head out over Stanny at dawn.

The slapping of oars against the dark waters alerted me to the fact that Bryan had made fast the big boat in the river and was rowing ashore in the dinghy. Together we waited below the saltings for dawn. It was a long time in coming, for the moon had disappeared behind a thick bank of cloud and even as the hour of sunrise approached, the sky was lit only by the dimmest creeping glimmer of grey. I was totally unprepared for the first bird, a wigeon which zipped across from the sea wall in front of me at a height of no more than ten feet. It flew directly over my head, and had disappeared in the gloom behind me by the time I had turned round. Frustrating? Yes, but could it be an indicator of what was to come?

Then wigeon were on the move. A pack swung round to my right, and I fired my choke barrel, missing far behind. A huge flock of curlews shrieked in alarm and beat a retreat over the dark saltings. Then there were birds behind us, dropping down to settle on the tide's edge. I alerted Bryan, we turned and as the nearest bird jumped, my finger tightened around the trigger and the brightly painted cock wigeon tumbled into the water. Pintail needed no second bidding and a short swim had the bird safely brought to hand.

More birds cut over the saltings to our right. Most of them were too high to warrant a shot, but soon another bunch curled round and set their wings as though to settle on the water, Bryan's shot knocking a hen wigeon out of the pack. Again, Pintail was quickly onto the bird, and with her confident strokes snatched it from the tide and returned it to shore.

We could see, though, that our flighting position was not ideal. A further 250 yards around the saltings, at the point where they projected furthest out into the tidal channel, would have had us right beneath the main flight line, and our bag of two wigeon may have been much more. But that is wildfowling: we had chosen what we thought would be the best position for the predicted wind and tide, and there was nothing to be gained from moving now. It was getting light by this time, and the forecast wind had failed dismally to materialise. Indeed, the by now ebbing tide was barely ruffled by the light breeze and the wigeon had made good their morning departure across the river to the safety of the Suffolk Wildlife Trust's reserve at Hazlewood marshes. Bryan was about to zip his gun into its slip for the journey home, when from above the sea wall came the murmur of geese.

It took him just a couple of seconds to reload, whilst I snatched the 32 gram 5s from my open chambers and fumbled for the Alphamax bismuth 3s. We could hear the greylags on the move, and for a moment it seemed that they would come right over us. However, it soon became clear that there were two distinct skeins, one cutting over Big Bight for the river and the Blackheath estate beyond, the other curling round the edge of Stanny

saltings. Searching the gloom, I eventually spotted them, a long smudge of black against the dark grey sky. There would be no goose in the bag this morning.

We piled into the dinghy and Bryan rowed back to the launch. As he did so, perhaps a hundred wigeon lifted from the edge of Stanny saltings.

Certainly there are plenty of places on the Alde & Ore club's marshes where the footslogging fowler can get on terms with the ducks and geese, especially if he is not afraid of a walk. The secret landscape of Lantern Marsh, for example, where the tide is slowly claiming back marshes which were once grazed by cattle, where the teal zip across the sea wall and the ghostly remnants of a cold war early warning station rise out of the North Sea mist. Town marsh where, if you do your reconnaissance correctly, it is possible to get under the skeins of Canadas and greylags as they head back from the tidal river and where, in winter when the grazing marshes are bright with floodwater, you can intercept flighting wigeon at dusk. Or Geldeston, where the Waveney spills out over the cattle marshes in winter, creating an inland haven for wildowl.

But many of the serious fowlers on the Alde prefer to be waterborne, finding their position by boat, then dressing their craft in camouflage netting and setting out big stands of decoys on the tide. Good bags of wigeon can be made with a little skill – and of course a decent slice of wildfowler's luck. Club members have a standing invitation to launch their craft from Bryan's slipway which provides access to the river at all states of the tide, while there is even a club boat for the use of members which is moored conveniently for Stanny and accessible from the club's car parking area via a public footpath.

Now the leaden sky was getting not lighter but darker and as the big engine of Bryan's launch growled into life, spots of rain started to fall. The weather front had arrived bang on schedule, but its accompanying wind had not. We motored back to Slaughden, past a scattering of moored boats, a tiny fraction of the vast squadrons of yachts and cruisers which line the river here in summer. For like many of the east coast rivers, the Alde is a popular holiday destination for weekend sailors, for it is still quiet and undeveloped, with a wild beauty and a grandeur of its own.

Yes, it is a pretty place to be in the summer; but I like it best in winter time when the sailors have all gone home and the river is left to the curlew, the wigeon, the geese and the wildfowlers.

Graham Downing 4th December 2007

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