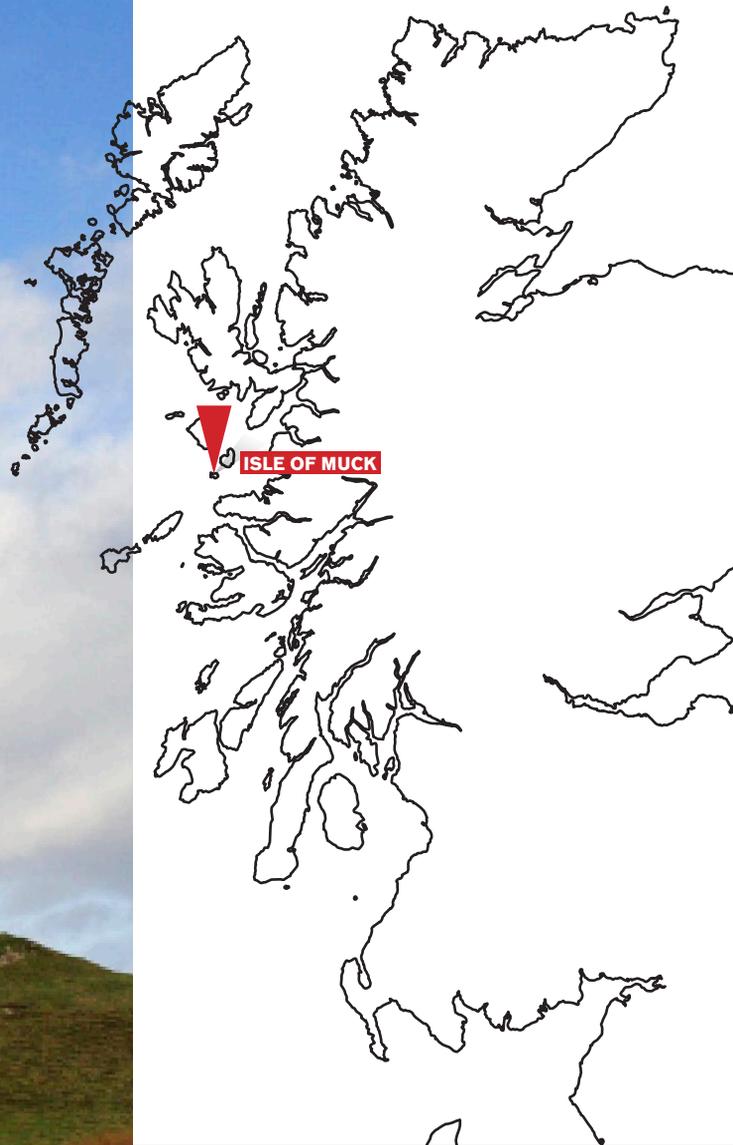


MAKING THE MOST OF

MUCK





OVER THE PAST SIX YEARS, THE TINY ISLE OF MUCK HAS ESTABLISHED A FAMILY-RUN SHOOT, OFFERING VISITORS A TRULY UNIQUE SPORTING EXPERIENCE, SAYS PATRICK TILLARD.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GLYN SATTERLEY

IT IS VERY rare nowadays that you hear about a shoot with a waiting list. However, a small, secluded island off the West Coast of Scotland has achieved exactly that. Despite being only two miles long and a mile wide; with no church, no pub, only ten hours of electricity each day and a population of just 38 people, the Isle of Muck is home to a unique, family shoot, which is rapidly becoming one of the finest in the UK.

Surrounded by white sandy coves, the intimate 1,600-acre island is part of the Inner Hebrides along with its neighbours; the Isles of Eigg, Rum and Canna. Muck has been in the MacEwan family for 120 years, and today's senior member of the family, Lawrence MacEwan, is very much the figurehead of the island. When referring to Muck in her new book, *Shooting: A Season of Discovery*, The Duchess of Rutland comments: "The panoramic views of deep gullies and heather banks, with the sea as a ⇒

GAME SHOOTING





“On arrival we are greeted by virtually all the islanders...”



backdrop, are truly magnificent.”

Despite pre-war efforts to introduce pheasants to Muck, the attempts never materialised and it wasn't until Toby Fichtner-Irvine came to the island that any real progress was made. Toby met Mary MacEwan at Rannoch School, and after he completed a degree in countryside management at the University of Aberdeen, they married. Toby then worked with Strutt and Parker on the mainland, before the couple moved to Muck in 2006 in order to school the eldest of their two sons, Archie, on the island.

The island has never struggled to attract visitors during the summer due to its abundance of wildlife, ranging from basking sharks to puffins. However, the winter months on Muck were a lean period and it wasn't long before Toby was scratching his head for a new enterprise – hence the initial shoot ideas were put into practice.

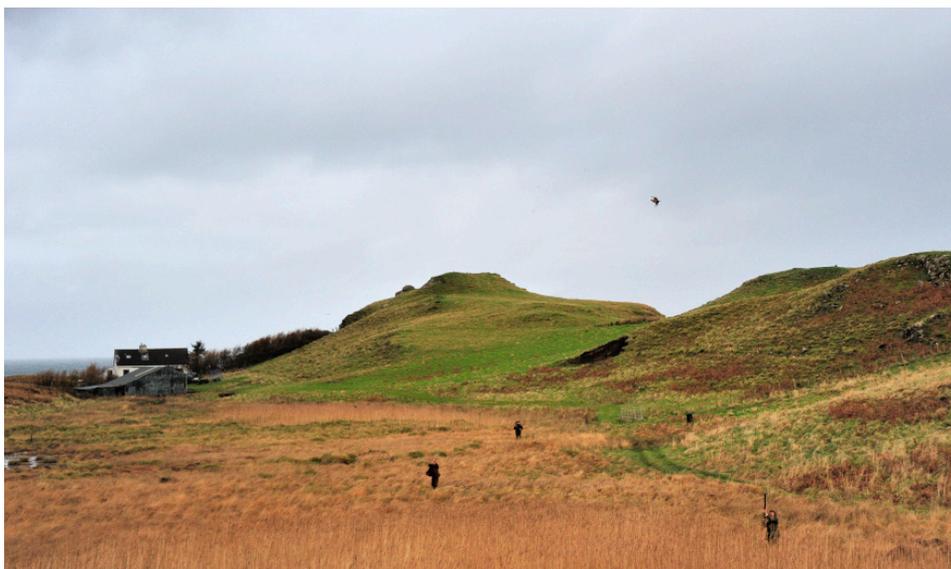
“To begin with, it was just a case of trial and error,” he says. “We planted 15 acres of game crop and released a few partridges and pheasants. We have a lot of natural gullies and cliff faces, so we used them all to our advantage and managed to produce some great birds.” The estate also upped the level of vermin control and in the shoot's first year 150 crows and over 1,500 rats were killed. In this first season, a grand total of two days were sold. However, just five years later, the estate is letting 20 days a season – and receives over 60 enquiries. “We didn't know what to expect when we started,” he continues, “but it has exceeded our expectations and we are still learning all the time.”

With such a small population, the shoot is a community affair with every member of the island somehow involved in the smooth running of each shoot day. Mary and Toby do the majority of the keeping themselves, with fellow islander, David Barnden, helping for two days of each week (David and his wife also run a B&B and the island's craft shop). On the shoot days, Mary runs the beating line whilst Toby places the Guns.

Scott Thomson has been captaining a syndicate for 14 seasons and they have been visiting Muck every November since 2008. The estate's weekend package allows guests to sample the very best that Muck has to offer. “We drive up early Friday morning to Arisaig and charter the *Sheerwater* to the island. On arrival we are greeted by virtually all the islanders and after a great lunch we go out for a couple of mini-drives of pheasant and partridge, walk up a snipe bog or shoot some geese. Then on Saturday we have the full-blown driven day,” says Scott.

“We offer a completely different package to other shoots,” says Toby, “with the boat ⇒

GAME SHOOTING



trip over, the island scenery and community feel, it's a lot more than just a turn-up-in-the-morning and leave-in-the-evening shoot."

The shoot has a diverse selection of quarry depending on what is on the island on each particular day. "It isn't uncommon for a Gun to shoot three or four species on a peg during a drive," he says, "it's very unpredictable and that's part of the appeal." The Saturday shoot now produces a bag of approximately 120 birds and during the season Toby achieves a remarkable 80 per cent return of the birds he puts down.

The shoot has also done a large amount to benefit other species and the island's environment. Since the shoot was established, over 25,000 trees have been planted and as the birds are fed throughout the year – and pest control has increased – songbird populations have also flourished.

For the past six years, visiting Guns have stayed in the Port Mor House Hotel, but the building of a new sporting lodge is presently underway, which will also offer packages during the summer months including simulated clay days and deep sea fishing trips. And for the first time, by February 2013 Muck will have 24 hours of electricity available.

However, the lack of electricity has never deterred visitors and Toby recalls having to give torches to goose shooting guests, to enable them to get dressed when waking in the dark at 5am.

"I shoot all over Scotland and England," Scott continues, "but Muck is certainly one of my highlights. The island may be small but it's got great variety, with tall duck and cover plots in the higher ground producing partridge drives to die for. Toby has done a superb job in putting the shoot on the map. He's full of enthusiasm and a first-class host."

The island also boasts a high level of self-sufficiency. Nearly all their vegetables are home grown, game is used from the shoot, and Colin MacEwan, Mary's brother, manages 600 ewes and 60 cattle, with pigs also kept on the island, as well as a boat to catch their own fish. "Mary is the most phenomenal cook," adds Scott. "I can honestly say that it would be worth coming here just for the food."

More often than not, when reminiscing about past seasons, shoot days blend into one; the birds always fly well, the scenery is always picturesque, the company is always pleasant and the food always delicious. However, the Isle of Muck is the curveball that will always stand out amongst others. "It's a little gem," Scott concludes, "I've never had to think twice about rebooking and we'll keep coming back as long as we possibly can."