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Alternative Macnab

A pheasant, a fly and a fish — **Ian Valentine**
looks on as three hopefuls try to bag a McDougal

The modern-day Macnab — bagging a stag, salmon and brace of grouse in a calendar day — adapted from John Buchan's tale of poaching high jinks, is known well enough, though few Guns today get to achieve it. Not only will the attempt cost you a tidy sum, but the odds of catching your salmon are not as short as they once were.

Its distant cousin the McDougal, however, is rather less spoken of, though it can be every bit as testing and considerably more affordable. The Ashbourne McDougal, to give it its full title, was conceived by Douglas Chalmers, owner of the Ashbourne estate in East Sussex. The ground has a variety of mixed woodland, home to a few hundred pheasants, and a pair of lakes, which are home to both brown and rainbow trout. A keen angler and Shot, Douglas was eager to maximise the sport on his little corner of England.

Rise to the challenge

"The concept is easy on paper," Douglas explained, as the three contenders took coffee in the fishing lodge before the challenge began. "In the morning you have to shoot a cock pheasant. Over a good lunch and a glass of claret, you will be shown how to tie your own fly from the cock's feathers. Once you have independently tied your fly, the final test is to catch a trout on that fly. So, apart from the stag, grouse and salmon, it mirrors the original Macnab exactly."

Ashbourne stands in the shadow of Tent Hill, the site of the Saxon Army's final camp before the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The ill-fated King Harold, among so many others, would have snatched a few hours' rest after the gruelling march from Yorkshire, where he had been repelling Vikings. That same night, a few miles away, a Norman archer would have been sharpening an arrow head with the English monarch's name on it. Nowadays, in the nearby towns of Hastings and Battle, it is hard to move without reminders of the famous date, more often than not with commercial gain in mind. As a parody, there is a similar brass plaque on a fence post at Ashbourne that reads,

*In 1996, on this spot,
nothing happened.*

This is typical of Douglas's sense of humour, which adds a great deal to the day. Of south-west of Scotland descent, he worked for many years throughout the West Indies, and lived in Hong Kong for more than 18 years before settling in

Sussex. A single-figure golf handicapper, member of the Magic Circle and manufacturer of a devilishly tasty Trinidad Hot Pepper Sauce, there are many strings to his bow.

However, today is not all fun and games. "The McDougal is far from guaranteed," he stressed, as three of his old chums spread out on one side of a lake. "Indeed, it needs a fair amount of skill and luck to get it done. It's not simply a case of pay your money and we make sure you get your McDougal. There is pressure to hit that cock pheasant, especially if you miss



the first one and panic sets in. We allow Guns to shoot hen birds and woodcock too, but they don't count towards a McDougal."

Winners get prizes, while those that fall short go home empty-handed. Douglas laments the modern trend of everyone-is-a-winner because they take part. "When I was young, at sports day, only the fastest and strongest won prizes. If sports were not your thing, it was tough luck and you learned to excel in other areas. But in this day and age, they don't hold the egg-and-spoon race because Little Jimmy may end up a loser and that's not fair. I believe it is healthy to know the difference between success and failure,



and not be wrapped in cotton wool."

The McDougal rewards sporting elitism. If competitors are struggling, usually on flytying or casting, then they may ask for an "assisted McDougal", but the emphasis is on the assisted and they are recommended to come back and do it off their own bat next time.

The day was a race against time so that any Guns who had shot a cock pheasant would have sufficient time to hook a trout before the sun fell. Weather, as always, tends to play its part,

and what's good for the pheasant is not always good for the trout.

Groups tend to be three- to five-strong on a McDougal day, which allows for an intimate, relaxed shoot, with every chance to throw banter up and down the line, especially if that first cock is hit or missed. Of course, a walked-up day or roughshoot along hedgerows might provide the same fun and opportunities if you are going to try this at home. "And while the original McDougal is a pheasant and trout," reasoned Douglas, "you could have a Silver

McDougal, say, which could be a different fish caught on a fly made from a pigeon you shot that morning." The permutations are endless, so long as the bird's feathers catch the fish.

"The key is to be in the running still at lunch," the host warned. "The fishing isn't quite so exciting if you are not using your own bird. Then again, the pressure is off, and you can sit back and enjoy the claret instead."

While Douglas is in charge of hosting the guests, teaching flytying and cooking lunch, Roy Foster makes sure the birds fly and the



◀ Douglas (left) is in charge of hosting the guests, cooking lunch and teaching flytying

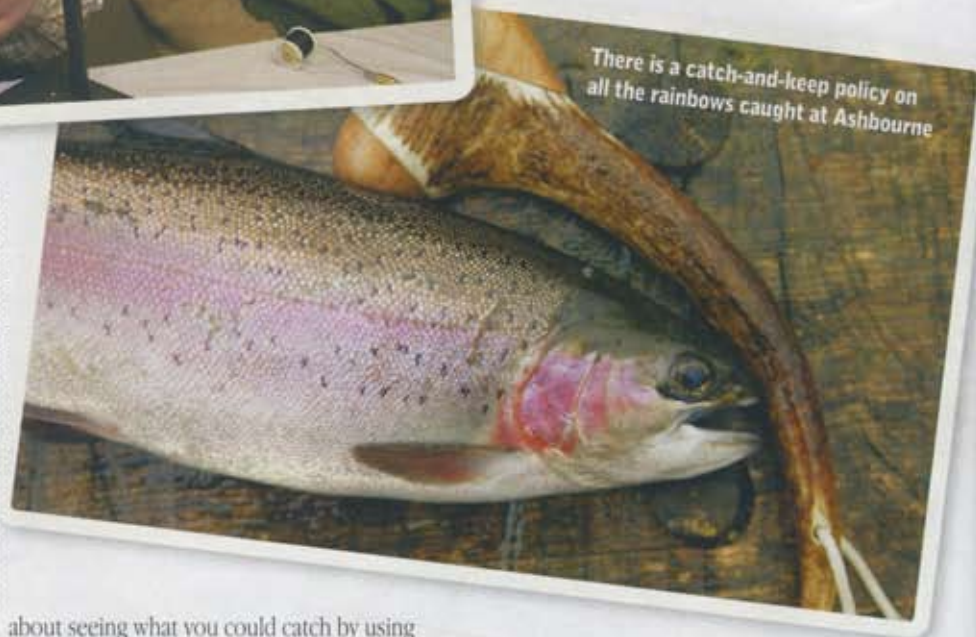
potato and celeriac mash, and hot pepper sauce quickly raised spirits and the trio were soon being taught how to tie their first fly — a pheasant-tail nymph. Expertly, Douglas set the hooks on a vice, with the spool of thread hanging below, and demonstrated how to set the head, twine on the thorax and wing casing, before tying off with what he called a nerdling pole. Then, like the *Generation Game*, the pupils had

◀ fish swim. A true countryman of the old school, he can turn his hand to almost any pursuit, whether it is dog work, deerstalking, falconry, vermin control, clays shooting, rifle marksmanship or flyfishing. During the summer months, Ashbourne holds corporate days for groups of around 12, which allow parties to try their hand at fishing and clays shooting, and Roy is headteacher.

"It is the perfect job for me," he said. "I love being outside. I have done all my life. When I was a boy I used to love watching Jack Hargreaves' programmes, with his horse and cart, and it's a shame those times have gone."

Despite living so close to London, Roy never goes into the city, saying that foxes and badgers, not humans, are supposed to go underground. He did watch last month's Remembrance Day ceremonies at the Cenotaph, at Whitehall, with great pride, however, as both his sons were on parade with the Army Air Corps.

As a younger man, Roy had plenty in common with Buchan's trio of rascals who joined to form the shadowy figure of John Macnab. "We would only poach for the devilment," he admitted, as eight fallow deer trotted through the trees ahead. "It was all



There is a catch-and-keep policy on all the rainbows caught at Ashbourne

about seeing what you could catch by using your fieldcraft, rather than making any money from it."

Now turned keeper, he and next-door Ashburnham headkeeper Mark Saunders worked their dogs through the undergrowth to send numerous birds forward over the three Guns. But it was only heavy rain that fell from the sky. Chris Long-Price managed to pull down a cock on the third drive, keeping his McDougal hope alive, but by lunchtime that was the only success. The other two were out.

Preceded by smoked salmon and champagne, Douglas's excellent venison stew,

to follow suit. "The only help you get is on the tying on and off — apart from that you're on your own if you want to get a true McDougal. It's a bit like sailing: the key is always to stay attached. If you can tie a second, then do, because your first one may fall off."

As Chris was the only McDougal with a chance of success, all eyes were on him as he began to flog the still waters of Kingfisher lake. Having never flyfished before, it was vital he learned to cast quickly, as he would have to play the trout himself to avoid the

DOUGLAS'S RECIPE FOR TRINIDAD HOT PEPPER SAUCE (AND WE MEAN HOT!)

INGREDIENTS

- ½lb of hot peppers and chillis (Scotch Bonnet or Habanero are best), seeds and all, but not stalks.
- 1 medium-sized onion
- 1 cup of vinegar
- 3 to 4 squeezes of American yellow mustard (hot dog mustard)

- 2 or 3 garlic cloves
- Salt and pepper

METHOD

Put all the ingredients together into a blender and mix until you achieve a sauce-like consistency — if too thick, add more mustard.

Ordinarily, hot dog mustard tastes awful, but it works wonderfully in this recipe. Add another onion if you think it lacks bulk.

It will keep well in small jars in the freezer and this also stops it losing flavour.

This is an extremely hot sauce

but, unlike many others, has a fantastic flavour as well as heat.

Treat with care and warn guests how hot it is when serving it. The Trinidad hot pepper sauce is a great accompaniment to sausages, mince, chicken — in fact anything!

Next week

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▲ L-r: Douglas Chalmers, Charlie Waters, Chris Long-Price, Brian Everall and Roy Foster

assisted prefix. Roy outlined the basics of casting, effortlessly throwing the fly a magnitude of yards to the other side of the lake, before drawing the line back in with practised ease. Understandably, Chris's first attempts were not so precise and there was rather more time spent untangling than angling.

"The rules are tough, but I'm afraid that if he did get a fish now, it would probably have to be classed as assisted," Douglas decreed.

"We can't just give McDougals away. Successful participants receive a commemorative disc, a bottle of champagne and a special box in which to take their fish home. We believe it is the little extra details that count."

There is a catch-and-keep policy on all rainbows caught at Ashbourne. "The water is extremely clear here and so there is never the muddy flavour you might get in other lakes. There are some beautiful fish in there and

if you catch one, you will get a good supper from it." The brownies are less numerous and are harder to catch, preferring to sit closer to the bottom at this time of the year, though if hooked give a very powerful account of themselves. Douglas will put these fish back, unless they are too well hooked for easy release.

By the time the shadows had lengthened across the lake, the only trout had been caught by *ST* photographer Paul Quagliana,

though it had been hooked on Brian Everall's impressively tied pheasant-tail nymph. So it really can be done. Yet, on the day we visited, there would be no

"The rules are tough, but I'm afraid that if he did get a fish now, it would probably have to be classed as assisted"

newcomers on the McDougal role of honour. Everyone retired to the lodge for tea, but no medals. ■

For more information about bagging a McDougal at Ashbourne estate, in East Sussex, or booking corporate days, contact Douglas Chalmers tel (01892) 864471 or visit www.ashbourncountry.com

To learn more on flytying, visit www.diptera.co.uk

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