

# STILL GAME





Anyone who has ever wondered about what work a gamekeeper actually does on Scotland's estates will find all the answers in John Cowan's book, *Advice from a Gamekeeper*, says **Mary Smith**

**Photography by Phil Rigby**

John has been a working gamekeeper all his life, the last 31 years of which have been spent on the 6,000-acre estate of Barwhillanty near Parton. Keeping is in his blood as his grandfather was a gamekeeper, working all over Scotland. A visit to an old estate he had known as a child, and which is now unmanaged, provided the spur to write the book.

"Partly I wanted to record stories my grandfather and other old keepers told me before I get too old to remember them," says John, pictured left with his dogs Lyn and Mac. "Gamekeepers are often criticised by people who don't know anything about what they do and I wanted to write the book to put forward the gamekeeper's case."

John also wanted to pass on his knowledge, gained from his lifetime of keeping. He first worked for keeper Ronnie Rose at Eskdalemuir. There, he learned about deer stalking, grouse, blackcock, duck and pheasant shooting. Later he went to Kelso to work on the Duke of Roxburghe's estate under Jimmy Nairn, where he learned about grouse and wild partridge management. "Then," he says, "I moved over here and stayed."

John's working life follows the seasons, each with its own jobs to be carried out: "In the winter I'm feeding pheasants, shifting two or three tons of feed in a day, and getting ready for shoots. I also lamp foxes at night, maybe three nights a week for four or five hours a night. [Lamping is the pursuit of foxes at night using a high powered torch from a four-wheel drive or battery pack. The fox is shot in the beam of light.]

"Once the shooting season is over at the end of February we cull the female roe deer. Deerstalkers from Denmark come to shoot roe buck so there's stalking morning and night. In the summer time I'm building release pens for the birds to go in about July."

John's wife, Jan, worked alongside him as his assistant for 20 years until she was made redundant this year. She still helps out and John acknowledges that women are better at rearing young birds.

*Advice from a Gamekeeper* is divided into

sections with separate chapters covering all aspects of keeping, from trapping to rearing and releasing. Writing about building release pens, John talks about the need to hunt through the pen with a terrier or spaniel to make sure a litter of fox clubs has not been accidentally penned in. It has happened, he says.

Chapters also cover poaching, vermin control, birds of prey, dogs and guns.

The book starts with an explanation of the various routes into becoming a gamekeeper. "You can go to college and get a diploma and apply for a job," says John – his voice indicating this is not the route he recommends – "or you can go to help a keeper part-time and without pay, to learn as much as possible. You'll get the rough work and tedious jobs but it's as well to know early on if you can't take to the life. I'd recommend that anyone who wants to become a gamekeeper learns a trade first so they've something to fall back on."

John's passion for the countryside, wildlife and his work shine through every page and the book is packed with practical advice of value to gamekeepers or those thinking about such a career.

Crammed with fascinating facts and anecdotes, *Advice from a Gamekeeper* is not only for gamekeepers but is an entertaining read for anyone interested in country life and countryside pursuits and provides a colourful insight into the day-to-day challenges of the job – a job John Cowan believes is the best job in the world.

"So many people today are divorced from the countryside and I hope this book will appeal to people who want to learn a bit about how an estate is managed."

■ *Advice from a Gamekeeper, which includes specially commissioned drawings by Roger Penwill and classic wildlife illustrations from CF Tunnicliffe, is published by Merlin Umwin Books and is £20.*

