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Grouse shoots stay on target amid recession

By Andrew Bolger and Bob Sherwood

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"Only death and bankruptcy", so the saying goes, force enthusiasts to give up polo. Amid a recession that is ravaging almost every sector of the economy, the same appears to be true of driven grouse shooting.

Considered the ultimate test of a shooter's skill because the birds can reach speeds of 80 miles an hour, demand for this eye-wateringly expensive sport - for generations the preserve of the super-rich - is outstripping demand, even in these straitened times.

The rarity of grouse, which are wild and exist only on UK heather moors, helps sustain the sport's high costs.

This year prices have risen higher still after a bumper season in 2008 inflated expectations and some shoots have been forced to restrict days as bird numbers appear lower. Nonetheless, wealthy enthusiasts are digging deep into their bank accounts ahead of next week's season opening on the "glorious 12th" of August.

Nicholas Mason, of Lancashire-based sporting agents Davis and Bowring, says price is proving no deterrent. "People who do it are hooked on grouse shooting and will find the money from anywhere to make sure they get their fix."

John Duncan, director of shooting at Roxtons, which lets estates and lodges for shooting and fishing, said: "The demand for the best is holding up."

"The weak pound has kept the Americans and Europeans interested in coming back. And because some estates have had to cancel days, any that do have availability have been going pretty quickly."

Phil Pugh, northern regional director of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, said: "Prices are slightly up, indicating the demand in the market. Last year was a particularly good season and people were keen to repeat their bookings."

In Scotland, which has the most grouse moors, agents also report brisk business. Robert Rattray, a partner with CKD Galbraith, said: "Bookings have been buoyant. Interest in grouse appears to be undiminished, in spite of the economic situation. Because shooting has been much better in the north of England in recent years, any grouse there are in Scotland are keenly contested."

Mr Rattray said prices of £130 to £150 a brace, before value added tax and commissions, were being achieved, with nearly all bookings coming from the UK. "Most grouse shooting is done in private parties - certain people are prepared to spend what it takes to have a day's grouse shooting," he said.

Grouse shooting contributes at least £30m annually to Scotland's economy and supports the equivalent of 940 full-time jobs, according to the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust.

Charles Connell, chairman of the trust, said: "A well-run productive driven grouse moor incorporating [deer] stalking and sheep farming can earn a gross income of up to six times that of a red deer or a sheep flock on an equivalent acreage alone."

It costs more than £100,000 a year to manage a typical 8,000-acre grouse moor, though, so owners need the shooting season to bring in substantial income.

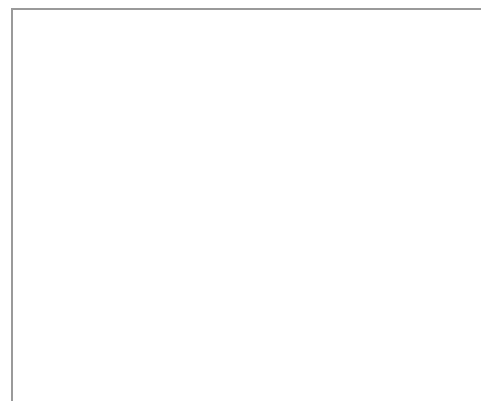
However, while agents say the cost of the most exclusive grouse and pheasant shoots has remained firm, the recession is taking a toll on mid-level driven pheasant shooting.

On less prestigious estates, which might offer fewer birds, the numbers of bookings are down by about 10 per cent. "There's definitely been a drop in the market in terms of days, but people are coming back to take the best days," said Mr Duncan.

"There's much less corporate shooting this year," said Mr Mason, which is unsurprising given that some City firms declined to shoot on days they had already paid for last season on the grounds that it would have seemed insensitive during the banking crisis.

Yet the agents said that many City workers were filling the gaps by organising private groups and possibly booking to shoot bags that were slightly smaller this year, both to save money and because they thought it better to show restraint in the current climate.

The recession is unlikely to inflict serious damage to many shoots, according to Mr Mason, as pheasant estates reacted quickly at the end of last season to cut costs and some have released fewer pheasants, which are reared rather than wild, in expectation of lower bookings.



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Ironically, many have seen bookings remain strong to the extent that some estates are now restricting days or bag limits for fear of running out of birds.

Considering the drop in corporate bookings, many shooters are waiting to snap up last-minute bargains in the belief that shoots will be stuck with unlet days. They will be disappointed, said Mr Duncan.

"There's a great theory that there will be lots of pheasant shooting left to let in September and October but it's just not going to happen. The best shoots are sold."

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