

# A Day in the Life

## Scottish Gamekeeper shadows the Young Gamekeeper of the Year as he prepares for the low ground season.

**C**iaran Woodman-Robinson likens his present state to that of a 'robot'. Not that he would be doing anything else with his time, though.

The 22 year old, crowned SGA Young Gamekeeper of the Year 2019 at GWCT Scottish Game Fair, is checking hoppers, overlooking the beautiful Perthshire countryside which rolls out below one of the partridge pens he is attending to. The estate where he has now enjoyed 4 summers, Edradynate, just got their birds in yesterday and it's all hands on deck as Ciaran loads up food bags to ensure all the feed points are replenished. The heavy bags thump into the back of the ATV, gears are engaged and we're off upwards.

There are a number of pens situated across the ground which rises steadily from low ground and farmland right up to a stretch of heather moor and open hill up on the top; home to some coveys of red grouse and- pleasingly- a growing number of lapwing and curlew since last year.

Keeping the pheasants and partridges fed, watered and disease-free is Ciaran's round-the-clock responsibility just now,

along with his Head Keeper, Ian Smith. There are shoot days planned for the season and the estate must have the birds to fulfil the clients' expectations. Not only that, there are foxes about and Ciaran smiles at the fact he managed to take a cub in the lamp the night before, close to where some sheep roam and maintain a watchful, backward stare as we traverse their grazing grounds. Stopping predators from developing a taste for the estate's new feathered arrivals is all part of the tapestry, as the new season draws ever closer. "At the moment, it's feeding, feeding and more feeding but it is the same for every pheasant keeper just now," he says, hauling back a roll cage placed around the hoppers, to stop the occasional incoming deer from getting a free snack. "We will feed first thing in the morning to just after lunch and then we will be checking everything is ok after that. Then, you might get a little break depending on what other jobs needs done about the place, and then, whatever happens, you'll be sitting out somewhere for a fox, later on."

In many ways, Ciaran owes his new life to the fox- and his pursuit of them. They are wily mammals which genuinely fascinate him.

Growing up in Worcestershire as the son of a professional golfer (PGA Pro, Noel Woodman), it looked very likely that he would follow his father's buggy tracks. Not a day went by when he was not on fairway and green, honing his prowess

with driver and irons. However, it was when he was asked if he could help out controlling the foxes, deer and squirrels that caused damage to the greens and the trees fringing the course that a new avenue in life presented itself.

In fairness, his grandfather had already got him into fly fishing and one of his grandad's friends, who was passionate about shooting, had given him a taste of that, too.

"Foxes have always really interested me," he says. "I did foxes, deer and squirrels around the golf club. My dad might hate me for saying this but, one day (I used to play golf every single day), I teed off, went to the 1st green and thought, 'what the bloody hell am I doing this for?'"

"I was heading towards following my dad, I think. Then I started keepering."

Even in those early days, Ciaran's fox control was meticulous. It remains so.

"This might sound daft," he says, distracted by a phone call to tell him some of his pheasants had managed to find a way into the neighbour's field and would need 'dogging in'.

"I would just sit and watch a fox and how it behaves. I have a huge respect for them. If you are sitting out, you might get a shot but then again, you might not. Even if you are close enough or can walk up to it, the wind might change or something happens and it's off. I was watching a fox in the lamp recently. I saw it going along a wall.

"There was a big gateway and it could have just gone through it but it went

through a hole in the wall instead- that is a wise fox, that! It knows the score." Despite the laudable respect for the quarry, Ciaran is also well aware of why numbers need to be controlled in the local area. To the left hand side of his patch, there is an extensive block of forestry which harbours foxes and other predators. With the days dominated by feeding, he only runs as many legal snares as he can get around and check, as per best practice, so the estate's gamekeepers must keep on top of what they can manage at other times.

The tenant farmers also benefit from the service, when there are vulnerable lambs about.

"Fox control is a big part of our job, not just for the shooting. The mountain hare leverets on the hill get taken by foxes, for example. They are a massive predator. "In terms of the pheasants and partridge, they won't go in and just take a couple. That would be fine- they've got to eat- but when it is your livelihood and you have to look after those birds because you've got shoot days to put on, if you take a big hit that will affect you.

"The reason you have brought in the number of birds you have is in order to fulfil the shoot diary.

If foxes come in and kill a hundred or a couple of hundred- just playing with them- that is major.

"They will take a few heads off birds or just nail them in a field or whatever. It is a big part for the shoot and for the general wildlife on the place.

"We also get a lot of stoats. When we first came here, there were quite a lot of foxes but it is pretty stable now. We get a litter per year coming out of the forestry block."

With some pheasants taking a shortcut through the farmer's field, we return to the kennels to pick up Teal, a well trained black lab pup.

Arriving at the field, the calm control Ciaran exerts over his charge is admirable as the biddable labrador pushes the birds back to where they need to be.

Moving on to the next job, Ciaran points



Ciaran crossing a burn on his way to the next pen.

out new plantings which the estate has put in over the past three years, adding to the mosaic of different habitats across the estate: woodland, grasses, thickets of wild raspberry as well as new planted cover crops.

Various shrubs have been added to the tapestry such as hawthorn, hazel, juniper, dog rose, broom, laurel, willow and snowberry. They've planted oak, rowan, western hemlock, alder and wild cherry trees.

It leads us on to a conversation about shooting, public perceptions and the growing need to explain the pluses of countryside management, financed by private business.

"People might look at a gamekeeper and think 'I don't want to be part of that because they kill things, but it is not all about going around with a gun," Ciaran says.

"This ground is being improved all of the time. We have put in different game covers, planted trees. We are trying to build up cover and it is also good for improving the drives or making new drives but the benefits, overall, are good, too. You are bringing wild birds in with the food.

"In the bare areas, there are more trees and shrubs. You are creating another environment for something else to live. We have a mixture of habitats here.

"The key thing is to improve people's knowledge of what you are doing and to explain why this benefits the wider countryside. The need for that is especially great now."

Ciaran is not ignorant of what detractors are saying about shooting, with social media giving agitators a greater real-time voice than at any other time.

While as exasperated, at times, as everyone else, it does not deter him from doing what he does.

In fact, it makes his resolve stronger.

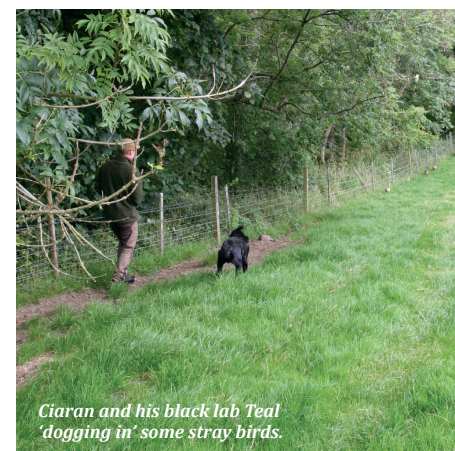
"I've never really been motivated by money," he says. "As long as I can eat and buy my gear, I am happy. There is nothing else I want to do but keepering.

"I think we all have a duty to educate, promote and be positive. We need to make the case that reducing the predators means you have more of other things and a balance you otherwise would not have.

"You don't want to wipe things out, you want a balance because you always want to see the predators, too, but they do have an impact on your other wildlife- even your crows and the eggs they take.

"We need to manage to best practice, do

\*If you want to nominate someone for SGA Young Gamekeeper of the Year, look out for the bulletins regarding the award, on our website and social media.



Ciaran and his black lab Teal 'dogging in' some stray birds.

the best we can and then show people what we are doing instead of them thinking what we are doing. People with opinions generally do not come to see what happens on a shooting estate, whether it is pheasants or grouse or whatever. They already have an opinion from word of mouth. I'd like to think these places will always be seen as working landscapes but that view appears to be getting thinner and thinner."

Ciaran's well-made points take on another perspective when we drive up onto the open hill.

Despite being flat out for a few years with reorganising the low ground shooting, he and Head Keeper Ian managed to get a bit of muirburn done last year on the heather moorland.

Patches of recent cool burn already have the new growth of moorland plants coming through and the green sphagnum below is visible from the track. In order to contain the small fires, planned to try and break up swathes of rank un-managed heather, they swiped around parts they could reach before commencing with beaters and leaf blowers.

The objective is to improve the habitat of the red grouse which are there and, as Ciaran explained earlier, the efforts in that regard have already created spin-offs for threatened birds.

"We are not looking to get massive numbers of grouse but just to help them along. You are managing that different part of the land but it helps all the other species as well.

"We started the burning this year, early, but there are already more curlew and lapwing. There were four pairs of Lapwing this year and previously there has been one pair up that side.

"There are a couple of curlew as well, you hear and see them when you are going about. It gives you a warm feeling.

"The long hours are worth it."



Gamebirds in flight.