

Battle of the .410 bores

An annual rook shoot pits all-American action against British elegance. Joe Dimpleby asks which comes top?



ANNA WAS ON HAND TO PICK-UP THOSE BIRDS THAT DISAPPEARED IN THE UNDERGROWTH

We carry out the traditional May rook shoot in the rookery at the end of our garden in Devon every year, but this time we wanted to try something a bit different. Reprising this ancient rural tradition of harvesting the branchlings always presents two quandaries. The first is what gun to use and the second is how to make the birds as palatable as possible.

The idea is not to drive the rooks away—it brings luck to own a rookery and they are largely benevolent corvids, preferring crops and wireworms to nest raiding. However, as with all birds, a lack of balance is in no-one's interest. The damage done to the trees in a small copse at nesting time means it is sensible to keep numbers to a sustainable level. The most efficient way to do this is to harvest a certain number of the

young birds once they are about to fly the nest.

Something different

So back to the question of the right tool for the job. In the past, we have tried most things, from air rifles to 12-bores, but it's never been quite right. This time we decided to pit old against new, using a Hushpower moderated Mossberg pump-action .410 alongside a couple of antique single-barrel .410s, one a folding William Evans. In another break from tradition, rather than our own not always successful attempts to create a tasty dish, the challenge of cooking the rooks was nobly accepted by the chefs at the village pub (*see p.17*).

Silence is golden

So how would English refinement fare against all-action American? The .410 calibre is ideal. The quarry in the



FOR ADAM BRATT, THE PERFECT GUN FOR THE TASK WAS HIS OLD HAMMERLOCK .410



ED DIMBLEBY FOUND THE MOSSBERG WAS SUPERIOR TO THE OLDER GUNS WITH BIRDS ON THE WING

May rook shoot are not the adults but the branchlings and so a 12-bore is overkill. Not only is it likely to damage the meat, but it is also a bit anti-social blasting away on the edge of the village on a sunny May afternoon. By contrast, the .410 causes minimal meat damage. You are aiming at a range of 20 to 30 yards at the treetops, so it has plenty of killing power. The moderated .410 had the upper hand

because, if you use the recommended subsonic cartridges, there is little noise. This makes it good for stealthy pest control as well as the ideal garden gun that will not frighten the neighbours.

The gathering

Normally, there are only two of us but we thought it would be more fun to ask the other three members of our small

roughshooting syndicate to recreate a traditional rook shooting party. When the four Guns assembled, there were two old English .410s, the Hushpower and an air rifle. Nick Millman would pick-up with his Labrador Anna.

In the 19th century the traditional spring rook shoot took place around 12 May. This year, the warm weather meant young branchlings were starting to come out in April, so we fixed our shoot for 2 May in case they had all fledged before we got to them.

I started off with the air rifle. The problem was, with a fair bit of wind on the day, the branches were moving about presenting a tricky shot. As ever,

"THE PUMP-ACTION HAD THE BENEFIT OF BEING ABLE TO FIRE OFF THREE SHOTS IN RAPID SUCCESSION"

there were a few young ones on the wing as well as in the trees, so we soon dropped the rifle and went back to the battle of the .410s.

The traditional guns had the advantage initially because the sight picture is more familiar than looking over the sound moderator, but we did start to get used to it. The pump-action was great fun to use and had the benefit of being able to fire off three shots in rapid succession, rather than the slow reloading of a single-shot hammerlock non-ejector.

The different feel of various guns is funny. The English guns won the aesthetic contest hands down. They are lovely little forms to handle and using them does take you back to yesteryear. The faux wood plastic stock of the Mossberg was no match, but it was entertaining bringing something from »

WILLIAM EVANS AND MOSSBERG

The Hushpower moderated Mossberg .410 pump-action was supplied by the Saddlery & Gunroom centre in Kent (www.saddleryandgunroom.co.uk). It kindly lent us the gun, which was generously handled by Sportsman Gun Centre in Exeter. We used a combination of familiar Eley Fourlongs and a 3in Eley eight shot clay cartridge. The latter worked in the pump but was not ideal — my fault, as I left it too late to order anything more suitable. Lyalvale Express has

launched a new subsonic 3in five shot .410 cartridge which sounds perfect (Magnasonic 17g Fibre Wad, visit www.lyalvaleexpress.com). As for the folding .410 Nick is keen to know more or if any readers have come across anything similar. The puzzle is that a top-end London gunmaker such as William Evans would have made what some people might describe as a poacher's gun. If you own anything similar or can shed any light, email STletters@timeinc.com.



LEFT: THE MOSSBERG PUMP-ACTION .410. RIGHT: THE OLD FOLDING .410

