

IN the show ring below Scone Palace in Perthshire, ponies stand, deer saddles polished and grouse panniers gleaming, gillies in estate tweeds. Dapple grey, cream dun and bay, manes long and thick, eyes calm, these sturdy, four-square ponies are the mainstay of traditional deer-stalking.

Harness classes are an established part of Scottish shows, but the Fred Taylor Memorial Trophy at the GWCT Scottish Game Fair is special. It was founded in 2013 by the Earl of Dalhousie with fellow stalkers to salute the 'true gentleman of the hill', head stalker on the Earl's Invermark estate for 30 years.

Like the ponies he worked with, Taylor was 'unflappable, polite and a great ambassador for the sport,' attests Hugo Straker of the GWCT. 'It gives me goosebumps to see the spectacle at the show, all the different tweeds and garrons in full attire.' The increasing number of entries proves that, despite the advent of off-road vehicles, stalking ponies are still very much in evidence in the Highlands.

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Although aesthetically timeless, deer-stalking is a relatively recent addition to the fieldsports pantheon. Deer had always been hunted, often with deerhounds, but it was only with the invention of the accurate, long-range rifle in the early 19th century that it became possible to bring down a stag with little fear of warning or wounding.

It was then that the southerners began to journey north, encouraged by romantic poems extolling the 'branchy-crested race/ When they quicken their proud pace' and the accounts of William Scrope, an English friend of Sir Walter Scott, who published *The Art of Deer-Stalking* in 1838. When Queen Victoria and Prince Albert arrived, they swiftly embraced the sport, Albert describing it as 'one of the most fatiguing, but also one of the most interesting, of pursuits'. Royal assent given, stalking was established as an essential element of the sporting year.

Once shot, a stag had to be transported to the game larder, for which ponies were essential. Tough and shaggy, adapted to life in the open, the small breeds of the Western Isles were often used, but the bigger Highland—some 14.2hh, with 'powerful quarters' and 'kindly eye'—was soon established as the optimum type and the breed society founded in 1923. The Gaelic word garron, ►

The best tool for the job: as on the Atholl estates, ponies reach places ATVs can't

On the hoof in the Highlands

On estates such as Balmoral, The Queen's home in Aberdeenshire, tough and shaggy Highland ponies are vital members of the stalking team when it comes to bringing deer off the hill, finds Octavia Pollock





Above: Eric Starke, winner of the Fred Taylor Memorial Trophy in 2017, prepares the load for Cally. Facing page: Raising the standard: The Queen photographed at Windsor for her 90th birthday with Highlands Balmoral Jubilee (left) and Balmoral Lomond, Jubilee's sire

now used as a general term, actually means gelding, but mares are equally capable.

The First and Second World Wars, when Highlands bore the Lovat Scouts to war as they did during the Jacobite '45, led to a damaging reduction in the breeding stock, compounded by the arrival of all-terrain vehicles in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, Highland ponies are still classified as a vulnerable breed, although this isn't a reflection of the quality of current stock, according to the Highland Pony Society.

Leading the commitment to quality is the Balmoral estate, where stud manager Sylvia Ormiston is responsible for breeding and training Highlands under the knowledgeable eye of The Queen. With six beats on the 64,000-acre estate, 12 garrons can be used at once and Mrs Ormiston has some 35–40 ponies in her care, with between five and seven foals born each spring and brought on: this year, Rum, Pimm's, Malt, Moët and Drambuie.

Naming runs by theme, with Mrs Ormiston suggesting ideas for The Queen's approval. Tragically, stallions Hercules and Lord were lost to grass sickness in 2018. It was a terrible loss—'they were my 10-year plan'—but she

has another stallion, Mandarin, and is using noted sire Brae of Shanquhar to fill in.

The Queen's Highlands have had great success in the show ring, including at Royal Windsor, but traditional working ponies are still the aim: a garron that will stand still as a 14-stone stag is hoisted onto its back, despite blood, rain and wind. Even with the best bloodlines, it takes five years to produce a working Highland, such as Balmoral Harmony, who won this year's Fred Taylor award with her handler, gillie Rebecca Cantwell.

For the great red deer, a last journey atop a noble Highland pony is the dignified option

Not every pony will join the stalking team, but a youngster 'will tell you' if it wants to work. Temperament is vital. 'It's all in here,' confirms Mrs Ormiston, tapping a forehead hidden under a pony's splendid forelock. 'Bone with brain is what we need.'

Training starts early: 'We put a deerskin in the youngsters' field to get them used to it. Brave ponies will pick it up and play with it—a good indication they'll make a worker.' This backfired once, when a policeman stationed at the castle 'radioed in panicked fashion that the ponies had killed something'.

The handlers will 'put the skin on their backs, drop it, wave it around, everything. They must stand four-square: one movement and we stop and start again'. Desensitisation is important and it helps that, at Balmoral, everything happens within sight of the ponies. On my visit, mares were being covered outside where two-year-old colts Major and Squire were stabled. The youngsters were so unaffected by the squealing and scents that they lay down for a snooze.

Naturally surefooted, the young ponies will be led from an older one at first, over bridges and through water, and worked under saddle. Although they must be steady, they're not plods: 'We need something that can walk,' explains Mrs Ormiston. 'They need to go all day and we don't want to be dragging them.'

Young ponies will start in hind season, when the load is lighter. 'If no bother with the



How ponies lighten the load

Much of the skill in using a pony lies in tying the stag securely to its back. The technique has changed little since Balmoral's first Royal Family, but estates are increasingly adopting the deer saddles developed by Sylvia Ormiston and Eric Starke, which flex to fit. 'It's based on a First World War saddle with a hinged tree,' explains Mrs Ormiston. 'There are no pressure points and it can be adjusted for different ponies. We also use wider girths with three straps—pull one and the other tightens. They fit so well, there's no need for cruppers, although we do use a breech strap for steep hills.' With hinds, two may be carried, one on either side.

After a stag has been shot, the stalker signals—once via smoke signal or flag, now with a radio—for the pony to be brought up. The stag's head is tied so one antler rests along its back, then it is manoeuvred into position; the pony, ideally, positioned in a dip in the ground.

'I use another strap to secure the end of the antler,' says Mr Starke. 'An old stalker once told me "it takes five years to train a stalking pony and five seconds to ruin them", and that's true. If they get a fright, such as a poke from an antler, you might never get a saddle on them again.'

a vehicle, ponies know where it's safe and will avoid bogs that swallow the unwary.

When head stalker David Allison started on the Reay Forest estate, Sutherland, part of the Grosvenor estate headed by the Duke of Westminster, in 2007, there was only a handful of ponies, but now there are 10–12 in work, with youngsters bred on the estate being brought on. 'The reason for using them is purely practical,' he explains. 'A pony is the best tool for the job. An ATV might get halfway there, but the stag would have to be dragged to it, which can damage the carcass.' Stalking isn't only a deer-management tool, but a valuable source of meat and no butcher wants a ragged haunch.

For the great red deer, a last journey atop a noble Highland pony is the most dignified option. As Mr Fraser points out succinctly: 'It's not the nicest thing in the world to shove a stag into an Argocat.'

It takes a long time to produce a good stalking pony and it's expensive to train and work one, yet garrons are not only more romantic, adding value for paying clients seeking the classic experience, but the best thing for the land. Stalking in the vast, wild Highlands, with no engine roar to disturb the peace, is as beguiling now as in Prince Albert's day. Ponies are here to stay. 🐾

www.balmoralcastle.com
Eric Starke features in 'Highland Ponies in Glen Prosen' by Matt Limb (£25, Wild Tweed)

hinds, they'll go out as a second pony with the stags. The stags smell different, so we need to get them used to that.'

For grouse days, when wicker panniers are strapped on either side of the saddle ('picnics out, birds home'), the ponies are trained by hanging hay nets in front of the panniers, 'gradually reducing the amount of hay. It's about sensation before sight'.

Some estates interested in using ponies want ready-trained garrons, but for Richard Fraser of Atholl estates, who judged the Fred Taylor award this year, training, as he did for 18 years, 'is one of the things I loved most. I'd spend 20 minutes a day with a young pony. Some would be a bit flighty. It takes time'.

Indeed, it doesn't always work. 'Some ponies never get used to the smell of blood,' discloses Eric Starke, who works his ponies on the Glen Prosen estate. 'Others will eat a carrot off a carcass from the word go.'

On a stalking day, pony boys or girls will follow closely until the stalk proper commences. It might be a long, cold wait, but it has its compensations. 'I would sit and talk to the pony,' divulges Mr Fraser. 'You could get a lot closer, too—you'd hear the

shot and go round the corner to get to the stag. In an Argo, you're miles away.'

Ponies won't spook deer as men do, too. 'Sometimes, we use garrons to move the deer on in a relaxed way,' emphasises Mr Starke. 'It takes longer by pony and the weather can be foul, but it's worth it.' Even young lads keen on quad bikes succumb to the charm. 'When they try it, they love it,' reveals Mr Fraser. 'You bond with a pony.'

'Argocats are horrible,' laments Mr Straker. As well as 'not scarring the landscape, ponies will reach places that vehicles can't,' explains Mr Starke. 'If it's steep or there are big rocks, a pony can pick its way through.' Where they survive, old stone pony paths help. 'They're a part of the landscape and don't take a lot of maintenance,' affirms Lord Dalhousie. 'We put cairns to mark them, a couple of stones with a white one on top, for when the mist comes down.'

Garrons can also sense which way home lies or when ground is treacherous. 'I got lost several times at first,' admits Miss Cantwell, who worked at Atholl before joining the Balmoral all-female team last year. 'I would drop the rope and follow the pony!' Unlike

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