

## The First Morning Flight

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I first shot on this bay as a 12 year old on a magical mid-February morning in 2008. As we stepped out of the cottage and into the freezing icy blackness well before dawn, the stars shone bright high above, and shooting stars swelled and faded at frequent intervals. With our formidable spaniel Sol trotting to heel at one side, we trudged along the well-cropped and white-frosted grass bank parallel to the south shore of the bay. It was freezing cold, and all was absolutely still, with a mist hanging motionless above the mudflats. A redshank wailed as we went, and the curlew's lower-pitched and distinctive fluting note echoed between the shores.

It was our first time here, and we were unfamiliar with our surroundings. We scraped through a small, red-rusted gate, through which the path led between gorse bushes, bracken, and short sliver birch trees. It was as we came to the end of this stretch of vegetation that we first heard it. That spine-tingling, life-pumping cry, emanating from somewhere across the mist-enshrouded shore. The pink-feet were here, and they were waking.

Listening to the murmur of the geese hastened my pace and sent my mind and whole body into a mad electrified frenzy. The open shore was shortly revealed, where patchy white boulders studded a small patch of marsh. A dark but faint smudge stretching out to our left, and pressed low against the backdrop of grey mud was the shingle bank where we were to take our ambush, and we split up around fifty yards apart before choosing a position to lie in, and wait. I knelt down onto the hard pebbles, and then lay flat, where I became ensconced in a world of mud, seaweed, mussel shells, and their distinctive tangy scent which filled my nostrils.

The anticipation intensified throughout my body, and through Sol's, who too lay flat and pressed tight against me. The morning was quite surreal with an almost deafening cold and silent atmosphere, except for the murmuring of the pink-feet. Would they fly straight and low over us as we were told they do here? Surely not on a hopeless calm morning like this! Moreover, perhaps only my dad with his 8-bore would have a chance of bringing down a bird in such conditions.

As the sun began to lighten the scene, the mist rose slightly. From out in front, a party of shelduck lifted from towards the roost and made my hackles fly into alert. They took the black forms of geese against the mist, but I realised what they were almost instantly. A party of wigeon whistled excitedly to one another somewhere along the channel, and the geese still talked...

I began to wonder what would actually happen. A glimmer of doubt crept in. Until, out of nowhere, a muffled roar shook out across the shore. Followed by a slight pause, then an incredible outburst of the most plaintive and beautiful wild clamour which sent my heart pounding out of control. Fraught with panic, I flattened my face to the shingle and almost bit the ground. I peered up as little as I dared and saw a long, dark, and regimented mass of small specks rising between the hills and the shoreline.

As I studied them, I noticed a darker, more prominent black line straight in front, which slowly evolved into individual shapes, wing to wing, advancing upon our position. My head went cloudy. I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing. But on they came looking huge and frightening. It was truly nerve-wrecking; a picture of broad wings with necks stretched and nodding heads imposing across my front which forever sticks in my mind. Rising carefully and burdened by layers of clothing, I hoisted the 20-bore to my shoulder, and.. "Bang". My shot obviously flew miles under one of the great shapes, as the whole skein stood on their tails and rocketed skywards. I fired again with the

same result, feeling a bizarre sense of relief and shock. The smell of gunpowder hung strong in the air as the geese drew higher overhead. "Reload", "shoot again", I thought. But no. I'd blown it.

The straggling geese veered away over the tall green trees on the opposite shore, with their calls cutting clean through the still air. In my dizzy state, I seemed to recall a blue blaze flash down into the shingle.. The blue blaze of the dead pink-foot, which I saw lying next to my dad as I approached shortly afterwards. I held the limp and heavy body of the goose in my arms, staring in wonder at its stunning chocolate and light-brown plumage. Its piercing open large brown eye looked as though it was alive, as if it was still intently scanning the horizon with its companions on the mudflats, sending its evocative call rolling across the shore.

This was my first experience of being within range of pink-feet, and I would have to wait longer for my chance to bag one. Although I was mildly disappointed to have missed my shots, it was a stunning experience, and I vividly recall the incredible satisfaction as we walked back to the car along the frost-covered grass bank as the sun reflected orange off the surface of the mudflats. Despite having had so many successful flights since then, I highly doubt that I will ever have another shooting experience quite like it. And in many ways I hope I don't, as that morning, for me, simply cannot be matched.