

Becoming a Wildfowler - Keith Ogden

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Journey

Earliest memory of my Dad coming home off the marsh with widgeon when I was around 4 years old. Me playing with them and asking if I could help to pluck them ready for Sunday lunch.

He was a long standing member of PDWA – he grew up in the middle of Preston in a terraced house. He built a yacht in his back yard and had to have it lifted out with a crane, then taken to a mooring on the tidal river Ribble in Preston, where he met Ted Conroy – one of the founder members of PDWA in mid late 1950's.. Ted had a boat moored there and also had a punt with a punt gun. He took my Dad under his wing and got him to join PDWA. My Dad was involved from then until his death in 2015 with PDWA as treasurer, committee, vice chairman, etc.

When my Dad came home with widgeon, I looked on them as a beautiful bird and was fascinated by their plumage. We would look forward to them as a Sunday roast and were lucky to get some good meat, as chicken was seen as an expensive luxury in the 1970's.

I became a passionate bird watcher/bird book reader as a child and learnt all I could about ducks and geese. My Dad would take me on the marsh occasionally and I became fascinated with it as a wild, wide open expansive environment.

When I got my shot gun certificate at the age of 15, I wanted to join the wildfowlers straight away, but wasn't allowed until I had turned 18. I made do with some rough shooting and duck flighting on the fields near the marsh but still yearned to get out on the estuary. I did have occasional trips out with my Dad and shared his gun now and again, but back then day tickets weren't issued. I made sure I was on the PDWA waiting list and couldn't wait until I was old enough to join.

When I turned 18 I passed my interview and joined the club. I was going away to Uni in late September and new members weren't allowed on the marsh until October, but I got special dispensation to go on the last weekend before I departed for Uni. I remember cycling to the marsh around 4-30 in the morning and staying on all day for morning flight, tide flight and evening flight – for the grand bag of 2 teal and 2 golden plover. I was ecstatic and dined like a king on the Sunday before I left for Uni.

I met some like minded friends at Uni and during the first term introduced two of them to my marsh on visits home – we learnt a lot then through sitting and watching and waiting – we saw spectacular sunrises, spectacular sunsets, wild moonlit nights, stormy dawns and dusks and revelled in the exposed grandeur of the place. We bagged a few ducks and took them back to Uni to supplement our meagre student rations.

I met a lot of the old wildfowling characters during my childhood and in my early years on the marsh. Charlie Geary had an old army Champ that he used to go shrimping with on the sands at Southport. Robin Prescott (Cat Weasel!) was a real character and taught me a lot about the ways of the birds on our marsh. My biggest mentor was my Dad, who taught me how to call widgeon, about being calm when the opportunity for a shot arose, who was with me when I bagged my first pink and who instilled in me a respect for our quarry and only to take what we needed for the table.

Everything we shot on the marsh was/is eaten. In my youth my Mum taught me to cook before I went away to Uni – I soon learnt some of her roasts, casserole and curry dishes to utilise the mallard, widgeon and teal that we harvested off the marsh. I have never known a time when me and my family did not eat wildfowl.

I have retained my PDWA membership since I was 18. I have become a passionate believer that what we do is sustainable and defensible to any one who eats meat. I believe that if we manage an area, make it attractive to our quarry species and then take a sustainable harvest that it is the most ethical form of hunting there is.

If we protect and enhance the environments to ensure that the birds are surviving in sustainable numbers and take a few for the table without affecting the viability of the population, we can prove the benefits of wildfowling.

I have introduced many others to our pastime over the years. My greatest pride was introducing my son (born in 1996) to our wildfowling passion. He joined PDWA as young shot when he was 8 and shot his first widgeon on the marsh when he was 9. He has eaten wildfowl all his life and is now a good wildfowl cook himself. He has been a full member for a number of years now and we often go out on the marsh together but he sometimes goes out on his own.

*Last year he rang me to say he was going out on wild, stormy night whilst I was still out working. We discussed where he should go to take advantage of the conditions, and I wished him good luck. He called in at my house on his way home around 4 hours later – muddy, cold, wet but genuinely exhilarated after bagging 6 widgeon and a couple of geese. He couldn't wait to tell me about the night, the shots, the birds, the wind, and I lapped it all up. He could have stayed longer and shot more, but he decided that he had what he needed and to leave the birds undisturbed. He was happy with his night, but I was brimming with pride that my son had continued the tradition of me and my father in harvesting his own sustainable wild food and doing it in a respectful and safe way.

I don't think we would have had the same satisfaction and elation if he had called in to my house to tell me he had just been to Tesco and bought a chicken for his tea!

I get out on the marsh normally around once per week, or at least once a fortnight during the season. I do not buy any supermarket meat (apart from a bit of bacon and chorizo) – all my meat is harvested by me or my friends and I'm proud to say that I can defend the ethics and sustainability of this to anyone.

It is interesting that my daughter has chosen to become a vegetarian for various reasons, including animal welfare and to save the planet from the evils of mass meat

production – BUT – she will still eat the meat and fish that I harvest as she believes it is sustainable and justifiable!

In the last 25 years I have become increasingly involved with the conservation aspects of wildfowling. I probably visit the marsh as many, if not more times each year to undertake conservation work and bird counts as I do to shoot. We do conservation work to protect the quarry species, but equally to protect all the non-quarry species that live in our special place. I get great satisfaction in seeing the new breeding colony of avocets that have moved into our conservation project area. I love to see the oyster catchers, redshank, whopper swans, godwits, lapwings, curlew etc all taking advantage of the special place that we protect.

When I am out wildfowling I feel at one with nature. I think the special times of dawn and dusk, between light and dark, when you are hidden from view and have birds all around are so special. Using skills handed down to me from my Dad to bag a few birds for the table feels as special today as it did 45 years ago.