

# Driven Woodcock Shoots at Cong

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## INTRODUCTION

The old traditionalists boast of the prized "Driven Woodcock Shoots" at Cong Forest and it is now pretty well accepted that it is the only one of any significance in Europe. The driven woodcock shoot is classed as the most sporting of all shoots. The Cong shoots, usually of six days duration, in early December and late January, have always been regarded as sporting, social and calendar events. Apart from their undoubted sporting aspect, their social side has always been important in the life of the poorer community of the area. In the late twenties, the thirties, forties and even fifties, local families depended on the December shoot for that 'something' for the Christmas dinner table. The January outing was relied upon for the provision of a pair of shoes or possibly for an item of badly needed clothing. The shoots were definite calendar dates in the area and one still hears of 'such and such' a thing happening "before the first shoot" or "just after the January shoot".

## THE ORGANISATION OF A WOODCOCK DRIVE

For those not conversant with a driven woodcock shoot, it literally means what it says. "Driven", because the birds are flushed and driven towards the guns on the right and left of the "beat" (Fig 1). A beat can vary in width from 100m to 200m and can be anything from 500m to 1000m in length. The beat is flanked on all sides by shooting paths and is worked to obtain the longest "drive". The personnel associated with a shoot are as follows: Guns (usually seven), Gamekeeper, Head Beater, Beaters (not less than twelve), Pickers (at least two), Loaders (one with each gun) and Dogmen (not less than three). The guns are positioned on the shooting paths, usually four on the right and three on the left. Each gun is numbered according to his allocated position with gun numbers one, two, three and four always on the right of the beat. (Fig 1). Positions are allocated by draw. To eliminate any advantage, the position of each gun changes, usually downward (seven to six, six to five, etc.) after the completion of each beat. Gun numbers one and seven start

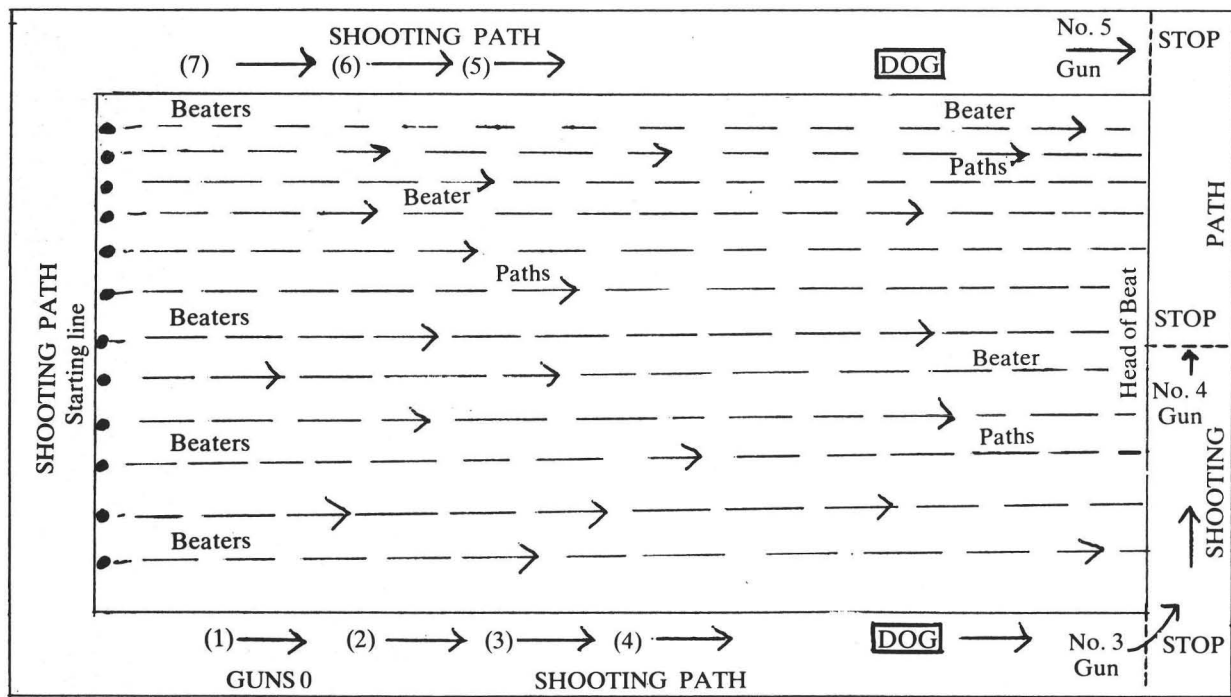


Fig. 1. Sketch of Beat.

roughly 25m from the beginning of the beat with the next gun 100m further on. Guns generally respect their distances from one another and to do this it is imperative that they keep pace with the beaters. Safety precautions are always a foremost consideration. Firing low is strictly forbidden. A bird must be clear of the beat before being shot. A loader handing an unbroken loaded gun to any person can expect instant dismissal. These safety precautions have paid dividends over the years, with only one minor accident in eighty years.

At the beginning of a beat, all the beaters are lined up across the starting line and the gamekeeper gives the starting signal. The head-beater leads his beaters along the beater paths, making as much noise as possible. The distance between beaters is normally 20m, though closer spacing is sometimes desirable. On flushing a bird, the beaters scan its direction of flight and shout to the gun nearest its line of flight. If the gun is successful, the gamekeeper may signal a halt to allow the bird to be retrieved. When the woodcock is bagged, the signal to restart is given. This process is repeated as often as necessary to the end of the beat. The picker is expected to be blessed with almost uncanny perception, as he has to anticipate where the downed bird will fall. This is referred to as "marking a bird". Injured birds must be picked and dealt with as speedily as possible. The picker is also responsible for keeping an account of the number of birds shot by each gun. The dead birds are carried along the beat in a gamestick. (Plate 1).



**Plate 1.** The "Bag" on "Gamesticks".

The role of the gamekeeper is that of Director of Field Operations and he is also responsible for cleaning and oiling the guns after each day's shooting. He is the powerhouse of any shoot and his knowledge of the birds' haunts, local geography and terrain is of paramount importance for the success of any shoot. The present gamekeeper at Cong, seconded by the Forest and Wildlife Service since 1974, compares favourably with the best of his predecessors.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF DRIVEN SHOOTS AT CONG

Lord Ardilaun, who owned Ashford Castle Estate from 1868 until his death in 1915, planted big areas with trees after acquiring the Estate. One of the objectives was to provide shelter for game. Towards the end of the century, this strategy began to pay dividends and these coverts, together with the natural growth of hazel, began to attract big numbers of gamebirds, particularly woodcock. At the turn of the century, the continuous influx of woodcock prompted thoughts of exploiting the situation and the idea of a driven woodcock shoot was conceived. The inaugural shoot was tentatively fixed for the year 1905. Lord Ardilaun considered the shoot such a momentous undertaking that he invited the Prince of Wales to participate and the first shoot actually took place on the 25th January, 1905. Six guns shot with the Prince. The shoot lasted for five days and a bag of 462 woodcock was returned. Shoots were then organised annually until 1910. The shoot was then allowed to lapse, due perhaps to the age or the failing health of Lord Ardilaun. The records indicate that the shoot was next held in 1917, when The Honourable A. E. Guinness took over the Estate. The four days shoot in late February, 1917, returned a bag of 390 woodcock for seven guns. Shoots were also held in 1918 and 1919 with bags of 182 and 203 respectively. However, the record books are blank for the period 1920 to 1927 and it is unlikely that shooting took place. This may have been due to unrest in the country. The shoot restarted in all its former splendour in 1928, with an eight day show for seven guns and a bag of 636 birds.

With the exception of the years 1935 and 1936, shoots were then held annually until 1938 under the direction of The Honourable A. E. Guinness. The 1930 shoot was noteworthy because Lord Oranmore and Browne participated for the first time and he was to remain associated with the shoot, in one capacity or another, for the next fifty years. During the 1938 shoot the beaters withdrew their labour on a number of occasions thus disrupting the shoot. This and other difficulties so irked The Honourable A. E. Guinness that he decided to sell the Estate and the Forestry Division took over as the new owners in 1939.

In their first year of ownership the Forestry Division offered to let the sporting rights on a ten year lease. Lord Oranmore and Browne, together with the Marquis of Sligo, submitted a joint tender and their offer was accepted. At this time the fine stands of commercial timber on the Estate and the fine arboretum were showing evidence that good forestry and good shooting were not incompatible. Further evidence for this can be seen in the excellent bags returned for the shoot over the past 75 years. (Table 1). It is worth mentioning that on the 31st January, 1910, a British and Irish record for one day's shooting for seven guns was established at Cong, with a bag of 236 birds.

Table 1 Shoot returns at Cong for selected years during the period 1905-1983.

Year	Duration of Shoot (Days)	No. of Guns	Bag	No. of Birds Flushed
1905	5	7	462	—
1906	6	7	280	—
1907	6	7	393	—
1908	6	7	434	—
1909	6	7	454	—
1910	6	7	571	—
1917	4	7	390	—
1918	4	7	182	—
1919	4	7	203	—
1928	8	7	636	—
1929	11	7	752	—
1930	11	7	569	—
1931	14	7	656	—
1932	13	7	522	—
1933	9	7	354	—
1934	10	7	509	—
1937	9	7	722	—
1938	7	7	526	—
1940	7	7	400	—
1941	6	7	326	—
1951	10	7	485	—
1961	5	6	88	—
1971	6	8	104	—
1974	6 (Dec. only)	7	48	243
1975	12	7	129	392
1976	6	7	81	345
1977	12	7	118	424
1978	12	7	79	406
1979	9	7	106	427
1980	11	7	168	699
1981	13	7	251	902
1982	12	7	187	708
1983	6 (Jan. only)	7	80	332

### WOODCOCK HABITAT

In 1940 Lord Oranmore and Browne and the Marquis of Sligo held their first shoot. It lasted seven days and the bag was 400 birds. On this occasion many more woodcock were sighted, but again the beaters withdrew their labour three times, thus causing a number of problems. After this time Lord Oranmore and Browne is of the opinion that bags generally got smaller due to the lack of maintenance of beater and shooting paths. However, it may be significant that about this time the Forest and Wildlife Service was embarking on an extensive afforestation programme in the northwest and the author believes that the new forests may have provided suitable stopping-off places for the incoming woodcock. Alternatively, the creation of an increasing area of suitable habitat may have led to the dispersal of the birds.

Prime habitat is of course vital in maintaining woodcock numbers and experience at Cong suggests that these birds although classed as waders, are happiest, and constantly frequent small heights under unthinned Sitka spruce, Norway spruce, Douglas fir, Grand fir and Western Hemlock. Observation over many years leads to the conclusion that when these species close canopy to provide good, dry ground cover, woodcock flock into them. The sheltered sunny sides of such coverts appear to provide prime habitat. Bag returns from these areas confirm this observation. The numbers of birds inhabiting such stands decreases when they are thinned and the pattern of appreciation wanes further with the normal development of the plantation. Experience at Cong also suggests that the majority of woodcock do not go in their nocturnal sojourns to stand on their heads in some marshy feeding grounds, but feed day and night in their selected haunts. The extensive borings (presumably for food) carried out by these birds in their normal habitat provides some evidence for this conclusion. The woodcock's number one enemy at Cong forest is the Pine Marten. Although the cock has excellent camouflage and all-round binocular vision, it still falls victim to this protected "predator".

### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In an effort to make the shoot more amenable and to enhance its attractiveness, the Forest and Wildlife Service began in 1969 to widen ride-lines cum shooting paths to 10 metres. Thus a strip five thousand metres in length was widened by bulldozer in 1969, 4000m was treated in 1970 and a further 2000m of path was widened in 1971. This widening is carried out in conjunction with normal thinning operations in so far as possible by removing lines of trees. In addition, beater paths are maintained annually to keep the event mobile. These measures have ensured that woodcock shooting at Cong has retained its attractiveness for the usual continental clientele. Long may it last.