

# Miracles happen at Sandrigham: Norfolk Trials

Almost three months later, I am finally here to write down what happened. On Sept 7<sup>th</sup> 2017, in fact, Briony won Novice Stake on Partridge at Sandrigham, organized by the Pointer Club of UK. Some might argue that, well, it's "just" a Novice Stake, but for me it is a great achievement. Briony is not my first English Setter, I got the first one, "Socks" (Slai di Riccagioia), in 1999, but he was a rescue and he came to me after having be discarded by a "pro" trainer and with a bag full of behavioural problems. In his own way, he was a smart dog, we managed to go hunting alone together (he did not want men with shotguns around him), but there was no way I could rehab completely and train him for trials. I had not enough skills, nor experience, and he would not have dealt well with formal training sessions. He, however, opened me new doors as we started training for rough shooting and I got a firearms and hunting license. I met people, got new friends and spent many years rough shooting over English Setters and other pointing breeds up and down the hills of the Northern Apennines. I, somehow, had the chance to watch- and shoot over- hundreds of dogs during those years, and it was an incredible experience. I also began attending trials and to work for canine and shooting magazines which lead me to meet breeders, judges and handlers...



Socks (Slai di Riccagioia)  
my first ES

After his death, when I started looking for another setter, I had very clear ideas about what I wanted in my next dog, but not so clear ideas about where to find her! It took months, but I finally located my litter and my puppy, on a farm on the Swiss Alps, not too far from Sankt Moritz (posh dog!). I knew what I needed to know about Briony's dad, but mum was quite a surprise: she was beautiful, gentle and smart. She came with us heeling off lead to the small village's café and then sat quietly under the table. I loved that, as well the whole bloodline registered in the pedigree and the parents' health clearances. When I brought Briony home, people thought she was cute, but too expensive, and that I was going to "ruin" her, training her in my own way and socializing her too much. I just thought she was a terrible pup who did not like me at all. It took quite a while to become friends, probably she was just testing me to be sure she was in good hands!



Ansa del Simano, Briony's

mum



First day of 2017 hunting season

She was naughty, but smart, and she quickly developed in a good hunting companion. Sometimes she had a mind of her own and sometimes she was not the easiest dog to handle, but she surely did not lack of determination and bird sense. She was, and she still is, strong willed and sensitive at the same time. Thanks to friends, we had access to some private estates where she could meet much more birds that she could have met on more affordable – by me – public grounds. Other people introduced her to woodcock and, I still remember the day, with my surprise, she pointed her first snipe. During these hunting seasons, she learnt to work with other dogs and we worked a lot on backing and on remaining steady on point. I must admit I had good teachers, and that skilled hunters helped us to locate birds, but steadiness to wing was not required. Hunters here want the dogs to be steady on point, but after the bird flies, all they wish is to hit it, none cares anymore about the dog.

In the meantime, as she also grew prettier, I entered her at a dog show that took place nearby and, to my surprise, she was awarded a RCAC (RCC), so I decided to continue on this road. Briony, however, had other plans and after a stressful indoor show, she decided she wanted to end her career as a show dog. She had already a CAC in her pockets and I did not want her journey to end. I am not a show person, and I consider dog

shows boring, but I wanted to prove that a good looking working dog, from working (mountain hunting and mountain trials) bloodlines, could make it. So, we went together to take handling lessons with [Richard Hellman](#), a great handler and a great person. Briony seemed to enjoy the lessons and, in August 2015, she became a Show (full) Champion. I also think that having learnt to face the ring she somehow increased her self esteem.



Briony first dog show... RCAC

Field trials were next on my list, but there was a HUGE problem: I did not want to send her away for training, nor to hire a professional trainer as people normally do here. I wanted to train and handle Briony by myself, easier said than done in Italy where field trials are dominated by male professional handlers. But, thanks to an unexpected series of coincidences, in the summer of 2015 I ended up watching the Champion Stake for Pointers and Setters in Northern England and... [I had an awakening!](#) I saw some "ordinary people" handling their dogs to a very high standard and I saw very obedient setters! I was used to see very obedient Draughtaars (GWPs), but the average Italian Setter is usually quite a wild critter! I could not believe setters could be that obedient and, as naïve as it might sound, I was impressed.



Dorback Estate, Scotland,  
training with gamekeeper  
Brian

Briony herself was pretty wild at the time and her nickname was “Tigress” but, again, unexpectedly, a good mentor came to us. You can read more about Briony’s taming for field trials and about “White Feather” [clicking here](#) but, in a few words, I would describe her [training](#) a demanding task, it was equally rewarding though! It took a while to tame “Tigress”, but as soon as she decided to cooperate, she became impressively reliable and well behaved. This is how we ended up on the moor in the summer of 2016, and this is how my passion for British trials developed even further ([you can read more here](#)). [Our first experience with grouse](#) was not that bad: she always behaved and she kept improving but paid her inexperience with grouse during the English Trials and she paid my inexperience with trials in during the [Scottish – and the English- trials](#). She still needed some fine tunings but, overall, I could not complain. At the end of the circuit, I went home with no awards but determined to save money and to go back in 2017.



Haughton Hall, roading a hare :-)

But, when the time to go again on the moors was close to come, I had to withdraw all my entries as Briony anticipated her season. I wasn't happy, I was quite disappointed, no... honestly... I was quite upset, but there was not much else I could do. Some friends, however, tried to cheer me up advertising September trials on partridge. It is easier to get a run, they said, the atmosphere is very relaxed, they added and... we are going to run at Sandrigham Estate, on Queen Elizabeth II's grounds, they concluded. I must admit the last thing they mentioned was very tempting: it was thanks to such a good advertisement that I decided to bet on partridge trials in Norfolk. That was a brave bet, I shall admit, as I was perfectly aware they were going to be more difficult than grouse trials. While gathering information, I learn that: 1) during the first round, usually on stubble, dogs were going to be evaluated mainly for pace, style and ground treatment and that 2) "a few" hares were going to be present. Uh, I was forgetting the sugar beet! So well, while I was going to do my best to show up with a well behaved dog, going there to win was not surely written down in my agenda. I just wanted to be there, see people, get to know things better, learn more and feel part of a world I like.

Briony started the circuit well (we went to the 2<sup>nd</sup> round in 4 trials out of 9) and, even if, we could not find any birds on our paths, she was behaving well and respecting hare nicely (I do not have hare here, just rabbits and cats to train on). I was happy, we were learning more and enjoying the social side of September trials : I do not drink, but I was always at the pub! It was nice to see friends doing well and, especially after IGL Snettisham trials , when no awards were given, I was super happy to see Rhia (Tapper) and Sara (Chichester) receiving the Gun's Choice rosette. Trials proved to be as difficult as I expected: while there were plenty of hare,



feathered wildlife was scarce or, should I say, very smart and very professional at hiding. On Thursday, 7<sup>th</sup> of September, (Pointer Club trial at Sandrigham) I was number 13 AND the bye dog (quite a scary combination), but she did well in the first round, and well again in the second, so I knew I was going to get "something", but I did not know what.

When the secretary announced that I had won First Prize, I could not believe it and indeed, the Vaux Silver Tankard, fell from my hands a couple of times! It was like living in a Disney movie and this article should have explained you why. She is the first dog I have ever trained for trials, and I trained her all by myself. Yes, many wonderful people helped me through the journey (in Italy and in the UK, and I am grateful to them all), but I have always been the one in charge. I am just a normal person with limited training opportunities coupled with a high degree of stubbornness and self discipline which surely helped. This is why everything that could sound normal to someone else, is so special to me, and yes, winning an award at Sandrigham confirms that Briony is a posh dog!



Me, Alan Goodship (Queen Elizabeth's dog trainer) and the fallen trophy

Ps. I promise I will also write on other dogs – and not just on mine – as there will be more articles on September trials, (all [partridge trials](#) results can be downloaded here) in the

meantime, if you have a chance, take a look at the [research project](#) I am working on for my Veterinary Medicine dissertation.

Still curious about British trials? Check the section A Month on the Moor or [click here](#).

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## Trusting a Free Spirit

*This article stems from this morning walk. My walks in the countryside are always a good source of inspiration.*

Today I realized that, when you are “walking” an English Setter, all your senses have to be well alert in order to locate the dog who, as the breed demands, appears and disappears from your sight. You can hear him when is behind the trees, or coming out from a bush; you can see him when he is running free on a open ground. You can sometimes even smell him when he rolls into “something” and, no, you cannot taste nor touch him but, along the years, you have surely developed a sixth sense which tells you where the dog is, what is he doing and from which direction he is going to return.

While keeping all my antennae alert, I met a man with a golden retriever. She was meekly trotting by him carrying a huge log in her mouth. I am wondering whether I would be happy with such a dog or, if, on the contrary, I will be bored. As Briony was running at a full speed in a rice paddy, we met a runner trying to “Canicross” with a Cane Corso (a huge molosser) and another primitive dog, something bigger than a Shiba and smaller than an Akita. He was impressed with the recall, but most of all, he was astonished by her speed and deep castings. British pointing dogs, with the exception of Gordon Setters – sometimes, are the most extreme of the pointing dogs: they can



hardly be understood by the average pet dog owner. They often look puzzled when the setter (or pointer) owner refuses to let their dog free on a tiny patch of ground surrounded by roads, explaining it is too small, it would not be safe.

They cannot understand how small those places are: an unleashed German Shepherd or a Border Collie would always be alert, ready to obey an order; a Dobermann or a Rottweiler would always keep an eye on their owner, because they feel the need to protect them. With an English Setter, things are different: the best gift you can give to a working English Setter is freedom. Yes, they enjoy snoring on soft surfaces, they like good food but, if you want your Setter to be truly happy... Let him free! His cute face will become a cute happy face and he will start exploring. A free English Setter would not worry much about his owner. They perfectly know we can take care of ourselves when they are busy exploring the world, finding birds and so on... These guys watch Discovery Channel! The countryside has so much to offer! Giving freedom to an English Setter is like taking a pig to an "all you can eat" restaurant, or gifting a woman with somebody else credit card! So much excitement clashes with control!

A free ranging setter may pay more attention to you if you are carrying a shotgun: dogs actively used for rough shooting understand teamwork, and most of them are very happy to pick up and retrieve a fallen bird. This is how most of the Italian hunters "control" their setters. Things get more complicated when you do not carry any weapons: the setter (or the pointer) does not get any benefits from your presence and... This is the part I love the most! Because here relationship, training and MUTUAL trust enter the picture.

***Relationship:*** well... *Relationship, you need to have a relationship with your dog! No amount of training can make a dog can back to you if he does not want to. He shall trust you (mutual trust, see below) because he knows you are not going to affect his freedom, at least not that much. He will return*

*to you, of follow your directions, and then he will be free again.*

***Training:** the importance of training shall never be underestimated. Teaching a free spirited dog a reliable recall is not easy! But I am the living proof that the plain, basic, human being can do this.*

***Trust:** it is the key. It what allows you to let your dog free, being certain he will come back to you. You really have to trust your Setter: some people panic when they see how far and how fast these dogs can go. But you really love "something", especially something /somebody that thrives on freedom... let him free!*

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## **Between Dogs and Grouse (Sentieri di Caccia November 2016)**

### **Between Dogs and Grouse – Originally Published in Sentieri di Caccia – November 2016**

***Disclaimer:** This is the first of a series of articles I wrote for the Italian press. I wrote this article for Italian readers, this means that British people are not going to learn anything new from these pages and, whereas I did my best to be accurate, they may even find some inaccuracies. If so, please notify me.*

[I cannot tell when it all began](#). When I was a little child I used to refuse milk and kept begging for tea for tea to be put in my bottle, no wonder I could not sleep! At the age of four, I was given a Scottish kilt and a book on Queen Elizabeth, I still treasure both. At six, I began studying English and at 11 I asked for an English Setter. The setter came many years later, together with a master degree in British Literature. It was the Setter though, and not the books, that made me aware of the art of shooting over pointing dogs, of field trials and more. A mosaic tile, however, was still missing. I love the English Setter and I am sincerely happy that it is so popular in Italy (12.000 puppies were registered in 2015) but, at the same time, I have mixed feelings about how it is perceived, trained and bred by my fellow countrymen. The same happens when it comes to field trials. I have always felt there was something else, something hidden, something to be discovered. I was “feeling” rather than “thinking”, there was nothing rational about my perception. In July 2015, however, I had the opportunity to watch the Champion Stake and it gave me some little pieces of evidence that proved my emotional beliefs were right. I was not crazy, just a little odd, and there was a whole new world ready to be explored: British pointing dogs could be trained and used in a different way.

Once back home, I began training my dog according to what I saw. My training style was perceived by the Italians as “different” and more traditional, a very polite way to tell me it was outdated. The method I chose forced me to work hard but at a slow pace, I did not see any fruits until spring 2016. My original plan was very modest: I was going to use the British “enlightenment” to prepare Briony for Italian Field Trials, in the meantime I would have gone back to the UK to watch more trials and learn more. Things, however, took an unexpected twist which made me change my plans: in April the dog suddenly became very reliable and, one day, while I was driving back from the training grounds a light bulb went on: why not to go back with her and compete?



Briony, setter inglese di proprietà di Rosella Di Palma, in guidata durante il suo primo censimento a Muggleswick

**È** difficile dire quando tutto abbia avuto inizio. Ricordo solo che da bambina rifiutavo il latte e che il mio liberon era invece pieno di tè, forse per questo non dormivo mai. All'età di circa quattro anni mi hanno regalato un kilt e un libro sulla Regina Elisabetta, conservo ancora entrambi, e sei ho iniziato il mio primo corso d'inglese. A 11 anni volevo un setter inglese tutto per me e qualche anno dopo lo ho avuto, insieme a una laurea in lingua e letteratura inglese. Grazie al mio primo setter ho scoperto la caccia con il cane da ferma, la cinofilia venatoria e molto altro. Feci un pezzo del mosaico continuava a mancare. Adoro il setter inglese come cane da ferma e la sua popolarità in Italia mi rende felice, d'altra parte non condivido alcuni metodi di utilizzo nostrani e, alla stessa stregua, ho sentimenti misti nei confronti delle nostre manifestazioni cinofile. Da sempre avevo la sensazione che ci fosse dell'altro da scoprire. Nel luglio di 2015 ne ho avuto la conferma: sono riuscita ad assistere al Champion Stake inglese (la prova di eccellenza per setter e pointer) e mi si è aperto un mondo nuovo sull'utilizzo e sull'addestramento dei cani da ferma britannici. Una volta rientrata in Italia ho cominciato a lavorare il cane alla luce di quanto avevo visto lassù. Era, il mio, un tipo di addestramento diverso da quello che siamo abituati a vedere, più "funzionale" probabilmente e più lento nel mostrare i suoi frutti che, tuttavia, come ogni buon raccolto, hanno iniziato a spuntare in primavera (2016). In tutta franchezza il mio obiettivo era semplicemente quello di preparare il cane per le prove italiane e, nel frattempo, tornare in Inghilterra come semplice osservatore per continuare ad apprendere, ma le cose hanno poi preso una piega diversa. Dallo scorso aprile, Briany ha fatto grandi progressi e, un giorno, mentre rientravo dalla zona C mi si è accesa una lampadina: perché, anziché andare a vedere i cani altri impegnati in prova, non partecipare alle competizioni con la mia setter?

**La caccia con il cane da ferma: solo per pochi**

Per meglio comprendere le prove di lavoro britanniche è necessario avere qualche nozione sulla situazione famistica locale e sul tipo di lavoro che è normalmente richiesto ai cani da ferma. Mi limiterò a parlare di cani da ferma britannici (i quattro setter e i pointer) e di grouse. Alcune persone mi hanno chiesto informazioni sull'utilizzo dei continentali sulle grouse e se ci siano prove di lavoro su questi selvatici anche per loro. Si, esistono alcune prove di lavoro su grouse anche per i continentali, ma sono diverse da quelle per inglesi e vengono proposte in numero ridotto, nonché dopo il 12 agosto, giorno di apertura della caccia alla grouse. Quanto all'utilizzo dei continentali, dal vivo ho visto solo un danubiano allenarsi su un moor, per il resto solo fotografie e video ma, perdonatemi, l'opinione molto franca e poco diplomatica: trovo i cani da ferma continentali fuori luogo in questi contesti. Non metto in dubbio le loro capacità venatorie, anzi, ma non riesco ad accettarli in quel paesaggio e con quella famiglia, mi fanno lo stesso effetto che mi farebbe un setter inglese intento a riportare una volpe saltando recinzioni. In Gran Bretagna c'è un crescente interesse nei confronti dei cani da ferma continentali, che loro chiamano HPR (Hunt, Point & Retrieve), ma il ritengo meglio impiegabili sul fagiano o su altri selvatici. Devo poi dichiarare che la caccia con il cane da ferma, in Gran Bretagna, è praticata da pochissimi appassionati. Per gli italiani il cane da ferma è il cane da caccia per eccellenza, per noi è normale uscire di casa con cane e facile e andare a cercare un fagiano, una beccaccia o una liepre, per un inglese questa condotta è molto insolita. I britannici chiamano il nostro modo di andare a caccia rough shooting e sono pochissimi i cacciatori che lo praticano. Forse è tradizione o, forse, la loro legislazione venatoria non agevolava tale prassi: per accedere a un terreno di caccia occorre il permesso

del proprietario (che è titolare della selvaggina) e i luoghi in cui si trovano generalmente i selvatici sono riserve di caccia private, a cui a volte è possibile accedere a pagamento. Ho scritto "a volte" perché non tutte le riserve di caccia sono aperte al pubblico, in alcune cacciano solo i proprietari. L'accesso a una riserva, inoltre, non è legato semplicemente al denaro: la gestione e l'attività venatoria sono organizzate da ciascuna riserva in maniera piuttosto rigida, il che fa sì che possano decidere se ammettere, o meno, un certo tipo di cliente. Alcune riserve, per esempio, praticano solo lo shooting (caccia in battuta all'inglese) e non prevedono alcun tipo di caccia con il cane da ferma: ho avuto modo di allenarmi in Kent in una riserva dove un setter inglese non aveva mai corso, starnò e fagliani (i si cacciano solo in battuta). In altre riserve, soprattutto in Scozia, è prevista anche la caccia con il cane da ferma, ma i soggetti impiegati vengono procurati dalla riserva stessa, non è previsto che un cacciatore porti il suo cane. Non è impossibile in assoluto ma, fonte la mia esperienza, sono accettati solo eventuali cani consueti e ritenuti "sicuri". I cinofili italiani sono abituati ad andare a caccia all'estero con il proprio cane e in alcune nazioni vi sono riserve e strutture organizzate proprio per questo scopo; nel Regno Unito è diverso. Esiste il turismo venatorio, ma è mirato al cacciatore più che al cinofilo. Come deve essere un cane per poter cacciare in Gran Bretagna? Per i britannici il controllo sul cane è vitale. Il cane deve essere corretto al frullo, deve eseguire un terra in un seduto a comando, deve seguire le indicazioni del conduttore e deve rientrare quando chiamato. Vi sono terreni in cui la densità di selvatici è tale da rendere indispensabile un cane simile. Dove si cacciano le grouse ci sono spesso moltissimi conigli (Inghilterra) e lepri (Scozia), greggi di pecore (che il cane deve ignorare e può captare anche dall'altro... Le grouse

stesse più in Inghilterra che in Scozia) sono molto numerose, una covata può distribuirsi in pochi metri quadrati ed essere seguita da un'altra covata, vicinissima. Un cane non corretto al frullo e non perfettamente sotto controllo diventa ingestibile e può ostacolare il lavoro di tutela dei selvatici messo in atto dai guardiacaccia. Viste le condizioni faunistiche dei territori italiani, è difficilissimo preparare un cane come previsto dai cacciatori d'Ulter Manica. Io ho dedicato quasi un anno all'obbedienza ferrea, ci sono riuscito, ma è stato estremamente impegnativo.

**La grouse viene prima di tutto**

La differenza nei confronti dei cani è legata al grande rispetto per i selvatici. Il guardiacaccia ha il potere assoluto sul territorio e il suo primo pensiero è tutelare la selvaggina. Se parliamo di grouse, esse nascono e si riproducono in natura, non sono allevabili, il loro ciclo di vita è intimamente legato al clima e al territorio. Il lavoro del guardiacaccia comincia in primavera con i censimenti dei riproduttori, censimenti che possono essere ostacolati da difficili condizioni climatiche. È proprio il clima a essere la prima minaccia per le grouse: quest'anno, per esempio, ha fatto relativamente poco freddo in inverno, ma ci sono state nevicate primaverili e poi molta pioggia, eventi che in talune zone della Scozia hanno decimato il numero dei nuovi nati. Ogni moor è curato dal guardiacaccia (o meglio da uno staff di guardiacaccia) come un giardino: si effettua il controllo dei produttori, si organizza la presenza del bestiame, si pianifica la bruciatura degli appezzamenti di erica, il tutto per garantire all'amata grouse le migliori condizioni ambientali. Il tutto è curato nel dettaglio e spesso sono piccole astuzie a fare la differenza: una riserva che aveva avuto problemi di caccia heather



Dennis Longworth durante un censimento a Eggleston

**Only a few: shooting over pointing dogs**

To better understand British Field Trials, it is useful to know something about indigenous wildlife management and about how pointing dogs are worked. The information you are about to read relate only to grouse and British pointing breeds, things for HPRs (Hunt Point Retrieve/Continental Pointing Dogs) are slightly different. People asked me about HPRs and grouse: there are grouse trials for them as well, but they take place during the shooting season. The only HPR I saw working on a moor was a GWP (German Wirehaired Pointer): she was fine, but I cannot get used to the sight of a HPR running in the heather. I know I am not going to be politically correct here but... these dogs look out of place! I am sure they can work grouse properly, but they do not belong to this world. The sight of an English Setter jumping fences with a fox in his mouth would trigger in me the same feelings. In Britain the interest in HPRs is increasing, and I am sure they would do very well on pheasant and other game.

Shooting over pointing dog, however, is fairly uncommon. Italian hunters are crazy about pointing dogs: the average hunter here owns one or more pointing dogs and leaves the house alone in the morning, a dog and a shotgun are his only company. They hope to bag a pheasant, a woodcock or maybe a hare: British people hunting in this manner (they call this rough shooting) are fairly scarce. Why? I do not know, maybe it does not belong to their tradition and perhaps the legislation discourages this. In the UK, the game belongs to the landowners (in Italy wild animals are considered a public good – we have private estates but 90% of hunting/shooting takes place on “common ground”) and to hunt on these grounds you need the landowner permission. Furthermore, most of the places in which you can find birds suitable to pointing dogs are private estates. Some of these estates accept paying clients, but can be selective on which customers to allow on their grounds: money is important, but proper game and land management are even more important and are therefore strictly regulated. Most of the estates offer shooting days (with beaters, pickers up and shooters), but are not organized to offer shooting days over pointing dogs. Before coming back to Italy last summer, I stopped in Kent and through a friend, I had the opportunity to run Briony on grounds belonging to a local estate. Well, she was the first English Setter who had put her paws on these grounds, they only offer formally organized shooting days with spaniels and retrievers. Scotland is slightly different, as some estates organize grouse shooting over pointing dogs, but the dogs at work are selected by the estate and professionally handled: it is uncommon to see shooters bringing their own dogs. I am not stating it cannot be done but, from what I could gather, gamekeepers allow only “safe” (well trained and obedient) dogs on their grounds. Italian shooters like to go abroad for hunting holidays with their dogs, I think British hunting tourism focuses more on men than on dogs.

How should a pointing dog behave to please the average British gamekeeper? The Brits want their dogs to be under control. A



dog MUST be steady to flush, drop on command, obey orders and come back when recalled. These skills are vital if you run a dog on grounds rich in birds, rabbit, hare, sheep and maybe something else. Grouse are abundant, a whole covey can be scattered in a few square metres, followed closely by another one: a dog unsteady to flush, who likes chasing birds, would be a nightmare. Unfortunately, due to the lack of birds Italian dog lovers have to face, is very hard to train a dog to be biddable in these conditions. I eventually succeeded, but I spent one whole year working on obedience, it was incredibly demanding.

### Cani da caccia

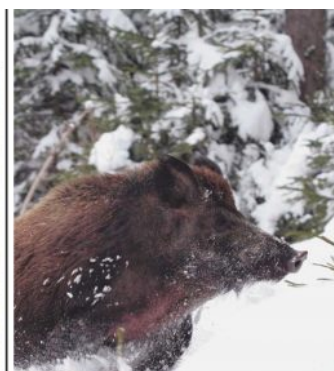


← ricinus - la stessa zecca che può trasmettere la malattia di Lyme - ha usato le pecore come raccogliatrici di zecche: in pratica venivano mandate in aree infestate, in modo tale che le zecche si attaccassero agli ovini e potessero poi essere uccise con dei trattamenti sugli animali. Il controllo delle zecche è importante, perché possono trasmettere patogeni letali per le grousse. In primavera, come già detto, vengono censiti i riproduttori e in estate si rifanno censimenti per avere chiaro il numero dei capi in vista della stagione venatoria. Per censire vengono normalmente utilizzati i cani da ferma, alcune riserve analizzano anche i segni di presenza degli animali, come fatte e altro. I cani impiegati nei censimenti sono soggetti "fidati", in mano a conduttori "fidati", ovvero persone che hanno il cane sotto controllo. Alcune aziende organizzano i censimenti in maniera molto formale e a volte, a fronte di una richiesta di impegno notevole, pagano i cacciatori che conducono i cani, riconoscendone la professionalità. In altre realtà, i censimenti

sono meno formali e vengono svolti su base volontaria: l'incaricato sa di dover controllare un dato territorio in un dato periodo, ma vi è più elasticità su tempi e modi. I cacciatori sono molto contenti di poter censire gli animali, anche senza retribuzione, poiché i censimenti consentono di addestrare ed allenare i cani. In alcuni casi al censimento è presente un guardiacaccia che aiuta a contare i capi individuati e segna su apposite mappe i punti in cui sono stati trovati. In altri contesti invece, il censimento è solo e ha la responsabilità di annotare tutto. In entrambi i casi tuttavia, i censimenti vengono presi molto sul serio: la persona a cui è affidato il compito può, a volte, portare con sé altri conduttori e altri cani, ma sotto la sua totale responsabilità. Ho avuto il piacere e l'onore di partecipare ad alcuni censimenti. La prima giocata si è svolta a Mugleswick, sotto la responsabilità di Steve Robinson che allena, a destra e conduce setter irlandesi. In mattinata e in presenza del guardiacaccia, →

1 Eggleston, Briony in ferma. Terry Harris controlla l'operato di cane e conduttrice

2 La grouse si riproduce solo in libertà e un piano di abbattimento "sbagliato" può compromettere più di una futura stagione di caccia



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Larger photo by Maria Jacques

## Grouse come first

Gamekeepers, those who rule on shooting grounds with absolute power, tend to be wary of dogs because... love their birds and want to protect them. Grouse are wild birds, they reproduce in wilderness and cannot be artificially reared. Their life cycle is intimately linked to climate and grounds. In spring the

gamekeepers are busy counting adults birds which are going to mate. Difficult weather conditions in the spring can hinder the counts and, most of all, decimate births. Winter 2015, for example, was fairly mild but spring 2016 brought snow and much rain: these conditions negatively affected the newborns. Each moor is being cared by a group of gamekeepers: they pay attention to pest management; organize sheep presence; plan heather burning and more. A newcomer might think that moors naturally look like the way they do they but, in reality, moors are not so different from gardens and their features are the results of proper care. Small details can make a difference: an estate that was infested by ticks (*Ixodes ricinus* ticks, those that carry Lyme Disease) minimized its problem through sheep. Sheep were sent grazing on the infested areas, they picked up the ticks which later died thank to the products applied on the sheep. Removing, or at least reducing tick presence, on the moor is important as these arthropods they can infect grouse with deadly diseases.

In the spring, as already mentioned, producer birds are counted and in the summer other counts are carried out to assess the number of young birds: estates need to know the number of birds to plan the shooting season. Pointing dogs are often used to count birds, some estates also take in account "presence signs" such as grouse faeces and so on. Only biddable dogs are used for counting, they are trustworthy dogs, handled by trustworthy handlers. Some counts are very formal and demanding, therefore the handlers get paid; other estates have a more laidback approach and accept volunteers: they are given specific area to work on, but the counting schedule is less tight and more flexible. Dog lovers are really happy to go counting as this allows them to train the dogs and let them gain more experience on grouse. Sometimes handlers work in team with gamekeepers who take note of the birds found, placing them on the estate map. Some other times the dog handler has to do everything by himself but, in both cases, grouse counting is taken extremely seriously. Dog handlers can sometimes take other people with them, but they



are deemed responsible for their friends (and their dogs!) behaviour. I am very happy to be able to write that Briony and I were allowed to go counting! It was an honour and a dream coming true. My first count took place at Muggleswick Estate, with Steve Robinson, who breeds and handles Irish Setters, supervising me. In the morning I followed him while he was handling his Irish Setters. Briony was kept on lead so that she could become familiar with grouse (she had never met any before) in a safe setting: as grouse always come first, we had to be sure she would not grab any young chicks. After hours of good behaviour, in the afternoon, she was allowed to work off lead cooperating with some new dogs. There were Steve Robinson Irish Setters, some Pointers owned by Terry Harris, Maria Jacques and Roy Heath; a Gordon Setter owned by Nicky Harris and, finally, a smart English Setter pup handled by John Naylor. I have to admit that these people were trusting my dog more than I was doing. It was nice feeling, they made me feel welcome and accepted. Briony did well, she was very gentle and careful with birds and thanks to this I was allowed to go counting again! On the following days, indeed, Terry Harris, a reputable Pointer and Gordon trainer, took us to Eggleston Estate and carefully monitored our work. There were his Pointers and his Gordons with us and sometimes some English Setters belonging to Dennis Longworth, Anne Maddison and John Naylor. Dennis Longworth, despite being "already" 83, is in wonderful shape and has a very sharp mind: he spent his life with pointing dogs and loves English Setters. It is a real pleasure to listen to his tales, opinions and advice. As said earlier, gamekeepers are really concerned about dogs behaviour during the counts and Terry Harris guaranteed for us: if a dog misbehaves during a count (or even during a trial) it could be banned forever from a specific ground! Things for us were going well and I was invited to go counting in Scotland too but, unfortunately, a kennel cough epidemic made this great opportunity vanish. Nevertheless, two gamekeepers, Brian at Dorback Estate and Craigh at Tollishill Estate kindly allowed me to train on their grounds sending me to the best "places".

Brian even spent a couple of hours with me in the rain enjoying working with Briony... she seemed to like him more than me!

#### Cani da caccia



Il cane da caccia è un cane che si occupa di portare il game, di indicare la posizione del game e di abbaiare per avvertire il cacciatore. Il cane da caccia è un cane che si occupa di portare il game, di indicare la posizione del game e di abbaiare per avvertire il cacciatore. Il cane da caccia è un cane che si occupa di portare il game, di indicare la posizione del game e di abbaiare per avvertire il cacciatore.

If you have read the whole article, it should be now very clear that grouse come first and that its preciousness makes gamekeepers wary about “unknown” dogs. Nowadays it is easy to travel to UK with your dog, all you need is the rabies vaccines and a de-worming treatment against echinococcus, any dogs can go to Britain but only a few, perfectly trained ones, can be allowed on a moor. Someone might be tempted to

go there and work the dog on grouse in disguise, without asking permissions. I would not do that, it would be dishonest, rude and you could be – rightly so – considered a poacher. Estates need grouse count to assess the quality of game management and decide how to organize the shooting season. Whereas shooting days might be booked in great advance (years!), the final decisions on the numbers of shooting days and on the number of birds that might be shot, will be made at the end of the counts. In 2015, some estates partly cancelled their season and I am not sure about what happened in 2016, I was told that some estates in the Scottish Highlands apparently had less birds than they were supposed to have. Grouse shooting is the result of careful planning and safeguarding the species is the priority. Mismanaging grouse can compromise both the bird and the estate survival. In Scotland and Northern England grouse are very important: they play a big role in local culture and economy. All the people involved in grouse management love this bird and the grouse plays a big role in rural economy. I think I love grouse too, and I know that what I am going to say cannot be considered “romantic” but grouse are money. Moors, as a natural

environment, can exist thanks to grouse and the same can be said about estates. Look at those barren landscapes covered with heather, you cannot grow any crops there. Think about these wide open spaces located in very rural areas of the country and imagine what could happen if there were no grouse. Grouse shooting brings money to these areas and creates jobs; grouse shooting finances moor management and supports biodiversity, these would not be possible without the money earned through grouse shooting. For more information check the website <http://www.giftofgrouse.com/>

The second article of this series, about British field trials, the Puppy Derby and the Champion Stake can be read [here](#).

Still curious about British trials? Check the section A Month on the Moor or [click here](#).

Slideshow below: