

# Reluctant star of



The recent hit TV series "Kill it, Cook it, Eat it" did much to enhance shooting's public profile. Ian Valentine talks to the star of the show, keeper Arthur Duffus

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**

**W**as I alone in dreading the transmission of *Kill it, Cook it, Eat it* on BBC Three this January? I feared the worst when the BBC advertised that a range of participants, including vegetarians, vegans and anti-fieldsports activists would be encouraged to shoot deer, duck, rabbits and grouse under the supervision of a Highland gamekeeper. Surely, it would be excruciating.

But I was wrong. Indeed, the series received a surge of favourable feedback from *ST* readers and shooting-related websites. There was relief that the BBC had given gameshooting unbiased coverage, highlighting the ethical practices and benefits of Highland gamekeeping. But most of all, there was praise for Arthur Duffus, headkeeper of Balavil estate in the hills above Kingussie in Strathspey, who gave a star turn as the professional instructor. Though some participants could not bring themselves to pull the trigger, others were liberated to do so, following Arthur's patient tuition and reasoned defence of gameshooting.

Arthur has been keeping for 31 years, with most of them spent at Balavil estate. Until this year, his distinctive dagger sideburns were known only to his friends and the regular clients who stalk the deer, shoot the grouse and fish the salmon of Balavil. But during the first week of January, the Aberdonian's face was broadcast to a wider audience.



I met him in late January after the dust had settled. The modest hind cull was completed and the hills were empty of sportsmen. On our way on to the hill, we passed some of the big stags that come down to feed near the house. It is a time of year that Arthur enjoys immensely as it brings the challenge of open hill fox shooting, tracking the predators over the snow — occasionally on cross-country skis.

Vermin control was one part of the keeper's job that the show did not examine, focusing instead on the harvesting of game for the table. "There was no doubt that the whole project was a gamble," estate owner Allan Macpherson-Fletcher told me at Balavil House, where his family have lived since 1790. "We knew that we would have

▲ Retiring by nature, Arthur Duffus went in front of the cameras for the sake of his sport  
◀ Arthur with presenter Julia Bradbury, who said the keeper won over all the participants

no control over the editing process, so there was always the risk that we would be displayed by the BBC as a bunch of murdering toffs. But my attitude is that you are as well to try talking to people and entering into reasoned debate rather than putting up barriers. We had an opportunity to demonstrate the reality of gameshooting. By and large, the gamble paid off. The participant Francesca, who said we would be better off buying multi-vitamins from the shops rather than killing animals, probably did more for the sport in five minutes than any of us ever could." ▶



**Estate owner Allan Macpherson-Fletcher gives a safety briefing to the show's participants**



◀ Balavil was the site of several scenes in the hit BBC series *Monarch of the Glen*, which was filmed in the area. “The big difference, though, was that on *Monarch of the Glen* there was one camera from one angle and if it went wrong, they would re-shoot it,” Allan said. “We had seven cameras and each camera had a big team behind it, so at one point there were about 70 people out on the moor. It was frankly amazing that, with that circus, we managed to shoot three grouse.”

Safety was one element where the estate retained absolute control. They could have pulled the plug at any moment if they deemed the situation dangerous. For that reason alone, pricked duck on the evening flight were left until the next morning, an anomaly that was identified by *ST* readers (*Letters*, 15 January). “It is our policy to pick any wounded game as quickly as possible,” said Allan. “But with so many novice Guns, we decided the risk was too great to set out pickers-up in that light. It was unfortunate, but we did find all the birds the next morning.”

Arthur took me to where one participant, Claudia, a one-time meat-eater who turned vegetarian on ethical grounds, stalked the stag on the opening show. It had been a foul day, with the wind forcing the whole crew to approach the deer from a difficult angle that required a two-hour detour. The decision to choose her over some of the male participants proved wise. “It was a difficult stalk by anyone’s standards,” said Arthur. “Some of the boys were better marksmen than her, including one who was an excellent Shot, but he wouldn’t keep his finger from the trigger. He could have been dangerous on the hill. Claudia was nervous, but I could tell on the range that she would react well to instruction and she made a brilliant job of it.”

“We were lucky to get that stag when we did,” Arthur continued. “It was a long stalk in the first place and then we had to run forward because

another group of stags had winded us. Poor Claudia was absolutely frozen by the time we had finished the post-stalk filming, so we had to get her off the hill as quickly as possible.” After thawing out, she got involved in the skinning, butchering and cooking of her first kill; and then enjoyed the pan-fried fillet steak at dinner.

The end may have justified the means, as the series gave a fair account of Highland shooting, but for Arthur it was a stressful experience. “Looking back, I am glad to have had the opportunity to show newcomers the way of life that I love,” he said, “but I had no idea how they were going to portray us. And with that many people about, I was on edge about safety.”

Arthur is certainly no *Big Brother* wannabe, craving the camera. He was a reluctant TV star and initially against the project. During the filming, he was allowed only one take to put his point across and no time to prepare his lines. In the three months before the series was broadcast, he spent hours running through the comments he had made, wondering how they might be twisted.

His first viewing of the programmes was at the same time as the rest of the country, but he was pleasantly surprised. The reaction from friends and family has been heartening. “I think the programmes comprised only about 20 per cent of the total filming, but it was a fair representation of what happened,” he said. “There were no nasty surprises. Looking back, I found it quite easy to be myself on the camera, because this is what I do on a daily basis. I hope it was educational, showing that everything we do out on the hill is for the greater good of the wildlife that lives there. If gamekeeping ever finished as a profession it would be incredibly sad, because it has given me so much pleasure. I have two sons who are keepers, but whether they will have the same career, I can’t be sure.”

▲ **Arthur enjoyed the opportunity to introduce newcomers to the sport and way of life he loves**

Arthur built a bond with the BBC production team, including the presenter Julia Bradbury. “Whatever your disposition on fieldsports you could not fail to be impressed by Arthur’s professionalism,” said Julia. “He was so engaging on the programme because he has time for everyone and an understanding of your point of view, whether or not he agrees with it. I saw him draw in vegetarians, animal rights activists and vegans with his patience and knowledge.”

Arthur found that other members of the film crew were also very professional, if a little scruffy. “They were a brilliant bunch, but during the week I noticed that none of them was shaving,” said Arthur. “I wrote it off as a media thing, until the night before the final shoot when we had a bit of a party. All of them came down wearing sideburns like mine. I threatened to shave my own off in retaliation, but with one day still left to shoot, the producer begged me not to.”

The programmes highlighted the preconceptions people have about shooting, but also how those prejudices can evaporate with the right practical guidance. They demonstrated the challenges that shooting faces and how they can be surmounted. Given that Arthur and his colleagues at Balavil had no media training or editorial control, it is all the more impressive that they were represented so honestly by the BBC. Let’s hope it’s not the last time. ■

*For more information about sporting opportunities at Balavil estate, visit [www.balavil-estate.com](http://www.balavil-estate.com). For more on the BBC Three series Kill it, Cook it, Eat it, visit [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006ywpr](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006ywpr).*

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