



ADVENTURES ON RABBIT ISLAND

In the first of a three-part series, Ed Cook travels from his Hampshire home to an Inner Hebridean island on a mission to eradicate its 12,000 rabbits

Hampshire is my home county, it's where I grew up and where I got involved with country pursuits. It is also where I learned my trade as a rabbit catcher. While most of my work is here, I do get to travel a lot across the UK in pursuit of rabbits and I've been lucky enough to see some truly amazing places and catch rabbits where I never thought I'd have chance to visit, let alone get paid to be there.

My business has grown since 2000, when I started as a full-time rabbit catcher, and while I have worked hard to get the business to where it is today, I am fully aware that it is only as good as the people I work with. Thankfully, I have the best team that I could wish for. Between us, we work on more than 40,000 acres over the year, which is no easy task. I like a challenge, however, and I am always keen to do jobs that perhaps could be classed as awkward or impossible. »



Photograph: DAVID KJAER AND ED COOK

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The left side of the fence, where the drop boxes were deployed, shows evidence of heavy grazing



Rabbit island

There's been a rabbit job that I've been after for some years, one that perhaps you could call the "Mecca of rabbiting", a remote island location in the Inner Hebrides so infested that it was eroding due to the sheer amount of damage they were causing. The problem got so bad that the owners had to do something to stop them, so we were asked to provide a quote.

After receiving the request, and having an excited conversation with my colleagues about the opportunity to work on the job we had wanted for so many years, it wasn't long before we were on site.

It was soon apparent the area was infested to a degree I'd seen before in areas, but not consistently over the whole island. Wherever you looked there were holes, rabbits and damage. We spent some time considering what would work and what might affect the outcome. We eventually devised a plan and worked on the various logistical issues. The quote was sent off and we waited for a response with fingers crossed.

Some time passed and I had almost accepted that someone else had got the job when an email came from the owners that ended with, "We look forward to working with you." To say I was excited would have been an understatement, and I soon

The 'Mecca of rabbiting', a remote island location so infested that it was eroding due to the sheer amount of damage they were causing



This remote island was a haven to a booming bunny population



Neil Hampton finds a rabbit in a drop box, one of the tools used on the job



Within the first afternoon on site, the dogs had caught 76 rabbits



Ed with a trailer full of his quarry. At the end of just one week they had culled 1,396 rabbits

phoned the lads to let them know we had the job. There was now a lot of "behind the scenes" preparation to do while carrying on with our normal workload. We eventually solved the knock-on problems of dealing with such large number, such as rabbit sales, ammunition, firearms, what dogs were needed or able to come along, as well as a few extra bits of kit. This meant I was a tad stressed, but we were all buzzing from the excitement of what was to follow. It wasn't long before my "merry men" and I were at the job and raring to go.

Bunnies in the bag

On arriving at the island, before we even got our luggage and equipment unpacked and in place for the weeks of hard work ahead, the dogs were soon appearing with rabbits. Within the first afternoon on site the dogs had caught 76 of them, while we were sleep-deprived with just our adrenaline keeping us going. However, we all knew from the start that we had targets to meet and nothing was going to be easy. We had fencing to repair to optimise the effectiveness of existing drop boxes, along with adding new netting, oh yeah and kill several thousand rabbits!

The first day was a bit of a warm up really and to exercise the dogs while getting organised for >>>

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the work ahead. By the end of the first day we had our equipment stored ready for action, and the dogs had a good night's sleep, as did we.

The weather was good to us and we soon went our separate ways as each person went about their particular tasks. Neil and David left at first light with a rifle to set drop boxes, repair fencing and shoot any rabbits in the hills. Meanwhile, Craig, Vince and I set snares, and my brother Nathan headed out with another rifle. There was no place for half measures, everything had to be carried out effectively and bring big bags. We managed to put a few hundred wires down, which over the coming week produced

Above: Ed's brother Nathan on patrol

Below: Tools of the trade included .22 CZ rifles, a .17 Anschutz, a single shot silenced .410 Hushpower Baikal and a pair of .410 Hushpower Mossberg pump action shotguns



really good results. Rifle shooting is Nath's "thing," so needless to say his passion showed through his results. David and Neil did very well with drop boxes over the week and it was almost shocking how the numbers caught didn't really drop off until the end of the week.

During daylight hours the dogs marked rabbits in every place imaginable. At night, lamping was providing us with big bags and strangely we often did better with lurchers on the lamp than we did with rifles in the first week. Most places were inaccessible to ATVs or 4x4s and the few places that we could get to were so waterlogged that the vehicles would have caused damage to such areas, so almost everything had to be carried out on foot for some time.

The end tally for week one was 1,396 rabbits, which we all considered a success, and they were taken away to a game dealer. We were then wondering, of course, what the next week would bring, if we could better the number, would the weather beat us and more importantly, what would we eat, as I'd miscalculated the amount of food for island life. Could anyone face yet another tin of corned beef? **SG**

Next month

In his second instalment, Ed will reveal exactly how he caught so many rabbits and what kind of conditions his team faced on the island.