



Would you cook a fox?



Sporting Rifle's Simon Barr joins game chef Mark Gilchrist as he selects ingredients for his latest menu on a fruit farm in west Kent

Without question, I have two main passions in life – and as chaps tend to do I am constantly trying to order them – shooting or food, food or shooting? Will I ever be able to settle this internal dilemma? This is a question that specialist game chef Mark Gilchrist has used to his professional advantage by shooting almost all of the meat that is used by his unique catering business Game for Everything.

Mark invited me to join him for an evening's shooting in June on a fruit farm in west Kent.

The farm comprises of blackcurrant and pear orchards which are a haven for rabbits, in particular the blackcurrant bushes as they provide good low level foliage, food and cover. "At this time of year the farm is awash with young and inexperienced kits which in turn provide irresistible bait for the younger foxes," Mark explained to me as we were pacing out a zeroing target. Mark has an arrangement with this farm that he will manage all vermin and deer in exchange for the carcasses that will then be reborn on the Game for Everything menu.

Mark has shot game since he was seven

years old. He shoots rabbits and pigeons at least once a week and is a member of the Woodcock Club – in fact he was the first ever to qualify for this club using a 3-shot repeater (with a pigeon on the third shot which raised a few eyebrows). He stalks and manages some of the most productive fallow ground in Sussex and is a hardy and committed wildfowler. Other than myself, I know few others who love shooting quite as much as Mark does.

Mark learnt his culinary skills working at his mother's restaurant in the Alps for a couple of years before he launched his own business in 2005.



Inexperienced youngsters come readily to the call

Mark has combined his love of food and shooting to form his company Game for Everything



“I had been wondering all evening – I had to ask if he’d ever cooked a fox”

Mark was able to zero his Pulsar Digisight night vision scope during daylight hours without the fear of damaging it

He learned the art of butchery in a local abattoir and further to winning the Institute of Directors 'Young Entrepreneur of the Year' award in 2007, was contacted by a retired baker who having seen Mark's press coverage was keen to teach him to make and bake bread. Mark has featured on numerous television and radio programmes including Gordon Ramsay's F-Word and most recently BBC's The One Show. He spends most weekends during the summer at game fairs demonstrating game cookery techniques and is often asked by organisations such as the Countryside Alliance to cater for their large and prestigious dinners. When not in the kitchen you will find Mark out shooting, whatever the weather, to replenish his needy larder.

The evening we went shooting, Mark had just purchased the new Pulsar N550 Digisight from Chris Potter Country Sports in Tunbridge

Wells, Kent. "I am looking forward to seeing how much more effective this makes me," Mark told me. Mark had not yet zeroed his Sako .22LR Finfire with the Digisight, but as we finished setting up the target he told me, "The sensible thing about this night vision scope is that it can be turned on and used during the day without the fear of breaking it or significantly diminishing its lifespan." Mark got into the passenger seat of my Hi-Lux and rested the rifle on his rock steady 'Dog-Gone-Good' purpose-made window sand bag, which I was very impressed by.

It took Mark all of five minutes and three groups of three rounds to be totally happy with his zero. "That was as easy as any other scope I have ever zeroed. I'd like to say that it was literally out of the box, but I had to go to Chris Potters today to buy a Weaver rail with dove tail adaptor as the Digisight comes complete with Weaver mounts."

When inspecting the Digisight, I happened also to note that the scope has moulded leg mounts for a short action rifle, so if you were to fit this on a .270 or .30-06 for boar shooting you would need to get a gunsmith to fit a picatinny rail over the ejection port enabling you to mount it. I spoke to Ashley Beard at Thomas Jacks Limited, which is the exclusive UK distributor for the Pulsar Digisight, about this point and he told me, "Pulsar is looking into other suitable mounts for this unit but nothing is currently available for long-action rifles."

That evening, Mark's larder was bereft of bunnies having recently catered 200 individual rabbit pies at a dinner, so our evening had a dual purpose; restock the larder and shoot any foxes in line with the landowner's wishes. Mark's rifle of choice for foxes is an unmoderated 25-year-old Parker Hale .22-250 given to him by his father more than ten years ago. "This is



Mark feels his unmoderated hand-me-down .22-250 rifle is the perfect calibre for his foxing



a fantastic foxing calibre in my opinion," said Mark as he loaded the magazine with Norma 50-grain rounds with Hornady V-MAX Ballistic tips. "I can aim bang on target all the way out to 200 metres and further if I needed to, but 200 metres is as far as I ever like to shoot a fox. The V-MAX Ballistic tips are completely instant and have never let me down," said Mark as we prepared to head off.

Gauging the wind direction or lack thereof, Mark hatched a plan that was to get within calling distance of a known earth and see if he could tempt any youngsters that may be close by to boldly venture down one of the blackcurrant rows where we would be sat up.

It was a truly stunning early summer's evening, we were in that magic hour of light when everything has a luscious orangey glow. As we drove towards the fox's earth, Mark took us on a route that ran south to north giving us the setting sun as dazzling cover behind us in the west. The orchards fell away perpendicular to the car lining Mark up perfectly on his window sandbag as he scoured each row.

It was not long before Mark quietly asked me to stop so he could introduce a rabbit to a 40-grain subsonic Winchester hollow point bullet. "You can alter the contrast on this Digisight making it perfect for this low light condition before the sun has set. You also have a choice of six reticules that you can change from black to white depending on the predominant background colour."

Mark bagged another 12 larder-worthy coney before we stopped to get out and stalk into position near the foxes earth. As we moved quietly through the pear orchard, I noticed that Mark had a BSA ND3 long distance laser designator mounted on his ancient scope that had the maker's stamp worn away. I asked him what he thought of it and he told me, "I have been trialing it for a few weeks on my foxing rifle. I like it and have shot a few so far but it is not worth £325 especially as you can now buy a Digisight for £1,000 which is far superior and has made the laser designator very expensive for what it does. You fix the laser onto your scope and when you look through the whole sight picture is illuminated green. It is basically a laser with an aperture that you can widen to the size of your scope's field of view," Mark whispered to me. "It is not really that different from lamping and is still visible to the animals, it is just more precise and easier to use alone. It is certainly not night vision and if you can afford it, the Digisight is the right choice."

As we got settled into our final position, Mark showed me how he calls for foxes. He uses quite a traditional method with a high



“Mark showed me how to he calls for foxes. He uses quite a traditional method with a high pitch kissing noise into a cupped hand that helps to throw the sound. After only a few minutes Mark was rewarded with an inquisitive youngster coming at some pace”

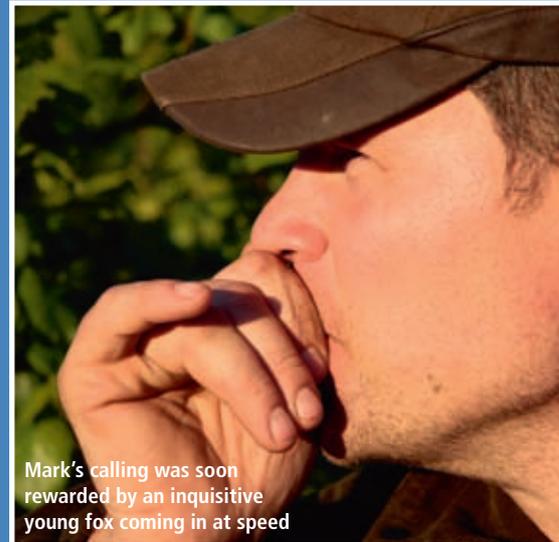
pitch kissing noise onto a cupped hand that helps to throw the sound. After only a few minutes Mark was rewarded with an inquisitive youngster coming at some pace down a row towards us to investigate the distress sound. Mark stopped squeaking when the fox was about 90 metres away which almost instantaneously stopped it in its tracks; a split second later a deafening unmoderated .22-250 crack sounded out across the orchard. I hadn't fired an unmoderated rifle for a while and that reminded me why not. The shot was clean and true; the young vixen had been disposed of instantly, such is the signature way with a V-Max ballistic tip.

Mark collected the carcase so it could be disposed of sensitively and out of sight of the orchard. I had been wondering all evening – I had to ask if he had ever cooked a fox. Now, Mark has a rather direct no nonsense style and made it very clear to me that people often ask the very same question which he finds rather belittling of game cookery. With a wry smile he answered, “Why would I want to cook a fox when I have a plentiful supply of pigeon,

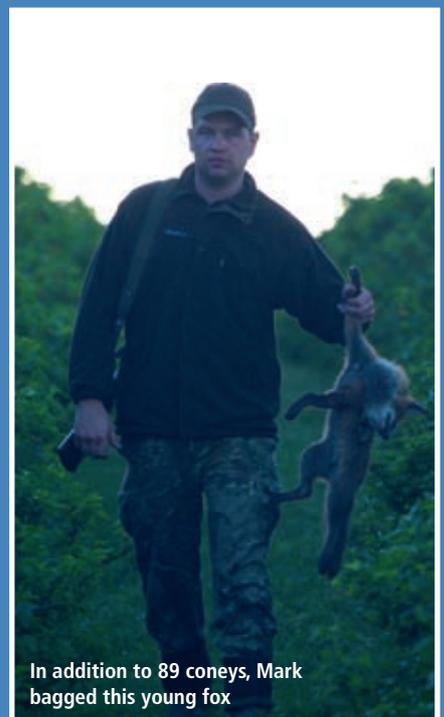
venison and rabbit? People try to sensationalise what I am doing, but yes of course I have done it before. You need to soak them in salt water for at least four days and then slowly cook it, but even then it is no roe haunch so what's the point?” Mark quipped as he discarded the carcase in a deep bramble thicket.

We had another couple of hours shooting after the sun had set, Mark managed to chalk up 89 rabbits for the larder which we both agreed was a successful first outing for him and his new Digisight. He told me he had lamped the farm in similar conditions the week before and shot only 45 rabbits, so the Digisight had already started paying for its keep.

As I was leaving, Mark kindly presented me with two of his famous handmade pies. Filled with thick, rich gravy and delicious large chunks of wild game meat, it had been tempting me from the passenger seat all the way home. I finally buckled to its charms when I got in. Whilst tucking into this pie and pondering the events of a fine evening's shooting, yet again I had to ask the question of myself, which is better: shooting or food? ■



Mark's calling was soon rewarded by an inquisitive young fox coming in at speed



In addition to 89 coneys, Mark bagged this young fox

EQUIPMENT USED BY MARK GILCHRIST						
Product	Manufacturer	Bought from	Price	Contact	Marks	Comments
.22LR Finnfire Bolt action rifle	Sako	Guntrader	£550	www.guntrader.co.uk	★★★★★	This excellent rifle has been superseded by Sako's new QUAD. Many purists say this is one of Sako's finest. Only available second-hand at a good gun shop or www.guntrader.co.uk.
Large window sand bag	Dog-Gone-Good	Chris Potter Country Sports	£50	www.gun.co.uk	★★★★★	Turn your car window into a bench rest, literally. Perfect for zeroing, rabbits and foxes.
ND-3 Laser Designator	BSA	Chris Potter Country Sports	£325	www.gun.co.uk	★★	A cheaper alternative to night vision but has its limitations.
Pulsar N550 Digisight	Pulsar	Thomas Jacks Ltd	£1,100	www.gun.co.uk	★★★★★	At last, an affordable good quality daylight friendly night vision with plenty of extras.
.22-250 bolt-action rifle	Parker Hale	Guntrader	£250-£300	www.guntrader.co.uk	★★★	Mark's favourite ever hand-me-down. If you want one of these it's a trawl through the gunshops or www.guntrader.co.uk.
Taiga Fleece	Paramo	Paramo Covent Garden	£138	www.paramo.co.uk	★★★★★	Warm, silent and extremely durable, perfect for an evening's shooting.

★★★★★ = Excellent, ★★★★ = Very Good, ★★★ = Good, ★★ = Adequate for purpose, ★ = Poor