

A HUNT OF TWO HALVES

Rich Saunders adopts a two-pronged attack to deal with problematic squirrels and rabbits.

One of my largest permissions is also one of the most demanding. It started out as an opportunity to hunt a few rabbits and pigeons for the table, but somehow turned into an almost full-time pest control obligation. The farmer won't mind me saying he's a shrewd old devil. He knows the value of his land, or more specifically, the pests on it, to someone like me and has no concerns about assigning whatever pest-control duties come up.

Right now, there's an issue with squirrels

breaking into a couple of warehouses that are let to a company that distributes bulbs and seeds to the garden industry. It's a contract the farmer only picked up last year, and when boxes of stock were damaged, his customer made it very clear that unless the vermin issue was addressed, he'd lose the business. At first, rats were thought to be the culprits but it turned out the be squirrels. So, I got the job of clearing them out from a

nearby copse.

I've shot a couple of dozen over the last few months, and thankfully, the problem seems to have been resolved, but squirrels are resilient, so I fill up a feeder with peanuts every few weeks to check on the population and it's become another item on my list of unpaid pest-control responsibilities.

POPULATION EXPLOSION

Just recently, that list got a little longer. I've shot a few rabbits on the farm, but the



A tree serves as a backdrop to mask Rich's silhouette as he awaits the squirrels' arrival.

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Rich's squirrel stake-out was based around a peanut-loaded feeding station.

population has never been that big so I, and more importantly, the farmer, have been happy to leave them be. However, the numbers have exploded this year – I guess they must have been breeding like rabbits – and their digging has started undermining cattle fences. The farm is close to a busy road and the thought of cows escaping on to it doesn't bear thinking about.

The rapidly diminishing level of peanuts

suggested it was time to crack down on the squirrels again. However, an insistent farmer combined with other commitments meant I'd have to spend a couple of hours targeting grey squirrels before concentrating on the rabbits when it got dark.

I'm fortunate to have a firearm certificate, and most of my rabbit shooting uses either a .30 calibre FX Impact MKII, a .22 AGT Vixen or a .22 Daystate Wolverine R. The extra

power means I can push the range out a little further and the flatter trajectory is more forgiving when it comes to judging distances in the dark. However, I've recently got my hands on a 12 ft.lbs., .22 Brocock BRK Ghost Carbine and was desperate to use it. So rather than take two rifles and have to leave an FAC firearm in the truck at some point, I decided to use the Ghost for both squirrels and rabbits. I've paired it with an

Hard-hitting .22 Hades was Rich's ammo of choice for his double pest-control assignment.

With a silencer fitted to its carbon shroud, the BRK Ghost enabled a whisper-quiet ambush.



The sidelever Ghost's 300cc air bottle and Huma regulator meant Rich wasn't going to run out of shots.





With the Ghost safely harnessed in Ridgeline's 25L Day Hunter Backpack, Rich was able to keep his hands free for other tasks.

MTC Cobra F1 4-16 x 50 scope and to cope with the fact that I'd also have to shoot in the dark, I took a Pard NV007 with me, which I could attach to the back of the Cobra F1 and turn it into an infrared night-vision scope.

TREE COVER

I arrived at the farm at around 1pm and set off on the 20-minute walk to the squirrel feeder. When I arrived, I was elated and then immediately dismayed at the sight of two squirrels dashing away from it. I settled behind my trigger sticks at the base of a tree, which I hoped would give me enough cover for the next few hours and within 20 minutes, the first squirrel appeared. It made

its way to the feeder, selected a peanut and settled down to eat it. I eased the safety catch off the Ghost and lined it up. At a distance of just over 20 metres, the shot caught the furry pest between the eyes as it looked straight at me. It fell backwards against the feeder then onto the ground.

I re-cocked the rifle and as I looked through the scope to confirm a clean kill, another squirrel appeared in the scope's window as it went to sniff its companion.

The squirrel was clearly agitated, flicking its tail, so I held fire and before long it decided it liked peanuts more than its dead friend and dashed up the tree. After only a few feet, it heard or sensed something it didn't like and spun around to face back down the tree – to hear, see or smell whatever had made it uncomfortable – presenting itself as a perfect target, and the BRK Ghost did its thing once more.

STATIC AMBUSH

Over the next couple of hours, I was able to claim another four squirrels. Six was far more than I was expecting, especially in such a short session, so I made a mental note to come back before too long. As it was, the light was starting to fade, and I wanted to get into position before the rabbits came out, so I put the squirrels in my backpack, attached the Pard NV007 to the Cobra F1 – a process that takes just a second or two – and made sure everything lined up to give a clear picture.

A short while later, I entered the corner of the field where I knew the rabbits were most likely to be. I planned to sit in ambush rather than walk about because not only was there a full, bright moon, but the wind had died

The first half of Rich's outing concluded with a decent tally of troublesome grey squirrels.





Rich prepares for the after-dark stage of his session by attaching the collar of the Pard NV007 to his scope and then coupling up the IR units bayonetted attachment.



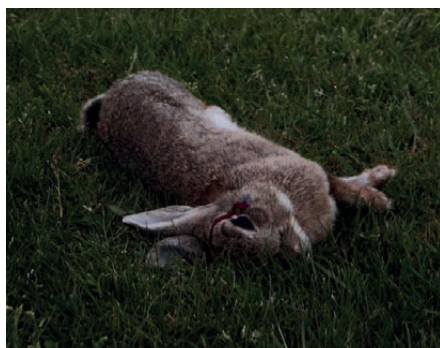
away, too, and wouldn't cover any noise I made. Being static also meant that I could be more confident of the distances I'd be shooting over – hunting with a 12 ft.lbs. .22 rifle, I set myself a limit of 30 metres. Fortunately, there was just enough light left for my rangefinder, and I quickly mapped out the distance to some prominent features.

Once again, sitting on the ground, I used my thermal spotter periodically, to scan for rabbits, and darkness was closing in when I saw the first one. A tree stump marked my 30-metre limit, and it was well beyond that.

CLEAN KILL

Half an hour later, I put the thermal to my eye once again, as I had done scores of times, but on this occasion, I was rewarded by the ghostly white image of a rabbit sitting conveniently 30 metres away. I don't know how long it had been there, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. I got

Rich's set-up enabled him to pick off rabbits with pinpoint precision.



A thermal spotter gives Rich an edge when scanning the gloom for his quarry.

the sense the rabbit was going to move off at any second. Anxious to not miss the opportunity, I put the thermal spotter down and raised the BRK Ghost to my shoulder, moving as quickly as I dared.

I pushed the button on the Pard NV007 to wake it up from standby and after a few seconds, when I thought I'd missed my chance, I was able to locate the rabbit. I

Fortunately, the mystery was soon solved as the white shape moved through the undergrowth, revealing itself to be a rabbit. It was a little beyond my maximum range, but luckily, it made its way toward me and when it eventually emerged into the open field, it was a little closer than the one I'd already shot, so I estimated the distance to be about 25 metres.

"I used my thermal spotter periodically, to scan for rabbits, and darkness was closing in"

placed the reticle just behind its eye and pushing the safety catch off, took one final breath, held it and then squeezed the trigger. The pellet hit with a hollow 'thwok' and the rabbit rolled over on to its side, its stretched out legs and splayed toes telling me that the kill had been a clean one.

HEAT SOURCE

I left the rabbit where it lay and recycled the BRK Ghost's sidelever before reapplying the safety catch and settling back to resume my vigil. I picked up the thermal to double check that the dead rabbit wasn't moving, and thought I could see the hint of a white heat signature in the hedge line. It had to be another animal – if not a rabbit then a hedgehog, rat or mouse.

I looked through the Pard NV007, but the undergrowth was too thick. Over the next 15 minutes, I checked on the heat source through the thermal, convincing myself that it was definitely a rabbit, then dismissing it as something else.

Once again, I located the rabbit in the Cobra F1 / Pard NV007 and the BRK Ghost sent another pellet zipping across the corner of the field to knock the rabbit over cleanly.

I sat in the field for another hour and although I could see several rabbits at distance – locations mentally noted – no more came close enough to me and the BRK Ghost. ■

RICH'S KIT

GUN: Brocock BRK Ghost .177
brocock.co.uk

OPTIC: MTC Cobra F1 4-16x50
mtcoptics.com

MOUNTS: Sportsmatch two-piece
sportsmatch-uk.com

NIGHT VISION: Pard NV007
sportsmanguncentre.co.uk

AMMO: JSB Hades .22
schulzdiabolo.cz