

STICKS APPEAL

What does your shooting stick mean to you, and does it matter what it's made of or where it's come from? **Chris Warren** shares his thoughts.

Last January, whilst out and about on our little shoot here in Hampshire, I slipped over. It wasn't especially dramatic. One moment I was edging along a particularly steep section of one of our hangers and then I wasn't; I was sliding rapidly downhill through the leaf litter. After a rather frantic couple of seconds I managed to catch hold of a piece of elder, which as usual in this situation snapped off but then a rather more substantial growth of hazel arrested my progress. I lay for a few moments running through a checklist of possible injuries but came to the conclusion the only things damaged were my dignity and a bit of bruising to my ego, but as there had been no one to witness my fall from grace, all was well.

What would have saved me was that countryman or woman's friend and beater's tool – the stick. Ironically enough, what had brought me to this hillside on that rather dank and chilly day was the search for a particularly straight section of holly that I had noticed when beating on our last shoot. Because I was laden down with a saw, secateurs and gloves, I had left my walking stick at home. More fool me.

I am guessing the first tool was a stone but the second must have

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS WARREN

been a stick, and anything with a handle in my view probably started life as a stick. Isn't a shotgun just a modified stick? Possibly not, but

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what is undeniable is that a stick-less beating line would not be very effective. Apart from the tapping and bashing aspects, on the shoots that I beat it is doubtful if a beater could get to the end of a drive without a trusty stick.

DO IT YOURSELF

Every year, in the winter months while the sap is not rising, I like to go out and cut three or four stems that have walking stick potential. These then go into storage in a shed for a year or two before I use them. Hazel is the easiest to find but holly is my favourite. Hazel tends to grow straight and with little taper and those are the

reasons that most commercially made sticks have hazel shanks. Holly, on the other hand, needs a little more endeavour to find suitable pieces but the effort is worth it. The bark is a streaky mottled brown and when stripped you are rewarded with a beautifully smooth, ivory-coloured wood. And it is a timber that is tough and seems to get tougher.

A stick is a very personal thing. It has to have the correct thickness, the right length, the right heft – which is why it's a good reason to choose and cut the wood yourself. And as hobbies go you don't need a lot of kit. You need a saw, of course, but that's about it as far as harvesting the raw material is concerned, though gloves and loppers make the job easier and more comfortable. Once seasoned, a saw comes in handy again to remove the twigs, a rasp or two will help you smooth off any knots, and sandpaper is useful for finishing. And you'll need a good sharp knife if you want to remove the bark. Should you wish to carve animal heads, or fit antler and horn handles then you will need rather more in the way of tools but a good basic stick needs almost nothing.

The reason for collecting four at a time? Well, you can never have too many sticks and, besides, they also have a tendency to disappear ►



A beautifully crafted stick is the beater's most faithful tool.

Tools of the trade

when lent to the undeserving, or occasionally they break. I once lent my second best stick to a friend. At the beginning of the day it was four feet long but at the end it had shrunk to a disappointing two feet long. Our friendship survived but I can't say I was altogether happy. And from time to time sticks get appropriated by my other half when she wants a rustic pole for the garden. How you can possibly mistake a seasoning walking stick from a rustic pole, I have no idea!

THE CURSE OF THE FORGETFUL OWNER

You can buy a stick. There are thousands available at country fairs and the Internet is awash with them, and very fine they are too. I saw some beautifully made sticks at a shoot just last year. They were works of art that had three of the guns reaching for their wallets before pegs had been drawn or bacon rolls consumed. But while I admired them greatly they were not for me. Why not? Partly it was the "How much? For a stick?" tight-fisted sort of thing, but mostly because I enjoy having a stick I've chosen and made myself. I also know, sure as pigs have trotters, that were I to own one of these

examples of a master's art that I'd lose it or break it. I am forever leaving my stick leaning against a tree or stuck in the ground, and I know if I left an expensive stick I would not remember where. Or I'd run over it, or snap it in a car door or something.

Of course, what I want is the sort of stick I can hit trees with, beat down brambles and generally abuse so a 'good' stick is, for me, out of the question. Actually, come to think of it, my favourite beating stick was not cut by me at all but given to me by a close friend (though I did season it for a year before finishing it). It is a lovely straight piece of holly and all I had to do was peel eight inches of bark from the thicker end to form a handle and add a used cartridge case at the other for a ferrule. I have used it for a few seasons now and it shows its age by the lack of bark and scars at the thin end. It may last for years yet, or it may not. You can never tell with a stick.

My newest stick was not cut in winter but is an example of the old saw (sorry) about cutting a stick when you see it because otherwise some other bugger may cut it first. The April before last, in an effort to provide the aforementioned

rustic poles for beans and sweet peas and the like, I was in some woods where I knew there was a supply of crowns of straight hazel. As I collected the hazel I came across a piece of holly that had clearly had a bit of a fling with some honeysuckle because of the beautiful corkscrew shape it had formed. I'd had my eye out for something like this for years but had never found a suitable piece; they were always

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too thick, too short or too bent. I knew if I left it then come the following November I would never remember where I had seen it. Moreover, there I was, saw in hand, ready to do the job.

Eighteen months later it is ready. I cut off the twigs, filed and sanded the scars, did a little bit of straightening (just steam over a saucepan for 15 minutes and carefully bend the opposite way) and it was good to go. Actually, it still has a slight organic curve to it, which I like, as someone said there are not many straight lines in nature. It looks like something Gandalf might use, which pleases me inordinately. I am still deciding whether to mount something in the top. The end of a cartridge seems a little obvious, an old coin fairly pointless. I do have a pin feather from my very first woodcock which I suppose I could set in resin, but then I'd certainly lose the stick. It's simply lovely but it's too good to use for beating. Perhaps it'll just have to be my trophy stick. 🦋



Just a few simple tools are all you need to start crafting the perfect stick.