

**CHALLENGE CLIVE!** Our Clive is always ready to try his hand at a sport or activity on offer in Sussex. If he can do it, then so can you!



# Ferret in the hole!

It's thought that ferreting is the most humane method of controlling the rabbit population because no injured animals escape. Clive joins possibly the only course on ferreting on offer in Sussex to see if he's got the stomach for it

**T**HERE wasn't much in the way of wildlife in the mean streets of north London where I grew up. Flies, ants and the occasional brave sparrow were about the only non-humans able to tolerate the choking smog, inhospitable terrain and infrequent bus service.

Consequently my knowledge of animals was largely limited to what I could glean from watching Armand and Michaela Denis – the David Attenboroughs of their day – on television. Arguably the most famous Belgians of all time, they so aroused my interest in wild animals that I pleaded with my parents to buy me a gorilla. Although I had to settle for a Meccano set, the seeds of curiosity were firmly planted.

When my family finally escaped to the leafy suburbs, I was thrilled not only at being able to breathe without

corner of Sussex. To my wife's considerable annoyance, anything freshly planted in the garden rarely survives the night. Although I've no moral objection to blasting their fluffy tails into oblivion with a shotgun, being a considerate neighbour, I worry about the noise. Ferrets, on the other hand, go about their business discreetly. And so here I am fairly close to Flimwell and the Kent/Sussex border to attend what might very well be the only one-day ferreting course available anywhere in the country.

## The Good Life

Michael White greets me outside his quaint cottage and invites me in to meet classmate Trevor and fiancée Emily. Over tea and delicious cake Michael asks us why we're interested in ferreting. Trevor explains that, now he's retired, there's time to explore things

harvesting nature's gifts. A cross between Ray Mears and Richard Briers, he's an engaging young man who combines a passion for the countryside with a gentle manner.

Unlike dogs, ferrets are not working for you but for themselves, he explains as he hands out a glossary of terminology. Ferreterers have their own rich argot to describe the wide variety of situations peculiar to the sport.

A casual glance just down the letter B reveals plenty of colourful terminology. Here are just a few: Backed Up – a rabbit in a tight ball turned with its back to the ferret; Back Netting – when a rabbit is ensnared in a net when diving into rather than rapidly exiting a hole; Bury – what we call a burrow; and did you know that the collective noun for ferrets is a business?

Female ferrets are called jills and the males are not jacks but hobs, bucks or dogs. Although hardly fluent in ferret, my vocabulary is rapidly expanding.

As well as the lingo, we're learning lots about ferreting. Because rabbits cause an immense amount of damage, their population has to be controlled and ferreting, Michael suggests, is the most humane method. Unlike shooting, no injured rabbits escape and it's clearly preferable to gassing.

## Clear conscience

Because they contain no shot, ferretted rabbits command a premium at the local butchers but even at a pound a time, catching rabbits is no way to amass a fortune.

My conscience clear and thoughts of an alternative career banished, I follow the other two outside to meet the ferrets. Not everyone can claim to

## Our instructor is a cross between Ray Mears and Richard Briers, an engaging chap who combines a passion for the countryside with a gentle manner

a scarf or handkerchief wrapped around my mouth but also by the thrushes, blackbirds and robins that would drop from time to time into our modest garden.

For me, rabbits only existed in Beatrix Potter books and Walt Disney movies until I eventually quit London in the early 1970s. The furry imbalance created by the absence of them in my youth has now been more than adequately redressed by the veritable plague of them in this quiet

that interest him. Because he travels a lot, he's not sure whether he would be able to keep ferrets but is open minded about the possibility. My story, of course, is that I simply love a challenge.

Michael is a 28-year-old musician who, as a young boy, went ferreting with his father. Steeped in the ways of the country and very much living *The Good Life*, he keeps bees, chickens, geese, pigs and peafowl; grows his own vegetables; shoots, fishes and is an expert on living off the land and



Clive's new friend the ferret, left, and above, getting one back in the action

have ferrets at the bottom of their garden but Mike can. Housed in hutches, hand-fed a high protein diet, regularly exercised and frequently handled, they seem genuinely content. "They only bite if they're nervous," explains Mike as he passes a jill over to me. Do I make females nervous? On today's evidence, apparently not.

### Mistaken for rabbit

In all the years he's been in the sport, Mike has been bitten only once and that happened when he unadvisedly put his hand down a hole to grab a ferret moments after a rabbit had bolted. In the excitement, the ferret mistook his hand for a rabbit.

Easily done, I suppose, when you're rushing out of a black hole into the full glare of daylight. However, a 'rushing' ferret doesn't move all that quickly, which surprises me as I had always assumed they chased the rabbits in the style of diminutive greyhounds. They do, however, wriggle.

After an impressive demonstration of how to skin and prepare a rabbit, we go inside to lunch on, what else but rabbit stew. Delicious.

A nearby orchard has a number of buries. Unlike those in a hedgerow, the holes are clearly visible and helpfully out in the open. Treading softly and whispering so as not to alert

the prey, Mike divides the nets between us. Trevor and I carefully place one at the mouth of each hole and, satisfied that we have every exit covered, Mike pops a jill down a hole as we spread out, crouch and wait.

Rather like fishing, nothing happens for quite a while. A second and third ferret are drafted in but still nothing. Suddenly, a head appears at one of the holes. It's a ferret, which is turned round and gently persuaded to go back down.

Then at last there's a real kaffuffle behind me. It's a rabbit caught in a net. At the risk of being savagely kicked, I bravely pin the victim's narrow shoulders to the ground as Mike rushes over. Grabbing it by its feet, he disentangles the net and quickly dispatches the creature with one swift blow to the back of the head, a rabbit punch. Although they don't exactly come thick and fast, two more rabbits follow over the course of the next quarter of an hour.

After ensuring that we have recovered all the nets and ferrets, we relocate to another bury, repeat the exercise and catch two more. The last bury proves the most productive and we finish the day on nine.

A fascinating day full of facts, fresh air, fur and ferrets ends with a cup of tea and a delicious slice of fruit cake.

### THE VERDICT

An open mind and a willingness to get your hands dirty are essentials to any apprentice ferreter and Clive arrived with both. Having had the myth dispelled that a ferret kept up the trouser leg is a prerequisite to the sport, he cottoned on fast to the theory of ferreting and demonstrated a natural ability for handling nets and ferrets. In the field he was stealthy, swift and ruthless. An excellent student.

Michael White

Michael White's Introduction to Ferreting course costs £60, which includes lunch and tea.

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### Would you like to challenge Clive?

Is there an ultimate quest which you think would test Clive's courage and little-known talents to the limit? Dare you dare him to take them on? Email jonathan.keeble@archant.co.uk with your challenge of a lifetime – then stand well back ...

For more of Clive's adventures visit [www.sussexlife.co.uk](http://www.sussexlife.co.uk)