

BETTER THAN A POLAR BEAR?

Rich Saunders considers how he shapes up against the rest of the animal kingdom when it comes to his hunting prowess

The domestic cat is a successful hunter 38 per cent of the time.

That's impressive – unless you're a songbird – but the African wild dog can boast a hit rate of 85 per cent, and cheetahs and leopards are not far behind at 58 and 38 per cent, respectively. I know this because Sir David Attenborough told me on the telly. It got me thinking about how we, the airgun hunter, compare. It's not a very good comparison – thankfully, we don't have to chase down rabbits and squirrels on foot, and I don't think it would be right to include kills taken by sitting in a hide, but when stalking, the closest comparison we can make to the animal kingdom

ABOVE: Modern equipment gives hunters an edge, but how much of a difference does it really make?

when it comes to catching our prey, how do we stack up?

Of course, not all cats are created equal. The fat old ball of fluff next door has never caught a thing, and in much the same way, some airgunners are better at stalking than others, but as an average, how successful are we? Better than cats? Or on a par with polar bears who only get lucky one time in ten?

Personally, I find stalking airgun quarry exhilarating, and few would disagree that it is the ultimate test of one's fieldcraft, but even with all the advantages of telescopic sights, thermal spotters and PCP rifles that being a human gives us, wild animals, with thousands of

years of evolution behind them, have the upper hand. We have evolved as well, though, and it's one of the reasons why we know that ambushing rabbits and waiting for them to come to us is far more effective than stalking. Less fun, many would argue, but undisputedly more effective.

The trouble is, at this time of the year with cold weather or sodden muddy conditions underfoot, lying or sitting on the ground is not much fun. The solution is to stay mobile, which makes us less effective as hunters, but it is what it is, and as a result, I find myself doing more stalking in the winter than at any other time of the year.

RIGHT: The quick-fit 850nm infrared illuminator supplied with the Apex means it can be rapidly switched to night-vision duties



SHARP INSTINCTS

On the plus side, most of my winter rabbit hunting is done at night. Not only is my quarry significantly more active, the cover of darkness also helps to even things up a little. Of course, rabbits have an array of other super-senses at their disposal – smell and the ability to detect the vibration of footsteps, for example – but at least the gap is closed slightly.

It works both ways, though, and in the dark my instincts are sharper, too. With eyesight compromised, my senses of smell and hearing go up a notch.

I was out last night on one of my permissions in south Oxfordshire. It's a sheep farm and, although there's more than enough grass

to go around, the rabbits insist on digging along fence lines, and repair costs are prohibitively expensive.

The yard sits atop a hill, and armed with a thermal spotter, I get a panoramic view of the surrounding fields, enabling me to spot rabbits, as well as foxes and badgers, doing their rounds.

Although I shoot plenty of rabbits on the farm using ambush tactics, it's the ideal venue to stalk at night. It really doesn't matter in which direction the wind blows because I'm usually able to spot rabbits from a distance, and stalk from a direction that favours me.

As a result, I base myself in the yard and return to it after every stalk, successful or not, to plan my next attempt.

BELOW: Rich's hi-tech set-up on this occasion included the recoilless BSA Ultra and a HikMicro Apex A50T day and night scope



FAR FROM IDEAL

As it happened, the wind last night was almost non-existent, and whilst that meant my shots wouldn't be blown off course, the downside was that any sound I made wouldn't be drowned out. Couple that with a full moon, a clear sky and crunchy frost underfoot, and you can imagine that stalking conditions were far from ideal, but I set off nonetheless, my .22 calibre BSA Ultra SE and HikMicro Apex A50T digital day/night scope over my shoulder, and a HikMicro Gryphon GH35L LRF thermal spotter in my pocket.

From my hilltop perch, I'd spotted a several rabbits in one of the fields amongst the sheep. The Gryphon's laser rangefinder indicated a distance of 220 metres, and from my elevated position, I was able to map out my stalk before taking a single step.

A track would take me most of the

way and with thick, tall grass and weeds on the verge to help screen me, I hoped to get close enough for a shot over the fence, but if the rabbits moved further into the field, I'd have to navigate through the undergrowth and climb over or through the fence.

FREEZE!

Plan set, I hefted the Ultra on my shoulder once again and set out. It took me a good half-hour to creep down the track. The hard surface and loose stones coupled with the silent conditions meant that a scuffed step would give me away and despite inching along, I winced at every tiny sound when I inadvertently kicked a pebble or crunched down on rigid grass stems. Every 20 or so paces I stopped to look through the Gryphon for reassurance that the rabbits were

RIGHT: Conditions were far from ideal, but that didn't stop Rich from chancing his hand



BELOW: A challenging stalk puts Rich within range of his quarry and in a spot where he can take a rested shot



HIKMICRO ALPEX A50T

£799.99 SCOTTCOUNTRY.CO.UK

The HikMicro brand is well-known to those who shoot with thermal optics. In fact, the company's thermal expertise extends way beyond shooting and includes many other applications.

However, the company has decided it wants a piece of infrared action as well, and its Alpex A50T has already won a lot of fans. It's not hard to see why, because its impressive performance makes a mockery of the price tag.

Not including the detachable rubber eyecup, the Alpex A50T weighs in at 1.2kgs, measures 375mm and is attached by a set of 30mm scope mounts. Also contained in a crush-proof case is an 850nm IR illuminator and mount, spare rechargeable batteries for the scope and the IR torch, a cable, battery charger and carry strap.

For many, the thought of interacting with technology is a barrier. For sure, the Alpex A50T is stuffed full of it, but thanks to thoughtful design, it's all very accessible. In addition to the on/off/sleep mode button, two others mounted on top of the eye bell operate the

picture-in-picture mode, switch between day and night functions and take photos or video.

The left-hand turret scrolls through the 3.5-14x zoom. Pushing it accesses a menu

A50T sets a high bar. The 1024 x 768 HD OLEC display combines with a 1920 x 1080 HD sensor, which is enhanced by an image defog algorithm, to serve up a crystal-clear image both in daytime colour

“A twilight function, which requires only ambient light, will provide a very usable colour image in dawn and dusk”

for a range of functions including; contrast and brightness, a choice of five reticles in seven colours, the one-shot zero function and five profiles.

When it comes to the most important function of all – image clarity – the Alpex

and night-time monochrome modes.

However, although the supplied 850nm IR torch is quick to attach and provides a claimed detection range of 600m, you won't need it until the sun is well and truly done for the day. A twilight function, which requires only ambient light, will provide a very usable colour image in dawn and dusk conditions.

It's no surprise then that the Alpex A50T is equipped to run for a long time.

Removing a cap on the top turret means you can drop in a CR123A 3v battery to augment the integrated battery for a combined run time of 13 hours.

Unscrewing the right turret exposes a USB port, which charges the onboard battery and downloads data from the 64GB internal memory.

