

Down on the Duke's river old Alec nets a salmon at 93 and . . .

FISHER TAIT HOOKS A SNAKE

YOU might think that the Duke of Norfolk, friend of royalty and master of pageantry on the grand scale, would stick to London and its titled blue-bloods. But, in fact, he likes nothing better than a quiet holiday on his Scottish estate on the Solway Firth.

His home there, an enlarged and modernised farmhouse called Tanton-side, will be occupied by him in a few days' time.

But no visitor to Scotland makes less fuss.

His estate borders a fine stretch of the tidal estuary of the River Nith, which is famous for salmon. There is a growing demand for annual permits to fish this water with haaf-nets—the kind you stand behind during the ebb and flow of a tide.

All sorts of people, including doctors, lawyers and civil servants, are keen to get these permits—at five guineas each—but the duke reserves them for local residents.

You just wait . . .

Fishing for salmon and grilse with the haaf-net is my idea of lucrative relaxation, for salmon nets the fisherman around 6s. per pound. All you do is stand in the tide, breathing ozone, until a fish enters your net.

There is no age limit, and my old friend Alec Black, of New Abbey, now 93, has had a grand season. A few weeks ago he netted a 20-pound salmon. And more recently he got three good grilse in one tide.

James Straiton, who has been the Duke of Norfolk's game-keeper for 33 years, knows more about the birds which feed on the merse-lands of the Solway than anybody else.

He has an interesting flock of wild geese at his cottage near Glencaple, including four snaky Canada geese and a big greylag which came to him 23 years ago. The greylag shows no sign of his age, and may be 50 years

By

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old, for he was a mature bird when he came to Mr. Straiton.

Many of the rare birds which visit the area do not live long for itinerant gunmen blaze away at anything with wings and colour.

Nothing is safe from these town-bred vandals. They shoot shell-ducks and swans and throw the dead birds into ditches. They killed the three rare white barnacle geese which settled on the merse. They widen the areas where no bird sings.

Over in Galloway, I motored up the big Water of Fleet to the deserted railway station which is supposed to serve the attractive village of Gatehouse-of-Fleet. It is up in the hills, in a scene of brooding loneliness, nearly seven miles from Gatehouse, and was closed by British Railways as a post-war act of economy.

Noon train, only

The station is a pretty one flanked by rhododendron bushes which were once a station-master's pride. But some of the buildings have been demolished. The waiting-room is as silent as a morgue, and an atmosphere of desolation hangs about the place.

Up in their little wooden tower John McGaw and Niven McKenzie still work the signals. They seldom see a passenger.

In response to some raucous

local squawks, British Railways now permit the noon train to Dumfries to stop for passengers, but only on Mondays and Saturdays. All other trains travelling to the flesh-pots, including the handie one at 9.20 a.m., flash through the dead station at 10 and sometimes 15 miles per hour.

The service annoys the Gatehouse anglers who lash the waters of Loch Skerrow, for they have to travel to Creetown, 13 miles away, to catch the 9.20 a.m. train, which lets them off at the loch.

And British Railways may be interested to know that 150 anglers have paid to fish on Loch Skerrow this year. Surely it would not cost much to halt trains which travel no faster than 15 miles per hour.

For experts . . .

I conclude with a nature note for the experts. When fishing on Loch Whinyeon, near Gatehouse, Mr. Thomas Tait saw a miniature monster looping rapidly over the surface of the water, about 70 yards from the shore. He made a cast for it, and hooked a large adder.

My question: Do adders swim for pleasure?

