



**THE WILD BUNCH:** Dan Watson and Liz Murphy, who run the woodland weekends.

## Into the woods to see what's on Nature's menu

Catch them like Ray Mears and cook like Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. Justine Gaunt tried a taste of a wild food weekend.

I MAKE my way, as directed, down a public footpath and along to the back of a wood. Here a pair of parked Land Rovers indicate I've come to the right place, a wood near Sicklinghall in Lower Wharfedale.

At the camp I'm met by experienced woodsman, Dan Watson, who with his partner, Liz Murphy, has organised this weekend's forest foray. He is collecting strips of hazel near the edge of the wood, chopping them with an alarmingly large knife. He explains that the hazel strips will be used in cooking the evening meal. I'm intrigued.

Leads-based Dan and Liz started running seasonal woodland weekends just over a year ago and this one is for a group of eight. The experience combines Ray Mears-style survival techniques with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall type cooking. They've brought all sorts of equipment with them, snares, traps and

fishing rods, but also a huge amount of supplies in case the local wildlife is unobliging.

They also have with them Rob Pickering, an outdoor enthusiast who combines a fine knowledge of catching and preparing wild food with an impressive beard and tribal tattoos.

Like Dan, Rob is also a green woodworker, and while wild food is his main interest, he also makes chairs, tools and leatherwork. He tells me he has worked his way through the entire Ray Mears syllabus, so I pay special attention when he takes the

hazel strips (now whittled-down to rather dangerous looking spikes by Dan) and starts preparing a large salmon. Apparently it has not been caught in the near vicinity.

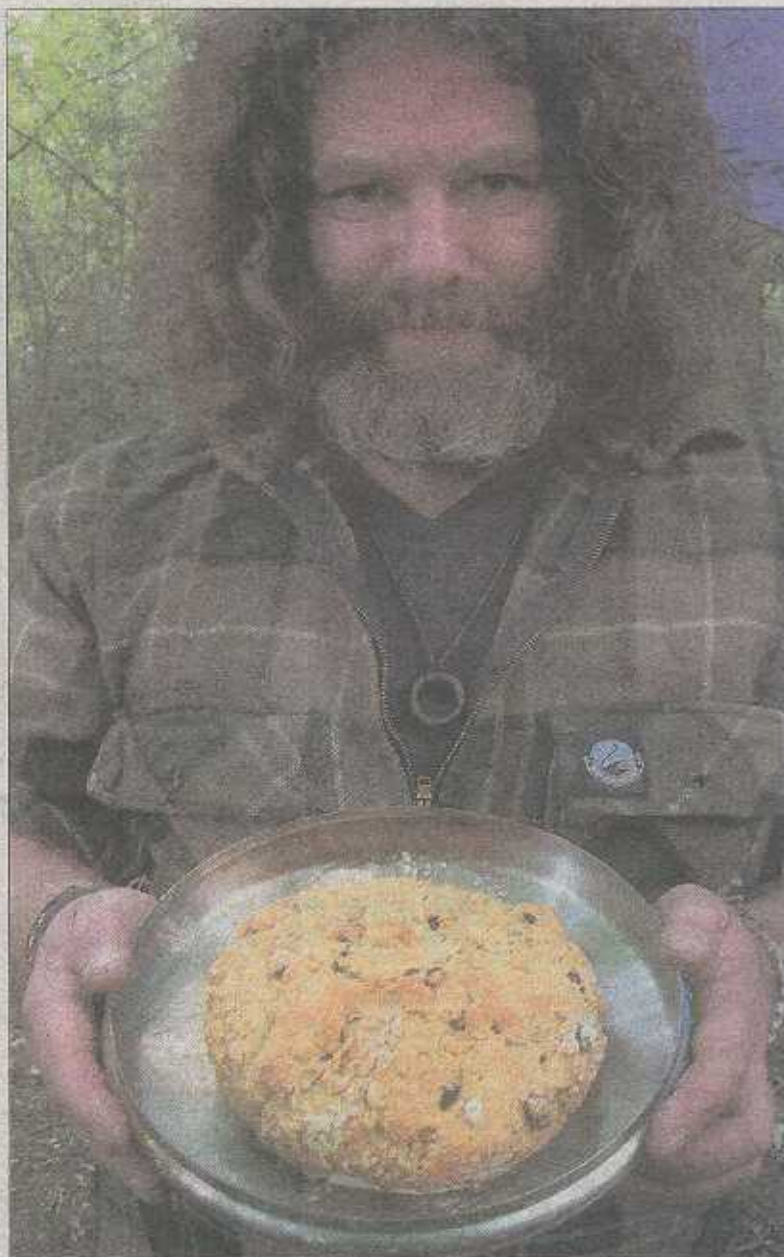
Instead of a chopping board, Rob has a bed of leaves for his fish, which he swiftly cuts open, guts, bones and then skewers, creating a structure that can sit comfortably above a cosy campfire. It cooks the fish to perfection, leaving the chefs to get busy chopping veg and attending to less manly duties.

Catherine Nuttgens is attending the weekend in the name of research – she runs Forest Schools and takes Year 7s into woodland – and is keen to learn things to pass on to her students.

She explains that the group prepared a rabbit yesterday



**FINE DINING:** Salmon with sheep sorrel, lemon and blackberries.



**HAIR APPARENT:** Rob Pickering with some haddock bread.

Did they catch it themselves? It seems not. A snare was set, but the local bunnies were wise to such tricks.

Luckily Dan had brought one with him. 'We skinned the rabbit and took out all the offal,' says Catherine. 'And prepared it for the pot. I've never done anything like that before, and I really enjoyed it. We also gutted trout without cutting the belly open. We called it fish on a stick. It was delicious.'

It would be easy to believe to the contrary, but this weekend is not just about eating. For a start, there's a the whole setting up camp

routine, the digging of latrines and of course, learning to make fire. Dan and Rob strike me as the sort of fellows who would resist resorting to a packet of safety matches.

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They explain the uses of a variety of incendiary devices – including bow drills and even a flammable mushroom, called King Alfred's Cakes, or Cramp Ball. Dan lights a fire from the spark of a dried specimen (one he prepared earlier), and reveals that the smoke of the mushroom also acts as an insect repellent.

'With something like this, you can always carry your fire with you, as the Viet Cong did,' he says. I'm getting into the jungle vibe, and as I reflect on this, I see that Rob is now busy demonstrating a quick and failsafe way to



**COUNTRY KITCHEN:** Top and above, cooking on the campfire.

prepare pigeon. "You rip the wings off and flip the chest out," he says as he stands in front of a crate full of the things (already dead) awaiting their fate. The feathers are soon flying as everyone has a go. Couldn't be simpler.

In another part of the wood, where Dan and two willing (if not particularly glamorous after a night in the woods) assistants have been building their own oven. Constructed from a metal container with rudimentary doors, the oven has a fire under it, and will, says Dan, be used to cook a fruit crumble.

I'm impressed at the sophistication of the menu. Dan says many of the dishes have been flavoured with wild herbs collected out on one of Liz's herb foraging walks. Liz's knowledge of plantlife is extensive – Dan proudly explains that she is a fully qualified chartered landscape architect.

Dan takes time out from crumble baking to comment on the weekend's programme. "It's very full on, we're all still talking about what we've learned during the day and related things until late into the night. Last night Liz and I made a treat

for everyone – a rum orange cooked in the fire."

Next morning people were up early inventing contraptions on which to cook their bacon, served with delicious Bannock bread, also cooked over the fire. "It has been a really good few days," says Dan. "For many people it's a novelty to camp in a wood, but people have learned a lot, too. I think they will go away hungry for more knowledge."

For more information about Dan Watson Woodland Courses and about forthcoming courses, visit [www.dwvp.co.uk](http://www.dwvp.co.uk)

## WILD RECIPES

### Pan fried pigeon breasts with port jus, served with red onion, wild mushroom and plum relish.

Serves 4

Cooking time 10 min

Great served with roast potatoes and green beans

- 4 pigeons prepared for 2 breast filets per person
- 2 cloves of garlic
- Port (or full bodied hedgerow equivalent such as elderberry wine)
- 4 tbs olive oil
- 1 large red onion
- 2 handfuls of fungi such as field or horse mushrooms
- Juice of 1 orange
- A handful of plums pitted and coarsely chopped (other seasonal fruit could easily be substituted)
- A sprinkling of brown sugar

#### For the relish:

1. Fry off the red onion in some of the olive oil until softened.
2. Add the chopped mushrooms and brown off.
3. Add the orange juice and plums and simmer until most of the juice has reduced.
4. Sprinkle in the brown sugar.
5. Add a dash of port and reduce again.

#### For the pigeon:

Make sure the oil in the frying pan is really hot. Crush the garlic and fry off for 30 seconds. Add the pigeon breasts and brown off for 2 min on each side. Set the meat aside to keep warm. Add port to the pan to deglaze. Slice the pigeon breast and serve with the warm relish.



**GAME ON:** Preparing a game stew.

### Bannock Breads

Cooked in the embers of a camp fire

- 2 cups flour
- 2 cups coffee whitener or milk powder
- 1 tsp baking powder

Mix. Add a small splash of water & mix more.

Take a large pan with a lid (such as an oven proof casserole or camping cookset) and put three flat stones in bottom.

Gently bring the dough together and lay bannock on a bed of flour in a smaller tin with no lid.

Place the smaller tin inside bigger tin with lid on. Bake in fire on slow embers for 40 min.



**VITAL SPARK:** Coaxing an ember into life.

**Beer bread:** Substitute beer for water.

**Fruit and nut bread:**

Add dried fruit and nuts to basic recipe for scone-like breads.

**Pizza-style bread:**

Add items to basic recipe eg Parmesan, sun-dried tomatoes, chorizo. Cook in frying pan or oven-tray (with a little suet) on its side next to fire 30-40 min.