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GAME SHOOTING, FISHING & HUNTING

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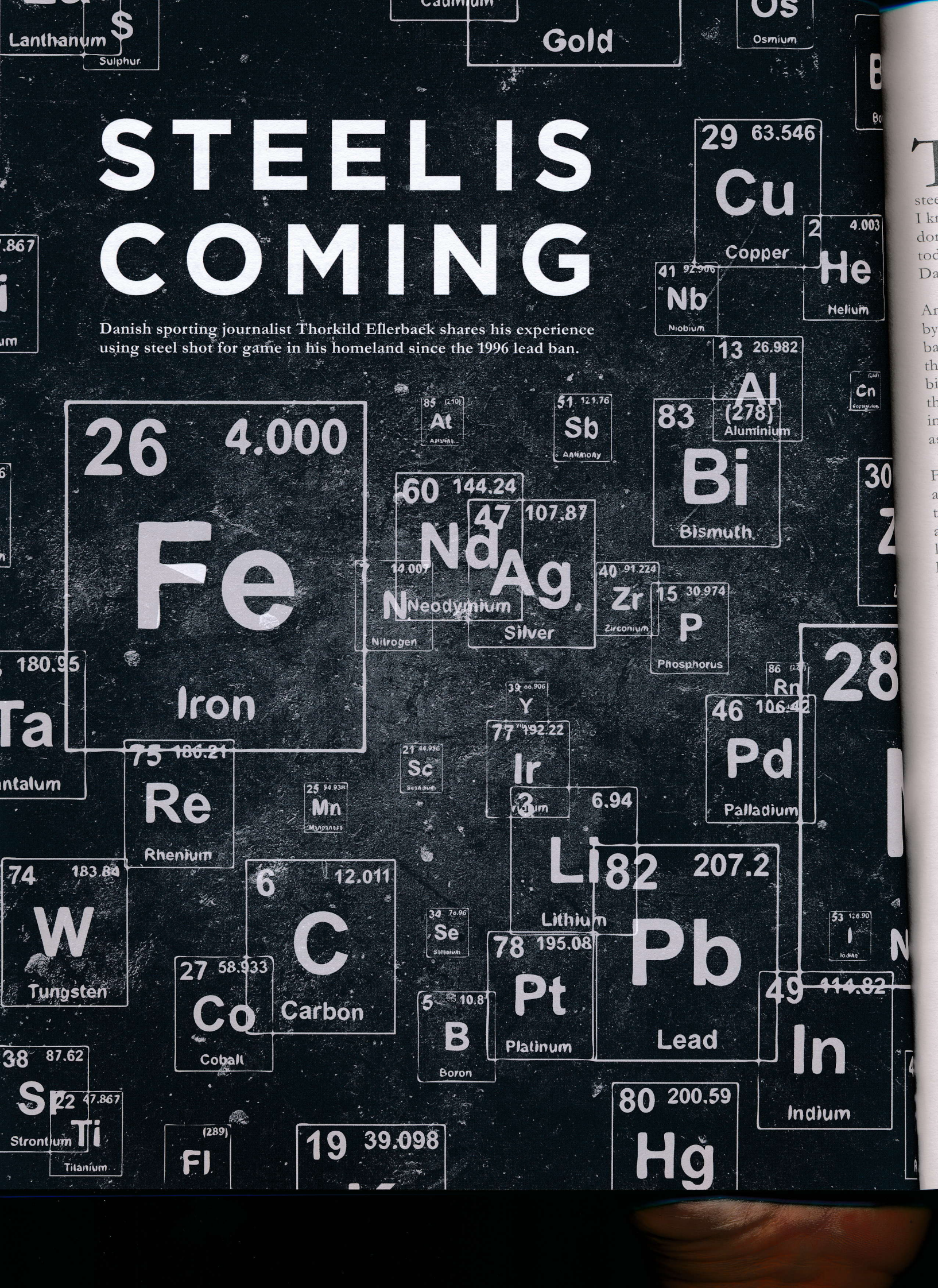


TIME WELL SPENT

R. McPhail

STEEL IS COMING

Danish sporting journalist Thorkild Ellerback shares his experience using steel shot for game in his homeland since the 1996 lead ban.



The really hot and unavoidable topic at this season's shoots in the UK will be lead versus steel in your cartridges. Believe me, I know: in Denmark we've been there, done that – but it is so long ago that today it is not an issue at all in the Danish hunting community.

And why is that, you may ask? Because by the 1996 hunting season lead was banned from use in shotguns (from the smallest 9mm to 12 bore, the biggest legal gauge here). And yes, there were a lot of heated discussions in response to that – exactly the same as you have in the UK now.

Full of evidence provided by the authorities against arguments from the community, and generally the argument was that steel shot would be less effective than lead, and therefore lead to more pricked game. Plus, steel shot would send a lot of fine old guns to be scrapped.

In the transition period there were some lead hardliners still using their old cartridges. But it was in the days when police in the countryside had reasonable time and they actually did visit shoots and hunting parties with a very effective tool: a powerful magnet to 'dip' in the cartridge bag. You can imagine the face of the guy where all the cartridges stayed in the bag. There were fines to be paid, and soon after 1996 lead cartridges were history.

The real problem at the time was that the manufacturers did not produce decent quality steel shot. The cheaper brands were disastrously bad with the pellets tumbling inside the barrels and in the air when fired. The quality did get better and better, though, so the problems with damaging guns and very bad coverage disappeared.

Today we shoot high quality steel shot for all our shooting in Denmark. The use of bismuth and other alternatives to lead are almost gone now. In the beginning, some estates demanded bismuth for protecting their timber, but this is not an issue anymore because the damage is non-existent.

Shotgun hunting in Denmark is very much walked-up shooting in the open and driven shooting in the woods. Our driven shooting is not a very big setup with beaters and dogs behind the lines. Normally it is a few people beating (often quietly) with a few dogs. On this kind of hunting we shoot birds – such as pheasant, pigeon and woodcock – and roe deer. There is traditional driven shooting on a lot of Danish Estates, which are run like you know it on UK soil, typically pheasant and duck.

We do have shoots in Denmark that boast 'high pheasants', but it has never really been a success. You might come across a drive or two on a driven day where the birds are flying higher than 30-40 metres, but it is not considered ethical to aim for birds flying higher than 30 metres as the risk of pricking birds is too big.

Because of the increasing quality of the steel shot and a set of ethical rules and guidelines introduced by the Danish hunting organisation, we have reduced the ratio of pricked birds. Plus, this has also reduced because everyone has learned the limits of the steel shot, which are not created for extreme-range shooting.

Of Denmark's population of 6,000,000 people, 177,000 of them have a hunting licence. And for many years we have had obligatory tests and courses before you can have your licence. It is quite interesting

that only about half the license owners actually kill anything. We know that, because it is compulsory to register your game – or no game – at the end of the season if you want a renewal of your license.

We don't have a registration of the cartridges used in hunting, but from my sources around and at the estates it is normally three cartridges per killed bird. Compared with research on especially ducks and geese we also know, that the ratio of pricked birds are decreasing from year to year.

Going from lead to steel here was not popular, but on the other hand I can say that we Danes in general are very pragmatic people. So no more lead, okay, then let's use steel. You will not find many lead cartridges in Denmark. Maybe someone has a couple in the cabinet for historical or nostalgic reasons, but in the field today lead is absolutely a no-go.

As the transition today is 100 percent, the industry – all gun dealers, gunsmiths, shooting grounds and hunting areas – is fully adapted. If you ask the younger generation, they don't even know that once upon a time we had lead. They may have been on a hunting trip to the UK or other countries which still use lead, but they don't see any difference. I shot lead in my boyhood and in my younger days, and going to steel was never an issue and it was not something I spent much time thinking about.

Indeed, coming from lead we had to adjust our shooting and our choice of cartridge and shot size. If you normally shoot pheasants with No. 6s, you'll have to choose steel shot a couple of sizes bigger – typically No. 3 or 4 shot. For ducks and geese, we use even bigger sizes up to No. 2. ➔



Then there's the *big* issue: what about my guns? We have a lot of pre-War German and Belgian shotguns in Denmark and most of these can fire steel shots. Newer guns from Italy, Spain and France will be made to use steel. And, of course, all new guns today are made for steel. But as all gun-manufacturers state in their manuals: use chokes no tighter than $\frac{1}{2}$.

And the *really big* issue: what about my old English shotguns? For me it is quite simple. I own and shoot a Westley Richards from 1892 and use it for most of my bird shooting. If not the lovely Westley, I use a slightly older J.

Blanch hammergun. Both guns feature beautiful Damascus barrels and are chambered in 2.5". It is not thousands of shots in the season, but I use them on simulated game days and clay shoots too. My good friend is a highly praised gunsmith with an expertise in English guns, and he shoots an old Patstone hammergun. Several thousand steel shots have been fired through that gun in the last 15 years, and he never shoots with anything else.

What to do with the old beauty and family jewel, then? First of all, have it checked by a qualified gunsmith. If the chokes are tight, have them

opened. We normally shoot cylinder/cylinder in our small syndicate called The Danish Hammergun Society. If your old gun is in good condition and you have not shot it to pieces, it should be up to the new world order.

Steel shot for these guns are normally available at most of the Danish gunshops. They are Rio, Eley and Gamebore, typically 2.5" chambers loaded with 28-30g steel shot. They are moderately powered, but they all live up to the Danish norm of a minimum of 400m/s. And remember, they are loaded with a protective paper or plastic wad.

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We have been there. We have done it. And now, 24 years after the transition, it is not an issue we talk about. It is just a fact, and even my shooting dentist friend confirms – after talking to some colleagues – that there has not been an increase in broken teeth due to steel shot in the roast pheasant. *FS*