

HEATED DEBATE

Tim Pilbeam discusses the ethical impact on stalking brought about by the game-changing thermal imaging explosion

I'm writing about the 'T' word, not the 'F' word. Mix the 'T' word with fox shooting and it doesn't seem to raise an eyebrow, but use it for deer stalking and it suddenly becomes rather controversial. Thermal imaging devices are here to stay; we spend £2,000 on a scope to give us 15 minutes extra shooting time, so why not invest in something that is a total game changer? They pick out animals during all hours of the day!

Like it or not, thermal is here to stay. Sales are booming, technology is driving prices down, and finance deals mean it is not just for the boys who pride themselves on possessing the most expensive toys. With prices from just £500, will they replace the need for traditional optics altogether?

FIRST TIMER

As I write this article, it is nearing the end of the fallow buck season, and during my last early morning outing, for the first time in my stalking career, I did not lift the Swarovski 8x42EL binoculars from my chest. Instead, dangling from a lanyard was a Pulsar thermal monocular. Heaven forbid!

I really enjoy glassing tirelessly through a pair of binoculars. I cast my mind back to memories of being under the tutelage of Andrew Evans-Hendrix, as one of several

students learning the craft of the sniper. It was over 20 years ago, and I remember spending an hour sitting on a park bench with a pair of tiny binoculars, overlooking a deserted children's playground in the middle of Norfolk, being asked to identify 10 items which would not normally be seen in such surroundings.

Most of my fellow students spotted about seven but two of us located nine, not seeing the penknife that was pushed into the end of the horizontal cross bar of the swing. It was so subtle, extending the bar by only 1", and it fooled my eyes into thinking it was a part of the structure. To me, observation techniques are one of the many key skills of stalking. In order to identify objects, think about the seven 'S's: Shape, Shine, Shadow, Spacing, Skyline, Silhouette, Sound – oh and you'd better add Movement!

I will happily sit in a field, forest or on a mountain slope and spend hours gazing through my binoculars. It never ceases to amaze me how things just appear, when most of them have been there all along. Deer stalking is no different. It mystifies me how these ghostly figures appear from nowhere. They certainly don't just jump there, but slowly and carefully ease into visibility. That is one of the many reasons why deer stalking, or in fact any form of hunting, is so

RIGHT: As technology improves and prices tumble for thermal, is there going to be a place for classic, quality binos?

BELOW: Tim doesn't mind getting his hands dirty, it seems – or, indeed, his kit!



“ONE OF THE ETHICAL BENEFITS OF USING A THERMAL DEVICE IS IN THE RECOVERY OF ANIMALS”



« special. For me, it is not all about the kill, as more often than not I will arrive home with nothing to show for my endeavours; but I do wonder, for some of us, if the way we stalk is going to change.

Binoculars enhance or improve what we are looking at, aided by the clarity of the lens and magnification of the image, but whatever it is, the image is basically the same. Nothing is being changed. Whether you can identify things is another matter!

THERMAL FACTS OF LIFE

Thermal, however, just pulls out the warmer surfaces, and that is it. Does this mean those primary identification skills, the seven 'S's, are not required at this stage of the stalk?

Either there is an animal there or not. If not, move on!

Controversial? Yes, you bet!

Back to my early morning excursion. I started my stalk 45 minutes before the light wasn't anywhere near shootable. In other words, it was pitch black. If I was using the high seat, then this was a sensible time to climb into it, allowing my eyes to acclimatise and the animals to settle around me, but on this occasion, I set off at a care-free pace. By the time the light was bright enough to shoot, I had scanned over 200 acres of open fields with my thermal, and as the trees are still devoid of leaves, I was able to look into the surrounding woodland. Nothing.

I sat up on some high ground in the area where the fallow tend to be seen, and every 15 minutes I would wander about to check other margins next to the trees. Nothing. I had yet to use my very expensive optics in my Kouli holding case. Short of time, I moved about for another hour and then headed home. I was there for the meat, as I need another beast for the freezer before the end of the season.

As I drove back, realisation hit me. I had totally relied on that black box around my neck, the dreaded thermal imager! OK, I was in a hurry to get back home, but what about my all-singing, all-dancing binos with the built-in rangefinder at a

RIGHT: Will new technology change shooting beyond all recognition? Clearly, it's a concept that's a concern for Tim. Perhaps improved efficiency will actually erode the magic of stalking?

cost of over £2,000? I am now becoming the new-age, modern stalker who rocks up, has a quick look, and if there is nothing about, gets bored, clutters off to somewhere else with an attitude, or clears off back home.

I was then overtaken with guilt, and the moral questions started to fester in my mind. Come on Tim, is this right? Is this fair to nature? Is this real stalking? Is it an unfair advantage to the hunter? Is it cheating? Is this going to deplete my hunting skills gleaned over many years of making mistakes? Did I feel a part of nature – perhaps not?

Over the past two years, I have been experimenting with thermal, and on a couple of occasions, testing some rather expensive equipment. This article is based on my experiences of using thermal for spotting.

THERMAL ON THE GROUND

Early morning stalks are when I tend to use thermal the most. Much of the ground I shoot fallow over is made up of open fields surrounded by woodland or wide hedges. Typical Sussex farmland. I start, around 30 minutes to an hour earlier than normal, giving me time to either walk or drive to see where the deer are.

How many times do we make a decision on where to go, and then park ourselves in a high seat, only to see beasts in the next field?! My pre-scanning of the property will tell me where the animals are; even accepting that they will move about, I have at least doubled my chances from the off. If none are spotted, traditional techniques are adopted, either selecting a high seat or walk and stalk.

If animals are spotted, I head for the deer, using the cover of darkness with the wind, hopefully, in my favour. While this seems easy, I have experienced unsuccessful stalks on several occasions, due to my sheer complacency. I expect most deer to be the same, but they can see in the dark, maybe out to over 500m! I cannot see them unless I use the thermal, so I bundle towards them, using trees or hedges as cover. Totally in the dark, I have tended to be a little sloppy in terms of my movement and noise. Perhaps it is a false sense of security. When it is dark, it is generally deathly quiet. No dawn chorus. No pheasants kicking off. None or little background traffic hum, which gives the deer a huge advantage, and they pick up on the softest of sounds.

I remember well one occasion, tip toeing across a frosty grass field, still at a good 300m, they either heard or perhaps spotted me! So, using the thermal to spot game can be a real advantage, but stalking in the dark is not as easy as it seems. Just a personal observation!

To be honest, to have a tool at hand that can pick out animals in the dark is a total game changer. Spending time scanning the property, in a similar way to using binoculars in the half light, can make a huge difference to your success rate. Is it fair? Is it giving the hunter an unfair advantage? Without the thermal, normal stalking routines would be practised, using the binoculars. Start just as the light lifts, walk, stop, listen and observe, walk, stop, listen and observe; for me, these are some of the most enjoyable aspects of stalking, but you will inevitably cover less ground, although perhaps in more detail.

Things happen around you, and if you are a careful stalker, you make yourself evaporate into your surroundings, which in itself is fascinating. The alternative is to scan, no heat signature, no deer, move on, thus showing no need for an understanding of what's going on around you! Patience is a virtue, but not anymore it seems. Am I sounding a little old-school?

BELOW: It's a tough call for old-school stalkers. Do you go down the thermal route or stick with the traditional stalking tool set?



The transformation to foxing brought about by thermal is undeniable. An ethical question obviously still applies to stalking. The question is, how long can the allure of instant detection and improved efficiency be ignored?





ABOVE: Tim gets the job done with the Pulsar Quantum Lite XQ30V – a budget introduction to the thermal game

Recently, I had just finished stalking with a buddy and he received a call from a landowner, who had spotted three large fallow bucks in his small 10-acre wood, next to his house. While he liked to see the occasional animal, he took exception to the deer nibbling the shrubs and flowers in his garden, so they were a pest to him, and in his view they needed to be removed.

I went to take a look. The middle of the wood had a thick understory of brambles and ivy. I couldn't see anything with the binoculars without getting too close, so it was with the thermal that I quickly picked out parts of their bodies, telling me exactly where they were. It just shows how thermal can be so useful in woodland stalking. Is this fair chase? Personally, half the skill or challenge is being pitted against mother nature, unless pest control or population management are the overriding priority, as in this case.

There is no doubt that during broad daylight, an animal can be spotted much more quickly than with a pair of binoculars. I remember walking about with a colleague and as I peered through my posh optics, he tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a buck that was within 30m of us, behind a clump of dead bracken!

MAGICAL MYSTERY

Waiting up in a high seat at first or last light is, for me, a magical time. It is when I draw upon years of experience,

knowing the animal movements, knowing the layout of the property, and even then it is very often down to pot luck if the right beast emerges, if any at all! You have to try to spot and identify as the light diminishes.

It's all so challenging, yet to me this is being at one with nature. With thermal, this magical time is completely taken away. The challenge, the hunt, is so much easier, yet this too can be so beneficial to the stalker. You can view them moving about well before you can actually see them, perhaps in or around a wood, giving you so much more time to prepare for the shot, and perhaps giving the stalker more choice.

I have been in situations where I was just about to pack up, as it was getting too dark, only to spot deer walking about using this new technology. Without it, I would not have seen them at all, as they were well over a 100m away, but having said that, if I had just waited a tad longer and used the light gathering powers of the binoculars or the scope, perhaps I may have had the same outcome.

I have had the pleasure of using some more expensive models, such as the Pulsar Accolade XP50LRF from Scott Country. This is a binocular model as opposed to the monocular that I generally use. The clarity of the image is so much better, allowing quicker identification out to ranges beyond 1,200m, which is a huge bonus if you need it.

On several occasions, I was able to pick up the faintest of heat signatures around wooded areas at well over 300-500m – animals I would have missed using the lower specification models, but it comes at a price. If you want top quality images at longer distances, you have to pay for it, but that in itself begs the question: what do you want out of your thermal imager?

For me, all I want to do is spot animals out to say 300m, and scan what's around me as I walk and stalk, but I can just spot them to a good 600m. Personally, I find my budget Pulsar Quantum Lite XQ30V (SRP in 2019 £1,195) is perfectly adequate. My colleague's Helion XQ38F is much clearer and can see further, but it is double the price.

All I want to do is see where they are and make decisions thereafter. Field of view is quite important, as some models start at 2x and others at 4x. If all you are doing is quickly scanning open ground, it may not matter. In closer environments such as woodland, however, a wide field of view makes quite a difference.

ETHICAL RECOVERY

Perhaps one of the most ethical and justifiable benefits of using a thermal device is to aid the recovery of animals. I recall an experience last year in a field of half-grown maize. After quickly checking to see that there were no deer around, I climbed into my high seat and sat down, only to be greeted by three pairs of eyes peering out of the three foot crop, but only 40m away! Without any hesitation, I quickly grabbed the rifle and took the young buck that had turned broadside, ready to make his escape. Everything felt good – an instinctive and simple shot. However, in my haste, I had completely forgotten to triangulate where the animal was in this 20-acre field of three-foot maize.

As I looked down, reality sunk in, and after searching for an hour, I pulled out the thermal. Of course, it is completely ineffective when surrounded by thick cover. I eventually searched a thinner area of crop with the thermal, only to find the deer some 125m from the original shot position, despite near-perfect shot placement. Without the magic black box, I was snookered as it was getting dark.

There is no doubt that it's very useful for finding dead or tracking wounded deer, but does this make stalkers more impatient and prone to storm in after taking the shot, as opposed to waiting for, say, 30 minutes which is something I have also witnessed?

FOXING INVESTMENT

I will briefly digress into the control of foxes. The deadly duo I tried last year were the Pulsar Accolade with the Trail LRF XP50 riflescope fitted to my Blaser R8 in the .223 barrel set-up. What a combination, but at over £8,000 for the pair, they ought to be! Both came with rangefinders, which is a godsend! So, is this the ultimate foxing kit?

Night or day, I struggle with shooting foxes with thermal beyond 175m, as I cannot pinpoint a specific kill zone due to the blurred heat signature transmitted by the animal, but that is just lack of practice on my part. I know that many prefer to use night vision riflescopes to shoot and thermal to spot, but I dare say that will change as technology improves.

IN CONCLUSION

So there you have it. My experiences with thermal, from a purely practical point of view. As for the ethics, it is down to the individual to make that call. I wonder how I will stalk in the future. Three years ago, it was 100% normal binoculars; last year it was 75% normal and 25% thermal; and this season, I think it is 60/40, but it is very tempting to keep using the thermal, especially if my current model is replaced by a slightly better version.

For many, time is scarce (our choice). There are more deer about than ever, so anything that makes us more effective must be good, but to what end? Perhaps I'm a traditionalist, but I really enjoy using my binos. It never ceases to amaze me how they bring things to life, but the ability to easily pick out animals with a thermal at all times of the day is a huge advantage. That is a fact.



ABOVE: *The Accolades in action, with state-of-the-art thermal performance and laser rangefinding all part of the package*

Will I be tempted to keep the thermal in my rucksack or bum bag, just for recovery, maybe for the odd peek? I really hope so, as my success rate has definitely improved since using thermal. I normally shoot to fill the freezer, I'm not driven by cull plans, so do I need one? Thermal spotters are an aid, a tool, not a guarantee for a kill, and surely the final stalk still relies on the fieldcraft and finally pulling the trigger.

If you are a recreational stalker, taking one for the pot, thermal may not be for you, but if you are under pressure with cull plans or pest control or a professional, I have to admit it is a no-brainer. Many will not be interested in even casting an eye over this perceived unethical or unfair technology. I cannot disagree, but I expect you are thinking the same as me: will my beautiful Swarovski binoculars soon be made redundant? I sincerely hope not. **RS**

BELOW: *There's absolutely no doubt that thermal spotting has completely revolutionised foxing for many*

