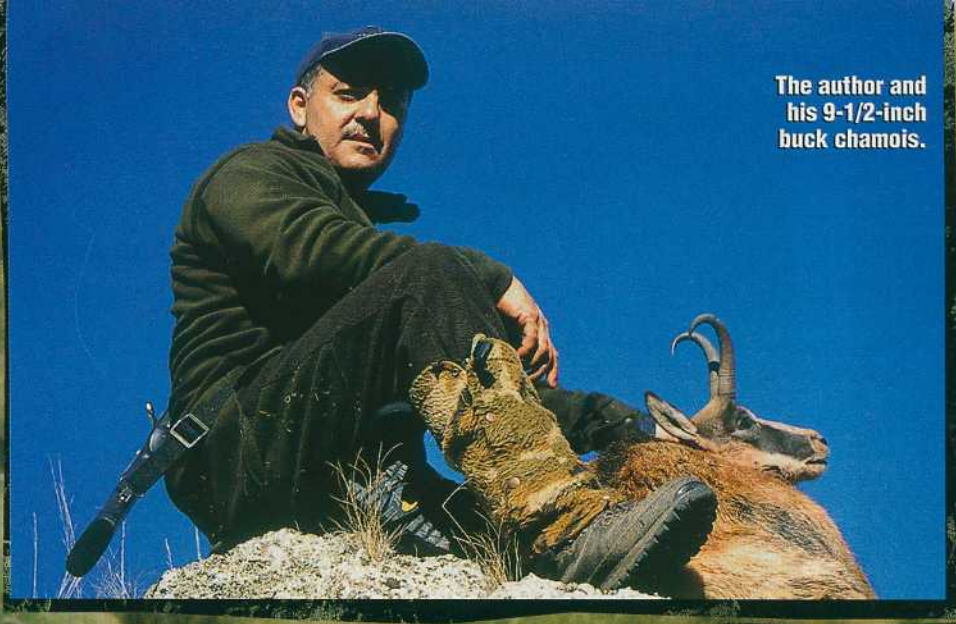
A photograph of a herd of tahr in a lush, green alpine meadow. The animals are scattered across the frame, some standing and some grazing. The background is a steep, grassy slope. The overall scene is a natural, wild environment.

# AN ALPINE DOUBLE

The group of bull tahr  
from which Lloyd  
shot his bull.



The author and his 9-1/2-inch buck chamois.

**Tony Pizzata can't resist the temptation to cross the ditch to NZ in pursuit of two high-altitude trophy game species.**

**IT WAS THE END** of March 2002 when my good friends Lloyd and Glenda McMahon from Alberta, Canada, arrived in Sydney to spend some time with us. Glenda said they needed a well-earned break after a long, cold winter guiding for whitetail and mule deer and were happy to laze on the beach and do some shopping. I'll bet those weren't Lloyd's sentiments. I thought to myself. Besides, it was getting close to that time of year when I usually fly east for the winter.

A phone call to friend and outfitter, Brendan Matthews of *Matthews Trophy Hunting* in New Zealand confirmed Lloyd and I could hunt tahr the second week of April. Lloyd was as excited as I was and a few short weeks later found us discussing plans with Brendan in Wanaka. I knew it wasn't going to be easy, as the bulls are not with the nannies at this time of the year. They usually form bachelor herds after the rut and don't return until around the first or second week of May with the nannies.

The property we were hunting was a privately owned block and regarded by many as some of the best tahr country in the world. Access was only allowed to two outfitters and Brendan was one of them. Numbers were good and trophy quality excellent. Brendan assured us that only a few days prior, another hunter had secured a good bull and had indicated the valley the bulls were living in.

The following morning we drove to the area we'd be hunting. Leaving the vehicle, we followed the creek on foot and continued to climb until we reached the first saddle. As Brendan knew the valley the tahr were supposedly in, we slowly worked our way towards it. A short time later we were approaching the area Brendan had spoken about. Finding a sheltered, rocky ledge with a good field of view we settled in to do a little glassing. Like most alpine hunting, a good vantagepoint will enable you to glass for miles without having to move. From where we were seated you could virtually glass areas that would take you a good day or more to get to. Soon after, Brendan picked up a group of tahr on the opposite face. "They're all nannies and kids," he muttered. After a brief discussion, we decided to move further up the valley, agreeing the bulls would probably be at a higher altitude.

By mid afternoon Brendan spotted what he thought was a tahr bedded down in a sheltered tussock face. The 40x spotting scope confirmed it was a mature bull. A more earnest look revealed 15-18 animals bedded in the tussock and believe it or not, they were all bulls. Several were younger animals but the majority were mature trophies. The decision was made to try to get a little closer. Working our way across the face we eventually got to within less than a kilometre away. A little further on and another look through the binoculars revealed the bulls were now on their feet. Our decision was to stay where we were until they eventually made a move, allowing us to plan our next response from there. Lloyd's nickname was "Lucky" and as things panned out, they moved in our direction just below where we were located.



**Lloyd McMahon (left) with his very respectable bull tahr.**

As we were all seated on a large rocky ledge, we guessed the tahr would probably travel below us and out of sight at shooting distance. The quick decision was made to change location for a better field-of-view. As the bulls were coming towards us, they could only travel one of two ways and from where we'd moved to, we had both routes covered. Slowly the mob moved closer until they were almost directly in line with us, then disappeared below the bluffs we were glassing from. A short time later they reappeared directly below us. Our position from where we were seated couldn't be better. Within minutes the complete mob had emerged in full view again, at less than 200m. Lloyd had already found a steady shooting position while we continued to glass the mob. It's hard to judge horns with so many mature bulls in one mob but Lloyd picked a mature looking bull with an excellent main and took the shot, resulting in an instant kill.

You don't realise how steep the country you're hunting is until the animal, once hit, continues to roll downhill and out of sight. After filming the remaining tahr on video, we slowly pick our way down to where we thought the bull had ended up. Approaching his trophy, Lloyd kept commenting at the body size of these animals. His bull was more than 130kg live weight, with a superb

main and good horn length – 32cm (12-1/2 inches) in length and with enormous bases. As the wind had picked up and the fog had begun to roll in, we all pitched in and wasted no time in caping the bull for a full body mount. By late evening we reached the vehicle and unloading our packs, deciding to enjoy a hot brew before returning home.

The following day, Lloyd had been invited to hunt red stag with a mutual friend and as Brendan had planned to visit a new property he'd recently acquired to guide on with a colleague, I decided to tag along with them. Addicted to alpine hunting, I was more than happy to simply go along for the walk. It was situated in the Hakka Valley and hadn't been hunted commercially before. Chamois were supposedly in good numbers and eager to inspect the property's potential, Brendan had us up at 4am. "Bring you're gun, Tony," he said casually. "If we see a good buck you might want to take him. I used to muster sheep in this area and know the numbers are good." He wasn't going to get any arguments from me, so I quickly obliged and threw in the .270.

Driving through the lower ranges, Brendan pointed out the area he knew so well. Tiny white dots, presumably sheep, peppered the many square kilometres of undulating hills and valleys. After crossing a couple of rocky

creek beds, we commenced our ascent into the mountains. This neck of the woods had a different look to it. The higher we climbed the rougher the terrain. The end of the track came quickly, as Brendan cut the diesel motor of the Nissan. "We'll have to walk from here," he muttered. "That's what I call the razorback ridge," he said, pointing across to some of the most inhospitable terrain I'd seen on New Zealand's East Coast to date. A combination of grey rocky crags, steep gorges and shingles led up to an almost razor's edge which fell away on the other side to who knows where.

Although still early April, with no snow on the tops, the air was crisp and the light breeze made it necessary to wear our cold weather gear. With daypacks on we crossed an old barbed wire fence and headed across a tussock flat at the base of a rocky outcrop. Although the sun was shining in the lower regions we had just traversed, a thick layer of cloud and mist seemed to hang around the top half of the ranges. Working our way towards the razorback ridge, chamois country soon became evident as the tussock covered hills and dry, rocky creek beds slowly became a maze of steep shingle slides and rocky outcrops. The near vertical terrain looked damp and inhospitable with very little vegetation present. Chamois and tahr seem to thrive in this type of country, possibly because of the cover it provides.

Working our way across the bolder strewn face and onto the first saddle, we settled in for a thorough glass of the opposite face. After satisfying ourselves there were no chamois present in the immediate area, Brendan suggested we move across to the opposite face and glass into the next valley. As the area we were in formed a type of horseshoe, all we needed to do was sidle around the face, keeping our height and eventually work our way over.

Stopping to glass at regular intervals ensured we hadn't missed anything, as the chamois could have easily been feeding or bedded down in one of the many gullies that formed the base of this enormous expanse. Brendan had visited this area a month or so prior and had commented on a mob of chamois he'd spotted on the face we were on. They were all nannies and kids and numbered a dozen or more animals in total. Before we crossed over to inspect the next valley, we decided to give the face we had just come from one last look. Finding a comfortable spot out of the light winds, we made one last attempt to look for a chamois. About 10 minutes passed before a lone chamois was spotted, bedded down on an open patch of dirt above a large boulder. It was located, surprisingly, right below where we were seated when we first began glassing. A closer look with the spotting scope revealed a mature nanny, probably around 23cm (9 inches) in horn length. At first I thought it may have been a lone buck, but Brendan mentioned that as a rule of thumb the fact that the horns were flared out at the top generally indicates a nanny. A buck usually has straight, unflared horns. Being a mature nanny, the horns seemed to have quite heavy bases, which is also uncommon. Female chamois have much lighter timber and skinnier bases.

The nanny eventually got up and shook herself off, finally squatting her back legs and assuring us she was, in fact, a female. A thorough search revealed no other signs of wildlife, so the decision was made to cross over the top and into the next valley without disturbing her.

**Pizzata with Lloyd and Stuart Rees and the chamois they bagged on the West Coast with Brendan. Note the darker cape due to the higher altitude and lower temperatures.**



**“...we peered over the top in its direction. The chamois was now feeding directly across from us with its family jewels in full view...it was a buck.”**



**Brendan and the author with his buck chamois, all caped out and ready for the taxidermist.**

Now on the far face and right on the spine of what we call the razorback ridge, Bevan, Brendan and I dropped into the next valley system. The country below looked a shadowed mass of wet, grey bluffs dropping away to countless crevasses forming the base of the ridge we were on.

Monkey scrub and the odd clump of tussock followed a running creek at the base of the razorback ridge. The opposite face, also completely shadowed by cloud and mist, looked ideal chamois country. Damp and cold wasn't my idea of home, but the chamois thrived in it. Scattered clumps of Spaniard and the odd patch of moss and alpine grass across from where we were seated, indicated we were in the right kind of area.

Over the top and into the gut just below, we carefully looked around for any movement. Shortly after finding a vantagepoint to glass from, we began searching for chamois. It wasn't long before a group of nannies were spotted feeding around a ledge on the opposite face. Brendan pulled out the spotting scope while I set up the video camera on a compact tripod I always carry. We watched the mob for more than half an hour with Brendan indicating there was a buck in the mob, but only a young 7 or 8-incher. After yet more glassing and convincing ourselves a mature buck wasn't hidden nearby, we decided to move around a little further.

Again, as a general rule of thumb, mature chamois bucks, similar to bull tahr, don't come into the mob looking for nannies until the rut occurs. Although a chamois buck is a solitary animal, whereas tahr tend to mob up into bachelor herds. The chamois in early April are still ginger in colour, with a black dorsal stripe in areas such as this. Hit the high country on the West Coast, however, where chamois and tahr live at higher altitudes and significantly colder conditions and they are a more sandy gold colour, with brown shoulders and well into their winter coat transitions.

Moving around a rocky bluff face and into another gut, Brendan suddenly backed away and indicated there were animals below us on the opposite face. Slowly approaching the edge with caution, we each peered over the top for a look. Although our chamois was on the opposite face, we had to be careful, as their eyesight is outstanding. Again Brendan pulled out the spotting scope for a look, almost immediately confirming it was a buck. Our quarry was nestled just above the creek bed in an opening surrounded by the odd clump of bush and tussock.

The plan was made to get in for a closer look. As we each carried a two-way radio, Bevan would hold his position up high and Brendan and I would drop into a narrow gut that ran at an angle down to the creek. Once in the gut we should be out of sight, relying on Bevan to make contact should the buck take off.

About a half-hour later found Brendan and I sneaking up a small crest concealing us from the chamois. As we reached the top of the knoll, now on our bellies and clawing our way forward in silence, we peered over the top in its direction. The chamois was now feeding directly across from us with its rear end facing us. At less than 100m distance, I could see the animal's family jewels through the binos...it was a buck. Feeding on quite a steep face, it lifted its head and nibbled away at a patch of moss on a rock face above it. Now directly adjacent to the buck I could distinctly see the horns were well above the ears, with heavy bases and hooked well back. Brendan gave a slow but definite thumbs up. Lifting the video camera slowly, he proceeded to catch the event on video while I slowly worked the bolt and took aim. As the buck lifted its head I squeezed the trigger, sending the buck over the edge and into the bushes below. The silence was broken momentarily by the shot and later by Bevan's voice over the radio, "You beauty, you got him. I'll be down in a flash with the gear".

As we sat there admiring my trophy, we each guessed at his horn length. About 20 minutes later Bevan arrived with my pack. Pulling out a tape measure and running them over the length of the horns, I confirmed a little over 24cm (9-1/2 inches) with heavy bases. I shoulder caped my trophy and once packed suggested we head for home. ●