

STAG MU

By Tony Pizzata

Tony has an eventful few days hunting, while also mustering sheep in wild New Zealand's hill country.



MAIN: Red stag country, also home to Brendon's sheep and cattle herds.

INSET: The author tries his hand on horseback in the high country.

IN ADDITION TO SHEEP AND CATTLE FARMING, Brendon Matthews runs a successful hunting operation on the South Island of New Zealand for most of its big game species. His chamois and Tahr hunting is done predominantly on privately owned leases around the Rangitata River area, where snow capped ridges and steep faced tussock country form the Canterbury side of the Southern Alps. Red deer, fallow buck, arapawa ram and lots more are also available free range or alternatively, on a large game ranch situated in the foothills of the alps. In fact I'm told his game ranch encompasses what's known as "Within the feral range". Which simply means there are chamois, red stag and fallow buck and at times, Tahr on both sides of the fence. This offers both free range or ranch style hunts.

Another species now available through Matthews

Trophy Hunting is pure-bred Canadian elk. Over several years of operation, Brendon has introduced a small heard of cow elk and bulls to start his own huntable heard. I'd been after one for years but hunting them in such places as Canada or the United States was well beyond my budget.

Having hunted with Brendon for more than 10 years for chamois and Tahr, I'd often stay on after a hunt to film and photograph other clients throughout the season. Last year in addition to other game, I filmed two of his clients take big bull elk in classic mountain country, thick with dense vegetation and studded with pine trees. From that day on I'd decided I wanted one and besides, a kiwi elk was well under half the price of what you'd pay overseas, not to mention a big difference in air fare. There and then I booked a return trip the following year for an elk with Brendon.

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spotted not two hundred metres distant, but they quickly made their escape into thick vegetation. A short time later we topped the first ridge and Brendon began to glass for sheep. Soon he spotted another group of hinds feeding on an opposite face, but the sheep were nowhere to be seen.


Moving on a little further, Brendon pointed out where he'd seen a couple of stags the week before. The afternoon wore on and eventually we spotted a small group of sheep just above a creek bed that wound its way down from the tops. Glassing down into open grassland in the opposite direction I mused, "That's a nice red in that paddock Brendon". "Where?" he asked. "Down there in that green open paddock", I pointed.

In an instant, all three of us swung our binoculars in the same direction, as Brendon proceeded to tell me there weren't supposed to be deer in that paddock. It belonged to the neighbour and he had no stock and in particular, no deer. There were five hinds and a stag in total, as they continued to feed in the open. Shortly after, the stag began to roar and the hinds gathered. It was getting late and light was starting to fade. Then, almost immediately, another stag roared from above. Brendon said that unfortunately we couldn't take the stag because, although he was a wild one, it was on the neighbour's boundary.

A young red stag caught in the open during the rut – something to set hunters' hearts racing – as if the terrain wasn't enough.

It was late March and the reds were roaring and the Elk bugling. I had only heard the eerie bugle of a bull elk on the many American DVD's I had watched. On the first afternoon after my arrival, I accompanied Brendon and one of his farmhand/guides Cory to where the sheep were situated as they were to be mustered the following day and needed to be located. His sheep block, unlike what you'd expect in Australia, was a mixture of undulating, semi open grass land, leading up to steep, rainforest type terrain, with narrow guts and a pine forest at the very top. The area continued around several faces and covered quite a large part of the surrounding ranges.

Leaving the bikes behind, Brendon asked if I'd like to carry the rifle as there was no shortage of wild red deer in the area at this time of year. In fact, as we entered the first paddock a hind and young calf were



A small group of hinds caught out in the early morning sun.



Tony with his nice representative mature red stag. Close country prohibits moving a heavy stag into a more photogenic pose.



Corey's cull stag where he fell.

Glassing for several minutes, we watched the stag gather his hinds and move back towards the bush. The mob was at least seven or eight hundred meters away and if they crossed back over the fence and into the bush, we could take the stag. A close look revealed what seemed to be a 12-point rack. Again another stag roared from above and leaving the 12 pointer alone, we quickly focused on the stag above. Cory was first to spot him and proceeded to give a series of roars back to encourage the stag down. Light was fading fast, so we decided we'd head out and try the area at first light before the sheep were mustered.

First light found us weaving our way up through the hunting block, through the gate and into where the sheep were located. Deer could be heard roaring all around us. Nearing the general area where the deer had last been spotted, a roar came from just over the hill. Carefully topping the ridge, Cory was first to spot the stag on the edge of bush. Unaware of our presence, the stag gave another roar. Although only an uneven head referred to as a bush stag, Brendon wanted him cleaned up, as not only do they damage fences, but they also compete with stock for feed. The stag was on his own and definitely not the stag I'd seen the afternoon before. Cory handed me the rifle and offered the shot. "He's your stag, you spotted him", I replied, "So you take him".

Producing a smile from ear to ear, Cory half-reluctantly took back the rifle. I was more than happy to video-tape the whole event and besides, there was always the chance that the stag from the previous afternoon could show up for me. Cory cautiously got into position for the shot while I set up the video camera. As I began to film, the stag continued to clear the bush and proceeded to step out onto the track and into a clearing. "When ever you're ready", I whispered; the stag was approximately 130 metres away. Taking his time to ensure a clean kill, Cory slowly squeezed the trigger, hitting the stag on the point of the shoulder and dropping him in his tracks. After several photos, Cory removed the head and cape and it was decided that the meat wasn't worth taking, as the stag was in full rut and wreaked of his activities. Instead, Brendon would drag the carcass down to where he knew of a mob of pigs were situated in an effort to keep them in the general area for other overseas hunting clients.

The morning sun had only been with us for a short time, so Brendon decided we'd hunt on for a bit longer



Corey's grin betrays his delight at one of the fringe benefits of working with sheep in NZ.

while the stags were still vocal and get into the mustering later on. More hinds were spotted in a nearby gully and the sheep were out, feeding down low. Another roar from a nearby gully meant another stag was just around the corner. At this time of the year when stags are vocal, it pays to just sit and listen, then follow up for a look – it's the rut that gives you the edge and their roar that gives their location away. Again we headed off in the general direction of the stag, as he was only one or two gullies away. Sidling

around the ridge on a well worn track, I spotted him down below. As all three of us watched, the stag began to feed on the edge of the track, then lifted his head and gave another roar. A close inspection revealed a very heavy nine pointer and an old stag at that. This time Brendon was working the camera and I was fortunate enough to grab the rifle for the shot. Taking a steady rest, I put the cross hairs on the stags shoulder and slowly squeezed the trigger. The stag dropped instantly and lay motionless as Brendon and Cory ran across to congratulate me.

Again, we took lots of photos and removed the head and cape. He wasn't the stag we'd seen the evening before but nonetheless I was very happy with him. Later we were joined by friend and Aussie outfitter Glen Giffin of Muckadilla Safaris who guides for buffalo and banteng in The Northern Territory. He had come over to work with Brendon for a few weeks and would help with the sheep muster later that day. By late afternoon the sheep were in and the job was done, as all four of us headed for home after a long day.

Tomorrow would mark the beginning of my elk hunt with Brendon and Glen who was looking for an arapawa ram to add to his New Zealand collection and a possible prospect for a bull elk as well. The elk's another story that I'll tell you about next time, but the red stag was an opportunity I just couldn't pass up.

Brendon has several free range areas for red stag, where ten, twelve and even fourteen pointers can be encountered. The best time to hunt reds is definitely during the rut, which occurs over there from about the end of March to the end of April. To find out more regarding any of his guided hunts, he can be contacted on 0011-64-274747921. ■