

Climb High for Chamois

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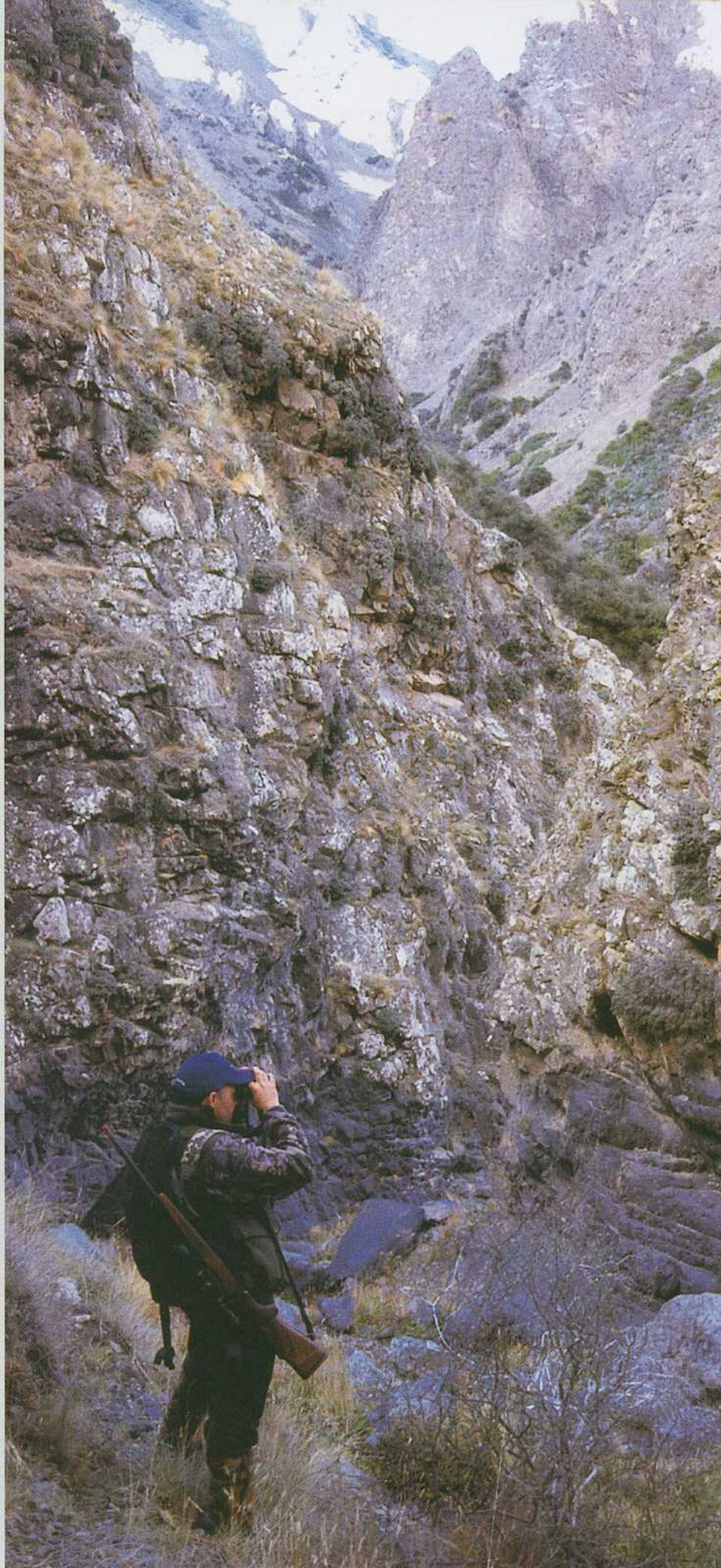
As the magnificent animal gradually came into view, Brendan lifted his binocular, and I lifted the rifle, putting the crosshairs on the chamois' neck.

After leaving the valley floor, we slowly picked our way uphill through low-lying scrub and tussock. Eventually reaching the rocky outcrop that formed the base of the range we'd be hunting, we continued up rocky guts and across shingle and clay slides to the first tussock-covered saddle. Gasping for air and sweating profusely, I hunched over to take the weight of the pack off my shoulders.

What am I doing here again? I thought to myself. After nearly 30 New Zealand trips to date, you would think I'd have learned my lesson. *Was it all that good? Was it all worth it? Yeah, you betcha!*

The last eight or 10 of my hunts in this exotic land were made with friend and outfitter Brendan Matthews of Matthews Trophy Hunting on New Zealand's South Island. He specializes in big game such as tahr, elk, red stag and fallow buck. Hunts can be undertaken by helicopter or on foot. My choice was on foot. I was here for an encounter with perhaps my favorite alpine dweller, the chamois.

After I'd caught my breath, we continued on. We hadn't reached real chamois country yet, but were fast approaching it. Brendan suggested we start glassing from the next ridge. The low country behind us and the many





A female chamois in summer coat. Males and females have hooked horns, but the males have much heavier bases.

bluff systems ahead were a breathtaking spectacle that included snow-capped crags reaching into the clouds. The higher we climbed, the steeper, rockier and more barren the terrain became. The chamois, though, seem to like it just fine in these surroundings. I suppose they feel more secure at high altitude, and they always seem to look down for danger, never up.

By midafternoon, we had covered lots of ground and seen lots of chamois, but no trophy bucks. Later that afternoon, we spotted a good mob in the next valley but had run out of time to get close enough for a stalk. Knowing they'd remain in the same general vicinity if left undisturbed, we decided to call it a day and return the following morning.

Day two dawned crisp and clear. First light found us slogging our way up a creek bed leading to the valley system where we'd last seen the herd the previous afternoon. At the head of the valley, we decided to branch off and steadily sidle our way up the adjacent ridge in an effort to get high enough to glass the entire opposite face. Up there, all we would have to do is maintain our height and thoroughly glass the country. If we were successful in locating them, a stalk could then be planned.

By about 7:30 a.m., we had found a comfortable glassing spot and were inspecting the many rock crevasses that formed the opposite face. Within moments, we spotted our first two

chamois. Brendan's tripod-mounted spotting scope revealed a nanny and kid. At this time of year their coats are a rich chocolate brown, with striking, cream-colored facial features – as pretty as chamois get.

For the next half-hour, we continued to glass high and low for more animals, knowing the rest were probably bedded down or in a sheltered cut nearby. Brendan produced a small thermos of coffee he always carries on day trips and offered me a cup. The next half-hour was spent in style, with coffee in one hand and binocular in the other.

The rising sun's rays began to shine on the face we were glassing. Soon, we spied two chamois opposite us and three others appearing out of nowhere. Again, the spotting scope was put to use, revealing immature animals.

"The rest of them will be in there somewhere," Brendan whispered.

"There's got to be a decent buck with them," I offered.

Eventually, we picked up another chamois, and close evaluation with the spotter confirmed it was a buck, and a good one. This fellow was a lot higher up than the rest, feeding on the fringe of the snowcapped tops. He wouldn't be easy to get to because the group of nannies was between him and us. Our only option was to head back down the creek, cross to the opposite face, then work our way up until we were just above or in line with him.

We packed up and began backtracking, moving as hastily as possible



A female chamois and her kid in summer coat.

down a deep, sheltered cut and then down a shingle slide to the creek.

After crossing it, we paused for a quick confirmation of our plan. Then, we headed directly uphill in an effort to reach our quarry's elevation while at the same time keeping our distance. A faint breeze blew conveniently down the valley, ensuring that we wouldn't be detected, at least by scent.

After an hour we were nearing the perceived location of the big chamois. To keep the buck below us, we would have to reach the snow line before moving toward him. Our glasses showed no sign of life, but we knew one or more chamois would be tucked away just around a corner.

We continued carefully forward at snow level, stopping behind the shelter of a rocky outcrop to glass. Shortly, we heard the clatter of rocks below us. Brendan and I looked at each other simultaneously, knowing it was probably our target on the move. Moments later, we both caught a glimpse of the

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Author with 9 1/2 inch chamois.



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Author with a fine 9-3/4 inch chamois taken on an earlier trip with Matthews.

buck 70 or 80 meters below us. He was on his way up, but now was out of sight in the rocks below. If the buck continued to climb, he'd almost certainly have to cross a small open section of tussock before hitting the snow and rocks where we hid.

The plan was for Brendan to call the shot if the buck was as good as we thought. My benchmark after many trips was 9-1/2 inches in horn length. Otherwise, we'd pass him up. As the buck gradually came into view, Brendan lifted his binocular, and I lifted the rifle, putting the crosshairs on the animal's neck. When the buck turned broadside, paused and looked in our direction, Brendan whispered, "Take him!" The buck seemed to sense danger, but it was too late. The 130-grain spire-point struck home, dropping him on the spot.

Unloading the .270 Winchester, I stood up to stretch my cramping legs and dropped my pack to head down for a look. We carried the buck up into some nearby snow for a photo session and measured the horns. The buck wore a prime winter coat and horns slightly over the magic 9-1/2-inch mark. He was so good, in fact, that I decided to cape him out for a full body mount. An hour later we were packed and ready for the hike out. 🐾

For more information about hunting big game in New Zealand with Brendan Matthews of Matthews Trophy Hunting Safaris New Zealand, phone +64-330 26008 or email b.matthews@clear.net.nz.