

Winter Tahr Hunt 2004

by David Eaton

Most winters find me spending a couple of weeks either wandering about looking for tahr or sticking sharp things into ice while tied to the end of a rope. Or both at the same time, as luck would have it. This past July, we three members of the Porirua Branch of the N.Z.D.A., Andrew Rowland, Don Hawinkels and I headed into the Macaulay and Godley valleys in search of tahr. It was the first trip together for some time and we all had our own goals. Andrew hadn't as yet had success on tahr and was naturally keen to do so. Don was keen to find a larger bull than previously shot. My number one objective was for Andrew to have success and then I would look for 'mister big', with all of us having plenty of fresh meat to take home.

With enough food and equipment to open a couple of shops, the Hilux made it effortlessly to the hut door by mid afternoon, just in time to make a brew and get the spotting scope into action. Andrew thought he would ease into the big hills over a few days, gaining fitness and confidence as he went and then hopefully getting on to something. Only problem was that in less time than it takes for a cuppa to cool, the spotting scope had zoomed in on some tahr. Talking to Andrew, he agreed it was a goer. They were two kilometres away and 500 metres up a tussock ridge with no snow and ice. That would come tomorrow. The weather forecast wasn't too good for the next few days, however, and though not ideal, we thought that we had better take our chances. After rapidly packing day bags and not forgetting torches we drove the first kilometre - such luxury.

A short time later we had blown a few cob webs out of the system on the steep climb and were lying flat in the tussock with a group of nannies some 250 metres away and no chance of us getting closer. Andrew's shot connected, but as can happen, the nanny went into one of those really nasty places. I don't usually risk life and limb for a nanny and so it was back to the hut for a well earned brew.

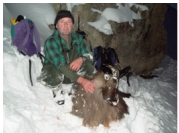


The next morning was clear and calm, so the relaxing holiday would have to go on hold for another day. We all headed up into the same area, only going higher this time and took shelter near a good vantage point as the wind was fair howling along now. Don's day pack soon

thought it was a kite and flew off into the jaws of a major nasty place. Luckily it got snagged and then retrieved. Moving on round we encountered a group of nannies. Andrew shot and recovered a good sized nanny while Don and I got some lead in the air and added to the meat pile. Hand shakes all round and Andrew was a happy chappy. Heading down a shingle slide can be hazardous, requiring you to keep a constant eye out for loose rocks. Being aware of the potential threat we where moving away from the base, when we had to duck for cover. A boulder exploded on impact near by, sending bits flying over our heads. When climbing we wear helmets; maybe we need Hi Viz hunting helmets.

The forecasted front hit that afternoon with rain, then snow, but who cares when you are all cosy in one of the best huts in New Zealand.

Our long awaited sleep in had finally arrived. Such joy. With that out of the way I started to hassle Andrew about another slog up hill, especially as the skies were clearing and a certain bull tahr up valley warranted closer inspection. While Andrew and I plodded off in the powdery snow, Don headed off to check out another area. A lengthy detour to keep us out of sight ensured that we located the animals. Unfortunately the bull was younger than anticipated, so we left them to it after a few photos and raced off around the corner to see what else lurked nearby while there was enough light.



It didn't take long to locate two separate groups with one group having a good looking bull amongst it. The group were holed up on the cold face with the fresh snow restricting their movements. Earlier in the day an avalanche, had come down an adjoining gully, therefore some experience and care would be required to get up there. Using patches of scrub initially to camouflage us, we edged closer in, at times, waist deep snow. We minimised our time crossing the gully and after an hour we approached the designated shooting point. A quick guess of the range was about 250 metres and they had started to move off. Using his day bag, Andrew quickly lined up and fired. The bull kept moving and Andrew sent a few more shots its way. It wandered around as if not hit, as bull tahr often do, and then fell over. He had landed two or three fatal shots at what turned out to be 300 metres - checked by GPS. It then took another 40 minutes to climb up to it in chest deep snow, just as darkness set in.

Naturally Andrew was now a very happy chappy. It was great to share the moment as we stood together in the silence of the Southern Alps, an environment that can be so daunting while, so enriching.

We returned to the hut quite late with the skin, back steaks and head. A celebratory drink or two followed. We all sleep in after that. Over the next few days we saw more tahr with Don shooting a tasty young one. He also had some fun and games with a couple of good sized bulls, but they got the better of him on this occasion. I also focussed on young nannies as it is important to contain animal numbers below agreed thresholds. Generally nannies up to two years of age are the best eating. Tahr roasts and sausages are very tasty.



We moved up to the head of the Godley next and soon found some animals that required further checking out. The closer you get to the main divide, the steeper the country gets and with the recent snow covering everything it looked quite impressive. I had been in the area over the summer checking out climbing routes and topping up the freezer. Some of the far off places observed then must surely harbour a few huge bulls just waiting for some muggins to have a go at them.

Next morning it was early, too early, for the warmth of my sleeping bag still beckoned as my head torch scanned the icy slopes ahead. Ice axe and crampons clawed their way up, taking me metre by metre towards what had to be a tahr hunter's el dorado. An hour and a half later my nostrils flared as the scent of bull tahr had me fully awake. Leaving my pack (and good camera) I slithered down a spur following my nose. A nice 12" bull with his harem fed unconcerned within 50 metres of me. Time soon passes in these situations, so after a few snaps with the pocket camera it was time to again head on up. I planned to camp on a high terrace.

The fine weather was hanging on, but due to the distraction of the earlier bull, I'd left it too late in the day to get across a tricky snow slope which was now warming up. I located a number of animals including a 10" bull below my lunch spot which provided some photo opportunities. In the distance was a bull I would like to have had a closer look at. All afternoon you could see the threatening north westerly cloud build on the divide and start to flow over the passes. Later, when I hit the sack the weather appeared to be holding. Then in the wee small hours the wind hit sending spin drift flying. This makes any activity in a bivy bag a little unpleasant, so a rapid descent to the hut for breakfast was called for. The others had been enjoying their surroundings - after all it was meant to be a holiday.

