

South Westland Adventure

by David Eaton

There is something very special about wild and remote regions, that is, hard to deny. Add to that the chances of encountering a majestic bull tahr or an agile chamois and you have the perfect ingredients for great adventure. With living in the north island the magnetic pull may be to the north, but the spiritual pull is definitely to the big country of the south island and in particular the central Southern Alps and South West Land. One day I may live closer, but in the mean time I try to head south twice a year. Ideally a summer and a winter sojourn. For some time I had been waiting for my son Fraser to be physically big enough to handle the rugged stuff that tends to pop up around there. Over the last year he sprouted faster than a new set of antlers, so plans were made to head into the Douglas River in January 2005 with his older sister Kelly. Unfortunately Kelly had to pull out and this opened the door for Fraser's mate Kieron Waldman to go.

I had been in the same area a few weeks earlier with plenty of Tahr sighted. Although securing ample tahr meat from young animals no bulls with horns over 11 inches were sighted. Due to the late season with heavy accumulations of snow still clinging to slopes that would normally be covered in flowering plants, the chamois had still to make an appearance.

The big day for the lads duly arrived and despite leaving some gear in the hut, we still had a good load on board as James Scott manoeuvred his machine skyward. Eyes searching for a break in the cloud, which had sprinkled fresh snow over the higher slopes that morning. No problems, as we were soon skimming across the tussock flats in a sun baked valley. As it was Kieran's first chopper ride and Frazer's first into such big country, it wasn't surprising that they both wore pretty big smiles. Once the excitement levels settled down we sorted the gear and got camp into order. The mountain radio aerial was strung out and I briefed the boys on what to do in case something happened to me. During the stay they had practise doing the evening sked.



While I made a brew the spotting scope was set up and before long Fraser had spotted his first

tahr. With all the bad weather of late, the animals were generally at lower levels. With an early dinner under our belts I was considering where to head for our first hunt when two chamois appeared in a creek right behind the hut. And if that wasn't good enough only a hundred metres to the side of them were six bull tahr. Excellent, you might say. The down side to it was that it required a fast hours climb to get into position. The tahr had started to move up to feed as we made our way out of view up an adjacent creek bed with a tussock ridge providing cover. Getting up hill quickly while not getting too puffed can be hard. As the tahr had moved we had to sneak into a dip on the ridge which should provide a view of proceedings. Pausing to steady the breathing, we then crawled onto the ridge. The bulls were feeding towards some bluffs. Fraser lined up on one and fired. Unfortunately all six bulls then ran into the bluffs to be consumed by the fading light.

There was a chance that the chamois may still be in the creek so I directed the boys to move quickly but carefully to a vantage point above where the animals had been. Peering over the edge I soon spotted one of them still feeding. Which goes to show that one shot doesn't disturb the area too much. As it was now Kieron's turn, he got into position. Unfortunately the shot went a little high and only removed a patch of skin, with the chamois exiting the area quickly and soon joined by the other one which had reappeared from below us. The direct descent back to the hut was at times challenging as we lowered ourselves into the darkness. Although we didn't get the desired result it had been an eventful first hunt, with much learned and things to work on.

The forecast for the following day was a cracker and so with the boys happy to rest up and generally muck around I made plans for an alpine adventure. The greyness of dawn found me strapping crampons on as I approached the Wicks Glacier. A downside to enjoying both hunting and mountaineering is all the gear on your back as you must always have your rifle etc with you just in case. With a good freeze I moved upwards and onwards with relative ease. The crevasses were generally well filled which assisted my travel as I scanned ahead for the safest route. Using my ice axe I probed the surface to check possible snow bridges. Resting below Blizzard Peak at around 2,300 metres the vastness of the area can be overwhelming. To the south the peaks and valleys of the Landsborough stretch out before you. I always take plenty of photos of different hillsides as you never know when you may end up there and it's great to have photo references. Immediately east of me Mt Sefton and just a little north Aoraki-Mt Cook stood in all their splendour. No doubt there would be others out befriending the high places on such a day. On Wicks Col above the Horace Walker névé I pondered the time it would take to reach Sefton. Not today. I scratched my way onto Pioneer peak for lunch and a well earned rest. Over the walkie talkie Fraser told me that they were up at the lake and all was okay. I told him where I was and where I intended to go. The plan was to hunt my way back once I got down out of the ice.

