

Tararua Fun

By David Eaton

Sitting in the tussock overlooking a saddle on a perfect day during the roar is what dreams are made of. Living my dream I settled down to enjoy an apple in the sun while making use of my trusty roaring tube, (40 mm PVC pipe). Reality soon disturbed my slumber as an eight point red stag popped into view a few hundred metres away roaring his head off. Noting his small set of antlers I sat back to watch developments. With a little encouragement from me, he located my direction and started to zero in. "Excellent," I thought with a smile on my face. He appeared quite determined and as he closed within 20 metres I thought it time to put the apple down and hunker as low as possible behind a stunted flax bush. With no intention of shooting him and for some reason not having my camera, it was a matter of let's see what happens. I did have one up the spout just in case though. Moments later he was about to step over me, when our eyes meet. I was looking straight up at his chest. "Boo!" He spun round and retreated a few metres clearly shell shocked - a talking flax! We spent the next hour in close proximity as it turned out, as he decided to head along my planned route. It is a memory that always brings a smile to my face.

Having fun in life is critical to our wellbeing, so as hunters we need to conjure up a bit of entertainment on the hill. Some of us have mates that are real comedians, great for around camp, but what about when you are out on the slopes? For me I look to the animals that I'm pursuing to provide that element of amusement.

The fun comes from the challenge of getting in close and personal, or perhaps just watching some hilarious antics.

It can be quite amazing what happens when you hold back and don't shoot the first identifiable deer you see. Often a better view of the animal is presented or more animals come into view. On one such occasion I was concealed behind an old log on a grassy river flat with a hind feeding twenty metres away. While watching her a fawn came into view exploring its surroundings. When only a few metres separated us it twitched its soft nose at the strange bump by the log (no camera). Kicked out its legs and returned to an unconcerned mum. Most of the year I am after tasty venison first up and photos second. Come the roar, I search for red stags with at least three points on each top. There is all the usual tension and drama of stalking an elusive quarry, but once I'm assured that the animal is not on my shopping list (frantic counting of points), then the fun begins.

My first recommendation is, keep it simple. Try not to get bogged down by thinking that you have to have all the latest gear. Don't get me wrong, it's great stuff but not essential. What is critical is that you get away from computer screens and bar stools. It is preferable to hunt by yourself while in the bush. Be patient. In light of recent shooting accidents be very careful. I do not walk around the bush looking for deer or flying pigs. What I am looking for is something that is different, that catches the eye as would a flying pig. This may be a stag standing broadside on at 10 metres in open bush, it may be a flick of white out the corner of your eye on the

opposite face 100 metres away or, in tahr country, it may be a small triangular shape on top of a large rock 200 metres away - nannies head.

Once you have noticed something do not move – keep watching. Consider your options first. If you are to shoot, remember that a clean kill should be paramount in your thinking, thus avoiding unnecessary suffering to the animal, tough meat or a lost trophy. To get a clean kill you need to prove beyond doubt what part of the beast you're aiming at and to do this generally means the animal has to move thereby revealing more than just a brown hairy patch. On one occasion while walking down a river with a new hunter, a stag crashed off up the bank into the bush. At the same time that I fired at its head he shot at a large brown bit - the paunch. Had he been by himself the outcome would have been less than ideal. If your heart beat is going faster than a rabbit down a hole, try a couple of deep breathes. Easy to say, and it is. Clearly when there is a reasonable distance between yourself and the animal things are a lot easier.

Never the less in the bush at distances of between five to thirty metres there is potential for catching your breath. Some animals will undoubtedly disappear as quickly as they came, but a lot won't. It's the nature of hunting that on some days everything will hum along and on others hardly anything goes right for you.

The Tararua is a special place for me and it would be an unusual year not to find me wandering around for at least a week during the roar. People say, "Is it not dangerous in there with all those other hunters running about?" Not really. By avoiding huts and tracks you immediately avoid most other hunters. It is very rare for me to encounter anyone on a five day journey, which when you consider that the Tararua is one of the most heavily used forest parks in New Zealand, is a little odd. Trampers generally stick to tracks though.

During the last two years I have revisited some of my old haunts with some pleasing results. I was keen to go back to a promising eleven pointer that on a wet and windy evening had come within six metres of myself and partner, Christine. It had been her first deer encounter and with it roaring defiance in full view of us, a memory not easily forgotten.

This time I was alone, once I had slid off the chopper skid that Jason had expertly nudged into the leatherwood. My fly camp was positioned on a knob covered in mountain beech with a thick carpet of moss beneath the canopy. A major saddle and a number of side ridges make for an area with ample possibilities. The morning ticked by with little evidence of deer. I pondered whether the high price for venison at the time may have had a bearing on this.

Undeterred I headed off towards the sheltered side of the saddle with its adjoining feed faces. A stag answered my call from a spur not far below camp. Back up the hill I plodded, sidling below camp in an attempt to pin point this now very vocal beast. The wind direction was good and the moss silent under foot. He was clearly keen to meet me as it wasn't long before sounds of his progress up the slope could be heard. Positioning myself behind a tree on a slight bump provided an excellent view. In these situations I roar gently away or towards the ground so as not to intimidate the stag. A stag will generally come straight in until it senses that you are close and then may attempt to sneak around you to gain an up hill advantage or cut your scent. That is why you often hear of one hunter staying back to roar while his mate moves in closer. Holding the rifle in a manner that would require little movement and with the bolt closed, I waited

with building anticipation. There! Was that a branch moving?

Suddenly at ten metres a strong antler with three reasonable top tines appeared. My body tenses. Looking good, then the other antler appears. It's a nine pointer and my body relaxes. Taking hold of my little Olympus camera I snap some photos as he continues to move around near by. After a period of time we go our separate ways – me up to camp while he continues his search for female company.

Over the next day and a half the only other sign I find is of a couple of hinds and two more encounters with the same stag in different locations. I later learn that a DOC worker shot a big antlered stag in the area earlier in the year. Oh Well.

It was time to pack up and head over the tops to scout new country, this time camping high in the tussock with commanding views of two large basins and a short walk to a vantage point from which any roaring stag would be heard. The net result was nothing heard and only shattered old sign from the previous summer.

After an early morning look around it was off to the next likely area some three hours away. The long descending ridge ends at a prominent tussock knob just above the leatherwood. The weather was holding with light southerlies and clear skies. Great stuff. Camping here required a little walk down a spur to an unused tarn/wallow to obtain water in a three litre wine cask. While doing this a distant roar could be heard somewhere along the ridge to the east. Negotiating a pile of five gut bags I entered the bush noting that there was a lot of regeneration of plants preferred by deer, e.g. five finger, broadleaf. "Not good," I thought. An hour later sitting on an open knob a roar drifted up from the bluffs below.

Having narrowed the search down I descended carefully into the stag's backyard. Once through the bluffs, deer sign was every where and guided by the odd sleepy moan the gap was closing. Easing through some thick beach regeneration onto the top of a small slip a hind appeared before me. Giving out a moan I was rewarded with a large eight pointer trotting into view eight metres away. Time for a couple of photos and he was off to catch up with his lady. Leaving them to it, I regained the ridge and backtracked. Just before the open tops I veered off onto what was once a major deer highway leading to a feed face.

After battling thick regeneration for ten minutes things opened up and I immediately saw my path blocked by a yearling hind. After being frozen to the spot for some time she wandered off feeding with another hind. Moving forward as stealthily as possible I peered over the rise in open beach forest to see four hinds looking my way. Time for a photo before they drifted off down the hill in no particular hurry. With the evening shadows lengthening a faint roar floated up from lower down the slope. The location of the morning hunt was decided.

First light found me edging down towards a nice grassy slip surrounded by pepper wood and fuchsia from where I hoped to lure the stag. He responded impressively and in no time was ranting and raving in the scrub just below the clearing. Whenever you see trees being thrashed close by and you could do with some ear plugs, your mind tells you that this is Mr Big. Then, as in this case, a small eight pointer pops out.

He moved cautiously towards me stopping a few metres away, steam coming off him in the early morning sun, his nose testing the air while searching eyes steered my way for that giveaway movement. Then unsure he trotted a short distance, pausing for a few nervous mouthfuls before wandering off.

Unfortunately it was now time for my seven hour slog back to the car park.

Another year rolled by and before I knew it I was plodding out of an empty car park on a Sunday night in the eastern Tararuas. Everyone must have been up in the Kawekas. Three hours later I was settling down for the night in my bivy bag amongst mist covered tussocks. The morning brought cool overcast conditions as I moved into the upper bush zone. My plan was to sidle through the headwaters of two valleys, ending up on the tops to facilitate easy travel back to my pack. Moving into the first bush basin I tried a quiet roar and got an instant response. Nice one. I closed in on a very vocal stag. Stopping where I could see a couple of approach angles, I got comfy and waited. First two hinds passed by below and then an average eight pointer stomped up to me. At four metres we exchanged phone numbers and said our goodbyes. Carrying on towards an area of wallows that catch the morning sun I noted a stag roaring further around the catchment. "He'll keep," I thought. A short time later another stag responded closer in, down the spur I was on. Thinking he was a wee way off I started to have some food when he broke in unannounced on my quiet surroundings. A quick pick up of the rifle with a surge in blood pressure was off set by the realisation that the four pointer was not what I wanted. He tried to out flank me, but knowing the deer trails in those parts I cut up and across, out manoeuvring him.

I always like the challenge of confirming that I could have more than a rushed shot. As he quartered away his shoulder paused between two trees long enough for the crosshairs to settle. "Bang," I said to myself.

As the morning was ticking by I carried on while endeavouring to pin point the next stag. He appeared to be in the head of a gully running off the ridge opposite. Sidling through the headwaters can be quite simple provided there are established deer trails to follow. As I hit the creek below the stags gully fresh sign wasn't hard to find. He had been quiet for some time now, so I was hesitant to push on too far with the wind swirling, making a direct approach very challenging. Right on queue a couple of moans drifted out from across the gully. He appeared to be tucked in amongst some real scrappy bush, ideal for a midday snooze. Easing in cautiously I was on tenterhooks with senses on full alert. This could be the one. Then there he was. His head and neck visible over a rotten log.

The tension of the last half hour fell away as the six pointer got to his feet ten metres away and attempted to locate the danger of which his senses had warned him. Moments later he ambled off, collecting a hind en-route.

Following their path I crested the ridge to find them together looking back from a safe fifty metres. A puff of wind and they were off. As always when deer vacate in a hurry I give out a loud roar. You just never know and in this instance I got a throaty reply from not too far away. We each replied a few times and closed in on each other. The wind was perfect with open beech forest providing ample visibility. He nearly caught me in the open as I heard and then saw movement coming in. Managing to get in behind a good sized stump I readied myself.

First impressions were that he looked pretty good with six on one side, but again, the other side

was disappointing with only three strong points. Carefully putting the rifle down I lined up the camera as he marched in on me. At two metres the camera clicked and a slightly bewildered stag spun round. He then proceeded to wander within about fifteen metres for the next ten minutes, eventually heading over towards where the six pointer had been. As it was lunch time and the old gas tank was a little empty I climbed up a short distance and enjoyed some cheese and salami, only to be interrupted by the nine pointer returning. We had another chat prior to him cruising off at which point I was able to have lunch in peace.

By now I had pretty much run out of country, so it was back to my pack in strengthening winds. With a good brew under my belt I shouldered the pack prior to heading around the tops in the opposite direction.

Dropping down a spur into an ugly little headwater I came to a sudden halt as on approaching the bush edge a hind, spiker and yearling hind materialised on the face opposite, all looking at me. Oops. At one hundred and fifty metres it was out with the zoom lense and a couple of shots before they had had enough of my presence on the skyline. Once in the creek a reasonable sidle would lead me to a series of bush terraces - a good spot to bivvy for the night.

In the twilight a hind barked fifteen metres in front of me. After some time I could make out her head. Little by little she moved slowly revealing herself. I should point out here that if a deer does not take immediate flight then it is possible to talk normally to them, however the conversation is a bit one sided.

They appear quite unaffected by the human voice. Eventually she wandered off giving the odd bark along the way.

Around midnight a stag opened up below me, ending a magical day.

Come morning the bush was silent and I had an uneventful yet reflective walk home. A week later deep in the western Tararuas I sat on another knob listening to seven different stags going to town just after sunset. On this occasion only one stag was momentarily sighted, demonstrating that it doesn't always go your way.

Deer numbers may not be great, but the odd pocket can provide some great memories.

So called hot spots are that way for good reason. Favoured habitat, unless heavily disturbed, will always have the highest density of animals at any given time. When numbers are low your most reliable opportunity will be by concentrating your efforts in these areas. Discovering these locations takes time and experience. Hunters who visit the same area each year are unlikely to divulge much info for good reason. I have been fortunate to have explored a lot of hunting country, which makes it possible to share with others some of these otherwise secret locations.