The Hunter River on the South Island of New Zealand

An Archer's Dream

Story and Photos by Sean Finley

The author with his 13- point red stag taken with his orginal Oneida Screeming Eagle Bow.

After 22 hours on a plane, you realize two things: The world is really big and you are exhausted. However, when you step off that plane in Christchurch, New Zealand, and know that you are only a two-hour drive away from the hunting adventure of your lifetime, the long flight feels worthwhile. As a teenager, I had dreamed of hunting big game in a location like New Zealand. Decades later in April 2008, my dream finally became a reality.

My company, the Presnell Sporting Collection, sent me to check out

Mountain view of part of the Spey Creek Ranch outside of Kaikoura

The Southern Alps

one of our venues, Spey Creek Lodge, in the Kaikoura region of New Zealand's South Island.

For five days my job required that I hunt such trophies as red stag, Himalayan tahr, and Arapawa. It was a tough job, but as they say, somebody had to do it.

Three months earlier, back home in Indiana, I had started to train for the trip. To be physically fit to tackle the up and down New Zealand landscape, I hiked the hills of Brown County every day carrying my two-year-old daughter Alivia on my back. I also practiced with my bow. I shot at least two dozen arrows each day, taking the most extreme uphill and downhill shots I could set up to simulate the New Zealand terrain.

As soon as I arrived at the lodge and put away my gear, I pulled out my bow

and equipment for a post-flight inspection at the practice ring. I wanted to make sure the baggage handlers hadn't knocked my sights out of line or loosened any screws. I shoot an Oneida Screaming Eagle compound bow with a 65-pound draw weight that I bought with my lawn-mowing money more than 20 years ago. I never switched to a newer bow because it hits where I aim. I also use a Pollington release strap and bow sight. After a half-dozen shots, I knew I still could put six arrows into a four-inch circle at 30 yards and was ready to hunt the next morning.

That afternoon we rode around the ranch in a 4X4 to check out the 6,000-acre property and get a look at some of the game I would be hunting. The scenery on the South Island is breathtaking to say the least. I truly believe I have never been anywhere more beautiful on this planet. It is amazing how clean it looks and feels. Typically, the weather is a blue-sky 50-60 degrees during the day and down to the 40s at night. The air is, quite simply, pure. The streams are so clear that you do not even fish unless you can see them. There were moments when I just stopped, looked around and realized how lucky I was to be in this spectacular land. We saw more than 50 red stags on the afternoon drive, and I hardly slept that night—a trophy red stag was what I wanted most of all.

Late March and early April are special times in New Zealand because it is the roar season when the red stag are in rut. It is fall down under where the seasons are reversed. Love is in the air and the stags are letting every hind on the mountain know that they are ready to get frisky. The sound a red stag makes when it roars is unlike anything you have ever heard. It sounds like a lion roaring except it comes from a large deer. One of the most awesome experiences is to lie in bed on 900-thread-count linen with the windows open, enjoying the cool night air and listening to dozens of red stag roaring in the moonlight.

My guide was John McBride, owner of Spey Creek Lodge. At Spey Creek the hunt begins as soon as you step off the porch. Not more than 10 minutes out the first morning, we were stalking a large red stag that was roaring his head off in a creek bottom. But the wind shifted, and instantly the stag was gone up the mountain. Up and down and around the mountains we went that first outing, with the red stag winning the day. We saw at least 20 trophy stags and stalked four, but big stags make their living by being smart. Snap a twig or even brush a bush and they are gone. And I was carrying a bow and looking for a shot at 30 yards, not a 300-yard rifle shot.

The author with his trophy Himalayan tahr in the Southern Alps

We started at daylight on the second day, and after eight hours of stalking, I found myself poised to take a shot at a nice silver-medal red stag 19 yards away. I was positioned above him with the wind coming uphill from him to me. I just needed for him to move two more steps to be clear of the brush. I could see he was a silver-medal quality stag, over 300 inches by Safari Club International standards, a perfect stag for me. He had just one last step to take, and then he spun away and vanished up the side of the mountain. A stray breeze carrying my scent, or was it simply Murphy's Law? I'll never know.

The afternoon of the third day found McBride and me glassing red stags from the top of a mountain about a mile from Spey Creek. McBride spotted a nice stag that was working a wallow and feeding. After a short discussion we decided to put a stalk on this stag. Thirty minutes later, we were within 100 yards of him and paused before trying to close the distance down to 30 yards for a clean shot. We took off all our gear and picked up only the essentials—bow and arrows for me, range finder for McBride. We made our way through the brush, careful to walk against the wind. After another 20 minutes, we found ourselves about 35 yards behind the feeding stag. McBride carefully lay down to spot distance for me, and I eased up to the edge of the bushes and notched an Easton aluminum arrow. I could hear my heart thumping in my ears. I calmed myself down and looked back at McBride for a yardage.

He mouthed the distance at 32 yards. Close enough. I drew my bow, made sure I had a firm hold, stepped out of the bush, put my sights on the stag and released the arrow. I watched as it struck him broadside, just behind the front shoulder—just where I wanted. He lunged forward and bolted to the left and out of sight.

At that moment, I felt every emotion a bowhunter can experience—relieved and nervous at the same time as I tried to bring down my heart rate and breathing. McBride came quickly to my side. "That was a great shot," he said. His reassurance helped calm me even more, and we talked more about the moment, allowing the stag time to expire. We walked back to the lodge to gather the trailer and the 4X4 we needed to retrieve the stag. We found him 80 yards from where I took the shot. He was a beautiful 14-point silver-medal stag—an accomplishment of a lifetime for a small-town guy from the Midwest.

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