

A photograph of a deer hunter with a large stag on a white horse in a mountainous landscape. The hunter is seen from behind, wearing a tan jacket and dark trousers, leading the white horse. The stag is mounted on the horse's back, and its large, branching antlers are prominent. The landscape is a vast, open plain with rolling hills and mountains in the distance under a cloudy sky. The ground is covered in dry, brownish grass and some small purple flowers.

DEER HUNTER

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THE DEERSTALKER LOWERED HIS BINOCULARS. "I don't fancy our chances, but it's worth a go," he whispered in a soft west coast accent. "There's a pair of stags below those crags yonder that might suit you. Whether we get near enough to them for a shot is another matter."

Pessimism tends to come as standard for the Highland stalker and this one was true to his kind. But he had managed the deer on the heart-achingly beautiful Braeroy Estate near Fort William for a sizeable chunk of his 59 years, so I could not have been in better hands. If anyone could get me within range of a stag up here, then it was Ian Stewart.

Building the tension is integral to the stalker's patter. A sombre shake of the head or deep intake of breath — like a plumber surveying a burst water pipe — only helps to enhance the thrill of the hunt, making any eventual success that much more satisfying. Yet, the intense look on Ian's face as he weighed up the options, made me wonder if he was genuinely sceptical about approaching the stags unnoticed. If we wasted time on a failed attempt here, then we might struggle for a second opportunity. Braeroy is one of a dwindling number of estates that still employ Highland ponies to extract the fallen deer from the hill and a cheeky-faced grey gelding called Angus was primed to collect a stag if we were successful. The sight of him leaving with an empty saddle would be hard to bear.

"The problem we have is the wind," grumbled the stalker. "It swirls about in that corrie something fearful. One minute it'll be into your face and the deer won't have a clue you're there. But the next, it'll be blowing up your backside and the deer will be in the next post code. If we're going to try, then I'll need you to do exactly what I say, with no hesitation."

I nodded. The last three hours had been a leisurely walk up the glen, filled with lively chatter as we gained height. A hot mid-September afternoon causes the monarchs of the glen to seek refuge from the flies on the breezy hill tops, where they can put on condition for the rigours of the rutting season, so you have to be spritely enough follow them. Some macho stalkers will push you until the sweat is pouring off your face, but Ian is more compassionate. Not that his own fitness is in question. Indeed, it had once bamboozled the medical staff of a nearby hospital. 'I had cut a tendon in my hand, so needed to have an operation on general anaesthetic to fix it,' he recalled. 'It turns out that my resting heart rate is 42 beats per minute. The machine didn't go that low, so the nurse kept running through, thinking I was going into cardiac arrest. She had to turn it off in the end.'



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But now Ian's relaxed demeanour had been shelved in favour of steely intent. 'You won't have time to muck about, as we'll be among deer. Any loud noises or sudden movements and they'll be spooked. If we get within range, I'll set up the rifle, point out the target stag, and then it's over to you. OK?'

I nodded again. In truth, I was confident of my ability to place a bullet in the 'boiler house' of a stag from up to 200 yards, especially with the estate's crystal-clear Swarovski telescopic sight. I had proved as much to Ian on the range earlier in the day, as all clients must at Braeroy before he will let them loose on a live animal. But it is one thing firing at a metal target from the comfort of a grassy knoll and quite another aiming at a magnificent stag weighing 15 stones after crawling for 300 yards on your belly. Stag fever, nerves, jitters, loss of bottle — call it what you will — can strike when least desired, leading to a botched job. If lucky, an inaccurate shot will miss altogether. If not, it can lodge in the guts of the unfortunate animal, which will run for miles before eventually subsiding in agony. Ian would have to run after it to deliver the coup de grace. There would be no lively chatter after that.

Before we moved off, we took a moment to watch a remarkable aerial battle between a young golden eagle and a disgruntled peregrine falcon that was dive-bombing the unwelcome predator in its territory. We craned our necks to marvel at these two masters of the thermals, until the eagle beat a retreat. There is always so much more to a day on the hill than the stalk.

Thoughts quickly returned to the task in hand. Ian led the way back down the path we had arrived on, so that we could skirt round the target stags in a wide arc, allowing a hidden approach into the wind. We had seen several hinds with their calves, out of season but much more vigilant than the stags. If we disturbed a hind, then its rapid flight would alert every other deer in the corrie to our presence.

Ian's strategy relied on us reaching the River Roy, a fast-running burn that meandered down through the estate, where we stood a better chance of creeping within range of the stags. 'A river can be your friend, as it will hide noise and movement,' Ian explained. 'But to get there, we need to cross that open piece of ground first. We'll crawl some of the way, but if I get up and walk, I want you to stay right in behind me, as it will lessen the size of our profile. It gives them just one chance to spot us, rather than two. But I won't lie to you — I don't like our chances.'

I believed him. All the way across that short plateau, I fully expected to see startled deer galloping off into the distance. At one moment, we seemed to be walking in plain view of the stags, but Ian clearly knew

the lay of the land better than me. Somehow, we reached the burn unseen. Down by the waterside, we could take a moment to reassess our options. Ian's brow remained furrowed. 'We'll just let them settle down a while, in case we've aroused suspicion. But not too long, mind, because that wind is swirling. It is amazing though how much you can get away with, as long as the wind is with you. Their eyes are nowhere near as sharp as their noses.'

The stalker removed the rifle from its canvas slip and quietly chambered a bullet from the magazine, before resetting the safety catch and returning the rifle to the slip. 'We're about 300 yards from the stags, so we're going to have to creep along the river and then up the bank towards them. Keep your head down, so they don't see the whiteness of your face. If we get close enough, I'll set the rifle up on its bipods. Aim for the heart, drawing the crosshairs up to the top of the near foreleg. Push the safety catch forward and gently squeeze the trigger.' He smiled in encouragement, possibly noting the shortness of my breath. 'You'll do just fine.'

Ian may have been over 25 years my senior, but he moved along that river like a mink over a weir gate, sure-footedly balancing on slippery boulders and peaty ledges. I scrambled to keep up with him, more than once gripping a clump of heather in trepidation that it would give way and follow me into the water. My eyes stayed trained on the soles of Ian's boots, despite the temptation to look up and see if the stags were still in place. As we crossed a shallow pool, the stalker stopped in his tracks like the party music had just stopped. He later explained that a large stag, previously unseen behind a peat hag, had raised its head and was now looking in our direction. He had no other choice but to remain statue still until the beast either went back to grazing or moved on. Or raised the alarm.

Mid-step and off balance, I was forced to lurch forward and grip a rock on the bank with both hands to avoid falling chest down into the pool. My knees trailed in the stream inviting the cold water to enter through the bottom of my tweed plus-tuos and flow down through my boots, as I offered a silent prayer that the boulder and my grip would stay firm. I stared at my hands, willing the hiatus to end before my strength gave out.

A speckled frog hopped onto the middle of my rock and we eyeballed each other accusingly. Had this been a Disney cartoon, the frog would have prized off a finger, one by one, until the evil hunter slipped back into the water with a mighty splash. Eventually, as my arms began to shake, Ian beckoned me forward. He had removed the rifle from its slip again and his jaw was clenched. 'We're going to crawl up this peat gutter to the top of the bank, and then we're in business. Stay close and keep your head down.' Bambi was still in grave danger.





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With the water squelching in my boots, I slithered forward on my belly over the black, slick peat like a mudskipper. I could feel my chest tightening with excitement, as adrenaline rushed round my body. In contact sports, adrenaline is an ally, but out on the hill it can be a curse, causing ill-judgement or even the dreaded shakes. I remembered an interview with the great West Indian batsman Sir Vivian Richards, who said that he always felt nervous and excited when he strode out to the crease. 'Five deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth, and my heart rate soon came down,' he had drawled in his Antigua treacle. It certainly worked for the Master Blaster and I can faithfully say that it worked for me too. As I finished the fifth intake, Ian reached the top of the bank, where he set the rifle up on its bipods. Then he ushered me forward.

The two stags were munching on the lush grass between the crags, each conveniently standing broadside. Another was lying down, chewing the cud. As manager of the herd, Ian's job is to remove the weaker heads from the hill. Today was a culling mission, rather than trophy hunting. "That young stag to the left is too promising to shoot," Ian whispered. "The one lying down would be good, but we could be here for hours waiting for him to stand up. I don't trust the wind to hold. Take the right-hand beast that's standing facing to the left. He's a good cull stag. When you're ready, sir."

In other words, 'don't hang about, sir!' I wriggled forward behind the butt of the rifle and eased the telescopic sight covers open. In seconds, I had the crosshairs in position on the stag's chest and I pushed the safety catch forward into the 'live' position. Some textbooks tell you to take a deep breath and hold it in before firing, but that is more likely to make you tense and jittery, in my experience. Breath out slowly, concentrate on an individual hair on the target and squeeze. It was a light trigger, so only the faintest pressure was needed to make the rifle thump back into my shoulder, sending the bullet out the moderated muzzle at over 3,000 feet per second.

The stag ran down the hill for 20 yards and my heart sank. I must have missed! But then the animal's legs buckled and its body fell forward onto the heather. A variety of emotions ran through me — relief, elation, pity. It is hard to explain how the taking of another life can make the perpetrator feel so alive, but that was the sensation on the hill that afternoon.

Ian had returned to his state of relaxed joviality, having radioed his ponyman to bring up Angus. "Well done," he said warmly, no longer needing to whisper. "That wasn't easy."

It was kind of him to say so, yet I knew deep down that Ian's stalking skills, the efficiency of the rifle and a large slice of luck had bagged that stag. Not that I stopped smiling throughout the long walk home.

DEER HUNTER HOW TO DO THE SAME

Red stags are in season from July to October in Scotland, with the best time being late September and early October. "No other activity stirs the imagination and liberates the soul quite like a day's stalking in the Highlands," explained George Goldsmith, whose agency can lay on top class stalking, fishing and lodges in the most scenic locations, including hunting excursions with Ian Stewart at Braeroy. www.georgegoldsmith.com or telephone 0131 476 6500.

Reaching remote locations in the Highlands is greatly facilitated by a good all-terrain vehicle. I travelled in the smooth 4X4 Volkswagen Touareg Altitude, with its gutsy 3.0-litre V6 TDI, that combines effective off-road ability with all the comfort of a luxury saloon. You wouldn't want to carry home a dead stag in the back, but we had Angus for that. www.volkswagen.co.uk/new/touareg

After a long day on the hill, the perfect end to a successful stalk involves a soak in a deep bath with a glass of your favourite malt followed by a slap-up meal, which will ideally involve venison. A short drive from Braeroy is the romantic Victorian retreat of Inverloch Castle Hotel. Its Michelin-star winning kitchen is run by head chef Philip Carnegie, who prepared a delicious recipe for the 'Ritz Magazine'.

"Seasonal game, and venison in particular, is a great treat – it's full of taste and low in cholesterol," he said. "The danger with game is that it can dry out if overcooked, so heat it through quickly and let it sit a while before serving."

Recipe

Venison Cooked in a Flat Cap Mushroom by Philip Carnegie (serves 4)

Ingredients

Four flat cap mushrooms
Four 100g red deer venison fillet steaks
Ten champignons
(For the mousse):
100g chicken breast
80g cream
80g foie gras
Salt

Method

To make the mousse, blitz the chicken breast in a food processor. Add a pinch of salt, then the foie gras and cream, before blitzing again. Pass the mixture through a drum sieve.

Line the inside of each flat cap mushroom with the mousse. Fit a seasoned steak on top and then cover this totally with the remaining mousse. Thinly slice and sauté the champignons and place them on the mousse until entirely dressed.

Cook the parcel for six minutes at 220 degrees centigrade and then rest for ten to fifteen minutes. Serve with chanterelles, creamed Savoy cabbage and carrot purée.