

The cold wind lashed my back. A thin wet shirt offered little protection to the elements. I crouched on my knees beside a large boulder, well concealed by tussocks. Only 30 metres away, directly parallel to me, was a trophy bull tahr. Unlike me, the bull had chosen a well sheltered place to rest throughout the middle of the day. He lay broadside behind a rock contently chewing his cud looking down the mountain and out over the Dobson Valley below.

The whole experience so far could only be described as 'Straight Forward'. I made contact with Gerald Telford of *Telford Fishing and Hunting Services* based in Wanaka, in the later months of 2011 inquiring about bow hunting tahr. After finding out he was also an avid bow hunter, successfully taking many species in NZ and around the world including tahr and Rocky Mountain goat, the best dates were suggested and the hunt booked for the first week of March.

Only 10 days before I thought I would have to cancel the hunt due to a suspected broken big toe on my right foot. My foot swelled severely and saw me on crutches for 3 days. My fitness regime came to a crashing halt and all my hopes plummeted to the ground. The Doc's prognosis was positive though, 'It isn't broken, but I've never seen such a severe jarring that's bruised so much soft tissue.'

The toe didn't matter now. From the valley floor Gerald spotted four bulls bedded up amongst tussock and rock. The blonde manes of two bulls glowing in the sun gave them away. I found them through my bino's and laid eyes on what I came to New Zealand searching for. I was a total amateur when it came to glassing for tahr. Gerald knew what to look for and where to look for it. Through his \$3500 Leopold lenses, nothing escaped his eyes. A bachelor group of bulls were bedded for the day. It was 12 noon, Gerald assured me they wouldn't be going anywhere til around 4 o'clock. The wind blew hard straight up from us to them. Gerald knew this area well. A simple plan was laid out. "There's a big washed out creek we'll use to get around below then above them. They shouldn't get our wind. When we're in the creek we'll be right."

After two and half hours of climbing, Gerald and I belly crawled to the crest of a rise, peering through the tussock searching for the bedded bulls. Our hopes were fading, maybe they got our scent. Glancing down hill, Gerald slowly raised his finger and gestured down hill. About 60m away below us was a previously unseen bull, tucked up out of the wind behind a rock. We realised then that the bulls were still here and had obviously not got our scent. We raised our glasses and inspected the bull.

'It's a 10 inch bull. Maybe 11,' was Gerald's conclusion. The bull was comfortable and so were we. There was no need to rush. The bulls that we had glassed from the valley floor were just over the crest, concealed in a depression no more than 40 metres away. There was no way we could have crossed the crest without the lower bull spotting our movement. There was no cover between us.

Gerald studied the bull further. "You know, that bull is worth a shot. It's better than I first thought. Have a go and see what happens." With that, I slinked off the crest into a depression and descended the 60 metres to a rock parallel to the bull.

With my bow in front of me I studied the resting bull. The bull's dark chocolate coat had begun to lengthen and mane was clearly blonde, his light coloured horns hooked back and finished at needle sharp points. I couldn't believe I was so close to such a prized trophy of the South Pacific, let alone on the first day. I sat tight trying to be patient, waiting for him to stand. I got itchy. I skirted to the high side of the rock looking for an angle out of the bull's vision, but it offered little advantage. I dropped back to the lower side. I eased my head up to check the bull, only to get caught. I cursed myself for being impatient. I knocked an arrow and cocked the rest. The bull sprang to his feet and whistled. He had turned to face his body away, looking over his shoulder back at me, but the angle was far too sharp and a shot wasn't presented. I drew and settled the 30 metre pin behind his shoulder and waited for him to turn. The bull held his position and didn't move. Another tahr, hidden from view, alarmed by the warning whistles, leapt onto the rock and joined the bull I had my

sights on. Through the peep I could tell it was a bull by its dark coat. The bull stood broad side next the first. My actions were immediate and instinctive. The decision was made in a split second. I was 30 metres from a bull tahr standing broad side at the same altitude; the size of his horns didn't matter. I swung the bow over and placed the pin tight behind the bulls shoulder. The shot surprised me, not that I wasn't ready to fire, but I was surprise at how fast this had all happened. The 530 grain rage tipped FMJ struck home, the fusion vanes leaving no doubt as to where the arrow struck then crashed into the rocks behind him. The bull leapt in the air and shuddered, a classic sign of a heart shot. Both bulls skirted the rock and disappeared from sight. The other bulls rushed out of the depression and bounded behind a rock face like the true mountaineers they are.

I climbed back up to Gerald. "Which one did you hit?" he asked. "The second one," I replied. "Good, the second bull was bigger!" His comment made me feel good about the split second decision.

We sat and had a bite to eat and a drink, reliving the stalk and talking over the shot sequence before descending to where the tahr was standing. The deadly effects of the 2 blade rage were obvious. Blood was splattered over the rocks were the bull stood when the arrow struck home. Although the tahrs agility across the terrain spread out the blood trail, it was an easy follow up. The bull had only run 30 metres before rolling 60 metres down hill. We received the 'red carpet treatment' down to his final resting place. We pumped hands, I let out a yahoo. Gerald chuckled and said "you just shot a tahr with a bow, not many people have done that. And this has to be some kind of a record!" I couldn't help but think it was pretty unbelievable to.

With what must be one of the world's most spectacular backdrops, a lengthy photo session ensued.

The descent was easy and cheerful. It couldn't be anything else with what is arguably the South Pacific's most prestigious trophy in my pack.

The hunt may have been over but trip certainly wasn't. The next day we headed back up the mountain for an photography trip. After a bachelor group of bulls were found, an approach was planned and up we went. On the accent, while pushing our way through low scrub we put up a good bull in his bed. He let us go past before taking off. We passed at only 2 paces! Plenty of nannies were spotted and we got in close to another good bull, around 11" laid up in his bed. At 25 metres we waited for him to stand up. But even with a steady up hill wind a suck back gave the game away. I thought the bull would stand and whistle, but he exploded out of his bed like any deer would. On the descent we put another bull up out of his midday bed again at only a couple metres. The final two days Gerald and I scouted for the fast approaching roar. Stags were still in bachelor groups, but were letting out an occasional roar. The size and number of the red stags was incomprehensible. From one viewing point we counted 14 different stags and 2 massive fallow bucks. The big reds had 18, 19 points with long tines, the spread, well, your choice of wide, medium or narrow. 12 pointers weren't deemed trophies and let go for a few more years. The fallow bucks were 230 Douglas Points plus. There was no short supply. What made it more astounding was that these stags were all wild and free, or free range fair chase if you like.

The last day was spent looking for chamois. The country chamois inhabit was not too different to the tahr country, chamois just like different areas, usually were tahr aren't. They frequent edges of scree slips and the sides of steep lush gullies avoiding the open tops. Gerald assured me chamois are much harder to hunt than tahr, due to their jittery and unpredictable nature and the terrain they inhabit. We rode the quad bike to the tops and glassed down. Sure enough the chamois we spotted were way down below. It gave me a great idea of what to expect next time. There will definitely be a next time!

I'd like to extend a thank you to Gerald and Sue Telford for their generous hospitality and providing a truly amazing service that will be remembered forever.

## **A few tips**

When looking for a guide, be absolutely clear on your intentions, expectations and your ability. Make sure they have experience with bow hunters. Guided hunts can be on private or public land. Private land will cost more but you have peace of mind that no one else will be there or a chopper won't fly by and ruin a stalk. Accommodation will be comfortable and tahr populations are controlled by the land owner and not the DOC (Department of Conservation). We sighted over 60 tahr in one afternoon and one morning.

Train hard, hunt easy.

Listen to your chosen guide on any advice they have. They are the experts.

I used a Hoyt Alpha Max 35 @ 70lbs 31" draw, Easton FMJ shafts with blazers and 125 grain Rage 2 blade. Total weight of the arrow is 530 grains. The Hoyt spits them out pretty well. This combo delivers complete penetration on most game. Tahr are heavy boned for their size and well muscled, a 450 grain arrow was recommended to me as a minimum.

The books *Tahr; A New Zealand Hunters Handbook* by *Steuart Laing* and *Mountain Monarchs* by *Ken Tustin* are well worth reading for a deep insight into these awesome animals.