

Feature

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My First Hunting Trip

AFTER TALKING ABOUT GETTING INTO HUNTING FOR A YEAR, THIS WAS GOING TO BE IT - MY FIRST HUNT.

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I've never been exposed to a lifestyle involving hunting for food until I moved to New Zealand. I was keen to learn but found it a challenge to get into. Most hunters I knew were lads, and they would not take me, and I didn't want to go out alone to start. I had learnt how to fire a rifle, read books, watched videos, followed my partner through the bush a few times, but never carried a rifle on a hunt to take a shot at a real target. My 'why' for wanting to take up hunting certainly had nothing to do with firing a firearm; it was the goal of putting food on the table from animals that were not the source of mass production. I was in search of likeminded people from whom I could learn how to make that happen. The first annual South Island ladies hunt was going to be my chance of hopefully, finally, meeting some of those people.

My initial anxiety of being a newbie was quickly put to rest. On the first evening the hut was filled with the laughter from a mix of women of all ages, from all walks of life, and a complete range of hunting

experience. Throwing a bunch of women into a hut can be a bit concerning, if you think about it... but I'd say Katie (our amazing NZDA hunt organizer) absolutely nailed the organisation of this long weekend trip.

We were divided up into small hunting parties, spread across hunting blocks based on interest and fitness/experience levels. On the first day, my party went on a bush hunt. It was a long day, exploring some beautiful forest, learning how to bush stalk from my friend Erin and her dog Oak. We spooked a lot of animals and shot none, but it was a great day anyway. The evening was spent around the fireplace sharing stories with everyone. No-one had shot anything, but many had seen animals: Red deer, Fallow deer, and even Chamois. We all agreed: seeing a Chamois would be the highlight of the trip for many!

Day 2 we decided to go to a different block, where we could glass for some Chamois. I went out with Erin again, and we took her two dogs this time, Oak and Carn. It was typical Southland weather, changing from sunshine to snow several times throughout the day. We glassed here, we glassed there, not a single animal to be seen. Erin and I pushed up to 900

metres through matagouri, spaniard, and everything else spiky we could find along the way to get a better view. Nothing. By the late afternoon we attempted to make our way back down, but every time Erin spotted another ridgeline there was a smile and a question of "Five more minutes over there?" By the third ridge I was pretty tired. We plonked ourselves down alongside the dogs and stared into the wide country. Within a few seconds I spotted something across the riverbed on the opposite ridgeline... "Erin? What's that black thing?"

A Chamois! One single buck was staring at us, 100 m distance. It was 4pm. Would we get to him before dark? Who would take the shot? I did not want to take the shot. I had taken a tumble with my rifle going up the hill and did not trust it would shoot straight. I did not want to miss and injure him. Erin offered her rifle - it would shoot spot on, she insisted. You would not believe how much I fluffed around. Take the shot or not? Which rifle? How do I set up for the shot? And I could not believe that Mr Chamois was still staring at us when I was finally on the ground, lining up. He must have been so fascinated by us two women and two dogs messing around on a ridgeline that he just kept on staring straight at us. I lined up. Shot. He dropped straight down. Erin even filmed it. I could not actually believe that I got him until we made it to the other ridge and found him exactly where he dropped. Spot on, just as Erin said. Erin talked me through taking down the animal and we were down the hill before darkness fell. I was over the moon. So proud. And so grateful to Erin.

We were the first successful hunting party to come back to the hut that night and being the newbie to announce that her first animal was a Chamois was pretty special. Shortly after that, Tash and Joan arrived announcing their Red deer and Fallow deer success. It was truly a special night. The hut was buzzing with stories and congratulations.

Independent of the success of getting my first animal, it was a truly awesome weekend. I met so many amazing people, learnt a lot along the way in a supportive, safe, and friendly environment, and it was a lot of fun to spend time out in nature with these awesome women. A huge thanks to all the ladies that were there, for making the weekend what it was. A special thanks to Katie for organising the trip - we are all waiting to sign up for the next one! And to my friend Erin, for helping me get my first animal and for just being her awesome self. From now on, I will always follow Erin when she asks for an extra five minutes towards another ridgeline... **NZHW**