

# A Hunt With The Master



The majestic red deer is slightly larger than the mule deer and is found in many European countries. Male red deer, or stags, sport impressive antlers similar to those of the American elk.

## The Scottish Gamekeeper Was Considered The Best Red Stag Stalker— And Proved It.

By R. J. Robel

**I**t was English all right, but I could hardly follow the conversation between the head gamekeeper and the young deer stalker. As the excitement of the stalk increased, the Scottish Highland brogue thickened until I simply nodded and tried to follow their hand signals. In addition to the language problem, I was becoming exhausted. These Scots were used to trekking over the hilly moors but I wasn't. Mother Nature just did not build the Flint Hills of Kansas the same way she crafted the moorlands of Scotland.

We were stalking the noble Scottish red deer at about 2000 feet elevation along the eastern edge of the Grampian Mountains. This far north, few trees survive at 2000 feet, and the rolling moor is covered with heather, a knee-high plant resembling buckbrush. The heather was in full bloom, coloring the hillsides with beautiful pastel purples.

I had arranged my travel schedule so I would arrive in Scotland a few days before the Glorious 12th, the traditional opening of the grouse season. For several years, I had joined a small group of other American hunters to shoot driven grouse on this Scottish estate. Each year we would spot large herds of red deer while

travelling to and from grouse shooting. The red deer is slightly larger than our mule deer and the males, called stags, have antlers similar to American elk. The head gamekeeper often had discussed vividly how exciting and difficult it was to stalk these stags.

"Tis nay sport for flatlanders," he would say, quickly followed by "Nay for the olds."

And so it was, after 13 years of visiting that particular moor, an opportunity presented itself for me to have a go at a stag. It was an opportunity I could not pass up.

Like a responsible rancher in the United States, a Scottish gamekeeper carefully manages the grazing pressure on his moor. Overgrazing damages the quality of the moor and reduces its ability to sustain a vigorous and healthy deer herd. Overgrazing also diminishes the moor's ability to support a good grouse population. To make sure his moor does not suffer from overgrazing by deer, a head gamekeeper controls the size of the deer population.

Dan had been the head keeper on this Scottish estate for more than 25 years. He is known locally as the "master of stag stalking," a man with an uncanny knowledge of wildlife. The hills are his life; he knows the moorland terrain intimately. He was approaching retirement, but only

because of age, not because of a lack of energy or ability. This would be his last year as head gamekeeper on this estate, so therefore it was my last opportunity to hunt with the "master of stag stalking."

Dan needed to remove about 20% of the deer on the land to balance the herd with the habitat. He would harvest both stags and hinds to keep his herd in prime reproductive condition. Stags are harvested first, beginning in August before the rut while the antlers are still in velvet. After the proper number of stags was killed, he would concentrate on removing the required number of females, called hinds, from the herd. Dan selectively culls his deer stock to maintain a healthy condition. He is careful to weed out individuals with poor growth characteristics, leaving only the best to reach maturity and breed. The deer harvest is normally completed by November.

Because of the strict firearms laws in Great Britain, it would have been very inconvenient for me to bring my own rifle for the stalk. This was disappointing because my customized 7½-pound, .270 Winchester with its 6X scope would have been ideal. Instead, I had to borrow one of the estate rifles, a BSA .243 Winchester equipped with a 3X-9X variable. It was a very accurate rifle with which I had previously killed two roebucks, each with



The author's trophy red stag was taken with one shot at 300 yards using a borrowed BSA .243 Winchester equipped with a 3X-9X variable scope, a gun with which he had previously taken two roebucks.



After an exhausting three-hour stalk across the rolling Scottish moorland, the members of the hunting party relax and discuss the stalk before beginning the long hike back to the estate house.

one shot at medium range. So I was confident that the rifle shot well, but still, I would have been more comfortable with my faithful .270.

The night before the stalk was a restless one — the excitement culminating 13 years of hunting stories, contemplation and anticipation. This was one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that could be spoiled by rain, by the shifting wind, or by a missed shot. I was fully awake a half-hour before the alarm sounded. Breakfast was eaten quickly and without fanfare so I could be at the head keeper's house promptly at 8:30 a.m.

When I arrived at Dan's house, we quickly loaded into his Land Rover and headed into the vastness of the 100,000-acre moor. Dan had already decided where to look for deer based on the temperature and the wind direction. Although it was August, the air temperature was in the low 50s. Therefore Dan decided to look for deer on leeward slopes exposed to the warming sun.

After a short ride, we came to the end of the primitive trail and parked the Land Rover. Frank, the pony man, was already there adjusting a pack saddle on a 25-year-old mare. Because the moorland is very boggy, even 4-wheel-drive vehicles cannot traverse it. Horses must be used to pack out the carcass of the deer if a stalk is successful.

For this hunt Dan had brought along one of the estate's young deer stalkers. This was the young stalker's first time out, and his primary job was to carry the rifle and rain gear and to act as a general assistant to Dan. My excitement began to

mount as Dan organized the group. He instructed Frank to wait with the horse for at least two hours before following us.

Dan knew where he wanted to go, but he purposefully neglected to tell me how far away the area was. Then he set a walking pace that barely allowed me to keep up. The moorland is a vast rolling landscape intersected occasionally by deep slopes and washes cut by fast-flowing streams. Whenever we approached a high spot, Dan would caution us to crouch and carefully move forward until we could view the far hillside with our binoculars. The secret is to avoid silhouetting yourself on the skyline. Dan's big German 10 X 40 binoculars could pick out even a small roe deer on a hillside a mile away. A walking stick served to support his binoculars when he really wanted to examine a foreign object on a far hillside.

The three of us moved slowly across the moor, stopping frequently to glass the exposed slopes and to examine every draw. Dan made certain we always moved into the wind and never silhouetted ourselves on the crest of a hill. We covered well over three miles before we spotted deer. Dan had climbed up a steep sidehill to look into a large valley. He slowly lifted his head so he could glass the far hillside then froze in his tracks. Again slowly, he lowered himself, retreated from the crest of the hill, and motioned us to come forward. He talked quickly to the young deer stalker and me. I tried hard to even catch a gist of what was said.

Evidently he spotted two large herds of red deer, one herd of hinds and a mixed herd of hinds and stags. Both herds were



Walking sticks came in handy for steadying binoculars. Powerful glasses were needed to pick up the deer across the moorland.

undisturbed and feeding on the hillsides ahead of us. The only problem was that there were hinds between us and the stags, and if the hinds were disturbed, they would spook the stags. The herd of hinds numbered more than 200 and was scattered a little to our right about 500 yards out while the large mixed herd was twice that far directly ahead of us. He said there were at least 75 stags and an equal number of hinds and calves.

A gentle breeze blew the smell of deer into our nostrils. My head began pounding as we cautiously advanced to the ridge to assess the situation. I saw several large stags through my binoculars, and when viewed through Dan's bigger glasses, they looked even more impressive. But if we

disturbed the herd of hinds on our right, all would be lost. It was now approaching midday, and both herds were beginning to bed down.

Dan studied the situation methodically and decided we should at least try for one of the stags in the far herd. The adrenalin level in my body increased again; my heart began to pound even harder against my rib cage. He said it would be a long and difficult stalk with maybe a 10-percent chance of succeeding. We would have to backtrack and circle away from the herd of hinds to get closer to the stags, but even so it would be a very long shot at best. My heart sagged. A very long shot with my own rifle would be a comfortable challenge, but trying such a shot with a borrowed rifle could prove disastrous. However, there was no alternative, so I agreed it was worth a try.

Backtracking was not difficult, but losing sight of the quarry increased my anxiety. Would the herd remain there while we circled, or would we come upon an empty hillside in a couple of hours? We could not risk exposing ourselves to the other herd on our right so there was no way of verifying that the stags were still on

ahead. Three big stags were bedded in the middle of the herd, calmly chewing their cud, flicking their ears to dislodge flies and midges and watching for danger. The range was too great for me to be confident I could make a clean kill with the .243. We watched the herd as Dan tried to figure how to get me closer.

The other herd was now directly to our right. Any route taking us closer to the stags would expose us to the watchful eyes of the hinds. I was determined not to attempt a 500-yard shot for fear of wounding a stag. We weighed the options and decided to try stalking closer to the stags by crossing the open hills — exposed to the other herd. If the hinds spotted us, they would bolt, alerting the herd with the stags and ruining any chances of a shot. However, I preferred that to trying a long shot with a chance of wounding a regal animal.

We took off anything that might reflect light and placed our binoculars inside our coats. Dan led the way as we spaced ourselves in a line about 20 yards apart — Dan, me, then the stalker. We slowly slithered on our bellies across the open slope. Once, we stopped and waited for at

The largest of the three stags was lying broadside to me. I planned to shoot while it was still lying down. Dan said no; the target area would be twice as large when the stag stood up. So we waited. Ten minutes passed, then 20 minutes, and finally a hind and her calf got up on the stag's left. The calf nursed for a few minutes then began to wander off. That action triggered a response from the whole herd. One by one the hinds got up and began to mill around. The three large stags in the middle of the herd arose almost in unison. The three stood there calmly surveying the hillside. The largest was lighter colored than the other two which focused my attention on him.

I had already positioned myself for a long shot. The forearm of the rifle was resting on my soft leather camera bag; the scope was set at 9X. The stag stood broadside angling slightly uphill. As the crosshairs came to rest at the very top of his shoulder, I said a silent prayer and slowly squeezed the trigger. The crack of the rifle shattered the peace of the moor.

Recoil caused me to lose track of the stag for a brief moment, but Dan quickly reassured me. He was watching the stag through his binoculars. When I shot, he saw blood spurt from a hole in the lung region high on the shoulder and knew it was a clean single-shot kill. The stag dropped in his tracks. The rest of the herd departed over the crest of the hill. As the young deer stalker offered me his congratulations, Dan marveled over the quick, clean kill. I was on cloud nine as I slowly extracted the spent .243 case and replaced the leather caps on the scope.

Dan gathered green heather and built a smoky fire to signal Frank that the stalk had been successful and that the pony should be brought to the kill site. After the fire was built, the young deer stalker and I hiked over to the dead stag and began to field-dress it. It was a grand trophy, one I've dreamed of for years. By the time the stag was dressed, Frank arrived with the pony so we all sat down for a well-earned lunch. It was now late in the afternoon and only then did I realize we had been actively stalking my stag for more than three hours. I was exhausted.

Following a relaxing lunch, we loaded the stag on the horse. To quiet the horse, Frank removed his jacket and tied it over the horse's head before we lifted the whole carcass onto the saddle. The carcass was tied securely with the head centered to the rear for balance. An hour later we reached the Land Rover.

Back at the estate, the field-dressed stag tipped the scales at slightly more than 284 pounds, a very large stag indeed. The sensations, the adventure and the long-term excitement of the hunt are etched deeply in my mind. I had made the most of my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to stalk a red stag in Scotland with Dan, the "master of stag stalking." ■



**A strong horse is needed to carry a stag across the moor. Its head is covered to steady it while the stag is being loaded.**

the hillside as we stalked them. An hour passed as we made our way through the heather. Dan was a true strategist. He guided us through eroded cuts in the peat, along meandering stream courses, and through hidden depressions on the face of the moorland. I had long since lost all sense of direction, but I knew Dan had not.

He began picking his route more slowly now so I knew we must be getting closer to where the stags should be. He instructed the young deer stalker to stay in a shallow depression in the heather while he and I crept ahead to see if we could spot the herd. We crawled on our hands and knees for 100 yards until we could see the hillside through the heather. The herd was still there, peacefully bedded down on the sunny slope about 500 yards straight

least 15 minutes when one of the hinds got up and stood looking in our direction. Finally, when she began to feed, we continued forward again. Snaking through the wet heather towards the herd was fatiguing; the resilient heather had already torn two leather buttons from the front of my coat. After a full hour of slithering on our bellies, Dan stopped and waited for me to move up to his side. When I got there, I saw the problem. Between us and the stags was a wide expanse of ground with insufficient cover to hide a hare much less a human. Dan asked if I wanted to try a shot from here. It was my only chance — try a 300-yard shot from here, or call it a day and go home empty-handed. I felt confident I could make it, so I decided to take the shot.