

Red Deer Stalking for Highland Game Just In Time for the Bard

My First Experience by Euan Ross, Sales & Marketing Manager

In the spirit of the Bard, there is no better way to celebrate Burns Night than dining on a fine hand cut Wild Scottish Venison steak, knowing that you have actually gone out on the hill to experience the wild beauty, drama, intensity of it.

Highland Game has been very busy this season preparing to supply the additional requirement necessary to satisfy our demand for Burns Night. Over the course of this week we are expecting to sell in the region of 18,000 packs of wild Scottish venison steaks on national promotion into one retailer alone. This is equivalent to providing from 700-750 hinds, just for Burns Night!

To put my efforts into perspective, after one whole day of stalking the hind that we brought off the hill and into the larder, then on to Highland Game offered us the equivalent of 44 steaks or 22 packs, in a 250g retail pack form. This is only possible due to the fantastic work undertaken by the sophisticated network that partner us, including expert marksmen, stalkers, ghillies, landowners and dedicated drivers, that in all-weather serve both the Scottish Forestry Commission and the many estates in Scotland and North of England. What makes our steaks so special and celebrated by many, is down to the dedication and expertise of our highly skilled butchers and support team at Highland Game, which without compromise deliver on every occasion.

Highland Game Wild Scottish Venison steaks are currently available in-store at Aldi and Morrisons across the United Kingdom and Tesco, Waitrose and Coop in Scotland.

Celebrate in style with this delicious recipe amongst friends and family at this very nostalgic time.

<https://www.highlandgame.com/recipes/venison-steak-with-sun-dried-tomato-and-basil-butter-2>



For many a stalking enthusiast, I thoroughly recommend stalking on Invermark Estate, one of Scotland's premier deer forests, established in 1853 with the introduction of a perfect number of red deer from Black Mount in Argyll and owned and run by The Dalhousie Estate.

As a cold bitter sweet northerly wind rips through the barren and rugged hillsides of Invermark Estate,



a perfect combination of beaming sunshine and horizontal snow blizzards roars us along. Every step is unforgiving, our boots squelching in and out of bog soaked tracks carved through the heather by generations of stalkers and deer. My thoughts begin to race, adrenalin pumps through my veins as the excitement of experiencing the unknown and coming up on one of our most majestic and

emblematic mammals, the Red Deer is willing me on.

Bristling with heritage, this timeless and bitterly challenging landscape was drawing me into an experience that I never thought possible. Far from the maddening crowd, nature in complete control, every movement, climb and muscle strain is compensated by the magic of Scotland's natural wildlife. The stage has been drawn and wild actors choose their perfect moment to grace the stage. Grouse flutter in and out of the heather, whilst mountain hares turned white in preparation for a coarse winter bound across the moors using their powerful hind legs to propel themselves forward in a zigzag pattern, which quite easily takes you away from your bearing.

Up above me, the wide open sky turns dark grey, a silhouette can be seen gliding overhead. Earlier on the drive up I had been offered a spectacle by a red kite, but nothing quite prepared me for the site of a golden eagle scouring the landscape, using us to rustle out its next pray from the undergrowth.

The most challenging aspect of deer stalking is how quickly you learn how completely hopeless you are when removed from your own habitat. The entire landscape is a sneakily deer-coloured patchwork of tall grass, burns, shadows and scree slopes that stretches to the horizon. A couple of hours into our stalk, Gary our very experienced head stalker points out across the ravine in front of us. There in the distance on the crest of the hill, virtually invisible, I set my sights on the first Red Deer of the day. Without interruption the Red Deer continues its path along the side of the hill and in a flash, is out of site. Thankfully, Gary points over the brow of the hill and informs us the deer is more than likely to join a herd reasonably close by. Without Gary's intricate knowledge of the land, it becomes quite clear to me that the chances of edging up on a suitable target is nigh on impossible.

The wind is now getting progressively stronger, we have to work the wind to get us into position. Before we get into position, your ever thoughtful Commander in Chief, Christian Nissen chooses this perfect moment to dish out a dram, a German liquor that gives us the necessary punch to counter exhaustion and continue our stalk.

Crouching in places, we look to see over the brow for any sign of activity, Gary informs me that if you can see the tips of their ears then it's likely the Red Deer can see you. Their vision is great, yet their sense of smell is phenomenal so they can pick you up very quickly and before you know it, they are well gone. So the importance of patience, resilience, readiness and a strategy of how to close in cannot be underestimated.

It's now 1pm and as we continue to climb in Indian file, thoughts are now crossing my mind as to the opportunity, will it be there for me today, or will I have to go back to the larder empty handed?



Fortunately, our patience finally bears fruit. A herd is spotted and we quickly go back on ourselves and clamber up a scree slope to get into position. Well so I thought, but the herd moves on. The chase is now on, using Gary's guile, we continue quickly along our path and within 10 or so minutes we are in position. Promptly I crouch down on hands and knees, then in an instance I am in a military crawl with Gary leading. I follow his every movement

somewhat less gracefully, trying hard to control my breathing. After a period of time that feels like an eternity, stopping and starting, camouflaged by the heather, Gary signals me to crawl up into position.

Out of breath, this feels wildly removed from my position four or so hours ago taking a perfect shot on the practice range. Pointing downhill, just keeping my head up becomes a hugely intense challenge in its own right. Now in control of the hunting rifle, I have a steady aim on the target, three deer sitting within 170 meters from my position, virtually invisible, I have to remain patient to allow them to stand side on before I can take the shot.

Keeping calm and confident in oneself, that the shot will be perfect is my sole focus. If I am going to shoot then the timing has to be perfect to deliver a humane shot.

Guile, skill and dedication is what it takes, you have to do it. The joy of stalking is not about the kill, but being able to experience something that our ancestors having been doing for many a year. There are two points to the exercise, firstly to experience life in the wild in its most raw state and secondly to keep the deer population in the correct balance. Sometimes this will require shooting an old stag, sometimes a young stag, sometimes a couple of hinds, but for much of the time it doesn't involve shooting anything at all, but monitoring.

After what felt like an eternity, Gary manages to cause a stir, the deer come to its feet and turns broadside. Now with the deer in the centre of my rifle's telescopic sights, Gary whispers in my ear to take the shot. A deafening crack echoes across the glen as the rifle kicks back on my shoulder, the Red Deer rears up, staggers then subsides.

In an instance Jock, the head stalkers dog directs us a path down to the already fallen Red Deer. Thankfully, my shot had been perfectly staged and controlled meaning that I had succeeded in my most important objective, performing a humane kill on a majestic animal that I hold in such high regard.



Within minutes Gary has effortlessly with great technique gralloched the deer and dragged it with tremendous energy into a position for the pony to collect. Given some time to reflect, we take our lunch sheltered from the wind. Here I was able to assess my achievement. With stags roaring in the distance, my focus had become much greater and my senses were starting to come to life. I was beginning to see, hear and scent things on the landscape that I would never have picked up on hours earlier, thereby enriching the experience greatly.

I now feel that bit closer to nature, and understand much better the importance of effectively and professionally managing the land and deer on it. As importantly, I now recognise how much energy is spent in stalking, culling and preparing in the larder and factory.

Without reservation, we are truly fortunate to dine on such an iconic and healthy protein that is Wild Scottish Venison.