

# HUNTER'S ★ HORN™



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FALL 2022

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COVER ARTWORK:  
Photo by Jenifer Tule-Ham



# NEW ZEALAND

South Island  
New Zealand  
countryside  
with Jenifer  
Tule-Ham hiking.

# TIMES TWO



Derek Ham happily carries the Fallow taken by Jenifer Tule-Ham.

..... **BY DEREK HAM** .....

**N**ew Zealand guide Heath Smith said to me with concern “Mate, you don’t want to climb these mountains to get a tahr.”

I was crestfallen. I’d got myself in great shape utilizing just about every method or piece of workout equipment other than a shakeweight or thighmaster. I was ready. That and I wasn’t getting any younger. I wanted a mountain hunt and I was going to get it.

Heath went on to say, “We can do it, but we’ll hike two days up and still won’t get high enough to get a great one. You need to use the heli. Trust me. You’ll never forget it.”

At that moment, I wasn’t convinced. I had trained hard and was ready so why take the easy way out by taking a helicopter?

Heath appealed to my sense of adventure and by stating, “We can have a go of it, but a heli tahr hunt is not what you think. If you’re good with heights, it’s wild and it’s a real adventure.”

My wife, Jeni, looked at me with wide eyes and a smile. The helicopter would give us more days on the trip, the wine country was waiting and there was, so I thought, less risk. Thankfully, I agreed. It was most certainly an adventure but not the only one we would have in our time there.

This, our second trip to New Zealand, wasn’t planned in the typical manner of an international hunt. There was no thought into dates and time of year, etc. We weren’t even sure we knew much about the outfitter—High Peak. This was a hunting trip like so many of our hunting trips bought at a charity auction. But my wife and I do well at charity auctions. If there’s a good cause and hunting involved, we’re in. That and dogs. Hence, the pack of dogs (almost literally) we have now. So, because of this

well-deserved cause—Trinity Oaks—we got to give back and go back to one of our favorite countries and, as we found out, to one of the best outfitters in New Zealand. I was going to hunt an animal I had always dreamed of pursuing. I would hunt a tahr.

Located near the Rakaia River in the Canterbury High Country of the South Island, we would be guests of High Peak and stay at one of their many private and well-maintained accommodations. Simon Guild was our contact there and couldn’t have been easier to deal with. A family-owned operation with over ten thousand acres available to them to hunt, High Peak is also family owned. We saw Simon every day after our hunts and he made sure we had anything we needed.

Our first trip to New Zealand, we brought our own rifles but had a terrible experience with a scope on one of our rifles damaged in transit. This trip we used the rifles recommended and provided by High Peak. It turned out to be a great choice. The rifles were sighted in almost perfectly and suppressed. I was given a 7mm Blaser Mag and my wife a 30.06. Both great calibers for the game we hunted.

The guide for our hunts, Heath Smith, is a veritable fixture in the guiding and hunting landscape of New Zealand. He’s been guiding a long time for several outfitters but also has his own outfitting company called New Zealand Hunting Adventures. I would find out later his passion for hog hunting and managed to get him to the states to do some helicopter hog hunting. I do hope to get back to New Zealand again and hunt how he hunts in his native country with baying dogs.

I’ve been in helicopters before and am not a fan of heights but still wasn’t too worried about the flying side of things with this hunt. That all changed when we took our first dive down the side of a mountain

to get a closer look at a herd of tahr Heath spotted.

It was just the three of us on the helicopter: Heath, the pilot, and I. The helicopter was large enough and I thought my wife would be able to join us. But, because of the winds, amount of time it could take to hunt and the size of the helicopter, fuel could become an issue. That and, well, once we were in the mountains, the helicopter couldn't land.

"Too steep for the heli to land on the mountains. We'll just

jump on and jump off," Heath yelled into his headset.

"What?" I said quietly.

"Ah, you'll be fine mate. I've had people freeze up and won't jump off or jump back on but I'm not worried about you."

Heath wasn't worried about me but I was worried about me—especially after the hunting plan was shared. The idea as explained to me was that we spot tahr, we jump off the hovering helicopter onto a snow-covered mountain with not much of an idea how deep the snow was, we stalk the tahr without falling off the mountain, I shoot the tahr, and we retrieve it. If not for Heath's confidence in me and casual demeanor, I'm not sure if I would have jumped the first, second, or third time...

Heath spotted a good herd, and we swung around to take a look. The tahr were running fast, but Heath was able to spot an excellent tahr in the herd. The pilot maneuvered the helicopter around to a point where the tahr couldn't see us and Heath spotted a place that would be good to jump out and stalk.

Considering the high winds at that altitude, the pilot did incredibly well keeping the helicopter as steady as it was. Nonetheless, it was rocking a bit when Heath gestured for me to jump out.

"Into that snow?" I asked.

"Yep," he said. "Then I throw you the gun and I jump out."

Not knowing how deep the snow might be, I braced myself for a hard landing. Not this time. This time I jumped into snow to about my waist. Excellent. At least I wasn't rolling down the mountain. Heath pitched me the rifle and then nimbly jumped off. The helicopter immediately flew off the opposite direction of the tahr. Then it hit me. The silence. The silence of being on top of a snow-covered mountain with no sound but the wind. The silence was quickly met with Heath telling me to keep up and not to fall. We were here to hunt after all. In all fairness, he did look me in the eye and ask if I was alright just after he landed on the snow next to me.

The first stalk was a bust. The tahr unpredictably ran off another direction and we couldn't follow. Too dangerous. We radioed for the helicopter, and it popped up next to us a few minutes later. Now it was time to jump back on the helicopter. Somehow jumping back on seemed a bit more daunting to me. I really didn't have to jump much but still managed to land with half my body in and my legs wrapped around the landing skid. I quickly recovered and turned to receive the rifle being thrown to me. Unloaded, of course. Heath calmly jumped in the helicopter and easily got back to his seat next to the pilot.

The next jump and stalk came up quick when the herd of tahr we spotted hadn't spotted us. Or, at least, they didn't run. After jumping out again without incident, we stalked over and around large rocks and snow for some time. Then Heath put his hand on my shoulder and a finger to his lips to not speak or move. He looked around a large rock, smiled and had me take a look. Probably only some 60 yards away with its body standing facing us was an



**Above:** Jenifer Tule-Ham and her Fallow Deer.

**Below:** Derek Ham and Jenifer Tule-Ham with Derek's Tahr.



amazing tahr. It was almost motionless except for its head grazing on something on a rock side. Having shot Whitetail deer in a similar body position, I knew where I wanted to aim. Heath nodded his approval to shoot, I took my time, leaned against a rock for support and slowly squeezed the trigger. Expecting a fallen tahr, Heath gave me a congratulatory slap on the shoulder. Nope. What we both saw next was the tahr bounding up the mountain. He wasn't even courteous enough to give us a look back. He was gone and I was left dumbfounded as to how I missed.

"Where did you shoot?" Heath asked.

"The chest," I said.

"If he was leaning forward, you shot through his mane and under him. That mane is really thick mate."

Obviously, I knew tahr had a thick mane around their necks but I thought for sure I compensated for that. I've taken much harder shots that were much further away. I was both confused and embarrassed, but Heath wasn't the least affected and stayed positive.

"Look mate. You're on a mountain jumping out of a helicopter and shooting at an animal you've never seen in the wild. We'll find another. Don't you worry."

It took a minute to get over my failure but after a while, I told Heath, "It was too easy and I'm having too much fun. I pulled that shot on purpose."

"Yeah, right," Heath said, laughing.

We flew around the mountains searching for more herds quite a while after that last stalk. I began to worry I truly missed my opportunity. Heath and the pilot were doing their best to spot tahr who blended in these mountains so well. We spotted a few here and there, but then the pilot thought he saw a herd. Heath saw that one tahr specifically was out in front of the others.

"Oh, mate," Heath said emphatically. "Here's your tahr. He makes the others look small."

I was ready to jump out of that helicopter right then.

"Hold on a sec," Heath said almost in a whisper. "He's headed down! Not up or around. They never go down."

We watched this tahr as he outran the other tahr who, at one point, went up while this tahr was still headed down the mountain at an amazing pace. Heath told the pilot to drop us near the river at the bottom on the other side of the mountain.

"He's still going down. But if he's coming all the way down, he'll likely run the river. Or go back up," Heath said. "It's worth the chance to set down and see where he goes."

Heath sounded excited which only got me amped up like I've never been. Suddenly, that missed shot was gone and I was hoping for another chance at another tahr. The pilot was flying with purpose now. Fast and around the side of the mountain we went. He may have said hold but I already was. Heath kept saying it was a great tahr and we had to try. I was game for anything. I had spent a good part of the day jumping on and off a moving helicopter at I don't know many thousand feet and didn't want this ride to end.

Once on ground, Heath and I knew what direction the tahr would be coming from—if he continued down the mountain - and looked for a good place to set up. There was only one. A big



Helicopter ready for its hunting flight.

boulder in the middle of the shallow river. Where we set up, the tahr would run by us on one side or the other. 50/50. We were on a curved part of the river so if I guessed wrong it would be hard to get another shot. But then again I kept wondering if he would even come?

We stayed silent for what seemed like hours. Then I heard it. Heavy hoofs hitting the rock. But I was sure it was a herd of tahrs. The hoofs hitting the ground sounded heavy even so far away.

"It's him. He's coming," Heath said, almost out of breath he was so excited.

I couldn't speak. I was just listening. Then the hoofs were hitting stone and water. He was still a ways away but coming down the creek and fast. Almost decision time. Left or right? We were crouched down behind that rock and when the sound changed again, I knew he was coming around the corner. And still fast and hard. I couldn't stand up too soon or he could change direction and I'd have no shot.

With a quick nod, Heath whispered, "Pick a side and put him down."

I picked right and was right. This majestic tahr was running full gallop when our eyes met. The tahr couldn't believe what he was seeing. Neither could I. No time to set up on my knee or brace myself. I had to take the shot. In his disbelief, the tahr had tried to slow down and regroup but he was still running. I took the shot. The tahr went down, and Heath jumped up.

"What a shot mate! We never shoot them down in the river! Never!"

So much for the hiking up the mountain. I'll do more mountain hunts until I can't do them anymore. But this helicopter hunt was just as Heath had said it would be and more. Most importantly, though, I have a great story of a great hunt and made a great friend in Heath Smith. Many thanks to both High Peak and Heath Smith.

New Zealand is open again. Do yourself and your family a favor and get there soon. I promise you won't regret it. ★