

BOWHUNTING THE BALKANS

Bulgaria's Hidden Treasures

By Ben Salleras



I knew they were down there below me somewhere. However not knowing exactly where, and unable to pinpoint their precise location due to the near vertical terrain of this rocky labyrinth, I knew I had to take it one inch at a time. There was absolutely no room for error. Chances weren't coming easily stalking the Balkan Chamois, these animals were proving just as difficult to get near as I'd been led to believe. I peered down the cliff face, probing for a safe route that would lead me down to a more stable and safer section of cliff below me. There were very few options, risks had to be taken to allow the stalk to continue. With only one visible option, I carefully lowered myself down the face, bow in one hand, rock handhold always in the other. I latched onto a protruding rock, this was the riskiest step in my descent. Carefully maneuvering downward and concentrating on every millimeter of movement, without warning the rock that I assumed was securely connected to the rest of the cliff detached, connecting with my right leg and then my bow, as I dropped a metre to a ledge below, only just retaining my balance and avoiding certain injury or worse had I fallen any further. Thankfully, the rock didn't roll any further, precariously balancing on the ledge next to me. Had it continued to roll, the game would have been over, surely alerting any animals within earshot. I laid back against the cliff, holding on to anything I could, adrenalin surged through every part of me. Staring out at the stunning vistas of limestone cliffs, Balkan forests and endless mountains, I wondered if this time, getting within bow range was just going to be too tough an ask...

The hunting opportunities on offer in Bulgaria came as an intriguing surprise to me, after commencing a new

job in nearby Greece early in 2017. Sadly, bowhunting has not yet been legalized in Greece, although there are efforts underway by some dedicated locals to change this. Upon reaching Greece, I immediately started to research the bowhunting prospects in nearby countries. The more I researched Bulgaria, the more excited I became. An unmatched array of species; vast wilderness areas; the opportunity to hunt with bow and arrow, and the incredible affordability compared to other European countries immediately sparked my intrigue. Finally finding the time to visit, I experienced my first Bulgarian adventure in November of 2017. My main focus was to take a Mouflon Sheep with my bow, a species I had dreamed of hunting my whole life. A chance stalk on a trophy boar a few days prior, and the culmination of persistence and luck on the very last day, saw me walk away from that hunt with two dream trophies and a collection of memories at least equal to the fondest of any hunt of my life. Though the most important find of all was Bulgaria itself. I had fallen deeply in love with the mystique of Bulgarian hunting, and before leaving, had already booked my next hunt. I simply could not wait to return, and was willing to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to get back as soon as possible. With some incredible luck, there happened to be one tag left for male Balkan Chamois in December.

From the very first moment I set foot in the splendid Izvora lodge near the mountain town of Devin, I was simply blown away. The warm hospitality; amazing trophy displays adorning the walls, and the professionalism and friendliness of my hosts were just the beginning. When I experienced being surrounded by several wild boars in the near-darkness on the first evening of my hunt, I was truly hooked. The woods have a certain spooky mysteriousness in Bulgaria, your imagination

Above: Ben with his European wild boar taken on the first trip to Bulgaria, after a successful late afternoon stalk. Sadly the boar could not be safely tracked after darkness fell on the direction of the Game Warden, and even though the animal only travelled 80m from the shot, a fox managed to find him and chew part of his snout off overnight.

Opposite Page: The author admires his impressive mature Balkan Chamois buck. Following Bulgarian tradition, a sprig of spruce is placed in the animal's mouth, to respectfully celebrate the 'last meal'.



Top:
Typical chamois
habitat in the
Balkan Mountains.

Above:
Guides Vlado (L)
and Hristo (R) take
a well deserved
break after
another mountain
ascent.

runs wild as you turn each corner, not knowing what might emerge at any moment. During the hunt we saw many wild boars, mouflon, as well as red, fallow and roe deer. It was almost like being in a European version of Africa. As an outsider, there is something deeply captivating about the European hunting scene. Nowhere in the world are modern hunting traditions so engrained and so respectfully retained, which for me as an Australian are captivating.

After a month at work, I was conveniently able to catch a taxi direct from my hotel in Greece to Devin, a mere three-hour drive across the border. It felt like I was arriving home again. I was reunited with my guide and friend Hristo, a game warden and keen hunter himself. Hristo

spoke only a few English words, but after our initial five days hunting together during the first hunt, we had formed a solid bond and always found a way to get our messages across. I also met Vlado, a seasoned chamois guide who would be assisting us during the hunt. A fit man with a steely gaze who was obviously at home in the mountains, upon shaking Vlado's hand I could tell immediately he would be a formidable asset to our team.

As we pulled out of the lodge in our small Russian-built jeep on the first morning of hunting, the intensity of the rain increased a notch. I wasn't too concerned, I had seven days up my sleeve to try to take a Balkan Chamois with my bow. Since the legalization of bowhunting in Bulgaria, only a small number of these animals have been successfully taken. While I had hunted chamois in New Zealand a few times, I wasn't really sure of what challenges would lie ahead attempting to hunt their Bulgarian relatives.

After a 30-minute drive we stopped by the side of the narrow mountain road to glass some nearby cliff faces, defined by a huge rock formation semi-detached from the main mountain range. The cliffs were near vertical, with thick scrubby vegetation growing wherever soil could hold on. With no animals sighted through the dreary rain, we moved location to a section of extremely steep rocky cliffs a few kilometres away. Conveniently we were able to follow a narrow mountain road near to the top of the mountain, overlooking a large lake, and glass from the tops of the cliffs into the ideal chamois habitat below. Not spotting any animals from the top, Hristo, Vlado and I edged our way cautiously down the slopes, which were so steep we could only descend by holding onto trees and their branches. We glassed from suitable

vantage points, across the large ravine to the opposite facing slopes, hoping to spot an unaware chamois.

About 30 minutes into our descent, I happened to peer over a ledge, when something caught my eye about 100 metres away. The buck already had us pinned, probably through scent I thought, and he was on his way across the ravine in a flash. Never did he look back until he was a safe distance away, at which point he relaxed and just stood and stared in our direction, from about 400m. It was almost as if he knew the reach of a standard rifle hunter.

The following day we opted to search a completely different area, focusing on sections of steep cliffs directly adjacent to the fast-flowing river which divided the mountain ranges in this region. Following torrential rain and the resulting snow melt, the river was flowing at full force, flooding many nearby fields and agricultural establishments. After much glassing from different vantage points, eventually we spotted a mixed group of six chamois feeding in the drizzly rain right at the top of a mountain. The spotting scope revealed a very nice buck amongst them, and my excitement increased a few levels.

After locating an old (and concerningly flimsy) steel footbridge, we managed to cross the swollen river and connected with an ancient forest path that Vlado clearly knew well. Two hours of climbing up the mountain in the rain and we were directly above the chamois, in what seemed like an ideal stalking position. Surrounding landmarks confirmed, I shook the hands of Hristo and Vlado and continued on alone, inch by inch. The rain continued to fall as I painstakingly edged closer to the area where we'd last seen the group feeding. I dared not to move too fast, checking every square inch of the terrain before

taking another step. These are the moments I live for. Honest effort; steady adrenalin; a tactical approach, and no room for the slightest error.

After half an hour of meticulous stalking, I had not located a single animal. Something was amiss. My mind continuously assessed all of the possible scenarios, and the result was a decision to back out and approach from a different angle. I climbed back up the steep slope, and then began descending again, trying to uncover the location of the chamois. Carefully climbing my way down a razor back ridge, with only rocks as cover, I made every move with the most thorough caution, to ensure I spotted them before the vice versa. But my efforts weren't to be adequate today. As I slowly raised my head above a rocky edge, I identified the face of a young chamois buck,

Bottom:
The author takes
a quick break
amongst the cliffs,
on the descent
towards the
chamois where the
golden opportu-
nity would finally
present itself.

Below:
The Balkan
Chamois inhabit
only the steepest
and most inacces-
sible cliffs.



a mere 15 metres from my own face, staring already in my direction. After a stand-off lasting more than ten minutes, the moment he looked away I managed to ever-so-slowly lower my head back out of sight. Waiting for at least 15 minutes, I slowly raised my eyes over the edge, only to find him still looking straight in my direction. Once again, I slowly slunk backwards into the rocks in an effort to convince him I was only a figment of his imagination.

Another patient 20-minute wait later, I poked my head up to find he had finally relaxed, facing away. It was then that I noticed a tiny movement through the shrubs a further 20 meters behind him, the Zeiss Victory 10x42s clarifying a large set of male chamois horns of a bedded buck amongst the undergrowth. Unfortunately, from this vantage point I could only see the buck's head, with no ethical shot on offer. I stayed hidden and assessed my options – I could either wait them out and hope that the buck would eventually stand and move into a shooting lane, or try to force something to happen. The freezing cold rain continued to fall heavily, and with Vlado and Hristo still waiting without news about 200m above me, I decided that I would try to make something happen.

Before I'd commenced my stalk, Vlado explained to me (mostly with hand signals) that if the chamois were to make their escape, they would probably run a particular way (to the left of where they were last seen) to the safety of a large steep section of cliffs. Remembering this advice, I decided to hurl a stone over the top of the group, hoping that Vlado's experience would pay dividends. The rock crashed into the ground, landing precisely where



Above:
A pair of chamois glassed from long range, emerge for a late afternoon feed at the very top of the mountain.

Left:
Long periods of time were spent glassing the cliff faces for chamois. Vlado inspects the opposite faces with his spotting scope.

I wanted it to, as I stayed tucked into the rocks, arrow poised on my string. At once the group of chamois leapt to their feet and sprinted precisely towards an open area to my left, exactly where Vlado had said they would go. But a mere few metres short of breaking from the cover of the shrubs, they halted, and dared not go any further. I could see the buck at about 35 metres, but simply had no clear flight path for my arrow. They stood motionless for several minutes, deciding what to do next, when I carefully lofted another rock into the air without being seen, hoping to push them that little bit further, but my plan failed, they ran in exactly the opposite direction into the thicker vegetation, never to be seen again. I sat back on the rocks and took a moment to appreciate the splendor of the surrounding mountains. I couldn't help but feel extremely grateful and lucky to be a bowhunter. Freezing cold and wet; adrenalin still surging after several hours of high-intensity stalking, and a very close encounter, but no shot today. I was just pleased to have been within striking range of the animals, in such challenging terrain and conditions. I walked off that mountain on an exuberant high, after my first close encounter with the Balkan Chamois.

The following morning, a disaster that would give any bowhunter recurring nightmares occurred without warning. While enjoying a relaxed and typically tasty Bulgarian breakfast with my hunting friend Bruce, our translator (who shall remain nameless) came running down the stairs calling my name. 'What on Earth could this be?' I wondered. 'Ben, Ben, please come, I have to show you something,' were his words. In the 20 seconds it took me to climb the stairs I still hadn't established the slightest clue of what could possibly be so urgent at this time of the morning, inside the lodge. Then I saw it. My beloved Xpedition bow, leaning against the wall, with its cables and strings completely derailed from the cams. I knew immediately what had happened. My translator had succumbed to the temptation of my bow which I'd left resting outside my room to dry after a soaking the day before. He thought he would try to pull it back, and did so with no arrow, then when he tried to let down the string slipped from his hand, causing a 'dry fire'. On closer inspection, not only were the cables and strings derailed, but both cams were bent over, beyond repair. I had brought the tools to fix most issues, but this was not something I could deal with. My bow was unusable, and the worst-case scenarios started flooding my mind – would I be able to continue my hunt at all?

Frustration and bewilderment set in as I tried to comprehend why he had made such a poor decision. He was very apologetic and knew that he'd done wrong, and wanted to do anything he could to remedy the situation. There was only one solution to enable my hunt to continue – I needed a new bow. Thankfully, my translator friend was able to make contact with the only archery store in Bulgaria, a three-hour drive north in Sofia. He was on the road immediately, and by the time the sun went down was back at the lodge with a brand-new bow. Not my usual brand, but I was confident it would do the job, once properly setup and tuned.

That night I worked away on the bow, installing the necessary attachments and tuning it as best I could. The morning came, and I walked out to the target, praying for my tuning efforts to result in the level of accuracy needed for hunting. To my amazement, the bow was perfectly tuned, and was just as accurate as my previous bow with a few minor adjustments and an hour at the target range. I was ecstatic and relieved, it's not always this easy to get a new bow shooting the way you want so easily. Our hunt could continue!

After shooting the bow and being very content with how it was performing, it was time to head into the mountains again. Upon reaching the same spot we had hunted a couple of days earlier, we glassed the cliffs below and immediately Vlado picked up a shape. It was a chamois buck, bedded on a bare rocky outcrop about an hour's climb down below us. It was immediately obvious he was in a difficult position to stalk, but chances weren't going to come easy, so I was willing to give it a go. Hristo stayed at the top of the cliffs, while Vlado and I carefully stalked our way down the mountain, carefully selecting our route through the craggy cliffs to ensure we descended down

the correct spur. Before I knew it, I was only 200 meters from the still bedded buck. I left Vlado behind and shook his hand, continuing down the steep slope alone. Before long I was behind the last section of rock that I could physically use as cover to hide my approach. I dropped my backpack, focused on my breathing and carefully made my way towards the unaware buck. Reaching the very last point I could stay concealed, I managed to get a range on him, the ballistic distance was 50 meters, but with the steep downhill angle he was probably about 70 metres in true distance. A long shot by my standards, but after hitting the bullseye so many times at the same distance two hours earlier, I was more than confident enough to take the shot.

At full draw, I struggled to control my excitement, but followed my shot sequence and settled my nerves, settling the pin in the precise spot I wanted my arrow to connect, the buck was facing away slightly and also his body was angled towards me in the vertical plane, resulting in an ideal shot angle with an arrow. In the millisecond before my arrow commenced its short journey, a little voice inside my head said 'It's not supposed to be this easy', and of course, it wasn't! I had not accounted for the slight breeze blowing to my left across the rocky spur, and my arrow drifted just slightly, smashing into the rock the buck was sleeping on a few inches away from his body. The buck erupted from his bed and dared not to look back once, he was over the next ridge and out of sight in a matter of seconds. Failing to take account of the wind had cost me a great opportunity, and I made sure that lesson was etched into my brain as I climbed back up to the top of the mountain, recounting the stalk and shot over and over. That night around the dinner table, I said to my Bulgarian friends, 'We're getting closer!'. And we were.

Below:
The aftermath of the dry-fire. Not the most welcoming sight on an overseas bowhunt.





We sat on separate rocks, scanning every part of the cliffs below, searching for any signs of our prized quarry. The temperature had plummeted, the occasional snowflake landed around me. We were back at the same area of steep cliff faces, on what would be our third last day of hunting. For at least an hour we glassed with no result. Vlado stalked to a lower vantage point down one spur, and soon after leaving Hristo and I, signaled down to an area below us. A few quick text exchanges and Hristo and I were on our way down the southern-most spur, Vlado had spotted an animal worth stalking. The details were hazy, but Hristo seemed excited by whatever Vlado had seen.

I had certainly become more accustomed to rock-climbing over the previous few days, but nothing prepared me for what was to come next. This spur was the steepest and most difficult to traverse, every meter was gained only with the utmost care and attention to personal safety – I was really pushing myself to my physical limits. An hour into our descent we found a suitable vantage point to glass from, but were still unable to locate any animals. We had to get lower. I continued my downward climb, carefully selecting each foot and handhold, all the time wishing I had remembered to bring my bow sling with me as to free up the other hand.

Leaving Hristo above me to glass, I reached a point where I could glass almost all of the cliff faces surrounding us, and not being able to identify any animals, I was able to narrow down on the last remaining section of cliffs that weren't yet visible. "They have to be there" I thought to myself, scanning for potential safe routes down the cliffs....

After the close shave with the rock breaking loose, I settled my nerves once more, and climbed back up the cliffs to try to find another angle of approach. I managed to find an alternative path, which led me to the vegetated ledge below that I hoped I could spot the chamois from. By this stage, Hristo had climbed down to join me. We silently pushed our way through the shrubs while using them to support ourselves, a slip now would result in unthinkable consequences. Meter by meter we approached the ledge, when suddenly I spotted a dark shape ahead – finally we had pinpointed them!

My binoculars confirmed the animal I could see was a magnificent trophy buck. At this stage I could only see his head, as he laid on a ledge chewing his cud. I wasn't sure of how many animals may be nearby hidden in the rock outcrops, so I moved with extreme caution. I managed to get myself into a small patch of grass, just behind a ledge, which put me approximately 30 meters from the buck. Settling in to a seated position, I struggled to control my own excitement. After the most physically daunting stalk of my life, and all of the events leading up to this moment, I was now within shooting range of the buck of a lifetime. All I needed was for him to give me a shot angle.

Snowflakes fell around me, and I thanked the Hunting Gods for keeping the gentle breeze in my face. Staring intently at the buck, willing him to move, my prayers were answered and he did just that. He stood, and took a few steps forward. I had already used my rangefinder to confirm the shooting distance, my arrow was poised and ready. He took another few steps and gave me a sharp quartering-away angle. I knew I could make this shot count. I slowly raised my bow, drew, and released, and watched that arrow fly perfectly to the point of aim. He bolted across the cliffs at impact, with two other animals



also running in a similar direction. I knew the shot was going to be lethal from the moment it hit, and that rush of relief and elation completely overcame me. The buck disappeared from sight behind some vegetation, but I knew he wouldn't have made it much further. I turned to Hristo, who had just witnessed his first bow shot on a chamois, he was just as excited as me! We embraced and savored a special moment, one that was the culmination of a true team effort, in extremely testing conditions.

Navigating our way across the steep cliffs, we found the point where we'd last seen my buck, only to find him laying conveniently on a rock just ten meters below. He was a glorious buck, exactly what I had been dreaming of. After taking in the moment and completing the photo session, we dragged the buck directly down the rest of the mountain to the lake. Vlado had meanwhile organised an assistant to fetch us in a small boat. By the time we got to the lake's edge I could see the boat coming in the distance. The traditional Rakia flowed well into the night, we had much to celebrate!

With two days remaining, my attention shifted to hunting the wild boars. Boars were my main quarry growing up in Australia, they will always be my favourite species to bowhunt, and the thrill of hunting European boars in their native habitat was far too much to resist. There is something very special about seeing a native *Sus scrofa* being itself in a natural European forest. The area is home to a very healthy population of true pure-blood European mountain boars. While the average body size is not as great as other parts of Bulgaria, the region is well known for its trophies. The most practical method of hunting them in this area is from a high seat, as I understand is quite common across Europe. After a restful morning, we spent the evening in a high seat located above a feeding area, seeing many animals but no trophy boars that got my attention. I had my heart set on

a big boar, the trophy size was not really a concern, I was mostly interested in body size and a great cape.

The final evening of my hunt was upon me, and after the epic highs and lows already experienced during this hunt, I really wasn't concerned about what may or may not unfold on my last day of hunting. I was incredibly content with my chamois, and the quality of the experience I had already enjoyed. Sometimes in bowhunting, when expectations are low, amazing and unforeseeable events happen, and this afternoon was to be a very memorable example of this phenomenon.

At about 4:00pm, we were sitting silently in another high seat, again overlooking a feeding area. We had seen a few mouflon and fallow deer wander past, but no wild boars. Hristo mentioned that if we weren't to see any boars in the next 30 minutes, then we should shift to another area to try during the last hours of daylight. I willingly agreed, always trusting his judgement on these matters, as he had proven so many times in the past his knowledge of the area, its animals and their habits.

Staring out of the high seat at a small group of mouflon casually feeding, I was just starting to daydream a little when movement caught my attention to my right. Sauntering with the type of elegance only the true kings of this forest could exhibit, two magnificent red stags silently approached. I immediately sensed Hristo's excitement. Earlier in the week, during (translated) discussions at the dinner table, the Director of the forest area, Niko, had explained that there was just one individual red stag out there in the mountains that could be taken, should he be seen. He had a forked crown on one side, holding five points on that side and eight on the other. The same night, influenced by a few glasses of Bulgaria's finest Rakia, I had secretly promised myself that I would take a shot on that stag should I be lucky enough to encounter him....

Above:
Ben with his trophy chamois.

Opposite Page Top:
An immature fallow buck emerges from the Bulgarian forest.

Opposite Page Middle:
A stunning ice garden produced by the splattering of a small mountain stream on a sub-zero morning.

Opposite Page Bottom:
Hristo Parov sits proudly behind the author's last minute boar. A beautiful representative of the European *Sus scrofa* (italics).

I hesitated for a moment, trying to do some rapid financial calculations in my head, but emotion took over and washed any thought of trophy fees from my brain. I was here to hunt. This was a golden opportunity. A true European Red Stag was another dream trophy I wished to some day hunt, I just didn't think it would be happening during this particular hunt. Thoughts and emotions flashed through my mind, I had never been in a situation like this before. Instincts overcame any rational thinking, I carefully pulled an arrow from my quiver, silently placed it on the string, and admired the regal elegance of the magnificent stag through my peep sight.

The OzCut-tipped arrow flew straight through his lungs, as he and the other animals erupted, running in all directions. I had no doubt whatsoever that the stag would be fallen in a short distance, the shot was perfect and I knew my razor sharp broadhead would do its job very fast.

My stag travelled approximately 80 metres from the point of impact, as I approached him I marveled at the massive antlers he sported. Never in my life had I physically held a set of stag antlers this heavy and long. Everything had happened so fast, and the opportunity was so unexpected, that I didn't know quite how to feel. But the smile could not be wiped from my face, as I admired him and took a moment to appreciate this beautiful beast of the deep Bulgarian mountains.

Hristo was clearly eager to continue our hunt, and with only an hour of daylight remaining, we had to move fast. He contacted the other guides back at the lodge, who would come immediately to collect my stag and take him back for caping and butchering. Hristo and I hurriedly travelled to another stand, and got settled in. I was still running high on adrenalin, not being able to comprehend what had just happened. Within less than twenty minutes we started to see the first wild boars passing by, some smaller animals coming closer to feed. Was a dream ending to my hunt about to unfold?

The moment I saw him, I was absolutely stunned at his size and prowess. Accompanied by five other boars, this particular boar was much bigger and intimidating in appearance than any of his companions. He was clearly under the effects of the mating season, froth oozed from his mouth covering his entire snout, making it impossible to even assess his tusks. The group of boars nervously approached from the eerie darkness of the woods, coming within 100 metres of our stand but not closer. I stared intently at the huge boar, willing him to come closer, as he stared at his surroundings in a rut-fueled gaze.

As the sun slipped behind the last distant mountain, finally the group of boars came closer, joining the other already feeding pigs. My boar appeared to be in a trance, staring at apparently nothing, while the other animals fought each other as the pecking order was established while they fed. He took his time, but eventually made his way closer, coming to within effective shooting range. My heart was pumping out of my chest, my own heart-beat reverberating in my ears, I couldn't believe what was unfolding. I was already standing and ready, arrow on the string, waiting for my moment of opportunity. At 30 metres he slowly walked along broadside, all I needed now was him to stop still. He stopped, something had caught his attention, his body language changed as he stared across to my right, along with some of the other

pigs. I drew, settled my 30m pin behind the last rib of the quartering-away boar, the moment of truth was here. Slowly expanding my shoulders and pulling through the shot, I kept the pin precisely where it needed to be as the milliseconds passed, my back-tension release aid would trigger a lethal blow any moment now....

To my horror, the very same millisecond my release let the arrow fly, the boar turned away to run, the arrow taking him too far back. I felt physically ill as I watched him run into the forest, my shot was not perfect, as it should be every time. Never in my life had I experienced this scenario. The timing was absolutely precisely wrong. One millisecond earlier, and the shot would have been perfect. One millisecond later, and I could have held the shot back. But the result was the worst possible. The boar travelled about 100 meters into the forest, and laid down, giving me hope that I had taken enough arteries to bleed him out quickly.

Darkness fell, and my emotions also turned much darker as I began to realize the situation unfolding. I had a flight to catch early the next morning, from Sofia, which was a three-hour drive away. We left the boar be, carefully sneaking out in the darkness, and headed back to the lodge. I hadn't felt these emotions for a very long time – not knowing what the outcome might be; knowing that the shot wasn't perfect, and realizing that I had very little time to make anything happen to secure my animal.

We met with the Director and other guides, and explained the situation. We discussed the option of tracking the boar at night, which the game wardens considered risky. We were unsure if the boar was already dead or not, and I managed to convince the team to assist me giving a search just one chance. We returned to the area after an hour's drive in the darkness, and a team of six searched under torchlight. I found the blood trail, and followed it with full diligence, ever wary of the potential of the wounded boar to be around any corner. Eventually though, it disappeared into nothing. The shot had not been immediately lethal. The heart-wrenching, hollow sadness that comes with these situations took me over. After such an immense high earlier in the afternoon, I was now experiencing the lowest of lows that bowhunting can possibly deliver.

It was with great sadness and disappointing circumstances, after what had been such a marvelous week, that I left my friends at Izvora lodge late that night. Hristo assured me he would find my boar, but I didn't hold a lot of hope, they were endless mountains and wild boars are tough animals. It was a difficult pill to swallow, most of all I felt I had failed as a bowhunter to secure the animal with one perfect and lethal shot. These are the scenarios we do everything to avoid. While it is a very rare occurrence, and the same outcome can occur with any means of hunting, it is a fact that at some times in our hunting lives, it may happen. On the way to Sofia, staring into the star-glittered sky, I pondered what our ancient ancestors did in these situations. Man has hunted beast for many thousands of years, and over these millennia this same situation must have been played out countless times. It is a stern reality of the act of hunting wild animals, and always will be.

Working away at my computer three days later, I received a photo message on my phone, it was from Hristo. My heart skipped a beat. There, posing ever-so-proudly, was Hristo behind the most magnificent of wild

Opposite Page Top:
A group of Red Deer hinds on full alert.

Opposite Page Bottom:
Ben with his surprise Red Stag taken on the last afternoon of the hunt. With such a variety of species inhabiting the forests of Bulgaria, you just never know what opportunities could present themselves.

boars. It was him. Once again, my emotional roller-coast of a Bulgarian hunting experience took another sharp, upwards turn. The messages continued to come through, more photos, more explanation, my translating phone app couldn't work fast enough! After a tireless team effort over the following three days, Hristo and his companions found my boar, dead and undisturbed by the foxes, wolves or bears, his meat and cape still perfect. I couldn't believe it. I rejoiced at the news, and just wished I could fly back to Bulgaria to give my proper thanks to the team who helped find him.

The colossal highs and harrowing lows of bowhunting is a fundamental part of the addiction. The great efforts involved in hunting challenging mountain species with the bow and arrow, make for even greater rewards, for those willing to push themselves to the limits of physical ability, patience and perseverance. The different styles of hunting experienced during this hunt represent the two extremes in terms of techniques, but I can honestly say I enjoy both as much as each other.

Bulgaria as a hunting destination is up there with the best in the world. As I said to my friends at Izvora, if I were to fill out a 'scorecard' for this hunt, taking into account all of the different aspects of a guided hunt, the Bulgarian experience would be equal to or better than any hunt I've experienced around the world. The people; culture; hospitality; splendid hunting lodges; breath-taking scenery; and quality, quantity and diversity of game animals, is unmatched in my experiences. I booked my hunt through Bulgarian Hunt Service (www.huntservice.com), led by Mr Konstantin Kotsev. Konstantin's communication and professionalism in all dealings, before; during and after each hunt, have been second to none. I cannot urge you strongly enough to investigate the opportunities available in Bulgaria, whether with bow or rifle. I can guarantee that hidden treasures await you.

