



By Ben Salleras

**An epic tale of adventure that saw 12 bowhunters band together and venture into the coastal wilds of New Zealand's Stewart Island in search of the one of the country's most highly sought after animals..The whitetail deer!**

**Wafts of steam** rose from my shoulders as I readjusted my backpack, following the steep ascent, which took me much deeper into the forest. Taking a moment to catch my breath and assess my surroundings, I thought to myself that this might just be the right spot to set up my tree stand; it had the right feeling about it. A rare opening in the forest; with good signs of deer traffic on the ground, and the right species of tree dropping leaves which the deer have an appetite for. At that very moment, I caught a slight movement about 30 metres ahead of me, between some patches of dense fern. Then again, but this time, antlers! Instinctively I carefully pulled an arrow from my bow quiver, and took two very cautious steps forward. The buck was already aware of my presence, I drew my bow but struggled to find the window I needed through the vegetation. I finally found his chest through my sight, settled the pin, and released, not believing what was unfolding on this very first day of hunting!

Apart from the southern-most extension (Peru, Equador and Brazil) of the white-tailed deer population native to the Americas, New Zealand is home to the only recognised wild herds of the species in the Southern Hemisphere. In 1905, a representative of the New Zealand Government purchased 22 deer whilst visiting Virginia, with the goal of establishing a wild population in New Zealand. Whilst some did not survive the long journey, it is reported that nine were liberated at Stewart Island, with a further nine released nearby to Lake Wakatipu on New Zealand's South Island. Both herds continue to endure to this day, although the Stewart Island herd is much more stable compared to the Lake Wakatipu herd. The white-tailed deer of New Zealand are a highly valued game resource for hunters in the South Pacific, yet little-known by hunters from further abroad. To take a New Zealand whitetail is regarded as one of the most difficult bowhunting challenges available in the South Pacific, there is sound

reasoning behind their nickname of 'Grey Ghosts'.

Geographically speaking, Stewart Island lies off the southern point of the South Island, at latitude 47° South. The island is also known by its traditional Māori name of 'Rakiura', which translates to 'glowing skies', likely a reference to the Aurora Australis (Southern Lights) the island is also well known for. To hunt Stewart Island is to experience a true expedition. The logistics and planning involved equate to a serious undertaking. Due to the terrain and habitat of the deer, it is quite a unique scenario in that a larger number of hunters can distribute themselves quite densely without impacting each other's hunting. Our team consisted of twelve bowhunters, only two of which had hunted the island previously.

Preparations for the hunt started almost two years in advance. As is the case for any major hunting expedition involving a large crew, the first task was creating



# THE GREY GHOSTS OF RAKIURA





the team itself. After the initial sparking of the idea of a group hunt, a nucleus of friends gradually grew and grew until a formidable team of 12 was formed. All were known to each other (the Australian bowhunting community is a tight one); some were great friends before the hunt; others had never met previously, but the experiences shared on this hunt ensured we all walked away as great mates, the kind of bonds only a

shared experience this extraordinary can create.

Hunting on Rakiura is coordinated by two differing bodies. Public land is managed by the NZ Government's Department of Conservation (DoC), while an adjoining and substantial amount of private land is owned and managed by the Traditional Owners of the land, the Māori people. All land on the island (with the exception of the island's only village, Oban) is pure wilderness, with the only infrastructure in the hunting areas being small yet well-equipped huts provided at almost all blocks. Access to hunting 'blocks' (specific zones mapped and named for the purpose managing and coordinating hunting activities) managed by DoC is through a 'first in, first served' booking system, where blocks are available to book precisely one year in advance, with very minimal fees. A certain level of coordination and flexibility is necessary to book a quality DoC block within the desirable timeframes for any group.

Access to the private land blocks is coordinated through the Rakiura Maori Lands Trust, an organisation representing the Traditional Owners, at reasonable fees (but substantially more expensive

than the DoC blocks). The private blocks are generally easier to book as they are less popular (due to the increased cost), and offer pockets of exceptional deer habitat and hunting opportunity. They also provide a great backup plan should there be a failure to secure a DoC block, which was kept as an option up our sleeves. There was no need in the end, as we managed to secure an excellent DoC block, and then booked the adjacent private block. Our group would split into two teams comprising 6 hunters per block, sharing the excellently maintained huts positioned right on the beach at each block, conveniently only a 5-minute boat ride apart.

There are 12 very different perspectives to this hunt, as we all hunted individually with varying encounters and opportunities. This story is purely the sharing of my own experience, and I hope some of the other members of our team take the time to put pen to paper at some point, because it is simply impossible to capture the entire adventure in one story. The scale of the experience, the amount of action on land and water every single day, and the numerous unforgettable occurrences witnessed by each of us, could never be properly captured here.



As is always the case when organising group hunts, the excitement levels were elevated a very long time before the hunt even started. After confirming the team, the social media 'group chat' that followed was a never-ending source of entertainment, and is still going strong to this day (plans for our repeat journey are already underway). Tactics; logistics; costs; gear lists and various technical matters were discussed in the finest of detail, with the usual splattering of jokes and banter. A key factor in preparation was the fact two members of our group had hunted the island previously, proving a valuable wealth of knowledge in preparing properly for this logistically complex and inherently challenging bowhunting expedition.

The big day finally arrived, but some of us were not facing the day in the most positive of light, following some predictable yet unavoidable socialising in downtown Invercargill the previous night. Our arrival day had been riddled with incidents – including a spider scare at the airport Customs inspection station (a highly poisonous white-tailed spider had hitched an illegal ride from Australia in one of our bags); several delayed flights due to an untimely storm, and a large stationary street light pole falling victim to the rear end of our hire bus due to the poor reversing skills of one of our party. Despite our varied challenges, we made the meeting point on time to board our chartered 18m twin engine catamaran 'Aurora', with all of the ingredients we needed, including four aluminium skiffs with outboard engines; our bows and treestands, and enough food and supplies to live a comfortable cabin life for a week.

The feeling of pure exhilaration as the Aurora sliced through the giant southerly swells was pure magic. The atmosphere on the boat was electric as each kilometre of open sea passed. Some of us were well enough to enjoy the views and hypothesise about the unknowns ahead of us, while others took the opportunity to recover some much-needed sleep. I held tightly onto a pole, my body swaying with the motion of the waves, staring back at my face as I studied the beautiful albatrosses gliding effortlessly above. After hitting a difficult crossroads in my personal life in the previous weeks, it felt soothing to be entering another realm for the next week. That realm we are all familiar with, where the usual pressures and expectations of existing as a human being in modern society would be left behind, and the priorities and activities for each day would transform into something of





a hunting dreamscape. There is simply no better medicine than an epic hunting adventure with like-minded people, I was looking forward to countless hours in solitude high up in a tree, the perfect place to process one's thoughts and an opportunity to press the 'Reset' button internally.

My sub-crew, consisting of five of my bowhunting buddies and me, were the first to unload our boats and equipment. Good teamwork and plenty of heavy lifting had us inside the hut preparing our gear in no time. The coal-fuelled wood stove provided heat inside the cabin, as six very amped-up bowhunters prepared bows; studied treestand manuals, and sharpened broadheads. The plan for the first afternoon was to undertake a recon of our individual 'zones'. The previous night, through a random selection process, we drew straws to select our own individual hunting zones, which had been masterfully mapped out prior to the hunt by the most seasoned Stewart Island hunter in the party, Casey 'Macka' McCallum. Three of our zones were within walking distance of the hut, while the other three meant a 30-minute boat ride to reach a starting point for hunting.

The boat planed across the ocean easily with three of us on board, I kept a close eye on the water's surface, having noticed many rocky outcrops and logs partially submerged along the coastline and within the river we ventured up. We had to be vigilant at every moment due as the hazards in the water were numerous. Reaching our parking point, Macka and Steve eagerly headed in their directions on one side of the river. I tied the boat up, battled through some knee-deep mud, and put on my boots. I was about to experience the Stewart Island bush for the first time, a moment I had long dreamed of!

Regardless of the stories and accounts I'd heard from others over the years, nothing could have prepared me for the realities of trying to hike through the forest. It's difficult to explain with words the technical difficulty in achieving each metre of travel, but there were generous lashings of steep, slippery, dense, vines, ferns, logs, moss and tangles. I have never experienced a landscape that is so three-dimensional at ground level. For each metre forward, it felt like I had travelled at least one metre up, down, left and right. Being a cool temperate rainforest, the trunks of the fallen generations of trees take decades to rot away, creating an incredibly complex network of vines, roots,

branches and logs on the forest floor. That means some seriously challenging hiking when you have 30kg of treestand and gear on your back, and only one hand available for grabbing onto things. The going was incredibly slow, but following Macka's advice, I continued to climb upward, and eventually found clearer openings at the ridgelines. Everything about this place screamed deer, and soon enough I started identifying good quantities of sign on the ground.

Cautiously stalking through the undergrowth and mega-maze of obstacles, after about 500m I had selected two nice treestand locations. Both were adjacent to obvious deer trails, and more importantly adjacent to specific species of tree which the deer target to feed on the fallen leaves of. I installed game cameras and marked the locations on my phone. With extremely minimal grasslands on the island, the deer have adapted to survive on a specific selection of suitable feed species in the forest. Having the ability to identify these species was a critical factor in choosing advantageous stand locations. Pushing further up the

ridgeline, I reached an opening with multiple food trees and a perfect stand tree with good visuals of the surrounds. Just over one kilometre from the boat, and with good sign on the ground, something inside me told me this was going to be 'the spot'...

As the sun closed in on the horizon, I retreated back towards the boat, and soon learnt how much fun it was trying to navigate through that forest with a headlamp and navigation app on my phone. The denseness of the forest meant that visibility with a headlamp was close to zero, it was impossible to follow my own tracks back, and impossible to stick to a straight line of travel, and I have no shame in admitting there were a few circles in my plotted track back to the boat! Eventually I got there, finding Steve and Macka struggling to stay warm. Moments before I had arrived, a massive swell of water had surged up the river (due to a freak tidal phenomenon, which we still don't fully understand), causing an instant raising of the water level by over a metre, almost beaching our boat on the riverbank. Macka and Steve had





managed to keep things under control, and as the water subsided again, we made our escape down the river with the aid of torchlight. There was certainly no shortage of adventure on the first day, and the stories inside the cabin flew thick and fast that night.

Upon demand my Xpedition Denali released her dose of stored energy into my Native arrow, which flew a short distance before making contact with an unseen twig. It then proceeded to smack into the large tree covering part of the buck's body, and needing no further encouragement he disappeared into the ferny undergrowth. In disbelief that an opportunity had come on the ground, especially at an antlered animal, I wondered if I'd just blown the best opportunity one could possibly hope for. The sighting and missed opportunity did however prove my instincts were accurate about this spot, so I decided to set my treestand up. The most suitable placement in the tree was quite high, probably 10 metres up. I waited the afternoon out, and was rewarded with my first sighting of a kiwi foraging below me, something I had been looking forward to. They were much bigger than I imagined, a very curious looking bird and almost an evolutionary link to the fauna of Gondwana times.

Camp life was a continuous assortment of unexpected encounters; intense story-swapping, and continuous food gathering and preparation. As the deer started to fall, the repertoire of venison recipes expanded, with 'Popcorn Venison' taking the win for most popular recipe. Fishing missions were frequent, and most unchallenging. The Blue Cod that are in large numbers were very easy to convince on soft plastic lures, it was a matter of 10 minutes of effort to feed six men for a night. The huge male Sea Lion who also resided at our beach regularly demonstrated his presence, lazing around on the coastline and under Al Karaitiana's treestand on an almost daily basis!), and the birdlife was absolutely splendid compared to any other environment I've hunted in. By night time, pesky feral possums (introduced from Australia and now a serious environmental problem) made the mistake of making themselves known around the hut, and several arrows were lost to the wilderness in the quest to remove these feral pests.

As the days passed, more and more game camera action guided our strategizing further. Some incredible trophy bucks were photographed, and coming into the rut period, it mostly appeared they were travelling around rather than repeatedly showing up at the same spots. The deer were very difficult to pattern, with sightings and game camera captures occurring at all times of the day. Hours were spent each evening discussing tactics and likely locations to hunt. With full bellies of wild harvested protein every night, we collectively drifted off to sleep in our beachside cabin dreaming of what opportunities the next day in this mystical hunting paradise may bring.

After a very quiet morning with no sightings, I returned to my treestand early in the afternoon. Cold drizzly rain continued to fall, as I pulled on another layer, struggling to keep warm. I eagerly anticipated every sound in the forest, absorbing every bird call, constantly scanning every part of my surroundings I had a clear visual on. As the hours passed up high in my perch, my mind wandered back to a time more than two decades earlier, when I was at home completely engrossed in the gripping tales of Australian bowhunting legend, the late Bill Baker. In his book 'Born to the Bow', he recounted the tale of hunting Stewart Island sometime in the early 1990s. Since reading Bill's book as a teenager, the idea of travelling to this wild place had been etched in the depths of my hunting imagination for many years. Having had to cancel my place on a similar trip two years earlier, it was a deeply satisfying sentiment to finally be here living the adventure I'd so long dreamed about.

Snapping out of my daydream, I peered down and was stunned to realise a beautiful doe had materialised below me. She had not made even the most miniscule of sounds on approach. I had already decided earlier that I would take the first shot opportunity on a mature animal, male or female. I ever-so-carefully reached for my bow, arrow already poised on the string. Managing to avoid any creaks in my treestand or bow, I came to fall draw and aced the shot. She darted back into the fern thicket; I listened to her run for about 80m before the noise ceased. Seeing the shot connect clearly, I knew it was a perfect hit, and she wouldn't be far. Just like that, I had my first South Pacific whitetail down. It happened so fast and the shot sequence was so textbook that it took quite a few minutes to sink in. I silently rejoiced 10m off the ground, and





thought back to the photo of Bill with his doe in the book.

After giving her 15 minutes to be sure, and having seen the shot placement very clearly, I prepared to dismount from the stand. But something instinctively reminded me that the day wasn't over yet, what if a buck walked in now? All was quiet, as the final thirty minutes of daylight started to affect the colours of the forest around me. It was prime time, and I convinced myself to sit tight, 'just in case'. I absorbed the visual feast around me, content in knowing I'd just accomplished a very big goal in my bowhunting life. Some faint rustling noises met my ears, I stared intently towards their source, when out waddled a kiwi. He pecked along the ground in a random and hurried manner, making his way eventually past my stand and out of earshot. Light was fading fast, and I knew I only had about five minutes of reliable shooting light left. After a few minutes of silence, I heard the now familiar sound of a kiwi foraging, from the same direction the last one had just headed. I peered down, only to be met with the visual outline of a mature deer.

The outline of the animal emerged closer out of the thick ferns, and then came the moment I saw his antlers. I wish I hadn't, because as is hard to avoid in such situations, and being an admirer of the trophy side of hunting, I went into meltdown. He was beyond a dream buck, he was beyond anything even the deepest annals of my imagination could have produced prior to the hunt. As I'd stated to many of my friends before the hunt, the holy

grail outcome of a hunt here was a buck with any kind of measurable antlers. What stood before me was a once-in-10-lifetimes animal. The classic 8-point frame; perfectly even antlers, with the most gorgeous dark staining not dissimilar to that of his relatives the Sitka black-tailed deer of the Pacific North West.

I reached for my bow, again the Native was poised and ready, and delicately moved my boots millimetre by millimetre to prepare my posture for the shot. Redistributing my weight on the platform, the treestand let out the tiniest of creaks, and the buck went into full alert. Milliseconds felt like hours as he stood poised to run, but somehow he didn't. He took a few steps closer, then again, and before I could draw, he was positioned directly under my platform. I drew, but no matter what I tried, I couldn't physically point my bow in that direction. I let down, somehow managing to avoid any noise errors. Here I was, 10m up a tree, with the trophy of a lifetime so close I couldn't even shoot at him. My mind jumped a few steps ahead, thinking of the laughter back at camp when I recounted the story to my mates, who were all well-accustomed to this kind of thing happening to me.....

The buck suddenly took a few more steps, giving me just the millimetre I needed to settle my pin on him. As the final rays of light met with the optical fibres in my sight, and the sounds of the forest seemingly ceased for the night, I settled the pin and took the most vertically aligned shot of my entire life. The arrow struck, although I couldn't tell exactly where, he erupted

but only made it a distance of 20m before crashing into the ferns. I listened intently as the adrenalin coursed through every artery in my body, and witnessed him breathe his last breaths. He was mine.

Safely negotiating the climb down, I went immediately to work searching for the doe. The rainfall had done enough to wash away any signs of blood, and despite a desperate search, I couldn't locate her in the darkness. Even with the aid of a quality headlamp it was an impossible task, the vegetation was just too thick. I made my way back to where my buck fell and kneeled down to admire him. The most special gift imaginable, an outcome I never ever could have dreamt up, and all thanks to the forward-thinking outdoorsmen of a time over a century earlier, and a game animal and conservation system successfully implemented over so many decades. I silently thanked the Hunting Gods and those whose efforts in the past had made this moment possible.

Caping and butchering completed, under very heavy load I slowly inched my way back towards the boat and a waiting Steve. At least three hours after darkness fell I finally made it back to the boat, after several circles and mishaps in the 3D mega-maze. Upon arrival a jubilant Steve announced he had also hit a doe, no less with his beloved longbow. He had also not been able to recover her, but was equally confident with the shot. Steve and I have shared a few very special moments in the bush with our bows, and this one will probably be a highlight for the rest of our days. The feeling of riding in that boat across the





open water; in the pitch black and freezing cold; a mosaic of one million bright stars above, knowing we had both got the job done, was a feeling like no other I have experienced.

We had chosen the right day to do it, as that night we had pre-arranged a gathering for the entire party at our cabin. As our boat hit the beach, various characters emerged from the top of the beach, beverages in hand, approaching our boat knowing that either something very good or very bad had happened to delay our arrival this much. The news spread quickly, and after finding the most convenient bottle of rum I could, I started retelling the story to the crew. The looks on their collective faces were a good indicator of the calibre of my buck. We feasted on freshly caught 'Pāua' (abalone); mussels; cod and popcorn venison, and celebrated as only a group of 12 Australian bowhunters after a successful day know how. I kept thinking to myself, it could have happened to anyone. Having had more than my fair share of opportunity and luck over the past few years, a big part

of me wished that he'd walked out in front of any one of my 11 brothers, as I knew it would have meant even more to me deep down. Nevertheless, I drifted off to sleep that night as content as humanly possible; it had been a perfect day.

After a morning of finishing preparation of the cape (with the expert help of Uncle Willsy following a rare mental caping meltdown), I returned to search for my doe, with the help of Willsy, who was planning to spend an afternoon in my treestand. In short time we had located her, photos were captured and the animal processed. Willsy dedicated the afternoon to the same stand, but was without any luck, despite my game camera showing us the passage of several deer overnight and during the morning. I retired from any further hunting, and took the opportunity to relax around camp, tending to the various jobs that needed doing to keep our crew fed and the camp maintained. The days passed and the deer continued to fall, as each new success story was excitedly shared from within our own crew

or over the UHF radio from our friends at the next bay.

Statistically speaking, by the end of the trip we had taken 10 deer with our bows, a remarkable outcome considering the difficulty in getting a shot opportunity at these notoriously reclusive deer. My buck officially measures 109 points under the Norman Douglas System (the recognised measuring system of the South Pacific), with only a small handful of free range bowshot trophies larger than this having been registered previously. Besides the hunting, the most defining success of the expedition was the lifelong memories created and long-lasting bonds forged between the crew. We went as friends, but returned as brothers, vowing to return again without changing a single detail. The pristine wilderness of Rakiura; the secretive quarry that call the island home, and the immense adventure involved, are far too much to absorb in just one trip. I'm already counting down the days until the next time I have the chance to be amongst the Grey Ghosts of Rakiura. 