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Kathy Takes a Trophy Home

I have been a hunter since I was 9 years old — some 62 years by now. For 50 years of that time I've hunted across the United States (including Alaska) and in Canada, South America, and Europe. Yet, I have only one trophy in my house, and it's not because I have not taken animals that would make the record books. It is because the two ladies to whom I have been married were intolerant, "...of dead animal parts hanging on the wall."

Margaret never hunted with me in the 37 years we were together before she passed over. She didn't object to my hunting, and she cooked and helped consume at least a couple of tons of wild game over those years.

Kathy and I have been married for eight years. She is a "city girl" and was unacquainted with hunting when we married. But she came ready for adventure.

We have hunted red deer, the same species as elk, in Scotland over the last seven years. Unlike most other wives, she insisted on "going on the hill" with the hunters.

In Scotland, the hunter ("the gun") hunts ("stalks") directed by a guide ("stalk-

er"). These men are wet-leather tough, know every inch of their hunting territory, can predict reactions of their prey, and are the enforcers of "proper hunting behavior." That code is their version of what we call "fair chase."

On last year's stalk the weather turned foul with winds gusting in from the North Sea, temperatures hovering near freezing, and light and steady rain.

Clouds scudded across the sky. Occasionally, the sun burst through and patches of heather flashed dark burnt orange from the gloom. Johnny, our stalker, said we would simply walk the moors, into the wind, until we encountered deer.

The heather and grasses were not more than 18 inches high. Johnny, with the rifle in a "slip" slung over his back, led out with Kathy and me behind. When we approached the brow of a hill, Johnny would signal us to wait while he crawled up to the crest and, using a telescope, took "a wee spy." This was repeated many times as we moved miles across the moors.

Finally, he spotted deer and signaled us to crawl up to his position. There were 40 cows ("hinds") and calves lying down with 8 stags fussing about. A "royal" stag kept the younger "staggies" at bay. Johnny declared him our objective.

We slid back out of their sight and began an hour's stalk up a "burn" (creek bottom), and around a hill. Johnny walked to near its top and crawled to the crest. He peered through his telescope and signaled to us to crawl up to him. He pointed out two young stags lying 100 yards apart 300 yards ahead. We could hear the royal roaring just over the ridge

where the young stags were lying. We would have to crawl between the two young stags to have a chance for a shot — a risky bet. Johnny set off crawling.

For an hour we crawled, my eyes on Johnny's boots and Kathy's on mine. Noses took in the smells of plants crushed in our passing and of the soil itself. Eyes saw tiny plants and animals. In moments of respite from crawling, we admired the austere rolling mountains and the ever-changing light. Stags roared in the distance.

Johnny slithered to the brow of the hill, slowly raised his head, and ducked

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down. He took out the rifle, extended the bipod, and motioned us forward. Just as I reached the rifle the stag roared. He was lying 50 yards ahead with his head and neck showing above the heather. By God, we did it!

But the code prohibits shooting a lying stag. The wind and rain alternately surged and resided. Over the next hour, young stags approached us several times within 50 yards. Shivers came and went and the wet cold penetrated into our cramping muscles. We waited.

Then, suddenly, the stag heaved to his feet. I squeezed the trigger. The stag dropped. We lurched to our feet, and then slumped back to a sitting position, our muscles too stiff to control.

Kathy said, "Johnny, I want the antlers mounted to remind me, always, of this wonderful day." Those antlers are the only "animal part" that adorns our wall — not the largest antlers from red deer I've killed — but they conjure the best memories. ■

