

# FROM THE CENTER

## The Stalk is Everything -- The Shot is Nothing



Jack Ward Thomas

B&C Professor of  
Wildlife Conservation  
The University of Montana

**This fall I had the great** good fortune to be invited to hunt red deer in Scotland with good friends. The red deer is the same species as the North American elk – albeit a much smaller version. Having spent much of my professional life studying and writing about elk, much of my spare time and money hunting elk, and a lot of nights thinking about elk, I have always been curious about *Cervus elaphus* elsewhere around the northern hemisphere. So, I quickly accepted the kind invitation.

Besides my interest in *Cervus elaphus* in all its manifestations, I wanted to experience first hand the hunting customs that govern the pursuit of red deer stags (bulls). The red deer is native to Scotland and has persisted in significant numbers as the Caledonian forest of north Scotland disappeared over the centuries and left the heather and grass dominated hills and vales without a natural tree in sight. The red deer persist by using the topography to escape the winds and to maintain the best energy balance. The animals pay a price for their continued existence on the wind-swept hillsides in the absence of trees for shelter and concealment in smaller body size and lowered reproductive rates.

The “rules” related to the ownership of game animals and the access to private lands are the exact opposite of the situation in the United States. In Scotland game belongs to the landowner in contrast to the United States where ownership resides in the people (i.e., the state). But, in Scotland people have “the right to roam” and can walk over the landscape at will in contrast to the United States where access to private land is at the discretion of the landowner. As the game is owned by the landowner, a system of paying for the right to kill an animal entails only that action and the retention of the antlers. If the hunter wants the meat it must be purchased separately.

Yet, many of the problems in sustaining the hunting tradition are strikingly similar in the two countries. The key problem is maintaining incentives for landowners to nurture wildlife and resisting the division of large ownerships into ever smaller parcels that, ultimately, creates a situation where effective wild ungulate management and hunting of wildlife are increasingly difficult. The large “highland estates” of Scotland were established largely as hunting preserves for wealthy or elite folks of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the wealth of the owners was eroded by circumstances that certainly included graduated income and estate taxes, it became more and more important that the hunting of red deer stags produce a significant income to the owner. It has come to the point, for many highland estates, that the income from the stalking of stags is the largest source of income. Even then, the highland estates are gradually being broken up – usually in order to pay inheritance taxes.

Even though most of the stag hunters are now paying guests of the estate, the tradition of stalking in a manner that we would call “fair chase” in the United States is expected and enforced. I knew these traditions were a serious matter when my host, the day before the hunt was to begin, took me to a “tweed shop” to be outfitted in proper trousers, socks, and gaiters. For the first time since I was a very young lad, I was attired in what we called knickers or knee pants. The appropriate term in Scotland is “plus fours” (i.e., the trousers of heavy wool tweed are buckled four inches below the knee over heavy wool socks). Then, when hunting, heavy canvas gaiters are worn over the lower leg. The night before the first morning of my first stag hunt, I sipped single malt scotch with my host and was drilled on the cultural aspects of stalking the

wily red deer stag. It was clear that breeches of etiquette and custom were serious matters and were to be avoided.

The hunt began when the stalker (whom we would refer to as a guide) and his assistant arrived in a tracked vehicle that rode easily and with little trace over the heather. The starting time was late enough to allow for a leisurely breakfast. The method of hunting was to travel about the roads in the vehicle and, then, to stop at vantage points and glass the hillsides for groups of hinds (cows) and calves gathered into groups attended by rutting stags. Most of the time the groups were so far off that they were not quickly discernible to the naked eye. The stalker, according to custom, used a telescope to study the situation, determine if the groups contained a “shootable stag(s).” The term “shootable stag” took me a while to figure out. Large old bulls with a particular antler formation of the tip of the antler being divided into a three-pronged “basket” are called royal stags and such were originally reserved for taking by the King. Some of these stags are stalked and killed with most being spared for breeding purposes. So, beyond the few targeted by the stalker, these are not in the shootable class. Young stags with single tines (spikes) do not make the cut. Shootable stags, then, are those with four to six antler points and deemed by the stalker, by means that were not clear to me, not apt to develop into royal stags.

If he had shootable stag(s) in view, the stalker began to study the terrain (which he knew by rote) and the wind to decide if a stalk on the selected stag(s) was feasible. The stalk is the act of getting the hunter into range and position to shoot. In this wide open terrain that meant using the topography – including the burns (water courses) – to approach as near as possible to the selected stag. Then, the real stalk began. That

part of the stalk involved crawling toward the stag while using the small undulations in the ground and the low growing-heather for cover until the hunter is within reasonable shooting range of 250 meters or less. During five days of stalking there were "crawls" of up to 500 meters. And, I heard stories in the cottage at night of even longer crawls of up to a mile. The ambiance of the crawling was much enhanced by the fact that the moors are underlain by peat soils that were saturated by water with free-standing pools between the tussocks. In plain American English that means that it was wet and muddy – very wet and muddy. It quickly became obvious why stalkers wear plus fours of heavy plaid wool. These pants and accrements are made for crawling. And, the wool gets wet and maintains warmth, the plaid serves quite well as camouflage, and the pants do not bind as one crawls and crawls.

The stalker controls the hunt. Once the stalker and the

hunter set off on a stalk, the stalker carries the gun in a slip (a gun case). There are cartridges in the magazine and none in the chamber. Once the stalker has worked himself and the hunter into shooting range, he removes the rifle from the slip, puts a round into the chamber, and puts on the safety making certain with eye contact that the hunter is well aware of the action. The stalker places the rifle pointed toward the selected stag and the hunter takes over for the shot.

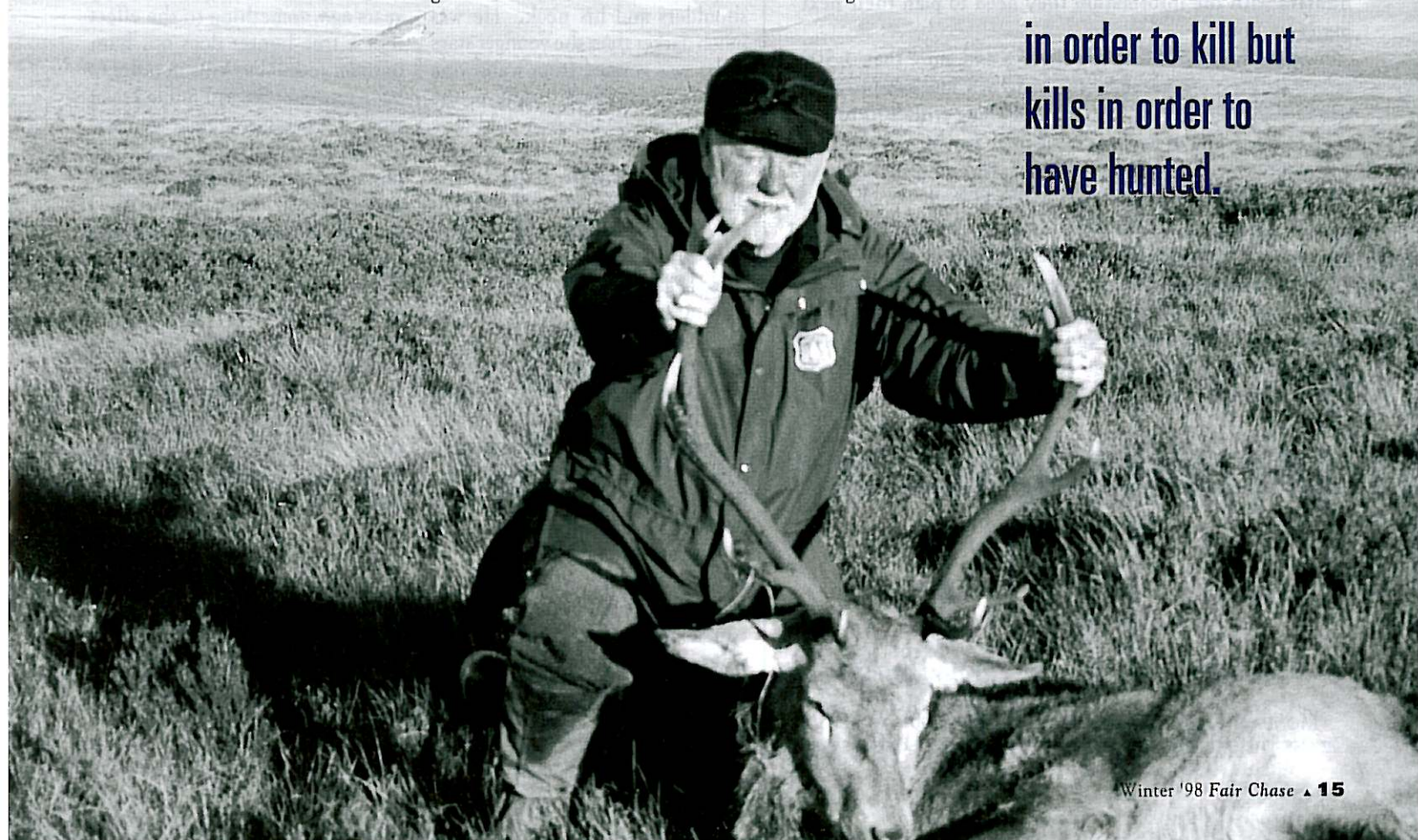
What I thought, at first, was a service of the stalker in carrying my rifle became, upon reflection, a matter of safety. Clearly, if I were the stalker, I would not want someone I did not know crawling behind me for hundreds of yards with a loaded rifle on his or her back pointed at my rump.

I became thoroughly impressed with the skill of the stalker. He knew the terrain, he knew the animals, and he could get the hunter close to the prey over ground that I would have bet could

not be crossed and leave the animals being approached unaware. This was all complicated by the fact that he had his eye on a single animal and had to work himself and the hunter past other red deer that were often lying about without our being seen, heard, or winded. Well over half the pleasure and thrill of the hunt was watching the stalker at his trade and having time to visit with him about *Cervus elaphus*, the traditions of hunting, and the factors influencing the future of stalking and that of the highland estates themselves. He loved his job. He should – he was indeed an artist.

We stalked together for five days. He put me within rifle range of six stags – including one at less

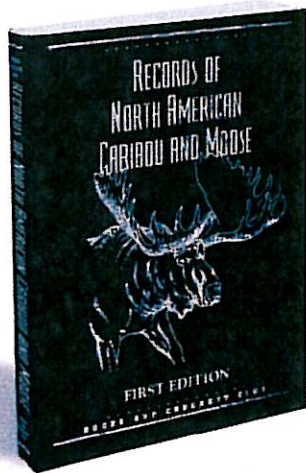
**That was a Scot's down home way of saying what the Spanish philosopher Ortega Y'Gassett may have meant when he said many years ago, something to the effect that a true hunter does not hunt in order to kill but kills in order to have hunted.**



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than 10 meters (when that stag jumped up and ran we both nearly jumped out of our skin). I watched the stalker carefully, listened just as carefully, and learned things about hunting that I had not discovered in over 50 years as a hunter. In the company of the stalker and my host, I watched the deer for hours and learned things that I had never noted in over 40 years of work as a wildlife biologist specializing in deer and elk biology. This week in the field was pure pleasure – and very hard work.

On the first day of the hunt, in recognition of my first hunt for stags, the stalker set our goal as the taking of a “royal” stag. Only a limited number of such stags are taken each stalking season and the remainder reserved as breeders. After an arduous stalk that involved a long downhill crawl we were within 200 meters of a magnificent royal stag and the stalker simply couldn't figure out how to get any closer. The old stag was lying down and I could see only the top of his shoulders and his neck. He was much darker than the younger stags as he was stained from wallowing in a urine enriched puddle in the peat. Occasionally, he would raise his head and roar (American elk “bugle”). We were lying facing down slope in an extremely uncomfortable position. As the minutes ticked by muscles in my neck and back began to cramp and I could wait no longer.

I locked into a prone shooting position, breathed deeply three times and let out half the last breath. The sight picture on the base of the stag's neck was perfect with only the slight twitch from my heartbeat visible in the scope. I squeezed off the shot and was astounded when the bullet went over the stag's back. The stag's head was up but he did not stand up and run as he did not know from whence the shot came. I repeated the process with the same result – and, then, again. The old stag was

up and running and we watched him go. I was dumb founded, chagrined, and more than a bit angry with myself. The stalker repressed his feelings. Were the feelings of amusement or disappointment or disgust? I couldn't tell as he as was too much of a pro to say anything but, “Too bad, that.”

After a long hike back to the tracked vehicle, we commiserated over my poor fortune, and then the stalker left with my host and hunting partner after a shootable stag that his assistant had located moving over a far ridge. That left me with the young assistant to the stalker. We talked of many things over the next several hours but I always came back to rehashing the missed shots. Finally, the young man said something that I will always remember. He said, “At the end of the day, it is well to remember that the stalk is everything – the shot is nothing.”

That was a Scot's down home way of saying what the Spanish philosopher Ortega Y'Gassett may have meant when he said many years ago, something to the effect that a true hunter does not hunt in order to kill but kills in order to have hunted. So, as I mulled over what the younger stalker said and I began to relive the stalk and appreciated the skill, the patience, the exertion, and the luck. I thought of the stalker's skill and instinct in getting us so close to the old stag without him having the slightest idea that we were upon him. As I write this, I seem to remember every part of that stalk – I think I always will.

After a session on the target range the next morning, the stalker and I made other stalks where we worked together to a conclusion that included clean kills. And, the young stalker's words were indeed wisdom for the true hunter to live by – “the stalk is everything – the shot is nothing.” For, truly a mature hunter does not hunt to kill but kills in order to have hunted. ▲▲▲