

Red Stags *in* Cordoba

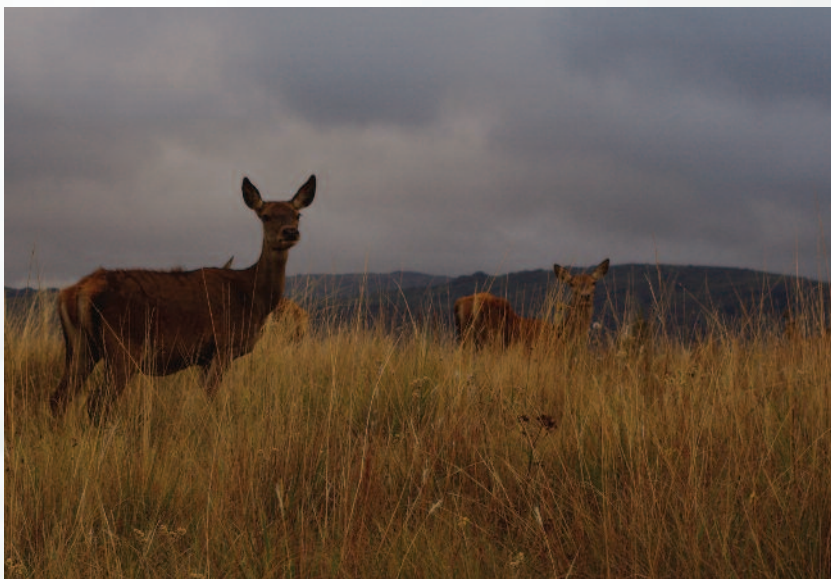
BY NICK SISLEY

PAGE DESIGN BY MEG BENHASE



We had a choice — sneak up on three very high- and long-antlered red stags more than 500 yards away to the east, or there was a single huge bull downhill at the same distance to the south. Either stalk was going to be through very open country. We had already attempted many such stalks that day, and every time ended up with a zero on our score card. The red stags of Argentina were proving their smarts to me over and over. Further, these red

Author with his red stag.



Nestor told me that from an old gaucho he had learned how to “divert” a storm, and I had watched Nestor do this less than 30 minutes before I pulled the trigger. A huge bolt of lightning had just shattered the sky and obviously struck the earth very close to us. That storm, coming from the south, was one unbroken front of dark, dark gray – nearly black.

After the close-by lightning, Nestor pulled out his sheath knife, aimed it above the storm, and made an imaginary vertical cut right in the middle of the dark blackness. He then made a horizontal imaginary cut along the bottom of the storm, and then finished off the procedure by kissing his knife and crossing himself. Within 10 minutes the black front had parted in two with one front going to our left and the other to our right. If the storm hadn’t parted, we would have been in the midst of a downpour with heavy hail at trigger-pulling time. Sometimes old gauchos know a lot more than we do.



deer were playing me out because of the territory — steep mountains strewn with boulders the size of mansions all the way down to mere pebbles with every rock size in between. Though we were only at 5,000 feet elevation, I had stopped numerous times, gasping for air and resting weary leg and other muscles. Being 70 days shy of age 72 didn’t help these physical matters either.

Nestor had just come back from the crest of the mountain we were ready

to top out. He had been viewing the next valley over. I looked at him quizzically, to which he came back with, “Nothing of worthy size over on that side. We have those three to the east. It’s going to be tough to approach them because it’s so open, but that’s our only current option.” Nestor didn’t have a lot of confidence in his voice.

But before I tell you what happened next, let’s get back to the beginning — the real beginning of red deer in

Argentina. From the best reports I can gather, red deer were brought to the Patagonia area of the country in 1906. Did they come from northern Europe, Scotland, or where? I’m still trying to find out. Argentineans from the Patagonia area, which butts up against the Andes and the border with Chile, also introduced California quail in 1934, plus brown, rainbow, and brook trout prior to that. Their rivers now team with those fish, the quail offer great sport over pointing dogs, and the red deer have spread far and wide across the country.

In the province of Cordoba, shooting doves is what it’s all about as far as significant tourism is concerned. The flatlands all around the city, but especially to the east and north, abound with small grain crops. A few decades ago, this was brushy cattle country, probably with a meager smattering of doves. Now, with some small grain crops nearing harvest, being harvested, or just harvested—nearly 12 months of the year — the earned dove population has mushroomed beyond all belief. Despite visiting wingshooters flocking to the Cordoba area and some of them shooting thousands of birds a day, the dove population continues unabated.

Shooting Cordoba doves for the umpteenth time last March, I also booked a red stag hunt. But because of drought conditions where I was supposed to hunt, the red stag portion was cancelled, virtually at the last minute, so my booking agent, Jeri Booth of Detail Company Adventures in Houston, had to scramble. She talked with Juan Jose Sala, who owns

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the Sierra Brava dove lodge where I was shooting, and he had a red deer contact. The red stag property was in the province of Cordoba, so I was not impressed due to my visions of doves, small grains in expansive farm fields, and gently rolling brushy hills. I thought to myself, This is going to be a red stag hunt on 1,000 high-fenced acres — like shooting figurative fish in a barrel.

When I expressed those feelings to Juan Jose, he smiled widely and came

The rifle I used on the stag was the relatively recently introduced Benelli R1 model—a semi-auto in .30-06. The semi-auto action made it easy to keep the scope's crosshairs on the stag after the first shot, even though another shot was unnecessary and not taken. The scope was a Burris 2-7x variable — small and light — essential for a hard hunt in mountains. The cartridge was the 180 grain Federal Trophy Bonded Tip that uses the Trophy Bonded Bear Claw platform. I can't say enough about that bullet. Though I didn't recover that bullet, it broke the front left shoulder, penetrated all the way back to the right ham. Overall it was maybe 60-inches of penetration, and obviously a lot of the bullet had held together to attain that much penetration. Nestor estimated the red stag at 600 pounds.

back with, "No sir, no way."

At eight o'clock the next morning, Nestor Speranza picked me up at Sierra Brava. Nearing 23 he is into his fifth year of college studying Agricultural Engineering. He headed for Cordoba, used the bypass to get around the huge city, and then proceeded to the southwest. Two and a half hours later, Nestor shifted the Toyota truck into low range 4-wheel drive, so I figured the lodge was minutes away. But it was 90 minutes farther west, and he needed the low range 4-wheel drive the entire way!

Obviously, we had left the agricultural area of Cordoba province, first entering gently rolling mountain

country, and then serious mountains where the road was hardly a road at all. When we finally topped the final ridge and saw the lodge, I was all in wonder — about how they could get all the construction materials in there, for example? The lodge was stunningly beautiful and modern, and in a setting so remote that it truly defies description. Out the front window of the lodge you look to the west — to more hunting country than you could cover on horseback in a month.

Vicente and Julia Speranza purchased this property in 1999. Initially, access was only by horseback. It took them four years to build a road into the lodge location. Vicente and Julia have three sons and a daughter. The oldest son, Rodrigo, seems to be at the figurative helm here, with Marcos the second son, and Nestor the youngest. Because this is a family-run operation, I believe such an arrangement contributes significantly to its success.

There are no high fences, and only a few cattle. Red deer are what predominate, but there are also many other free-ranging species such as blackbuck antelope, water buffalo, fallow and axis deer, and others.

After arranging gear and a short lunch, Nestor and I were off in the Toyota. The plan was to give me some idea of the lay of the land prior to the "real" hunting day — tomorrow

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Red Stags in Cordoba

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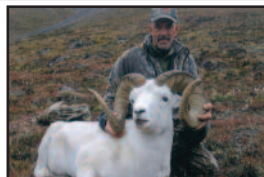
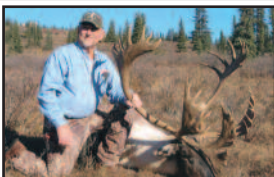
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March 25. The stags were in the midst of their “roaring” season. As with the bugling season for elk, this can make the hunt even more interesting. However, no attempt was made to “call” the stags by roaring back at them. Further, though I saw countless stags roaring, I did not see other stags coming to any “roar.” I am assuming that only the hinds (females) come to the roaring. Evidently, breeding during the daytime is very rare — all of it occurring at night — so this may have something to do with the lack of bulls “battling” over females.

That first afternoon I saw many, many stags. All were at good distance, and every time we saw one, that bull would already be staring back at us. Using rangefinder binoculars I spotted one good bull at 375 yards — a long but doable shot. I turned down the shot, telling Nestor, “I will not shoot from the truck.”

Early the next morning with breakfast under our belts, Nestor and I climbed our horses with the padded sheepskin saddles that are common in Argentina and rode west from the lodge. Walking the horses, we soon crossed the trout river that runs in front of camp. At one flat, long pool I commented on the trout-feeding dimples at the surface, but I had a .30-06 with me, not a fly rod.

Two hours after the horseback jaunt, with numerous pauses while Nestor used his binoculars to inspect a number of red stag heads, we dismounted. Now the real hunting was about to begin — on foot. We hadn’t traveled 100 yards before we spotted a good stag that wore massive headgear. Shortly, we glassed other heads, and the horses were still in sight. But up and up we climbed in an



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effort to get closer to those we saw with the field glasses. Maybe a quarter of a mile farther we heard roaring, and it was not far away.

Unusual for these nearly treeless mountains, the roaring was coming from a group of maybe ten old trees clustered together. Later, I found that decades previous an old lady had lived there alone. The deteriorating boulder buildings were in evidence. Despite a careful approach we were spotted. Four hinds were with a good stag. Only a fleeting chance at a running target was offered, and before I could make a decision it was too late. They were gone. As I had learned on other big game hunts, but especially in Africa, those who take instant decisions — and shoot accurately without delay—take the best trophies. On that first stag, me with a rifle in my hands, I was relearning what I already knew.

We went in the direction of that red deer pack, but we had also seen a magnificent stag sky-lined at the top of the mountain to the west, so we took a path that could eventually take us around to that one as well. At that moment my lungs and legs ached just thinking about the possibility of climbing to the bull on the mountaintop.

Topping out a saddle and looking to the south, a vast, vast amount of territory opened up to us. With every few steps we had to stop and glass as more new country was exposed to our eyes and field glasses. Further, stag roaring was echoing from many directions, indicating we should be very careful with our movements. It took us a good hour to move down a mountain-side toward concentrated roaring that seemed to be coming from the very bottom of the little valley through which a stream of crystal water gurgled.

We saw two stags farther up the valley to the west — good bulls but they were well over 700 yards off. The bull roaring below us still seemed the best bet. We finally got a good look at him. "That's one fine bull stag," Nestor offered while still looking through his binocs. So we could stay out of sight, we had to use little crags and tiny valleys that led to the bigger valley where the stag was. That took a long while. Once on the valley bottom, we had to move many hundreds of yards and top a slight rise of boulders to look at the stag Nestor had last commented on.

There was nothing. We spent some time there trying to figure out where the stag had gone, but to no avail. We started climbing the other side of the

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valley, and it was a very steep side. Muscles cramping, lungs pumping, boots slipping, I made my way behind Nestor as best I could. We had seen yet another good stag at the top of this mountain, and we aimed to have a better look at him.

Nearing the top we heard a "roar." Peeking toward the crest every few steps, I finally saw the great red stag, and I still recall that mental image well. Sky-lined, his head was massive. The distance was less than 100 yards, though there was no time to use the rangefinder on him. I had practiced such an offhand shot countless times during the previous months, but I wanted to take a few more steps to my right where I would be able to rest my arms on a car-sized boulder. But in those few steps a hind saw me, and the whole pack of four took off. I didn't see them again until they were running at some 400 plus yards. Now there was plenty of time for self scorn. When I first saw the stag I should have simply brought the rifle up and shot.

We had been climbing for hours, and the horses were hours away. Nestor suggested it was time to head back, and I retorted with an optimistic, "I bet we bag a good bull on the way back."

It was great toil getting off that mountain. Nestor avoided steep treacherous places, selecting the easier going, though it was never easy, plus we had to choose a circuitous route, one that was not directly toward the horses. My old muscles were rebelling and I was thinking how much easier this would be on me if I were 15 pounds lighter, but the immediate next thought was, "Don't fall and break something here. Help isn't hours away — it's days away."

By the time we started up the other side we were already seeing more game. Some of the stags wore smaller antlers that identified them three and four year olds, but I found it surprising how many wore really great headgear. We were working slowly now, Nestor taking it easy on me; for I think even he had not figured on a hunt of this difficulty for an old codger. Yet all the while we were spotting good heads, stalking and trying to get closer. The bottom line here is that it is easy to see a stag at 500 yards and more — and lots of them at this huge ranch. Some sportsmen will be willing to take long shots, maybe score and maybe not and, if they do score — brag about it. I'm not of that makeup. I want to get as close as possible for

that's what the hunt and the shot is all about. If I don't pull the trigger it's not that big a deal, and I'm certain most feel the same way.

Which now brings us back to where this all began — Nestor and me stalking a group of three distant bulls that neither of us had much confidence in approaching. We had traveled less than 100 yards when, peaking over a crest, we saw two bulls much closer. Hissing at Nestor, he soon had them in his glasses. He bent over and came back to me crouched and whispered, "The one on the right Nick."

It took some wiggling on my part to get to a boulder where Nestor had already placed his backpack. My rangefinder had already told me the distance was 192 yards. Alerted, the bull was looking right at us. He was quartering slightly to his right, so I took him in his left front shoulder, and I saw him shudder once I got him back in the scope. He turned, took a step or two and collapsed. "You got him." Nestor kept exclaiming. I knew I did, but I still kept the crosshairs where they needed to be — just in case.

But shortly it was time for backslapping and high five-ing. When I finally reached the red stag that had given up his life for me, I was in awe. The animal was huge, and his headgear was so, so impressive. I was shaking my head, still surprised that the province of Cordoba, so well known for its doves, could offer country this remote, this challenging, and so full of worthy big game.

The weather had been threatening, and Nestor stove off the storm with his knife (see the sidebar), though that held off the storm only until we took a few photos. As Nestor reached for his belt knife to begin skinning, the rain started beating down hard. Five hundred yards away were the only big trees within miles, those referred to after dismounting the horses, so we headed for those trees. The skinning would wait until the rain abated.

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