

Blizzard

stalking



Brian Phipps encounters a whole other world of weather up in the Scottish highlands on the first day of the hind season

You might remember a TV series that inhabited our screens on a Sunday evening in the mid-90s, which told the story of a young restaurateur called Archie MacDonald being called back to his childhood home of Glenbogle, where he is told he is the new Laird. The fictional setting of *Monarch of the Glen* was actually filmed on the famous Ardverkie Estate and the surrounding village of Laggan, near Newtonmore. The shop in the series is real enough – it was our first point of call, to buy provisions for going stalking at Dalchully Estate in Laggan.

We had stalked stags all week and today was the first day of the hind season. We were staying at the nearby, legendary Gaick Estate, and all week the stalking party had been split up and sent off by factor Vincent Brigode around the estates he controls to make sure everyone is having a good time and not missing out.

Vincent's reign over three estates will shortly come to a halt and drop down to two: Eighton Estates is owned by a Frenchman, who has decided to sell Dalchully. Although this will take Vincent's workload down to merely 'manic', he is sad to see it go, especially as it's been sold to a sheep farmer from New Zealand who has no plans to keep the hill for stalking. "Business is business," said Vincent, with a shrug of his shoulders.

With excitement nevertheless running high all round, I joined the managing director of Aigle, Christophe Perrier, and my partner Teresa Davis, who after a week of stag stalking was still keen to swap her paintbrush for a trigger. Both of us were eager to spend a day in the company of resident stalker and good friend of ours, Stephen March.

Dalchully was under the deer management group of Monadiath, which, along with Stephen, decides the annual cull in the spring. This year it was 30 stags and 40 hinds and calves, and the stag quota had been reached the day before. Stephen doesn't get a day's rest before he is on the hill again. His beat isn't large by any means – perhaps touching 7,000 acres – but the lower heather-clad reaches start at 830 feet and stretch to a lung-bursting 3,238 feet. Stephen is a veteran stalker of over 25 years, and has lived here with his partner Carol for the last five, but his enthusiasm that day was just like it was the first time he set foot here.

We got into the waiting Argo and in disappeared into the rain. We had tackled the ascent with relative ease, and the ancient tracks that stretched back hundreds of years soon disappeared and we were in Stephen's back garden, waiting for his response. He scanned the distant mountains with a pair of Leica Ultravids with a magnification of 10x25. "Tiny," I thought, and he must have known what I was thinking. "These are perfect for hinds," he smiled, "I can see all I need with these. I use a scope for picking out stags, but with these I can spot a group of hinds and that's all I need as I can always find a shootable one in a herd. They are lightweight and good for crawling as they don't get caught up." That was me told.

The Scottish terrain nearly always requires going the long way round to get to your objective, and this stalk was no different. The target group of hinds was a long way off, but owing to wind direction we needed to climb the next mountain and then cut across the peaks to get above them.

To keep a low profile and off the skyline, we had to navigate the walk up the mountain by a deep burn. It was a tough walk, and the water cascading down made it doubly hard. The driving rain had not halted for the last five days, and all we got from Stephen was a nod and a "Welcome to Scotland!"

As we went further we got above the rain clouds and faced some new ones, which had the familiar colour of snow. The sodden heather soon had a sprinkling of snow, and within the hour it was six inches deep – it was like we were in a different country.



Scotland: Red hinds



Target acquisition: An opportunity presents itself after a day-long stalk

Cutting across this mountain seemed endless. Navigating peat crags hidden by snow was hot work – the fresh breeze on our faces was welcome as we slowly stalked above our hinds. There were four of us that day, and as they say, ladies first. Teresa and Stephen left us and carried on to the last section of the stalk so as not to risk moving the herd. The last thing we saw was them crawling over the peak and out of view.

Hidden away, we waited for a shot but nothing came. Not too long afterwards, the other two came walking back despondently. Before they had even had time to stalk down onto them, the hinds had run hundreds of yards and were up and over a distant hill. But luck was on our side. Light disappears quickly up here, and with no time to look for another group before dark, we were fortunate our hinds had run down towards our starting point.

We stopped for lunch to give the hinds time to get settled before we marched on. It was a disappointing to leave our snowy landscape and go back down into the gloom, and the rain caused problems with grip as we navigated the steep sides of the mountain holding the heather for support with one hand and a walking stick in the other. Stephen, obviously used to this, walked as if he was strolling down the street in Laggan without a care in the world. When he noticed we were puffing, he would just stop for a while and look through the binoculars at nothing in particular – a polite way of giving us unfit folk a break.

“ The snow was six inches deep – it was like we were in a different country ”



Tough going: Mountainside stalking will exhaust all but the most experienced



The stalkers tracked the deer all the way up the mountain – and then down again



Scotland: Red hinds

Equipment reviewed by: **Brian Phipps**

Product: **SAKO 75 .270**

Distributor: GMK = 01489 587500 = www.gmk.co.uk

Acquired from: R Macleod and son = www.rmacleod.co.uk

Price: **£895 (second hand)**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

Product: **SCHMIDT & BENDER 3-12X50 ZENITH**

Distributor: York Guns = 01904 487180 = www.yorkguns.com

Acquired from: R Macleod and Son = www.rmacleod.co.uk

Price: **£795**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Product: **T8 REFLEX MODERATOR**

Distributor: Jackson Rifles = 01644 470223 = www.jacksonrifles.com

Acquired from: Sportsman Gun Centre = 01392 354854

www.sportsmanguncentre.co.uk

Price: **£229**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Product: **HARKILA PRO HUNTER STALKING SUIT**

Distributor: Harkila = 07887 997788 = www.harkilauk.co.uk

Acquired from: Bushwear = 08452 260469 = www.bushwear.co.uk

Price: **Jacket £309.95, trousers £219.95**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

It felt like a lifetime catching up with the hinds. Once again Christophe and I were left hidden, this time in a steep burn for shelter, while Stephen removed his Sako for the second time that day and checked that the optic covers were secure before he and Teresa disappeared once again. This time they had the help of the wind and rain, and they were able to stalk right down to within nearly 150 yards of the hinds. Although the deer were still wary, they carried on eating, so Stephen and Teresa sat tight for a while to observe and see if the hinds settled any more.

They crawled slightly closer to the heather-clad rocky outcrop which overlooked the hinds below. There wasn't any hurry to get in position, so there was time on hand to extend the bipod and try to push the legs through the heather to find some solid ground to avoid a spring to the rifle. With the magazine checked and in place and the safety on, it was time to select the cull beasts. Stephen pointed out a mature hind; its calf looked like it was a late one, so this was ideal for the cull.

Teresa positioned herself behind some of Germany's finest optics and waited. Stephen told her to take the shot when she comfortable; her painting finger was put to another use, and within seconds a crack echoed and from behind the hind Stephen saw the fur fly. The hind dropped, turmoil ensued and a mass panic happened in front. Teresa reloaded immediately and it became a waiting game again, but it didn't take long before a lonesome calf came back to look for its mother. Seconds later the second deer of the day was grassed.



The Argo was more than welcome with two deer to drag in the tough conditions

Teresa Davis

Teresa Davis has donated one of her limited edition fine art prints to *Sporting Rifle's* Save The Rhino auction. See page 88 for more details, and check out www.teresadavis.co.uk to see the prints. If you are in Scotland and want to see some of Teresa's paintings, stop by the House of Bruar, near Perth, and take a look in the gallery.

We hadn't walked far that day – maybe 6km in total, but it was a hard 6km. Christophe and I walked over to meet Teresa and Stephen as they came back up to us. By that stage I was relieved to find that we were only a few hundred yards from the Argo, so there was no long drag. We took it in turns to drag the gralloched hinds back to the Argo to be transported to the larder. It was then back to Stephen's house, Coul Farm, for his wife Carol's famous tea and cakes to finish off a perfect day.

So it was day one for hind season and there were already two in the bag. There were 38 more to go – tomorrow, it would be my turn to reduce that number a little more. ■



The cull begins: After Teresa's shots, it's two down and 38 to go for Dalchully