



# OUR 2016 NEW ZEALAND ADVENTURE

BY RICHARD MINNICH, CRPA BOARD MEMBER



Have you ever daydreamed about visiting New Zealand? I suspect that most of us have at one time or another — it's on everyone's proverbial 'bucket list'. I know my wife and I have talked about it for years!

We were at the 2015 Annual CRPA gala banquet walking around the tables during the silent auction when I noticed that one of the items for bid was a New Zealand safari. I mentioned this off-handedly to my wife before walking past the bid sheet to see what other items of interest were being auctioned off.

It was a couple of minutes later when my wife caught up to me and whispered to me in an excited voice, "Sweetie, I bid on the New Zealand safari!" Was she pulling my leg? No, she wasn't.

At the end of the evening (after checking that our bid was still the highest and nudging it up a couple of times) my wife and I had happily won the safari. Now we had our New Zealand adventure to plan.

Since going to NZ, even from Los Angeles, involves a 12-hour flight each way, we decided that this was not only going to be a dream hunt, but a dream vacation as well. We would take at least three weeks to explore the islands.

The safari was a four-day hunt with River's South Safaris operated by Pam and Mark Waite, 1409 Clayton Road, R.D.17, Sherwood Downs Fairlie, 7987 South Island, New Zealand. To check out their web site online go to: [riverssouth@xtra.co.nz](mailto:riverssouth@xtra.co.nz)

Although it is not uncommon for hunters to fly in, do their hunt and return to the States when the hunt is over, Peggy and I enjoy spending some time seeing what else the country has to offer. From past experience we decided to do the hunt at the end of our trip. We wanted to be rested and completely ready for our NZ hunt.

We worked with a travel agency in NZ that made the reservations at hotels and B&B's for us, arranged for rental cars (yes, we drove around NZ) and booked tours for us. Everywhere we stayed the accommodations were top-flight and the tours we took were enjoyable and exceeded our expectations!

By the way — driving: you probably know that the Kiwi's, like the U.K., the Aussies and South Africans — drive in the left lane of the road. Speed limits



in NZ are MUCH slower than in the U.S. with a maximum speed limit of 100 kilometers/hour, or around 60 MPH. And in the towns the speed limit often drops to half that.

After the first couple of days, Peggy and I were comfortable driving in the left, rather than the right, lane.

### **Our NZ Dream Vacation**

We scheduled our trip for late March and early April — Fall in NZ. Our flight landed in Auckland on the North Island, but instead of taking a connecting flight directly to Christ Church, we got a rental car and drove to Waitomo for the first night.

Most of our activities in New Zealand were active outdoor sorts of things, although the visitor is not limited to those kinds of adventures. There are museums (Wellington's is especially well known) as well as wineries and more intellectual pursuits.

In Waitomo we started by donning wet suits and climbing down a ladder into a 'glowworm' cave where we crawled, floated and swam in an underground river for about 4 hours to see the luminescent larva that hang from the ceilings.

At Lake Taupo we took a jet boat trip up to see Huka Falls. Motorboating on steroids!

We continued our drive to Wellington where we caught a ferry that took us





to Picton on the South Island. Staying in the small town of Nelson was the only time where there was a weather problem — our scheduled catamaran sailing trip was cancelled due to a storm that caused rough seas.

We went white-water rafting through the Buller Gorge in Murchison. The river was fairly high so the rapids weren't too intense. The beauty of the river gorge was enhanced with the pleasure of seeing Alpine Chamois on the cliff-like banks of the river.

One of the more exciting excursions was hiking on the Franz Josef Glacier, where we were dropped off by helicopter on the glacier and spent several hours walking on the ice — including seeing a large avalanche of ice crashing from the glacier down a chute perhaps ½ mile away from us. The guides explained that they keep far away from that dangerous area.

For fans of the “Lord of the Rings” movies, a lot of it was shot in the mountains above Lake Wanaka in a national

park that is a popular hiking destination.

Our Lake Wanaka adventure was when we visited Mou Waho Island, a nature reserve, in the middle of the lake where we encountered several of NZ's most endangered species. In addition to a small brown bird, called a ‘Buff Weka’, the island is home to Southern Alpine geckos and the most endangered species in NZ — a ‘weta’, — that for the life of me looks like a potato bug!

One of the better known ‘things to do’ in NZ is to take a boat trip in the Milford Sound, the northernmost glacial fjord of Fjordland National Park. We spent the night there on the ‘Milford Mariner’, cruising down the fjord to the Tasman sea then back to a sheltered cove for the night, and finally back again the next morning. It was overcast while we were there, but the waterfalls and rugged, rocky cliffs rising directly from the water made it a beautiful, unforgettable trip.

A little backtracking and we spent some time in Queenstown, which has become a magnet for young people

who come there for the extreme sports available in the area. Peggy and I took the opportunity to do a day hike on the ‘Routeburn Track’, one of the early trails used by Maori and later Europeans to access the interior of the island.

We finished our pre-hunt touring by driving back north to the eastern side of the ‘Southern Alps’ mountain range and taking an absolutely spectacular helicopter tour of Mount Cook — NZ's tallest mountain. It was on Mount Cook and its surrounding peaks that Sir Edmund Hillary prepared for his successful climb up Mount Everest in 1953.

And not far from the hotel where we were staying is one of the top five ‘dark’ spots in the world where they offer the opportunity to go out at night to see the stars with knowledgeable guides using small, computer-controlled telescopes.

I hope you aren't already bored to tears, but my point is that there are a lot of places to see and things to do in NZ in addition to your hunt!

## The Dream Hunt

We drove to Fairlie, NZ, to Pam and Mark Waite's hunting lodge. The facilities are modern, comfortable and serve as a base for hunting on a number of different properties. The main house is where meals are served, while there is also a large common room with a bar (complete with some of Mark's trophies on the wall) next to the hunter's quarters. There are laundry facilities available in the same building as the common room.

Mark and Pam are congenial hosts who insure that everyone is comfortable and well fed. Did I mention that Pam cooks excellent meals for her guests, from a 'full English breakfast' to wonderful dinners? (Not to slight Mark who turns out to be quite a cook himself!) And above all, you can tell that Mark and Pam genuinely like their clients. They're not joking that you may start as clients but you end up as friends. I know it's true for Peggy and me.

There are 15 "hunnable" big game species in NZ, including feral pigs and sheep, Asian buffalo and others. But what NZ is best known for is the Alpine Chamois, Fallow Deer, the Himalayan Tahr, and most famous of all, the Red Stag. NZ is

considered to be the premier destination in the world for hunting Red Stags.

In NZ you can hunt on public lands or on what they call 'estate' (private property) hunts. It isn't quite accurate to equate 'estate' properties with 'high fence'; it is more a distinction of 'private' property with limited access for hunting. Sometimes the fences are tall and others are barely enough to keep cattle from wandering off.

Peggy and I had two animals in mind: a Red Stag for Peggy and a Tahr for me. Of course if a tempting animal, like a chamois for example, just happened to cross my path, well...

We arrived the day before Peggy's hunt was scheduled to begin (the cost of the safari includes lodging and food for the night prior to your hunt). It was still mid-afternoon so Mark and I mounted a scope that I had brought with me on the Tikka 7mm-'08 rifle that Peggy and I were renting from him for the hunts.

I had brought a Burris Eliminator scope with us to 1.) provide a scope with an illuminated reticle, for our aging eyes, and 2.) with its built-in laser range finder it helps to compensate for the steep mountainous terrain that you hunt in NZ.

The next morning after breakfast,

Peggy and I joined Mark in his Toyota truck and drove over to his property in the nearby mountains — only one of the properties that are available for his clients to hunt.

We drove on the network of dirt roads periodically stopping to get out and glass when we had animals in sight. We looked over a number of Red Stags that day, usually at ranges of 400-500 yards. Some were larger than the others, some were very symmetrical with that 'classic' look while others were loaded with 'junk' on their antlers. After traversing the property, we actually decided to put a stalk on an animal that we had seen earlier in the day almost as soon as we entered the area.

The rut was over by early April and the stags were becoming wary again as their hormones were returning back to normal. So when the stags in the area heard the sound of a truck motor approaching, they seemed to feel that it was time to get out of Dodge. By the time we spotted them, we were watching their hindquarters as they disappeared over the tops of the mountains.

Not discouraged, Mark had us get back in the truck and drove us over some rather sketchy dirt roads to the other side of the mountains. We stopped at





that point and ate a quick lunch that Pam had made for us.

Now the stalk began in earnest. Mark had an idea of where the two stags we had been interested in were likely to come over the tops of the hills where we might be able to intercept them.

That afternoon we were going to approach them from downwind, making as little noise as possible. We were fortunate that most of the distance we could walk on tracks hidden from view of the mountainside where we expected the stags to emerge.

Mark led us up the trail, carrying his pack, followed by Peggy, and then me following with the rifle (and my cameras!) Mark had parked the truck two mountains over from where we had last seen the pair of stags we were stalking, so we had several miles to walk, most of it on a slight uphill grade.

It was about 3:00 PM when we got to a point where we could see the pair of stags who were across the canyon from our location. We got out the glasses again and confirmed that these were indeed our quarry before leaving the trail and closing our distance going through the brush out

to a point across from and a little above the stags.

At that point for no particular reason that we could understand, one of the stags started walking back up to the top of the mountain, each step taking him farther away from us. The second stag followed him for a short time before stopping.

Mark had set up a tripod for Peggy to use in one location before the stags had moved away. The stags' movement cause us to move up further ourselves, and he set up the tripod for Peggy a second time.

Peggy got settled into a shooting position, forced to kneel in a more upright stance than she would have liked, but that was necessitated by the terrain. Peggy patiently took her shot. We could hear the sound of the bullet hitting the stag but initially the stag seemed as if it was going to try running away. Although it took perhaps a half-dozen steps into the brush on the slope, it soon fell back and rolled onto the road where it had been standing. After that it began to roll down the road a ways, making us wonder if it was going to break off parts of its antlers, until it finally came to a stop.

Mark congratulated Peggy and told

us that her shot had been at 264 yards.

Now the real work began as we hiked back to the truck and then drove to a place on an adjacent road as near to the stag as we could get. It was still halfway up the mountain!

We all walked up together to this magnificent stag and took photos with it there on the slope of the mountain. Peggy's Red Stag had very symmetrical 24-point antlers with the 'classic' Red Stag crowns atop each antler. All-in-all a first class example of what a mature Red Stag should be.

Mark decided to skin it and remove the head where it lay to avoid possible damage. Once that was complete he walked back to the truck and left the head and antlers there. Returning, we dragged/rolled, tugged and cajoled the remainder of the carcass down the hill and the three of us lifted it into the truck bed. Remember that a Red Stag is about the same size as a bull Elk!

Peggy was as proud as could be of her stag and reminded us that her middle name is 'Annie.' Well, Anne really — but close enough.

We rested the following day as we

had a rain storm move into the area and Mark drove us to one of the neighboring towns where we purchased items made from a combination of Merino sheep's wool and fur from NZ opossums! We drove out to the coast as well, where we visited a gun store, which would look entirely familiar to an American gun owner with the exception of a singular lack of handguns and modern sporting rifles. But in NZ most of the rifles have suppressors! They don't regard suppressors as 'criminal' but they are to be polite and not have your shooting disturb your neighbors! Different attitudes.

Speaking of which: Mark and Pam are fully up to date on our battles for the 2nd Amendment here in the U.S. They are great supporters of the NRA, CRPA as well as the international hunting organizations. And they, like many in the non-U.S. English speaking countries, wish that THEY had an organization like the NRA to defend their right to self-defense!

My hunt the following day was for the exotic Tahr, a Himalayan mountain goat that was introduced into NZ for hunting over 100 years ago. They have adapted well to the mountains of NZ to the point of being considered a pest and some in the government of NZ have suggested that they should be eliminated. Thankfully, with hunters like us coming to NZ and paying for the privilege of hunting, Tahrs have thus far been saved from an elimination program.

Once again, like the day before, we had breakfast at the lodge and joined Mark in his truck. But this day instead of Mark's own property, we headed for a cattle rancher's place that hadn't been hunted for some time. As in Peggy's hunt we started by driving up dirt access roads and stopping and glassing when we thought we had spotted promising animals. But that is where our two hunts parted ways.

Richard's Law of Tahr Hunting: If you are at the bottom of the mountain, the Tahrs will be at the top; if you are at the top of the mountain the inverse will be true!

We spotted a group of Tahr at the top of one of the mountains, about 600 meters up. There were around 15 or so Tahrs in the group, including at least two to three mature Bull Tahrs.

So began our stalk, if you can describe climbing straight up the side of a mountain a stalk! We started climbing in an area where the ground was recessed



enough and at an angle that the Tahr wouldn't be aware of our presence, at least for a while. I'm not convinced that they didn't know where we were or simply didn't care. On the side of a mountain, we are slow, they are fast. They can get away with ease, so why worry about silly humans?

In addition to the slope of the mountain, the vegetation was tough to climb through. There is a plant like a yucca with stiletto like points sticking out in all directions that will pierce almost anything (pants, boots) and I still have the scars on my legs to prove it. Other plants had

thorns that would rival those in the African bush — and that's nasty. Others were simply slippery enough that one misstep and you could find yourself slipping back down the mountain that you just climbed, until you were stopped by one of the nasty thorn plants or impaled on one of the yucca-type bushes.

When we had climbed about 450 meters up the slope, we took out the glasses and began to identify which were the mature bulls and select which one to shoot. They were still about 225 yards above us and partially hidden by the rocks and plants, but we did finally identify a bull



that Mark thought was what we were looking for.

Mark set up a tripod for me to shoot from and with Mark using his range finding binocs and I using the Burris scope, we agreed on which was the correct animal — something any hunter will tell you is easier said than done.

I took my shot and the Bull Tahr dropped in its footsteps. We could see it struggling to regain its footing unsuccessfully until it finally stopped struggling and dropped too low behind the cover for us to see.

We didn't charge up the rest of the

mountain (as if!) but sat where we were and ate our lunch. In total we waited about 45 minutes before resuming our climb to retrieve the Tahr.

But when we had about halved the distance between us and where the Tahr had dropped, it suddenly struggled to its feet and slowly made its way back over the top of the mountain. And that was the last that we saw of it.

It was somewhat embarrassing for me to lose this Tahr. It's the first animal I've not recovered in the past 10 years or so that I've been seriously hunting big game. Several took us a couple of days to find and recover, but the Tahr (that I'm sure was badly wounded) got away and most likely crawled under some cover and died. But it is not an atypical situation with these tough mountain goats. Their heavy, hairy coats absorb any blood with the result that we could see where the Tahr had been laying down after it was shot, but there was no blood sign at all.

The following day, Mark pulled out his Polaris ATV and we took that back up the track to the top of the mountain where we had last seen the Tahr. We glassed and searched for several hours but saw NO sign of the animal at all!

On the positive side, we had noticed three bull Tahrs running up a ravine the previous day as we left and while we were searching for the Tahr from the day before, we located two of the three bulls. The day before the Tahr had been at the top of the mountain when we began the stalk; the second day, we were at the top of the mountain and they were in heavy brush at the bottom. Sigh.

So we began our stalk slowly moving down the mountain periodically checking to be sure that the Tahrs hadn't moved out of the area. And you know what? Going down those slopes isn't any easier than climbing up the slope.

Again, we got to about 230 yards from the two Tahrs that we had spotted. Both were large, mature bulls and either one would be a suitable animal to harvest. But as we moved down the slope, one of them disappeared into the heavy undergrowth (had he detected us?) leaving us with the remaining Tahr.

At that range we set up the tripod and tried to get into as stable a position for shooting as you can be on a steep slope. I moved up the magnification on the scope from the 4X or so that I use to locate the animals, to 8-9X to better place the shot

and then we waited for a clear shot. Sometimes all we could see was the hooves of the Tahr. Finally he emerged into a small clearing where I could see his body well enough to identify the heart/lungs area behind his shoulder and I took my shot.

This time, the Tahr began to run uphill for just a couple of steps before he collapsed and began rolling back into the ravine. This time there was no doubt, he was dead. So we carefully made our way down to the bottom of the ravine using a recent rock-slide area as our trail and retrieved the Bull Tahr.

The bottom of the ravine was actually a beautiful little place with a stream of the pure, cool mountain water that NZ is famous for, running down the center. By this time, though, it was getting close to sunset and we needed to get our trophy ready and pack it out of there before we lost daylight completely.

Mark field dressed the Bull Tahr and we began our trek out. We didn't try to go back up the 600 meters or so to where we had left the Polaris, instead cutting across several ravines until we could intersect the road. Although we didn't change elevation as much, we did go a much greater distance through the rough terrain and the ubiquitous brambles (more scars on the legs!) Once we found the road it was getting dark rapidly. Mark hiked back up the road to retrieve the Polaris while I stayed with our equipment and the Tahr. It was a wonderful time for reflection waiting there with just the stars and the moon for light, listening to the odd bullfrog-like croaking of the Fallow Deer bucks, until Mark returned with the ATV and we returned to the lodge.

Peggy and I both agreed: this had been one of the hardest and yet most satisfying hunts that we had done. And we could not have done it without Mark and Pam Waite of RiversSouth Safaris — our new friends.

It was a fitting conclusion to our New Zealand adventures.

The next day we drove up the couple of hours to Christ Church to catch a plane to Auckland and from there back to the U.S.

I hope this narrative of Peggy and my trip may inspire you to consider buying your own New Zealand Safari at one of the CRPA fund raisers. You will find it amazingly rewarding and it will help us continue to defend our 2nd Amendment rights here in California.