

ROARING STAGS AND RISING TROUT

Pick your passion at Poronui on New Zealand's stunningly beautiful North Island.

BY DOUG PAINTER

In the late summer of 1769, the HMS *Endeavour*, commanded by the famed English navigator Captain James Cook, left Tahiti and, on orders from the British Admiralty, set forth on a southwesterly course in search of what many believed was a great continent that existed in the southernmost reaches of the world. After some two months at sea, it was Nicolas Young, a plucky 12-year-old cabin boy on the *Endeavour*, who, on October 7 of that year, made out a distant promontory off the ship's bow.

For being the first of the crew to spot land, Captain Cook rewarded young Nicolas with five gallons of rum and the name of the headland he first spotted. It was not, however, the coast of the mythical southern continent. Instead, what Nicolas had glimpsed was a high bluff jutting from a bay on the east coast of New Zealand's North Island. Nick's Head, as it is still known today, can be seen from the town of Gisborne, which, incidentally, is the first city in the world to see the sun each day.

It is easy to believe that the Sporting Gods chose to bring dawn's first light to this faraway locale for a good reason: to call attention to the fact that these distant islands are home to some of the best hunting and fishing on earth, bar none.

Oddly enough, that wasn't always the case. Although it's blessed with a variety of great habitats, New Zealand was, with the exception of several species of bats, historically devoid of any land mammals. No indigenous critters of any kind, at all.

From the sportsman's perspective, this created a true *tabula rasa*, the perfect blank sheet from which to introduce the best of the best for hunters and anglers. For example: red deer from Scotland in the 1850s and '60s, the Turkish fallow deer in the late 1800s, and the wily and elusive sika deer from eastern Asia in the

early 1900s. Brown trout, from English stock in Tasmania, were released in New Zealand in the 1860s, with rainbow trout from the USA coming over in the late 1880s. And that's just a sampling.

The first four-legged animals on the islands were a small flock of sheep dropped off by Captain Cook on the North Island when he made a return voyage in 1773. Almost 250 years later I shot a wild ram, what might have been a descendant of this original band. It was, however, just one slice of my hunting and fishing adventure at one of the world's great wilderness retreats, Poronui, nestled in the secluded Taharua Valley of New Zealand's North Island.

Once a rustic fishing camp, Poronui has transformed itself into a world-class lodge without resorting to pomp or exaggerated décor. It retains its sporting ambience and a down-home, cozy feel, providing guests with a truly upscale experience in an atmosphere of understated elegance. With only seven guest cabins surrounding the main lodge, there is an intimate atmosphere to Poronui that simply can't be matched by larger lodges.

When I arrived at the lodge—it was about ten in the morning—I noted the open kitchen and communal dining table. Almost without asking, the chef began whipping up a full English breakfast that I ate in the company of several of Poronui's guides and staff. By my second cup of coffee, I was seated among friends.

Speaking of friends, my hunting guide, Mark, and I hit it off within the first five minutes as we left the lodge well before daylight the next morning on our way to the property's hill country in search of a suitable red stag. Dawn had us glassing a valley below, mostly high grass but interspersed with small groves of

trees and brushy plants in the steeper cuts.

It was from one of these thickets that I saw my first New Zealand red deer, an utterly amazing stag that Mark whispered would easily score well over 400 SCI. The profusion of points on his massive, backswept rack was mind-blowing; a vision, it struck me more like something out of a *Jurassic Park*-like past than anything you might see today. Of course, as a writer and guest of the lodge, this world-class stag was well beyond my pay grade, but nonetheless, he was a great sight to see in the wild.

Through the day we moved to different vantage points to glass new hillsides, not always seeing red deer, but often both sika and fallow bucks and hinds either grazing or on the move. Without question, the Poronui's 16,000 acres are among the most game-rich areas I've seen anywhere in the world.

We spotted at least four more stags during the afternoon, each, in the reverse of the usual dilemma, too big to shoot. Late in the day we made our way to a high bluff overlooking an expansive meadow, a prime spot that Mark hoped would hold at least one good stag or two. Mark's hunch was on the money. In the anxious minutes that passed before the sun began to set, two stags moved away from beneath the bluff and out onto the meadow

where we could see them. Unfortunately, both were very high 300-count bulls. But then the third sauntered into view.

I muttered to myself, "Well this guy is still too big," but Mark turned to me and said, "Shoot him, if you like. He's out at 290 yards." Which, using an 85 Sako chambered in .300 Win. Mag., I was thrilled to do.

Among the largest species in the deer family, a mature stag weighs somewhere between 350 to 500 pounds. Mark was able to get his truck close to the stag, but we had a bit of a tussle getting him into the bed. If someone was making a YouTube video of this event, it might well be titled, "Watch Two Old Guys Try to Push/Pull a Stag into the Bed of a Pickup!" Such are the memories, of course, that make the hunt.

After shooting a fine red stag, I was ready to put my feet up until it was time to go fishing. Mark would have none of that. Poronui, it turns out, is ground zero in New Zealand for sika deer, the first herd in the country having been released on the ranch's property in the early 1900s. The ranchlands continue to provide superb habitat for this elusive Asian species, and, arguably, Poronui is still regarded as the number one locale for trophy sika in all of New Zealand.

The second morning at Poronui started much like the first. Up before dawn and off to the high country to start glassing when the light became good enough. The first movement we saw on the hillside below turned out to be a band of fallow deer, not sika. Several good fallow bucks, with their uniquely palmated antlers, came into view, but we decided to stick with our plan of finding a sika buck.

We switched to another peak where we soon spotted a sika buck in the valley below. Unfortunately, he was bedded down underneath a large bush and looked to be perfectly content where he was, basking in the early morning sunshine. The good news: I had plenty of time to get to a prone position with a bipod up front and my daypack under my right elbow. This is about as close to benchrest-solid that you can achieve in the field. Mark ranged the deer at 301 yards, but there wasn't even a whisper of wind. The only question was, would he stand up before our patience wore out?

It seemed like an hour, but less than 15 minutes later a sika doe walked past our buck, and he stood and turned, giving me a perfect broadside shot. Loading him in the truck was a lot easier than the red stag.

We startled a band of wild sheep as we



ram at 354 yards, certainly the outer limit of my comfort zone. I missed low with my first shot but anchored the ram with my second. A very nice sheep, and a totally unexpected bonus on my hunt.

I was learning quickly, however, that getting more than you expected is par for the course at this extraordinary lodge.

After lunch Mark and I headed back out, not to hunt, but to simply sit high on a ridge on a beautifully crisp and sunny afternoon and glass for monster red stags. I saw four that made my jaw drop. In addition to red stag and sika deer, you can also hunt for fallow, rusa deer, and sambar deer on the property, as well as wild sheep and feral goat. Great hunting, however, is only part of the Poronui experience.

Keeping in mind that the seasons in New Zealand are opposite of those in the northern hemisphere, March through July are the key hunting months, with fishing available from October through May. Mid-summer, our January and February, is the most popular fly fishing time frame, with lower water and heavy terrestrial activity on the top. If you

descended from the top of a hill on our way back to the lodge. Mark saw an older ram that had a broken leg, though he managed to keep up with the rest of his gang pretty well. With winter on the way, Mark felt it best to shoot the injured animal.

Oddly enough, the ram seemed to sense our intention and broke off from the other sheep, heading uphill for heavy cover. If he had stayed put he would have been safe, but he chose to leave the thicket and make a break for the top of the ridge, exposing himself on the grassy slope. Mark ranged the

Top: A pristine river glides through Hawke's Bay on New Zealand's North Island. Above: The beautiful Taharua River flows past Poronui's main lodge and guest cabins, which evolved from what was once a rustic fishing camp. Opposite: The lounge and other rooms in the spacious lodge reflect a truly upscale ambience, but with a cozy, down-home feel.





plan to hunt and fish, mid-March, when I was there, is an excellent crossover time.

Many great fly fishing lodges boast that they are close to top-rated rivers or streams, waters that, as good as they may be, are also open to all, whether float-trippers, streamside anglers, or both. That's great for public access but can put a good measure of pressure on the resource, and make for tough fishing even when conditions are prime.

By contrast, Poronui has almost 25 miles of world-class trout water on-site: the Taharua, a spring creek, meanders down the valley, while the Mohaka River, a tumbling freestone stream, wraps itself around the property's border. If this isn't enough, the helicopters based at the lodge can, in a matter of minutes, put you on the headwaters of some of the area's remote mountain streams, some of the best but least-fished waters in

New Zealand. Guests can expect, the lodge notes, to fish new water every day, no matter how long their stay. "World class" has become an overused superlative, but not in the case of trout fishing at Poronui.

The lodge has suitable water for a range of fly fishing skill levels and physical abilities. If you're up to the challenge, Poronui will offer you the chance to catch a trout, or two, of a lifetime. I'm talking about fish measured in pounds, not inches. As they would say in Boston, these big boys are "wicked smart" and demand stealth and top-notch presentations if you want to hook up. Even then, your best may not be enough.

Indeed, my two most memorable fishing experiences at Poronui were with fish I didn't land. My first morning out we fished a stretch of the Taharua, slowly making our way up the bank looking for a feeding fish. My guide, Sean, spotted a big brown quietly finning in midstream. At first, I thought he

was pointing to a submerged log big enough for the lodge's hearth!

I inched forward on my knees until I was about in line with the trout. On this beat, the creek bank was about 15 feet above the water, forcing me to think of both drop and distance on my cast upstream. I was pleasantly surprised when my nymph landed delicately in the pool about just a few feet above this bruiser of a brown. Unfortunately, I was still on my knees when the fish took my nymph and raced downstream. My rod swished through the tall grass like a scythe cutting wheat. In an instant I was down to my backing, and then the fish broke me off, seemingly with no more effort than Muhammad Ali flicking off a weak jab.

On my second day I took a ten-minute helicopter ride to the banks of a remote stream on Maori land in the next valley over from the lodge. Heavily canopied, the stream had a dark, primordial feel to it, a place where trout grew to huge proportions

in the depths of hidden pools and anglers waded softly and spoke in hushed tones.

On one stretch, the vegetation was so thick that I had no choice but to cast directly upstream, a presentation that minimizes any sort of natural drift. Nonetheless, the tactic worked. A huge fish took my nymph the moment it hit the water; then raced up the riffle toward a large pool.

A good place for us to duke it out, I thought.

He quickly sensed the error of his ways and charged downstream. I was standing in



the middle of the stream with the water up to my thighs when the massive rainbow passed me within inches, like a miniature submarine blasting across my bow. I held my rod up high, but about 40 feet downstream he dove under an old deadfall and snapped my tippet in a flash. I won't admit to a trout giving me a bit of a fright, so I expect it was the cold water that caused me to feel a slight shiver traveling up from my wading shoes.

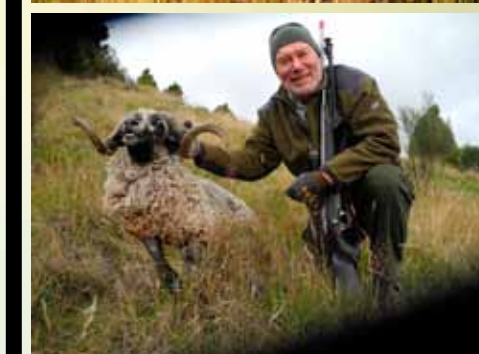
If you've hunted and fished a few more seasons than you care to remember, you know that it's not the game bagged or fish brought to creel that are the true measure of time spent in the great outdoors. In a sense, it's everything else: It's catching a glimpse of a red stag, his massive antlers backlit in the setting sun, just before he slips back into heavy cover. It's dropping your fly across the stream and a few feet above a nice rise and hearing your guide murmur, "Nice cast." It's an evening at the lodge, enjoying a wonderful dinner and having a brandy or two with a newfound friend.

Poronui has all the ingredients that go into making a world-class lodge, from great hunting and fishing to a superb cuisine and lovely accommodations. But the lodge also has a secret sauce that sets them apart: the friendliness of their staff, and the passion these men and women have for what they do. Sure, I'll remember the stag I shot and the big fish that got away. But what I'll miss is the men and women with whom I shared good cheer and great times in a land like no other. Thanks for all you did to make my stay an exceptional experience.

And hats off to you, too, Nicolas. You really did deserve that ration of rum. ■

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Poronui also offers superb equestrian facilities, a variety of nature excursions, and high-quality Maori cultural experiences. I highly recommend spending some additional time on the North Island seeing the sights and enjoying some unique New Zealand adventures. Along with booking your trip at Poronui, Kit Schultze of Esplanade Travel (kit@esplanadetravel.com) can put together an unforgettable tour of New Zealand.



Doug Painter took this red stag, then a big sika buck, and finally this wild sheep from 354 yards away. Opposite: The author and his guide scan the edge of a fog-choked canyon for stags.