





Photographing a couple of  
chamois along a mountain path.

New Zealand: Chamois

# *Return to the* West Coast

**Text and Photos: Ben Salleras**

*My left leg wavered around in the fast-flowing water, frantically trying to find the next foothold. The force of the current was so powerful that I could only just maintain my balance on the slippery rocks below. I'd already completely lost feeling in my legs, the glacial water was so cold it was stinging. Was it really worth it? If I slipped, I'd have no chance of saving my bow, because I wouldn't be able to save myself from what was downstream while still grasping onto it, it would be irretrievable. If I turned back, I could get to the edge of the river safely, but would sacrifice an opportunity to stalk the chamois I'd just spotted further upstream.*



## Early Success

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The desire to hunt can sometimes lead us into situations that aren't exactly safe, and this was certainly getting close to one of those. I was pushing the boundaries in terms of maintaining my own safety, but the instinctive urge to stalk this animal was very strong. It was the first afternoon of a five-day semi-guided hunt with my friend Marcus Pinney of Wilderness Trophy Hunting, and it hadn't taken us long to get into some action!

I finally overcame my instinctive apprehension and decided to push that foot just a little further out, eventually locating another rock to support me, and getting just enough grip on it, all the time being pushed by the great force of the current within the deep swift water which was above waist-

height. Another foothold, and another, I scarcely managed to maintain balance, until I passed the deepest section of the river, and began wading through shallower water on the other side. It was game on. The chamois I had spotted earlier was a further two hundred metres upstream, now out of sight, but I was confident she would still be feeding casually in the same location. I stalked in tight to the rock wall beside me, glassing ahead every few steps, until I finally spotted her. Like a lizard I slowly slithered over the moss-covered rocks. With no vegetation I only had them as cover. Eventually I got into a good shooting position at twenty-five metres, as she fed quartering away from me on the other side of a steep-sided stream, and the shot flew true. She disappeared over the edge of a rock face and out of sight, but I knew she wouldn't be far.

The next challenge was retrieving her. I had to execute some of the most difficult rock-climbing moves I've ever accomplished to get down a steep rock face, across a deep-flowing stream which ran into the main river, up the rock face on the other

side, then down into a tight gut where she disappeared. I was really pushed to my physical limits! Luckily she hadn't gone far at all, and with the chamois over my shoulder I managed to climb back out using tree roots and vines. It was definitely the most challenging retrieval I've attempted. Safely back at our backpacks, we got some photos in the fading light, and hiked back to the vehicle in the dark. I was ecstatic with such a perfect start to my hunt! The focus now would turn to finding a nice buck....

## A Year Earlier

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I had hunted chamois with my bow for the first time exactly a year earlier with Marcus in the same area. During that hunt I managed to take a nice doe, as well as a hornless doe which had completely lost her horns due to horn rot, which is a common issue for New Zealand's West Coast chamois. During my hunt we spotted fewer bucks than we'd hoped, they just didn't play the game. On one occasion Marcus and I hiked a long way up a river system to hunt some 'slips' (erosion or landslide creating an open clearing where chamois like to feed) he knew of. While glassing one particular slip, we spotted a beautiful big buck feeding alone. I put in a great stalk to get into shooting position, emerging from the thick bush directly above him. Stalking in to just eighteen metres, I couldn't believe how lucky I had been to be presented such a golden opportunity. Hiding behind a large tree, the buck feeding unaware at a steep angle below me, I settled my nerves and prepared for what would be a very simple bow shot. On taking the shot however,





A female chamois traversing a field of rocks near a mountain stream.

some old target panic problems reappeared, and I dropped my bow arm just a fraction as I shot, the arrow crashing harmlessly below the buck's chest. I was absolutely horrified, and that shot haunted me for the year to follow. After all the effort, to miss such an easy shot at such close range crushed me, and I felt bad for Marcus too, who would have been very pleased to see me take a nice buck. Nevertheless, I yearned to return. I had to get back and give it another go, and one year later I found myself back on the West Coast staying with Marcus and his lovely wife Kaylyn on their beautiful farm north of Franz Josef, with the mighty Southern Alps towering above us to the east.

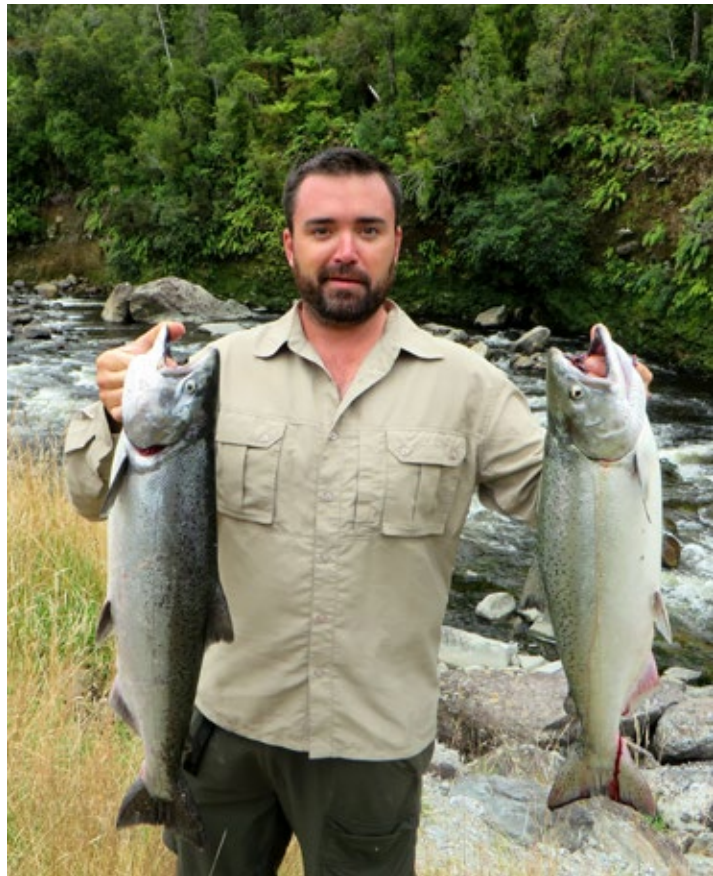
### The Spot

Since I'd hunted the area before, for this hunt Marcus kindly allowed me to hunt alone for most of the time. I much prefer to hunt alone for species as wary as chamois, plus Marcus had plenty of work to do back at the farm. The previous year, while flying into one of Marcus' best spots in a chopper, we crossed over an area of land with good visibility, and spotted a large group of chamois feeding in a clearing, in the middle of the day. There were a couple of really nice trophies amongst them. I had never stopped thinking about that spot,

and discussed with Marcus a plan to hike in to this area to investigate it further. Once some morning rain had cleared a little, I hiked in approximately ten kilometres to the same clearing, using my GPS Kit app on my phone to guide me. The chamois sign on the hike were very encouraging, plenty of tracks and scat. The further I hiked, the more sign I saw. Much was so fresh that I knew I must have only just missed them. Realising that I would have to turn around soon, and only sighting and shooting a hare for the day, I decided it was time to return, making it back to my vehicle well after dark. Getting back to Marcus' place, I explained what I had seen, and we both agreed it would be wise to return to this spot again during my hunt.











**Top:** The scenery of the West Coast is magnificent.

**Left:** A break in the hunt due to weather was filled with great salmon fishing.

## Salmon

The following day it rained heavily all day, and while not an ideal day for chamois we knew the salmon would not be worried by the weather! February is a great time to find chinook salmon migrating up the streams and rivers in certain parts of New Zealand, and they are a highly prized sport and eating fish for the locals. Marcus and I went down to his favourite salmon spot, and flicked spinners into the depths of the stream for several hours. Salmon fishing in New Zealand's streams is truly a test of patience, more so than any other style of fishing I've tried, but eventually, if you're very lucky, you may be rewarded with a strike. After many fruitless hours of working the same section of river, and several snagged (and lost) lures, I finally saw Marcus' rod bend over almost in half, he'd hooked one! After an epic battle, he brought the fish into the bank, only to find the salmon had been foul-hooked (not hooked in the mouth), and under local regulations it was not legal to keep a fish caught this way. Not being able to hear what Marcus was saying over the water noise, I could not believe what I was seeing when I saw him unhook the salmon and casually release it back into the water! I ran around the rocky bank to him to check if he had gone completely mad after all this heavy rain, but alas he was fine and explained what had happened. I couldn't believe it, by this stage I could almost taste that fresh smoked salmon in my mouth!

For several more hours we worked our lures, and finally when I least expected it while half daydreaming, I had some luck. A beautiful fish of about ten pounds, put up a great fight in the swift water, and I was over the moon to land such a nice fish. As luck would have it, not five minutes later another silver flash and another beautiful fish struck my lure. We returned home and smoked some fillets, enjoying fresh smoked salmon for our entrée, with crackers and cheese. During my trips with Marcus I've found that fresh smoked salmon is without doubt the single best food source one can find in the wild. They are my favourite thing in the world to eat. Life could not have been any better that night as we celebrated our catch with a few ales, discussing tactics for my final few days of hunting.

## After the Rain

The rain unfortunately hung around, and the windows of opportunity were limited. We were housebound during the heavier downpours, which gave me time to admire Marcus' impressive display of trophies, some incredible New Zealand whitetail, chamois and tahr amongst them. Finally a good break in the weather



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gave us a chance to hunt one of Marcus' favourite spots. In this particular area we found chamois emerging to feed immediately after the rain. Old timber logging tracks snaking through the thick bush were utilised to find chamois out feeding on the freely available grass. We stalked ever so slowly, ready for a chamois around every corner.

We spotted a few does and kids during the first half of our hunt, and got some great photos and video footage, but it wasn't until late in the day that we spotted our first buck. He was feeding out on the track, had a really nice set of hooks and a much darker coat than most chamois at that time of year. I split from Marcus and commenced sneaking in, using the limited cover as best I could as the buck fed unaware of our presence. As I got to about sixty metres however, I felt the wind gently blowing into the back of my neck. A few moments later and without hesitation he leapt into the thick scrub without the chance for a shot. Less than an hour on, we came across another feeding chamois, this time a huge-bodied buck with no horns whatsoever – both lost to horn rot. He fed straight along the cleared path towards us, almost as if he knew he was safe. He came right in under ten yards without realising we were there! I shot some photos with my phone before he dashed into the bush to safety.

On my second-to-last day of hunting I decided it was time to return to the spot I'd hunted earlier and seen plenty of sign, I had a feeling about this place. The weather forecast was much better, which would

**Top:** A female chamois with her kid.

**Middle:** Chamois tracks in the mud.

**Bottom:** Blood on a fern along an easy bloodtrail.



# Cameroon

## Savannah & Forest

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The author with his West Coast archery chamois.





allow me a full day of hunting. I headed off alone early in the morning, wanting to make the most of the day. Over the first few kilometres I sighted no chamois, but again lots of fresh sign. Stalking in on an ideal looking slip, I spotted a lone buck feeding, but he was immature and I decided to leave him, I stalked in as close as possible and took a few photos. Not long after, I reached an opening in a large stream, immediately spotting a group of chamois off in the distance in the bed of the stream. I stayed in as much cover as possible, tight against the thick bush at the edge, slowly making my way closer and closer to the group. At about the halfway point, while fully focussed on the group of three chamois still two hundred metres ahead, I heard a rustle in the bush in front of me, and out of the darkness walked a beautiful heavy buck. Catching his movement just in time, I stayed absolutely dead still, as he emerged onto the streambed and stared intently at me, at a little over ten metres. I could tell he didn't know whether to run for his life or do nothing at all. He stared at me for

several minutes, without moving a muscle, and I followed suit, staring straight down at the ground and not daring to look him in the eye. With adrenalin surging through me, and a trophy buck standing and staring at such amazingly close proximity, it was very difficult to control the shaking!

Amazingly, the buck decided I was no great threat, and took a few more steps, again staring straight at me. I could not believe my luck, and dared not move, holding on to the extremely slim hope that I might still get a shot. He just couldn't figure out what I was. The Ridgeline Buffalo camouflage was concealing me the best I could hope for, matched perfectly to the thick West Coast bush. Again he took a few steps, and again he stared, for another minute at least. Even at such close range, he couldn't determine what I was. He started to walk off, not looking overly concerned, and as he passed a large overhanging tree out over the stream, I had just two seconds to draw out an arrow and place it on the string. Luckily he didn't catch the movement, and continued walking along the

streambed, still within twenty metres. I still couldn't move an inch until he passed another piece of cover to hide my movements. Finally he passed another overhanging tree branch, giving me the opportunity to draw my bow.

After such intense adrenalin and standing dead still for a long period of time, I struggled to settle my pin, as the buck stared back at me around twenty-five metres away. I released my arrow, the buck exploded out of there and ran up the streambed, coming to rest within sight. The shot was not perfect, but a quick finishing arrow secured him. Absolutely elated and still in shock after such a close-quarter encounter, I inspected the beautiful thick hooks my buck sported. I had done it! I sat down next to him and savoured the magic moment. These are the moments I live for. I was probably the happiest man on the planet at that point in time, the sun was shining, the gorgeous New Zealand scenery surrounded me, and I'd just taken a dream chamois buck with my bow. Life just doesn't get any better. ■

## **i** Wilderness Trophy Hunting



The summer months (December to March) provide an excellent opportunity to hunt New Zealand's West Coast chamois, and are often overlooked. The chamois tend to migrate down to lower elevations, frequenting streams, slips and clearings, enabling superb stalking opportunities for the bowhunter or rifle hunter alike. The action is likely to be close and fast, with visibility in the bush close to zero, as opposed to the open tops often associated with chamois hunting in New Zealand. The hunting is very accessible, and the weather is very mild, much the opposite to conditions in the Northern Hemisphere at that time. Salmon fishing is an awesome way to fill in time between hunts too!

Marcus Pinney of Wilderness Trophy Hunting is one of New Zealand's most respected outfitters, offering first-class free-range hunts for red stag, Himalayan tahr, Alpine chamois, and extraordinary fallow deer. The accommodation at Marcus and Kaylyn's property is superb; they are the most welcoming and warm people you're likely to meet, and the scenery in the area is breathtaking. This is one of the most enjoyable hunts I've ever experienced worldwide, and anyone wishing to hunt an Alpine chamois and experience the best of the New Zealand wilderness should seriously consider a summer hunt with Wilderness Trophy Hunting.

You can find out more at [www.wildernesstrophyhunting.com](http://www.wildernesstrophyhunting.com).