

RUSSIAN RED STAG

I was headed to Russia for the second time in two years, only this time I was traveling with my friend Joel Kennemur. Last year it had been a grizzly bear hunt and I was fortunate enough to take two of them with my bow. This year we would be hunting red stag

In Moscow, we had 8 ½ hours between flights to Capatob (pronounced:Saratov), so we went through the Kremlin where Lenin's body was on display. This is a rare treat only displayed once very so many years. They treat his body every day to preserve it. He has been dead more than 90 years. We saw Red Square, which is where the Kremlin is located.

While at the Kremlin I saw the largest cannon in the world. Under it were four cannon balls stacked in a pyramid fashion. Each ball weighed more than two tons. I thought it would be cool to get a picture of me pretending to pick up one of the balls and load it into the cannon. I stepped over the roped-off area, climbed on top of the bottom three balls, wrapped my arms around the top ball and strained, while my interpreter, Andrew, was focusing to take the picture. I heard someone shouting from a distance in Russian and heard several people laughing.

Just after Andrew took the picture, I felt a sharp pain to my right thigh. When I turned, I saw that a KGB officer had hit my leg with a belt-like object. He then grabbed my arm and began to usher me away. Andrew ran over and began shouting in Russian.

Andrew grasped the officer's arm and broke me free. He got between us and began talking very rapidly to the officer. His back was to me. Without the officer seeing him, he motioned behind his back for me to leave. I got in the midst of a crowd of tourists. When the group was out of sight of the officer and Andrew, I darted into a men's room. Joel had watched where I went and after a while he and Andrew met me there. Andrew said in his Russian accent, "Wow, that

was a close one!" I could only laugh. I told Andrew, "Not really with a sliver tongued interpreter like you around."

We then drove to catch our flight to Saratov. The authorities x-rayed all our bags. Joel was gun hunting and I was bow hunting. Joel had 30 more bullets than he declared and I did not declare one of my large hunting knives. The authority was a very young man, probably 18 years old. He impounded the knife and bullets.

Our other interpreter, Dmitri, quarreled with him for at least 45 minutes. The young man was looking for a bribe. I gave Dmitri \$20 to give to the young man, and Joel did the same. The young man then permitted us to proceed.

The porters threatened to turn us in for having overweight bags. That cost us \$40 for each porter. Then Dmitri persuaded a bus to take our bags and us to the plane. The plane was a long way from the gate and unlike our airlines, here you have to carry your own bags to the plane.

Our bags, as we had speculated, were overweight. You are only allowed two bags per person and the total weight can't be more than 70 kilograms. I had six bags weighing more than 500 kilograms and Joel had four bags weighing more than 400 kilograms.

Dmitri asked the baggage checker to step into a private room. After about five minutes, he came out and we left for the gate, again. I do not know what he said, but I am sure it included some sort of payoff.

They had held the plane for us, and we finally made it. I will never forget the stench that nearly knocked me back down the airplane steps when I entered the plane. The plane was in a worn-out state and was packed with unbathed people. By this time, Joel was pretty upset. We landed in Saratov, and everyone went outside to collect their baggage.

The car ride to camp was an adventure. Now I know why Disney has not built an amusement park in Russia. With car rides like this, who would go to Disney. After three hours of the ride of my life, we finally arrived to camp.

There were four of us crammed into a small one-room building: Joel, two interpreters and me, plus all our luggage. The building reminded me of a railroad boxcar—but only half the size. The cook's husband prepared a late night snack for us because the cook was ill. I doctored the cook for the next two days with some medicine I had brought from home.

After unloading, Joel shot his gun with the use of the vehicle lights. It was dead on. I took one look at my bow case, fired one shot, and knew the sad news. The shot placement was terrible. I took aim again at the bull's eye and shot again. Dmitri said my second shot had missed the entire target, because there was only one arrow in the target. We examined the target. The second arrow had Robin-Hooded the first and pushed it through the target. This left only one arrow protruding from the front of the target. Dmitri was satisfied how I knew my bow was off with just one the first shot. (This has only happened twice in my life while using a broad heads).

The next morning, Joel went hunting while I worked on my bow, which had been damaged during the trip. He heard some red stags roaring and saw some poachers actually kill a nice stag. Joel's guide shot in the air to run off the poachers. The guides found the stag and decided to come back for it after eating. When they returned, the poachers had already come back and got the stag.

That evening I hunted and saw a small spike. Joel heard some roaring and saw a cow. The next morning, we were in the woods at least one hour before daylight. I neither saw nor heard anything. Our interpreters decided to move us to another place.

We took a Russian bath which was really nothing more than a sauna. The bath room was reserved for women Monday, Wednesday and Friday and for me Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Sunday was reserved for cleaning. They had a large room made of a cedar type wood. The floor elevated downward in the center where they had a hole in the floor. There was a wood burning stove that kept the room very hot. There was a tenant who kept the fire going and gave you a branch of leaves when you walked in. The leaves smell kind of like mint. Once your skin pores were open, you were to beat yourself with the branch. The mint from the leaves would enter your pores. When you had no more leaves on your branch, the tenant would take

you to the center of the room and you would straddle the hole in the floor. He would take a ladle full of water and pour it over you head until all the tree bark and leaves were washed off your body. Then he would hand you a small thin towel to dry off with. If you missed your day to bath, you would have to go 4 days without a bath. After the Russian bath, we had brunch. We packed up and moved about 2 ½ hours away. After unloading, we rushed to find the local guides for that area so we could hunt that afternoon.

When we arrived at the new guide's house, he was out scouting. His 8-year-old son rode with us in our vehicle to a place where he thought his father might be. The young boy blew a bugle three times. About 10 minutes later his father arrived. We jumped in our vehicle and we were off to hunt. Joel took off with his guide and my guide and I drove to an old home place, then jumped out and took off at a brisk pace. It was almost a trot. We arrived at our hunting location 15 minutes later. OUT OF BREATH!

It was a sizable open field with a small head of pines about 50 yards wide and 200 yards long, right in the middle of the field. We headed straight for the pine head. The trees were planted in rows. We began to slowly stalk through. I saw a brown spot at the end of the field, about 500-600 yards away, and pointed it out to my guide. After he looked through his binoculars, he said it was a bishoy that's Russian for big stag.

It was on the left side of the pine head, so we got all the way to the right side and stalked within 40 yards of the end of the pine head. We stopped and glassed the stag again. We both knelt down to one knee and after looking through his binoculars for about a second, my guide grabbed my leg and pointed. The stag was about 70 yards away facing and staring right at us. I swallowed hard as my already hard-beating heart, jumped into the top of my throat.

We both froze for what seemed like an eternity. The stag started right us—50...45...40...35 yards facing us. He was staring directly at us. I could hear my nose whistling with each breath I took. The stag turned broadside, looked back at us, and then started quartering away from us. By the time I eased my bow up, he had moved about 25 yards to my right but was still about 35 yards away. By the time I got to a full draw and anchored, he was about 40 yards away.

Just before I squeezed the trigger on my release, the stag sensed something was wrong. He could have seen me draw or may have winded us; in either case he made a 90-degree turn and began to trot directly away from us. Just before he finished the turn, I let my arrow fly, using my 50-yard pin. I held it steady near the front of his shoulder, allowing a substantial lead, as he was sharply quartered away from me.

Although the arrow seemed to be floating in slow motion, it was still difficult to follow, as it was getting dark. Finally, I heard the impact of the arrow. It sounded like a good hit. In a flash the stag was gone. I listened hard in the silence that followed. I strained my ears to hear any noise or crash in the woods. There was nothing but silence. We got out flashlights from our packs, and worked our way where we thought he had gone into the woods. By this time, it was very dark. We looked for about 30 minutes and could not find any blood. We elected to come back in the morning.

That night I could not fall asleep. When I finally did, I kept waking up to look at the alarm clock, thinking we had over slept. I finally got up about 90 minutes earlier than everyone else.

The anticipation was consuming me. Finally, my interpreter, my guide and I were on our way. Then it started to rain—not hard, but stronger than a mist. When we got to the field, we spread out and began to look for blood.

After about five minutes, I found a good stream of blood. My heart was doing cartwheels. In one instant, I knew I had hit the stag, and I knew it was a good hit. At first the blood trail was easy to follow, then after about 300 yards it began to dwindle to drops.

The rain was diluting the trail. The longer we tracked, the less likely our endeavors would end in triumph. About the time I began thinking the rain was going to make our efforts hopeless—the trail led straight into the river. We had to go back to camp to get a canoe so we could cross.

Once on the other side, far down the stream from where he had gone in, we found the blood trail. It was very weak. I am sure the river douched most of the blood from him. We tracked about 300 more

yards and located the stag. He was still alive. He saw us at the same time we saw him. Using all his strength, he jumped to his feet to run.

I shot a hopeless arrow, which barely grazed his hide. He bounded off directly into the river. He did not realize how much blood he had lost. When the stag reached the middle of the river, he panicked and swam back toward our side. The guide's dog jumped into the river and scaled to the top of the stag's head. As the stag began to sink, I commenced to strip my clothes off. Keep in mind, the temperature was 35 degrees.

By the time I got every thing off but my pants, the stag was caught up in the current and propelled swiftly downstream. My guide and I snatched up my clothes and bow and ran down-stream as fast as we could. We finally got in front of the drifting stag. I pulled my pants off, got my rope and dove in. I swam to the middle and intercepted the stag by his antlers as he floated by. I tied the rope to the antlers and swam back to shore, with the rope between my teeth. The guide took the rope and pulled the stag to shore. It was a nice 7 by 6. The animal was truly a "bishoy" stag, as they say.

When we got back to camp, Joel had also killed a nice 7 by 6. His stag had slightly more mass and his spread was about 2-3 inches wider than mine was.

Three days into our hunt we both had our trophy. We celebrated that night and had a feast of a meal.

Life is great, even in Russia!