



Red Alert!

Dom Holtam heads to Thetford Forest in Norfolk in search of what might just be the best value stag stalking in the UK

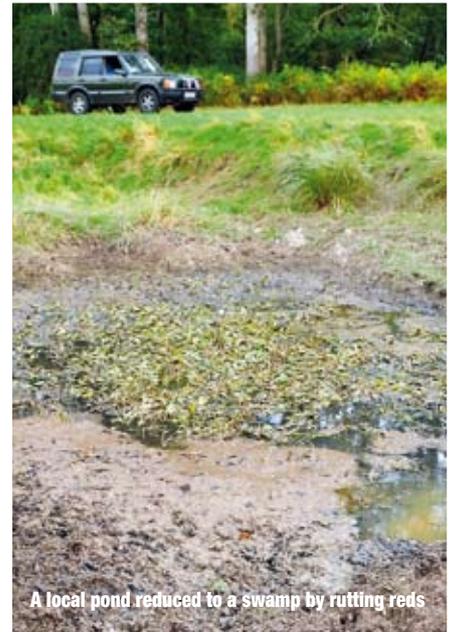
The red stag. The monarch of the glen. The king of UK wild mammals. It is the zenith for many stalkers and rightly so. Quite simply, they are magnificent. But of course, such majesty comes at a price well beyond the means of the man on the street, doesn't it? Well, not necessarily. What if I told you it was possible to shoot a cull stag for as little as £75? Interested? So were we.

Last time I visited Hockham Deer Management Group I was in pursuit of the UK's smallest deer species, the muntjac. But while I was there, boss Mark Jackson told me of the magnificent reds that they also had on their ground. "Yeah, we get some real monsters, and spikers are only £75 – the same price as hinds. You could get a nice nine-pointer for under £300 and a 12-pointer is

only around £400 – even if it is a gold medal. We charge by the point at that size."

It seems that the reds have found this corner of the British Isles, not far from the famous Thetford Forest, very much to their liking. We wander around the fringes of a 1000 acre forestry block as Mark explains. "The first thing is the food. The industry here is farming so the deer have non-stop access to food sources of the highest quality." Within line of sight there are maize cover crops for a local game shoot, fields of sugar beet and nearby, a field of recently harvested potatoes. "Then there is the land itself. It's flat, and the climate is very gentle. The winters are rarely harsh. Compare the life a stag has here compared to that of his brother in the Highlands – it's no wonder they grow so well.

"You can see how they've been using this



A local pond reduced to a swamp by rutting reds



There are few sights more magnificent than a red stag

PICTURE LAURIE CAMPBELL



Sitting in the high seat with stags bellowing in the forest is a memorable experience



Two pairs of Swarovskis?
That's just greedy

pond as a wallow. During the summer it is full of reeds and lilies – really pretty. Now it is a muddy hole. They like to make themselves look as black as possible for the rut.”

It is clear to see the potential for causing damage that these animals have. The size of them and the sheer numbers in the area can quickly put them into conflict with local farmers and landowners. Mark's team are often called upon to react to these situations and resolve this issue by either moving them on or removing the troublemakers altogether.

Climbing into the highseat, a couple of stags are already in full cry in the woods behind us. There is something primeval about a sound that will have been reverberating around the nation's great forests for millennia.

The unseasonable warm weather means that

the rut is very much behind schedule, but Mark suspects that the hinds will be moving out to feed on the potatoes missed by the harvester. And where the hinds go, at this time of year, the stags will surely follow.

I've got my Swarovski EL Range binoculars with me and pass the time by ranging the various key landmarks around the field to give me a feel for the likely shooting ranges. I also know it will annoy Mark who is a big fan of his EL 8x42s. It doesn't take long before he has borrowed the the Ranges and is doing a direct comparison. "They are every bit as light, and every bit as bright as my normal ELs. I want them!"

The stags behind us continue to roar but aren't getting any closer so with the very last of the dusk we climb down to scout another likely area just around the corner.

Teaching the next generation

The Hockham team are a pro-active and progressive lot. Mark is a natural teacher: you can't help but learn from him and his years of involvement in educating stalkers have encouraged him to set up a course for newcomers to the sport. The Introduction to Deer Stalking course is set to start in 2012.

It commences on a Friday afternoon with an introduction over coffee, a rundown of British deer species and an evening spent observing from highseats. The Saturday programme covers deer management and firearms laws, work on the rifle range, animal welfare and carcass inspection, culminating in a stalking outing. The Sunday commences at first light with another stalk, continues meat hygiene and carcass prep (hopefully on deer shot by the group!) and the programme closes with a venison lunch.

The cost for this superb weekend, including two stalks, is £250. Accommodation is not included but can be sourced locally. It sounds like great value for money to us and we can vouch for the quality of stalking and instruction on offer.

Contact Kerrie (email: kerrie@hockhamdmg.co.uk or tel: 07894 833165) to find out more.

DEER STALKING

There are a number of hinds working onto the fringes of the potato field. But in the shadow of the trees, it is hard to make them out. Then we spot a more heavysset animal, a hundred yards or so away from the girls. Mark thinks it may be a hummel (a stag that doesn't grow antlers) as he has seen one in the area recently and is keen to remove it. But he doesn't venture out from the shadows and works steadily away.

Sadly there is just not quite enough light to be sure of our hummel and we leave him for another day. But others were luckier. A Danish hunter out with one of the company's other field operators bags a fine 10-pointer. A grey-muzzled older animal, it is nonetheless still in magnificent health with a good coating of fat showing how well he had been living.

Mark's partner Kerrie grassed a true monster last year. Its dressed weight was 385lb, live weight over 500lb. The scary thing is, it was one of three stags that appeared, and by no means the biggest, according to Kerrie!

If you fancy a crack at the stag of a lifetime – or even if you'd just like to experience the thrill of stalking the UK's biggest land mammal for the first time – you know who to call. ■

Contact:
www.hockham
dmg.co.uk
For bookings and
enquiries call Kerrie
on 07894833165



Kerrie's monster 20-pointer weighed over 500lb

KIT BAG TROPHY SPOTTING

TESTED BY:
DOM HOLTAM

Binoculars are great for scanning large areas of ground but sometimes you want to get closer – especially if you are in search of a particular trophy, when you may want to examine every tine in great detail before deciding whether this is the beast for you. With this in mind, we tried the Swarovski CTC 30x75 draw scope this month.

I had always assumed that a draw scope such as this would be prohibitively expensive, but in fact, this fixed power device is very competitive at around the £800 mark, making it a similar price point to the company's entry-level CL Companion binocular range.

The construction is rugged and the device light in weight, while the extendable tube means it is compact when closed. The scope stows easily across your back with the attached strap and it doesn't take long to get the technique for swinging it quickly to bear.

I know several stalkers who team a pair of lightweight binoculars for scanning the ground with a spotting scope for detailed examination of a specific animal.

One big difference that you will notice, though, is the essential requirement of a very stable rest. The high magnification highlights even the tiniest of movement and acquiring your target is also tricky if you are only used to the wide field of view afforded by a binocular.

A handy gatepost, a set of stalking sticks or a rolled up coat while lying prone will all provide a sturdy base. If you are using them from a vehicle, a window bag (as you'd use for shooting) or creative

use of the door mirror will give you the stability you need. There is a threaded base to allow you to attach a monopod or photographic tripod, too.

Once you have honed your technique you will begin to appreciate the stunning clarity of the optics and the level of detail you can discern – even in low light situations. It really does open up a whole new world and it soon becomes quite addictive, too.

Other models are also available with zoom rather than fixed eyepieces and also with angled, rather than straight eyepieces, depending on your preferences. You can also get adaptors to fix your digital camera to the scope – a technique known as 'digiscoping'.

This model offers 30x magnification



You need a sturdy rest to get the best from the CTC

