



## **HIMALAYAN TAHR KING OF THE MOUNTAIN**

I stood there, surrounded by giant snow-covered peaks, my own sense of mortality weighing heavily. My emotions were in turmoil: on the one hand I felt a sense of awe at the majestic spectacle before me, and on the other a sense of dread. Part of me wanted to run towards the mountains ... to embrace them! The other wished I was back in the safety and familiarity of home. I felt intimidated. *“You mean to say, those tahr ... they live up there? Way up there?”*



by Mike Cooney



**H**imalayan Tahr (*hemitragus jemlahicus*) is a stunning mountain goat, which is native to the Himalayas, but also finds its home in New Zealand's Southern Alps. First gifted here by the Duke of Bedford in 1904, Tahr were originally released as part of the Government's effort to attract tourists who were keen on hunting. This was the first time tahr had been liberated outside of the Himalayas, and they found our alpine conditions to their liking. Within a few years, they were flourishing, and inhabited all the main ranges between Arthur's Pass in the north, and Haast in the south.

However, with that rapid increase in numbers plus the lack of predators, their impact on the environment began to worry conservationists. In 1930, their protected status was dropped, allowing hunters access to tahr for the first time. In 1937, the government began targeting them in culling operations – both by hunting and, (much later) controversial poisoning campaigns. Currently, tahr are actively managed by a combination of recreational and commercial hunters, and the Department of Conservation (DOC). In their native Himalayas, they're considered endangered.

LET NOT THE SANDS OF TIME GET IN YOUR LUNCH.

**A**s one of New Zealand's most sought-after game animals, tahr have long held my fascination. Images of large bulls – with their thick stubby horns and long sun-bleached manes – have always caught my interest. But even more than their striking looks, the place they call home – their *habitat* – has intrigued me. For a coastal dweller who spends most of his time at sea level or slightly above, my venturing in the Southern Alps has always left me standing in awe at the magnitude of it all. I mean, everything is just so much bigger!

My good buddy Taz and I had been trying to organise a trip into the 'hills' for a while now. So when the long-awaited opportunity finally presented itself, it was with some excitement that I made my way down to Queenstown.

Mt Cook Village was our launching pad for the mission. And, as we passed the beautifully turquoise Lake Pukaki, I finally got some perspective on the sheer size of the surrounding mountains. With the towering peaks of the Liebig and Malte Brun Ranges to the right, and the giddy heights of Aoraki itself in front, any thoughts of my own awesomeness quickly disappeared. I was in humbling country ...

We spent the remainder of the afternoon checking in with the *Heliworks* crew to organise the following morning's flight, and having a look around some of the sights, sounds and eateries of the village. Mt Cook is steeped in climbing history, and this small community in its colossal setting (along with the famous *Hermitage Hotel* and *Sir Edmund Hillary Alpine Centre*) is well worth a visit.





The following morning, after a coffee at the *Hermitage* with our pilot, Mark Hayes and his brother, Sir Richard ‘Hannibal’ Hayes, we made our way back to the hanger. Hannibal, (who owns *Heliworks*), is an icon in the helicopter industry and was recently knighted because of his legendary flying exploits – so we were in good hands! The plan was to head into the Murchison Valley, with its 18km glacier terminating near the Liebig Hut, our home for the next couple of days.

The flight from the *Heliworks* base to the Liebig Hut wasn’t a long one ... at least it wasn’t supposed to be. But just before leaving, a radio call came through about a back country skier who’d broken one of his skis. So Mark was tasked with dropping a spare off. Hannibal also joined us, and the quick trip ended up being an adventure in itself! Our flight

took us up to the head of the Murchison Glacier where we dropped off the ski to a very thankful skier. It was a bluebird day, and the visibility was outstanding. Cook, Elie De Beaumont and the numerous other 3000-metre-plus-mountains were a visual smorgasbord. And Mark, who’s a keen hunter himself, dipped and dived into basins and valleys, spotting small mobs of tahr as we went. Once again, I was amazed at where these animals live – and a little daunted at just how high they were off the valley floor!

After we stashed our packs at the hut, Mark flew us back into the hills – dropping us in a small snowy basin, high in the Liebig Range. After getting our gear out of the chopper, we waited – crouched and holding on tight – while the helicopter powered up. As they disappeared from the valley, the silence was almost deafening.



**T**he assault on my senses at 2000m was incredible! Until, that is, Taz pulled me out of the moment with his game-plan. The idea was to find a good vantage point, and then sit down and glass ... and glass ... and glass. By 'glass' I mean look through binoculars, exploring every nook and cranny, in every likely spot, as far as your eye can see ... and then repeat. Tahr bed down high in the rocky bluffs during the day, and then around mid-afternoon, venture out of their elevated fortresses and come down to feed. And this was the time they were most exposed. The other part of our game-plan was: by three-o'clock, we had to have figured out a way down to the valley floor. Many a tahr-hunter has spent hours descending the mountain, only to find themselves bluffed – and then having to climb

back up to find another route. And on occasion, this has meant darkness falling and an un-planned night out in the hills.

We spent the remainder of the day battling deep snow, avoiding avalanches, and, as much as possible, keeping eyes glued to binoculars searching for our elusive quarry. Some tahr were spotted – but far off in the distance, out of reach and safe.

It was almost time for us to find a route down when I caught a glimpse of movement below us. A young trio of tahr wandered into view, not more than 50m from where we were sitting. I managed to sneak in close and get a few photos before they spotted us and headed for cover.

Hunting is not always about pulling the trigger ...



After a restful night's sleep, the following day again dawned fine and clear. We spent most of it glassing from the valley floor, spotting a few mobs high up amongst the rocky bluffs. I'd decided previously that I was only interested in shooting a large bull – everything else was fair game for my camera. And Taz had brought his bow along, just in case an opportunity presented itself nice and close. As often happens, two bulls appeared just as the day started drawing to a close. They slowly made their way down, feeding in the scrubby lower mountain faces. We tried to close the gap in a race against darkness, but their sharp eyes spotted us at 600m. Game over.

Our last day in the valley was pretty grim, with low cloud and drizzle

threatening visibility plus our chance for a helicopter pick-up. We decided to pack up, and slowly make our way down the valley to where the Murchison joins the Tasman. On the way we spotted tahr high amongst the snowy bluffs – out of reach, because we were out of time. Taz radioed Mark back at *Heliworks* once we made it to the Tasman Glacier, and in no time at all, we were climbing into warm, dry gear back at the hangar.

I've since had time to reflect on tahr and their place in New Zealand's alpine wilderness. Managed well, I reckon they add value to our beautiful land – and not just from a game animal perspective. Mark summed it up nicely: of all the thousands of scenic flights he does around Aoraki, the thing tourists get the most buzz from, is seeing tahr running free amongst the mountains. They may not have originated here, but they certainly belong, now.

Tahr ... King of the mountain. 🍇

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