

Rivers South Safaris: A "New" Hunting Operation on the South Island

The South Canterbury region of the South Island is at the center of many **New Zealand** hunting safaris. This is high country hunting with several notable tussock ranges, including the Two Thumb Range, the Ben McLeod Range and the High Claytons. A gravel road winds its way up the valley floor from Lake Opuha, and the large private ranches on either side of this road offer

both estate and free-range hunting for the South Island big game species. The main draw is estate red stag and free-range bull tahr, though estate hunting for other species is also good.

For decades there was little change in the area but over the last few years there have been new farming initiatives (such as dairying), several property sales and some re-structuring among the original hunting outfitters. For example Dry Creek Station and Lilydale Station were sold and Kiwi Safaris has changed ownership. These changes have been good news for overseas hunters.

A good case study in point is Rivers South Safaris owned by Mark and Pam Waite, who have lived locally for some time (see Report 8943 from 2012), have a long history with the hunting industry in the region, and in recent years have expanded their own guiding to offer clients quality hunting. The Waites have built their own lodge alongside Lake Opuha with hunting properties virtually on the doorstep. They purchased nearby Mount Walker and hunting rights on Lilydale Station, a fantastic free-range bull tahr property.

Mark Waite is a character, a hunting outfitter fast with a joke, a quip or a story, yet skilled in finding trophies for clients. He would be the first to say 'you get what you see' with him, which means he speaks his mind concerning hunting and guiding issues. Other outfitters in the industry have not always agreed with his thoughts, but honesty



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is something his clients value. An example of this honesty: when hunting high wire enclosures for trophies, he makes a point of explaining clearly to all clients that the trophies they will encounter were released, though in the case of some, quite some time prior. This may seem a small point but such candor is not that common when a booking may depend on the answer.

Waite is a member of the New Zealand Professional Hunting Guides Association, and calls on the assistance of previous Lilydale owner Donald Bray and Puhi Peaks Station owner Don Cameron to guide for him during the main season. These two are among the top guides I have hunted with personally, and if they trust Waite, that means to me he is a good outfitter. He is also an adept trout fishing guide if you wish a dual safari.

The lodge consists of a comfortable home with adjoining trophy/entertainment room and four separate cabin bedrooms with ensuites. This provides privacy for all with ample spaces to meet and interact. Pam Waite is an excellent hostess and is responsible for meals and hospitality. Trophies presented are of high quality. While I was visiting recently, clients April, Tony and Doug hunted with Waite and over three days took three red stags of SCI-400 quality and two quality free-range bull tahr.

The hunting terrain in this region ranges from moderately steep to very steep. It's open with limited forest and wide tussock and scrub basins. Spot-and-stalk is the best hunting technique and dawn and dusk are the best times to hunt. Good binoculars, good boots, warm but lightweight clothing and practice at long-range shooting are all essential. I can't stress the word lightweight enough, as through my observation many overseas clients bring camouflage clothing that is too heavy or noisy to climb in. It may suit sitting long hours in a tree stand, but

is too heavy to walk long distances in, and rasps badly. New Zealand hunting and fishing shops are a good place to get appropriate gear, and there are franchises near all hunting locations.

Mount Walker, the Waite's newly purchased property, is at present a rough diamond with huge potential to hold large numbers of game. It has free-range populations of wild pig and chamois and, once fenced, will also hold trophy red stag, fallow buck, bull tahr, arapawa ram and wild goat. It has the land area to hold one of the largest fenced tahr populations in the district. Fencing is to be complete in 2015, with hunting starting in 2016.

Lilydale has already been well reported in this publication as a top free-range tahr property, so gaining hunting rights here was a real coup for Waite. On my recent visit I saw over 50 animals in just one creek and saw two trophy bulls harvested in just a few hours. There are only a handful of such private land high tahr concentrations in New Zealand so Lilydale linked in with Mount Walker should provide a quality dual hunting experience.