

AMERICAN HUNTER IN RUSSIA

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We came as hunters foremost, for the love of the chase, for promised adventure, but also as conservationists hoping to aid Russians in saving their treasured Siberian tigers. It was called a "Tiger Friendly Test Tour" -- seven Americans and a New Zealander organized by world-renowned wildlife artist John Banovich and Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Dale Miquelle to investigate the possibility of establishing an economically viable international hunting industry in the Russian Far East. The intention is to bring badly-needed money into the system. "Tiger Friendly" is the all-important distinction, the program including only hunting leases vowing to create an atmosphere conducive to the conservation of tigers.

To this end Banovich and Miquelle launched the "Khunta Mi Initiative," an effort to provide international hunters an opportunity to help conserve Siberian tigers. When invited to participate in this first-ever tour my initial thought was that I couldn't afford it. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that I couldn't afford *not* to go. Russia's a place that has long intrigued me, and a good cause is always appealing. Of course, there was the lure of

hunting as well; in a place no American hunters had yet had an opportunity to explore. I was told hunting pressure from local hunters was intense, that trophy quality was unproven, and that hunting could be difficult. It was a risk. But I also knew that it would be a trip of a lifetime.

Following an incredible two-day hiking tour through the Sikhote-Alin Reserve near Terney with tiger biologists John Goodrich, Field Coordinator Siberian Tiger Project for WCS, and Dale Miquelle, we split into two groups. I would be part of the group including Davey Hughes (Swazi Apparel, Levin, New Zealand), Tee Faircloth (F.M. Allen, New York, NY, USA) and Laurence Frank (Kenya's Laikipia Predator Project and Kilimanjaro Lion Conservation projects, Berkley, California, USA) headed to South Valley. John Banovich (Montana, USA), Ben Carter (past president of Dallas Safari Club; Texas, USA), Bill Robertson (retired agribusiness tycoon; Texas, USA), and Tyler Kaltreider (professional videographer/ documentary producer; Montana, USA) would travel to Nezhinskoe hunting lease and hunt there first. We'd observed WCS biologist's arduous task of collecting data on a wild and elusive animal in vast and rough terrain, walked along trails where tigers had been trapped and fitted with radio collars, even found a fresh kill surrounded by tracks of wild tigers. Now it was time to hunt.

South Valley

The trip was already proving an adventure. Our first destination lay eight hours from Terney over snowy mountain passes. The Land Rover blew its engine outside of Olga, parts strewn along the highway, oil gushing from the block. We piled into the Toyota Hilux, five of us and considerable gear. We pushed on, arriving in Listvinista just before sundown, a cluster of rustic wooden houses overflowing with dogs, chickens and goats. When we asked for directions strikingly modern youngsters and equally conspicuous traditionally-dressed older locals met their first Americans.

Camp was newly built, a modern lodge, the *banya* still smelling of fresh pine pitch, dual outhouses with real toilets. It was more than I'd hoped for and had all been constructed especially for our visit. Dinner was stuffed cabbage, seafood salad, sausages, *plov* and garlicky *mimosa* -- all traditional fare for the average Russian, but truly exotic for newly-arrived foreigners. Over dinner Vladimir Aramilev, South Valley director and professional biologist, explained that hunting would be difficult. No snow had fallen and the ground was covered in a blanket of noisy, dry leaves. Russian boar, red deer, roe deer, with the outside chance of

Himalayan black bear and brown bear, were our quarry. We were queried of our physical and shooting capabilities.

Perhaps it was the vodka. I offhandedly said I could walk as far as my guide. I would later regret my blithe reply....

We saw our rifles for the first time since arriving in Vladivostok, under police care during our travels to other places. It was quite amazing that the very first foreign firearms to arrive in Vladivostok passed through customs without undue hassle. We were all very thankful to Kliment Kim, tour agent for Primorsky Club Travel Company, for pulling this amazing feat off. We checked that our scopes were still zeroed and were soon off and running. And I mean that literally. My guide, Ivan Puchkov, a trapper and game warden on South Valley, maintained a blistering pace, straight uphill without pause or a backwards glance. I'd developed a cold, inflicted during the 15-hour Korean Airlines flight over. I'd been confident, watching Ivan chain-smoke cigarettes while we sighted our rifles, but they seemed to have no effects on him. With congested lungs and throbbing sinuses I labored to keep pace, sweating in the cutting late November chill.

We clambered across treacherous rock slides and cliff looking for bears that come to such places in fall seeking hibernation sites with true winter. We found much sign but no bears before stopping for a quick snack about 3 p.m., boiling spring water for tea, enjoying sandwiches. Then Ivan began his uphill scramble once more, the mountain seeming to have no top. We encountered boar sign, but nothing "smoking hot." We found where roe deer had scampered out ahead of us, but saw none. There was much sika deer sign. They were protected in this region as a unique and genetically pure subspecies so we weren't allowed to shoot them, but I was disappointed not to have seen one nonetheless. We were quickly losing light when we finally reached the top. I felt confident we would see game, as sign became abundant these 12 kilometers from the truck, but as we reached snow at the very highest peaks it would be another thrill that would make my day.

There in the snow, sharp and clear, were tiger tracks -- a female and two cubs. I've seen leopard and lion tracks in the wilds of Africa. I regularly see cougar tracks near my home. But these tiger tracks gave me a greater thrill than any of those experiences. Here I was seeing something truly rare, truly wild. I could see that as difficult as the hunting appeared to be from the perspective of a single day, it would be such encounters that would make this hunt more attractive to visiting hunters.

And then it was abruptly dark. What we had accomplished in six hours we quickly undid in two. This meant practically running off that rough, rocky mountain, with its burden of loose stones hidden beneath copious leaves. It was at once annoyed and humored. I've guided hundreds of hunters in the United States. Very few could have, or would have, made that dash off that dark mountain. My consolation was Ivan's two nasty falls, while I somehow avoided such. It was something that we'd have to work on. I was his first foreign client.

When I arrived back at camp I discovered that the others had also seen nothing.

The following day we accomplished three drives before lunch, the four visitors strung out along ridges or across drainages, our hosts circling to push game toward us. We hadn't sighted a single animal. Our group remained in high spirits, but everyone was beginning to worry. We paused for our customary sausages and cheese and heavy bread, hot tea and candies, everyone beginning to relax and at least attempt communication. After lunch I announced that the next drive would bring success. I could feel it. We were due.

I didn't like the prospects of my stand when the drive began, so I quickly climbed high into an oak where visibility improved. I remained convinced this would be it. Even so, a sudden scampering across leaves caused my heart to race. I quickly calmed myself as a small deer materialized from scrub 200 meters out, stretched out, running hard. I had my 3x9 scope twisted down low, easily picking up the deer as I clung to my perch. I swung onto the deer's shoulder and the gun simply went off, the big .308 Norma Magnum bolt-action rifle deafening. I saw the deer stagger and disappear. I couldn't believe my luck, but didn't want to begin celebration yet.

The guides arrived, laughing to see me playing monkey. I stayed in my tree and directed them to the place where I'd last seen movement. In short order they were shouting. I could not understand the Russian

chatter, but the universal language of hunting success was clear. I nearly killed myself getting out of that tree, too much in a hurry to see my prize. It was the first animal taken in the Primorsky region by an American hunter.



The roe deer stag had shed his antlers only days before, pedestals still bloody, but no less of a trophy to me right at that moment. Soon everyone converged on the deer and many pictures were taken. I didn't exactly feel I was making history, but it was great to have broken the ice. Back at the truck the vodka flowed, toasts offered all around. There was just enough time for one more drive but everyone seemed to have forgotten hunting for the time being.

I might have been a tad hung over from celebration the following morning. My cold had not improved and I was heavily dressed for a day of drives. After a couple miles of strenuous hiking I deduced that we were not doing a drive and that I'd better strip some clothing.

Ivan and I continued climbing through the morning.

We mounted a rise on rolling ridges of oak, stopping to use our binoculars. I brought binoculars to my eyes and the deer were simply there. I'd found three roe deer bedded well below, perhaps 200 meters away. I got Ivan's attention and pointed emphatically, saying "Deer, deer, deer!" holding up three fingers. His reaction was immediate. "Shoot!" he ordered. But I wanted to steady my rifle. The deer were small and far off, and my confidence had left me. I stepped to the right to use a tree trunk as a rest, but lost my view of the deer. I stepped back to my left and saw the deer looking my way. The entire time Ivan chanted, "Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!" Then it was too late.

The deer were running and it was hopeless. I tried anyway, just in case I might get lucky, loosing off two hasty shots, the deer melting into cover. I cursed. Ivan laughed, patting me on the back. Lesson learned. Next time I would be "quicker on the draw," as they say in American cowboy movies.

It was late evening and I'd fallen behind, pausing to take a picture of a distant sika stag. I was hurrying to catch up, trying to step quietly, but hurrying. Something to my left and downhill caught my attention. I glanced down to see something big, brown and furry moving out of a draw 175 meters away. I immediately thought brown bear. What appeared instead was a monster Russian boar. I'd learned my lesson earlier. Just shoot!

I hissed at Ivan and pointed, then forgot him completely. The boar cleared brush and I placed the cross-hairs on his shoulder as he paused to regard us, fighting to calm my nerves. The rifle roared. The boar didn't flinch. I worked the bolt furiously and got on him as he crashed through thick brush. The rifle sounded again, still to no apparent avail. I cursed this time while bolting another shell home. The boar turned straight away and I steadied the scope on him and pressed the trigger. Still the boar ran. I was cursing venomously. I'd blown it. The one trophy I'd wanted most of all from this trip and I'd missed him three times. Ivan tried to console me but I was furious.

We walked casually down to where the boar had stood, looking for blood. There was nothing. We continued, taking the general path the boar had described. Soon we were stopped short by guttural moaning. I thought the boar had stopped to watch his back-trail. We stalked ahead carefully, looking for movement. I happened to glance down, seeing blood, pointing it out to Ivan. "Da," he said, smiling widely.

The boar lay 300 meters beyond, dead as old bones. He was full of bullet holes. Three to be exact. Ivan and I danced around the dead boar laughing and pounding each other's backs and shaking hands, each of us rambling on in our respective languages and having no idea what the other was saying. He was some boar, all 400 pounds of him. He had under-fur like a bear, nothing like the bristly feral hogs of home that are often labeled Russian boars but are nothing of the sort. This one had eight centimeters of tusk showing outside ugly lips. I'd been taken from the peak of ecstasy, to the pits of despair, and back up again in only a matter of minutes.



But it seemed to be getting dark again.

The next day was another day of drives, the first providing the magic for the day. The drive had just begun, our group settled in only minutes, when roe deer appeared to my right. While placing us, Vladimir would hold his arms in a wedge to indicate our shooting lanes. Just outside of my wedge four deer appeared, one of them a fine stag with arm-length antlers. I waited impatiently for seconds that seemed minutes, thinking about shooting, truly wanting someone else to have a shot but not wanting to lose an opportunity, when Laurence's rifle sounded. He'd taken the largest stag cleanly, another fine trophy for our group and a fine way to end our time at South Valley.

Nezhinskoe Hunting Lease

Our luck at Nezhinskoe was proving no better than our fellow hunters, who had hunted here while we explored South Valley. They had taken nothing in four days, and after two full days of drives our group had the same story to tell. The last day of hunting I was determined to "score for our team." Tee and Davey were off photographing tigers in an enclosure several hours away. Laurence had surrendered and would stay in camp to rest. I would hunt alone.

We bumped and ground first up deeply rutted roads, then simply along a river bed where a road had once been but a recent flood had obliterated it. The behemoth vehicle had served in another time as troop transport, a hulking four-wheel-drive with waist-high tires. We were in that truck nearly three hours. The head *jegermeister*, Nikolai, a true *tayozhnik*, and I left the truck fighting a slicing headwind. We'd walked a short distance when we discovered Amur leopard tracks atop sand, one of only 35 to 40 of these gorgeous animals left on earth and found only in this small area close to China.

After several kilometers Nikolai encouraged me ahead, indicating he would follow at a distance -- to assure I didn't wander into nearby China, I assumed. I quickly forgot him and fell into the Zen of "still-hunting," taking pains to walk silently, scanning terrain ahead of me carefully for game, intent on seeing something before it saw me. We left the bottom after a couple more kilometers and stalked a bench flanking steep ridge, beginning to see more spoor the deeper we wandered. I'd gotten that feeling again. I was sure I'd see game.

There was a different color in the distance and I investigated through glasses to discover movement that turned into large grey deer. Sika. Unlike at South Valley, here they were legal game. I watched for several minutes as they fed contently, the wind in my face. They were 200 meters away. The sun had settled into the west and was in my eyes, but I was able to quickly inventory all that I could see. No antlers. I turned to find Nikolai 100 meters behind. I hand signaled that I could find no antlers. He pantomimed frantically to shoot. As much as I wanted antlers I also wanted our group to be successful on this lease. I found a fat doe and settled the cross-hairs on her chest. I took a deep breath and touched off a round. She spun in quick circles and fell from sight. Another deer appeared. I turned to Nikolai for direction and he was still signaling to shoot. I found the second deer in my scope and fired. It fell from sight.

The fun ended that quickly. We were at least ten kilometers from the truck. It would soon be dark. Nikolai indicated that I go back and retrieve backpacks and assistance. I finally understood and made haste down the canyon, arriving just at dark. It would be 11 p.m. before all the meat was packed out of that rough canyon. And camp was still three hours away. Still, we took time to pop the cork on a bottle of champagne that had ridden in the truck two weeks. We made toasts around a welcome fire, early December ice forming in my mustache and beard. We would get back to camp in due time, somehow missing the search party sent to retrieve us. My time in Russia was done.

Future

International trophy hunters – rich Americans in particular (among whom I do not include myself) -- are willing to travel widely, spend heavily, only when the largest, most mature trophies are available, when success rates are high (at least 50 percent) in a reasonable amount of time (say five to seven days), or when a rare game species can be found nowhere else. Where local hunters are primarily interested in meat, shooting females and young animals, this doesn't promote world-class hunting or allow populations to flourish. Primorskiy species, with a few exceptions (Himalayan black bear), can be hunted readily in more accessible areas of the world. It's true Russian Far East subspecies -- Manchurian roe and sika deer, for instance -- appear to have the capability of growing larger antlers than those found in other places, but few survive to prime age under current practices. Careful game management is the key, restricting shooting to allow male animals to grow the large antlers international hunters covet, to grow population numbers so a high degree of success in a "reasonable" amount of time is made possible -- for tigers as well as the hunters of the Russian Far East.

It is important to stress that if such goals are to be achieved, there will be the opportunity for substantial financial gains for hunting leases meeting these criteria, and likely a steady stream of outside hunters coming to Primorsky. The long-term survival of the Siberian tiger could also very well depend on it.

Until then, a few will still come, and some will take home trophies. With the right clients; with enough time; with the right weather, this is certainly possible (my own boar, Laurence's roe deer, serving as prime examples). But presently you don't shoot animals without hard work and luck on your side; you can't be assured of success in short order. Snow would certainly help matters, but hard work and time are your only sure hope. Support is certainly needed, to control poaching most of all, for concerted game management, for the benefit of tigers as well as all the wildlife and hunters of the Russian Far East. This, of course, will take time. Building herds and trophy quality for visiting hunters will not come easy.

But there will still be those, like myself, who will come no matter the potential for antlers and skulls. There will be those who will come for the tigers, to meet the friendly, gracious people of Russia, for the sheer adventure of a place little known to the outside world. Perhaps, some day, there will also be the promise of sure success and guaranteed trophy quality, but for now these things are enough.

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