



In March 2002 I purchased my very first live auction banquet hunt from the Southeast Wisconsin Safari Club Chapter and one month later found myself landing in Christchurch, New Zealand, where my guide John McInnes of Deerbrooke Safaris met me and introduced me to the beautiful and intimidating tundra of the South Island of New Zealand. I came in search of a free ranging red deer stag, but while there was awe-struck by a beautiful trophy that adorned John's living room wall. It was a species I had not seen before -- sambar deer -- and I knew from that moment I would one day hunt this species.

John said he knew of a couple of places to find good ones, but cautioned that they are very secretive and difficult to hunt. I kept in

touch with him over the years, always thinking about a return trip to that beautiful place.

Time passed as it tends to do, and in November of 2011 I read an article in *Safari Times* about Craig Boddington's successful hunt for a sambar in the coastal mountains of California. To say I was excited is an understatement. The ability to hunt this beautiful species free-ranging here in North America was a dream come true and I immediately contacted the outfitter, Don Anderson of Anderson Taxidermy and Guide Service, in Atascadero, California and booked my hunt for early September, 2012.

The sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*) is a large deer native to the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. They were introduced in North America on St. Vincent Island, Florida in 1908, and in the



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coastal mountains of California around 1940. The California herd inhabits private lands and is estimated to number around 300 with limited availability each year.

After obtaining my license at a local sporting goods store, Don and I drove back into the mountains to a cozy cottage and settled in for the night. The first morning of our hunt began with early breakfast and coffee and a drive through the mountainside country, stopping occasionally and glassing the brush-covered hillsides. The method of hunt is to glass, spot and stalk a good sambar stag. The best sightings are usually the first hour or two in the day, and the last couple of hours before dark. Sambar are very secretive and prefer to stay in the thickest cover during most daylight hours.

Our first sambar spotting was a small herd of cows and calves accompanied by a young stag that needed a couple of more years to grow. Further along the hillside, we saw a larger stag in a valley and Don sized the animal in his spotting scope, only to discover that he had a broken tine on his main beam.

The morning quickly gave way to bright sunlight and a commanding view of the Pacific Ocean below. I must say the scenery was breathtaking, and I said a word of thanks for the privilege of being right where I was.

We continued to glass the hillsides until late morning, but true to their reputation, the sambar had vanished into the thick cover. The property is a very large tract of land and the trip from the

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cabin to where we were hunting is a considerable drive through the ranch roads. Consequently, Don packed a nice lunch and we settled-in, high on a hilltop under the shade oak trees.

Midday, Don took me for a drive around the ranch. The area has a nice population of blacktail deer and we saw several decent bucks during the drive. In addition, we found a nice sized herd of elk with a magnificent herd bull and several good satellite bulls hanging around the perimeter.

Eventually we found a high spot to do some more glassing. With no sightings, Don suggested we head further down the mountain and check some draws he knew held sambar. About 15 minutes before dark, we spotted a stag feeding in a small meadow. Don scoped him and estimated he might score around 155 inches, a pretty good stag, but we were running out of daylight and still had three more days of hunting, so we headed back to the cabin.

During our drive that afternoon, we checked a green field near the herd of elk we saw the day before. One of the ranch hands had seen a good sambar stag in there early mornings on several recent visits. Our strategy was to get in there just before daylight and catch the stag feeding.

Morning arrived with a thick fog. We parked the vehicle and began our stalk. It was beginning to get daylight as we approached an impressive herd of bull elk standing 40 yards away in the fog, watching us. One of the bulls was between us and the field. Unfortunately he ran into the field ahead of us. Don saw the tail end of a sambar exit the field as we approached. The bull elk had alerted the sambar.

Visibility was really limited due to the fog, so we headed back up the mountain, trying to get above it for some glassing. About half way up the mountain, we rounded a curve in the road and off



to my right in a small meadow stood a magnificent sambar stag with about half a dozen cows. He stood majestic in the mist, quartering slightly toward us as if to challenge our very presence in his world.

We left the truck and stalked within range where I positioned myself for a shot while Don continued glassing the stag. With Don's whispered confirmation that he was a mature stag, my .30-06 barked, sending a 165-grain bullet about 75 yards to the target. The stag whirled and bounded into the nearby trees, expiring about 35 yards from where he stood just moments before.

As we walked up to the impressive stag, Don said that I had done something special and that he needed to go to his truck and get a tape measure. Don is an official SCI Measurer and he rough scored the sambar in the field at 186-

plus inches. My hunt was over on the second day of a four-day hunt, enabling me to spend the next several days with my wife enjoying the small communities, shops and wineries near Cambria along the coast.

What a fabulous trip in a beautiful area of the country.

On December 19, 2012, Craig Boddington officially scored the stag at 190  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches, making him one of the largest sambar stags taken free range anywhere in the world and the #1 largest taken in North America. Thanks to Don Anderson for his intimate knowledge of the species and the area, which culminated in a very successful hunt.

Finally, this story would not be right without extending a very special thanks to John McInnes of New Zealand for starting a dream that after ten years was finally realized. 