

RED DEER STALKING

MEMORIES OF MULL

A poignant trip to the Inner Hebrides brings Nick Hammond up close and personal with the wildlife of Mull.

RED DEER STALKING

It's got wings like a barn door. That's the only bizarre way I can think of to describe this white-tailed sea eagle.

I'm on a deserted loch inlet and the sea is Caribbean clear and blue. The eagle above turns a great grey head in my direction and scythes through the wind.

I'm on a pilgrimage. I first came to Mull 10 or so years ago with my father, and we spent an unforgettable few days in this staggering wilderness; walking in incessant rain by day; snug in a seaside bothy by night; sustained by a warming casserole, wine and a log fire crackling sleepily in the grate.

He's since died, my dad, and I've long felt the urge to come back to see this stunning island again and reconnect with those memories.

I'm going to try and claim my first red stag. But first I'm tramping



alone along the northern coast in blustering, rain-splattered splendour.

I walk for six hours and don't see a single soul. I'm on the Glengorm Estate – the heart of which is the castle, standing tall and overlooking distant Coll and Tiree. If Disney did Scottish castles, they'd do Glengorm. It's got turrets and towers, great oaken doors, mop-fringed Highland 'coos' and a driveway several miles long. It has also got a whisky library to die for. Keep this bit to yourself; whisky is free for residents.

I decide to stay.

Tom and Marjorie Nelson and their family live here, looking after the spectacular castle as well as an estate which boasts a coffee shop, full time wildlife warden, self-catering cottages, a bakery in Tobermory and a farm.

Tom has secured the services of local stalker Norman MacPhail for my red stag stalk, and the forthcoming trip is now playing on my mind. On my walk across the estate, I find myself thinking about how things will go; visualising the stag, the hill, the moor. What will the weather do? Will I shoot straight? What if I come home empty-handed?

As I lie in bed, fortified with a glass or two of the water of life, I can hear the stags roar at each other, back and forth across the estate. With each wave that dies on the rocks below, the sea issues a stern 'shh,' but the animals take no notice. They have other things on their minds.

Morning comes late up here and 7am feels like 3am as I peer out into the blackness. The castle is cold and still.

I breakfast in silence, the only resident daft enough to be up and about. The wind has dropped significantly overnight and as the sky outside turns from black to purple, I try and do justice to a hearty Scottish breakfast.

Norman arrives an hour later in a chatter and crunch of Argo treads on gravel. There's a .270 with bipod sleeved in the back, along with a terrier called Thompy and a 13-year-old called Lee. He's Norman's nephew (Lee, not Thompy) and he has the traditional flinty, stoic, Scottish style. I get the impression he could shoot out a gnat's eye at a hundred paces if required. No pressure, then.

Glengorm's fine cattle are just that because of the lush pasture around the estate, which the deer have taken a liking to as well. The biggest, strongest and canniest of them make their way to high ground and grab themselves a harem. They then spend the rest of the rutting season defending it from intruders who are intent on a military coup.

I take deep lungfuls of crisp air and try to relax as we drive through the farm cottages and lowland pasture. Hooded crows cavort in the fast-brightening sky.

It's damp – this is Scotland, after all – but clear and quite beautiful. As the track ahead steadily rises, the horizon falls away to reveal



the foaming Atlantic Ocean. "You're lucky," Norman tells me laconically. "It's not raining."

It turns out that the bellow of a cow – or even the plaintive cry of a mountainside blackface sheep – can sound eerily like a distant stag roar up here. And so we spend a lot of time craning our necks and trying to source a great antlered beast only to find it's a shaggy bovine instead.

But I also spend much of my time simply watching Norman. He scans the horizon constantly, occasionally stopping to look closer through binoculars. When we reach a great rusty-coloured plateau and move out on foot, he glides quietly across the boggy turf, taking account of wind direction and the contours of this strangely alien landscape.

We spot deer on the skyline – it's the only way I can seem to pick them up with any clarity – but they're a long way off, and apparently unstalkable.

Eventually, Norman stops, scans and turns to me slowly with a grin. He's onto something. There is a magnificent stag half-a-mile or so away with his harem, browsing across the top of a small hill. He's perfectly placed and very difficult to stalk – but the best stag we've seen by far this morning. The game is afoot.

To maintain as small a profile

as possible, we leave both Lee and Thompy behind. Thompy, particularly, is non-plussed.

For 10 or 15 minutes I walk in Norman's footsteps, slithering along wet rockface and ducking into sponge-soft valleys in a bid to get ahead of the herd and down into an area where we can approach unseen.

The sky has darkened dramatically, clouds scudding overhead, and I'm sweating and chilled at the same time. My heart hammers and my breath is ragged. I have a mental word with myself as we crouch in a gully.

Time passes imperceptibly as we crawl, on hands and knees now, through the sodden fronds of bracken that grow among the rocks and scree. Norman stops, slowly scans again with his binoculars and then slithers back down next to me.

The herd is still on the hillside, the stag now lying down in the bracken. We proceed around and just below the brow of our hill, crawling forward excruciatingly slowly, now on our bellies.

I hear an insistent whooshing sound overhead and risk a glance up.

A pair of ravens are circling.

They are expecting me to make a clean shot so that they can get their beaks into the gralloch. No pressure, then.

Finally, we inch into position and I find myself peering down the scope at the hill opposite. The sun is dipping in and out of the clouds and zaps blinding flashes of light down the scope. My vision blurs and my neck is cricked at an unnatural angle.

But the stag leaps into focus the moment the clouds drop in; a great red-brown beast chewing, zen-like, among the fronds. I can't get a shot at vital organs and we embark

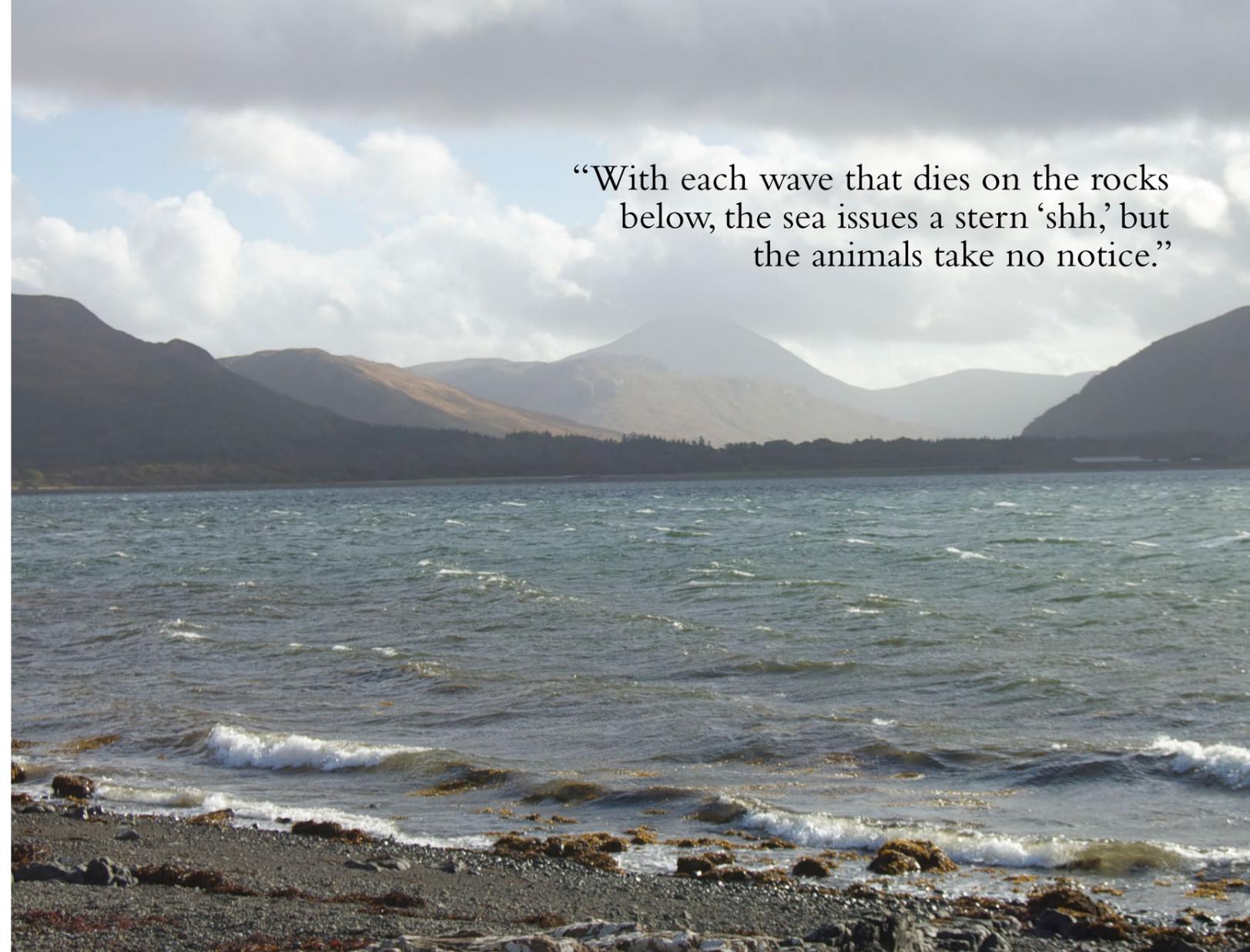
on what proves to be a tortuous waiting game.

My muscles begin to cramp; my eyes water-up; my palms sweat; and overhead, like the ominous ticking of a bomb, raven wings pulse audibly through the still morning air.

When eventually the stag does rise, it feels like hours later, although it's only a matter of minutes. And as I centre the cross hairs behind his foreleg and touch off the trigger, the suspense reaches a crescendo.

In the echoing silence that follows I am unsure of what has

“With each wave that dies on the rocks below, the sea issues a stern ‘shh,’ but the animals take no notice.”



RED DEER STALKING



“And as I centre the cross hairs behind his foreleg and touch off the trigger, the suspense reaches a crescendo...”

The author with his first red stag



Glengorm Castle

happened. There is nothing on the hillside and I look across to Norman who's watching carefully through binoculars.

He lets them fall around his neck, looks at me and smiles. “Good shot. He's down.”

I spend the rest of my time on Mull on other quests; distillery tour, boat trip, wildlife walks and, more than once, in Glengorm's glorious whisky library. I rediscover what it's like to watch a sea otter lunch on butterfish or a Golden Eagle dive like a lightning bolt from the heavens or a Hen Harrier dance over dun moorland

searching for rodents on a dreich, misty morning.

But what sticks with me the most is that morning on the hill, the view through the crosshairs, the sound of raven pinions and the roar of clashing stags.

Dad would have loved it.

CONTACT

*Nick travelled to Mull with Virgin Trains and Caledonian MacBrayne. He stayed at Glengorm Castle and went red deer stalking on the Glengorm Estate.
Tél. +44 (0)1688 302321
www.glengormcastle.co.uk*