

First Cousins

LONG CONSIDERED THE SAME SPECIES, ELK AND RED STAG WERE RECLASSIFIED IN 2004.

Story and Photography by KEVIN E. STEELE





CZ 550 AMERICAN

As European immigrants flooded the New World in the 17th century from England, Spain, France and Germany, they soon discovered large, antlered ungulates that were in fact familiar. Whether known to them as the stag, cerf, venado or hirsch, they soon learned that Native Americans called them wapiti, or, as they are commonly known today, elk.

Fast-forward 300 years and reverse the process. That's how I felt when Jason Morton and I found ourselves in northeastern Spain on assignment for "Petersen's Hunting Adventure TV." Loaded into a Mitsubishi 4x4, we headed north from Barcelona, past the granite massif of Montserrat where legend has it this "serrated mountain" rose from the earth upon Christ's Crucifixion. Our destination was deep within the pre-Pyrenees mountains, and our quest was for red stag.

Hunting camp turned out to be a rustic, stacked-stone farm house built in the 18th century around the remains of a Romanesque Catholic chapel dating to the 11th century. Situated high atop a mountain called Mollevi, the house perched above the village of Permola and offered breathtaking views of the surrounding countryside.

Our host was professional outfitter and guide Bruno Rosich, who, along with his brother Francisco, owns and operates Hunt Trip Spain, a first-class operation devoted to the pursuit of Spain's top big-game animals. Red stag, four species of

ibex (Southeastern, Gredos, Ronda and Beceite), fallow deer, roe deer, wild boar, chamois and mouflon are among some of the big game available from Hunt Trip Spain, along with both driven and upland-style hunts for red-legged partridge.

After unloading the truck and stowing our gear in the *casa de finca*, we drove a short distance to the shooting range to verify the zero on our CZ 550 American rifle. The 550 action is an improved Mauser M98, with controlled-round feeding and a fixed ejector. Their hammer-forged barrels are always accurate right out of the box, and they also come equipped with a single-set trigger for ultimate control. This one was chambered for the time-tested .30-'06 and topped with a Leupold VX-3 scope with 1.5-5X magnification. It did not take long to discover that our rifle shot to point of aim using Federal Premium's new 165-grain Trophy Bonded Tipped bullets. As it was early October, an hour or so of daylight still remained, so we accepted nature's gift and headed out in search of red stag.

That first evening we made our



This Spanish red stag appears to be ready for his close-up.

THE IMPACT OF THE 165-GRAIN FEDERAL BULLET CAUSED THE BULL TO HUNCH AND STOP DEAD IN HIS TRACKS, BUT JUST FOR A SECOND.

way on foot from the house and up a ridge and into the trees. The air was filled with the refreshing scent of wild thyme and rosemary, and about a mile from the house we came upon a grassy meadow surrounded by low hills of chaparral. At the back of this meadow was a small pond used by the red deer for wallowing, and along its banks stood four cows, two calves and a young stag. Although we

stood in the deepening shadows of the tree line, the animals sensed our presence nearly 200 yards away and they lifted their heads and looked in our direction.

We moved out of the trees, and the animals took flight, running at a lope up into the chaparral and around the crest of the hill. We watched them go with a sense of satisfaction at seeing our first Spanish red deer in the wild. As the sun set, we reluctantly retraced our steps back to the farm.

Next morning arrived a bit too early for me, as I was seriously attempting to sleep myself out of jet lag. I could smell coffee brewing in the adjoining kitchen and hear the



From left, guide/outfitter Bruno Rosich, Jason Morton and the author admire Jason's red stag.

clatter of pans and dishes. I quickly pulled on my hunting clothes and made my way to the bathroom with toothbrush and towel.

When I arrived in the dining room, I found Jason already tucking into breakfast. Bruno made his appearance with a pitcher of apple juice and said, "I think we will work close by the house first thing this morning. There have been stags nearby for the last several mornings, and before we head deeper into the hunting area I think it best to glass around and see what might be around."

It had been decided that Jason would be our first shooter. I would tag along to offer up encouragement and words of wisdom, whether warranted or unwarranted.

My partner, Jason, has an uncanny ability to spot game when no one else can. I had hunted with him before in Africa, and I was truly amazed at his visual acuity, which oftentimes was better than even the most native of African trackers. Bruno, Jason and I glassed the open ground and the tree line of the ridge across from us. We moved our binos slowly and carefully,

looking for the slightest movement, shape or shadow that was out of place. Finally, Bruno and I pulled our binos away from our eyes, tacitly admitting defeat.

"I don't see anything, so I think we should hike down into the valley and see what's there," Bruno whispered.

"Yeah, I agree," I replied.

We began to move off, when suddenly Jason said, "Hold on a minute."

"What is it, Jason?" asked Bruno.

"There's a stag bedded down below a tree. I can see a cow or two with him as well, but I can't tell if he's big enough to shoot," Jason said.

"Where are you looking?" asked Bruno.

"Go down the ridge to the left. Just past halfway, look into the tree line. The shadows are still dark, but you'll see the stag's antlers shining in the sun, but they are mixed in with the tree branches he's lying beneath."

Bruno and I looked at where Jason was pointing, and sure enough, deep in shadow was the outline of a resting red stag. His antlers did indeed shine a bit in the rising sun, and as light continued to build, we could actually begin to make him out pretty well. He

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Spain is closer than you think.

Hunting in Spain is a wonderful experience, and having the right outfitter will guarantee a memorable and hassle-free adventure. I cannot recommend more highly the services of Hunt Trip Spain and the Rosich brothers: www.hunttripspain.com, email: contact@hunttripspain.com.

was nearly 500 yards away.

What impressed me most was the mass. Even in the poor light and at that distance, you could easily see the stag's antlers were extremely heavy, close together and dark colored. It appeared to us that the antlers did not have great length. However, in retrospect that was due to the fact that the mass was so impressive; it camouflaged to a degree the true length of the main beams. Jason, however, seemed to know almost instinctually that this stag was the one he had made the trip to Spain to take. Assured that his client was happy with this animal, Bruno made a plan for us to get closer for a shot.

The ground sloped downward, and if we continued we would lose sight of the bull, which would be above us. So instead we moved uphill slightly and tried to cut the distance. After a careful stalk, we finally got to within roughly 200 yards, but we had paid a price.

No doubt about it, the cows had us wired. One barked and ran off to the left. Another couple milled around

enough to finally make the stag nervous. Jason set up for the shot with his rifle resting against a tree. Conrad hurriedly popped open his tripod and set the camera into its slot. As soon as the stag was in the viewfinder he said, "I've got him, Jason; take him when you want."

"OK, I'll take him when he stands," Jason replied.

The agitation of the cows finally got to the bull. Rising to his feet, he began to step out to follow the retreating cows when the report of Jason's rifle fractured the morning's stillness. The impact of the 165-grain Federal bullet caused the bull to hunch and stop dead in his tracks, but just for a second. He then broke into a run first to his right, then hooking back the way he had come. Jason's second shot knocked him off his feet. He fell not 50 yards from where he had lain beneath the tree.

Jason's stag was truly a beast. His massive antlers held 16 points rather than the typical 12. The crown points were long and swept back, and both main beams had matching kicker

points as well. Back at the skinning shed, Bruno measured him for SCI and found him to be just three points shy of gold medal status. Jason just could not have been any happier than he was with his trophy.

After lunch and a nap, we got going again around 4 o'clock. Bruno briefed us on the afternoon's plan.

"I think we should head down to the big valley and see what comes into the fields to feed before dark. Hopefully, we'll get lucky," he said.

We started down the trail into the deep valley and had not gone far when Jason stopped to glass the finger ridge where he had shot his stag that morning. We continued walking until Jason called for us to stop. He then signaled for us to return uphill to where he was standing. When we got back to him, he pointed to the very tip of the finger ridge, where it began its steep drop into the valley. There, intermingled within the juniper trees, was a large stag. Only his head and antlers were visible.

We looked him over carefully. He was very tall with long crown points.

He was also wide. But something did not appear quite right. Bruno finally put his finger on it.

"He is a good stag, better than average, but he's missing his G2s on both main beams. He's really tall, and those crown points are very long," Bruno stated.

Frankly, I was undecided. He looked good, but the missing G2s bothered me. I was hoping for a more representative trophy, and I also knew that we had three more days to hunt. A decision needed to be made.

"Let's go see if we can get a closer look at him," I said.

"I think I know where he is



Jason's stag was a magnificent animal only three points shy of gold medal status. Note the beautiful crown points and the extreme mass of the antlers running almost the entire length of the main beams.

A CLEAR VIEW WAS BLOCKED BY VEGETATION, BUT AS THE STAG TURNED SLIGHTLY TO HIS RIGHT I COULD SEE THE SPREAD OF HIS ANTLERS.

going. We need to cross parallel to him and get to the next ridge over. He will most likely go down the backside of the ridge, cross the canyon and come up the next ridge. Maybe we can intercept him there," Bruno said.

When we arrived at what Bruno had determined to be the right spot, I sat down and readied my rifle and then carefully glassed the opposing ridge. We waited patiently, but after 10 minutes or so we decided that the stag had given us the slip. I responded to a call of nature, and just as I was finding relief I looked past Bruno and Conrad and noticed Jason about 25 yards behind us. He was partially crouched down and frantically gesturing with his hand for us to come quickly.

I zipped my fly as fast and safely as I could and grabbed my rifle. Bruno and Conrad had also seen Jason's pantomime and were working their way over to him.

"He's right there...right there...30 yards and looking at us!" Jason hissed in a whisper.

Sure enough, the stag was looking straight at us from some heavy brush. He had made better time than our estimate and was actually behind us rather than in front of us, as we had thought.

I swung up my rifle, and the stag's eyes bored right back through the scope and into my own. Only his head and neck were exposed in the tangle of branches, but his antlers rose majestically and my finger settled on the trigger.

I centered my crosshair on the stag's massive neck, just below his chin. I had him dead to rights, but then I hesitated. I realized that the stag was in deep shadow and that the light was fading fast. This was a TV hunt, which is a lot different than hunting without a video camera. You could not see much of the stag in the

brush and shadow, and I knew the lighting would make the image murky on tape. I also had a couple more days to hunt. As I lowered my rifle, I watched as the stag swapped ends and made good his escape.

"You made the right decision, Kevin. I was on him, but the light was bad," the cameraman said.

"Yeah, I thought so. I don't know what it was, but for some reason, that particular stag just wasn't in the cards," I replied.

The next morning once again found us heading out before first light. We were off in a direction we had not taken before that led through a forest of oaks along the top of Mollevi, from which we could look down into the village of Permolá far below.

In effect, we were making a wide outside circle toward the highest point, from which we would be able to glass the deep bowl into which almost all of the ridges and canyons fed. Our course led us straight up the side of a mountain. The brush gave way to scattered granite boulders, which we scrambled across to reach an outcropping of rocks. We were all puffing by the time we reached the summit.

From our vantage point, we waited and watched for nearly 30 minutes. At one point, a Spanish golden eagle soared on the thermals above us. I have seen video footage of this species actually knocking chamois from the rocks and into the abyss. The eagle will follow the chamois' fall, and when it hits bottom, the eagle swoops in to feed.

We didn't find the big one that morning. We hunted slowly back to the house, arriving five hours after our departure.

Following lunch and our now-mandatory siesta, we began the afternoon hunt around 3 o'clock. Bruno suggested we check out the wallow up in the hills that we had come across on our first afternoon, and I could not find any reason to dissuade him.

By the time we had worked our way deep into the hills, the sun was beginning to tumble toward the tops of the mountains. Once again, we emerged from the tree line for a view of the wallow and were immediately rewarded by the vision of two mature stags enjoying an afternoon mud bath.

Bruno and I dropped to our knees and brought up our binoculars. I



Hunt Trip Spain's hunting area lies in the mountains above the picturesque village of Permolá, which lies in the valley of the Rio Segre.



The author's stag was taken late in the afternoon after it was interrupted in a mud wallow. It scored high bronze with tall crown points.

could see that one stag was tall and narrow, while the other was tall and wide. The funny thing was that the antlers of both stags appeared almost ghostlike in their pale coloring. I then realized the coloration was due to the dried mud covering every inch of their headgear and their hides as well.

We had just begun our movement when both stags spotted us. They immediately moved clear of the wallow and trotted into the cover provided by a small copse of trees.

Now we were on our hands and knees, crawling toward the stags using every available bush and blade of grass for cover. We got to within 60 yards or so of the trees and were brought to an abrupt halt when we spotted one of the stags, almost totally concealed within the twisted boughs of the trees, staring directly at us. We immediately stopped our crawl and lowered our faces into the ground so that the stag could not make eye contact. But Bruno and I continued to sneak peeks at him from beneath the brims of our ball caps.

We decided that I should take the wider of the two stags. The problem was, we could only see one of them and we were not sure which one it was. The standoff continued.

After several tense minutes passed, I saw a flicker of movement to the right of the sentinel stag. It was the second stag, moving behind a tangle. A clear view was blocked by vegetation, but as the stag turned slightly to his right I could see the spread of his antlers.

"Bruno, the wide one is on the right," I croaked.

"Yes, I see him now. Let's wait for them to make their move, and then we'll have to move fast," he replied.

Our standoff ended when the stags made the first move. They spun their heads and started a dash through the trees to their right. We immediately got up from our bellies and began to follow them, using the trees in front of us to screen our flanking movement.

At the run now, I took a second to jack a round into the chamber and slide home the safety. Bruno was in front of me. The stags broke cover about 70 yards in front of us and began their dash for the hill. As we ran around the edge of the last tree blocking our view of them, they caught sight of us running and, incredibly, stopped to look back at what was pursuing them.

Taking advantage of the stags' momentary curiosity, I slammed on

the brakes, snicked off the safety and threw the rifle to my shoulder. The wide stag was on the right. My crosshair slipped behind the stag's shoulder, and the rifle seemed to go off by itself. The stag buckled when the bullet hit, but then he regained his senses and continued with his partner to sprint up the hill.

My stag trailed his buddy, and it was obvious that he would not survive my first shot. Then the stag turned slightly left, offering me an angled broadside. I held at the front edge of his chest and pressed the trigger. The bullet's impact knocked him over, and he was down for the count.

If you're an elk hunter, you owe it to yourself to someday hunt their European cousins. To be able to visit a foreign country, learn about its customs and history, and combine all that with a big game hunt is an experience you will never forget. Trust me, life just doesn't get any better. 🍷

GUNS AND GEAR

Any rifle suitable for deer or elk is perfect for a hunting trip in Spain. Rifles in the .270- to .30-caliber range combined with premium bullets like Federal's Trophy Bonded will offer plenty of power and range for all species. Most of the hunting takes place in the mountains, and while conditions will not be cold, you will need a good pair of boots that provide both traction and ankle support. Lightweight rain gear is also a good idea, along with a windproof jacket, wool sweater, light gloves and perhaps a stocking hat for early morning.

