

MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

Owen takes his Scandinavian visitor on a hunt through the magical Chiltern forests, in search of an elusive muntjac; they end up doing rather more scanning than hunting!

As part of the management of some of the woodlands I look after, I take clients out to shoot trophy muntjac bucks, normally in early springtime between February and April. This coincides with the end of the gamebird season, when the coverts become peaceful again after the weekly disturbance by beaters and dogs. The deer settle down and can be seen and stalked in a much more relaxed fashion and, normally, are more active at times when you can see and assess them.

The days become longer and, as spring arrives, the woodland flora bursts into life again with snowdrops,

primroses and carpets of bluebells. The birds sing the arrival of another season as life returns to the forest. It is a lovely time of year to be out in the woods, and all the new activity gives the forests a somewhat excited feel.

My job as a sporting agent/deer manager attracts many enquiries from potential clients, one of which was a member of Nordic Women Hunting (NWH) – a Swedish lady called Evelina Aslund. This club is made up of Scandinavian women who enjoy and promote hunting together, and write and post via social media. Evelina herself owns and manages a business called JoyEvent, Hunt and Health. It

BELOW: Evelina is an experienced hunter and owns a business offering hunting and wellbeing packages

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PICTURES: MARTIN OSBORNE

"AS WE WALKED ALONG THE EDGE
OF A PLANTATION, WE FROZE; 80M IN
FRONT WAS A MUNTJAC BUCK"



« offers 'hunting and outdoor activities with themes of health and wellbeing'. So, for example, a day's walked-up grouse shooting in the mountains of Ljungdalen may begin with a yoga session and end with a post-hunt massage... Sounds good to me! What an interesting concept and one I'm sure the Highland lodges will soon adopt. Not.

After several phone conversations with Evelina it was decided that, during a short visit to see friends in London, she would do a preliminary hunt to see if it was a suitable experience for NWH. I suggested April; the springtime was best to see the woods in bloom and also the best time to try for a muntjac buck. We set the date but, with only three outings on the agenda to get her a decent trophy, it was going to be a challenge.

I collected her from the airport and headed up into the ancient beech forests of the Chilterns. She was amazed at how beautiful the English countryside was, explaining that she had worked for a year in London, but hardly ventured out of the city except for a short trip to Cornwall; she hadn't realised the flora and fauna was so close to the capital.

After checking in to the hotel we quickly checked the zero of my rifle and headed to the woods, as the afternoon was drawing on. I am always amazed by just how well female hunters perform, on the range and in the field; the absence of competitiveness, or ego perhaps, helps them to operate at a more relaxed level than some of their male counterparts.

We kitted up and slipped into the woodland, glassing any areas that looked suitable for deer, and picking our way carefully to a high seat that I thought would provide a fruitful start to her trip. The new growth of grass on some of the woodland rides attracted several fallow does, now feeding with confidence having been 'out of season' for a



ABOVE: *The ancient forest is alive with flora and fauna*

few weeks as my attention had changed from 'cull sheet' to 'trophy bucks'.

The high seat I had selected to sit in this particular evening was located on the edge of a rhododendron thicket under some tall stands of beech. I had been feeding it regularly with a bean/wheat mix, and one of my trail cameras had done the reconnaissance, so I knew I had a reasonably mature buck frequenting the area. Still, with Evelina's short agenda I would be sitting with fingers crossed.

The afternoon sun melted into the Chiltern Hills and the thrushes sang their final song of the day. Several muntjac does were seen 'going about their business' and a young buck had a brief feed on the food, but no sign of the buck I had hoped for. We quietly left the seat and made our way to the field edge, trying to squeeze a few minutes more out of

BELOW: *Evelina and Owen wait excitedly for their buck to make an appearance*



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WATCH THE VIDEO

Watch this hunt on the Cervus-UK YouTube channel:

<https://youtu.be/L7vq01r7w4U?list=PLXWPN5JPYCfcGIeANbdFo66wJ1g-BUQV0>

« the last light, but to no avail.

The following morning was chilled with a spring frost as I collected Evelina from the hotel. I commented on just how cold it was for early spring, and she smiled and said that this wasn't cold; where she lived in mid Sweden they could still have snow!

We went straight to the high seat and sat in the dark for half an hour. As light broke a thousand rooks flew overhead, screaming from their roost, and the forest came to life; cock pheasants cackled as they dropped from their perch, pigeons cooed their courtship and squirrels chattered as they disputed territory. Evelina could not believe just how much wildlife there was a stone's throw from the capital city.

I was glad she was enjoying it and could see how much she loved nature. Being a hunting guide herself meant there was no pressure from her at all. This was nice as the species that we were after were nowhere to be seen! Not a single good-morning bark from a buck or doe to be heard, and at a time when you would normally expect to see and hear them at first light. Only a single solitary young roe buck passed our way; he was now in season, but not on our menu, as roe deer in this area of the Chilterns are few and far between.

After an hour I decided it would perhaps be better to stalk, as we may bump into a muntjac buck patrolling his

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territory. We crept through the woods again, glassing every bramble patch, glade and ride edge, but nothing in the muntjac department was moving at all. The sun was shining now and it really was a wonderful spring morning as we made our way back for breakfast.

As we walked along the edge of a plantation that bordered a rape field, we froze; 80m in front was a muntjac buck. He wandered out of the cover and started to feed on a fallen tree that was sticking out into the field. The buck was a real cracker – medal class for sure – and I told Evelina to get prepared on the shooting sticks while I clarified how old and how suitable a buck it was. Just then, another buck appeared, of similar size and stature, and joined the first as they moved in and out of the branches of the recently fallen tree, feeding or scent marking – I couldn't determine which as they were constantly busy. Both bucks were very good quality and both suitable for Evelina. I confirmed this but, despite having them in front of us for a few minutes, the shot never presented itself and they both wandered back into cover as if invisible to each other. "That was definitely

LEFT: When a buck is spotted, Evelina sets up on sticks, but a shot never presents itself



Muntjac are widespread across the Chilterns, having escaped from the parks around stately homes in the 1920s.

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not normal muntjac behaviour,” I said to Evelina. To have two such strong bucks within a few metres of each other, and for neither to be bothered by the other, was not the norm. We waited a few more minutes. I even tried a quick few ‘fieps’ on my cherrywood call, but to no avail. We headed back for breakfast.

It was now the third and final outing for Evelina and, although she was delighted with all the wildlife she had seen, I was under my own pressure to produce a decent trophy buck to hang up in her hunting cabin, and to blog about and tweet to her Nordic mates.

We went out far too early, but I thought it was better to be in place with plenty of time than arriving into the seat as everything was starting to move. We sat in glorious spring sunshine and, again, the forest fauna kept us amused. Pigeons, jays and squirrels feasted on the food I had put out for the crafty old buck that was eluding us.

An hour passed and suddenly, as if a switch had been tripped, a muntjac doe was out feeding casually behind us. Heavily pregnant, she was perfect for my cull, but not this evening. Another younger doe appeared out in front of us and made her way to the beans, eagerly feeding. A moment later another mature doe joined her. ‘Thank God for small mercies; I have got muntjac in these woods,’ I thought to


ABOVE: Evelina is fascinated by her buck, which looks so different to any species she has hunted before

myself. We had three deer to look at and, even if it wasn’t the buck we were after, Evelina was enjoying studying them as they fed undisturbed.

The light started to fade and the pheasants started to return to roost. My eyes were poring over every inch of cover, trying to find another deer as I twisted in my seat to check out a distant game cover, where I’d seen this buck the week before. Evelina nudged me. In front of us, on the bean mix, was another muntjac. He was a buck, but just a youngster at two years old, if that; it had a trophy, but to be honest it wasn’t a buck that wanted shooting.

We both watched carefully, and I told Evelina to mount the rifle and have a look through the scope. Just as she did the buck scuttled off. ‘Damn it,’ I thought, ‘It heard us.’ But immediately, entering the stage from the right, came another buck. He cautiously picked his way out onto the food, the black triangle of his forehead indicating his maturity. It was the buck we were after, and easy to identify as his left antler was slightly misaligned due to a damaged pedicle. “That’s him,” I said.

Evelina took aim and shot him perfectly behind the shoulder, as instructed. The .308 Win Hornady SST round did its job as the buck fell in its place. We unloaded and got down from the seat with a sigh of relief from me. A beaming smile from Evelina said it all.

We approached the buck and she was amazed to see it, finally, up close. Looking at the long canine teeth and huge, prominent glands on the forehead, she remarked, “What an incredible little deer, living alongside humans and almost in the suburbs.” “Yes,” I replied, “I don’t think your moose would perhaps fare so well in the same circumstances!” 

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