

## What an American Hunter Learned from a Scottish Red Deer Cull



[Katie Hill](#) Nov 10, 2021



Jess Johnson touched down in Edinburgh at 1 a.m. on September 28, just in time for a hunt that was scheduled to start five hours later—on the other side of Scotland.

Sleep wasn't much of an option even if Jess had more time. She'd just spent five days in Hungary speaking about wolf policy in the American West at a symposium hosted by the [International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation](#), and she was too excited for this final leg of her trip.

Jess is the government affairs director for the [Wyoming Wildlife Federation](#) and an expert voice on wildlife management. She shared the stage in Hungary with other members of the international conservation sphere, such as Dr. Linzi Seivwright, an ecologist and wildlife management consultant who runs her own private firm, [Caorann](#), in the Scottish Highlands. Seivwright made a presentation about red deer.

Jess and Seivwright have lots in common—both are conservation professionals, expert hunters, and both love deer more than just about anything else. But they come from two completely different worlds. From cull hunts and rules about selling game meat to land ownership and public perceptions, Scotland and the United States couldn't possibly have more different hunting cultures and deer management regimes, even though they evolved from the same lineage.

Jess was about to experience those differences firsthand on what became part red stag cull hunt, part knowledge exchange with Seivwright, her husband Tom, and a longtime professional red deer culler. The experience would both strengthen her appreciation for the North American

Model of Wildlife Conservation and open her eyes to new ideas she could bring back to Wyoming, all in just two short days of hunting in the Highlands. And first light was just a few hours away.

**Making the Cull** The first time Jess laid eyes on a stag was through the crosshairs of Seivwright's riflescope on the first morning of the hunt, but she couldn't quite bring herself to take the shot. The professional culler, who will remain anonymous for privacy reasons, called in the stag that Jess considered to be huge by American standards.

"We belly-crawled up to it and got the gun set up, and I was looking through the scope and understanding that I had never seen a red stag in my life," Jess told MeatEater. "It was an OK shot, but he wasn't totally still, and I couldn't wrap my head around it. I didn't really want to kill the first one I'd ever seen. I just had to sit and stare at it and be like, 'Whoa, these are cool.'"

The point of the hunt was not to kill one trophy deer. She was participating in a cull, a term for the deliberate removal of animals to stabilize a population, and was told she could shoot stags on both days if she wanted to. After a long day of roaring and crawling through the heather and bracken, eventually the culler called in a massive stag that would become Jess' first harvest of the trip.



Jess with a Scottish red stag.

She fired Seivwright's Sako 6.5x55 straight through the heart, which she was more than delighted to cook for her hosts that night. They unsurprisingly insisted on pairing it with a "wee dram of whisky."

Jess had already squeezed a whole hunt's worth of excitement, awe, and emotion into the first day. So naturally, when it came time to shoot another monster stag on the second day, she felt hesitant.

"Tom looked at me and was like, 'We have to shoot this stag, do you want to shoot him?' And never in my life have I had this embarrassment of riches," Jess said. "I just shot my first red stag yesterday. And now I have another really incredible chance today. I kept feeling like I hadn't even recovered from the first one, and to know that we had to shoot this one because we were

culling was such an interesting experience. Pulling that trigger certainly was conflicting because I was still processing the first one.”

But Jess maintained her composure, remembered the context of the hunt she was on, and fired the shot.

“We walked up to this huge, monstrous body and Tom turned around and was like, ‘Jess, I think you've shot the two largest-bodied red stags in Scotland.’”

**Kings of the Forest** Red deer, which look more like American elk than whitetail or mule deer, are one of the biggest and most prevalent families of deer species in the world, with introduced populations stretching from New Zealand to North Africa. Scottish red deer are their own unique species that only exist in the United Kingdom, and their numbers in Scotland have flourished since the country started tackling largescale reforestation projects 100 years ago.

If the idea of culling big game still makes your stomach turn, consider this first unique truth of Scottish wildlife management: These deer have no natural predators.

Wolves were extirpated from the United Kingdom a long time ago. Red deer and wolves haven't interacted on Scottish dirt since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is one of the many reasons why Seivwright's job is so different from Jess': Across the pond, when it comes to managing the overwhelming deer population, humans are the only species fit for the job.

“There are no natural predators here in Scotland, other than humans,” Jess said. “They don't have wolves. They don't have big cats. They don't have bears. They don't have an animal big enough to eat red deer in the U.K. So hunting, at its very heart, is a management tool. And because there are so many red deer, because Scotland is trying to bring back their forests, it's really important that hunting exists as a measure to manage all that.”



A Scottish red deer is named for its distinct russet-colored coat.

According to a 2020 Deer Working Group [report](#), Scotland's tree cover has more than tripled since 1947. The red deer population hovers around 400,000. But reforestation efforts and red deer management efforts tend to work against each other. Red deer eat lots of young trees, making them a significant pest for those trying to reestablish Scotland's timber stands. They have a similar effect on crops and suburban landscaping, and without any predators to maintain equilibrium, the population grows largely unchecked.

**Meat of Epic Proportions** Close your eyes for a second and imagine if North America didn't have bears, wolves, coyotes, mountain lions, or other carnivores. Forget the ongoing political spats over wolf reintroductions, whether bears belong on endangered species lists, or if mountain lions should be hunted with hounds. You must admit—everything from our forests to our cornfields to our tomato plants would probably look a little more barren.

But if the United States were to use deer culling as a pest eradication strategy, it's safe to assume that lots of meat would go to waste, rendering the practice unethical. This is where a second distinction between the United States and Scotland comes into play: Scotland allows for the commercial sale of game meat, a compounding factor that makes culling much easier to swallow.

“Cullers shoot a hundred deer a year, obviously they can't eat it all,” Jess said. “So yes, they can sell their game meat. In doing that, you bring the government and food services into wildlife management.”

While some might buck at the idea of government intrusion in something as sacred as field dressing and butchering, Jess sees some upsides to it.

“One really cool benefit is that there are standard practices in meat handling. The government puts out incredibly detailed instructions on how they want the meat handled and what to look for and how to do it. And if it's not done by those standards, you can't sell it. So, it adds a level of professionalism to whoever's butchering the animal.”

Seivwright explained that when the bottom fell out of the restaurant industry during the COVID-19 lockdown, the venison trade struggled because game dealers were not able to pay cullers or other venison producers enough money for the meat, even though the culls continued for the sake of ecosystem health. This made a lot of non-hunting venison consumers rethink the way they procured the resource.

“Here in lockdown, I think people were starting to think ‘Well, this is ridiculous. We have this source of really healthy, sustainably produced food right on our doorstep, but we can't get to it,’” Seivwright told MeatEater. “So, it really got a lot of people thinking about how we future-proof ourselves for this. Shouldn't we be trying to build an infrastructure whereby more groups can set themselves up to produce local food successfully? Shouldn't people have more access to hunting if that's what they want to do?”

This raises a third major distinction: In Scotland, many hunters still struggle for access—and acceptance—in the first place.

**Private Land, Public Perceptions** Unlike the United States, most of Scotland's land is under private ownership. Large estates account for a shocking majority of undeveloped acreage: In a 2019 [study](#), the Scottish Land Commission found that 70% of Scottish rural lands are in the hands of just 1,125 owners. Overall, about [12% of Scottish land](#) is public. For comparison's sake, the United States is about [40% publicly owned](#).



Jess, Seivwright and their culling partner look out over the Scottish countryside.

This makes hunting in Scotland a pretty exclusive practice. Landowners, often nobility, can charge large sums for hunting experiences on their properties during the red deer season, and the tradition is viewed as something for the elite class only.

Even if more hunting opportunities were available to Scotland's average citizens, whether they'd be interested in partaking in the practice is hard to tell. According to Seivwright, 17% of Scotland's population lives in rural areas, despite those areas making up 98% of the landmass. The population is overwhelmingly urban, and the public perception of hunting tends to lean in the direction of neutral disinterest ranging to disgust. [Overwhelming majorities](#) of poll respondents believe trophy hunting and fox hunting should be universally banned. Culling also has its own issues in the public eye.

“You have the animal rights side, and you have the traditional guides and hunters—or ‘stalkers’ in Scotland—and their job is to manage and advise on red deer management,” Jess said. “Most of the animal rights side doesn't like the government cullers because they're killing a lot of red deer, and then the stalkers and traditional hunters also doesn't like the government cullers for the same reason.”

To make matters more complicated, when deer cross property lines, their management falls onto the shoulders of the property owners themselves. Some landowners have deer during hunting season and use them to turn a profit from other hunters using the land. But other landowners have deer arrive out of hunting season and must manage them as a nuisance. These conflicting views of deer and management make for a lot of conflict between landowners.

“There's a code of deer management, which anybody who has deer on their land in Scotland is expected to follow,” Seivwright said. “It sets out your roles and responsibilities in managing deer. It's not a statute code, so you don't break the law by not doing these things, but it's very much advisory in terms of what you should and shouldn't do. So, there's a lot of pressure on landowners to manage deer in a way that's considered sustainable.”

**Lessons Learned** With so much of North America's hunting population relying on public land access to notch tags every season, it's hard to imagine what our freezers would look like if so much of our big game habitat was under private ownership. Additionally, much of North America's perception of hunting is built on the experiences of responsible, ethical hunters. In simpler terms, access and experience equates to acceptance, and with little access to the practice

and few experienced participants to advocate for it, Scotland's hunting culture has a lot of room for growth. But Seivwright has a vision for where that growth should start.

“If you're going to hunt properly, you really need to understand nature and you need to be connected to it. Particularly in our situation, since we've got such an urban population, we should be engaging people with nature and getting particularly young people into the countryside to understand how it works,” she said. “We should be giving people these experiences of not just being a voyeur in the landscape, but actually feeling connected to it. If you get all that, then hunting is almost like a natural extension of that.”

She's certainly doing her part to get the landowners on board.

“I think there would be huge benefit for a lot of the people I'm working with who are landowners,” Seivwright said. “I'm working with them to see how they can engage with local communities and connect people back to nature so that people have opportunities to experience what we as hunters might take a little bit for granted.”

While Jess wasn't able to bring back any meat or antlers to show for her two stags, she did return with photos, memories, and lessons.

“To go and see Scotland and learn a different conservation story in a different place was pretty incredible,” she said. “I wish we could hammer that home with the larger crowd of hunters out here: Take the time, do the research, and meet the conservation professionals in the area or reach out to the biologist in the place you're going to hunt. Just ask for the conservation story.”

Ultimately, Jess said, one of the best ways to become a better steward of conservation in her own country was to open her eyes to how wildlife management works elsewhere. Every conservation model comes with its own history and context, which is important to consider before casting judgment on practices that are foreign to us. While Scotland's high-involvement approach to deer management might seem like overkill, the circumstances make it clear that such an approach is necessary.

“In the end, broadening your view gives you empathy. It makes you understand different points of view,” Jess said. “And then, when you're faced with different opinions in your own backyard, rather than just building a wall right away, you're willing to sit at the table and have a real debate. And when people are willing to sit and have a debate, whether you agree with them or not, that's how change happens.”

All images via Jess Johnson.

Report Title:

**The management of wild deer in Scotland: Deer Working Group report**

## **The final report of the Deer Working Group**

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/management-wild-deer-scotland/pages/5/#Figure3>