



Connemara's

pony-sized stags

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Ireland's native equines are famous for their bone, a product of the limestone underlying their grazing. Now, deer introduced to west Galway 10 years ago are growing like Topsy and producing record-breaking antlers. Duff Hart-Davis reports



The Muggor (top) which would take on all comers; Pirate, a less aggressive stag, in velvet (above)

IF ANYONE had told you, a dozen years ago, that a stag born in Connemara would set a new record for a wild red deer head, you would have thought him crazy. For one thing, there were no red deer in Connemara then and, for another, it seems most unlikely that the barren environment could produce a champion. Yet now an animal known as Pirate (because he lost one eye in a fight) has won top honours, beating both Irish and British records. His antlers scored 226.5 on the scale of the CIC (Conseil International de la Chasse), the authority that adjudicates on such matters.

The earlier strain of reds in Connemara was shot out during the famines of the 1840s, and for 150 years the species was extinct in that

splendid wilderness of rock, lough and mountain. Then, as an experiment, in the spring of 1996 the owner of the Screebe estate, the German entrepreneur Nikolai Burkart, imported 16 animals from a farm in Co Wexford. They were, admittedly, of superior stock, deriving ultimately from the herds at Windsor and Warnham; but nobody foresaw how dramatically their offspring would flourish.

Soon people began to be amazed by the stags' precocity. Beasts in their first heads were carrying six points and several in their second heads carried 12 or 14 – as many as a mature Highland Royal or Imperial. On his final head Pirate had the astonishing total of 44 points. Yet he was gentle, with courtly manners, not

Field.
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given to unprovoked aggression. His great rival, The Mugger, would take on all comers with or without provocation.

These two master stags were the stars of the first new generation born at Screebe. Both were culled in the autumn of 2004 because they were at or past their prime, and both exemplified the astounding stature which the herd has achieved. The Mugger at his best had a mere 26 points but his antlers were so tremendously thick that his head came within a whisker of beating the British Isles record.

Body weights are correspondingly huge. One stag known as The Sailor was so massive that, when he was culled, a team of seven men with a quad bike could not shift his carcass. They had to quarter him where he fell, and in the larder his aggregated, gralloched weight proved to be 700lb, or 50 stone. The heaviest Highland beasts seldom exceed 20 stone.

What is it that has caused this amazing growth? Some experts believe that underlying limestone increases the mineral content of the herbage, contributing to the build-up of bone and antler; and the main factor certainly seems to be the food the deer are eating. Most red deer are grazers but the Connemara herd have become predominantly browsers: regular analysis of their droppings reveals that between 50 and 60 per cent of their diet consists of bramble leaves, with ling heather the next most important ingredient. Grass scarcely features, probably because there is so little of it: only a few small fields are scattered about the lower slopes of the mountains.

The deer's strongholds are the extensive conifer plantations belonging to Coillte, the Irish state forestry organisation. Luckily for the animals, these are unfenced and provide ideal feeding and shelter. Luckily, too, the deer do little damage to the trees. In the view of Paul Wood, the English manager of the estate, "One reason for their success is that they have a fantastic variety of food and keep switching from one thing to another."

In the 10 years of their existence the deer have developed some unusual characteristics. The females, for instance, do not gather in large herds but remain in groups of eight or nine – maybe five hinds and three or four calves. In other environments female calves stay with their mothers for life but here a high proportion push off on their own at a year old. Except for during the rut in September and October, the hinds are very aggressive towards the stags and rout them from favoured areas.

As for the stags – after the rut many of them simply disappear. Reports of a huge stag appearing on farm land beyond Loch Corrib, 10 miles to the east, made Paul suspect that The Mugger was spending his summers across the water. Sure enough, two cast antlers found by



Paul Wood with The Mugger (above); Nikolai Burkart with Pirate

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a farmer left no doubt about the identity of the wanderer, who must have swum a couple of miles on each journey out and back.

Regarding records, experts become agitated by the question of whether the stag was truly wild. Last year in Austria it emerged that an immense red deer head which broke the world record had come from a beast reared in captivity and let out of a stable the day before it was shot. The record was disallowed.

The Screebe deer, in contrast, have never been confined. Nor are they artificially fed (another means of increasing antler size). One year the estate did try putting out a patent German mixture like coarse muesli, which smelled deliciously of molasses, but after a few days most of it was left untouched.

As far as Paul can tell, the herd is now about 150 strong. Poaching is an obvious threat, and in the run-up to Christmas the estate took on extra security guards. Fortunately the price of venison in Ireland is extremely low – only about 40 cents (26p) per kilo – but big heads are a powerful lure, as they are across the Atlantic. American trophy-hunters are queuing to come over and cull the monsters. During the rut of 2004 a man who had arranged to shoot a good stag – not of the top flight – found himself confronting The Mugger day after day.

Again and again he offered \$20,000 to shoot the bruiser but Burkart was determined that the head of the foundation stag should remain at Screebe. In the end he told the visitor that he could shoot The Mugger free, provided he left the trophy behind. The American declined.

A week later Paul found the stag looking sick unto death. He had lost weight, and young rivals were driving him off the hinds. So Paul shot him through the neck from a range of 10yd. A post-mortem revealed that he was just a bag of bones, with a wound in his belly and one kidney pulped – and Paul felt certain that the aggressor had been The Mugger's son Warlock, another dark beast with a big black mane, which he had seen kill a rival by hoicking it into the air, throwing it to the ground and finishing it with a charge in the ribs.

Burkart culled Pirate on the grounds that the stag was at his zenith, and had passed on his genes to numerous offspring. Both heads adorn the lodge at Screebe. Michel Nolans, the Belgian expert who measured Pirate's antlers, believes that the herd is on its way to still greater things. He forecast that within 20 years one of the stags will capture not just the Irish but the world record.

Visit www.screebehouse.ie or call 00353 91 574110 for more information on Screebe.