

The Hutt Valley NZDA hunter training course gives students many different experiences. Here they are in the foothills of the Tararuas.



The HVNZDA hunting course EXPERIENCE

The Hutt Valley branch of the NZDA has been running their hunter training course for well over 15 years. Each batch of budding hunters can vary from teens just starting out to crafty old goats wanting to get back into it (and possibly an excuse to buy more toys). With support from Outdoor Sports NZ and the New Zealand Ammunition Company, one lucky punter this year was given the use of a Howa Mini Action in .223 and plenty of 53 grain Norma ammo to feed it. Here is Aisling's story.

I've always had an interest in the outdoors, like hiking and adventure sports, but hunting and firearms were totally new to me. After talking to a few friends, it was suggested that the Hutt Valley New Zealand Deerstalkers Association (HVNZDA) was my best opportunity to learn and connect with people. Being from the city, and growing up similarly, I had very few opportunities to meet or talk to anyone about hunting and the culture that surrounds it, let alone get any basic firearms advice or handling practice. I just managed to squeeze in as the course signups came to capacity.

The course is run once a year by the talented and energetic guys from HVNZDA, who volunteer all their time to make it happen. This effort, and their patience too I can tell you, is no small feat. Five full Saturdays at the range and two long weekends away, on top of work, makes for a full on two months for both students and instructors. In its own right, this creates a

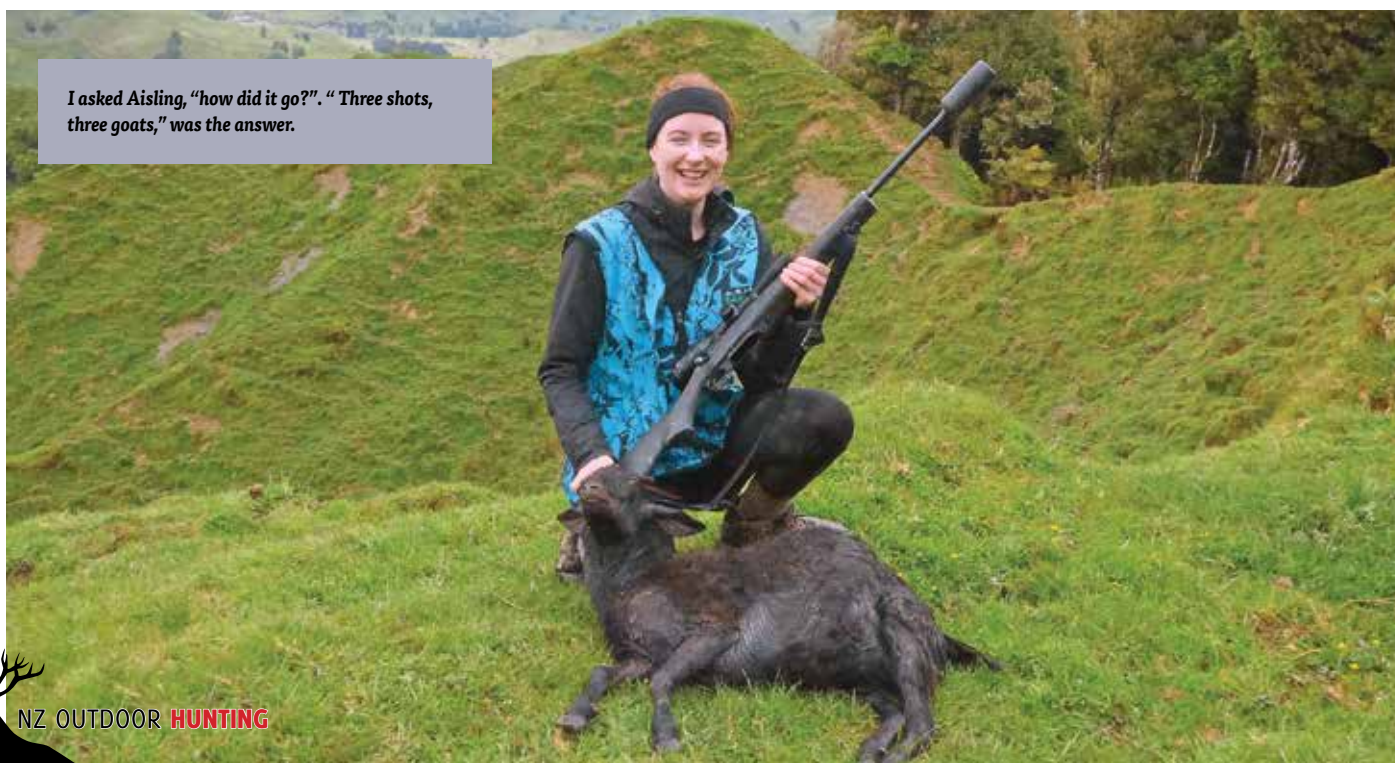
safer hunting environment and culture in New Zealand. It also creates an opportunity for people from so many different backgrounds and abilities to learn and build confidence in both their shooting, bush skills, and butchery. Even now, I'm left struck by the process that has led my freezer to bulging and the steps, skills, and little tricks that had to be developed to get me there.

The amount of information we covered through the course was spectacular and overwhelming all at once. I became suddenly and acutely aware about how marginally appropriate most of my gear was for the outdoors. Waterproof jacket? Only for so long! Not to mention the noise I was making crashing and crunching through the bush. Boots? "Yeah, they're good, but..." All this leads to strong observations and understanding of safety in the bush. Know your limits, know your gear, and know what to do when things aren't going right. I now feel so much more confident

in what decisions I will make and why.

Choosing an appropriate knife was one of the most memorable moments. I sought advice from both the trainers and the local 'Hunting and Fishing' and was told, "a knife is a personal thing". I thought to myself, "really? I'm just looking for something I can't stab myself with and that has a good edge". Apparently, this is just too simple a request but after some agonising decisions I settled for a beautiful flip Gerber. I now carry this in my handbag with pride knowing I'm prepared should anything need extra cutting.

One of the best things about the course was that we had the opportunity to rent club rifles, so we would get a chance to get some practice while deciding how far we wanted to go with hunting. This also meant that the outlay wasn't too expensive, considering all the other gear we were trying to catch up on. As Outdoor Sports NZ are in support of the hunter training course, they offered the club a Howa .223 rifle



I asked Aisling, "how did it go?" "Three shots, three goats," was the answer.



Real hunting can be a true slog.

and The New Zealand Ammunition Company provided Norma ammunition to trial. I was lucky to be chosen for this. This made for a delightful experience as there was minimum recoil, which was important to me as a first-time shooter whose aim could be shaky at times. The Howa Mini Action .223 was fitted with their Panamax 3-9x scope, along with an ASE suppressor from NZ Ammunition Company. This package was easy to use and the ammo was reliable, which made for consistent shots at varying distances on the range and out in the field. This provided me with early confidence and an example of this was demonstrated out on the hunt weekend where I shot three goats with three rounds one after another. I don't think I can comment too expertly on the technicalities of the setup, but I can firmly say that I really enjoyed the feel of the rifle. The combination of its form in hand, its weight, its recoil, and the consistency I experienced with it, made the rifle that

much better for me and I grew a personal attachment to it over the course.

One of the most profound experiences for me came a few days after the course. We said our goodbyes, arrived home and spent hours cleaning the mud and blood from our gear. Grass and hair were frantically plucked from the meat while we argued about how long to rest it before we would get food poisoning, then it was jigsawed into the freezer while we generally decompressed after so many internal goat-related conversations. I threw the meat into a slow cooker with an onion, salt and pepper for six hours and then mixed the results with carrot, potato and beans fresh from the markets. It struck me suddenly with both pride and confidence that this was my meat. I had sweated up and down hills for it. I had met it personally and taken it apart with my own hands, and I can now do it again when I need to. I think this represents a huge personal growth in life skills and understanding.

I appreciate the origins of my meat so much more. I respect the hunting community and better understand the culture around firearms in New Zealand. Something I believe other people could benefit from and I just generally feel better prepared for life, no matter what adversity we might face in the future. I'm also hoping there are a few more deer that cross my path in the near future.

I would like to take one last opportunity to thank the HVNZDA and others for all the effort and individual sacrifice (more than one instructor mentioned this was time that they could have spent hunting) that goes into making this course possible. The knowledge the instructors shared is invaluable and they respected the pain we endured at times and were always encouraging.

Overall, it was a very enjoyable, grounding and empowering life experience I will always remember.



The Howa Mini Action did the job well and Norma 53 grain soft-points provided the results.