

## George

We had moved to a new house, in a beautiful location on the side of a hill, overlooking the town, and seafront, the views were breathtaking and at the back we were surrounded by woods.

I enjoyed spending time looking through binoculars at the fields in the distance beyond the town, where I could see a herd of deer.

In the area we live in, it was a normal pastime to drive up onto the hills and look for deer, and feel very lucky if you spotted some. There were even tourist safari's that would charge to take people looking for deer, but many a trip was uneventful, and disappointing, especially if you were trying to impress visitors by showing them the deer, and non appeared in a spot that you knew they frequented.

So the herd of deer that I could see, fascinated me, and everyday I would look for them and track their movements. Sometimes they were out in the open fields, and other days they would be sheltering in the trees on the edge of the fields, so near the town and yet undisturbed.

One evening, not long after we had moved into the new property, my partner called me outside to show me three hinds, who were standing by the side of our garage. At least we thought they were hinds, but they may have been young stags before their antlers had started to grow. It was a shock to see them there, so close, but a wonderful and privileged sight.

Not long after this, we had visits most days from two beautiful Stags, we named them George and Scrumpy. George because he reminded me of a King, and Scrumpy because he seemed more interested in the apple trees than anything else. Scrumpy would shake the apples down by hitting the branches with his antlers. We often wondered if they would not get drunk on the many apples they consumed as they fermented in their stomachs.

Hours and hours were spent just watching them, they were so serene, majestic and mythical. They could jump over a hedge or fence from a standing position, no height seemed to deter them. They just leapt over in one graceful movement.

George would lie on a patch of grass on a steep incline at the back of the house, then after a few weeks, he would sleep there all night.

At first, I was a little scared of the stags being in such close proximity, they were very dominant and seemed to demand respect, and I didn't think it would take much for them to give chase. But as time went on, I began to feel safe with them around, and looked forward each day to their visits.

We were paid a visit by the local wildlife consultant, who asked if he could leave a day/night camera in our garden. He had been tracking these two stags for many years, and said it would be helpful to get some close footage of them. He had called them Ash and Cedar, but was happy with the names we had given them. He warned us about the rutting season, which would start in October, when the stags would be sharpening their antlers and getting ready to defend their hinds in battles with other Stags. The testosterone would be kicking in, and even though these two stags were approachable most of the year, this would not be a time to try and get near them.

All too soon October came. George and Scrumpy went to the top of the garden where they gauged out strips from the trees with the points of their antlers, and rubbed off the velvet from them at the same time, getting themselves prepared for the battle with the other dominant Stags.

The antlers were beautiful when the velvet was removed. There seemed to be an excited air about George and Scrumpy, while they prepared themselves for defending their hinds from rival stags wanting to mate with their females. The testosterone now obviously had kicked in.

One day during October, a delivery van had parked at the bottom of our drive. The driver had spotted George making his way down the side of the property. The driver got out and started taking photos on his mobile, but George was agitated, his path was blocked, and he bolted towards the front lawn and decking, having spotted our dog, who was out having a wonder around. George took chase, leaping over borders and bowing his head, charging with his almighty antlers. If the patio door had not been open and the dog hadn't had the sense to quickly run inside, she would have been speared and killed in a second. George turned back and ran towards the drive. I stepped outside, having watched all of this happen from the window, I shouted to the delivery man to move his van and clear the way for the Stag to run out into the road, where he would then bolt up into the woods again, it was obvious he was getting very het up and frustrated by now. I don't know who was more frightened at that moment, the driver or George.

Our dog never went outside again when the Stags were around. She would stand, nose in the air, and if she caught their scent, she was straight back in the house.

Soon George and Scrumpy took their leave for the rutting season, and we missed seeing them for the next six weeks.

Late November, George reappeared, but he had been injured during the rutting, obviously gored quite badly by a rival stags antlers being thrust into his side. He seemed tired and battle weary, but we were glad that he chose to come back to us for his respite.

It wasn't long before George started to make trips around the front of our property, passing by the lounge windows and visiting a tree which we hung a lot of bird feeders on. He soon learnt a very useful trick. He would position himself so that he could hook the bird feeders off with his antlers. He mostly went for the peanuts, but occasionally would take the sunflower seeds down too. He would drop the feeder from his antlers and consume the nuts or seeds that had scattered. We told the wild life consultant and he moved the cameras to the front of the house, where he could capture George having his daily feed. He said he had never seen a Stag do this before, it just went to show how intelligent they are.

George was getting braver, and so was I, in fact I could walk right up to him now and feed him carrots, which he gracefully took and greedily ate. George had lost his fear of humans (well, fear of us, as we posed no threat), but we were well ware that he was a wild animal and it would be disastrous if he approached all humans in this way, as there were people who would be prepared to harm him for a trophy or to sell him for venison. We would not have encouraged George to be so tame, but we had been told that an old lady who lived in the house before us had been feeding the wild deer for many years. She had refused to go into a residential home when she could no longer look after herself, as she did not want to abandon the deer, so she had carers to call on her every day, and they related tales of how she cared for the deer, feeding them and enjoying them being in the garden. Obviously George was one of her regulars, which is why he had stayed around our area. Although at first he was wary of us, he soon realised we could be trusted and we meant him no harm.

George would sometimes walk up and down our drive during the day in full view of us. Other days he would just rest in the back garden. Sometimes he would sleep there all day and night. Although if

we had visitors he would be wary and stay out of sight until they had gone, unless they were frequent visitors, then he would make himself visible to them, as they counted as family, like us.

It was comforting and reassuring to have George's presence there in the garden, and I would look out for him each morning when I got up. Seeing George in the garden first thing in the morning would set me up for the day. Christmas morning he was there too, it was a great Christmas present. The grandchildren were really excited to see him, and they thought of him as part of the family. They followed me up the garden to give George his extra Christmas rations. We didn't go as far as putting bells around his neck though! We felt so privileged to have such a wonderful animal in our garden. A monarch of the glen. We even made a Christmas card out of a photograph of George in the garden.

Our wildlife consultant had managed to film hundreds of hours of George and Scrumpy, including footage of me stepping out onto the decking in my dressing gown to give a carrot to George (I had forgotten about the camera). This particular video was edited for the local news channel, and was given the caption of 'What does Rudolph do on his day off, he visits a house on the edge of Exmoor'. Fortunately the film was in black and white, so my fluffy blue dressing gown wasn't seen, although a lot of people recognised me. The camera was set to point towards the tree and house, but not the view from where we live, as it would have been easy for deer followers, and the Press to find out where George was otherwise, and we wanted to protect George and Scrumpy as much as possible.

The lump on George's side was unfortunately getting bigger, and by February it had burst and was looking quite unpleasant. We were told by our friend the wildlife consultant that it was an ulcer, and that a sympathetic vet may be able to dart George with a tranquilliser and possibly remove the lump. But we knew that it would be very difficult procedure to carry out on a wild animal, and would probably cause him more stress than he would be able to take.

Unfortunately the opportunity didn't arise to try and help George in this way, as his health deteriorated quite quickly, and one Sunday morning he actually came down from the garden and stood close to our back door. He seemed to be asking for help. We fed him, hoping to give him strength in case he could have some treatment. We called the wild life consultant, but he couldn't get hold of a vet that was prepared to come and help at that point.

We didn't see George the next day, but the day after that, on the Tuesday, he appeared again, and didn't seem to be quite himself. Again he had come to the back door. I had just returned from shopping and saw his antlers through the glass in the back door as I went into the kitchen.

I went out to him, he was bleeding quite badly. Awkwardly, he laid himself down on the patio, looking very soulful and sorry for himself. I took him some sheep feed nuts, which he ate. I called our wildlife friend,, who came and supported us during the day, while we kept watch over George, he was still trying to track down a vet who would come to help, but it was to no avail.

By the evening we could see that George was suffering, and a decision had to be made. It was not an easy one, but there was only going to be one outcome in the end. So, a stalker was called to come and put George out of his misery. We had taken advice from a vet and the police were informed that there would be a firearm on the premises.

I will never forget the sound of the bullet as it hit George, he died instantly, which was a blessing, but it was so very, very sad. I cried and cried, it was as though a pet had been put to sleep. There would never be another Stag like George, he was special, a King. Our King.

George had lived to a good age for an Exmoor stag, he is believed to have been 15 years old, but that knowledge didn't help much, we were going to miss him so much.

George's antlers were removed that night and he was covered over with a tarpaulin until we could arrange for his body to be taken away.

The next morning, I got up after a poor night's sleep, I couldn't stop thinking about George, and as I went past the landing window, where I would see him first thing in the morning, I was thinking it would be pointless to look out at the back garden as he would no longer be there. But, I couldn't help but look and couldn't believe my eyes when I saw that Scrumpy was lying there in George's place. He was lying where he could look down on George who was under the tarpaulin. What a day to choose for his return, we hadn't seen Scrumpy since October. George died last night, and here was Scrumpy. How did he know? What had made him return on this particular day, when we hadn't seen him for almost 5 months.

I took Scrumpy some food, and he seemed to be letting me know that he was now the King and was taking George's place. His big brown beautiful eyes stared at me, knowingly.

He stayed all day, watching over George, and only left when our friend the consultant and our son came with a truck to take George away in the afternoon. As soon as the truck disappeared down the drive, Scrumpy got up and walked quietly away and up into the woods.

The consultant performed an autopsy on the lump and sent it to the DEFRA labs (department for environmental food and rural affairs), where it was confirmed that it was not TB or anything sinister, but simply a subcutaneous cyst that had been infected when it burst.

Scrumpy didn't return again, it was as though he had come to pay homage to George, and it couldn't have been more fitting. To who ever says that animals have no feeling, I can assure them I have seen it with my own eyes. They have feelings just like us.

Scrumpy was a good five years younger than George, and we believe he may have been one of George's offspring. We live in hope of one day seeing him again.

George will be remembered. His antlers have been mounted, and they take pride of place on a wall in our house. I'm not sure if George would be happy when they are decorated with baubles and tinsel at Christmas though!

I am so glad he came to us for his final resting place. RIP George.