

The Northern Territory of Australia is known as the Top End. It is the closest comparison New Zealand hunters have to African hunting. Like Africa, the Northern Territory is sprawling in size, has large tracts of land owned by the indigenous people and has big game capable of seriously ruining your day. The region is as big as France, Italy and Spain combined. It is well known in the tourism blurbs for tropical weather, two clearly defined seasons (wet and dry), aboriginal culture, Kakadu National Park, barramundi fishing, big saltwater crocodiles, and a bustling Darwin city and nightlife. The population is small, just 200,000, but regular visitors swell the numbers enormously, especially during the Dry Season.

HUNTING THE TOP END

PART 1

Author and trophy boar.

The region has suffered adversity, and the locals have a reputation for resourcefulness, resilience and determination. Darwin suffered devastating Japanese air attacks in 1942 and Cyclone Tracey obliterated the city in 1974. The Japanese raids killed approximately 250 people, while Cyclone Tracy killed 71 people, and caused \$837 million in damage. Tracey destroyed more than 70 percent of Darwin's buildings, including 80 percent of residential houses. More than 41,000 of the 47,000 inhabitants of the city were made homeless and the disaster required the evacuation of over 30,000 people.

The Hunting Vehicles are ready.



can afford to add them to their trophy wish list. Endangered in Asia this trophy can only be hunted free-range in Australia. In 1849 European settlers brought 20 banteng from Bali, Indonesia to the Cobourg Peninsula in the Northern Territory. When the settlement was abandoned the banteng were left to run free.

Today a sustainable herd thrives within Garig Gunak Barlu National Park but hunting is allowed by concession permit only. The concession system is going through an update at present but when sorted out two hunting operation permit holders will be able to offer clients 15 banteng bulls a year. The reality is that most Kiwi hunters primarily focus on harvesting a good trophy water buffalo bull with a scrub bull and boar thrown in for good measure if they walk by. Some culling of management water buffalo is usually part of the hunting package as well.

This talk of concessions and permits might have prospective Top End hunters confused but it is necessary because many of the desirable big game species are most numerous on indigenous people's land. In essence, unless the hunting takes place on a privately owned cattle ranch, the hunting guide will have to enter into a hunting contract with the traditional aboriginal owners of the land. For example, the Arnhem Land region, which is located in the north-eastern corner of the territory, has an area of 97,000 km².

Hunting camps in the Northern Territory are transient, in that the guides only hunt there during the Dry Season. Many of these 'out of state' guides sign hunting agreements with traditional owners, and in return for a hunting concession pay trophy fees and associated costs to the tribe. Sadly there are examples of hunting agreements not being honoured by some Australian operations, and in those cases the company involved has been evicted. The upside of this is that respected guides fill the void and the winners are the tribe and future clients.

This situation occurred recently and as a result a 'new kid on the block' will be operating on Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation land next Dry Season, and what's more he is a Kiwi. Who is he and how big is the Jawoyn slice of the Northern Territory. The hunting guide is Glenn Martin; best known as co-owner of Aotearoa Safaris and his Australian hunting company is called Hunt Down Under. Contact details are glenn@huntdownunder.com, phone NZ: -7 895 9066 or contact him through his website www.aotearoasafaris.com.

The Jaowyn holding is 50,000 km² in size and has good numbers of water buffalo and feral bulls, with wild boar and donkey also being present. This article, and the two that follow, are going to look at Top End hunting through my eyes as I experienced a recent introductory safari with Glenn after the big three species available in his concession area. In this article the emphasis is on the nature of Top End hunting and wild boar, while in Part Two I discuss water buffalo hunting, and in Part Three the emphasis is on hunting the aggressive scrub bull.

I had flown with Glenn from Auckland New Zealand in mid October, a hot time in the Northern Territory. The Wet Season was close, so thunderstorms would be a regular evening event. Glenn was met by his son Ben and the three of us headed inland to Katherine. Here we were met by Jawoyn Land Manager and

Hunters come to the Top End seeking 'big' animal trophies. They fly into Darwin, are generally picked up there by their hunting guide and travel east to their hunting camps. The hunting grounds are traditionally a day's road travel away, though well heeled clients might charter a plane flight. The road speed limit is 130kms an hour, and even the massive road trains can eat up the kilometres quickly. Red dust, long straights, mango fields, and spindly bush dominate the road inland with the town of Katherine being the nearest major settlement to the best hunting. It is located three and a half hours travel from Darwin.

The Northern Territory is the realm of the bovines (oxen breeds) and the big three are banteng, water buffalo and red scrub bulls. The other attraction is wild boar. Banteng are the rarest and most expensive of this quartet, and realistically only a limited number of hunters



Water buffalo.



Glenn and Ben Martin

Aborigine Ranger Coordinator Ian McConnell, who would show us around the hunting block. Ian was superbly organised and his three vehicles of Toyota Land cruiser, Polaris ATV and Honda quad bike would see us travel 320 kms off-road in just three days. This is where the comparison with Africa becomes very real. We were in the wilderness, very isolated, dependent on Ian's ability and organisation for survival, and facing herbivores that were not overly afraid of humans. Many of the bulls we encountered had probably never seen humans before.

Jawoyn traditional land extends from the regional town of Katherine, south-east to the township of Mataranka, eastwards past Barunga and Beswick, then north-east in an arc crossing from Bulman in Arnhem Land across to the southern part of Kakadu National Park and south-west Arnhem. Like all big country, travel is an issue and of my five day trip two days were lost getting there and back, leaving three full days to hunt.

The non hunted Australian species observed are worth the price of admission alone. Cockatoos, galahs, parrots, doves, plains turkey, emu, freshwater turtles, freshwater crocodiles, dingo, cane toad, duck and crows all crossed our path. There are no salties in this hunting area but the rivers apparently have plenty of fish, such as black bream. Insects abounded, particularly the many species of ants, but thankfully flies and mosquitoes were low in number. I would have to say the lack of biting bugs, and non sighting of snakes, was a real plus. Clothing should be light, including a wide brimmed hat, sunglasses, and light boots. A thin sleeping bag was all that was needed in the evening.

Rifles, as you would expect, are big. Ian provided the artillery; top notch Sako and Tikka weapons in .375, .308 and 9.3 x 64 calibres. I used the latter rifle and it fired a heavy 285 gram bullet. It was a light rifle to carry and, though it packed solid recoil on targets, I never noticed any kick when firing at game. Camp was basic, but included accommodation, ablutions, and

cooking areas. Camps will always be basic because they are dismantled during the Wet Season.

The dominant vegetation in the Top End of Australia is savannah woodlands, and open forest, with 50% of this vegetation being deliberately burnt each year during the Dry Season. These fires are for the greater good of the ecosystem and are a common sight. The Dry Season (June-October) is also the hunting season, with access to the Wet Season water-drenched hunting areas now becoming possible. Cooler temperatures and less humidity can also make the middle months of June to September a particularly pleasant time to hunt.

On my visit the temperature was hot, but to be expected since it was late October. The first hunting day was 38 degrees, and we fried, but thunderstorms in the following evenings made the following hunting days very bearable. My principal targets were the two bull species but I was hoping to have an opportunity at a big boar. Pigs and Australia are synonymous but the days of huge numbers are over. There are still plenty of pigs in some areas, but there are lots of keen pig hunters chasing them as well. Ian is a mad keen pig hunter but even he has rules imposed on him by his farmer contacts. He is to mainly hunt alone, as landowners don't want strangers on their land, and he is to use well trained dogs. Ian's pack are Louisiana Catahoula leopard pig-dogs, a breed which is very distinctive as they often have white/blue eyes, or mis-matched brown/blue eyes. He swears by the breed and regularly brings home the bacon.

We left the dogs behind on my trip so hoped to spring a boar as we hunted the bull species. In our hunting area pigs are low in number but when they are encountered they tend to be big crusty boars hanging out on their own. Ian checked out a lot of spots, particularly swamps, creek beds, and rivers as boars are usually close to water. Some hunting operations bait for pigs using feral donkey carcasses, but that approach works best when pig numbers are high.

Our first two hunting days were exciting in respect to water buffalo and scrub bull but no pigs were seen. It was on our last hunting day that our only chance at a boar occurred. Bush bashing through scrub in the Polaris we burst into a clearing and sprung a big boar out of a creek bed where he had been wallowing and feeding. Hearing the ATV he trotted up to the top of the bank and stood listening. My rifle was in a roof holder so, while the guys watched the pig, I ripped the rifle down and slid a bullet forward from the magazine. Glenn was trying to film things but the boar wasn't following the script and began to trot into the scrub.

I swung on to his departing shape, gave him a slight lead and fired. Big bullets take no prisoners and he collapsed instantly. It had all happened so fast that we had not noticed how good a pig he was. As we walked up to him he grew and grew. No ground shrinkage with this boy, and the tusk sticking out on our side was enormous. He was easily 200 pounds and a spectacular trophy. Both ears were ripped and torn; he was blind in one eye and covered in scars. A true warrior.

The grinder on the left side was damaged so that tusk was beginning to curl back into his face. The other side tusk was also very long, but had a normal grinder. Ian was grinning like a Cheshire cat as he had worked hard to find us a boar and what a boar it was.

Ian is a very skilled hunter in his own right, and on this same morning he took off on foot after a young dingo and ran it down so we could photograph it. It tried hard to savage him but he had a good grip on the neck. Not to be outdone Ben grabbed a live freshwater croc in a creek and held it up for a photograph as well. We saw three dingoes in total, with one being a rare black animal. The trophy fee for a boar is AUD\$250, so very reasonable if one crosses your path while searching for your water buffalo trophy.

Next issue: Part Two: Trophy Water Buffalo

Ian with dingo pup.

Freshwater croc.

