

A cattle bull is one animal that all humans treat warily. As a farming nation I think this is particularly ingrained in us New Zealanders from an early age. Even urban dwellers would have encountered a domestic bull when having a picnic, crossing a field, or paddock, and feared his baleful stare, ground pawing, bellowing and interest in your presence. Anglers, hunters, and trampers often encounter them when in the outdoors and unlike most farm animals it's not always the stock that does the running. People do get trampled or gored, and in Canada 42% of all livestock-related fatalities are a result of bull attacks, and only one in twenty victims of a serious bull attack survives. Dairy breed bulls are particularly dangerous and unpredictable.

HUNTING THE TOP END

PART 3

Author and his wild bull.



The general rule is 'treat bulls with caution and skirt rather than confront'. Feral bulls just crank up the risk even more. An old, grumpy, solitary, ex herd bull with several bad human experiences under his belt often just wants to get even and faced with 'fight or flight' he'll fight.

My recent trip to the Northern Territory put me in prime wild bull country; the land of the famed Red bull. These red-brown coloured cattle are derived from the shorthorn beef breed (*Bos Taurus*), and are lean, mean, fighting machines. The other wild cattle breed encountered in other hunting areas is the Brahma (*Bos Indicus*), but from a trophy point of view this breed is not recognised by SCI (Safari Club International) as a big game trophy species. The Red bulls are recognised, and trophy hunters are after a long, thick set of sharp tipped horns.

What constitutes a trophy? If hunting with a rifle a gold medal trophy Red bull must score greater

than 58.5 points (length in inches of each horn: girth of each horn : Total added up), a silver medal bull greater than 51.6 and a bronze medal bull greater than 39. The largest recorded by SCI was taken by Bruce Keller and scored 96. For comparison the best SCI New Zealand wild bull shot was taken by Craig Ferguson in 1997 on the East Cape and measured 75.6. That would make each horn about 28 inches (71 cms) long. Red bulls have a few names. Wild bulls, scrub bulls, scrubbers, clean skins, feral bulls, micky bulls, wild ox, and south pacific oxen depending on how prestigious you are trying to make them appear to the hunter. A wild bull has no brand,

no ear tags and little or no contact with humans. They do however have a short temper.

In our area wild cattle were relatively common, and the cows and calves were seen as a valuable food source by the traditional land owners; the Jawoyn tribe. The bulls were less hunted due to their aggressive nature and tougher meat, and were as a result less fearful when facing humans. A Red bull is similar in shape to a Spanish fighting bull and may weigh up to about 650 kg. They prefer living in the dry, thicker bush land rather than swamps and open plains, and like the water buffalo are best hunted in the dry season which runs from June through to November.



Mad eyed Red bull.

We were in Australia to primarily hunt water buffalo but the Red bulls with their ‘in your face’ attitude soon caught our attention. The hunting block we were on was 50,000 square kilometres in size, and cattle were randomly scattered across it. Jawoyn Land Manager and Aborigine Ranger Coordinator Ian McConnell was our resident expert; Ben Martin, the Aussie / Kiwi connection; and Glenn Martin the Kiwi outfitter who would work in with Ben in 2012. Ben had guided here for a couple of seasons with an Australian outfitter who had since left the area, providing an opening for Ben and Glenn to guide independently as Hunt Downunder.

On my three day hunt it was a Red bull that was the first trophy animal taken. We had arrived in our hunting area, three and a half hours inland from Katherine, about noon and after getting organised headed out for a late afternoon look about. Animals abounded, the majority being herds of flighty water buffalo cows and calves, though we also observed feral donkeys and some wild cattle cows and young bulls.

An hour out from dark we spotted a big animal standing on his own in a stand of trees. Sneaking closer in the Polaris we could see he was a solitary Red bull with a white head, obviously old, suffering condition wise from the long dry season but sporting an impressive set of horns. He had no intention of running and stared intently at us.

Ian said he was a shooter so Ben and I were dropped off to stalk in closer. We crept from spindly tree to spindly tree until I felt I was close enough to take a shot. He was broadside on watching the spot where he had last seen the Polaris. I was using Ian’s Tikka 9.3 x 64 rifle and 285 grain bullets so had plenty of knock down weaponry. Lining up his shoulder I fired and the big bullet dropped him instantly. The shot seemed perfect, but the big bovine rolled himself on to his brisket and tried to get to his feet. I quickly lined up his neck and was pleased to see him collapse on to his side with the shot.

We cautiously approached him, and Ben touched his eye with his rifle barrel to ensure no nasty surprises. From a management point of view he was a perfect

animal to remove from the herd. He had been a huge animal in his prime, with a massive head and large frame, but age and a harsh environment had shed a lot of weight off his body. I had probably sped up his rapidly approaching end by a few months. Trophy animals like this are always the best for hunters to target. Their breeding days are done, their use to the herd is over, yet their age means a good trophy head. His horns scored 52 so in that regard he counted as a silver medal trophy.

Over the next three days we encountered at least twenty solitary bulls, and few ran at our appearance. They invariably faced up, and either regarded us with interest, caution, or aggression. All looked faintly crazy, as a copper deficiency or fly problem meant the hair around their eyes was rubbed away making their eyes look huge, maniac and bulging. Crazy looking in fact. Ben, riding the red quad took most of the heat as they love that colour, and the quad was also a machine they associated with past bad memories. One big bull did a couple of mock charges at him and saw Ben do an evasive retreat as this boy looked very serious. Several of these bulls had good sets of



The trophy Red bull that chased Ben.

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Ben Martin
ben@huntdownunder.com
www.huntdownunder.com

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Ben on the red quad.



All muscle bull.



Glenn and his wild bull.

horns but because they were relatively young were reprieved.

On day two we flushed another old bull out of a creek bed, and his lean condition plus good set of horns saw Ian nod to Glenn to put some lead in the air. Glenn followed him up and managed to angle a shot in behind the ribs as the bull ran off.

It was a perfect shot and after a stumbling sprint it collapsed stone dead. This animal too was in the twilight of his life and from a management point of view surplus to herd requirements. It scored about the same as my bull. Both bulls had fat ticks hanging off them and plenty of scars indicating a tough life fighting other bulls.

Ian rated the scrub bulls even more dangerous than the buffalo bulls because their mood was more unpredictable. Like Forest Gump said about the chocolates, "You never know what you're going to get".

Interestingly, over the three days we never got close to a wild cow as they fled at the first sign of humans. Apparently they too can be very dangerous as they are used to being hunted hard, and also have dingoes trying to catch their calves. Over the years Ian has had many close calls with wild cattle but the worst encounters had been with cows that charged without provocation, and had to be shot to be stopped.

Australia is that kind of place. Lots of things happy to bite, poison, trample or gore you, so you need to be on your guard at all times. Back in New Zealand wild bulls have a similar reputation for ferocity and I remember the tales I was told about them when I was hunting in Taranaki and the Whanganui regions. An opossum trapper had been stalked then gored seriously, and several others treed by various angry bulls. Chatham Island locals also have great tales to tell of aggressive bulls during their rut.

On my first visit to the Top End, in another area I had only seen one wild bull so this region is special in having a large and stable population to hunt. On trip's end I looked back at three days that for me had involved a trophy boar, two big sweeper buffalo bulls, and a true feral Red bull. ■

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