

The Northern Territory of Australia is huge, over 1,349,129 square kilometres and the area I was hunting in was a 50,000 square kilometre chunk of that landscape. Owned by the Jawoyn Aboriginal tribe and administered by the Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation this hunting region is a magical part of Australia. Aborigine Ranger Coordinator Ian McConnell was showing New Zealand based Hunting outfitter Glenn Martin, Glenn's son Ben and me around the hunting concession block in preparation for Glenn undertaking hunting safaris there later in 2012.

Check out the SCI site - www.scirecordbook.org/water-buffalo-south-pacific/



The SCI website also provides some useful background information about the water buffalo species. It states “

DESCRIPTION:
(male) Shoulder height 48-60 inches (122-152 cm). Weight about 1,200 pounds (545 kg), sometimes considerably more. Females are smaller. A large, heavily built buffalo with stout legs and large, splayed hoofs. General colour is black, but older animals tend to be gray or pinkish. Lower legs are a dirty white, and there is often a narrow white “V” on the throat. The horns (both sexes) are heavy at the base, triangular in cross section, flat on top with conspicuous wrinkles, and grow out from the sides of the head without forming a boss. Horns in Australia will vary from the typical type that curve back from the head in a semicircle, to “sweepers” that stretch straight out from the head with only the tips turning back. The latter can attain tip-to-tip spreads of as much as nine feet (2.74 m). Female horns often have wider spreads than those of males, but are light and thin, almost never equalling male horns in total score.

BEHAVIOUR:
Gregarious. Lives in small herds of 10-20, which often consist of an old cow with as many as three generations of calves. Mature bulls are usually solitary except during the mating season, but are sometimes found in the company of one or two other males. Most activity is early and late in the day. Feeds mainly on grasses and aquatic plants. Water is required, both for drinking and bathing. Sense of smell is excellent, hearing good, eyesight fair. Despite its size, a water buffalo is quick and agile.

REMARKS:
The endangered wild water buffalo has disappeared from most of its original range in south-eastern Asia, and now numbers about 1,000 animals in India, plus a few scattered herds from India to Indo-China that may have descended from original stock.

Domestic water buffaloes were introduced in the South Pacific region from stock originating in India or Sri Lanka. The first ones probably reached Australia in 1824 with the Captain James Bremer expedition. Sixteen more were brought from the island of Timor in 1826 and liberated on Melville and Bathurst islands.

When the Melville settlement was abandoned a year later, some of the free-ranging buffaloes were rounded up and shipped to Raffles Bay on the Cobourg Peninsula, from where they have expanded their range to what exists today. Proof that these animals adapted well can be found in records of 390,000 water buffalo hides being shipped from Australia between 1886 and 1956. Col Allison, an Australian trophy hunter, says water buffaloes are “renowned for ferocity, the ability to remain hidden in little cover, uncanny stealth and kill-or-die charges.” Large calibres and heavy bullets are recommended.”

A few years back an Australian government program to eradicate populations believed to be infected with tuberculosis and brucellosis reduced numbers considerably, so regions, such as the one I was in, with stable, controlled populations are highly prized by outfitters and hunters. My visit was in late October, right near the end of the Dry Season, and every evening a brief thunderstorm warned us how close the Wet Season was. As mentioned last issue hunting camps in the Northern Territory are transient, in that the guides only hunt there during the Dry Season from runs from June through to November. The middle months of June to September are a particularly pleasant time to hunt. Clients need light clothing, a wide brimmed hat, sunglasses, light boots, a thin sleeping bag, good optics, and good sunscreen and insect repellent. Rifles can be supplied and we were using a Sako .375, Tikka .308 and Tikka 9.3 x 64. Big guns for big animals.



The sweeper head always catches the eye because of the width illusion, but usually the crescent head scores better because each individual horn is longer than their sweeper counterpart. Sweeper heads are often broomed off. Big heads are always older animals, and management heads are those that fail to develop fully. Hunters seeking trophies are always encouraged to shoot some cull animals as well.

Scoring is usually done under the SCI system (Safari Club International) where each horn is measured for length and girth at the base, then the four measurements added up for a final total. The SCI record book website states that a gold medal bull must score over 101 (rifle) 96 (bow), a silver medal bull over 95 (rifle) 92 (bow), and a bronze medal bull over 80 (rifle) and over 72 (bow). A great bull then should score over 100 on the SCI system. To give you an idea of how good Ian's best bull is it scored SCI 119, which makes it a true monster.

The accompanying photo shows Ian holding this mega-sized head.



HUNTING THE TOP END PART 2



Glenn and big crescent bull.

Glenn's Australian hunting arm is called Hunt Down Under. Contact details are:
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Having travelled a fair distance from New Zealand to get here our scouting trip would also double as a trophy hunting trip after boar, water buffalo, and scrub bull. Our scout, Ian McConnell, lives and breathes hunting and fishing. Previous to this position he had been a fishing guide in the Cape York area and, as he pointed out, working in two top hunting and fishing locations was no occupation accident. His current passion was pig hunting with Catahoula pig dogs, and the hunting of top water buffalo bulls.

His credentials in both areas are outstanding, as he is the go to man for a lot of local farmers when they have pig problems, and the buff horns hanging at his house are testimony to his skill in this area. To spice up his hunting he now hunts buffalo with the bow, successfully I might add.

What constitutes a top water buffalo trophy?

There are two main ways of looking at this vexed question. Shape and size. Water buffalo horns tend to come in two main shapes: the sweeper

and the crescent, with variations of these shapes also occurring. Each client can choose which shape spins his or her wheels. The sweeper goes straight out from the head and gives the appearance of great width, while the crescent goes out then sweeps back, hence the crescent shape.

Here comes ... Chucky!!!

On the drive in to our hunting camp we passed several small herds of water buffalo cows and calves, and a couple of wild donkeys. Sign littered the road and Ian was confident three days of hunting would reward us with trophies. Equipped with truck, Polaris and quad we covered 320 kilometres off-road in the next three days, mainly targeting water-courses and swampy regions where the buffalo would be hanging out.

The drying up of many water areas meant the buffalo are more condensed at this time of the year. We saw a lot of animals,

but then we did cover a lot of territory. The information on the SCI website was spot on as the majority of animals seen were herds of cows and calves without bulls. These herd animals were spooky and tended to run as one. In one area we struck a lot of young bachelor bulls hanging out together, and they lacked any fear, gawking at us as we travelled by. Near here we also saw a white buffalo cow. Medium sized bulls were also regularly encountered and showed little fear.

The big bulls were solitary and over our trip we encountered about a dozen trophy animals sprinkled through the bush. Ian reckoned many would never have seen a man as they were well away from tracked areas. Of the dozen big boys, five cunning ones took off at our approach and never looked back, while the other seven either showed intense curiosity, disdain, or territorial interest.

What is un-nerving when you are new to buffalo hunting is the bull's habit of approaching what he can't identify. His nose goes up, his horns go back, and he advances in a slow and arrogant way testing the air for scent. What goes through your mind at such times is that there is nowhere to hide, the trees are very skinny, and the vehicle some way off.

Like all bovines buffalo are very curious and territorial, so will approach boldly, while attempting to cut the wind of the threat approaching them.



Ben Martin has guided after them for a couple of years, respects them rather than fears them, and had one good piece of advice for the budding buffalo hunter. Make the first shot a good one. Everything after that is the result of that shot.

We carried out a stalk on one big bull on day two that was limping badly and in the company of two others. Even injured he escaped

As mentioned earlier their eyesight is only fair so they can get very close before snorting and charging off. They can move very fast and we saw one solid bull charge another then chase him at speed for a couple of hundred metres.

This same animal was the only one that approached us with 'aggressive intent'. He charged out of the bush and rushed the quad. He did so in a territorial menacing way and was not easily deterred. Ian had the rifle leveled as he was very close, when he finally backed off and watched us retreat. We nicknamed him Chucky as he had trouble on his mind, but lacking a decent head we had to try and avoid him rather than shoot him. He snorted and pawed the ground, and followed us through the bush for some distance. In the same area we came across another bull with a broken back leg, almost certainly Chucky's work. The accompanying photo of Chucky was taken at just a few metres, and yes I was sitting on the red quad at the time. It is slightly blurred because he never stopped advancing.

Ian said that bulls fight viciously and often sweep their opponent's legs with their horns, resulting in serious fractures and dislocations. We saw at least two other bulls limping badly. To be fair, water buffalo are not in the killer league of the black death of Africa, the Cape Buffalo, but are big enough and fast enough to cause human damage if that is their intention.

us but imagine our surprise when returning to the vehicle we sprung him out of some scrub, right beside where we had walked. He had obviously hidden there as we followed his mates' tracks, watched us walk past, and only flushed when we walked on to his hiding place as we returned. The situation had potential for a charge, both when we walked past him and on our return, but luckily he fled again, hobbling into thicker scrub and escaping.

Most hunting outfitters have at least one 'incident' with buffalo a year, and always have a back-up rifle covering the hunter. Back in 2005 a man was killed near his home on the outskirts of Nhulunbuy. He was checking the water level at a pump station when a buffalo charged and gored him.

At the end of our three days three trophy bulls had been shot. Two were sweeper bulls in the silver medal size range while Glenn was successful in taking a huge crescent horned bull. The big crescent bull scored SCI 104, making it gold medal quality. All were hit fatally with that first carefully aimed shot, but still took more shots to kill.

One problem with shooting water buffalo is that they are often facing you rather than broadside on, and the frontal shot can be hard to get the angle just right. The ideal is the broadside, double-lung shot. Buffalo are big units and tough to bring down.

The hunt is the exciting part of the safari while the processing of the trophy is real time-consuming, hard work, and this is where guides earn their money. The skull and horns have to be removed from each bull, boiled out, horns popped off, the skull dried and tidied up, while head skins, if required, have to be removed, salted and dried. All of this then has to be made ready to go through customs. For instance it takes about half an hour per horn to boil it enough so it can be popped off the core.

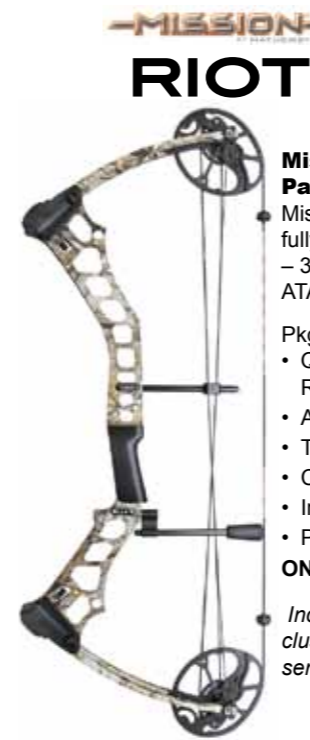
The beagle dog went ballistic when our packages came through Auckland airport. His handler had never seen a reaction like it before, but then the beagle had never experienced water buffalo in a bag either.

Want to experience African hunting on your doorstep, then the closest comparison available is hunting the water buffalo bull. It's a lot cheaper than Africa as well.



Second big sweeper bull.

Next issue: Hunting The Top End: Part Three: Red Bulls



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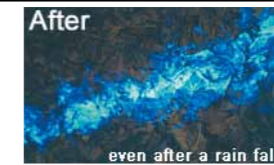
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