

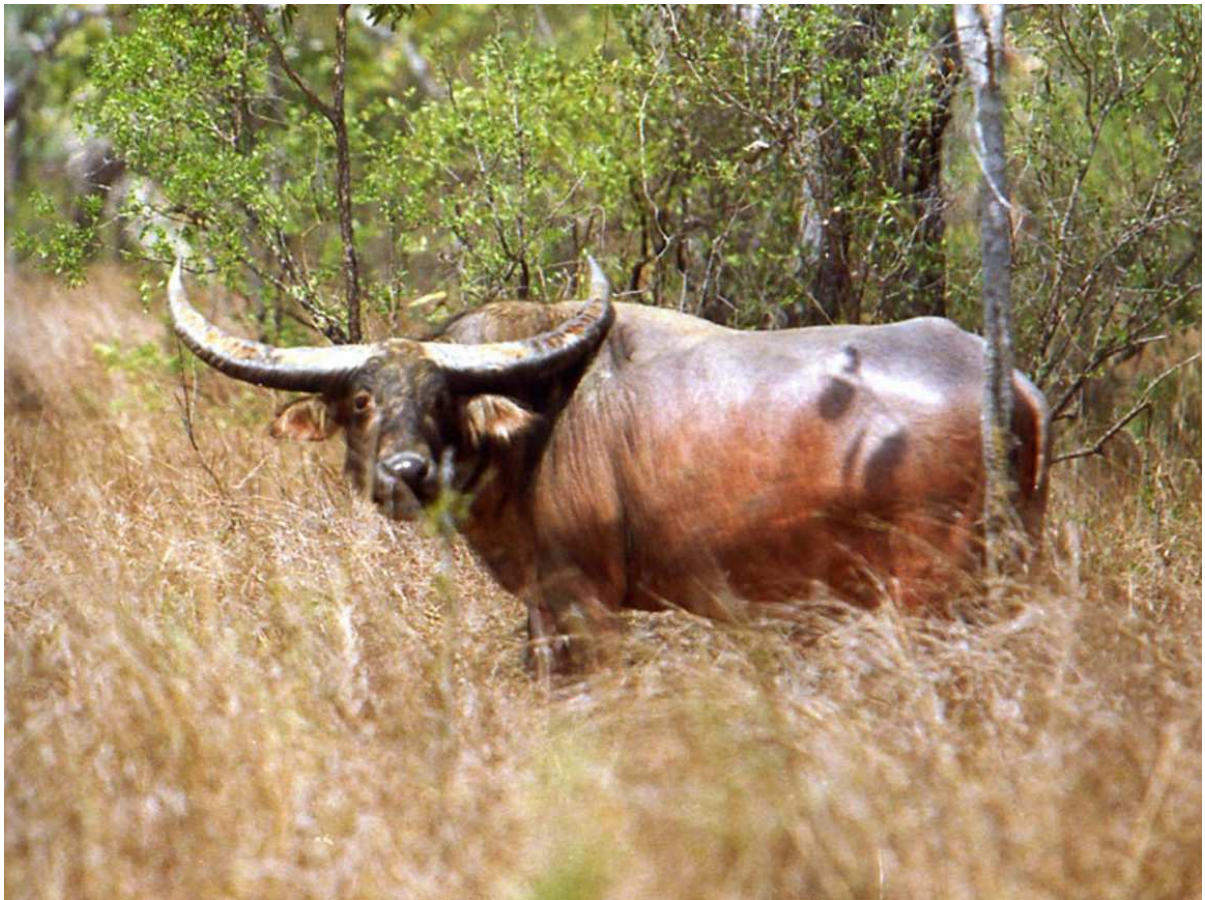
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## Water Buffalo – Australia’s ultimate big game adventure!

The Asian water buffalo is one of the largest of the major species of wild oxen still hunted for their trophies. These comprise the Musk Ox which inhabits the northern Polar Regions, the four subspecies of African Buffalo and the Bison of North America. Only the massive Gaur of Southern Asia is bigger, unfortunately there is no legal hunting of gaur available today.

A mature trophy bull will weigh between 700kg and 900kg on average and some massive specimens from the territory have been weighed at over 1000kg. As with all horned or antlered game, sheer body size bears little relation to the size of horns.

Buffalo are herd animals and live in a matriarchal system of family groups lead by one of the older cows. Such groups are rarely bigger than 10 to 20 animals although several families may congregate on good feeding areas giving the impression of a much larger herd. The peak of the breeding season is between March, in the hot, wet northern coastal region extending to July in the southern interior. Bulls join the herd and hold the cows against all comers only whilst breeding but share grazing areas with cows even when not breeding so you can reasonably expect to find bulls where there are cows. As with all herd animals the successful breeding males are the strongest.



***A fine example of a trophy Water Buffalo, an aged 'Dugga Boy'. This old bull would have been around 16 years of age judging by his teeth. His SCI score was 104 points Gold Medal class! Note the lack of physical condition and the absence of hair from most of his body. He was shot by an equally old and debilitated hunter, my good friend John Saunders of Century Arms, using a fine old Belgian Double Rifle chambered in one of the all time great "medium" cartridges the 318 Westley Richards.***

Bulls in their prime, from 8 to 12 years of age, dominate the breeding and the older bulls, past their prime and tired of battle, tend to seek out quieter areas to live out their days. Immature bulls from 3 to 6 years will often congregate in groups of 2 or more animals whilst biding their time until they feel up to challenging for breeding rights.

Buffalo graze from early evening until late morning and avoid the heat of the day by seeking a shady spot near water and wallowing when they feel the need to cool. Although buffalo enjoy grazing on aquatic vegetation they do not need extensive swamps or flood plains to live a satisfactory existence and will happily colonise any area where there is food and a permanent water supply be it a river or system of waterholes.

To the inexperienced all male buffalo and their horns look huge. In common with all horned animals buffalo horns continue to grow throughout their life so older animals sport the largest thickest horns. As they fight and rub their horns through life mature bulls will generally have more worn, blunt (and often broken) horns. Old cows and young bulls have horns with less bulk and sharper points that lack the character and sheer bulk of a mature bull.



***Examples of an immature bull, perhaps 7 years old and a grand old 'Dugga Boy'. The younger bull will reach his prime in terms of physical strength and desire to breed in the next year or two Note his sharp horns and their lack of mass. In contrast our trophy buffalo has thick deeply worn horns with their tips completely worn down. This guy scored just on the magic 100 SCI points.***

Buffalo can grow both curved and relatively straight (sweeper) horns. The curved style provides the longest trophies and score higher using both the SCI and Douglas systems. However many hunters prefer the sweeper variety which are wider and look more spectacular.



***On the left we have a great example of a straight horned "Sweeper" This one scored just on 101 SCI and is the widest spread bull I have seen taken. An absolute ripper! One the right is an exceptional example of the curved horn style. He scored 105 SCI.***

Securing a buffalo can be as easy or as hard as you desire. There are many areas where the only equipment and hunting skill required is a Toyota and an accurate rifle with appropriate, solidly constructed projectiles in any calibre from 6.5mm upwards. This is also true for almost any animal in Australia with the possible exception of free range sambar and hog deer. Add an electric light and you can include all animals found in Australia. This is shooting not hunting and it is not ethical.

Ethical hunting for buffalo requires the hunter to locate his animal and stalk it until he is close enough to place a reliable killing shot to the body using an appropriate projectile and calibre, 70 to 30 meters is the norm. This provides the animal with the opportunity to detect your presence and escape or to counter attack should he chose to do so. This fair chase ethic is what makes dangerous game the most exciting hunting available.

Decades ago the Victorian Government, after consultation with experienced sambar hunters decided that the 270 with a 130gr projectile was the minimum reliable and humane calibre for hunting sambar. Buffalo are large, thick skinned animals, mature buffalo bulls in particular, and they weigh around three times more than a sambar stag. The appropriate calibre and bullet for effective and humane close quarters hunting is therefore commensurately greater.

The various 9.3mm offerings with 293gr or 320gr projectiles are my suggested minimum as these provide good penetration on a par with the 375 H&H using 300gr bullets. I have found the 350gr Woodleigh projectiles travelling at modest velocities are superior to the various 300gr offerings.

(Do not use the various 270gr projectiles in 375, these are not designed for thick skinned game and also lack the sectional density for reliable penetration).

Anything larger and more powerful will do the job better provided the user can tolerate the recoil and place his shots.

A 416 or 404 with 400gr projectiles and a low powered scope (a 1 – 5 power variable is ideal) is perhaps the best choice with regard to weight, bullet performance and accuracy. Projectiles should be strongly constructed and of the round nose variety, softs or solids, as long range shots will not be taken.

Bow hunters will need to get within 20 meters and use the heaviest arrow they can construct with a top quality two blade broad head to obtain the deep penetration required. If the hunter can hold his nerve and place the arrow correctly buffalo can be reliably taken with a bow.

Most buffalo hunting takes place over very large areas and in a week you might expect to cover up to 400km by vehicle (4WD and/or boat) and a further 40km on foot if you are hunting ethically and seeking a good mature trophy bull.

During the course of this adventure it is likely that you will also observe a range of other game, donkeys, horses, pigs, dingo, scrub bulls, there are even camels in some of the extreme buffalo range.

In addition it is also likely that you will have the opportunity to view crocodiles, both the fresh and saltwater varieties and a myriad of native birds and animals that inhabit our northern tropical wilderness.

You will also likely have the opportunity to try your hand at securing a barramundi; Australia's premier game fish and they are not bad eating either.

However the really big bonus is the complete absence of any other Homo sapiens and their associated noise and litter.

The first question most new hunters ask usually revolves around the likelihood of a charge from a buffalo.

The short answer is; not great. They do happen, rarely, in the case of wounded buffalo.

More importantly buffalo can also attack without any obvious provocation. I have suffered this, somewhat unnerving, experience whilst guiding a client on one occasion. I have also experienced several instances where buffalo have pressed home determined attacks on vehicles and only some spirited and inventive driving has saved a significant panel beating bill or worse.

I have seen over 400 trophy buffalo bulls taken ethically by hunters since I started guiding buffalo safaris and can attest to the fact that no two hunts are exactly alike. As with other forms of hunting you can spend some days in fruitless search of the "big one" only to happen upon a great trophy by "accident" minutes from camp and have it on the ground before you have time to think.

At the other extreme I once spent 4 successive days with an American bow hunter (pictured with the sweeper above) hunting the same buffalo bull only to have him elude us each day through his excellent use of all his senses, sight, smell and hearing. On the 5<sup>th</sup> day we located him, holed up in what he thought was an impregnable position with the only possible approach populated by a herd of donkeys as his watchdogs. After sitting them out for some 4 hours the donkeys eventually grazed off and we were able to make a successful stalk.

Like all dangerous game hunting it is the proximity of the danger that adds to the excitement of a buffalo hunt as the following example illustrates.

### **The Cane Grass Buffalo**

Hunting buffalo be they African cape buffalo or Asian water buffalo involves an element of danger at any time but when you are forced to follow a wounded animal into grass so thick and tall that visibility is less than 2 meters, the adrenaline really flows.

Early morning saw us (Reinhard, his wife Ulrike and I) hunting a broad plain adjacent to the river, the abundant water, the result of recent heavy rains, had dispersed buffalo across the whole region and the better part of the morning was involved in tracking several bulls, all of which failed to meet our trophy expectations. The going was heavy and we were glad to rest up for an hour over lunch in the field. After lunch we were hunting along the river, skirting the cane grass thickets, when I spied some buffalo bedded down out of the midday heat. It was a small herd of approximately 8 cows and their young together with the herd bull. They had selected a raised shady spot on a low ridge surrounded by gullies choked with thick cane grass, a position that provided a cooling breeze and plenty of escape routes. To approach unseen was difficult and it took some 30 minutes before we were in a position to assess the trophy potential of the bull. He sported horns of SCI silver medal class or better. It had been

a hot, hard day and as Reinhard was after two buffalo, a scrub bull and several boar with only 4 days to secure them we decided take the prize despite the thick, 3 meter high, cane grass thickets around him. We performed a careful stalk to a spot some 60 meters from our quarry where a clear shot could be taken. Once in position it took several minutes until the bull turned broadside to provide a clear target. The shot produced instant pandemonium with the herd, including our quarry, rushing headlong into the cane grass. In the shadow of the tree it had been difficult to see where the bullet had landed but Reinhard was confident he had placed it well. Casting about for some minutes I was able to pick the bull's tracks out of the multitude of marks left by the herd and followed them to the point where he had left the cows and careered down into a grass clogged gully. His hooves had gouged the rich red earth in his headlong rush and there was the odd splatter of blood adhering to the grass where his body had pushed through. Where is he and what condition is he in? The grass stretched for 2 or 3 hectares before falling away up the far bank. To state the obvious I was less than keen to follow a wounded buffalo into that thicket. However after waiting 20 minutes and several cigarettes later with no activity from below there was no alternative. I opened the bolt on my 404 Jeffery to confirm what I already knew, there was a cartridge in the chamber, and headed slowly down the slope into the matted, rustling sea of grass. I had gone less than 15 meters when the sound of a large, very large, animal pounding through the grass erupted. Going away, my lucky day - so far!

Racing back up the bank I caught sight of the bull vanishing over the far slope. Back to work, I picked up his spoor only to find it lead straight into a larger thicket of cane grass. Into the grass again with adrenaline pumping. The weather was humid and hot and the atmosphere in the grass akin to a sauna. After an hour of slow and steady tracking with as little noise as possible my clothes were drenched and clinging to my body and I had covered perhaps 300 meters. I finally came across him— waiting for me in a small opening in the grass. *He lowered his head but before he could move I shot him in the forehead and sank to my knees with a sigh of relief.*



***Reinhard and Ulrike with the cane grass buffalo pictured where he fell.***

*For more information on the history and distribution of water buffalo in Australia refer to the facts sheet on the following page.*

## Australian Water Buffalo – Fact Sheet

Water buffalo were introduced to Melville Island in the 1820's and into mainland Australia in the 1827 when a settlement was established at Raffles Bay on the Cobourg Peninsula. The settlement was abandoned in 1849 and the buffalo left to fend for themselves. However buffalo had been escaping since the first days of the settlement and had extended their range at least 200Km south to the East Alligator river by 1845 where the explorer, Ludwig Leichhart noted their presence on his epic journey from Brisbane to Port Essington.

There was no white presence in the NT from 1849 to 1864 when a settlement was established at Palmerston (later named Darwin). By this stage the buffalo were firmly established throughout the tropical "Top End" of the NT.

From the first days of this permanent settlement buffalo were hunted for their meat and hides. They still are today with some thousands of young bulls taken from the wild each year for live export to South East Asia with Brunei the major market.

At the peak of their population, 1970 – 1980, their numbers were estimated at around 350,000. In the late 1980's the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign (BETC) was set up in an attempt to eradicate all wild cattle and buffalo from northern Australia. The program was undertaken in order to convince the USA that Australia was TB free and ensure entry for Australian beef.

If you believe the fact sheet compiled in 2004 by the Federal Government's Dept of Environment and Heritage (Available from their website at [www.deh.gov.au](http://www.deh.gov.au) you may think that this campaign was successful.

With comments such as (the BETC program) "... has all but eradicated feral buffalos from the wild" and "In 1996 the number of buffalo in Kakadu was under 250".

Somewhat paradoxically this paper provides an illustration of the distribution of feral buffalo that reaches from Broom in the west to Mackay on the East coast. Young vagrant males regularly penetrate far west Queensland and it is possible that an odd buffalo may have been sighted at the NT /WA border buffalo.

However wild buffalo have never established populations on the East Coast, Cape York or the Kimberly.

In reality the BTEC program did not cover all the area outside of Arnhem Land; in addition there was generally no shooting inside Aboriginal lands. Given this situation a very substantial population of both buffalo and wild cattle remained and commenced to re-colonise as much as possible of their former range and by 2000 the NT Dept of Parks & Wildlife Service estimated buffalo numbers at over 70,000.

Current estimates place their numbers between 100,000 and 120, 000 with the vast majority inhabiting central and east Arnhem Land.

From my own experience of a decade hunting buffalo I would consider this to be a conservative estimate.

The number of wild cattle would probably be double this figure – hardly a successful eradication of all wild bovines!!

Perhaps 90% of the breeding population of buffalo inhabit Aboriginal land and the properties bordering Arnhem Land together with some small isolated populations in the Adelaide, Daly, Fish, Fitzmaurice, and Victoria River Valleys to the west.

Buffalo can still be readily seen by travellers on the Stuart Highway between Darwin and Katherine. Non-breeding vagrant bulls will walk incredible distances in search of new country and available cows. Vagrants regularly turn up in the Gulf country of far west Queensland over 500km from the nearest established populations.

As there is no legal hunting on Crown land in the NT it is not possible for hunters to mount a DIY hunt for buffalo.

There are a number of established Safari operators in the NT who provide hunting on both Aboriginal land and those cattle stations where there are sufficient numbers of buffalo.

Barry Jones