

Selected Extracts - Safety off and one up the spout

The Early Years

We now live in a time where there is almost universal internet and “mobile devices” with their inane and ever screeching “social media” constantly bitching and whining about virtually any decision made by any government that does not directly benefit the author’s social group.

Self-reliance and an understanding of nature – it sounds simple but few individuals born into western society today will ever achieve either state with our universal basic welfare and smart phones the weapon of choice for communication, weapons that almost require surgery to remove from the gaze and grasp of many individuals.

One of my earliest memories is hunting with my mother, Thelma, along with my elder brother, Keith, and youngest sister, Wendy. The three of us children would have been between six and three years old.

Mum is hunting for a rabbit for the pot. European rabbits were introduced into Australia in the early 1800s and quickly established themselves as a major pest species spreading rapidly across the southern portion of the continent. A feature of their breeding cycle is the use of shallow, short, perhaps sixty centimetres to a metre long, nesting burrows by the doe to birth and nurture her young. The reason for this behaviour is the likelihood of the young kittens being killed by a male if birthed in a major warren.

My mother is armed with a shovel to exploit this knowledge, finding a newly excavated burrow she quickly digs two or three sections of rich brown earth from the entrance, pauses, looks down to spy for the rear of the nesting rabbit, recoils in haste! A large annoyed black snake comes flying out into the sunshine with its head raised aggressively. Despite its deadly venom it is no match for a country woman armed with a shovel, the head, still snapping viciously, is parted from the body with a deft thrust of the blade! I often reflect upon this early lesson when faced with the task of tracking up a wounded buffalo bull. Hope for the best but be prepared for the worst and capable of handling it!

A few years down the track and it is the summer of 1959 in southern Australia and my first serious hunting attempt, my mother walks in front carrying a kerosene fuelled hurricane lantern, the thin, orange glow from its flickering flame barely illuminates a three-metre circle. The warm night is filled with the delicious scents of mown hay from a paddock next door mixed with a rich spice of all sorts of unknown scents. A curlew wails in the distance and the air hangs like a velvet curtain. We approach one of the objects of our walk, a rabbit warren nestled amongst the browning summer bracken.

The rattle and clink of metal being pulled and dragged erupts.

The light illuminates the wide round eyes of a fat bunny, its foreleg securely caught in the viscous jaws of the metal trap I had set earlier that day. Success! Under my mother’s direction I quickly grasp my prey’s rear legs, bear down on my left foot, depressing the spring and loosening the jaws, then a swift crack to the back of the neck, all struggles cease as life departs the unlucky rodent.

The hunter is born.

Sambar – Expanding my hunting skills

Hunters talk about the sambar deer 'honking' and generally associate this with the deer detecting their presence and alerting others.

However, there are at least three variations of the alarm signal.

The third alarm signal is the unbelievably harsh Klaxon honk of a totally surprised sambar that has only detected your presence at very close proximity.

Hunters get to experience that klaxon honk when they possess the experience, skills and patience necessary to successfully outsmart sambar on a regular basis or blunder into an unsuspecting or sleeping deer. On the first encounter the sheer force of the sound at such close quarters literally stops you in your tracks.

More knowledgeable 'Sambar Men' than I have made the suggestion that indeed this alarm response was probably developed to arrest a tiger in the sambars' home range and provide the necessary seconds for the deer to bound away.

If you have encountered this sound several times before and can control your reactions you will often have the chance to take a very close range, probably running, shot.

My best sambar stag was taken in just such circumstances after a long and painstaking tracking exercise.

It was mid May 1989, my regular hunting buddy, Kim Walters, and I were on a three-day hunt in our favourite spot deep in the Victorian Alps. Despite being on public land, we usually had an area of around 10 square miles of prime sambar habitat to ourselves. We achieved this advantage by setting up a cache of camping gear in a small cave about 4 kilometres down the ridge from the nearest, highly difficult to negotiate, 4wd track.

Any hunters wishing to camp at their vehicle with its attendant luxuries would spend 2 to 3 hours hunting down the slope and then faced a 2 to 3 hour climb back leaving precious little time to hunt the prime area of the valley floor.

Over a period of 15 years the collection of luxuries hidden in the cave ensured every creature comfort except an inner spring mattress.

On this occasion we arrived at camp in the early afternoon after an eleven hour's drive and an hour's walk, dropping about 1500 ft in altitude down the steep, wooded ridge. After retrieving our gear from the cache, we set up the tent and tarpaulin cover/wind break along with our collection of folding chairs, plastic barrels of canned and dried food, cooking utensils and lighting. As usual we supplemented this with the fresh food and additions packed in including a couple of bottles of Scotch to be enjoyed with a little freezing mountain water from the nearby river. After collecting some firewood – voila! All the comforts of home.

After twenty years of use, in 2008, a bush fire raged through the area and incinerated the all the stored gear – all that remained was a small cast iron camp oven and frying pan, some blackened cutlery and metal frames of the chairs. *Sic transit gloria*

After setting up camp we still had time for a few hours of hunting before nightfall, I headed downstream, Kim upstream.

There was sign aplenty of all number of deer, young, hinds and the very impressive prints of a very large stag.

I encountered no deer, just the pleasure of watching an alpine dingo working along the flat below until he finally cut my warm trail – dead stop, head raised, tail curls out, he bolts!

Returning to camp I am formulating a plan, buoyed by the stag sign and his obvious use of a large wallow earlier that day.

It is 5 AM and we are up and making a breakfast of coffee, toast, beans, bacon and eggs, not your average spike camp, what a difference a cache makes!

Breakfast completed we stuff some energy bars into our pack. No need for water the pristine river will provide that and we can avoid the added weight. I ensure an adequate supply of toilet paper after those beans and bacon. On with the gloves, it is a frosty morning and likely to get a little cooler at sunrise, and hoist the rifle - ready to go.

This trip I am carrying a Sako L61R chambered in 338 Win Mag. It is a newly introduced left-handed model, I had wanted one chambered in 375 H&H but the few that were imported were gone in a flash.

It is a lucky miss as otherwise I would probably have never have experienced this, very useful, medium calibre round. Over the following years I used it to good effect, taking more than a dozen sambar. It can certainly be numbered amongst the ideal cartridges for this large deer.

I reach the wallow at around 6 AM and the sky high above the eastern ridge is just beginning to lighten – it is freezing – I spend the next 90 minutes motionless and observe nothing more than a large wombat searching for roots through the thick wattles that border the wallow. The birds have been chirping for 30 minutes and I have seen no activity – Plan A has drawn a blank.

However, at around 6.30, my awareness fully roused, I sensed his presence rather than detected any sound or motion, sounds crazy but I am sure he was close and quite possibly picked up the scent from my visit the preceding afternoon and decided not to continue to his bath.

I stretch myself, have the obligatory 'dingo's breakfast' of a piss and a look around, then climb about 40 meters up the slope. I begin to slowly contour around the wallow. I reach the opposite slope and cut a game trail – bingo! Imprinted in the dusty surface are the fresh marks of a large sambar stag!

I determine that he has approached the wallow from a point of vantage, milled about, then walked off along this trail. As I surmised earlier, he probably caught some lingering scent from my visit the preceding afternoon and decided to forego his morning dip.

There is no wind and he is perhaps 30 minutes ahead of me, but who is to say what he is about to do. I begin to track his passage up the slope. It looks like he is climbing to perhaps pick up the warming rays of the rising sun in order to slough the chill of the morning frost. If that's his plan he will not be going too far and will be picking out an easterly facing spot. It is now approaching 10 AM and I have been patiently following his tracks as silently as possible for nearly 2 hours, all of this time I have been on high alert, rifle in two hands with the safety off and one up the spout.

This is truly debilitating stuff and I need to remind myself to maintain continued and complete concentration of all my senses.

Five years prior I would have given up this total effort and accelerated my speed, convinced that there is no chance to catch up with him at this pace.

The tracks look like they are dead fresh. However, there is no wind to feather the dry dust, they could be an hour old.

A light branch of a small gum tree hangs across the game trail, I gently and slowly push it aside -HONNNNNK! The 130+ decibel blast erupts about 10 meters directly in front of me. Caught him dozing on the track! I have heard that sound before and instantly the Sako comes up to my shoulder as he launches himself forward, the 250gr Nosler Partition takes him in the neck - instant death.

What an animal! Massive is the only way to describe him, probably well over 700 lbs, by far the largest sambar stag I have ever encountered.

His huge antlers are almost 40 inches in spread with long, thick, brow tines and coronets in excess of 12 inches in circumference. After deducting 22 points for overspread he comes in well over the magic 200 Douglas points at 206 $\frac{3}{4}$. This is a trophy worthy of a hunter that has reached the peak of his stalking skills and his understanding of his quarry.

Westmoreland – the early years.

Our customers are flying in from Mt Isa by charter flight. They duly arrive late afternoon and we have them in the vehicles and ready to go to camp, just waiting for the twin engine Cessna 404 to take off. There is a minor problem with one engine, it will not run properly and will require a mechanic to fly out to rectify it before it is safe to take off.

I take the pilot to the homestead to make the necessary calls and we head off to camp. We have plied our visitors with a welcoming beer and they are settling into their accommodation. I hear a call from one of our guests, a gentle, rotund, accountant. 'Barry there is a problem - this is not my suitcase – it is full of ladies clothes and underwear.'

Howls of mirth erupt from his companions accompanied by calls of "Oh, Euan this is not the place for cross dressing." and the like.

I have visions of a lonely suitcase doing the rounds of the carousal at Mt Isa whilst an equally lonely woman waits in vain.

He is panicking, his ammunition for his 450/400 NE is in his case, along with all his other possessions – no ammo means no shooting.

"Don't worry – I'll take this case back to the plane on the strip – the mechanic cannot fly out till first light tomorrow. I'll telephone and see if he can locate your luggage and bring it with him, if so, all will be sorted by lunch tomorrow" – sorted it was.

Such was one of the first of many minor problems that plague any business operating in the wilderness.

Later in the week I am guiding Euan as we approach a waterhole, seeking pigs. "There is a pig over there!" he announces. "Where? I can't see one". "There! There!" He gesticulates in the direction of his pig – all I can see is termite mounds.

If you have ever been in the tropical outback of Australia, you will know what a termite mound is. There are literally 100s of millions of them dotting the landscape of all shapes and sizes. Often the termite mounds are of a size and so numerous they resemble the headstones of a large military cemetery. Some are as large as a small hut.

"I cannot see a pig, but if you think there is one – shoot it." I reply.

Boom, boom - the twin blasts of a left and right from a 450/400 double rent the air. A cloud of dust arises from a termite mound about 40 yards away, other than that it weathers the blast well.

I congratulate him on the accuracy of his two shots off hand - the entrance holes are less than 3 inches apart. However, it gives me some insight into how he managed to pick up a green suitcase off the carousel in Mt Isa when his own was brown.

The rest of the hunt unfolds without problems and the satisfied group departs on the airplane that arrives bearing our new hunters.

Mainoru Store, Mainoru River, Central Arnhem Land: 2009 – 2018

Living with Dingoes

One of the most rewarding experiences we enjoyed during our time at the store was living with dingoes. People will say "I once owned or I own a (insert name of dog breed). No one owns a dingo. Dingoes either accept you into their lives or not.

Our first half-breed dingo / camp dog was Warra, he arrived in the first 12 months of our occupancy. He belonged to a police officer stationed at Bulman, He asked if we wanted a dog as he was faced with the task of putting it down due to its incessant barking at the local indigenous. Sonja requests for some details; "He is 4 years old; he has been neutered and he dislikes aboriginals." "Good, I will take him!" About 3 days later, I have the need to take a shot at snake, alongside the store. Warra, takes off like a fire has been lit under him.

His previous owner had neglected to tell us he was terrified of gunfire. Later in the afternoon, Richard, one of the Bulman locals, tells us he has seen Warra on the other side of the flooded river. "How do you know it's ours?" "He's wearing a collar." That evening we are sitting on the veranda having a drink and lamenting the loss of Warra. "Don't worry if he wants to come home, he can hear the generator." About 10 minutes later a dripping wet

Warra appears around the corner wagging his tail. Warra's unfortunate demise about 3 years later ushers in the arrival of Rocky and Ringo.

The small, and almost deserted, community of six houses at Mt Catt, which we became to know very well in later years was the home of "Hula Hoop" so called because of the hoops worn under her dress. She shares the location with her ageing partner and one other couple. Hula Hoop had three bitches, one pure dingo and two half caste camp dogs. Between them they had given birth to around 20 pups, all of them had been sired by a wild dingo. Sonja offers to swap some groceries for a pup and we make our way out there to select one. All of them are covered with numerous ticks. We sit in the dirt as Sonja tries to decide her fancy. She is asking the sex of each and the old man is lifting them and pronouncing "boy dog" or "girl dog".

Eventually she decides on Rocky, he does not like the smell of White man and is quite prepared to bite if handled. Hula Hoop, obligingly loads him into the rear seat of the Toyota. However, I neglect to place a collar and lead on him. Back at the store I am faced with the task of getting him out of the car and a lead on him. In the ensuing melee he squeezes between my legs and disappears into the bush. He is 10 weeks old; it is late November and the build-up is in full swing, the daily temperature is around 42 degrees, every day! We lament his escape and surmise he will not last long alone out there. A few days later we return to Mt Catt for a second selection. It is my turn now and I choose one of the more aloof, pure dingo pups, Ringo, who has been keeping well away from the strange white people. This time we take the precaution of placing a collar and lead on him. On return to the store, we chain him up and provide a big meal of milk and meat, wrong move! Aa we are to learn later.

We retire for the evening with Ringo tethered to the leg of the bed. Around 2 AM we are awoken to the sound of Ringo pulling madly at his lead and yipping for all he's worth, dingoes do not bark.

Finally, his bowels erupt and I have to spend the next 30 minutes cleaning up.

Lesson number one! Dingoes do not need to be house trained; they are taught/inherit the awareness not to defecate where they sleep lest it lead a predator to them.

Next morning around 6.30 AM I awake and take Ringo for a piss then tie his leads to the outside table with a piece of 8mm poly rope. I return in five minutes with my morning coffee – to find Ringo has chewed the rope and bolted! Not a good look, two pups lost in two days! I track him dragging not one but two leads, one with a collar and one a chocker, for about 3 kms until I lose his tracks in some thick grass. I spend the rest of the day in the 42-degree heat looking and listening for him, all the while thinking he must get caught up somewhere and dehydrate to death. I have no success.

The following morning, I find fresh drag marks around the dust of the car park, at least he is still alive. I do a circuit and catch sound of his frantic yipping not far away. He is hooked up in an old barbed wire fence. We manage to free him and the story ends with him, happy and settled in after a few days. A week or two later he starts to go missing for an hour or so each morning. Sonja has a habit of waking in the night and going outside for a cigarette. One night she heats herself a meat pie, one of the perks of running a shop, your food is tax deductible, then ventures outside for a smoke. Looking across at the chair beside her she spies Ringo asleep. Wait! Ringo is asleep inside! With that the sleeping pup bolts, it's Rocky! Eventually we coax Rocky to join us and have two dingoes to contend with. Two, well fed and healthy dingo pups are a very big handful! They take great joy in destroying all manner of essential items so we decide to purchase two electronic training collars in an attempt to teach them some discipline. All goes well, for a day only! See one chewing a hose, tell it to stop, no response, give it a zap, see one ripping the padding off the ride on mower, give it a zap. Day two see one chewing a hose, give it a zap. Wait! No collars! The cunning bastards have chewed the offending items off each other. Eventually they settle down, and after I shoot an agile wallaby to blood them, they take up hunting for exercise rather than destroying inanimate objects, with one exception. Whenever we left them overnight for a trip to Darwin, they would come bounding up to greet us on return but we could be sure they had extracted some revenge in the form of a chewed hose or the like.

The agility and hunting prowess of a dingo has to be seen to be believed, I once observed Rocky sniff the wind then quietly makes his way to the thick grass bordering our mowed area,

biding his time, motionless for some minutes, he then leapt into the grass and emerged shortly after with a young agile wallaby in his mouth. On another occasion we were enjoying a drink on the veranda, yes, we enjoyed a drink on the veranda almost every evening! A colony of fruit bats, flying foxes is the common name due to their size and appearance, had taken up residence a few kilometres downstream, perhaps 200,000 of them in total. At night they fly out to feed on the nectar from the flowering trees. Bats were swooping over the lawns and into the trees around the store. One bat makes the fatal error of coming in too close to the ground. Ringo leaps to his feet, streaks across the lawn, launches himself, and plucks it out the air about 6 feet off the ground.

Sadly, both Ringo and Rocky met premature ends, in Rocky's case almost certainly from a 1080 bait dropped by our landlords given that I failed locate his body but did find another, freshly dead, dingo within 800 metres of the store. Ringo probably met his end from a snakebite.

Neel's Charge

Perhaps I should not have been surprised that Neels and I were charged. When we were discussing hunting on his arrival in camp, he gave me the information that he had been on two Cape Buffalo hunts and both had resulted in a charge. In one instance his PH had been very badly injured before the buffalo was killed.

Neels, from South Africa, had already secured a good buffalo and we were out and about looking for 'something bigger'. We spied a very good buffalo bull paying close attention to a cow on heat. They were accompanied by what I presume were a couple of the cow's offspring. It took us nearly a kilometre to close the gap on the group unobserved and we were about 30 meters behind the bull. At this point he turned and saw us.

Neels was carrying a Kreighoff double rifle chambered in 470 NE and I motioned to him to take the shot.

The bull bucked at the shot and promptly disappeared behind a small grove of cover. Neels careered off to the right to get a view of the departing bull, whilst I was yelling at him to break the rifle and recharge the right barrel. My pleas fell on deaf ears. The bull appeared; he took a second shot.

At the sound of the second shot the bull instantly turned and headed back the way he left. In the event that he was intent on an appointment at closer quarters to us I hurriedly took a rest on a nearby melaleuca – rifle shouldered and ready.

"Have you reloaded?" "No!" "Reloaded?" "No!"

The buffalo bull is now 15 meters from impact with us and coming at speed. My shot enters just under the nose and takes him a little too low to hit the brain but his spine is hit and he drops instantly. He is alive but paralysed. 'Reload and give him a finisher.' is my request. Neels steps up and squeezes the front trigger. Pop! No powder, just the primer, behind the bullet! He squeezes the rear trigger and the job is done. I am feeling a little weak after this exhibition. Had he responded yes to my second plea regarding his progress reloading the first shot would have been the dud. With perhaps half a second lost we would have had a very exciting time with the outcome anyone's guess!

Surprisingly this is not the first instance I have encountered where a hunter has arrived in camp with hand loaded ammunition and we have discovered a round with no powder charge under the bullet.

The other instance was discovered when checking the rifle sights in camp – so no harm done.

Searching for wounded animals that have disappeared into cover is the most dangerous aspect of a professional hunter's job. Wounded water buffalo, if they have run from the shot, will generally try to escape if they are not badly hurt. Once a buffalo decides that they are hurting too much to want to keep running they will turn towards their pursuers and prepare to fight to the death! If you find them dead, they are inevitably facing toward you.

In thick cover a motionless animal has the advantage over a slow moving, noise making, human trying to track and search for something he has yet to see or hear.

You simply cannot relax for one second when you are alone with your thoughts on the trail of a wounded buffalo! Here are a couple of instances the follow up.

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 (Reinhardt, 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 once we gained sight of them.

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, so named because, up to 3 meters high, it resembles sugar cane.

The buffalo has chosen their position to catch the cooling breeze with plenty of escape routes in the event of trouble.

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 Reinhardt was after two buffalo, a scrub bull and several boar with only 4 days to secure them.

Why only 4 days? A late season storm which dropped 6 inches/150mm of rain on the eve of his scheduled arrival had also damaged camp and isolated us for several days before we could get him, and our food supplies, into camp with the only method available – helicopter! Now I was hiring the helicopter daily to ferry us to and from camp to a hunting area, great experience for Reinhardt and Ulrike but very expensive for me!

Given the time constraint 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 about 15 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 Reinhardt 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 follow them to the point where he had left the cows and careered down into a grass clogged gully. His hooves had gouged the moist, red earth in his headlong rush and there is the odd splatter of blood adhering to the grass where his body had pushed through. Where is he? What condition is he in? The grass stretches away in a patch of around 5 to 7 acres before falling away up the far bank. To state the obvious, I was less than keen to follow a wounded buffalo into that thicket.

After waiting 20 minutes and several cigarettes later with no activity from below there is no alternative. I open the bolt on my 404 Jeffery to confirm, what I already know, there is a cartridge up the spout. I release the safety and move slowly down the slope into the matted, rustling, sea of grass. I have travelled less than 20 meters when the sound of a large, very large, animal pounding through the grass erupts. Going away, my lucky day - so far!

Racing back to the top of the bank I catch sight of the bull exiting the grass and vanishing over the far slope. Back to work. I pick up his spoor only to find it leads straight into a larger thicket of cane grass. I am into the grass again with adrenaline pumping. The weather is humid and hot and the atmosphere in the grass is akin to a sauna. After half an hour of slow and steady tracking with as little noise as possible my clothes are drenched and clinging to my body along with an assortment of caterpillars, small spiders and other insects. I have covered perhaps 400 meters at this stage. I am not carrying my pack and water as it is just another impediment to progress through the grass and a hinderance in the event of the need for evasive action.

The physical strain of maintaining 100% awareness in these trying conditions is something that has to be experienced to fully comprehend. You simply cannot afford to relax your guard as your visibility is restricted to a tunnel / corridor about 2 feet/600mm wide and less than 3 to 5 yards to the next turn. Your quarry can be around that next turn! Your firearm must always be ready. After an hour I am getting severely dehydrated and nearly at the end of my tether.

Finally, we meet – he is waiting for me in a small opening in the grass. He lifts his head and raises a front foot - before he can take a step, I shoot him in the forehead and sink to my knees with a sigh of relief.