



Schweinschirke werden in
Australien ausgesetzt.



Australia: Hog Deer

Bowhunting Australia's most Elusive Deer

Text and Photos: Ben Salleras

IT WAS THE FOURTH DAY of a five-day hunt in coastal Victoria, in the middle of Australia's best hog deer habitat. The hunt so far had been action-packed - a true roller-coaster ride. I was nestled in a self-constructed nest of tussocks, hidden in the shade of a few acacias. The wind was gently blowing in my face, and a well-used game trail lay before me. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and hardly a cloud floated in the sky. During the previous day the conditions were identical, and we'd noticed the stags were coming out in full force for a midday feed. Slowly I rose to stretch my legs, and to peek out into the bracken to my right. As I scanned the ferns I caught movement, and my heart skipped a beat. Like a shark's fin cutting through waves, antlers were cutting through the bracken. The buck was coming straight for me!

Getting There

Many months earlier, while talking moose hunting with Rob Lopardi, a well-travelled Aussie hunter, the subject of hunting hog deer had come up. Rob spoke of some contacts he had down in Victoria, and said he'd be able to put me in touch with the right people. All I wanted to know was where

to sign! Hog deer are arguably the most elusive species one can hunt in Australia. Hunting is tightly regulated with tags and seasons (unlike the majority of South Pacific game species), and access to hunting areas is extremely limited.

Six months later I was greeted at Melbourne Airport by Rob and his wife Emma, and after the usual intense hunting conversations on the drive to the property, we arrived late in the evening. A pair of young stags caught sparring in the driveway in our headlights, was just a small taste of what was to come.

Bowhunting is Not Gun Hunting

The following morning I found myself in a tree-stand well before first light. It was built in a giant banksia tree, and overlooked a well-used game trail that connected feeding to bedding areas. Jason, whose family owns the property, was my guide for the day. We whispered nervously in the pre-daylight stillness about the likely paths the deer would take. The wind wasn't perfect, but just good enough. I was buzzing with excitement as we stared in silence across the clearing before us, straining for any signs of movement. After thirty minutes the first faint signs of daylight

began to filter through the clouds. Soon the first deer, a couple of hinds, nervously filtered through. I stared in amazement and savored my very first encounter while bowhunting hog deer.

During the next hour approximately twenty deer travelled along that game trail, including several good stags. Every one of them took the same path, approximately forty-five meters from the stand. This would have been perfect for hunting with a rifle, but it was just a bit too far for me in low light. I was hoping for something a bit closer. By about 7:30 a.m. the show was over, so we headed back to the cottage for breakfast. I was amazed at the number of deer we had seen.

Throughout most of the day we talked hunting. It turned out that Jason and some of his mates were heading to Canada to hunt. I had hunted there, so that of course was a topic of intense discussion. By around 3:00 p.m. we were ready for another hunt. The weather wasn't favorable; the sky was overcast with a bitter westerly blowing.

Jason and I decided to check out an elevated blind behind the homestead, which was built into the back of an old truck. It was an impressive-looking structure. We nestled in for the afternoon, and glassed across the tussocks, eagerly awaiting any

sign of these little deer. At around 4:30 p.m. a little velvet spiker materialized out of the tussocks and started to feed in the improved patch of pasture about three hundred meters away. We watched him until dark.

That night Jason and I talked tactics. He hadn't seen a bow in action, and had hoped that the tree-stand would be close enough to the trail to put me within bow range. I knew I had to be a bit closer. A plan of attack for the following morning was hatched.

Lowest of Lows

In the pitch-black of night we made our way silently to the same tree-stand. I positioned myself in a little hollow, screened by a patch of small banksias, with a clear shooting lane down to the game trail. This time I was about twenty-five meters from the trail, with the tree-stand behind me. I switched my headlamp off and settled in. Soon I was covering every patch of bare skin as mosquitoes did their very best to carry me away. At first light I caught movement on the trail, a glint of antler, and then it was gone. Later Jason, who was in the tree-stand behind me, confirmed that the first stag was a beauty, with beams around fifteen inches in length. A little later a few hinds meandered past. About an hour into the hunt two stags appeared. One carried a very nice twelve-inch rack, and the other was about nine inches. I was beside myself with anticipation.

The bigger stag stepped into my shooting lane at twenty-three meters. Slowly I drew my bow, gave a soft squeak to stop him, aimed steadily, and released. To my utter disbelief the arrow zipped straight over his back. Both stags disappeared real quickly. I was in a state of disbelief. What had just happened? I signalled to Jason to let him know about the miss. He was already signalling frantically for me to get ready again. I could tell that time was of the essence. Without hesitation I snuck another arrow out of my quiver and prepared for whatever was approaching. No less than four stags filed through the undergrowth, including one definite shooter with antlers around the twelve-inch mark. I drew once again. It was déjà vu as I let out a squeak as the stag stepped into view. I settled my top pin on him and let off a smooth release. I watched as the arrow covered the twenty-three meters and hit the stag in a perfect line. The sound was right, the stag's reaction was right, and all was silent in just seconds. I turned around and looked at Jason who gave some silent celebratory signals. I was confident that I had just made a good shot,

although I thought it may have been slightly high. We waited ten minutes before taking up the trail.

Almost floating above the ground I headed over to the scene of the hit, and located my arrow a few meters beyond the game trail. Immediately my heart sank. There wasn't a trace of blood on the arrow, just a tiny bit of meat and some fur. It took us five minutes to find the smallest drop of blood. I maintained as much optimism as I possibly could for the next three hours as we crawled on our bellies through the thick coastal scrub. I eventually realized that my worst nightmare was happening, and that we wouldn't be finding the stag. This was the lowest of lows.

The only explanation I could imagine was that the shot had gone high, through that small zone above the spine and above the shoulder. On a hog stag that's a very small area. An inch lower and the arrow would have taken out his spine. There was almost no blood, and it was one of the lightest blood trails I've attempted to follow in my life. The few drops we did find were dark and rubbed onto vegetation. There was nothing on the ground. Words can't describe how I felt at that point, but I'm sure many of you have been in a similar situation. After the shot I was confident that it was lethal, and that my dream hunt was over. As I walked back to the homestead I wondered if now my hunt was indeed over.

Back at the homestead, we sat down over a cup of coffee and carried out a review of the morning's events. We decided that the hit was unlikely to be lethal, and I would continue with the hunt, something I was tremendously grateful for.

During the early afternoon we watched some footage taken over the previous weeks of deer feeding out in the tussocks during daylight. Jason explained that when the weather had been better, the stags were feeding around midday. We headed down to the same elevated blind that afternoon to see what might show. Apart from a velvet spiker, only an old hind appeared from the thick stuff. The weather still wasn't ideal, and was keeping the deer in cover for much longer than usual. The forecast however told us that a change was on the way, so we remained optimistic for the remaining three days.

Stalking

In the early morning darkness of the third day, Jason and I headed to a new ambush point we'd prepared the day before. This hide put us about ten meters from a virtual hog deer highway. We were in position well before daylight, and prepared for the onslaught of mosquitoes. I've never seen them



Während sie in weiten Teilen ihres ursprünglichen Lebensraumes, etwa dem Osten Pakistans, in Indien, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos und Myanmar, bedroht sind, haben sie in Australien keine Wilderei zu fürchten, können dort nachhaltig bejagt werden.



Top: Ihren Namen haben die Schweinshirsche dem Umstand zu verdanken, dass sie oft mit tiefem Windfang ziehen, was ihrer Statur etwas sauähnliches verleiht.

Bottom: Hirsche sind dunkler gefärbt als weibliche Stücke, erreichen Wildbretgewichte bis 50 Kilogramm.

like that in my life. Within five minutes a lone doe came wandering through in the dark. We were still at least half an hour from shooting light. I sat motionless, my sanity being pushed to the absolute limits by the cloud of mosquitoes, and silently prayed for a stag to come walking along the trail. But it was not to be, we didn't see another deer all morning. We discussed the lack of sightings on the walk back home. Our activities the previous morning had probably pushed the deer into thick cover.

Later after lunch Jason climbed the watchtower to glass the tussock flats. When he yelled out excitedly I climbed up to investigate. A really nice stag was feeding in a prime location for a stalk about four hundred meters from the cottage. I hurriedly threw on my camouflage, grabbed my bow, and trotted out into the open flats. After closing the gap to forty meters following a simple belly crawl, I was just getting to the point for a clear view to range him, when out of nowhere a previously unseen spiker jumped out of the tussock next to me and squealed. I couldn't believe how close I'd come yet again.

Redemption

The fourth day began with perfect weather conditions. Jason and I took positions in two separate stands. I hid off a well-used trail in an area that we hadn't hunted or disturbed, while Jason sat in the main tree-stand to survey movement in that area. Covering both of these primary travel paths would give us a good idea of what the deer were up to, and hopefully provide a solid plan for the final morning's hunt.

I was tucked into some small banksia bushes about twenty-five meters from the trail. As the first morning rays penetrated the thick clouds I scanned the clearing for movement. To my left there were a few openings in the vegetation that gave me about ten seconds of warning before any deer walked through my shooting lane.

My first sighting was a lone hind. She wasn't nervous and casually wandered through. Twenty minutes later some movement caught my attention. I manoeuvred

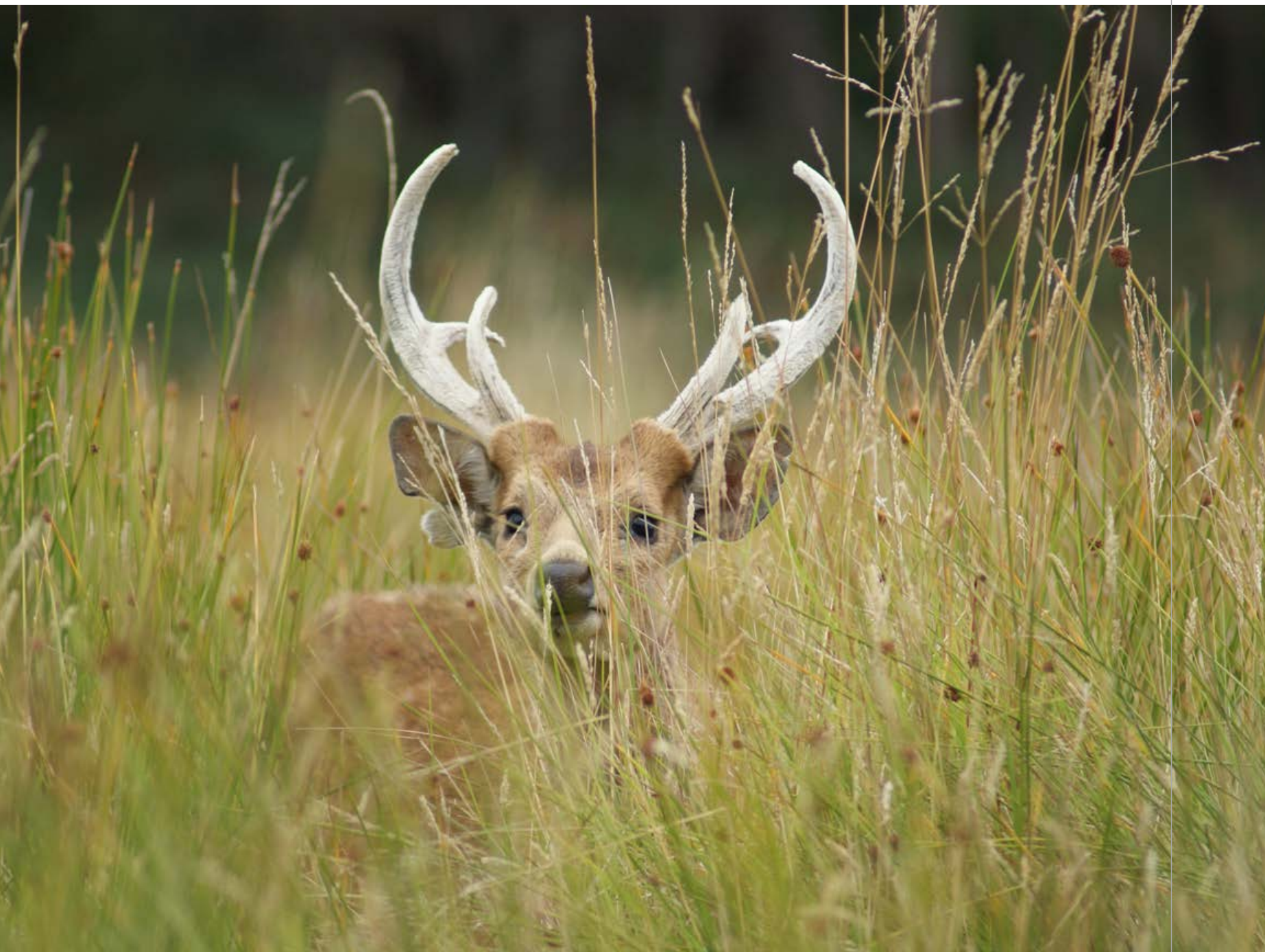
slightly to get a better view and saw a huge stag standing in a clearing about eighty meters away. His rack was around the fourteen-inch mark, and just what I was looking for. But alas that morning he chose not to walk the trail I was hunting. He had chosen very well.

Later a doe and a fawn passed by very close and provided me with an interesting encounter. As the sun rose higher in the sky however, I was becoming less optimistic that any more deer would use the trail. Around 7:30 a.m. I had my last glimpses of deer, two spikers. They came in fairly close, before picking up some scent and departing. Fifteen minutes later Jason turned up, and another morning's hunt was over. He had a wedding to attend, so he unfortunately had to leave. He had been a champion guide, and it was a shame to see him depart before I had my hog deer.

With a gentle westerly wind blowing, we hoped that the stags might show up for a midday feed, as they had the previous day. The game camera that morning revealed that a very nice stag had stepped out to feed at 2:00 p.m. at a rarely-hunted pocket, some distance from the main hunting area. The new area was thick with regrowth acacia and bracken fern. The owners had slashed a few tracks around and through the bedding area, and planted a small patch of improved pasture in amongst the adjacent tussocks. There was a well-used game trail between the bracken thicket and the patch of pasture. This is where the game camera had picked up the stag.

I decided I'd give it a go. If the weather was similar surely the stag would reappear, at least I hoped so. Around midday I was dropped off about a kilometer from the ambush point. I worked my way around the thick vegetation to get the wind in my favor, and closed in, searching for a good spot to hide. A patch of young wattle trees made a good natural blind. I had a mostly clear view out to the clearing, and a game trail about twenty meters in front of me.

After sitting a while I slowly rose to stretch my legs, and to peek out into the bracken to my right. As I scanned the ferns I caught movement, and my heart skipped a beat. Like a shark's fin cutting through



Links: Dieser Hirsch ist noch im Bast.

Mitte: Der Hirsch kühlt langsam aus, wird anschließend zerwirkt.

Oben rechts: Am letzten Jagdtag, nach mehreren gescheiterten Versuchen, liegt ein guter Hirsch.

patch of slashed ground he was likely to cross. Had he expired in the thick bracken, I dare say I would have been searching much longer.

I'm surprised they couldn't hear me in Melbourne, as I let out several roars of elation. The job had been done, and I was now just floating. The guys came down from the homestead and helped out with the photo session. The mosquitoes were almost carrying both the stag and me away, but I didn't care, as I had my stag on the ground, and life couldn't be any better.

After the customary trip to the check-in station, which is required by law in Victoria, I spent the afternoon enjoying a few rums while caping out my stag. I cannot

explain how good it felt to have made a good shot and to have dropped the stag so cleanly, especially after my rough start to the hunt. It had all come together in the nick of time. My first hunt on Victorian soil will always be one to remember. The guys I hunted with were amongst the most genuine people I've ever met. And those deer are something else. I can honestly say that I am now addicted to hunting hog deer. ■



waves, antlers were cutting through the bracken. The buck was coming straight for me! I sat and watched quietly, nestled in the grass. Silently I hoped that the stag would do the same thing as the day before.

He filtered through the bracken fern and was quickly getting closer. With an arrow ready on the string, I said to myself all those things you say when you really want to get something right. I knelt in the shadows, hidden by a row of tussocks. The stag came into full view, and as if part of a movie script, slowed down and started to browse. I couldn't believe my eyes. He was a beauty, an excellent representative of the

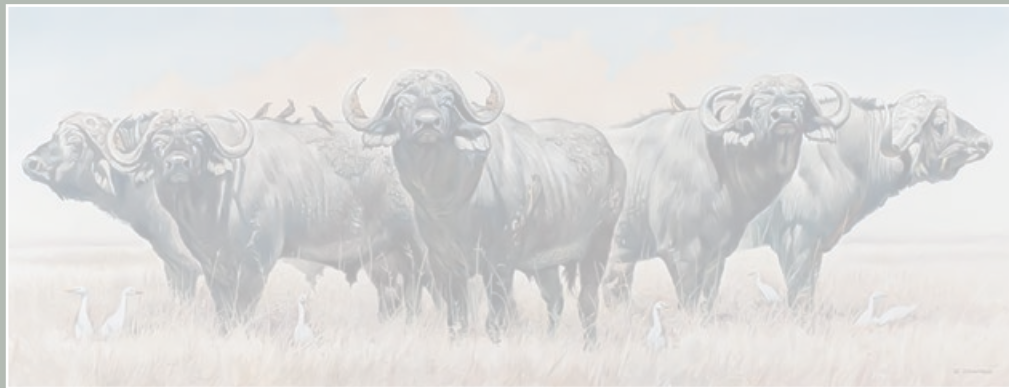
species. Ever so slowly I rose for the shot. I slowly drew my Hoyt Vector Turbo, settled my pin on the stag, which still browsed unaware of danger at twenty meters. My release kissed the arrow goodbye, and I watched it pass through the sweet spot.

The stag bounded away into the tussocks in a matter of seconds. Was the hit good enough? Would there be a good blood trail? Would that little stag be a needle in the several hectare bracken haystack that was beside me? All sorts of thoughts and emotions flew through my head. I waited ten minutes before walking over to inspect my arrow. This was more like

it. The arrow was totally covered in frothy bright blood.

I searched for the blood trail, trying to pick up any evidence of the escape route, and found very little sign. Since the shot looked so good, and there was lung blood on the arrow, I decided to have a quick scout ahead. I followed one of the slashed trails through the bracken for around fifty meters, parallel to where I'd seen the stag run. The track I was on ended at a t-junction with another. I looked to my right and only ten meters away, right in the middle of the track, was my stag. He had only made it eighty meters before dying on the only

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POWER PACK - 38x100 cm - 14,9x39,37 inches - oil on canvas © Renato Casaro

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