

**B**eing a native Queensland, one would think that I'd have found the time to hunt South East Queensland's well known Red Deer herd a little earlier in life than 2015. But for one reason or another, it wasn't until then (apart from a couple of quick hunts during my Uni. days) that I finally made the time to get out after our home state Reds.

I had wanted to get on a hunt with Wayne Preece for years, and had been keeping an eye on the quality of stags his hunters had been taking. Preecey is a living legend in Australian bowhunting circles, and it was certainly on my bucket list to get out on a hunt with him, just as much for the entertainment as for the hunting. Along for the trip was my mate and cameraman Benny, we were keen to get some good hunting action on film as well as do some filming for Ridgeline Australia. After an epic adventure in N.Z. chasing tahr, I got home, repacked and headed straight up to Kilcoy with Benny to meet up with Preecey, and the hilarity hit fifth gear before too long. Joining us on this hunt was Paul 'Piggy' Thompson, a bowhunter from Melbourne, as well as legendary motorcyclist and avid bowhunter Casey Stoner.

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Preecey's camp had to be seen to be believed. I can't think of a better camp setup I've ever seen in this country. Perched on top of one of the taller hills, in amongst a patch of mature trees, this vantage point offered a 360 degree view into the surrounding prime deer habitat. The country consisted of open rolling hills, with scattered patches of cover and plenty of creeks intertwining the hills. We were able to glass deer in all directions, and immediately upon arrival had the spotting scopes on several different stags within a few kilometres of camp. We settled in on the first afternoon, had a few shots at the target, and swapped plenty of entertaining yarns that night, all the while listening to a multitude of stags going absolutely off their heads around us. You can just imagine the atmosphere after a few cans in camp, I just

couldn't wait to see what might unfold in the morning!

Before light on the first morning, we devised plans and headed off in our different directions. There were stags roaring so close to camp it was almost impossible not to spook a few as we headed out. The density of deer was high, but they were just spread out enough to weave amongst them, using the creeks and hills to our advantage. Within 30 minutes of leaving camp, Benny and I were positioned in a gully below a couple of roaring stags, there was a little fog hanging in the air, carrying that sweet sound to our ears almost every minute as we commenced our stalk. After realising our first angle of attack wasn't quite right, we backed out and circled around, coming in at a completely different angle. I got Benny into a good filming position, and proceeded to get closer to the roaring stag, which was shrouded in gently wafting clouds of mist as he let out each roar. Yep, this was what I'd been waiting for!

Using the sparse patches of cover, I managed to get into about 60m from the stag, which I'd now had a good look at, he was a cull 4x4. Just as I was planning my next move, and keeping an eye on Benny back behind me, the wind changed and blew straight up behind me, taking the stag and the group of hinds with him. They disappeared over the ridge without making too much fuss luckily. We regrouped and listened out for the next potential target, and that didn't take long. Cresting a few hills, we closed in on the next roaring stag, eventually spotting him from about two kilometres. Even from this distance I could see he was long and wide with plenty of points, the adrenalin stepped up a notch as we slipped into cover and worked our way towards him. The immediately obvious challenge was that he was hanging with about 30 hinds, there were going to be plenty of eyes. Using the patches of regrowth and lantana, we worked our way into a good vantage point. Another smaller stag had joined the action, they sized each other up a few times but didn't quite come to blows. I got Benny into a good position, from here he could film the entire herd on the opposite hill side, while I slithered through the vegetation between us and the deer.

It was slow going as I meticulously belly crawled closer to the deer, getting into within 20m of several hinds, with the two stags still bugging around about 50m above me. A few times I almost got a clear shot at the big fella, but couldn't quite pick a good shooting lane through the vegetation. Then just out of sight, all hell broke loose as the two stags launched into serious battle;



By Ben Salleras



surprisingly the smaller stag flogged the bigger 6x5, which took off over the hill. It's quite common for less impressive 3x3s and 4x4s to have undesirable but very effective fighting heads, often wounding and killing the better stags due to their long sharp sword-like beams. Preecey referred to these as 'Stag Killers', and such stags were to be taken as culls if the opportunity presented.

The hinds spooked a bit in a different direction, leaving me in my hidey hole with no opportunity. The herd started to settle again and went back to feeding, I now had another patch of cover to use between them and me. In good cover now, I weaved between the patches of scrub, using the lay of the land to get closer to the herd. Suddenly I spotted movement ahead, and over the ridge in front of me came the beautiful big 6x5 that had fled 10 minutes earlier, he was headed almost straight for me. I got an arrow organised, perched back on my knees, and stayed dead still as he approached, all the time hoping that Benny had a clear angle from his spot. The stag trotted in closer, I came back to full draw, when he suddenly pulled up and looked in my direction, he'd picked me out. Luckily in the majority of cases, we bowhunters who use rangefinders have the time and opportunity to properly range a target immediately before shooting. In this particular instance, there was no time, and I was forced to guess the distance in those milliseconds before I let the shot go. I estimated 40m, and let fly. The arrow struck the stag slightly high, but in perfect line, and because I was slightly elevated above the stag, I was confident I had enough angle to take out the top of his lungs. He bolted across the creek at lightning speed. I kept a close eye on him until he disappeared out of sight and over the last ridge.

The adrenalin still surging, I caught up with Benny, who showed me the awesome footage he'd just captured. We took up the blood trail, giving the stag a bit of time to expire first. Immediately I grew concerned at the amount of blood, it was hard going even over the first 100m. Within 200m it was untrackable. I was really gutted, but remained hopeful we would be able to recover this animal, and I was prepared to search high and low for as many days as it took to find this stag. We headed back to camp, regrouped over lunch, traded reports with the rest of the crew, then, headed back out to continue the search. Not one lantana bush was left unchecked over the next 48 hours, we searched an area of about 4km by 4km, checking every single potential hidey hole, but with no luck. I've never put so much effort into a search. I was devastated, it'd been a while since I'd lost a wounded animal, and I'd forgotten how harrowing

that hollow, haunting feeling is. After the exhaustive search over the following two days, we all came to the conclusion that the shot hadn't been fatal, probably just missing the top of his lungs. Both ends of the arrow had broken out, which gave us confidence the stag had a good chance of healing up.

After using up two days searching, the end of our hunt was already starting to draw near. Over the first three mornings and evenings, we had noticed a definite decline in roaring, heralding the tapering-off of the roar. If we were going to make it happen, we had to get cracking. After a fairly eventless morning, Benny and I hiked over to a gully not far from where we'd been searching the previous days, Preecey had mentioned he'd sighted a nice 6x6 there a couple of weeks earlier. He hadn't been seen recently, but there was hope he was still hanging around there somewhere.

After several unanswered roars with the caller, we hiked down a hillside into the gully, which held plenty of country we hadn't yet disturbed. Following a farmer's track down the open pasture-covered hill, I suddenly spotted three hinds directly over the slope below us at about 50m, luckily right at the precise moment they came into view. One of them just caught my movement and looked up towards us. I immediately dropped to the ground, Benny followed suit a couple of metres behind me, and I pulled out the caller and gave a few hind calls. Poking my head up slowly and just cresting the grass in front, I spotted a nice looking stag powering straight up the hill towards our position, he looked like a shooter! With almost no cover, we were stranded on the track and had no time to move, I ripped an arrow out and got it on the string. I gave one soft roar and he roared back with belligerent disgust, within a few more seconds his tops came into view over the grass, he was coming in hot!

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Warrior boot and the Sable Airflow range. You can check out both under the 'Media' link at [www.ridgelineclothing.com.au](http://www.ridgelineclothing.com.au). With Benny's talents it didn't take long to get what we needed, and the serious hunting continued. We were stoked to be able to get out with Preecey that afternoon, managing a stalk on another cull stag, but getting busted just outside of shooting range.

That afternoon Benny and Casey had to head home, leaving the camp a little quieter. Paul hadn't had any luck yet, but was still working hard to get his chance. I was happy to just relax, enjoy a few cans, and witness the walking comedy extravaganza that is Wayne Preece. On my last full day in camp,

gradually pinpointing his position on a hillside covered with thick scrub. He was going real hard, barely stopping for breath, when they roar that consistently and vigorously the adrenalin really spikes. I started to pick my way through the thick scrub, it was quite warm and there was absolutely zero breeze. It was hard going, as with no breeze every single noise I made sound amplified, and this was proper thick tangly scrub, infested with lantana and other weeds. After sneaking through about 200m of it, I heard a bit of rustling in front of me and froze. Immediately I spotted the back end of a decent sized pig, lying down, just a few metres in front of me. With the amount of rustling, I realised I had stumbled right onto a little mob of pigs. Not what I really needed right now. I tried everything to 'carefully' spook them, making noises, waving my bow around, anything to get their attention without spooking the absolute crap out of them. But nothing worked. I couldn't believe it, the one time I'm actively trying to spook an animal, and I can't do it..... I would totally forgive you if you didn't believe me, it was the most ridiculous thing I've ever witnessed during a stalk. With the stag still roaring like there was no tomorrow a mere 100m ahead, and the daylight starting to fade, I decided there was only one option left. I lined up on the one decent sized pig I could see, and put one straight through its chest at about 3m. They all erupted, and I thanked the Hunting Gods as they bolted off out of the way, exactly where I wanted them to. They didn't quite make enough noise to spook the deer, and I continued to weave through the undergrowth at snail's pace towards the stag.

Preecey and I were hanging around in camp, not doing a whole lot, when late in the afternoon a few stags started to fire up in different directions around us. One was right down the back, in an area of particularly thick scrub, Preecey was pretty sure he knew which stag it was, as he'd seen it over several days beforehand. He demanded I head down there and have a crack at him, knowing it was a cull. I wasn't going to argue with him, plus any culls eliminated would be a positive for the herd. I grabbed my bow and took off into the hills.

I hiked over towards the still roaring stag,

As I got real close, I had to slow down even more, as there was literally no other sound in the air other than me and the stag, nothing. Millimetre by millimetre I picked an impossible path through the vegetation, only daring to move each time he roared, cancelling out any noise I was making. It was tough going, but he seemed stationary, and any second I was going to get a view. Eventually I heard a couple of hinds spook and run, they were onto me, I took a few big steps with my arrow already ready, and out he marched at about 30m. Just one single shooting lane was on offer, as he passed through it I let the shot go and watched it disappear exactly where I wanted it to, although it was so late in the afternoon visibility was pretty poor. Everything bolted in all directions, leaving me standing in the dead silence, sweat pouring from my face after an intense stalk in the balminess of the April afternoon. I wouldn't have it any other way.

I got straight into tracking, but was soon slipping back into that horrible, hollow feeling of doubt when I could only locate one tiny drop of blood. I couldn't bloody believe it. The last light disappeared and I hiked back to camp in the darkness, wondering whether the shot really was as good as I'd first thought.... I got back to camp and updated Preecey and Piggy, reassuring them that I was confident with both shots, and that surely we would find both animals at first light.

Preecey and I began our search early, firstly pinpointing the site of the pig shot.

There was reasonable blood, but it was so ridiculously thick that I swear it took half an hour for each twenty metres gained. I was crawling on hands and knees most of the time, the only way to get under the lantana thickets. Eventually we found the pig piled up right under the biggest patch of lantana in Queensland, we both managed to crawl in under there to get a quick photo. Then onto the stag we went, I showed Preecey the only drop of blood I found in the fading light the previous afternoon. We ran a grid pattern search up into the wide open gully he had run towards, searching for at least two hours without uncovering even a second drop of blood. It wasn't making sense to me, I strained my brain for every possibility. I just couldn't understand how a shot through that part of the chest quartering away, with a complete pass through, could result in one drop of blood and a lost stag.

We had grid searched a large area of about 2km by 1km, searching every patch of long grass (or so we thought) and every bit of cover, luckily where he'd run was mostly open pasture. Beyond that though was endless bush for miles. I stood on top of a hill, glancing down towards the spot where I shot him. I realised there was a very small patch of long grass only 80m from where he'd been hit, that we had looked through once or twice but mostly worked around. I headed down there and started to really scour through the long razor grass, then bang, right there in front of me lay my stag. He hadn't even made it 80m, the shot was

textbook. Two lessons here: 1) Don't always assume a broadhead, even straight through the sweet spot, is going to result in a good blood trail. He literally dropped one drop of blood between the hit and where he rolled over, with a fresh razor sharp 3-blade head, 2) Never underestimate the ability of even a quite large deer to disappear in quite low grass once they're down. We simply hadn't searched that little patch thoroughly enough. Relieved, we snapped some photos and removed the head of this classic stag killing cull, he would be spreading his seed no further.

Wayne Preece Safaris offer absolutely first class red stag hunting in their original Australian range, in the Brisbane Valley. I honestly cannot say enough good things about Wayne, as a bloke, as a guide, and as a never-ending comedy act. The camp is first class, it was like a dream being up there with the action happening around you in a full 360 degree view. Wayne is as good a hunting guide as you'll find anywhere on the planet, his dedication to the hunt and the animals he pursues is second to none. The trophy quality here is as good as you'll find in the Queensland herd, Wayne's hunters have an unmatched track record when it comes to trophies. If a very reasonably priced hunt, in a premier location, for quality Queensland red stags, whether with bow or rifle, is up your alley, then you seriously need to get in touch with Wayne. Search for 'Wayne Preece Safaris' on Facebook, or contact him on 0419 681 996 or [wpreecey@gmail.com](mailto:wpreecey@gmail.com) to get in touch.

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After some great photos using the afternoon light, and removing the cape and head, we hiked back to camp jubilant and pleased with our efforts. After the low of the previous few days, we were absolutely pumped to have bounced back and nailed a nice 6x6 on film. The footage was absolutely superb, about as good as we could possibly ask for bowhunting red stags. We celebrated properly that night, led astray by Preecey even more than usual.

The next day we took it a bit easier, shooting some footage for two promo films we were planning to produce, for Ridgeline's

