

BECOMING THE TIGER

By Ben Salteras

The moment of truth had finally come, after over three hours of painstakingly slow belly-crawling through the limited cover, it was time for me to make this shot happen. Adrenalin surged through every part of my body as my brain came to the realisation that all of the effort that had gone into this stalk, despite the odds and the hurdles thrown at me, had miraculously paid off and culminated in a shot opportunity at the stag of a lifetime. I slowly rose from behind the very last decent tussock I had for cover, and ranged him at 37m as he fed broadside, completely oblivious to my presence. Slinking back down again, I reached for my bow, arrow already on the string, when from just 20m away to my left I heard the most painful alarm bark I'd heard in my life – I'd been busted by the hind!

Two years earlier in 2012 I'd hunted with Neil, Corrie and Jason at Hog Deer Australia and had an absolute blast, not only because of the incredible hunting on offer but also the endless entertainment provided back at camp. I managed to take a nice 12.5" stag during that trip, but the hoggie bug really bit me hard, and I knew I had to return as soon as possible. There is something very magical about these animals, as those who have hunted them will agree. I immediately rebooked for the 2014 season and couldn't wait to get back for another go!

April 2014 eventually rolled around and I was again heading south to Victoria. The weather was unfortunately quite drizzly with spells of decent rain, not ideal hoggie hunting weather. Nevertheless Jason (who could only hang around for the first day) and I got in amongst the deer on the first morning, spotting a really nice 14" stag feeding early in the morning amongst a patch of bracken fern with a bunch of girls. This particular stag had been sighted previously, he had a distinctly shaped head

it. It's always a dilemma when you get an opportunity this good very early on a hunt. My instincts told me not to shoot, so I didn't. I watched the group continue to feed, until a few minutes later one spotted me and they were off on a mad dash into cover in an instant. I tried to explain my choice to Jason, he seemed a bit bewildered but knew that I knew there'd be more opportunities yet, although he would've loved to have seen me nail the stag!

Unfortunately Jason had to leave later that day for work commitments, he wished me the best of luck and I hoped to catch up with him again later on. The next couple of days were fairly slow, with no real stalking opportunities on the type of stag I was after. We were spotting plenty from afar, but stalking with the bow required the right situation, and I was content to wait for the right opportunity on the right stag. The rain was keeping them in cover a bit more than usual which was a shame, they seemed to be bedding very early and not emerging for day time feeds as they would during

fine weather. Nevertheless, I was kept well and truly entertained back at camp during downtime. Corrie and I poured through 100s of game camera photos of a range of stags and other wildlife. Neil in his usual way kept me laughing almost constantly, sometimes with, but mostly at.

One afternoon Corrie and I were on our way to a drop-off point in the ute, when at the same time we both spotted an absolute monster stag just off the driveway with distinctly red stained antlers, he was well over 15" and heavy. He didn't appear to take a lot of notice of the vehicle, I asked Corrie to keep driving for another couple of hundred metres before letting me out. I very carefully stalked back to where he was spotted, checking every bit of cover and being ultra-careful with every step, but he had vanished. He was definitely the biggest stag I'd ever seen in the bush, and I was disappointed to not get a chance to stalk him.

I woke up on the second last morning to the realisation that time was beginning to run out for my hunt, and I started to get that slight sneaking feeling of regret after passing up such a good trophy on the very first morning. The rain had been fairly relentless, limiting our opportunities, and limiting the amount of time the deer were spending out of cover. I'd had a few half chances, but it just hadn't come together

since that very first stalk on the first morning. It was an overcast day, and at first light I headed off alone down to the same elevated stand Jason and I glassed from on the first morning. As the light improved I started to spot a few deer around the open tussock flats and bracken patches that lay in front of me. After glassing for 20 minutes or so, I suddenly spotted a massive set of antlers poking above the grass, and a tiny shot of adrenalin hit me... There he was, an absolute cracker of a stag, the type I had been dreaming of for so long. He was following a hind around through the tussocks about 250m away, unfortunately only minutes after I spotted him, he followed the hind right across the open paddock back into thick bush and disappeared completely. I was disappointed that I'd missed my chance to stalk such an awesome stag, but hoped that he may re-emerge later.

After another couple of hours glassing, nothing really notable had appeared, until out of the blue out came the big boy, still trailing the same hind around! He followed her past my stand at just 100m, and I got a really good look at him through the binos. It was 'Broken Brow', a stag known to be

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frequenting the area, distinctly missing about an inch off one brow line. The excitement levels went through the roof when I watched him follow the hind out into the main bracken patch and begin to feed, it was on!

I ever-so-slowly climbed down from the elevated stand at about 8:30am, the sky was completely greyed out with heavy cloud, light misty rain continued to fall. As soon as I hit the ground I bee-lined towards the main patch of bracken where I knew my target stag was feeding, about 250m away. Crouching down I stalked in about 80m before I ran out of high cover, meaning that I'd be belly crawling from here on in. I just kept the essentials on me: my bow; binos; rangefinder and facemask. From there it was 'Tiger Mode' all the way.

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had to now back out and come in at a completely different angle, crawling all the way.

About 45 minutes into the stalk I was taking a few risky movements between tussocks, when I was busted by a hind feeding about 70m in front of me. She had spotted movement and stood motionless, staring in my direction. The Ridgeline Grassland camo did its job though, as after staying dead still for 5 minutes or so, she decided I wasn't a concern, and went back to feeding. Hurdle number one out of the way.

I continued to edge closer to the back end of the bracken patch where I hoped the stag would still be feeding. Out of nowhere, a mob of roos came hopping through the tussocks, of course perfectly in my direction. I laid dead flat on the ground and didn't dare move a muscle. They stopped at about 5m when they spotted the camouflaged mess lying in the grass before them. They eyeballed me for a couple of minutes, deciding what to do. I silently prayed to the hunting gods, please don't let these buggers stuff up my stalk! Instead of spooking and making a racket, they changed direction slightly and continued on their way, making no fuss and not attracting the attention of any of the 15 or so deer feeding within 200m of me. Hurdle number two out of the way.

Another 20 minutes or so passed as I continued in Tiger Mode towards the spot where I last saw the stag, when finally I spotted his unmistakable antlers above the grass. Just the reassurance I needed to continue on this epic stalk. A moment later a fox came sniffing past at about 5m, luckily I spotted him first and again laid dead flat on the ground hoping he wouldn't notice me. He didn't, and just poked around straight past me without spooking. I had several deer within 80m by this stage and a fox spooking was the last thing I needed. Hurdle three out of the way.

I was getting close now, he was feeding by himself about 80m away, and the only hurdle remaining was a hind and her fawn feeding at an angle out to my left about 60m away. To get into position to shoot, I would have to crawl into fairly close range of the hind, hopefully she'd feed in a different direction. I felt like I needed to truly become the tiger to close the gap over that last stretch, this was the zone where I was at highest risk of being busted. ...

After concentrating on the stalk like I never had before, I found myself tucked in behind the last tussock I had available. The hind and her fawn were now feeding just 20m to my left, too close for comfort in this very limited cover. I thought everything through in my

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head...First step – try to get a range on him without getting busted. Second step, try to get up on my knees and draw my bow without being busted. Was this even going to be possible?

The bark of the hind rattled through my eardrums, after total silence in concentration over the last few hours. I had just lifted my bow arm, and was coming back to full draw. Alerted by the hind's bark, he looked straight in her direction. I came to full draw as smoothly as possible, holding the 30m pin high on his shoulder. Life went into slow motion like I never have experienced, with each millisecond passing I waited for him to turn and run before I'd let my arrow fly, thinking I'd tragically miss this opportunity I'd worked hard for. The pressure was immense, one of the most intense moments of my life so far. I heard the sound of the hind running through the tussocks, and in slow motion saw his head start to turn away to run for his life. ...

The arrow was on its way though, with mere milliseconds to spare, I watched it arc out across the tussocks, disappearing into the centre of the chest of the fleeing stag just as he turned to run. From slow motion my brain swapped into fast forward mode, as I watched the stag run across the flat towards cover at a rate of knots. He made it about 80m before dying mid stride, piling up well short of anywhere to hide. It was all over! I roared into the sky with sheer joy after executing the hardest stalk of my life so far, it's hard to describe the feeling of elation I experienced after making it happen and seeing the stag fall in sight. Life just doesn't get any better.

I walked back to camp to share the good news with Neil and Corrie, who were stoked for me. After an entertaining photo session came the obligatory visit to the check-in station, it was great to be returning again! That night was a late one, the celebrations were solid and my first full-body caping job saw me through till about 3am. For those interested he measured 101 2/8 Douglas Points.

I cannot thank Neil, Corrie and Jason enough for the opportunities I've had to hunt their prized hoggies with them. I have shared two of the most memorable hunts of my life with them and of course we're now good friends, I feel like part of the family when I'm there, even though I'm a Queenslander and hunt with a bow and don't pronounce 'sambar' correctly. You can check out their website at www.hogdeer.com.au. Also a big shout-out to the teams at Ridgeline Australia and Wild Stag Archery for providing me with the right gear to make it all happen!

