

GREG PENNICOTT SAFARIS



Tony Pizzata pays a long overdue visit to the Top End and on the way gets to achieve a long-held hunting ambition.

ARRIVING IN DARWIN, my nephew, Michael, and I were full of anticipation. I for one had hunted Australia extensively, but never visited the Top End. The Northern Territory is one of Australia's last frontiers. I'd heard the stories of croc-infested rivers such as the Adelaide, Roper, Mary and others. I was in the Territory to sample what it was really like to hunt buffalo, fish for barramundi and witness its unspoiled wilderness.

We'd booked a hunt with Greg Pennicott Safaris. Greg is a hard-core deer hunter from Tasmania who, among other things, travels to the Northern Territory each year for several months at a time, guiding local and international hunters to trophy buffalo bulls. Hunters can be picked up in Darwin or meet Greg and his guides in Katherine, about a three-hour drive south of the capital. Michael and I chose to hire a car in Darwin and drive to the rendezvous point as we had plenty of time and wanted to see the sights.

Tony waited years for a crack at a NT bull buffalo.

Heading south, we got the opportunity to visit some of the locations I'd only ever heard about. Areas many of my mates had traversed in search of buffalo, big Territory boars and barra. Hayes Creek, Pine Creek and the Adelaide River, all were within throwing distance of that drive from Darwin to Katherine.

Prior to leaving, Greg had given us directions to the motel. After checking in and meeting up with Greg and Ian, one of his guides, we all headed for the pool and a few cold drinks to discuss plans.

Hunts can be undertaken from May to the end of October; our trip was early October. At that time of year temperatures are in the mid to high 30s and as we'd later found out, with very little water around most of the wildlife congregated near rivers and scattered billabongs.

Although a five-day hunt, Greg's operation utilises several private stations within a half hour drive of Katherine where hunters can enjoy motel-style accommodation at the end of each day's hunting, or a

full-on wilderness adventure into Arnhemland where camps are located in buffalo-rich areas. Greg has access to the south-western corner of Arnhemland which covers some 7000 square kilometres. My choice was the wilderness hunt, as both Michael and I wanted to sample an area we'd heard so much about.

The following morning just before sunrise we headed south towards our destination and took the turn off to Arnhemland. I was surprised we hadn't seen much wildlife on the highway as we encountered few vehicles. Leaving the bitumen and following the dirt track into Jawoyn country, the scene changed. The birdlife began, a dingo darted out across the track and a solitary old man emu appeared. There's more to the hunt than the trophy, I reckon.

A little further down the track a small band of wild donkeys were feeding not 50m from the vehicle.

"Stop," I urged Greg, quickly pulling out the 300mm zoom lens and taking a few pics. A little further down the track a lone scrub bull appeared. Instead of running from us he ran towards the vehicle and came to a halt about 30m away. I took some photos as Greg drove the Hilux away and the bull disappeared into thick spear grass.

By mid morning Greg called smoko and offered up a drink and a snack. Proceeding on, Ian spotted a buffalo and although only an immature bull, its black horns

seemed to shine among the trees. The boys then proceeded to explain what constitutes a trophy bull, how to evaluate them and what exactly told them that bull was an immature animal. The further in we travelled the more wildlife we saw. Throughout the morning both Ian and Greg stopped at every sighting and evaluated each bull through binoculars, and I with the camera. Lots of representative trophies and the odd high scoring bull were seen.

Greg said he'd point out a shootable trophy but the final decision was ours as to whether the trophy appealed or not. Buffalo come in a variety of shapes – some hunters like the wide sweepers and others the horns that seem to curl round in a semi circle.

By lunch we'd spotted heaps of buffalo and a trophy looked certain. I wasn't too concerned with passing up a bull or two, besides, I'd offered my nephew first shot and until he'd got his bull, I was content to photograph and shoot nothing but video footage.

By mid afternoon, however, it became a little too much as we ventured past a mob of four or five mature bulls that'd obviously already seen us and were looking in our direction. Without lifting their binos Greg and Ian agreed there was more than one bull in this mob that warranted closer evaluation.

After several years of guiding in the Northern Territory

Michael's trophy buff.



alone, these guys knew their stuff, and a true big bull when they saw one.

Greg decided we should keep driving until out of sight, as the bulls appeared undisturbed and it'd allow us to sneak back on foot.

Over the hill and around the bend Greg cut the motor. I grabbed the video and Michael the 7mm Blaser. Greg and Ian had their binoculars and a .375 as back up, just in case. The bulls were about 400m behind us. Checking the wind direction, we headed away from the vehicle and moved towards them. I expressed surprise that we'd seen any buffalo at all in the area as it was still smouldering after a massive burn-off operation by aboriginal caretakers and park rangers. Greg said to the contrary: the buffalo don't mind the smoke and for some reason followed the outskirts of burnt out areas.

Moving slowly into the area we'd last seen the bulls we all continued to glass at regular intervals. Greg and Ian again spotted the small mob. Grey-black bodies on a black burnt background made for ideal camouflaged for the buffalo. The boys agreed that one out of the

three bulls standing was definitely a 'shooter'.

Then Ian spotted a fourth bedded down under a tree. The sheer size of this boy was enough to suggest he was a mature animal, but we couldn't make his horns out due to the fact he was partly obscured by a large termite mound. The bulls still had no idea we were there as everything, including a light breeze, was in our favour. At about 50m and after lots of video and photos, I wanted to move round for a better look at the bedded bull. Another few metres in and the other bulls were alerted and looked straight at us. Moving across to the bedded bull they all peered in our direction. This caused the bedded bull to stand and face away from us – his horns looked enormous. Greg said the bull was a shooter but the choice was up to Michael. Mick didn't need much coaxing and after a further look decided the bull was the shape and size he'd come all this way to take.

Positioning the video camera, I whispered to Mick to hold off until the bull turned broadside and then take a double lung shot. He was using my Blaser chambered in 7mm Rem Mag. As these animals are

Two Arnhemland buffalo caught in the open.



OUTFITTER PROFILE

very thick skinned, we were using Winchester Supreme Fail Safe ammo, which is hard as nails and guaranteed to hold together.

As the bull turned side-on his shoulder became partly obscured by a couple of small trees but within seconds Mick had taken the shot, hitting the bull through the front of the shoulders and causing it to turn and run. The bull crossed the creek and in seconds had scrambled up the bank, but was slowing down rapidly. Turning broadside and moving across to the other bulls the big buff stopped momentarily, giving Michael the opportunity for another well-placed shot. At the report the bull dropped instantly.

After a quick congratulations, Greg cautiously led Michael to his trophy. With a bit of movement still in the bull, Greg ordered a finishing shot and on his signal Mick fired again. As I approached, the bull's body and horn size got bigger and bigger. What a monster, we could barely move him!

The other bulls were long gone and after inspecting the old fella, Greg left Ian with us and headed back to bring in the Hilux. As the bull had crossed the creekbed he could only get the vehicle to within a couple of hundred metres, still, it was close enough for us to carry the cape and horns back.

After dozens of photos, some video and a welcome cold drink, we began the task of caping the buffalo out for a shoulder mount. Greg and Ian are both burly bushmen for which I was grateful; a buffalo head, horns and cape took both of them to carry back. A second trip by all four of us ensured everything

including packs, guns, cameras and equipment was returned to the vehicle. Sitting in the shade, Greg offered to cape and prepare the skin for Michael and salt it down to ensure the cape wouldn't spoil as Mick wanted to have his buff shoulder-mounted. About two hours later we were back on track and heading towards Pennicott's camp.

Scrub bulls, donkeys and other wildlife were spotted throughout the drive into camp. We must have counted more than 100 buffalo for the morning. By mid afternoon we neared the area we'd be camping in, when Ian spotted two bulls to the left of the track, several hundred metres in. The size of one caused Ian to motion Greg to pull over. Lifting their binos, they both confirmed another shootable bull.

"We've still got plenty of light," Greg mentioned. "Let's go take a look."

Again Greg grabbed the .375 and binoculars and I grabbed the Blaser 7mm. Michael agreed to carry the camera, as he'd already secured a fine bull and if this one was as big as the boys said, it may well be my turn for a shot. Again we approached from downwind and again crept to within a short distance of the bulls. This time I took my time to evaluate the bull myself as I was more content to shoot something that appealed to me rather than what the animal would score. The bull was every bit as long as Michael's, but this bloke spelt mass from the base of his horns right through to the tips. He looked super heavy and also formed a semi circle in shape – which is what I was after.

