

## **The Follow up – Alone with your fears.**

*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. However once they decide 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 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.

However' 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 in the chamber. 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.*



**Reinhardt and Ulrike with his 'Cane Grass' buffalo where I found and shot it.**

### **Andreas' buffalo that got away.**

It is 2008 and we have two friends hunting 1x1. I am guiding Jeff, from Luxembourg and Roland is looking after Andreas from Germany.

Day two finds Roland and Andreas back in camp with a magnificent, 105 SCI points, buffalo. By day 4 Jeff and I have not spotted anything better than around 90 points. However I have been making a point of passing through an area, not far from camp, where I spotted a very good trophy. However this week the cunning thing is keeping a different schedule to ours. On day six we decide to take a reasonable *'insurance'* trophy, an old bull with thick worn horns that score 93 points, then keep looking for something better. The morning of day eight yields nothing of note and we are back at camp enjoying our lunch when Roland and Andreas arrive looking very sheepish. It transpires that Roland has visited the area where I have been looking for my monster buffalo. On this occasion it has been standing out in the open not 50 meters off the track.

Andreas has quite carelessly taken an offhand, frontal shot from around 80 meters with the entirely predictable result of a pulled shot and wounded buffalo. To say I am annoyed is an understatement. To top the whole thing off they have lost the blood spoor quite quickly after around 100 meters. I rob Jeff of an afternoon's hunting and join them to determine where the bull might have gone. I have no luck. After tracking the buff for around 300 meters I lose the spoor in a very disturbed area where a herd of cows and young have joined him.

The following day, the last day of the hunt, I finally find Jeff a good buffalo bull, it is feeding on a relatively open plain but we are able to approach quite closely by way of a deep, dry creek bed.

At the closest point to the buffalo there is a tree atop a slight slope about 15 meters away from the creek, sufficient cover for one person but not two. From the tree to the buffalo was about 30 meters.

It is a beautiful, clear, crisp, dry season morning with light dew on the grass and not a breath of wind. The birds are chattering and you could almost hear the grass being torn off by the grazing buffalo, a perfect day to be out in the wilderness!

I tell Jeff to quietly work his way to the tree whilst the buffalo has his head down grazing then wait until he has a broadside opportunity.

However the buff lifts its head just as he makes the tree.

The bull has seen, or heard, movement but cannot make out what caused it. It reacts as mature water buffalo bulls are prone to do - it commences to walk slowly toward the object to satisfy its curiosity.

With no predators large enough to take on a buffalo bull, except man or another, bigger and bad tempered, bull they are not inclined to flee unknown intrusions until they have decided exactly what they are looking at. Closer and closer plods the buff.

I see Jeff put the rifle up then down, up then down, repeatedly.

Christ! Why doesn't he shoot, it is almost on top of him! I have my 404 primed and ready to go.

Finally the Browning 375 H&H I have loaned him bellows and the buff stumbles, turns, takes a second shot, another six or eight hopping steps and it expires the 350gr Woodleigh soft points doing their job to perfection.

'Why did you wait so long?' He looks at me sheepishly 'I kept putting the scope on him but all I could see was black! Then I realized I had it on 7 power and screwed it down to 2.'

*Another of my pet hates – people playing around with variable scopes.* 'I told you to leave it on 2x, you're shooting buffalo at 50 meters not rabbits at 100!'

The buffalo rough scored 98 SCI, a very nice trophy but not the same league as the one Andreas had wounded.

The hunt over, Jeff and Andreas flew out of camp the next day along with Roland, his guiding stint for the year completed.

I would be busy with a number of camp chores for the next few days along with a trip into town for supplies. However once that was out of the way I told Andreas I would spend some time looking for his wounded buffalo.

I planned my return to the spot to coincide with the same time of day. I was hoping that there would be some of the resident buffalo grazing in the area and I could track the general direction they ran for cover.

There were some buffalo, they did scamper off, I followed their tracks.

The area was quite heavily wooded intersected with numerous dry creek beds and small open clearings. However I knew that the river was a little over a kilometer from the point on the track where the shot was taken.

A universal response by animals, including humans, to severe wounds is the desire and need for water. Wounded animals will invariably go to, and hold close to, water.

I was hoping that the buffalo had taken off and either died of his wound or was camped up on the river with a ready supply of water. If the buffalo was dead I was hopeful that by following the direction of the fleeing buffalo today I would come across his stinking remains. If he was still alive I was banking on him holding close to the point where he got to the river. After a kilometer or so of tedious walking and checking for tracks along a straight direction to the river I finally cut some relatively old, big, running, buffalo tracks in the loose earth of the dry season. Beauty! This looks promising.

Eventually I get to about 200 meters of the river bank. Here the trees are larger and enjoying their shade are reasonably dense thickets of the annual growth of *Hiptis* to about a 2 meters high combined with perennial shrubs and eucalyptus saplings under the canopy of mature Paper Barks (*Melaluca*) and Eucalypts.

Very good concealment for a revenge seeking buffalo!

About 20 meters from the top of the bank I cut fresh buffalo bull tracks, a lot of tracks. Then I spot watery stools, thrashed saplings and more tracks.

Here the Mainoru River cuts a deep channel across the flood plain so it is about 3 to 4 meters down the semi vertical bank to the dry season flow. Every 50 to 100 meters or so there is a path carved into the bank by buffalo and cattle making their way to water or crossing points.

From the top of the bank I can see his tracks and watery droppings along the side of the river and thrashed and broken saplings. I have all the hallmarks of a buffalo in pain and reluctant to move very far. Needless to say I have my 404 Jeffery primed.

However a open the bolt to ensure there is one up the spout and slip the safety off.

I am nearly 2 Kilometers from my vehicle and 20 kilometers from the nearest person, my wife Sonja.

If something goes wrong and I am incapacitated it will be a long time before anyone finds me – perhaps too long.

Which direction to head? Initially into the wind is the safest course. If I strike nothing by the time his tracks peter out I will have to work the other, more dangerous, direction with the wind behind me.

Slowly and very cautiously I make my way through the tangled thickets, trying to make as little sound as possible. After I have covered about 200 meters I am dripping with sweat and getting exhausted by the 100% alert level I am operating at.

I catch some movement out of the corner of my eye. Across the river, about 40 meters in front of me is a large, very large, buffalo bull with very large horns gingerly making his way down to the water. I close the distance a little as he stops and takes some copious sips. I am now around 30 meters away by direct line of sight and about 4 meters above him. He is completely oblivious to my presence, a perfect ambush. However all I can think of is 'What can go wrong?'

I raise my rifle as he takes a step into the shallow water. 'Wait' I tell myself. 'Let him come across so you won't get wet retrieving the cape and skull.' Three or four steps and he is a few meters from the bank. Up with the rifle, crosshairs on his shoulder – Bang! Bolt up back forward down! Bang! Bolt up back forward down! Bang! I get three shots away in a couple of seconds as he blasts the 25 meters up the bank toward me. The last 400 gr Woodleigh soft nose hits when he is about 10 meters away!

My rifle empty I jump behind a paper bark then down the vertical bank and reach for cartridges. There is no sound from above as I gingerly make my way back up the bank, rifle at the ready.

All I find is a large, dark mass of very dead buffalo exactly where I was standing. I am exhausted from the mental strain and adrenalin flow from this classic encounter and flop down to enjoy the soothing flow of nicotine from my first cigarette since I commenced the follow up 2 hours before. After a second smoke and some water I make a quick call on my Satellite phone to Sonja in camp to let her know I am OK, I have found the buffalo and it is now dead.

I am now ready to examine the body in detail. Sure enough there are three 423 calibre holes in his near side shoulder and neck and one 375 entry hole on the front of the off shoulder with a matching ragged exit at the rear. I consider my options for retrieval and realize that there is no way I can get my vehicle anywhere within a kilometer of my present position from this side of the river.

However had I dispatched the buffalo when I first saw it on the other bank I could have utilized a track running a few meters away on the top and would not have to drag the trophy down and across from this one.

An hour later I have removed the cape and skull and dragged it down the bank, leaving it beside the water.

Two hours later I have returned to the Toyota and driven a circuitous route of about 20 kilometers to arrive across the stream from the buffalo and complete the retrieve.



**Andreas's buffalo where he fell after three shots from my 404 Jeffery.**

