

A proud author with the trophy water buffalo she hunted in Arnhem Land, Australia. She used a Sako .375 H&H, loaded with 300 gr bullets

Hunting water buffalo in Arnhem Land, Australia

Margaret Botha

After a busy year in the hunting field, the time had come for the big one of the season. This time we headed way north to where few had ventured before – Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia.

It was a dream come true and a privilege indeed to be invited on this hunt by Australian Outfitters Hotspur Outback Safaris. After an exhausting trip from South Africa, which involved several airports and bus stations, I eventually arrived in Katherine, where I was met by Mike Mackay, previous, owner of Australian Outfitters Hotspur Outback Safaris.

After a warm welcome, we headed straight for the grocery stores to buy a few items and then we hit the road. “How far, Mike?” was my first question. “Ah, only about six hours, mate,” he replied. My only thought was that I would probably be dead on my feet by then.

Expecting the same conditions and landscape as on my previous trip to Cape York, I was quite surprised to learn that what appeared to be a salt pan was actually the ocean and beach sand. Apparently we were going to hunt buffalo next to the ocean while camping on the beach – no one said anything about packing fishing rods! After a good meal around the campfire, it was off to bed for a well-deserved rest.

Up before daybreak, Mike, Craig Richardson, outfitter and

new owner of Australian Outfitters Hotspur Outback Safaris, Donna Partridge, one of the Heart of the Huntress ladies of Australia, and I headed out. Within about 2 km from camp, we spotted a beautiful water buffalo bull in the creek next to the road – definitely a trophy specimen. We stopped for a while to have a closer look. “This has to be the opportunity of a lifetime,” I thought, while admiring the size and beauty of this magnificent animal with its massive pair of horns. I was very tempted to take him because all the pressure would be gone then and I could simply tag along for the next ten days. Fortunately, my conscience got the upper hand and I decided to pass him up. This had to be a realistic walk-and-stalk hunt. According to Mike, it is quite common for hunters to run into the biggest buffalo of their trip on the first day.

Moving on, we came across many water buffalo herds, consisting mostly of cows with calves and young bulls. In the far distance we spotted another big bull with long horns but very thin bosses. However, the shape of the horns impressed me. The herd disappeared among dense reeds, grass and pockets of vegetation. Spotting a big bull among the herd, we decided it was time to start tracking them. After a few hours of tracking, we were getting closer. We could even hear them breathe as they brushed through the reeds. They had to be aware of our presence but did not act



Outfitter Craig Richardson, previous owner of Australian Outfitters Hotspur Outback Safaris, with Margaret Botha who spotted another big bull in the distance



Margaret doing all she can to make a clean kill.

as if they knew or even cared. My nerves were riding on a very sharp edge. This was definitely suicide but it was also exciting – just what I expected of a buffalo hunt!

In my mind I pictured the massive animal charging towards me, only allowing me a split second to act; a close-range head shot possibly the only thing to stop him ... One gets used to practising these shots on the range while shooting at a fast-moving cardboard box, with someone paddling his guts out to get it up to speed. I remember the first time was quite intense, accompanied by lots of nervous laughter as I realised how easily we humans break under pressure. Being in a real-life situation is totally different to being charged by a 'cardboard buffalo'! Was this the opportunity I had been waiting for my whole life? Yes – the hunt was on!

The big bull circled around us and we had no idea where he would come from. My heart was pounding in my chest. Then everything went quiet ... Our quarry had slipped away and only left a track that faded as we tried to follow it.

We decided to turn back. Getting lost in the dense bush, Mike used the opportunity to make a fire and boil the 'billy' for a quick 'cuppa'. Eventually, we decided to call it a day. Although we had spotted many buffalo, nothing came close to the first one of the trip that had set the bar.

At the crack of dawn the next morning, we headed south, covering many miles. In some areas smoke from what seemed to be veld fires from the previous day filled the air. Eventually, Mike decided to stop as he spotted a nice open area, trusting his gut feeling that this was the place.

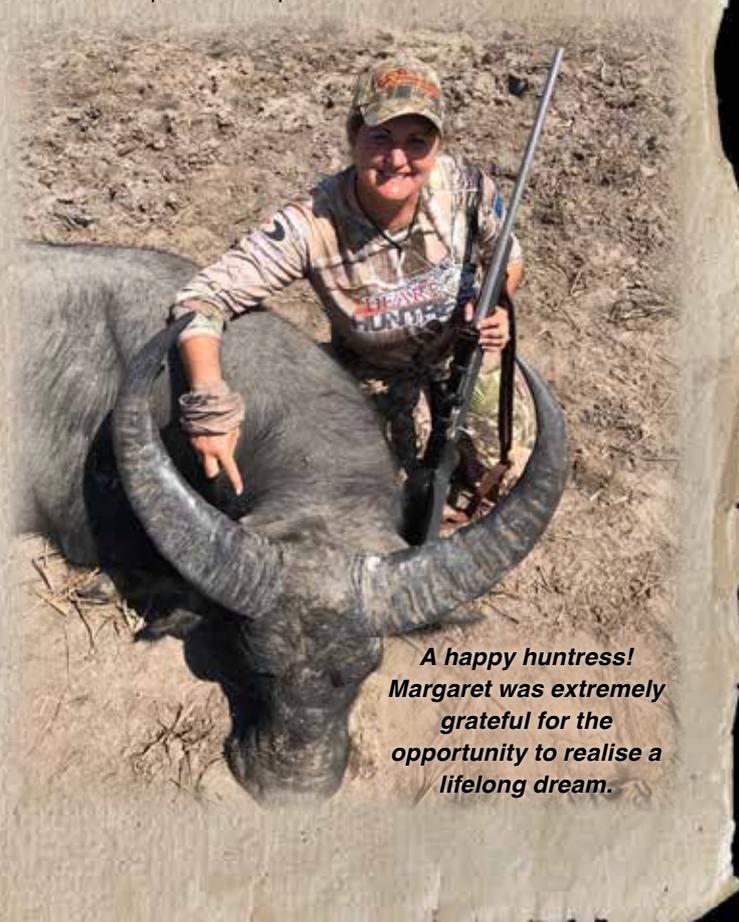
We got out and checked our gear. These buffalo are very smart – to get close to them, you have to try and think like them. Soon we came across signs of their activity in the area. Again we spotted a big bull but he outwitted us very quickly. We spent the morning chasing and tracking until lunchtime. Time to regroup and asses our situation. The smoke intensified as it appeared that there were still many fires around. This seemed to have spooked the buffalo that were hard to find due to poor visibility.

Just then Mike spotted another bull. This time we kept a close eye on him as we crept closer over the crunching, dry leaves, trying our best to minimise the noise. As he stood behind a tree about 100 yd away, we took up position, waiting for him to present us with a clearer view. We were

so absorbed in the stalk that we did not even notice the fires around us intensifying. The intense heat, thick smoke and poor visibility forced us to retreat as we found ourselves in a very dangerous situation. A poor shot would either put us in harm's way or wound the buffalo. No one would be very eager to go searching for a wounded buffalo in these conditions ...

On the way back, my gut instinct about animal behaviour proved correct. The floodplains were swarming with hundreds of buffalo, out in open and away from the smoke. It was an amazing sight and I tried to imprint it on my mind. It looked like a scene from a wildlife documentary on *Animal Planet*.

That night in camp we were joined by one of the traditional landowners and chief of this section of land, Kev, his wife and sister for dinner. With the distant crashing of waves on the beach, we stared into the fire while listening to Kev's calm voice as he spoke about past adventures.



A happy huntress! Margaret was extremely grateful for the opportunity to realise a lifelong dream.



A clean kill spells relief!

The author, Mike Mackay and Donna Partridge taking sunset photos on the last hunting day

The author spotting a big water buffalo bull after stumbling upon the herd.

The following morning there was a lot of animal activity around the camp. We decided to return to the area where we had encountered the big bull the previous day, hoping for a bit of luck. However, soon we were stuck in the thick vegetation, hardly able to move. We quickly found ourselves surrounded by hundreds of pigs. Donna had a close call when taking a close-up picture of a spider web. As the shutter clicked, a pig exploded from the bushes almost right underneath her. The expression on her face was priceless!

As we pushed on, the smells in the air were getting stronger. It almost smelled like a cattle farm, only there were no cattle in this area. We came across a billabong and navigated our way through it, catching up with Mike again on the other side. Out of breath, he told us that there was a very large bull in a herd a little further down on the other side of the billabong. So back we went.

We were fortunate to stumble upon the herd, spotting a big bull among them in the distance. But we needed to get closer. Slowly and carefully, we stalked to within about 90 yd of the herd. The bull instinctively moved in behind a cow with her calf. Patience was now of the essence. I readied myself, opting for the Sako .375 H&H with 300 gr projectiles and fitted with a Bushnell Elite 3200 scope. I settled down, calm enough to hear my own heartbeat.

The mother and calf moved away but still I had no clear shot, with branches and trees blocking my view. All I could see was the bull's legs and belly. We needed to see his entire

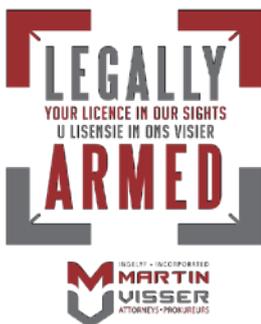
body to make sure we picked the right one. As he moved into the open, we were able to confirm that this was indeed the one. The calf was gambolling around his mother, constantly blocking our view. Finally, the bull presented a clear shot. He lifted his head for a moment, as if smelling something – the ideal shot opportunity. The next time he did this, I would be ready for the perfect shot right behind the ear. The bull lifted his head again, and without a moment's hesitation, I squeezed the trigger. The bullet struck behind the head and he folded to the ground. Immediately I chambered another round for a follow-up shot. In a calm voice Donna whispered, "He's down." It became clear that the bull had died on the spot. We sat still for a while to give the herd time to absorb the activities around them and pay our final respect to the large bull. Then we chased them off and they disappeared into the wilderness. Following our safety drill, we approached the buffalo to confirm the kill. What a magnificent animal! He was everything I had hoped for. A mixture of emotions washed over me and I was grateful for having achieved what I wanted in the way I had intended.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I had to realise a lifelong dream and hunt such a magnificent creature in this sacred land. My heartfelt thanks go to the traditional owners of the land for their blessing, and of course to Australian Outfitters Hotspur Outback Safaris for the magnificent trophy. This special hunting experience will remain with me for the rest of my life. 🦏

Cheers mate!

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