

Southern New South Wales has been good to me over the past 30 years of hunting. Goats, foxes and rabbits were almost a weekly event in my earlier days. Then there was the dogging thing, where most weekends I'd travel south in search of big boars with dogs. In those days, mountain pigs were in good numbers and

doggers were comparatively fewer in number than today.

The memories of those days are many and so was the tally of pigs we racked up. I remember on one particular trip, while out with the dogs on foot, encountering a small mob of deer and on a later trip shooting one for meat. The property owner said they

were fallow deer and one of six introduced species available throughout Australia. My first stag was little more than a fork horn, with basically no palms, but lots of points. Needless to say, I'd been bitten by the trophy hunting bug 25 years down the track, of all six deer species, fallow are still my favourite.

FAVOURITE



TONY PIZZATA RELIVES THE TAKING OF HIS TWO MOST PRIZED FALLOW TROPHIES.

In the years since I've hunted them plenty of times and of the many stags I've seen, two trips stand out as ones that I'll never forget. The first took place in the month of February. I'd been scouting the property for weeks in an effort to locate something bigger than I'd already secured in previous years. The stags were now fully

formed and in hard antler. There were several that looked promising and sure to go over the magic 200 Douglas point mark. It was a cool morning, as I anxiously waited for Joe to arrive. With first light breaking I could see the Cruiser slowly making its way up the track towards our rendezvous point.

I'd hunted here with Joe on numerous

occasions. Joe's a real gentleman, with many years of hunting experience and a pleasure to be out with. Pulling up beside me we started yarning and later loaded our packs and headed off for the day's hunt.

It was now light enough to glass, although a patch of low-lying fog covered most of the flat, open country below. Joe suggested we head up high and work our way down to the flats. This would work out as ideal as the fog would hopefully lift by the time we got down into the lower areas. In addition, the deer, if there were any on the flats, should be making their way up by then to the safety of the bush and an intercept might work out well. Reaching the top of a scrubby knoll we'd visited many times over previous years, we unloaded our day packs and settled in to do some glassing. Immediately, we saw deer on the opposite face. A short time later we spotted more but all were does, with a few spikers thrown in. The stags were still in bachelor groups and would remain together until they had shed their velvet. Once fully rubbed, the odd stag will mingle with the does, but the big boys usually disappear into the timber until the rut comes along in April.

Now well into the morning, we'd glassed from several vantage spots and seen lots of

THE 253 DOUGLAS POINT STAG.

FALLOW



ABOUT OUR FALLOW

Before we get into some of those memorable moments, let me tell you a little more about the deer.

- The first wild heard of fallow deer was introduced into Australia during the 1830s and the species is now the most widespread of all six deer species available in this country. A mature fallow stag stands about 90-100cm at the shoulder and weighs 70-80kg on the hoof. Females are referred to as does and are comparatively smaller than stags, standing around 75cm at the shoulder.
- This is not to say that a variable difference in size won't occur depending on feed availability and the origins of that particular strain of deer. For example, the Tasmanian strain is, in fact, larger in body size than those found in southern NSW.
- Fallow come in four main colour variations: white, menil (cream with white spots), red and black (ranging from light to dark brown coats). Unlike the other five species found in Australia, fallow stags have palmated antlers of which no two sets are ever identical. This is what make them so appealing to hunt, as each stag has a different appearance.



THE 232 DOUGLAS POINT STAG WHERE IT FELL.

deer and the odd group of stags, but nothing worth a closer look. Dropping down in elevation through the scrub, again we encountered deer – this time they were all stags. The bachelor mob numbered around eight or 10 and apart from a few younger models, most were respectable heads. At no more than 200m, Joe and I continued to glass the mob. One was definitely a shootable buck. His brow and trey tines were strong, guard tines both present and his palms were both even, but he did

lack a bit of antler length. Although a very respectable head I decided to pass him up, as I was sure he wasn't any better than what I'd taken in previous years.

The stags hadn't seen or detected us but had begun to graze away, so without disturbing them, we backed away in the opposite direction.

Within minutes we'd reached the flats. The fog had now lifted and a sunny, clear morning with a faint breeze in our faces signalled near perfect conditions. It was still cool enough for the deer to be down low, although after lots of glassing and a few sightings, we were sure the big stags had definitely knocked off for the day.

Joe was eager to head back up into the hills, and I agreed another look wouldn't hurt, so after having a quick feed, we headed back to where we'd hunted earlier. This time, however, we took a slightly different route in an effort to glass the same area, but from a different angle. Reaching the base of the hills we entered the bush. This neck of the woods is one of the prettiest spots on the property, as the entire timbered hillface is covered in low lying bracken fern and flowering shrubs. The low, green cover is a haven for foxes, rabbits and the odd wombat and a great bedding spot for undisturbed deer, as we'd

THE AUTHOR WITH HIS FALLOW STAG THAT WENT 232 DOUGLAS POINTS.



soon find out.

Joe and I entered very cautiously, making sure we both glassed ahead at regular intervals. "Down," he whispered "there's deer ahead." The deer were still on their feet but hadn't seen us, as they were moving away in the opposite direction.

At no more than 100m away and both flat on our stomachs, we peered through the bracken, not needing the binoculars to judge the biggest stag amongst them. He looked enormous with good length, good palms and very long point. I knew he was a lot bigger than I'd ever seen, let alone taken. Both Joe and I lifted our binoculars to confirm all the desired characteristics were there. Joe gave me the nod to shoot and I quickly but cautiously got ready to take the shot. The entire mob numbering about a dozen and they had now stopped, with several deer bedded down. The big fellow



TONY ALONGSIDE HIS GIANT 253 DOUGLAS POINT TROPHY FALLOW.

turned broadside and began to move off to their right, obviously heading for his own bedding area up higher. Big stags will often bed away from the rest of the mob, as there's less chance of them being detected by predators on their own. He wasn't going any further though, as the .270 roared and the stag dropped instantly. The rest of the mob disappeared in all directions. A few minutes later and we probably wouldn't have seen them.

Racing over to the big-bodied stag, I lifted his antlers for a look. Joe was as excited as I was and after a heap of photos and some video, I field-dressed him and returned for the 4WD to pick him up. The stag later scored 232 Douglas points and by far the biggest free range fallow I'd ever taken.

For the following two seasons I continued my annual pilgrimage to the

property and never saw a stag that went close to that 232 Douglas point animal. In 2004, I headed down for a hunt as usual, but this time with friend Owen Kay of Great Southern Hunts, who now guides on the property. Owen knew my standards were high, as I'd already taken two good stags off the place. Besides, shooting a stag to hang its antlers in the garage seems a waste to me when you already have a couple of good heads mounted on the wall.

At first light I met up with Owen at the front gate. Upon entering the property a small mob of does ran across in front of us. The deer were certainly down low and with very little water around, feed was scarce and the paddocks almost bare. I'd never really seen it that bad and half expected to see poor antler growth for the year due to the conditions.

A quick drive around several of the

paddocks without upsetting the deer too much, or getting too close, saved a lot of legwork. Provided we kept our distance they didn't seem to mind. All the deer seemed to be mobbed around the base of the hills and still out feeding in the open. Parking the vehicle, Owen and I grabbed our packs and headed back towards them. Although we'd spotted them from miles away in the vehicle, they were too far away to judge antler quality, but it did save a lot of walking and gave us a direction to head in for the morning. Sidling around the scrubby hillfaces, we finally reached a good spot well above the deer and settled in for a long and thorough glass of the surrounding area.

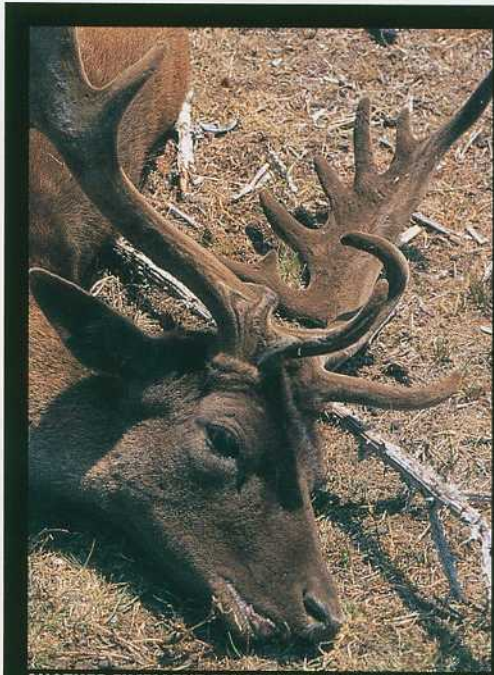
Throughout the morning we glassed dozens of stags and on a few occasions, pulled out the spotting scope for a closer look. Owen spotted a small mob of three

FALLOW DEER HUNTING

stags off on their own and all looked mature animals. They were at least a kilometre away and down in a rocky gut, feeding around the base of some boulders. Soon after I produced my spotting scope for a closer look. Winding it up to 45x power, the stags were drawn closer and closer until their antlers were plainly visible. All were indeed nice trophies and all were well above average heads.

Owen and I both knew the stags would probably bed where they were, as the spot not only provided shelter and reasonable feed, but seclusion from the many frequently used tracks on the property. We both glassed the trio for more than an hour as they were magnificent to watch. Each stag had its own individual look, shape and form, so typical of the fallow deer.

As there didn't appear to be any huge stags in among the other mobs visible from where we sat, Owen and I decided to move down to the unsuspecting trio below for a closer look. We moved cautiously, using the scattered bush as cover and stopping from time to time to ensure they were still in the same spot. Closing the gap to about 300m, we snuck in below some bushes to break up our outline and again began glassing them. The trio had now bedded down, but another two stags had appeared and they too were around the same vintage, sporting well above average antlers. Again we set up the spotting scope and in no time were methodically inspecting each stags antlers for all the typical points and symmetry. Brow, trey, guard and even the odd basal snags on one stag were visible. Owen pointed out the biggest stag in the mob and estimated him to be around 225 Douglas points. He had a totally different shape to the big fellow I'd shot a couple of years before, with much longer palms but shorter points. He was indeed a magnificent trophy.



ANOTHER EXCELLENT STAG TAKEN ON AN EARLIER TRIP.

"What do you think," Owen whispered. "I can't make up my mind," I replied.

By now the sun was quite high and the morning was getting warm, which meant the stags weren't going anywhere as they were now all bedded down, so we had plenty of time to discuss and make plans. I'd become accustomed to passing up the odd buck, and after a little video footage and a few photos, Owen and I decided to move on and give the lower country another look.

Later that afternoon we continued to glass likely spots and again saw lots of stags. But nothing near as good as we'd seen that morning. I started to doubt whether I made the right decision in passing up that mob. It was at that point that Joe exclaimed "Look at that big fella over there". Immediately I saw him and he was huge, a lot bigger than what I ever seen, towering in length and mass over the rest of the antlers

around him. Was he just a mature stag among immature bucks or was he a once in a lifetime trophy. A closer look revealed he was a real giant. Owen confirmed the fact, as I reached for the bolt-action. Instantly, I knew he was what I was after – a real monster.

As we watched the deer slowly move away, this stag appeared to leave the mob and head into a small bush on his own. Watching him through binoculars, he eventually bedded down and placed his chin on the ground and laid his antlers back along his body. He was a smart old timer. The whole episode was unbelievable.

Owen suggested I should stalk in alone as he was a very wary buck and the less attention we attracted the better. I agreed, and dropping my pack, chambered a round and lifted the bolt for safety. On my approach, if the stag spooked or detected me I'd have to take an offhand shot. Owen watched with binoculars glued to his eyes as I approached downwind of him. Closing the gap to less than 100m, I expected him to bolt at any moment. It seemed to take forever to reach the bush he was in, but knowing he was there, I knew the closer I got the better my chances of making an offhand shot. At 60m I was out of cover, but still had the wind in my favour. It was at this point I shouldered the rifle with the bolt now down and the safety off. All I had to do now was edge my way forward and wait for him to break cover. At 50m or so all hell broke loose and the big stag broke cover, heading away from me. He sounded like a buffalo charging through the bush. Placing the cross-hairs on the back of his head I took a short breath and slowly squeezed the trigger. An instant *thump* confirmed a hit. The stag dropped instantly and never knew what hit him, the bullet striking him high through the back of the neck. The sight of him breaking cover will stay in my mind forever.

Owen ran over shouting for joy and had captured the whole event on video for me. After photos and more video we caped him out. I'd never really bothered too much with scoring antlers but this one had both of us guessing. Later I had the head officially scored at 253 Douglas Points, probably the biggest head ever recorded off that property.

These days I'm just as happy to go along for the ride with my son to film and photograph them, saving my bullets for the other five deer species available in Australia. ■