

# RUSA REVISITED

**D**estined for Sydney's South Coast, I could barely see the road as I squinted to make out the white centre lines. The large amber sign said heavy fog ahead. Yeah, no kidding! Cautiously weaving my way down the dark, lonely highway at 4am my mind wandered back to the numerous other trips I'd made earlier in the season, watching, learning and trying to pattern their habits. Sydney's South Coast rusa herds were in good numbers, but getting legal access was almost impossible unless you knew a local. I was hunting with friend, Clint, who's passionate about his hunting and has a couple of excellent properties on which to hunt for rusa deer.

The plan was to meet at the gate at around 4.30am and enter on foot to a small grassy knob situated well above the farmer's house, where we would sit and wait until first light for a thorough glass of the area. Clint had spent three or four mornings a week in this spot and had patterned the deer's movements on the property. The deer were coming out in two particular clearings each morning at around 4.30am and would feed there until around 7am before re-entering the bush to bed. By late morning, they would sometimes reappear for a short while and then be gone until late evening. Although many opportunities had presented themselves over the last few months, the stags were still in velvet and hence a waste to shoot. Now, late May, although still in velvet their antlers were hard so Clint had been kind enough to offer me a crack at a big one.

Just before first light, Clint and I were positioned approximately 200m from where the deer usually came out. Heading in early was a good idea, as we wouldn't spook the deer, nor would they see us. The morning air was crisp but very still as I pulled the powder puffer out to check the direction of the air's thermal flow. As it slowly floated uphill behind us, I at least knew we wouldn't be detected from below. By 5am the distant horizon became visible. As the small, clear openings below were completely surrounded by scrub and bush, it was still too early to make out any sign of deer on them. On a clear night with a full moon, however, I suppose you'd make the deer out a lot



**ABOVE: Pizzata with his trophy rusa.**

easier, but without being able to closely evaluate an animal, it's simply better to wait for first light.

As time marched on, I began glassing through my 10x Swarovski binos and scanned the dark openings for any sign of movement. I could see a faint amount of light on the grassy flats and could now begin to distinguish the bushline around it. "What are those dark spots on the open area," I asked Clint, "Are they cattle". "He's got no stock, give me a look," he replied. "They're deer,"

he whispered back excitedly.

Within seconds we'd regained our composure and continued glassing for movement. Before long I could now quite plainly see the deers' silhouettes. There were three right in the middle of the opening and three on the edge of the scrub. Although it was still too dark to make out any antler, the deer at the back of the group was definitely a lot bigger in body size from the rest. Minutes seemed like hours, as we sat patiently for a little more light to be able to accurately assess the deer and their

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**ABOVE:** The author (left) and Clint pack out the meat and antlers after their successful New South Wales South Coast hunt.

headgear, if any. As the sun began to light the valley below, so it did our quarry.

Continuing to glass the mob, another animal appeared from the scrub. Now plainly visible, we counted a total of seven animals and all were stags. Surprisingly enough, all had six points, with no spikers present. Inner and outer tops on two stags were almost even, which indicated they were immature animals. Three other stags revealed inner tops slightly longer than the outer points, which still indicated a non trophy for this year, but potentially good stags for the future. The two stags in the middle, however, were both what seemed respectable trophies. Although the longer antlered of the two had long inner tops, he was also quite heavy in the main beams. Definitely a shooter.

Clint and I quietly debated the stag's antler length. We agreed the best would reach 30 inches and the second probably about 28 inches. It's hard to accurately judge antler length on any stag when in velvet, but this one had the heaviest set I'd ever seen or had an opportunity to shoot at so I decided to take the shot. We knew the stag was in hard antler, as a friend of mine had already secured a

stag several days prior and it too, although in velvet, was hard as a rock.

Sitting up against a large gum tree, surrounded by thick lantana bush, I slowly slid the bolt of the Blaser closed and took a steady rest across my knees. From here, the distance was a little more than 160m and I felt quite confident at taking the shot. Besides, to try and get any closer would mean I'd have to drop down in elevation and loose sight of them. Taking careful aim, I slowly put pressure on the trigger, as I knew the Blaser had a clean, short trigger pull. As the 7mm pill left the barrel, I momentarily lost the sight picture. Apparently the other mature stag had disappeared at the shot and the rest had departed, single file, into nearby bush. My stag although fatally hit, slowly wandered across to the opposite side and disappeared into the lantana that surrounded the entire flat.

I knew damn well the stag was running on empty, but rusa are a very large bodied animal and sometimes even a fatal hit takes a minute or two to take effect. I'd hit the stag directly behind the shoulder, knowing the projectile would enter the vitals and bring him down quickly. As the gullies the deer had

entered were a maze of tangled vine, scrub and lantana bush, I didn't want to enter the area unless I absolutely had to, so I allowed the stag 10 minutes before searching for him.

Gathering our gear, we headed down towards where the stags had fed. The first spot I walked to was where the stag stood when I took the shot. Here, I could clearly see their prints in the long green grass across to where they'd disappeared to. My stag, however, had made his escape in a slightly different direction. Following the tracks across to a hole in the tangled maze of bush, I looked for any sign of blood but saw nothing. But the stag's tracks were prominent and led into the dark tunnel ahead. Entering the bush, I expected to see the stag at any moment but was disappointed to find the track continued on. Without messing the prints up too much, Clint and I followed them in further. I was surprised at the network of tracks that weaved their way up, down, across and in every direction under the huge bush canopy we had entered. With still no sign of blood on the trail, my hopes of finding him began to fade. We tracked the stag for a further 20m or so, eventually hitting a



**ABOVE:** A nice rusa stag – probably about 28 inches in antler length – spotted on the edge of the bushline.

well used deer track and loosing all sign of him.

Certain that the stag had to be down and in there somewhere, we kept looking. After hours searching, we found my prize. The stag had gone down the track, but doubled back across to where the other deer had departed and then run out of steam. We were searching too low. Approaching the vine entangled deer, its antlers soon became visible and I couldn't believe my eyes. He was surely in excess of 30 inches and a lot bigger than expected. Clint decided to leave me with the trophy and head back up for our packs.

I thoroughly enjoyed that moment and will surely never forget it. Returning shortly after with all the gear, Clint and I took lots of photos and recounted the morning's events. After skinning and caping was complete, we began the steady climb out.

Later that day we measured the antlers: 33-1/2 inches on his left side, 32 inches on his right and extremely heavy in the main beams. Looking back at that trip, I often wonder how big the second stag must have really been. He too would have exceeded the magic 30-inch mark. After stripping the velvet, boiling the skull out and allowing a couple of weeks for all to dry, the antlers shrank about a half inch either side. My trophy was later mounted by well known taxidermist-Mario Filippi of Wollongong, NSW. ■

*A hunter and shooter for more than 30 of his 46 years, Tony Pizzata is a keen fox whistler and pig hunter but regularly succumbs to the lure of big game hunting both in Australia and overseas.*