

OUTFITTER PROFILE - STONEY CREEK STATION

By TONY PIZZATA.



This outfitter not far from Brisbane can cater for deer hunters of all levels of ability.

BACKGROUND:
The author's stag in full rut.

IT WAS MID JULY and the stags were in full rut. The surrounding hills were barely visible as we sat there in awe, listening the short guttural roar of a rusa stag in a nearby valleys systems. As daybreak progressed, the outline of our surrounds became more visible, until not one but several stags could be heard voicing their dominance in the hills around us. I owed this experience to a recent visit to Safari Club International's annual show, which at the time was held in Coffs Harbour, N.S.W. It was there I met up with Geoff and Maureen Bontoft who own and operate Stoney

Creek Station. Geoff had brought along some pretty impressive red stag racks; world class standard in fact, heads I presumed were from New Zealand or somewhere in Europe. After quizzing him on were they were from, Geoff filled me in on his operation.

Stoney Creek Station is situated in the Brisbane Valley, only about two hours north/west of Brisbane. It's there Geoff and Maureen run a manageable heard of Brahma cattle and in addition have some two thousand acres of virgin bushland behind wire. Reds, chital, fallow and rusa deer are all in good numbers and much to Geoff's dislike, there's also a healthy number of dingoes to cause havoc when the does/hinds are fawning. In addition, there's free range reds and rusa running the fences on the outside, but more on that a little later. Geoff was kind enough to

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Red stags are also available.

offer me the opportunity for a look around when next up in his neck of the woods, to which I gratefully accepted. He's written several articles for *Sporting Shooter* magazine over the years, one of which I recall was a Russian Brown bear hunt he undertook several years ago, securing not one but two monster boars, each in excess of nine and a half feet tall. In addition, he's hunted the U.S. for elk, New Zealand for several species and Africa for a large number of plains game, not to mention Australia and New Caledonia. A recent trip to Brisbane earlier this year gave me the opportunity to visit Stoney Creek Station and take a first hand look at what it has to offer. If I was going to shoot anything, I'd decided it would probably be a rusa stag, as they were supposedly in full rut and very vocal.

It was mid afternoon as I recall, as I entered the front gates and followed the track up to the main homestead. On arrival, Geoff and Maureen offered me a warm welcome along with a hot brew, before offering to show me around. While I was sitting in his trophy room admiring his fine collection, Geoff commented on how privileged and lucky he was to be able to travel the world on so many exciting hunts. "That's part of the reason I've started a hunting ranch here at home" he commented. "I've met so many business people who didn't have the time to travel, or those who weren't fit or healthy enough to do so". "Then there were hunters who simply didn't have access to good property, but wanted to experience a successful hunt". "Our goal is also to provide a once in a lifetime opportunity to take a trophy that most would never be able to find in the wild". "Here at Stoney Creek, we pretty much assure success and a hunt can be as hard or easy as you want to make it. I agreed and could see the logic in his thinking.

Accommodation for hunters at Stoney Creek Station was first class, but as I later found out, there were other options if you so desired. About fifty meters from the main homestead, situated just below the bush line was a 4-5 bedroom bungalow with all facilities. A large lounge room with colour TV and video player, main bathroom with some en-suite bathrooms as well, washing machine, kitchen and a fridge filled with snacks and plenty to drink. Oh, and by the way, there's no need for a sleeping bag, as the beds were made and towels provided. Next we visited what I call "The Hanger" for more than one reason. About two minutes down the track, we pulled up at a rather large out building. Pushing the huge doors open, Geoff beckoned me in for a look. "We've got a walk in cool room for storage of meat and skins over



Author and Geoff with his magnificent 36 inch plus rusa stag.

here, a gas stove for boiling out the heads; and stainless steel benches for caping and processing on in this corner over here” Geoff exclaimed. The other reason I called it the hanger was the fact that Geoff has his own little four seater helicopter, an R44, complete with leather trim and shiny finish, parked in there. “We don’t hunt out of it” Geoff explained, “but I do offer our hunters a joy ride around the outskirts if they so wish after their hunt is complete.

Well, enough with the profile, let’s get on with the hunt. The first morning was cool and crisp, but nothing like what I was use to further South in New South Wales where I hunt. Eager to get out for a look, I sat waiting for Geoff to arrive in the 4WD to pick me up and head down to the hunting area. Although only about a kilometre away, I could faintly hear a rusa stag somewhere up the valley, roaring his dominance in the stillness of the morning. It was still quite dark, but I knew Geoff wasn’t far away. Within moments he arrived and after loading my gear, we were off to the hunting area. Driving across a large open flat, Geoff parked the 4wd and in no time we were sitting on the side of a nearby hill, waiting for the first signs of dawn to set a path for us. By now, several rusa stags had become quite vocal in and around the area we were positioned and in what seemed a very short time, daybreak had arrived and found us stalking in on the closest vocal stag for a look. Just around the corner and over the hill we saw him, a magnificent stag in anyone’s books and probably about 34 inches in length. He had two does with him, and a spiker and young six pointer were also nearby. The stag threw his head back and continued to grunt as I captured the whole event on film and snapped off a few photos. Prime time to hunt stags are obviously when they are rutting as their mating calls give there location away and make them a lot easier to find. Shortly after, we decided to back away, as it was early days and I wanted a look around.

Slipping back over the hill and into a creek bed, we followed the calls of another stag. Two reds were spotted not far ahead and a little further on, a mob of chital deer with a young stag and a few spikers were

also seen. About a half hour passed before we finally managed to get a look at the next stag, as this fellow was chasing a doe and had managed to move location several times. The good thing about this block was the fact that there was plenty of cover and the terrain varied dramatically from valley to valley. There was a mixture of fern choked gullies, with steep, semi open faces and rolling hills that resembled the terrain I’ve hunted in New Caledonia in certain areas of the property and in others, there were lantana choked gullies, dry creek beds and long grass that resembled the South Coast where the rusa frequent in New South Wales. No wonder they were doing so well here. As the rut was in full swing, the fresh wallows were frequent and so were the encounters. By lunch time we’d managed to stalk in on several stags and lots of hinds, both my cameras were doing overtime. Shortly after, Geoff and I decide to make our way back to the vehicle for some lunch and then head out to a different part of the property to see what else was about.

After lunch Geoff drove some three or four kilometres to the very highest point of the station and pulled up at a well maintained outhouse. I must admit, I’d forgotten where we were and asked who lived there. Geoff explained this was another means of accommodation for hunters who wanted to be well away from the homestead and in amongst the deer. The outhouse had all facilities including solar power and kitchen and bathroom facilities. “Some small groups prefer to be up here doing their own thing” he explained. “There are several tracks running through the block and if you haven’t been here before, getting back to the main homestead can be tricky, as all the hills look the same”. Leaving the vehicle Geoff and I headed off once again for a look. More chital were spotted across the valley feeding on the opposite face and a lone fallow stag was bedded in the shade of a nearby tree. A moment later, a couple of red deer hinds cut across below us, but soon disappeared into the scrub. The rusa had gone silent throughout most of the day except for one that could be heard several ridges away. Glassing from high up was a lucky dip as you simply didn’t know what was going to appear next.

Later that afternoon the rusa started up again and in no time we had located more than one stag either wallowing, chasing hinds or thrashing bush and in one area we actually stalked in on a pair of mature stags fighting. With only an hour of light remaining, we headed back towards the vehicle and drove back to where we had entered, spotting lots of reds and chital on the way. At one point we watched a rusa stag and hind emerge from the bush only to find another big bodied stag stiff legged and ears back come in to challenge him. In the fading light they clashed antlers until there efforts led them back into the scrub and out of sight. Soon after, Geoff dropped me off at the hunters quarters to clean up and later, I met up with Maureen and Geoff for dinner. Maureen’s home cooked meals and deserts were second to none, I’m sure I left the property with a bigger waste line than when I arrived...

The following morning Geoff was there like clockwork to pick me up for my final days hunting. As we approached the hunting area, Geoff spotted a rusa stag running the bottom fence on the outside. “Quick



A nice rusa stag.

INSET: Rusa Stag caught roaring.

RIGHT: The living quarters at Stoney Creeks are modern, air-conditioned and comfortable.

shoot him", he muttered. "He's a wild one and will end up damaging the fences". As we approached and set up camera, the stag made haste his escape and was gone. Geoff explained that during the red roar which occurs in April, the wild reds do much the same thing and as such, he insists on cleaning them up. "Even the red and rusa hinds that venture too close have to be eradicated" he explained. "If they are hinds on the outside, they lure the stags out and if stags run the wire, they often smash the fences trying to get in for the hinds". The second day progressed similar to the first, with lots of shoot able stags ranging from approximately 30 to 34 inches in length. All appeared with spikers, and immature six pointers, so there were plenty of up and coming stags for the future. Most of the chital deer had fawns at foot and so too did many of the rusa hinds. Geoff assured me there were even a couple of stags that went close to 40 inches in length, but these old bucks were seldom caught out in the open. Through out the day we continued to see reds and chital, but my mind was set for a big old rusa stag. Mid afternoon came quickly and after some two hundred photos and some awesome video footage I managed to spot the same very first stag I'd seen on day one. Yes, he was still grunting and carrying on with the same hind, a spiker and another smaller stag.

A closer look this time revealed a nice heavy set of antlers. Probably better than I'd taken in New Caledonia or the South Coast of N.S.W. for that matter. The stag was unaware of our presence as he continued to chase the old girl around, ducking in and out of view through thick scrub and bush. Shortly after he followed her over the hill and into an open, grassy basin. This was my chance, as light was slowly fading and it was my last day of the hunt. "I'm gunna take him" I whispered to Geoff, grabbing the video camera and passing it to him. Sneaking around the corner and over the rise, there he was in full view not 100 meters away. Grunting and snorting, he followed her every footstep until the hind decided to make a short dash

up the hill. The stag just stood there knowing she wasn't going far. Again he laid his head back and again grunted his dominance. His antlers were almost three quarters the length of his body, I knew he was the best I'd seen to date, and as the Blaser 7mm Rem. Mag came up, the stag looked in my direction for a moment. Centering the crosshairs on his shoulder I slowly squeezed the trigger. The stag took a leap in the air, circled and dropped to the ground. What a finish to my hunt and what's more it was all on film. The hind and younger stag fled as Geoff and I approached my trophy. Lifting his head we both knew he was going to exceed 34 inches in length. Later back at the "hanger", a tape measure confirmed 36 1/2 inches in length and excellent brow tines.

The following morning as tradition has it, I was invited up for a ride in the helicopter. The view for the air was magic and confirmed what Geoff had mentioned about the wild deer in the area. A short run around the perimeter of his property and adjoining bush land revealed a few other small herds of wild deer not far from where the Stoney Creek Hunting area was located. Heading back to Brisbane that afternoon, meant I didn't have time for another look at the wild stag running the bottom fence line, but a phone call the following evening from Geoff revealed another hunter caught up with him the next day, it measured almost 33 inches in length. Stoney Creek has been operating for two years now and this is the first year that rusa have been offered and already three have scored in the top 10 ranking. Last year at least 8 reds scored higher than 310 S.C.I. with several fallow taken in the 240 D.S. range and a huge chital stags scoring 194 D.S. Many thanks to Geoff and Maureen for their hospitality and the opportunity to shoot a stag I'd otherwise probably never have the opportunity to encounter anywhere else. ■

For a brochure or further details regarding a hunt contact Geoff and Maureen Bontoft, Stoney Creek Station, tel. 07 5424 7200.