

RETURN TO THE CAPE



“Mark managed another good boar before the sun had started to heat up”

ABOVE: Pigs abounded around lily-strewn waterholes - typical of Starthburn Station.

RIGHT: Mark and guide Alisdair with the best boar for the trip,
FAR RIGHT: Author with yet another nice boar.



Tony Pizzata goes back to Strathburn Station... and it's better than ever.



LAST YEAR'S TRIP to Cape York had definitely produced the goods for me. Lots of tusky boars, high pig numbers and an abundance of other wildlife to admire was what Strathburn Station offered me. As the 4wd cruised along the Peninsula Development Road bound for Musgrave our final fuel stop, I couldn't help but ponder the memories of that previous trip. This year, however, I was up there about a month earlier than my previous journey. In fact, it was only the first few days of August and a lot milder in temperature and weather conditions. Dawn and dusk had that very slight chill to it and there was definitely a lot more water about. Would we be as successful this time, would we see the number of pigs I'd seen previously? Sure, the pigs were there, but in these conditions, they'd be a lot more spread out and probably not wallowing, as it didn't seem hot enough. All these questions and more would make you wonder if this early season trip would be as rewarding as the later months in warmer weather.

At a little after 8p.m. Mark and I arrived at the homestead to be greeted by Alisdair our host. Having hunted there before I felt at home and it was over a welcome brew after the long dusty trip into camp, that I posed these questions and more to him. As the cattle side of business is actually leased out on Strathburn, Alisdair and his brother Rory concentrate most of their attention to the hunting side of things so I had no doubt they'd have the answers. When not guiding, Alisdair is usually out on horse back scouting new territory, then he'll return with the grader, cut a few tracks and monitor the pigs movements. The whole lot would be confirmed to me over the following days and as it turned out, there was a stack of new country for Mark and me to enjoy.

All up and out of bed before first light, Alisdair offered to run us down to the cattle yards not six or seven hundred meters from the homestead. "There's a cow carcass out in the open I'd like to check first and then we'll come back for breakfast before we head out for the day" he exclaimed. Grabbing the rifle and a few shells we drove the 30 seconds or so it took to be greeted by a nice boar out in the open. Hopping out and setting up the video camera, I asked Mark to take the shot while I filmed the episode. Dropping the boar where it stood feeding, Mark just shook his head in disbelief. "I haven't washed my face yet" he snickered. Removing the jaw, we headed back for breakfast.

Shortly after, we headed off in the "Troopie 4wd" and it wasn't long before pigs were encountered on the move; in fact Mark managed another good boar before the sun had started to heat up the morning. As late morning approached, it was time to hit a few water holes and while pigs were being encountered, the big old boys didn't seem to be there. This is where having a guide who knows his stuff comes into play and would answer one of my previous concerns. As there was a fair bit of water about, Alisdair asked if we'd mind a bit of walking. Most seasoned hunters who have been there will know the answers from experience, however, for the benefit of those who have not encountered a "Top End" experience, let's share his secrets.

Although you will still find the odd boar around those lagoons and water holes at night feeding and sometimes



ABOVE: Young boars with not much in the tusk department are passed up for future hunting potential.

ABOVE RIGHT: Author with a tusky boar.

during the day devouring water lillies and bulbs, at this time of year, the big old boars tend to bed up along the creek and river beds during the day rather than wallow out in the open as there is still plenty of water for them. It's here amongst plenty of cover and shade they make their beds in the soft sand, up against the dried out river bed walls. Later in the season when it gets really hot, they have no choice

but hit the major water holes, as the small dams and creeks have dried up. As pigs don't have sweat glands they need to wallow several times a day in hot weather to keep cool. A walk along the semi-dried creek and river beds will produce the goods at this time of year and it's not uncommon to find a big old boar asleep and unaware of your presence if you sneak along quietly.

Although we'd visited several new lagoons covered in water lilies and an abundance of birdlife, I asked Alisdair to take me to one of my most memorable water holes, named Zulu, as we'd shot and filmed a few good boars there the previous year. Approaching the big lagoon on foot, I could see a mob of pigs in the distance. "I see nothings changed" I whispered to Alisdair, and Mark just shook his head in disbelief. Sneaking in, a rough count revealed a family group of about forty pigs, but no mature boar. In saying this however, most big old boars are usually out on their own. After filming and a few photos, we snuck around them and let them be. A little further forward and more pigs were encountered, but again, no mature boars in sight. As mentioned previously, this is where you separate the good guides from an exceptional one like ours. "I know where they'll be, just wanted to show you Zulu Tony". "Well what am I doing here" I mused with him. "You said you wanted to see Zulu, so here we are". "I'll take you to where I think the boars are now" he joked.

Cutting directly across into the thick stuff on the outskirts of the lagoon, we managed to push, shove and grunt our way through some very thick scrub and bush, finally exiting in a small opening about two hundred meters along. About 50 meters further and the scrub seemed to drop away to what Alisdair confirmed was the main river-bed. Checking the wind direction we carefully descended into the dry river bottom and headed into the breeze. The odd puddle of water, soft sand and green canopy produced the ideal conditions for an old boar to bed up for the day. Sneaking along slowly, Alisdair spotted a boar bedded along the wall on the rivers edge. Pigs will usually pick a spot in the shade and dig into the walls of a river-bank, then bed in the soft cool soil for a sleep. All we could see were its ears twitching occasionally, but that's all it took to give his location away. Setting up the video camera, I had plenty of time for the shot to follow and after filming for a while allowed the camera to run and took the shot. He was indeed a nice mature boar with good hooks and after removing the jaw, we moved on to look for another. Through out the day more were encountered and taken on film. As this was Marks first trip to Cape York, he couldn't believe the numbers. Questions like "Have they had many other hunters there and will there be any pigs left" were soon confirmed to him as by the end of the day, we'd taken three tusky boars each and passed up several younger ones.



ABOVE: Another huge set of tusks, this time taken by Mark.

ABOVE RIGHT: Typical scene on Strathburn - pretty landscape and plenty of wildlife.



The following day was a lot warmer and after a good night's sleep, we were on the road before sun up destined for a distant waterhole Alisdair wanted to hunt at first light. Approaching the lagoon via a barely visible track that looked like it hadn't been used for some time, we glassed for any sign of movement. Donning our packs and a few supplies we entered the bush and eventually reached a small lagoon. Alisdair whispered we were about 38 kilometres from the homestead and he hadn't been up there since before the wet season as it was all under water until recently. To our amazement, there were no pigs present, however, lots of sign confirmed they were there somewhere. About one hundred meters further we encountered another lagoon covered in water lilies and brilliant white flowers. A lone black dot on the edge of the water soon materialized into a big mature boar as we snuck in closer. The surrounding grass was waist high and although still green and not dry, made our approach difficult. Wading through it carefully, Mark and I approached with caution. Setting up the camera, I asked Mark to press record. Attempting to quietly chamber a round into the rifle caused a pair of nearby ducks to make haste their departure which momentarily spooked the boar. Thankfully the breeze was in our favour and with no further disturbances, he soon settled and continued feeding again. Raising the rifle, I placed the crosshairs on his shoulder while broadside to me and squeezed the trigger. The boar dropped where he stood and it was suddenly well worth the long trip up to the remote lagoon. On our way back we visited several other water holes and walked a few creek beds later in the day and again managed a few mature tusky boars each.

I won't bore you -pardon the pun-with every pig encounter and kill we managed for the trip, but I will however, recount the last walk we did on the last day which produced the biggest, thickest set of tusks for our short stay. As mentioned,

the pigs seemed to be quite spread out due to an abundance of water, but with Alisdair's local knowledge, we managed our bag limit and in fact did better than expected returning home with a dozen or so sets of trophy size tusks, three of which featured more than 3 ½ inches out of the jaw and two of which would be shoulder mounted as a memento of the trip.

I'd decided to carry the camera only on this walk and let Mark do the shooting if a big old boar showed up. Besides I'd already taken a few good boars and needed the footage. Alisdair led us in to a long row of paperbark trees in the middle of a low-lying swamp. Quietly sneaking along the edge, Mark and I were quite tense to say the least, expecting a boar to appear at any moment. Maybe we were travelling a little too quietly to spook a bedded boar, but then again, maybe there wasn't one there either. After about two or three hundred meters without any encounters, we became a little relaxed and began talking. The pressure was off, there was no pig on this swamp and that's when it happened. Have you heard the saying "It will happen when you least expect it" Well how true those words are. We could hear him sloshing through the water, but couldn't see him yet. Then in a split second he emerged not thirty metres ahead and out into the open. "Is he a shooter?" Mark whispered. But Alisdair could tell by its shape and size he was a mature boar and simply said "Shoot him!" Hit solidly through the shoulder, the boar only travelled a few meters and expired. As he'd obviously been digging in the soft black mud, his long tusks were barely visible, but a closer look revealed they actually protruded longer than the top of his snout.

Opening the pig's mouth revealed a very thick long set of tusks which later measured 3 ½ inches out of the jaw. At the time of writing I don't know how long the tusks were once boiled out as Mark froze the head and cape for a shoulder mount. Yes, Strathburn Station had once again lived up to its reputation for me and yes, I will return for another encounter next year so I'll keep you posted. For details check out their website; www.strathburn.com or phone 0414 783 471.

A segment on Strathburn pig hunting safaris can also be seen on my latest DVD entitled "Back To Basics". Check www.outbackadventuremedia.com.au for highlights. ■