



Aerial shot of a mob of pigs on the flood plains.

SLICE OF HEAVEN

Bruce Read reckons taking a trip up to Arnhem Land is the closest thing to hunting Valhalla.

IF EVER THERE WAS a hunting 'heaven' then Arnhem Land would have to be it. I'm sure this isn't breaking news for hunters around Australia but I'm not sure that most actually realise just how much of a pristine paradise this place really is.

I recently spent a week up in Arnhem Land hunting wild boar. It's not the first time I've done it and it won't be the last! Each year we venture northwest from Brisbane to the Top End and I come back full of awe at just how much this wonderful area has to offer those of us that hunt.

Flying into Darwin for a seven-day expedition, we hooked up with our guide early and travelled by 4WD for about five hours east through Kakadu National Park and north to the campsite via some

pretty exciting terrain that is strictly 4WD only. If you prefer, you can charter a light plane, which sets down on a small landing strip only minutes away from the base.

Hunting season is basically June (if you don't mind getting your feet wet) through to November and all you need bring is your rifle/s, ammo, clothes and personal effects. Everything else is catered for.

The modes of transport for the hunt consists of well maintained quad bikes, or your legs.

In the area we hunted there wasn't an empty can, chip bag or cigarette butt to be found and given its size and the limited number of hunting done, the wildlife is prodigious and has had little or no contact with humans.

Medium size pig with good ivory.



One of the many reasons why hunting this area is such a great experience is the diversity of game and wildlife on offer. Each day brings something different and is only equalled by the expectation of what will come tomorrow. Camera, rifle, shotgun, compound bow or cross bow, wild 120kg pigs, waterfowl, buffalo, barra, whatever your preference you'll come away from Arnhem land with incredible stories to tell.

Following is a description of the kind of physical characteristics you can expect to encounter.

PAPERBARK FORESTS (DRY)

These forests are generally grouped in slightly higher areas and are the first to dry out once the rains subside. Some are thickly forested with small tightly-packed paperbark trees which makes navigating through them very slow. Others are more sparsely vegetated with larger trees allowing easier walking on dry, dusty ground. The pigs seem to like both and during the heat of the day big boars bed down in the dry dirt at the base of these trees. With a keen eye for twitching ears and black lumps you can generally spot your quarry at a distance and take your time enjoying the stalk. Medium range shots (20-50m) are the norm but if you put a foot wrong all you will see is the arse end of that recently snoozing pig as it bolts through the trees. It was in one of these forests that I took a Texas heart shot on a large boar that just wouldn't turn around and due to the entrance angle didn't drop him immediately. He was understandably very annoyed at getting shot up the rear end and decided to vent his anger on my hunting buddy, Alex. Within seconds he was only metres from him and coming in hard. A hurried snap shot from Alex and a shot from guide Peter Lorman's 10mm Glock pistol put an end to the charge but not before Alex and the boar had a bit of a dance.

PAPERBARK FORESTS (WET)

These areas are similar to the dry forests except for one very obvious difference. They're wet and in some cases still very wet well into the dry season. We found that in these areas we were more likely to come across large mobs of feeding pigs milling around in the shade and mud. We had many instances of large mobs (50-100 pigs) which we watched from afar with eyes peeled for the obligatory one or two big boars that had to be in the vicinity. If you don't mind the mud and mozzies these areas can produce some very large boars.



The author and a well-built Arnhem Land boar.



ABOVE: Wheeled transport with a light footprint is essential when covering the vast distances hunters often travel in Arnhem Land.

CHANNEL COUNTRY

Because of the relatively flat geography of Arnhem Land when the flood waters recede they leave behind a network of shallow heavily vegetated channels on otherwise featureless flood plains. It seems that the time of day makes no difference to whether pigs enjoy themselves or not in a given channel. Approaching by quad bikes, boars could normally be spotted from a distance and then approached on foot. The cover is sparse so most shots are taken free standing or sitting at 50-100m and beyond, and you generally don't get a second shot before they're gone.

LIVASTONIA PALMS

This is my favourite hunting zone and where my Marlin .30/30 lever-action comes into its own. Dotted within forests of scrubby bush you find stands of these unique palms that form tall, compact mushroom-like structures that are perfect for pigs to sleep under during the heat of the day. The problem is that it is very difficult to spot them until you are virtually on top of them. I recall on one occasion I was making my way around one particular stand and I peered under the low canopy to find myself face-to-face with a medium-sized sow staring directly at me from less than 3m away. She didn't flinch while looking at me with as much interest in me as I had in her.

Several of our biggest boars were dropped on the run after being rudely awoken from their midday slumber.

WHERE IT'S AT

Arnhem Land is situated due east of Darwin and is bordered by Van Diemen Gulf and Kakadu to the west, the Arafura Sea to the north and the Gulf of Carpentaria to the east. The area is owned by the Northern Territory's aboriginal people and is therefore considered private property.

To access Arnhem Land you must have either a letter and personal invitation from an indigenous local or a permit issued by the Northern Land Council, or as we did, enter with a contracted hunting safari guide that has express permission to bring paying hunters on to the place.

RIGHT: Picking off lone boars feeding way out on the flood plains can be challenging but very rewarding.



ESCARPMENT COUNTRY

This consists of breathtakingly beautiful canyons carved by flowing wet season waters that hide all sorts of surprises. This area requires a high degree of stealth and a good dose of courage. Caves, huge broad-based trees, narrow canyons, rocky outcrops all make for a most interesting and exciting hunting backdrop. The big boars are bedded down for the day in cool shaded areas hidden from prying eyes. Keep your camera handy because if you don't find that big boar in one of the many caves you're likely to find some amazing ancient Aboriginal art.

FLOOD PLAINS

As far as the eye can see dried flood plains have been torn up by pigs. Seemingly endless expanses of short stubby grasses and bare earth dotted with areas of dried, cracked mud and salt pans. It constantly amazes me that at the hottest times of the day when any self-respecting pig would be bedded down in the shade you find a lone boar wandering around out in the direct sun in the middle of nowhere. While this is rare it's not uncommon to find plenty of sizable boars out on the flood plains early morning and late in the day.

Spotting them on the flat expanses is generally easy. Once you do pull up the quads and take your time checking range for a long distance shot. My Mach 5 Weatherby .308 Ultra Light topped with a variable Leupold scope is perfectly suited for this kind of work but it's no easy task dropping a grazing pig at 150m with a single shot. While practice at the range certainly helps, when it comes to the real deal there are lots of variables. Stacks of wild brumbies (Timor ponies) inhabit these plains. While the pigs aren't gun shy the ponies certainly are.

SCRUB AND SWAMP

There is something to be said for just parking the quads and moving through a given area of scrub bordered by swamps – you never know what you might find. We spent more than a few hours walking through dry scrub between swamps and bagged two of our biggest boars, and had two interesting experiences. We were feet dry for quite some time when Peter pulled us up, pointing at four dingo pups high-tailing it away from us. We dropped our gear and gave chase and only just managed to catch up to the straggler. A fine looking bitch pup in excellent condition she was. After a photo shoot (not allowed to shoot dingoes in Arnhem Land) we let her go and she scurried off to rejoin her siblings.

Not long after this, just on the other side of a shallow swamp, we came across a pair of robust boars and a huge mob of mixed pigs. After slog-ging our way across 40m of knee deep swamp we got within range of the two big fellas. The rangefinder told us they were 78m distant. Alex lined up on the biggest of the two and a single shot dropped the boar where it stood. Seconds later what should have been a perfect killing shot rang from my rifle but the boar took off like the proverbial bat. It took another two hasty snap shots to finally bring him down. Upon inspecting the carcass we found that the initial shot was, in fact, perfectly placed into the big boar's left shoulder. To our amazement we found that the 150gn PMC projectile had shed its copper skin and what was left of it was corkscrewed into the boar's heavy shoulder pad. The remaining lead core had simply disintegrated as it entered the animal and caused minimal damage.



Alex with a boar taken amongst dappled shade.

BILLABONGS

These are one of my favourite hunting areas for a couple of reasons. Firstly they are just so beautiful and full of all sorts of amazing wildlife. Unfortunately, even this pristine wilderness has not been untouched by the scourge of the feral cat. At one particular billabong I was astounded to see a very large and healthy tabby cruising around looking for a meal. He's not wandering around anymore.

The other reason the billabong is such a great place to hunt is that you start on one side and simply work your way around, keeping in mind wind direction and time of day. Your sight lines are usually very good and the pigs generally use well worn and obvious animal runs to get to and from these billabongs. We bagged many a big boar and saw countless mobs of sows and suckers in and around billabongs.



ABOVE: The boys were well catered for on this guided hunt and the quad bikes suitably adapted for use by hunters.



Wildlife is prolific. Here a dingo feeds on a carcass on the edge of a swamp.

TERRACE AND TRANSIT

The terrace zone is the area between the thick scrub forest and the open plains and is a very productive area mid to late afternoon when the pigs are moving from inaccessible scrub hideouts to their grazing or wallowing areas in the cooling afternoons. We just picked a different spot each day and sat and waited for the pigs to come to us. And come they did.

Early mornings and late afternoons while in transit on the quads from one location to another sometimes bought unexpected surprises. I was barreling down this dirt track at 50km/h just on dusk and came across a nasty black boar standing right on the track. Sliding to a halt, rifle out, cycle, aim and fire. One more good boar to add to the tally.

On another occasion there I was scooting along minding my own business and out of nowhere a lone mid-size grey roo came bounding along at full tilt. The bloody thing just didn't stop and nor did I. The stupid bloody thing smacked directly into the side of the 300kg quad, giving me the shock of my life and the roo a very serious headache.

I can only suggest to any half keen hunter that if you ever get the opportunity to get up to this part of Australia, don't hesitate for a second. Any hunting you do in Arnhem Land will have you talking about it for years to come. ■

For more information on hunting Arnhem Land, contact Tropical Hunting Safaris on (08) 8945 5880