



Stalking gold



Paul Childerley accompanies an experienced hunter on a stalk for medal-worthy Chinese water deer

The first of November is the most important date in my stalking calendar, as it's the opening day of the Chinese water deer season. It's a tricky time of the year for my business; we're in full swing with the game shooting season, having two driven shooting days per week along with occasional walked up or evening duck flights but it's an essential time to start taking out some of the mature bucks before they become territorial, aggressive and start to fight or damage each other.

I had Erik from Diana Hunting Tours coming over from Denmark for a meeting with me about some new projects in England and he had also booked a hunt for Chinese water deer and muntjac for him and his friend. Erik has hunted all over the world and has hunted Chinese water deer before but never managed to get a gold so his aim was to hunt over the two days to get the perfect medal class buck and also try to bag a muntjac along the way.

On the first morning of the hunt, we set off early in the dark to the north side of the main estate, where I had seen a monster buck for the last two to three weeks, but it was in an awkward area because he was living on the top of a hill and getting a safe shot would have been a challenge. On approaching the field, we could see an outline shape on the ridge and from the shape of its head and neck, looking slightly thicker and stockier than the other three deer it was with, I could tell it was a mature buck. He was doing the characteristic movements of a territorial male – a slow strut, stopping and scraping the ground with his front legs and with his tail upright looking to chase off any challengers for his territory. We could not tell if it was the buck I'd been seeing, as it was still breaking light, so we'd have to wait for another 10 minutes or so, using the darkness to our advantage to stalk into a safe shooting position without being seen. We had crawled in the last 20 yards

and Erik was ready waiting with the bipod deployed and the red dot turned on, ready for my commands.



An experienced stalker, Erik was more than up to the challenge



Stalking: CWD



Chinese water deer are locally very common but expanding much more slowly than muntjac

Once the light started to break we could see clearly down to a small wood, where I assumed the buck would be heading. Another day in the office, first light lying on wet and cold ground but seeing another of those wonderful sunrises so many people miss out on. To my surprise, instead of the buck heading to the small wood, the total opposite happened. All four deer started to walk towards us and the buck was leading the way. He got to about 40 yards from us and he saw that there was something lying in front of him that he was unhappy with, so he started to do the false stare, where he keeps looking away to readjust his eyes and look back at us. Normally I would retreat or head for cover when they do this, but we were lying in the middle of a field so had to hold position and hope for the best. He kept moving forward until about 30 yards from us, and then started heading to the left to try to get the wind to see what we were.

This had given me ample opportunity to look at his tusks. I could see that this buck was going to be a very high gold, possibly even platinum medal as they were very long and thick at the base, with no chips visible.

With no warning, the buck bolted towards the wood and gave a warning bark, which meant he still didn't know what we were and was going to stop very soon to look back to see if we were chasing or following. I told Erik to get prepared as I was going to call out to stop the buck. After 150 yards, the buck slowed its pace down and I called out which made him turn, broadside, and look back at us. I gave Erik the go ahead and the shot was taken. I saw the dust kick up behind – he'd missed. Erik could not believe it and I must say I was amazed, as Erik has shot many times under pressure from doing all the hunters videos on Monster Roebucks without issue. But that's hunting and that's why we all do it. We pushed on for another

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hour or so but Erik's disappointment was making him drag his heels so we headed back for breakfast.

When we got to the larder, we were greeted by Erik's friend with a huge grin on his face because he had shot a cracking gold medal Chinese water deer buck that morning. Erik managed to mumble out he'd missed



his chance of a monster. That evening we all decided to head out for muntjac for a change of scenery and location.

After a successful evening of calling, we headed out for another early start to try to find yesterday's buck. After over three hours of endless stalking, crawling, crouching and glassing, we could not find him, so we headed back to the larder. During breakfast, Scott, my head gamekeeper, mentioned he had seen a mature buck in the morning – he wasn't sure it had both tusks but his left side was massive. Scott went on to explain it was sat out in the middle of a field sunning itself, so there was a good chance he would still be there after breakfast. We decided it was worth a look, so Erik and I headed out to that area. We parked up at the bottom of the field and stalked to the topside to give us a good view of the whole field. At first we thought he'd gone but there was a big undulation in the field so we pursued on to get a better look. As we approached I suddenly saw the top of an ear and I could see it was badly ripped, indicating it was a buck. Although getting close enough for a good shot was going to be a challenge as it was in the middle of the field and we would have to walk over the bank, which would show our silhouette and potentially give the game away. Also, I had to get close enough to make sure it had the other tusk to make sure it was a gold medal for Erik.

As we approached, the buck clocked us straight away, as you'd probably expect when trying to stalk a mature buck laying in the middle of a field on a bright and sunny day. This was a great opportunity for me to see if he had both tusks because he was looking around and was showing both sides of his head, which gave me a good, clear view of both tusks. I could see that he was a very good gold medal but I decided to tell Erik that he was just OK, so there was no added pressure. There was no clear shot for us as he was facing us. All of a sudden, he had too much pressure from us and decided to bolt up the middle of the field and knowing the behaviours of Chinese water deer, I got Erik to lie down and get ready on the bipod as I knew the buck would either stand or lie down and pretend to hide. Unfortunately the buck ran a little too far, about 250 yards, hit the deck and lay flat, thinking we couldn't see him. I turned to Erik and said "I hope you like crawling".



Success at last – Erik poses with his medal-worthy CWD

It was hard going as there were a lot of stones and flint stuck in rock hard clay but we continued slowly, which worked to our advantage as it let the buck settle and be confident we weren't chasing him.

We crawled in to about 180 yards but the buck was starting to get restless so we had to get into position because we only had a very short shooting window if he was to stand up.

Almost on command, once Erik was ready, the buck stood up and trotted ten yards, then stopped to look back, giving Erik the perfect chance to shoot.

It was a perfect strike, the buck leapt forward and kicked out with his back legs, signalling to me that it was a good heart shot. I think Erik was relieved when I said "great shot". After struggling to our feet, on the walk over to the buck, I told Erik that I knew it was a very good gold medal; I hadn't wanted to tell him until the shot had been fired successfully. ■



The CWD turned out to be a very good gold-medal trophy