



# THE BROKEN FANG OF A WATER DEER

Great Britain is world famous for its great hunting, be it the excitement of stalking the majestic Red stag in Scotland, the challenge of imitating the call of the Roe buck during the Roe deer mating season in the Midlands, maybe hunting the secluded Sika deer in the region around Dorset or the enticement of shooting high flying pheasants or fast flying pigeons with a shotgun. Yes indeed, when it comes to hunting, the island has a lot to offer and as such, I for one, could not resist its charm.

It is, however, not the Red stag, the roe buck nor the Sika deer I want to hunt. It is the Chinese Water deer, one of the most exotic deer species in existence, that has become native to England. Not much is known nor can be found in literature about this type of genus that don't grow antlers, but instead have fangs like a smilodon and ever since I observed these Water deer in the Beijing Zoo, my desire to hunt these unusual deer has steadily increased.

A hunting buddy of mine recommended a hunting agent in England whose reputation is well known in Europe. I contacted them per e-mail and receive a prompt answer. After a brief exchange of information, I book their services. Since I have a few extra days of vacation, I decide to take my car (a Calais I drive) onboard the Hovercraft and after a short yet choppy and very loud ride disembark in Dover. From there I head northeast past Canterbury and London until I reach Woburn, where I am to meet Alex Hinkins (my outfitter and guide) on the following morning.

I arrive at the designated meeting point at 6:30am on the dot, where Alex is already waiting for me. Alex is one of the best and most experienced hunting guides on the island; his success rate of 100% in 2013 speaks for itself. In addition he is one of the very few Blaser and Zeiss professional stalkers and personally knows the present Duke of Bedford. So as it turns out, today I am allowed to hunt on the grounds of the Duke, of course not in the park of the 'Woburn Abbey Manor' itself, but on the adjoining estates. In other words, in the cradle of the English Water deer population,

there, where it all started and from where these small Asian deer spread across the south of England in record time.

While it is still dark, we are driving down paths through the fields into the heart of our hunting terrain, of course in a Landrover which was to be expected. Upon parking the vehicle, we discuss the strategy for the day. The landscape is defined by large fields that are repeatedly interspersed with small creeks and hedges. The land is very flat here so that we have to be extremely careful where we aim and shoot, especially because the M1 Motorway, the main north-south transit artery of Great Britain, winds right through our hunting terrain. The weather promises us a beautiful day. Only the wind causes us concern, because other than usual, today it is blowing from the east, forcing us to hunt in the direction of the Motorway. We must be ever mindful to exercise extreme caution should the opportunity to shoot arise. To start off we decide to work our way, crouching as it were, across an open field towards a power mast in order to get a better view from there. Even though Water deer are very abundant here, the restrictive wild game management of Woburn specifies that only gold medal bucks may be hunted. Unique to the Water deer is that they do not have antlers – the only trophy are the fangs and in order to get a good look at them. So as to determine a matured buck that may be hunted, you have to get up real close to the game.

As the sun slowly rises, we are lying comfortably in a prone position under the power mast, where against the green background we can distinguish



dark points here and there. Alex scans the field with binoculars, but can only confirm some does and fawns. Then suddenly a single Water deer is moving directly towards us. I already have my weapon ready at hand, but then Alex shakes his head slightly after taking a closer look at this fellow with the binoculars. It is a one year old buck coming towards us and of course we do not want to shoot him. The wind is favorable and so he comes closer and closer without a care in the world, casually wanders around the power mast under which we lie and then takes off in flight when he finally gets wind of us. Fantastic, the hunt had in effect just started some 10 minutes ago and I was already within several metres of a Chinese Water deer. We stay put as we were a little longer, but no other Water deer show up in this field, so we decide to break it off and try our luck elsewhere.

There are about 20 Water deer in the adjacent field. Not making any noise, we carefully slide into a trench running alongside the field (which fortunately didn't have any water in it) heading towards the adjoining hedge of the field. We push ourselves through the hedge to a position from where we can easily identify each animal with the binoculars, but how again there is no sight of a mature buck in this group. Meanwhile it must be around 11 o'clock and the Water deer, though very active in the morning hours, have slowed their movement and settled down across the field. We continue to hunt along the hedges, then, out of the corner of my eye I see a slight movement, there, about 150 feet away from us we spot a secluded Water deer facing away from us as it lay in the meadow casually ruminating. Now and then it raises its head and looks around and Alex thinks that on one of those occasions he saw a fang, even at this distance. So, it is a buck, a good one notes Alex. Although a shot at this distance would be possible, we have to get a lot closer to properly identify the gender and age. To our fortune advantage, we can stalk the buck along a hedge so that our silhouette is well hidden in the shadows.

Slowly, taking care not to make any noise and steadily keeping the buck in sight, we approach ever closer. Time and again we have to freeze in our tracks, remaining motionless whenever the buck raises his head and scans his surroundings. At a distance of about 30 metres, Alex again tries to zoom in on the buck for a close up and telling view, there's no way to get any closer without blowing our cover because the hedge ends here. Well, it seems our buck has all the time in the world and whenever he turns his head looking about, we can only see his right fang from our position. What a fang it is, even my inexperienced eye can clearly spot an impressive fang protruding significantly over the lower jaw – looks like a trophy to me.

Yet, patience is asked for; we must wait, waiting until he turns his head far enough to the left so that we can also get a clear view of his left fang. Alex watches every move of the buck for over ten minutes in full concentration. Then he lowers his binoculars and in a low whisper tells me that the left fang is about a quarter to half an inch shorter than the right one, a small piece must have broken off. "Do you still want to shoot?" he asks. What a question, of course I want to shoot. It's been a great hunt right up to this point, so why would I want to break it off just because one fang had a story to tell? No way! I give Alex a nod, he slowly and carefully sets up the tripod for me so that my shot has the utmost accuracy. As luck would have it, the Water deer is lying in front of the only ever so small hill in the surrounding landscape so that our safety concern of a possibly wild flying bullet can be rendered mute. Since I didn't transport my own rifle to the



island, Alex had graciously offered me the use of his Blaser R8, caliber 243Win, equipped with a silencer which is legal in England. In slow motion I place the weapon on the tripod and prepare to shoot. The buck is still lying down with his back to us, not allowing me the opportunity to place a shot. "Ready?" asks Alex. I nod and cock the rifle. Alex makes a short wolf-sound that brings the deer to its hoofs in flight, whereby it takes a jump to the left. I follow through my sights; bring the cross-hairs on target and with the muffled sound of the shot, the buck drops in place. No flight, just a short stagger as it goes down in deadly silence. Caught in the moment, I pull back the cartridge slide and as the empty shell ejects, I am reloaded, all the while staying on target through my scope.

All of a sudden, as if out of nowhere, a bunch of Water deer come hopping over the crest of the hill in haste towards us. Talk about unexpected company. Seems they were lying on the tender slope of the field right on the other side of our little hill when the muffled shot caused them to take flight, yet disorientate their sense of direction from where the shot came. Now they are mulling about, not knowing what to make of the slain buck in front of them, until they start wandering off at a steady pace in the direction of the nearby woods to the right without any particular hurry. In wonder, I watch them trod off in the distance and not until the last deer has disappeared in the woods do I feel the tension in me subside.

Together with Alex, I proceed to the kill, sit down next to my deer and stroke the fur with my hand as a gesture of respect for the game I have slain. I note the similarity of the fur with that of the hollow, tubular-type hairs in the coat of the North American Pronghorn antelope. As I check out the teeth, I see that a small piece of the left fang had indeed been broken off. Hard to believe that these animals only eat plants, but as I look at the ears of this old warrior, whom Alex figures to be about 5 years old, I notice that they have multiple scars, tears and fissures – the result of many territorial and rut challenges which these bucks fight exclusively with their fangs. My eyes wander back to the fangs and I realize that of the many hunts I have been on, this must be the most unusual hunting trophy I have yet encountered.



### The Chinese Water Deer

The Chinese Water deer, originally native to the Jangtsekiang-Delta in east-central China, reaches a shoulder height of up to 55cm and a maximum weight of 14 kilos and is not quite as big as the European Roe deer. The overall stature also seems somewhat more compact in comparison. The most distinguishing characteristic of these bucks, however, is their set of teeth. The upper canines of the bucks are elongated fangs that can get up to 8cm long and are clearly visible as they protrude from the upper jaw. Antlers, however, are missing completely, both on the buck and the doe. The venison of the Chinese Water deer is a real culinary speciality in the traditional Chinese kitchen and one of the varieties of meat that make up the 'Platter of Eight Delicacies'. In its ancestral homeland China, the Water deer is now under strict protection, so that hunting them is only possible in England (especially here in Bedford, Norfolk und Suffolk). The closer you get to Woburn in the county of Bedfordshire, the higher the population of Water deer and therefore, of course, also the population of gold medal bucks.

For additional information go to [www.wings-hunting.co.uk](http://www.wings-hunting.co.uk)

### Historical Perspective

It was Herbrand Russell, the 11th Duke of Bedford (19th of February 1858 – 27th of August 1940), who can be accredited with the proliferation and dispersion of the Chinese Water deer as well as the muntjac in England. The Duke 'collected' deer species from the various continents on the family estate in Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire. Aside from Muntjac Water deer, Fallow deer, Sika deer and Red deer, he was especially fond of the Pere David's deer. He spared neither cost nor effort to foster and care for this deer species in the parks of his estate and one can assume that without the Duke of Bedford, the Pere David's deer would today be extinct. Unfortunately, during a bombing attack in World War II, the gates to the park were destroyed or maybe just left open, (today it is hard to say with certainty), so that many deer were able to get away. Although it was possible to capture the larger species of deer, the smaller Muntjac and Water deer were able to hide easily and remained in the wild. They formed the first generation of the deer population of England living in the wild today, which got so big that not only can they be hunted, they have to be hunted.

