

## SPECIAL CONTROVERSY INVESTIGATION

# Canned Hunting in Europe and How To Avoid Getting Scammed: Answers from Dr. Rolf D. Baldus of CIC

*Editor Note: In our January issue (page 10) we reported on possible scam hunts in Hungary and Romania, where several Danish hunters were set up to shoot captive-bred trophies under the guise of fair-chase hunts for free-range animals. Following up on those initial reports has been, in a word, frustrating. We have confirmation that such hunts did indeed take place, and rumors of several other possible instances of fraud, including one in Serbia and one in the Czech Republic. We have the names of the hunters involved in some of the questionable hunts, and, from a source we cannot quote, the name of at least one of the guides allegedly involved. But, unfortunately, we have not been able to get any of the hunters or agencies to file on-the-record reports naming the outfitters or booking agents involved.*

*Following that initial report and our request for follow-up information in last month's issue, we've heard from a number of subscribers who have had excellent hunts in Central Europe, several others who are nervous about hunts they've booked or trophies they've already taken, and booking agents concerned that we are painting a negative picture of the entire region with too broad a brush. Certainly the latter was not and is not our intention.*

*We want to make it clear that we here at The Hunting Report are not taking a position against high-fenced hunting operations that are clearly and accurately represented as such. Our only concern here is with the alleged "bad apples" selling illegal canned hunts under the guise of fair chase. Not only is that fraud, but for US hunters, importing any illegally taken trophy carries with it the very real and profound risk of being charged with a Lacey Act violation.*

*While following up on this story, we contacted The International Council For Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC). Based in Europe, CIC is an international organization championing sustainable use of natural resources not only in Europe but also Africa, Asia and elsewhere. The CIC is also a record-keeping organization and a watchdog for hunting. Tamas Marghescu*

*of CIC told us that complaints against the outfitters involved in the Hungary scam have been filed with CIC, and they have taken those complaints to the appropriate police agencies for investigation. With legal investigations ongoing, Marghescu is understandably reluctant to comment on the specifics of these cases. But Dr. Rolf Baldus, author and CIC insider (he's the former President of the CIC's Tropical Game Commission) agreed to answer some more general questions for The Hunting Report (THR).*

**THR:** *Following our report on the possible scam hunts in Hungary, some readers have expressed concerns about the alleged canned shooting operations in Central and Eastern Europe being sold as fair chase hunts. Should they be alert?*

**Baldus:** The answer is simply yes. It happens, though not on a wide scale. Probably 99 percent of the hunts on offer are legitimate, but a number of canned shooting enterprises (locally known as "hunting brothels") do exist. Unfortunately, they are on the increase.

Such crime got into the spotlight in 2005 when a German baron shot a monster stag in Bulgaria, allegedly the world record at that time. An investigation by the Austrian criminal police and the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) uncovered that this stag (nicknamed "Burlei" by its original owner) had been captive bred and artificially manipulated in an Austrian stable and small enclosure. The unfortunate animal was then transported to Bulgaria, where it was shot in a forest by the unsuspecting hunter. The victim of this fraud, who paid 65,000€ for the 15 kg trophy, was, in principle, very knowledgeable about red deer in the wild. He manages his own forests and is the chairman of his local red deer management association. This proves that even well-informed "experts" can fall into traps cleverly prepared by people with criminal intent.

**THR:** *How do these operations work?*

**Baldus:** In several countries, thousands of red deer, fallow deer, mouflon

sheep, wild boar, ibex and to a lesser degree roe deer are reared every year on special breeding facilities. Increasingly, the animals are artificially manipulated by the application of steroids, hormones and all the other methods modern veterinary science has developed for livestock breeding. The breeding happens under the pretext of meat production. However, many animals end up in canned killing operations. Complementary hunting lodges or farms manage a fenced area and buy such "trophy" animals as soon as a hunting client books a hunt for an animal of a certain quality. Sometimes these animals are still partially under the influence of immobilizing drugs when the hunter climbs his high-seat. The fences are often cleverly constructed, so that the unsuspecting hunter is sometimes not even aware that the "hunt" is staged in an enclosure. Occasionally, semi-tame or drugged animals are released in the wild. In such cases the killing will be done immediately upon release.

Just six weeks ago, in the Czech Republic, a friend of mine found himself sitting in a fenced enclosure, although he had been very much on the alert and had asked the operator to confirm that he was hunting in the wild. The operator had assured him they were hunting in the wild, which shows that in many cases, not always, it is set up with the intention to con unsuspecting hunters. There are, however, also shooters who know well and do not mind that they are killing a specially bred domesticated animal in a small enclosure. Animal rights activists cleverly describe these unethical killers as "hunters," thus giving hunting and hunters negative publicity.

**THR:** *Where should our subscribers be on the alert for scam hunt fraud?*

**Baldus:** The main countries where such malpractices occur are Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and on a smaller scale Croatia, Slovakia etc. Austria alone has over 500

farms where domesticated wildlife is bred for live-sales. Even Germany has two or three dubious fenced hunting places. Canned killing activities are illegal in all these countries. They violate hunting laws and often veterinary and food regulations, when the meat from drugged and non-inspected domesticated animals enters the market. They also violate animal welfare legislation, as in most European countries it is illegal to kill any vertebrate without any reasonable justification. Killing animals in order to satisfy a lust to kill or just to collect horns, antlers or teeth is legally not regarded as a justifiable cause. This is similar to the North American wildlife conservation model which excludes "frivolous killing of wildlife." Thus, "killing for lust" is differentiated from sustainable hunting, which - apart from being an ethical sportsman's legitimate activity - is a proper and accepted form of the management of land, wildlife and bio-diversity.

Fortunately, most hunting in Central and Eastern Europe is free-range and fair-chase. There is plenty of wildlife available, and fair-chase hunting is easily possible. European hunters do not condone "canned shooting" and most dislike any hunting behind fences, even very large enclosures that are properly managed. Such officially-recognized hunting enclosures also exist, and some of them have been around for several hundred years.

**THR:** How can the hunter looking for fair chase and a good hunting experience in the wild avoid the traps?

**Baldus:** As always, paying attention and gathering good information is key to avoid being defrauded. Most "hunting brothels" hide their true nature quite cleverly. There are no official registers, no hard data is publicly available and there is little transparency.

In Germany or Austria, a prospective hunter with questions about an operation may contact the hunting authorities or other people who know the country, as the culprits are generally well known. But in countries with widespread corruption there is little transparency, and hunters need to be even more careful. One way is to ask friends or experienced hunters or to book the hunt through a reputable hunting agent. Even with a reliable agent, always ask for a written confirmation that your hunt will be only free-range wildlife.

Last but not least, one should not let greed overcome common sense. Being naive and greedy for a big trophy is normally a sure recipe for disaster. If the baron mentioned earlier had applied common sense, he would have been warned when the hunting operator took him straight from the plane to the high-seat where the stag was already waiting. There was also a film team waiting to shoot the whole exercise for a commercial hunting movie. Another example: If somebody hunts for a few days in Hungary and during that time shoots two or three handfuls of medal-class roebucks, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that these bucks came out of a box and had been bred somewhere in a stable.

In many ecosystems in Central and Eastern Europe, nature generates game animals with very good trophies; however, they do not grow on trees. It has always been difficult and time consuming to hunt real trophies. And this is what hunting is all about, isn't it? If you are guaranteed your hunting results - beware! There is nothing like a guaranteed medal trophy - neither in natural European hunting grounds or anywhere else in the world.

**THR:** What should traveling hunters take away from this?

**Baldus:** The CIC excludes all "trophies" of animals so manipulated from being scored with the copyrighted CIC Trophy Evaluation Methods (CIC point system). The CIC recently adopted a Resolution against the manipulation of wildlife ([http://www.cic-wildlife.org/uploads/media/Rec\\_on\\_Wildlife\\_manipulation\\_EN.pdf](http://www.cic-wildlife.org/uploads/media/Rec_on_Wildlife_manipulation_EN.pdf)), and has brought some recent cases from Eastern Europe to the attention of the authorities. Investigations are under way. Artificial manipulation and canned killing endanger sustainable hunting and, thereby, the future of our beloved fair-chase sport.

*Postscript: Be assured that we are staying on top of this situation, continuing to dig for information, and will report more specifics as they become available. In the meantime, as Baldus noted, any hunt anywhere in the world that guarantees trophies of a certain size and seems too good to be true, probably is. - Tim Jones, Managing Editor* ■

*Photos taken by one of the Danish hunters, who realized his roe buck trophies were manipulated to produce non-typical antlers.*

