

weekend potlsh

June 25-26

focus: sordid history

travel: ride of your life

garden: rot sets in

drive: suzuki swift



Tally-ho

... and a hunting we go with the Hume Hunt Club, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

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COVER STORY

THE RILE OF THE CHASE

It could be a scene straight from an historic English novel yet on any given Sunday in winter across the region you can find finely decked out riders, horses and hounds gathering for the fray, writes **Ben Robson**.

MIST rises from the ground like steam in the cold, damp morning.

Only the English could find a sport where these are considered ideal conditions, but ideal they are and the hunt has gathered in all its finery.

Blood-red jackets circle on horses whose breath lingers in the air along with the scent of mounting excitement.

Inside a trailer the hounds scurry, their snouts sniffing out the freedom they sense is only moments away.

It's the quintessential English scene, but this is not England.

This is a world away in the open, brown landscape of the Border region where for 25 years keen hunt members have gripped tightly to age-old tradition.

Next week the Hume Hunt will mark its 25th anniversary at a black tie ball, an annual event made even more special by the milestone.

While tradition is de rigueur, there is still a distinctly Australian flavour to this hunt.

Traditionally hunts are the preserve of the elite across the continents but here members come from many backgrounds — solicitors, doctors, sales reps, anyone really with a horse and a passion for the thrill of the chase.

"We're certainly not elitist," ball co-ordinator Denise Madsen says.

"In England membership can cost thousands of pounds while our membership is \$180.

"Kids can come out and get involved and have a good time then we have a barbecue at the end of the day."

Heading beyond the ghostly trees, disappearing into the morning fog, from a distance only the red jackets are instantly visible.

Hunts dream of mornings like this.

Foxes have scent pads on the bottoms of their feet that leave a trail as they make their way across the land.

The moisture helps to hold the scent to the ground, letting hounds follow the trails which would otherwise lift and be blown in the breeze.

A horn pierces the air as the master gathers the hunt around him.

After the welcome, warm mulled wine served on a silver tray is despatched to adult riders.

"It's tasty and the traditional thing that warms the cockles of the belly," Ms Madsen says.

"If you're going through a paddock and you see the red coats in the distance it automatically draws your eye.

"Not everyone gets the red coat though.

"It's an acknowledgement of service to the club and to be a recipient of the colours is something special, it's like getting the ultimate footy guernsey."

"Then you see the hounds and they are a happy mob of critters, you see their tails wagging and they've come out to play again."

"They just love it, they really do have a ball."

And, when all is said and done, the annual ball next week is all about the English fox hounds.

"They're why we have them," Ms Madsen says.

"It's our primary fundraiser for the year to house the hounds, to feed them, to vet them."

"They're very energetic animals and they go through a lot of food."

Throughout the year kennel master Kevin Richardson maintains the hounds.

Outside of the winter months when hunts take place they're housed in kennels and let out to do "doggy things".

"Then when it comes into the beginning of the hunt season we will take them out for what we call a puppy run and they are walked out," Ms Madsen says.

"The huntsman will walk out with them through the paddocks and get them used to the horses. "We'll have puppy runs where the rest of the hunt members come on an unofficial ride before the opening hunt, which is usually the Mother's Day weekend."

But the real thing is governed by tradition, etiquette and the full weight of history.

"It's something that's not for the faint-hearted and you have to be a fairly competent rider because when you go, you go," Ms Madsen says.

"But there's nothing more exhilarating than when you've got 40 horses going for the same timber panel."

"It's all about horsemanship skills, the courtesy you have to others and looking out for everyone else — there's just that comradeship."

Importantly, Ms Madsen says the hunt sees itself as doing a community service, benefiting farmers and the native environment.

And according to the Department of Primary Industries, foxes, "pose a significant threat to the survival of a range of fauna and a significant threat to the survival and evolutionary development of two or more taxa."

They can eat up to 300kg a year, much of it native fauna.

"We are invited onto properties by owners because they have fox problems," Ms Madsen says.

"A fox will kill for sport, they're very vicious and they're very cunning."



TOP: Whipper-in Mark Todd and fellow riders anticipate the morning's hunt.

ABOVE: Eager hounds course across the paddocks in pursuit of their prey.

"They are a very beautiful animal but they are an introduced and feral animal."

"When the hounds get them it is almost instant, but if you look at baiting a fox or dog or fox traps, that can take days."

"Usually the first hound will grab it by the neck and, bang, it's gone ..."

Led by the hunt master the hounds trail across the paddock. They cast across the landscape, finely-tuned noses sensing out their quarry.

When they smell their prey they give voice, their excited barking closing in on the fox.

With the fox flushed out, the cry goes up, *tally-ho!* and the ground thunders as the hooves pound the earth, adrenaline driving horse and rider.



Whipper-in Eric Matherson, of Findon Hunt, clears a jump during a hunt at Chiltem. Pictures: BEN EYLES



ABOVE: Les Carter, of Indigo Valley ... the esteemed red jacket denotes recognised service to a hunt club.

BELOW: In keeping with tradition, Lyn Elligate serves warm mulled wine from a silver platter to adult riders.

BOTTOM: Father and daughter enjoy the ride together.



LEFT: The hounds sniff the air excitedly from their trailer ... they sense the thrill of the chase is not far away.



"The fox has a fighting chance," Ms Madsen says. "If they are cunning or wiley enough they'll get away or they might run up a tree."

"You quite often see in traditional paintings the fox looking down on the hunt from the top of a tree."

But the sense of ongoing tradition is almost as important as the hunt itself.

With an English background, Ms Madsen says it's that sense of tradition that she enjoys.

"I think that's what appealed to me," she says. "It's something that's happened for hundreds of years and we're sticking to it as closely as we can." The riders head out into the mist.

Among the last are a father and daughter, horse and pony side by side.

When they return from the hunt it won't matter whether they catch a fox, or whether they have even see one.

"As part of our club we ride to the weakest rider because we try to encourage it as a family sport," Ms Madsen says.

"There are elitist clubs out there but we're a growing club because we nurture the idea of growing through families and we see that as a positive thing."

— For details of next Saturday's black-tie Hume Hunt ball, phone hunt master Steven Fulton on 0435 803 979.

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