

Buffalo On The Buby River

Pursuing an outstanding Cape buffalo is tough enough when it's one's sole objective, but when a leopard is included in the mix, it complicates things. For one, much time is spent collecting bait as well as meticulously placing them in the most enticing cat-like places. It's a lot of hard work followed up by the constant vigilance over the hopefully well-positioned baits checked daily and more importantly revitalized by replenishing the miasmic smells attractive to the dappled colored predator.

Cat hunting simply erodes away opportunity for tracking buffalo, which takes even more time because one must look over a lot of bulls. And even though The Buby Valley is inhabited by some outstanding bulls, they don't appear behind every knob thorn tree. To make things even more challenging, my daughter Nan and her husband Paul arrived on the sixth evening of our 15-day safari and had their wish list as well. So to say that my ph Brent Hein, owner of Brent Hein Safaris, was feeling a little pressure would be an understatement; that is, until we outwitted a huge leopard on our sixth evening.

On the seventh morning, it was not long before Nan, who is a crack shot, was on Brent's heels stalking a herd of zebra. Off the sticks at 60 yards, she nailed her first stallion.

Shortly after preparing the zebra, we traversed the deep, sandy roads transecting the huge concession in search of buffalo tracks. Even when we focused on leopard, we still spent time tracking buffalo, turning down several nice bulls. Enjoying the fresh, cold air smacking us in the face on top the cruiser, we came to an abrupt halt as William, our tracker, spotted a nice steenbok in the grass-laden thorn scrub. Immediately I bailed out of the vehicle following Brent. A few minutes later, with my 7mm on the sticks, I quickly recognized portions of the petite, tan-colored antelope through my scope. Partially concealed by tall grass, Brent apparently whispered to wait a bit for a better shot. I, on the other hand, thought he said take him. And without a single finger in his ear, the loud crack of my rifle

momentarily interrupted the placid morning, and all Brent said was “I guess you’re going to shoot it” in a not so pleasant tone as we approached the unique trophy.

Shortly afterwards, we cut fresh buffalo spoor and entered the thorn scrub. Within 20 minutes, we were face to face with a 35-inch-wide bull not 30 yards from us. The heavy-bosser bull precariously moved his head up and down in an attempt to get us to move. With hopefully additional bulls in the herd, we remained still and vigilant, but the dense stand of Mopani and knob thorn regrowth inhibited our view of the others. Suddenly the bull wheeled around and dashed off, carrying the others with him, leaving a contrail of dust. It was the seventh herd of bulls we tracked, not counting a number of single bulls we spotted from the vehicle over seven days. The area supported a substantial number of buffalo, but the dense understory remained a problem.

After a short pause to enjoy what I refer to as five star dining, we were back at it. Brent and Paul made a stalk on a kudu, but the gray ghost simply vanished in the sea of brush.

As evening approached, Paul took a giraffe, and the remainder of our evening was spent procuring the animal.

On the eighth chilly morning, we conducted our daily ritual of locating buffalo tracks. Picking up the spoor of three lone bulls, we tracked them for an hour before they busted us and dashed off, leaving only a cloud of red dust lingering in their path. Not sure of horn size, we sat down on the sparkling, silicon-laden sand to let them calm down before we made a second attempt to approach them. But as we moved forward a short distance, the restive animals could once again be heard crashing through the scrub and we returned to the cruiser.

By mid-morning we were traveling along the river. As the sun’s rays eclipsed the early morning chill, shade from the giant acacia and Nyala trees kept us comfortably cool. Although we focused on buffalo, we were constantly scanning openings in the low-growing fever berry trees and toothbrush bush for kudu, particularly since we had spotted a large kudu bull in the area early on in the hunt.

Assuming the buffalo had parted the grass-laden riparian zone paralleling the river where they fed on grass under the protection of darkness, our intense search for buffalo waned when William spotted a pair of buffalo. Brent, William, and I accompanied by Paul rapidly entered the sea of thorn scrub. I was on the sticks each time Brent paused to glass out ahead of us. An extremely quiescent morning, we could hear the animals, but not see them. Undisturbed, they were slowly working their way to their midday bedding area. We ventured deeper into the bush, pausing a second time when the feet of one of the 1,800-lb. behemoths could be seen. Once they roamed off, we forged forward until we caught up to them. When Brent got an adequate look at the larger of the two, he didn't have to say a word, his face said it all.

As I carefully manipulated the sticks to a comfortable position, I peered through my scope to prepare for a shot. Suddenly the smaller bull appeared staring at us. With his ears twitching and tail periodically flopping, I knew he was a little uneasy about how we got within 50 yards of him. The 37-inch-wide bull displayed massive corrugated bosses, but I searched the bush to find the other bull as I knew that once the bull facing us decided to move, both would be swiftly swallowed up by the understory. Suddenly the smaller bull dropped its head and arched backwards to avoid the fever berry bush he stood under and moved to his left. The larger bull suddenly appeared in my scope, at least a part of him did, but it was the right part. Angling away from me, I placed the crosshairs just behind his left shoulder and squeezed the trigger of my CZ. As silence returned following the shot, not a word was said as everyone listened intently to determine the direction the animals ran. After a minute or two of remaining stationary, we proceeded to walk in the direction where we last saw the bull as Brent loaded his .416 on the move. Shooting, or at least hitting a bull, is easy, and after taking four of the animals on previous safaris, I knew well and good that it's what happens afterwards that counts most.

Without the detection of blood, I still remained optimistic as we began to negotiate our way forward, avoiding the knife-sharp spines of combretum and the cat claw thorns of the knob thorn trees.

William, carrying a .375, and Friday, our trackers, scanned the ground surface for spoor and blood, while Brent and I peered through the shallow openings in the brush out front when the silent jungle floor was interrupted once again by the loud bellow of a buffalo—the death bellow. Looking back at Paul, I said, ‘you hear that, we’ve got us a buffalo.’ Not 100 yards later, we found the animal on the leaf-littered jungle floor. We cautiously approached to within 40 yards of the bull before I fired an insurance shot.

With 39-inch-wide horns and heavy corrugated bosses, it became once again evident why we returned to Africa.

After a break for lunch, we drove a considerable distance looking for Paul’s kudu and a warthog, high on Nan’s wish list. Without any luck, we simply enjoyed the comfortably cool, placid evening observing herds of zebra, wildebeest, and impala.

Returning to camp at dark, we were delighted to discover that dinner was being prepared right in the middle of the dry Buby River bed. Dining by the bright red and yellowish flames generated by Mopani wood was simply another unforgettable Zimbabwean experience.

On day nine, we rose at 6 am and traveled to a 142,000-acre area recently acquired by the Conservancy. Nan and Brent stalked several tuskers only to discover that one of their tusks were broken. By mid-day, we were about to head back to camp when we spotted a single bull kudu exhibiting exceptionally tall, spiraled horns. A short stalk later and Paul realized one of his dreams—a 52-inch kudu.

With a buffalo and kudu in the salt, all focus turned to Nan’s desire to collect a warthog, a task that became quite difficult once it became our sole objective. But it added impetus to our excursions throughout the vast region as we were continually entertained by the area’s rich wildlife diversity. Without a tusker, we concluded our ninth day spotlighting our way back into camp after dark.

As the stream of light penetrated openings in the bush, we caught a glimpse of Africa’s nightlife, observing several raccoon-like civet cats and one genet cat, which happened to be on Paul’s wish list.

We also saw a bush baby, demonstrating incredible agility gliding from branch to branch, sometimes dropping to the ground only to spring back up into low-hanging branches, then the upper canopy where it felt most secure. We were also privileged to see several spring hares. These kangaroo-like, rabbit-sized leporids exhibit a tail almost as long as their body. We were like kids in a candy store visually salivating over Africa's wild inhabitants.

Early on the tenth morning, a spotted hyena was observed dashing away from one of our leopard baits. With the intention of checking on him later, we placed one of our previously-used baits nearby.

Traveling west of camp, we entered a savannah-like environment where the silica-laden, deep sand relinquished to a hard-packed, gray-colored clay loam soil. Littered with short, water-deprived Mopani trees, low-growing acacia thickets, and an abundance of seed-bearing grasses, the area was inundated by guinea fowl, a few of which we shot for dinner.

While driving by one of the many water sites, we spotted what appeared to be a long tusker. With as much enthusiasm as if it were a buffalo, Brent bailed out of the cruiser, followed by Nan and William with the sticks. I followed them in an attempt to capture the event on film. Within a few minutes, Nan's 30.06 was on the sticks, but no shot was fired. Waving me in, Brent pointed to a blue wildebeest he declared to be in the top ten of all time. And when it walked back out into the open, its wide, sweeping horns confirmed his analysis, but I simply had no interest in shooting him. It was a quiet walk back to the cruiser and return to camp.

As we continued our search for a warthog sometime around mid afternoon, we discovered that the one-way streets we are accustomed to in big cities occurs in the bush as a bull elephant refused to let us pass, forcing us to back up. We concluded our day watching a pride of five lions and several elephant at a water hole as the sun dipped below the horizon. One of the elephants made the event

even more interesting as it charged one of the lions. It was an amazing climax to another unforgettable day.

We continued our pursuit of Nan's warthog on day eleven, seeing 39 hogs, but none displaying the right dental work.

We tracked to within a few yards of a black rhino in the morning, but as I attempted to locate an opening in the thick Mopani scrub to obtain an image, the huge animal wheeled around and dashed off.

Out of curiosity, we checked leopard baits on the cloudy morning of our 12th day and actually caught a glimpse of a female fleeing from one of the baits. Of eight baits, four of them were hit by seven different cats, two of which were males.

Without locating a desirable warthog, we spent some time positioning a bait not far from the skinning shed where the skimmers reported seeing a hyena and set up on the hyena until midnight before we called it a night.

On day 13, I was able to film a magnificent lacquer-black-and-white sable, several gemsboks, and an outstanding kudu. More importantly, we finally came upon a fine tusker for Nan. Following a well-executed stalk, Nan made an excellent shot off the sticks, dropping the long tusker. The wide grin on her face was unforgettable.

Our time in Zimbabwe was surreal, and with several more days remaining we simply relaxed and enjoyed the environment. On day fourteen, we made a trip to the Buby River Conservancy's headquarters where we visited with Natasha Anderson. A native Australian, Natasha is in charge of maintaining records on the rhino that inhabit the area. According to her, the Buby is inhabited by the largest concentration of these endangered animals in all of Zimbabwe. The horn, located on the forehead of the animal, is composed of keratin, much like our fingernails, but in some parts of the world it is used for medicinal purposes. Even though this has not been medically substantiated, the rhino is intensively sought out by poachers and sold on the black market. As much as I tried, I captured only one

image of a large, black rhino that dashed in front of me on the evening of day eight. With the setting sun in the background, it wasn't the best situation to obtain an outstanding image, but filming one of Africa's rarest animals in any situation was a privilege of a lifetime.

On our way back for lunch, we saw numerous zebra, wildebeest, and giraffe before we came upon a herd of elephants. Sheltering their youngsters, the females were in no mood to put up with humans, and the matriarch rushed our vehicle to make sure we moved on.

At lunchtime, another professional hunter arrived at camp and asked if Paul and Nan could shoot some impala for him as he was pre baiting for a leopard hunter scheduled to arrive upon our departure. So after lunch, Paul and Nan's hunt continued as they collected several impala.

After dark, I sat on the top of the cruiser with my 7mm mag readied while Brent below attempted to call in a hyena. The animal whooped back at us, but it never came in close enough to see. Driving off, a female white rhino accompanied by her baby drank at the nearby water hole, the highlight of our evening excursion.

On our last morning, we were privileged once again to see a pair of male lions at a kill. Apparently filled up after consuming the wildebeest they had killed the night before, they demonstrated no aggression, allowing us to approach within 40 yards, and I collected some incredible images of the two old males.

The afternoon was spent leisurely driving around viewing the abundance of wildlife as well as enjoying some of its picturesque kopjes where several caves were located. Most interesting was the rock art that Brent said was over 2,000 years old. Our evening concluded at sundown on top a kopje, providing a panoramic view of the salient Buby River.

Before parting Samanyanga Camp on our last morning, we bid farewell to the camp staff composed of 15 generous souls. With tears in Jan's eyes, we parted camp, and four hours later we were

comfortably situated in our rooms at the historic Bulawayo Club preparing for a hunt of another kind— locating places to shop.

Possibly the most rewarding part of our time in the city was spent visiting the fine folks at Taxidermy Enterprises, particularly Johan van der Riet, who took time to show us around. I spent much of my time looking over their leopard mounts before deciding on them to do the work on my cat. Johan also showed me a number of huge elephant ivories, two of which exceeded 100 pounds.

Up until eight years ago, Taxidermy Enterprises, now Trophy Consultants International, was heralded as the largest taxidermy business in the world. It was also the place where my trophies taken in the past were prepared for the trip to the States. We formerly visited by email, but now were able to visit on a personal basis. It was truly fascinating to see the beehive-like activity of individuals working on everything from belts and leather purses to elephant mounts. It was an enjoyable climax to a wonderfully rewarding safari that will continue next May upon our return.