

High Country Hunting in South Africa

My heart rate escalated with each and every step I took up the steep rocky slope. If I did not know better, I would have thought I was sheep hunting in the Rocky Mountains, particularly with snow at my feet, but I was 10,000 miles from Texas stalking the unique vaal rhebok in the Stormberg Mountains of southeast Africa.

Borrowing a quote from F. Vaughan Kirby in a publication titled "Great and Small Game of Africa" published in 1899, "no other antelope in Africa affords truer sport than the rhebok for none is so shy and difficult to approach." Kirby referred to the vaal rhebok as the "sport of princes" and only through "perseverance and good physical condition will one enjoy success." I found his description of this smallish gray antelope which stands at 28 to 35 inches and weighs 40 to 50 pounds to be spot-on.

I first learned of vaal rhebok back in 2005 when I accidentally tuned into a TV show on the subject. By the time the show was over, I was researching the animal and planning a trip to the Dark Continent in order to hunt a vaaly.

It was at the 2008 SCI convention in Reno that my wife Jan and I met Chris Broster and Andrew Pringle, owners of Crusader Safaris. Following a short visit with the gentlemen, I knew they were our kind of people and booked the safari for July, 2009.

For Jan and I, this was our fourth trip to Africa as we have hunted in Zimbabwe twice and Tanzania once. With three Cape buffalo, a huge sable, several kudu, and numerous other trophy memories, the Vaal rhebok remained high on my priority list, but what made this trip even more special was the fact that my daughters Beth and Nan and their husbands Justin and Paul joined us.

After spending close to 24 hours in a plane, we arrived at Johannesburg on July 19 for a short layover before hopping another flight south to Durban, but our luggage didn't make it; more importantly, neither did our guns. Our first night was spent in a plush, beautiful cottage right on the Indian Ocean.

At sunrise the following morning, Jan and I rose to the sounds of surf as we walked barefoot on the deep, cold sandy beach of the Indian Ocean. By mid day, Chris and Melinda Broster escorted us two hours out of the huge city to a secluded tent camp on the Umkomaas River.

South African Airlines delivered our luggage shortly afterwards, and my girls went to work. Jan connected first with a heavy-horned Cape bushbuck right on the Umkomaas River, and Nan wasted little time taking a record book impala and a blue wildebeest. Nan's husband Paul hunted kudu with a bow, but failed to have one of Africa's gray ghosts approach within arrow range.

Over the first four days of hunting with PH Andrew Pringle, I looked over eight mature 26 to 27-inch-horned nyala, but none met my benchmark of 29 inches, so I passed on the beautiful lacquer black-and-white ungulates.

On our last morning in Zululand, Paul hung with me as I tried one more time to capitalize on an outstanding nyala, while the others parted early on the five-hour trip south to Chris's family ranch in the Stormberg Mountains. We spotted a 29 to 30" bull, but by noon, following a long stalk, the animal simply vanished as did my chances of taking one of the impressive animals.

As an unexpected cold front dropped temperatures to below freezing, Paul and I headed south enjoying some of the most breathtaking mountain vistas in all of Africa. Admiring the jagged snow-covered peaks on the horizon made the trip go by swiftly.

As the orange glow on the mountain peaks above us waned, we arrived at the Broster ranch where we were graciously greeted by Chris's mom and dad, John and Cheryl Broster, followed by some exquisite mountain reedbuck stroganoff prepared by Chris's mom.

As a pastel orange sheen silhouetted the Stormbergs the following morning, ph Scott de Villiers, our tracker Elvis and I drove to another ranch 40 minutes away in search of an exceptional horned vaaly they had spotted earlier in the year.

After glassing several rocky canyons, we located the ram and as they say in Africa "we made a plan".

With the herd feeding on cool season grasses in the bottom of a deep bowl was just where we wanted them. With cold wind hitting our faces, we initiated a stalk that turned out to be much more challenging than I expected.

Employing the large boulders encircling the valley ridge line for cover, we culminated our stalk by belly crawling some 50 yards to a point from which we could peer down at the antelope. Some were bedded, others fed, but the ram accompanying the 12 ewes was not visible. Our only option was to wait until the ram moved into the open.

Unexpectedly, our plan was shattered when several ewes exploded from their resting positions and dashed off along with the ram. The antelope's alarm sound tshuh, tshuh, tshuh could be heard resonating off the canyon walls before the herd effortlessly

dashed up the opposing steep slope, only to pause in a position facilitating an excellent vantage point for the herd.

Our second stalk ended when we realized we couldn't approach closer than 400 yards.

A third stalk approaching the overly cautious animals failed as I simply couldn't find the ram in my scope before it dashed off. We virtually spent the entire morning crawling over that mountainside, yet the animals' keen eyesight prevented any chance for a good shot, so we decided to break for lunch and let them settle down.

Upon return to ranch headquarters, I was greeted by Jan exhibiting a wide grin on her face as she proceeded to tell me how she and ph Chris Broster stalked a beautiful blesbok, and with one shot off the sticks at 308 yards, she dropped the magnificent ram. She was on a roll and now turned her attention to a springbok for the evening hunt.

After enjoying a fine lunch, Paul and I returned with Scott to the area we last saw the ram I was after and found them feeding once again below the rock-covered koppie we crawled over all morning. I was confident we would get a shot under 200 yards this time as we proceeded to crawl up to the ledge overlooking the feeding animals. As we approached a good shooting position the unconceivable occurred; an African wild cat erupted from the bunchgrass pursuing the ram, forcing it a considerable distance from us. Once again the herd was unsettled and alert. Suddenly one of the ewes spotted us, and before I knew it, the entire herd was bounding off, only to pause at the base of the bluff they chose as an escape route. Misjudging the distance, I placed the post of my duplex scope on the ram's back and fired, shooting over the animal. The ram bounded off

pausing once again, and I shot a second time only to watch in despair as the herd disappeared over the rock-strewn koppie and into the next valley.

Returning to headquarters after dark, once again I was greeted by proud grins on the faces of my girls as I listened to how Jan once again made a great shot, this time on a beautiful springbok, while Beth dropped a fine blesbok and Nan a springbok.

The following morning things fell into place for me, and I was afforded the privilege of harvesting one of South Africa's crown jewels—an 8.5"-long vaal rhebok.

By noon we were on the third leg of our African adventure. This time we were heading to the Baviaans River Valley in the Eastern Cape.

Following our arrival and a light snack, Beth, Paul, and I along with our ph Scott negotiated our way through the deep valleys, pausing ever so often to glass kudu moving down the dry mountainsides to feed on the lush vegetation in the bottoms. Getting a good look at six nice bulls had Beth really pumped up as a kudu bull remained number one on her African wish list.

Just as the sun dipped below the mountain ridge above us, we spotted a huge bushbuck, but when we approached the area where the dark-caped animal last stood, it was nowhere in sight. As luck would have it, a duiker with horns in excess of 3.5 inches appeared, and once again my rifle barked as I collected an impressive trophy.

The following morning Beth and I traveled with Scott to investigate several isolated valleys known to attract big bulls. We spotted two mature bulls in the first valley we visited, and Beth and Chris made a long, arduous stalk on one of the animals, but came up empty-handed.

As they negotiated their way around the rock-laden mountainside, I witnessed what makes Africa so unique as a bush pig, my first, darted down the steep slope behind them while the bulls below demonstrated as much caution as any whitetail I have ever witnessed. We were into bulls but getting close enough for a shot was going to be a real challenge.

Beth's first attempt at Africa's grey ghost took the better part of the morning so we decided to return to camp and make a plan for the evening's hunt. Shortly after lunch, we were glassing from a ridge top affording us a panoramic view of the Baviaans.

As we glassed from above, Scott had one of the trackers walk through the valley below, and as he did, mountain reedbuck erupted from the heavily-thorned acacias, dashing over the opposing ridge tops as if it were effortless, but only cows and a few young bull kuku were observed.

Returning to our vehicle, we drove to another vantage point and before the tracker was dispersed, two nice bulls appeared in the bottom below us. Once Scott decided that one of the bulls was an exceptional trophy, he and Beth initiated a long stalk, circumventing the mountain where they could proceed down a shallow pass in order to cut the distance between them and the bull. I remained on the ledge where I could observe both hunters and the hunted. After they had walked for some twenty minutes, it was challenging to relocate Beth and Scott, but the bulls remained in my sight, moving only a few yards at a time before cautiously pausing, continually scanning for danger. Exercising much caution, the hunters made their way to within 220 yards of the bulls, and as I saw them preparing for a shot, I focused on the larger bull.

What seemed like eternity, I suddenly saw the bull leap forward almost a full second before I heard the report of Beth's rifle. It staggered only a few feet before falling over backwards when I let out a loud "yeeha", echoed by Beth on the opposing slope. Rushing around the mountain to them took around 40 minutes, but upon my arrival a huge smile and grand hug from my daughter enforced my belief that the quality of a hunting experience is measured primarily by whom it is shared. With one dramatic stalk complemented by a great shot, Beth realized a dream come true as she beamed, holding her outstanding bull as I snapped some memorable photos.

The following day both Justin and I made a great stalk on gemsbok, and both of us took outstanding animals. Paul's gemsbok came on the last day as he and Scott followed a herd almost a mile before they settled down, and with one well-placed shot, Paul collected his first African trophy.

It was our dream to share Africa with our children--a dream that turned into reality as we still enjoy the memories each and every time we get together, and that is what hunting is all about.