

Leopards on the Buby River

The deafening silence within my brush-covered blind was shattered by the words ‘shoot him’, ‘shoot him’, shoot the cat’, expelled in a commanding whisper by my professional hunter Brent Hein. Forget the hand signals he addressed just two hours beforehand. Something surreal was going down as I leaned forward to peer out the narrow, vertical leaf-littered slit through which the barrel of my .375 H&H was positioned to view the ethereal image of Africa’s most cunning member of the Big Five.

On the 17th of June, 2011, my wife Jan and I embarked on our sixth African safari 9,800 miles away from our home in Texas. Although buffalo was on the agenda, my paramount goal was to hunt leopard. Following the long flight over the big pond, we arrived in Johannesburg where we were met by Ziggy Duehring, a ph from Pretoria. Ziggy is enrolled in my wildlife management program at Southwest Texas Junior College where we have become close friends. Following dinner and some catching up, he dropped us off at the Afton House where we enjoyed a comfortable night before catching a morning flight to Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

By noon on the 19th, our passports and gun permits were officially being examined by officials inside the corrugated tin, barn-like airport terminal in Bulawayo as Brent awaited us just outside. Once we received clearance, a joyous reunion followed. Having hunted with Brent back in 2005 on Matetsi Unit One, we had struck up a lasting relationship. Actually, my wife thinks that Brent, owner of Brent Hein Safaris, hung the moon; I, on the other hand, consider him the consummate ph with a fine personality complimented by a predatory-like hunting instinct.

Following a three-hour drive southeast of town in Brent's meticulously-clean land cruiser, we were on the famed Buby Valley Conservancy, formerly known as Lemco. Entailing over 1,000,000 acres, seven unique and luxurious camps occupy the area, and the one we would call home for the next 15 days was Samanyanga Lodge, which translates to 'tusks of the elephant'.

After a hot shower and exquisite dinner, a restful night was enjoyed in our comfortable thatch-roofed hut right on the bank of the river.

At five o'clock the next morning, our first day of safari, we enjoyed an excellent breakfast before checking our rifles. As the chilly morning air relinquished to the warm rays of the rising sun, animal movement increased, and following a short stalk on a herd of zebra, Jan collected a beautiful stallion. Following a little celebration, we focused on impalas for leopard bait, and by noon we had two bulls.

Driving along the dry river bed after lunch, giant acacia, Nyala, and scattered rain trees hovered over us, while the dense ground layer provided ideal habitat for a rich diversity of wildlife. I added one more impala, and we began to hang bait. By evening, trackers Friday and William were covering the last of five baits with the branches of thornless toothbrush bush in order to prevent vultures from discovering them.

While traveling between bait sites we drove up on a lioness bedded down in a short grassy area blotched with Mopani trees broken off by elephants some three feet off the ground. As we approached the female, I set the motor drive on my Nikon to continuous and fired away.

In my excitement of filming the lioness, I had failed to see a heavily-maned cat lying only a few feet from the female. Obviously in estrus, the lioness refused to get up

and her partner was not about to leave her. Dangerously close to the predators, I was capturing surreal images of Africa's iconic cat. Agitated by our proximity to his counterpart, the male made several mock charges, only to return to her side. Capturing all this on film remains to be one of the ultimate experiences I have ever enjoyed in the bush.

Just moments after parting the lions, we observed a black rhino slipping off into the sea of thornscrub.

By dark we had five baits hung and spotlighted our way back to camp, observing one bush baby and several civet cats to complete an incredible first day.

At five the following morning, the clear skies were gone. Locating fresh spoor of a herd of buffalo, we tracked them for most of the morning. Getting close to the animals was not a problem, but the dense stand of Mopani and knobthorn trees prevented us from seeing all the bulls. After making several attempts to circumvent overcautious cows, we simply returned to the cruiser. One more impala was shot and hung while we checked and refreshed the five previous baits, one of which was visited by a female leopard.

We caught up with two dagga boys later in the morning but with horn spreads of 34 to 35", we allowed them to meander off.

Sometime around mid afternoon we saw the same pair of lions again. This time we got even closer to them before the male let us know we had breached his security zone with a false charge, all captured on film. I simply couldn't see how things could get better than this as we concluded our second day on safari.

On our third cold morning, we tracked a single dagga boy along the river, then into the hip-high panicum grass that saturated much of the riparian zone. Friday and

William remained on the track for close to an hour, but we simply couldn't catch up to them before their spoor dissipated in the grass.

As we proceeded to checked leopard baits, we discovered that a big tom visited one of them. As a result, a meticulously-designed blind covered by thornless toothbrush bush was constructed some 70 yards south of the bait. I shot another impala to replace the one partially consumed by the tom on our return to camp and paused to check my .375.

By 3:30 p.m. we were ensconced in the brush-covered blind anticipating the cat's return. Now, sitting in a leopard blind is not like sitting in wait for any other animal. It's quite arduous as movement must be limited and noise eliminated. It's like sitting by your wife for several hours after a quarrel. And the narrow vertical slit on the shooter's side literally can cause nearsightedness. In other words, it is no fun, especially after sitting motionless in the dark for several hours.

After instructing me on hand signals and taps on the shoulder in case a cat shows up after dark, we never spoke again and barely moved till we parted at 9 p.m.

With dwindling rays of sunlight, I used one eye to peer out the narrow, vertically aligned opening on my side of the blind but nothing showed up. As darkness eliminated my view, I could hear a herd of buffalo approaching to drink at a nearby water hole, but the animals spooked when they neared our blind. A little later in the evening we heard a rhino, but it rushed off as well. Confused as to why the animals spooked, we parted the blind at 9pm but not before placing another impala in the tree.

The following morning, we discovered that the cat returned following our departure. Tracking the animal, we found that it walked up to our blind and bedded down within hands reach of me, providing us with a reason why the buffalo spooked.

Not enthused about sitting all night, Brent made a plan. He instructed the trackers to untie the fresher carcass and position it in the tree so it would not fall out. The plan was to allow the leopard an opportunity to drag it off to a secure position where we could hopefully catch it feeding before dark.

Shortly afterwards Jan shot a wildebeest and I took another impala. This time it was a rare black-faced impala, my first ever. We also tracked a single dagga boy, catching up to him after a timed hour and fifteen minutes. With heavy, corrugated bosses and 37-inch-wide, deep, drooping coal black horns, it was a magnificent animal, but his right horn was broken several inches below the tip.

We picked up the tracks of a large herd of buffalo on our fifth morning and spent two hours and 40 minutes tracking the group of animals. Pausing occasionally to allow zebra to go by undisturbed, we used the wind to look over a few of the animals. But again, in the dense thorn bush, viewing all the bulls was impossible. As we bumped the herd a second time, Brent decided to run at them and suddenly we were off, dashing towards the stampeding animals until they crossed a donga (dry river bed) and paused to see what was chasing them. We saw several nice bulls, but nothing exceptional, and in an instant they wheeled around and vanished leaving a contrail of dust.

Without sign of our cat, we ventured 23 miles north to look for waterbuck. Once again, we were negotiating our way along the densely vegetated area paralleling the Buby River. It wasn't long before the trackers spotted a nice waterbuck. We bailed out

of the cruiser and attempted a stalk, but failed to catch up to the animal. Not a mile down the brush-lined road William mentioned seeing a tall and very wide water buck in the vicinity on a previous safari when he spotted a pair of them.

Negotiating our way around the long-needed acacias and the catclaw-shaped thorns of the knobthorn trees, we reduced the distance between us, but the animals spooked and headed towards the river. We ran full tilt towards them in hopes of catching them crossing the river bed. Out of breath but with my 7mm resting on the sticks, I scanned the river bed littered with the cotton-top papyrus grass. Suddenly Brent pointed to the animal, which paused on the opposing bank 150 yards away to look back. The bark of my 7mm shattered the quiescent evening. The bull stood up on its hind legs and almost fell over backwards before catching itself, then dashed off into the river bed only to fall dead in the middle of the dry, silica-laden sandy river bed. Upon approaching the animal, I was overly pleased by its 29 1/2" long horns accented by an attractive wide spread.

Our fifth evening concluded as we glassed a herd of over one hundred buffalo at a water hole on our way back to Samanyanga.

We were back on the spoor of four dagga boys early on the sixth day of our safari. At one point we approached within 20 yards of a bull supporting 37-inch-wide horns, but hoping a bigger bull accompanied the group, we pursued them until mid morning when we decided to let them bed down while we checked leopard baits.

As we approached the bait by our blind, the freed impala was gone and William and Friday began to track the leopard, which carried the carcass some 300 yards before

consuming all but a portion of one hindquarter. I knew where we would be spending our evening.

While the trackers tied the partially consumed impala with an additional one we had in the truck and securing both to the base of the acacia where the leopard deposited the carcass, Brent selected a site for the blind. Friday cleared a shooting lane while William took down our previous blind and rebuilt it within 50 yards of the secured carcasses. By mid afternoon, the setup was complete as the trackers inundated the area with rumen contents until the area was redolent with miasma, eclipsing our scent.

Brent and I were in the blind at 3 p.m., and shortly afterwards, a bull impala was observed perambulating behind the bait, but wondered off undisturbed.

By 4 p.m. there was no sign of the cat, so I continued reading a book titled 'Gilligan's Last Elephant'.

At 4:54 p.m. I peered through the narrow slit and noted in my journal that it was a crystal clear evening. The sun's rays glittered bright off the yellow Mopani leaves, but there was no sign of my cat.

At 5:06, I heard Brent whisper 'Shoot him! Shoot him! Shoot that cat!' Looking up from my book, I could see Brent, glasses to his eyes, staring intently out the opening on his side of the blind. Rapidly but quietly, I leaned forward and peered through my scope to see the ethereal image of a huge, dappled-colored cat simply sitting in front of the bait. With the crosshairs placed on his shoulder, I squeezed the trigger. The loud crack of my .375 shattered the placid evening as the cat reared up on its hind legs like a bucking horse only to fall head first to the ground and thrash for a minute before collapsing into my memory bank forever. I was not sure who was more excited,

my trackers as they proudly carried the cat to the truck, or me for being privileged enough to hunt one of Africa's most elusive predators.

Upon our arrival at camp, jubilation broke out as I could hear drums beating and the entire camp staff singing in jubilation. The wide grin on Jan's face verified the overwhelming event. What made the surreal event even better was the fact that my daughter Nan and her husband Paul had just arrived to share the rest of the safari with us, making it an unforgettable festive occasion.