

## Why Africa?

Pursuing one of Africa's most dangerous animals, the Cape buffalo, is some kind of an adrenalin rush, particularly for sportsmen like myself who started out their hunting careers pursuing cottontail rabbits. Excitement, dynamic challenges, and danger all packed into one event is a good way of defining a true African adventure. But there's much more to the African experience, and like I often tell people, you do not have to kill an animal to realize you have participated in the pursuit of unique animals demonstrating a smorgasbord of evolutionary adaptations in the oldest, yet grandest of hunting theatres.

Why do I hunt Africa? is not a question I hear very often simply because most sportsmen I know are dedicated whitetail hunters characterized as adventurous souls willing to take on new challenges in different environments around the globe.

As my readers gloss over the words in this article, I will be back in Zimbabwe on my sixth safari, attempting to collect my fifth Cape buffalo and my first leopard. More importantly, I will be sharing the experience with my wife of 32 years, Jan, who has been with me on all previous excursions to the Dark Continent as well. My daughter Nan along with her husband Paul will arrive a little later in our 15-day safari and will make the event that much more memorable.

Why five Cape buffalo when shooting one should be enough is an easy question to address. The pursuit of an old dagga boy using the tracks this 1,600-lb. behemoth leaves imprinted in the dusty African soil is without question the most challenging endeavor I have ever had the privilege of performing. I'm sure there could be that rare occasion when one could shoot a buffalo from a vehicle, but I have yet to see that

happen. Actually, shooting from a vehicle in most African countries is unlawful and downright condemned.

Tracking a single and sometimes group of old belligerent bulls is an exhilarating experience because each and every step one takes unravels a new and totally unexpected challenge.

For instance, on my first safari in Zimbabwe back in 2003, Jan and I, along with our friends David and Angie Shashy, hunted the Chirisa safari concession located an hour's bush plane flight out of Victoria Falls. It was in Chirisa that I discovered just how difficult it was to track, alone catch up to several old bulls. Each morning, along with our professional hunter, Maurius Maertens, and trackers, we would visit a particular isolated pan (an ephemeral body of water) where the old bachelor bulls we were after visited nightly under the protection of darkness before grazing their time away throughout the cool August mornings. As the temperature rose to an uncomfortable level around midday, the old bulls with bellies full of grass would settle down, usually in the thickest of Mopani scrub, to rest and chew their cud. We as in my trackers, ph, and Jan, on the other hand, employed such time advantageously cutting the distance between the animals and us. And, as we reduced that distance, each and every step elevated in importance as we definitely didn't want to step on something as dangerous and deadly as a puff adder or disturb the ubiquitous herds of elephants, or jumbos, as they are often referred to, while making sure the wind remained in our favor so we didn't bump the resting bulls.

Unfortunately for us, fortunately for the bulls, we bumped them three days in a row, and the miles on our feet from our daily excursions began to add up. More importantly, I had a worrisome time handling the 'what if' scenarios when it came to shot

placement if we would ever catch up with the bulls. By our fifth day on a ten-day safari, I remained empty handed. But each day seemed to get a little more exciting as we were getting to see what the Africa we had only read about really was like as we got to see Kudu - Africa's Grey Ghost, lions in pursuit of warthogs, and baboons by the hundreds in an environment completely alien to us, but home to these denizens.

Then in the early afternoon of that fifth day, one of our trackers simply clicked his fingers, and we all dropped to the leaf-covered, sandy ground surface staring into the twisted jungle of regrowth before us. At the instruction of my ph, I inched forward on my knees only to come face to face with three 1,600 to 1,800-lb. behemoths bedded not 30 yards from us. Sitting on my rump utilizing my knees for a solid rest, I simply stared at what is often referred to as Black Death. With dark coal-black corrugated bosses and long, deep drooping horns rising to a point on each side, I suddenly realized that all the pressure was on me. The trackers had done their job and I did not want to disappoint them; more importantly I didn't want to wound an animal, which virtually always insured a dangerous event in the follow-up.

As the three bulls rose from their dusty beds, they stared at me just like the writer Ruark said, "like I owed them money". I placed the reticule of my scope on the shoulder of the largest bull, moved it approximately one third up the bull's body, and gently squeezed the trigger. The loud bark and expectant kick I realized each time I shot the .375 on the range simply failed to materialize as my focus on that bull was intense. Everything around me, excluding the bull in my crosshairs, was temporarily non-existent. If it wasn't for the fact that my ph placed his index fingers into both of his ears, I would

have not realized I had fired a shot. Now that's intense as I have failed to get used to the harsh rapport and jolt that this big gun delivered to my shoulder back home on the bench.

As the midday silence was shattered by the crack of my rifle, all three bulls exploded into a mad dash directly away from us. Only dust drifting back down to the forest floor remained a few seconds following the shot. Listening to the bulls breaking a pathway through the forest floor, one of the trackers caught my attention with a hand signal. With a wide grin on his face, he pointed into the direction in which the dagga boys ran intending for me to hear what was very familiar to him--'the death moan of the Cape buffalo'.

There was no dangerous tracking of a wounded buffalo that particular day as I enjoyed what I discovered to be extremely rare in later safaris—a one-shot kill on one of Africa's big five.

Once again, hunting something as dangerous as a Cape buffalo and doing it right is an exhilarating, rewarding, and memorable event. It also generates a feeling of apprehension I have not discovered with the many other species I have been privileged to pursue across North America. None of them, except for the grizzly I collected in the Yukon, ever led me to be concerned for my welfare, which remains preeminent while pursuing Cape buffalo.

Although the pursuit of Cape buffalo is my primary objective whenever on safari in Africa, there is a variety of other challenging and more importantly beautiful animals to pursue if not to simply film. Thus one's hunt is never over until one's gun is on the bush plane.

My first multi-bagged hunt was in the Yukon back in 1984, and before that trip I was used to pursuing a single species whenever I hunted. I was suddenly enthralled by the fact that my hunt was not over upon collecting a particular animal. The remaining time was simply an extension of my already hyped up excitement level.

One of if not the most dynamic features of an African safari is the wildlife diversity. Regardless which country you visit, wildlife is abundant with some species occurring virtually everywhere while some species such as the Grants and Thompson gazelles occur in only select regions. Although fees are assessed for each animal harvested and air fares are high, a wonderful safari could be enjoyed for the elaborate price some pay to shoot a big whitetail.

Hunting may be the highlight of any safari, but one cannot disregard the wonderfully acceptable ruggedness of camp life in the bush. And the food is as exquisite as any top restaurant in the states.

I like to refer to an African safari as one holistic hunting experience. And it doesn't end when the last shell is spent as some time should always be saved to do a little shopping. I don't even like to shop, but will do so in places such as Victoria Falls where some of the finest handcrafted carvings on the planet can be purchased for very little.

Africa is a unique place and truly the last hunting frontier. It may never return to the days when lions were shot in downtown Nairobi, but I have seen hyena on the outskirts of Victoria Falls, and that is plenty wild enough for any visiting sportsman!!

