

Buffalo in Zambia

With head held high above its tensely muscled frame, the Cape buffalo didn't look at me like I owed him money; it stared at me confused as to how I along with my ph and trackers could get so close to what he thought was a secure bedding site. At 25 yards, the rays of the early morning sun radiated from his age-worn bosses, but before my reflexes could overcome the sudden rush of adrenalin, the 1,600-lb. animal wheeled around with the grace of a impala and headed for the protection of the Mopani woods, pausing just inside the forest to verify if in fact we represented any danger.

As the loud bark of my .375 CZ shattered the placid morning, the bull dashed for safety, with my second shot hitting him in his back above and a little behind his shoulder. In a matter of seconds, the bull was swallowed up by the Mopane scrub and silence returned to the bush.

It was day four of my safari to Africa in pursuit of Cape buffalo. Accompanied by my hunting companion and wife Jan, we were now in Zambia in the Luangwa Valley with John du Plooy, owner of Muchinga Adventures Ltd.

We arrived at our tent camp located on the crocodile-littered banks of the Luangwa River on August 1 where we met up with professional hunter Terry van Rooyen, our tracker Freddy, and our game scout Tryson.

After a late brunch, Terry and I drove out of camp to check my rifle when we spotted three bull elephants feeding on the opposing bank. I tried filming the pachyderms, one of which had sizable tusks, but my 200mm lens provided less than adequate magnification.

Returning to camp, we rested up a bit and by 3:30 we were atop a land cruiser enjoying the sights and sounds of Africa. Uniquely enough, the same three elephants we saw earlier had crossed the river, affording me the unique opportunity to film them at less than 40 yards.

We spent the entire first evening negotiating miles of deep sandy roads in search of buffalo tracks, but failed to see any fresh enough to warrant pursuit.

Our second morning, Tuesday, August 2, arrived swiftly as we rose at 4 a.m. and following breakfast, we traveled two-and-one-half hours north to the village of Chewisa in search of dagga boys.

All morning we negotiated narrow walking paths established by the villagers only to track three bulls that crossed the concession boundary into one which we could not hunt.

As we headed back towards camp, Freddy spotted some fresh buffalo tracks and off we went. Bedded surprisingly close to the road, we busted a herd of approximately 200 buffalo. Our view of the jungle floor was suddenly eclipsed by a cloud of dust generated by the running animals. Pausing for close to 30 minutes, we proceeded to track the herd and before long, we were glassing buffalo, but in extremely thick Mopane scrub, inhibiting any possibility of a good shot at several hard-bossed bulls.

We found the herd once again early on our third morning and attempted to get ahead of the grazing animals all morning, leaving them midday as they bedded in order to facilitate our approach in the afternoon--a good plan, but a lion entered the picture pursuing the animals forcing them to move all day, and we failed to catch up to the roaming herd.

Enjoying the cool temperature from atop the land cruiser, we returned to camp, showered, dined on an exquisite supper, and made a plan to return to Chewisa in the morning for another chance at the dagga boys we tracked the second morning.

Up at 4 a.m. again on our fourth day, we made the long, challenging excursion north, arriving just before sunrise. A rare sighting of a pack of colorful African wild dogs and several spectacularly black-and-white civet cats in our headlights made the trip. Not long after arriving at the village, we picked up several residents who were knowledgeable of buffalo. Shortly afterwards, we came across a single fresh track, bailed out of the land cruiser, and began tracking the lone bull. Forty-three timed minutes later, we were face to face with my bull that failed to look at us like we owned him money, but with the same feeling of shock and amazement that I was feeling. Call it buck fever, but I failed to take what should have been a chip shot at 25 yards, and before I knew it, I had two shots into the animal at a distance I was not overly comfortable with. As silence returned to the bush, we sat down for what felt like eternity, yet was only 45 minutes before proceeding on its track.

As we followed the animal, little sign of blood really created a concern. We had a wounded dagga boy and he was headed to the tall grass.

As we exited the forest, the bulls track led us into an area laden with tall grass, about as long as a football field and twice as wide. Convinced we had a dangerous situation, Terry climbed a tall acacia tree in an attempt to spot the animal, but he had no luck. Cautiously we entered the sea of grass with three trackers leading the way, and within a few minutes our trackers indicated that they could hear the bull as they dashed back towards us. Once again the bull erupted from his bed only to pause at the entrance

of the forest where we dashed in hopes of getting a shot. Severely hurt, the bull was no longer willing to run, and I realized another dream come true—my fourth Cape buffalo.

After taking an old smooth bossed dagga boy in the morning, we spent our fourth afternoon looking for a nice puku for Jan. By sundown, Jan had her rifle on the sticks twice but failed to get a good shot.

On our fifth day, we spotted one of the puku we stalked the day before, and following a lengthy stalk and well-placed shot, Jan dropped a tremendous bull. The reddish-coated animal, indigenous only to Zambia, had tall and extremely heavy horns.

After lunch, we traversed the undulating road paralleling the Luangwa River glassing a substantial number of hippos in an attempt to find a mature bull. Although we failed to locate an old hippo, we ran into several elephants which provided exceptional photographic opportunities.

As the evening temperature dropped, we scanned a portion of the river where du Plooy had hunted a particularly large bull with several former clients. While we glassed three different pods, I counted 102 hippos before we found the bull, but failed to get a shot at him as he would never surface long enough to provide an opportunity.

We returned to the same sandy shoreline early on the morning of our sixth day. With a torn-up left ear, our bull was not difficult to distinguish from the others, and within minutes we located the huge animal. With my .375 resting on a small bipod right on the shoreline, I prepared for a shot.

What appeared at first to be a rather easy shot turned out to be much more challenging than I thought as this bull was savvy and totally aware of our presence. When he surfaced, he did so only to get a little air, taking only a second or two at the

most before submerging. Timing his appearances was quite interesting as he would remain submerged for an unpredictable time period ranging from 57 seconds to seven minutes 30 seconds. More importantly, when he surfaced he would do so in different places amongst the many cows he associated with. Thus we had to identify the animal and get a shot off rapidly because he never stayed up for more than two seconds. He also never showed much of his head, making my target between his eyes extremely small.

Quite excited, I missed the bull once as he disappeared a little too quickly into the muddy waters as I squeezed the trigger. My next shot, however, was dead on as he remained up a little too long and the bull disappeared into the deep and murky water of the Luangwa.

Right afterwards Terry congratulated me and said the animal will simply sink to the bottom, then floats to the surface in as little as 30 minutes and never longer than two hours. It was an exciting event like nothing I have ever experienced, but after the two-hour period passed and my bull failed to surface, excitement turned to despair. When it failed to float in three hours, I was extremely concerned.

As the cool morning temperatures relinquished to the heat of the mid day sun blaring down upon us, we decided to return to camp, have lunch, and return later in the afternoon, hopefully to find the hippo afloat.

My hope of seeing the bull at the surface was shattered when we returned several hours later.

I had made what I thought was a good shot six hours and 15 minutes before and still no sign of the bull.

Waiting only a short time, Terry decided to walk upriver and search for the bull I shot at when all of a sudden the trackers started yelling in excitement as the huge animal rose to the surface an unprecedented six-and-one-half hours after the shot.

The rest of the day was spent winching the 3,000-lb. animal to the shore where it was butchered and the meat divided between the villagers, a task completed long after dark.

I took an incredibly beautiful bushbuck on the seventh and last day of our safari, and Jan made an incredible shot on a beautiful impala--a wonderful trip and unforgettable experience which will be continued next summer when we return to Zimbabwe.