

An Expensive Day

This day finds me running at top speed down a two track road in the middle of northern Namibia with no idea why. My legs fly to keep up with my PH and tracker. All of the commentary to this point has been in whispered Afrikaans, and, not knowing that language, I am in the dark. A couple of hundred meters pass and we careen to the right into the thick bush still cruising at top speed. I have little experience with this hunting technique and find it unique to say the least. The thorn bushes tear at my arms and legs as I whizz past. Those cuts are going to sting in the shower tonight. Then we stop dead. The soft grey form of a kudu cow appears.....

Maybe I should rewind this a little and explain a few things?

I am on my first African safari with my parents, Gary and Sandee Cotton, and my wife Cathy. So far we have been having the time of our lives, and several animals have been taken by my parents including a super 94 cm gemsbok and old warthog. Cathy has been trying to get a zebra, but so far they have eluded her. Most of my time has been spent trying to entice a leopard to my baits, but that is another story. I did manage an old 96 cm gemsbok on day 3, and a Damara dik dik on day 5. So, I have not been out of the game entirely. However, we are not cutting into my trophy fee budget very quickly and it is now day 7.

We are hunting at Westfalen Hunting Safaris in northern Namibia near the town of Outjo. John and Julianna Van der Westhuisen run the operation with their children, Hain, Juretha, three dachshunds and an undetermined number of cats. The camp is called Elephant Camp and is situated in an area where the desert elephant roams, hence the name. Camp, if you can call it that, is comfortable, and well-appointed with hot showers, and great accommodations. You become part of the family immediately, and want for nothing. A truly exceptional operation.

Since I have opted to try for leopard, my PH is Anton Esterhuisen, a long time Namibian Big Game PH. He guides the leopard hunters when one is in the Westfalen camp. If you get the chance to hunt with him, you'll not be disappointed. He is very knowledgeable, and just fun to be around.

After six days of hard hunting, my parents have declared a day of rest. Since they are staying in for the morning that frees up John to check the leopard baits then take my folks to see a local Himba village this afternoon. Since Cathy has not yet connected on her primary animal, Hain will take her out after the crafty zebra. They have dubbed themselves "team zebra".

This gives me a day to concentrate on plains game. Specifically, we will try to find a kudu. Of course, you never know what a day may bring.

The Day Begins:

After a great breakfast of eggs, and bacon, Anton and I head north to an area where my folks had seen two big kudu bulls the previous day. Dad and Hain had stalked one, and got to within 30 meters, but the thick brush prevented a shot. We were hoping for a similar encounter with a different ending.

An hour later, we had picked up our tracker July, and Anton and I were still hunting through a hilly area looking for kudu and hartebeest. We are angling toward a large kopje to climb and glass the surrounding area. From the top we see a small band of kudu cows getting a bite to eat, but there are no

bull in sight. We move on and after a couple hours of moving and glassing, we end up at a water hole. A quick radio call and July comes to pick us up.

We drive further into the mountains, and basically repeat the same walk. This time we come up with a klipspringer ewe and two giraffe. By now it is lunch time, so we head to a large water hole nearby to eat lunch and see what visits.

On our drive to the waterhole, a good steenbok bolts from cover in front of the truck. I hastily snatch up my 9.3X64 Brenneke Mauser and bail out of the truck circling around the back to get on the steenbok's side of the road. Anton follows me then takes the lead as we sneak toward the last position of the steenbok ram. He pops his head up 30 meters in front of us under a large thorn bush, but otherwise remains still. The sticks appear in front of me and I snick off the safety as the Mauser is deployed onto them. A second later I squeeze off the shot and the steenbok ram evaporates in a cloud of dust. We advance and find blood, but no ram.

July joins us and takes the lead in finding my ram. As the search begins, we hear rustling behind us. I turn to see that the ram is up and trying to get moving. The rifle swings and fires as if on its own, finishing the tiny antelope. My first shot was a little low. The second passed through end to end. Luckily, the 250gr Nosler Accubonds didn't do much damage to the cape and a full mount will be possible. Big calibers are hard on these little creatures. Steenbok are a delightful little antelope. Though their horns are simple but they are quite striking up close with soft long rust brown fur and subtle facial markings. As fine a trophy as anyone could want.

After the photos are taken we pack up and continue on to the water hole. The layout is a large earth berm running east to west parallel to a dry river bed. The berm finally tapers and the river enters the pan where the water hole is. The waterhole extends along the other side of the earth berm from the river bed. This is an area that holds water most of the year, so there is a lot of vegetation, and some fairly large trees line the river bottom.

We drive up the river bed to the earth berm, grab our lunches, my rifle, and make our way to the top of the berm. At the top, two chairs greet us behind a thorn bush blind under a large tree that keeps you comfortably shaded. In front of us is a pan maybe 20 acres in size. There is 10 acres of water in the pan surrounded by dry mud bank that gives way to scrub Mopani and thorn bush. A large group of gemsbok and springbok are in residence on the other side of the water.

I'm busy trying to get a good photo of the gemsbok when I hear July start to drive off taking the steenbok ram to the skinner while we enjoy lunch. A second or two later, the vehicle abruptly stops with the engine off. Odd. A moment later, the heavy footfalls of someone running grow in our ears. July appears at the bottom of the berm and has a short frantic conversation with Anton. Anton turns to me; "bring your rifle" is all he says. I have no clue what they have discussed as it was all in Afrikaans.

I follow them to the truck at a fast jog. Once at the truck, more conversation in Afrikaans ensues as they come up with a plan. I load the rifle, still unsure what has sparked this tense moment. Now we get serious and bolt down the road at a run. I unslung my rifle to turn it around to point behind us. Running with a loaded rifle doesn't seem like a good idea to me.

And so I am running at top speed down a two track road in the middle of northern Namibia with no idea why. 150 meters further and we cut to the left into the brush for 50 meters more, finally July freezes. I

can just see a kudu cow off to our left about 75 meters away in a small opening. She is oblivious to our presence and keeps walking. More kudu file past the opening, but they are all cows and calves. I count 13 of them.

We back out slowly and cut back toward the road. A few meters further and we get back up to speed. The scenario is finally starting to sink into my brain. When July started to leave he ran smack into the kudu herd as they were coming into water. They bolted, but apparently not too far. Anton and July figure that the kudu aren't spooked and we are trying get in front of them. Trouble is, they walk fast. Much faster than I walk, if we don't run to outpace them we'll never cut them off.

We swing wide and scurry another 300 meters before slowing to a walk and turning left again toward where the kudu should be. 20 meters further and July halts. Anton throws up the sticks and whispers to shoot quick. I do as I am bid and throw the rifle to my shoulder and onto the sticks. A bull kudu fills the scope quartering hard away, head twisted looking back at us. My crosshair passes the shoulder settles at the back of the ribs, and I send a 250gr Nosler Accubond on its way. The impact is audible and the bull lunges forward vanishing into the bush. We bolt forward at a dead run to where he once stood.

We find him standing 30 meters away under a big Mopani tree. The sticks are up and I have the rifle trained on him, though he is clearly done for. A second later, he topples. He is still, and I feel the nerves finally catching up with me. We stand there for several minutes catching our breath and staring at the kudu bull. No words are spoken, no handshakes, just silence and calm for probably a good minute. Anton finally breaks the peace and asks me if I understand what I have just taken. It takes me a second to comprehend his question.

Anton is referring to Namibia undergoing several rabies outbreaks in the last 10 years. Those outbreaks seem to be particularly hard on the old bulls. No one knows why, but those seem to be the animals most often found dead from an outbreak. My bull is quite old and we judge him at 10 years. That means he has survived at least two outbreaks. Quite a feat when nature can be a cruel host. To take a bull this old given the history is something a bit more special.

His long horns are thick and worn from time. The tips have been polished to the color of fine ivory. The curl is wide, and he just makes two turns. His horns are covered in mud and I peel it off to get a better look at their astonishing beauty. Both of my hands won't go all the way around the horn bases. The ridges up the horns are well defined, and have chips in them from years of fighting for the right to breed.

I feel a small sense of sadness that I had slain such an old warrior; a fighter that survived the worst. I also feel the elation of success. For a few minutes, I try to soak in every detail of the face, ears, hooves, tail, and stripes. I count 7 stripes on one side, 8 on the other. I am surprised at how short the hair is, and how sparse it is. His neck is still swollen from the rut. It is simply massive as are the ears.

I'll only get one first kudu. So, I take my time and hope that maybe future years will not dull the memory. Maybe I can make the memory last in sharp detail forever.

Photos are taken, and we load him up for the journey to the skinner. July has picked up our lunch from where we left it at the water hole. It is now about 2:30pm and time to head to the main house to drop off my kudu and steenbok. And finally eat some lunch.

After lunch, it is about 3 in the afternoon. Time to get in one more hunt before nighttime settles and ruins our fun. We head a flat plains area where there are a lot of springbok and hartebeest. On the way we glimpse a cheetah in the tall grass. Very neat. However, that also means that the springbok will be scattered and not in their usual haunts. Cheetah are hard on the springbok. Some warthog appear under a tree. A good boar has love on his mind with a smallish sow. We are intruding on their plans, and they scurry off into the grass. We try to make a stalk, but the long grass shelters them from our sight. Back to the truck and we are off.

A short drive further on and we pull up to the base of a large kopje. A quick dismount and we climb to an outcrop on the side of the kopje to glass the flats beyond. A small water hole sits out about 150 meters to our left with a huge flat stretching for miles in all directions. Small groups of hartebeest cows and two groups of springbok can be seen grazing. Then a single hartebeest steps out in front of us. This one you can tell is something special. We admire him for several minutes, but can't come up with a good way to stalk him. No matter, he isn't that far out. We judge it at 250 meters and I am confident at that range. July bails off the rocks to retrieve my rifle. Did I mention that I really like that guy?

He is back shortly, and get ready for the shot. Rested on my hat over a rock, I take my time to ensure a clean kill. The bull is slightly quartering away and feeding to the right. I aim at the top third of his body, just behind the shoulder. Anton whispers to wait for him to raise his head as it would be a shame to put a bullet through his horn as it exits. The bull turns a little more broadside, and I have my opportunity. The shot rings in our ears, and a fraction of a second later we hear the impact. It is solid. The bull takes two unsteady steps forward, and tips over. His tail the only thing that moves, then he is still. A later check with my rangefinder puts the range at 239 meters.

He is a magnificent bull. Old and heavy. The bases are polished smooth from his many years. The tips sweep back parallel to each other and are very long. I wanted a hartebeest, but had put him lower on my priority list. I now see that was a mistake. He has a beauty that is made more unique by his ungainly appearance. The long face blends into the horn bases. And the body color is like no other animal that I have seen. A truly magnificent trophy and I can already see him as a pedestal mount in my living room. I make a note to see if my wife agrees with that idea.

We drop off my hartebeest with the skinner and head back to Elephant Camp.

Cathy is waiting for us along the drive. She holds up a spent cartridge from her 7X57 Mauser, and parades it back and forth in front of our vehicle. She had connected with her zebra. She recounts the tail, and I can see that she had a wonderful hunt. She is very excited.

I hold out my hand to give her something and drop three spent cartridges into her hand.

She says "you got your kudu?"

I respond with "yes".

She looks puzzled and asks "It took three shots?"

"No" I say.

"You got three animals?" she asks, this time with an edge of excitement.

"Yes".

But we really had four animals, my three, and Cathy's zebra. We may not have a day blessed with such success again. A day ripe with hope that ended in triumph and above all, memories. And one that turned out to be quite an expensive day.

About the Hunter:

Jeremy Cotton was born and raised in Montana, USA and is 37 years of age. His family has held up the tradition of hunting for several generations and passed it to him at a young age. Jeremy has hunted much of the USA from eastern turkey to western elk and deer. He currently resides in Indiana and works as an engineer in the steel industry. His wife Cathy graciously allows him to maintain his hunting habit and occasionally comes along to oversee the activities. This trip is their first to Africa, and rest assured will not be their last. The friendships made will be renewed in the future.