



Three Leopard with Three Weapons

By Kim Stuart

Not a McNabb by any means, but taking leopard with muzzle-loader, conventional rifle and handgun does make for an interesting story.

My first trip to Sandriver Safaris in the Limpopo Province of South Africa was with hunting buddy Jim Gefroh. We were using two of his custom built muzzleloaders. I hoped to take a leopard with my .54 cal. English sporting rifle. Its single shot projectile was a 750-grain slug propelled by 150 grains of 2FFG black powder. We had heard about Professional Hunter Marhtinus Robertse and his success with leopards and hopefully would not be disappointed.

Marhtinus began our hunt by baiting numerous sites where fresh leopard tracks had been found. He was using the abundance of meat available from a large group of bow hunters in camp, though he didn't say how they died (not the hunters!). Marhtinus and his tracker Orbit built a blind across the creek bed and about fifty yards away, positioned slightly above a bait that had been hit. Our first night in the blind was uneventful. The bait was only visited by a honey badger and at two in the morning we called it quits.

A second night in the blind again yielded no sightings.

The following day we had a fresh hit on another bait. Martinus' plan was to build a new blind and try for this alternate cat. Already late in the afternoon, we rushed to complete the blind, enter and set up. We were a full 50 yards away and as always slightly above the location of the bait. Dusk descended into early evening. In the distance a hyena cried its bizarre whooping laugh while we settled down for what would probably be another long evening.

Suddenly, Martinus nudged me. Then I heard the sound, at first a subtle crunch, then the sound of tearing flesh. The still night air made the sounds unmistakable. A leopard was feeding. After the two previous long nights in the blind the critical moment was at hand.

Martinus had coached me about how little time I might have to make the shot once the light was turned on. It was now or never.



Author and Martinus with the first leopard taken with the muzzleloader in 2003. Inset - The custom made .54 cal. English Sporting rifle by Jim Gefroh.



Myself with Martinus (right), our second successful hunt together. Tracker Orbit on the far left. Inset - the .270 Winchester which he had loaned me for the hunt.



Martinus switched on the light. The leopard was feeding on the far side of the bait. The only portion of the cat that I could see were his two back feet and part of his long tail. The spotted predator slid from behind the bait and began to ease away. I picked a moving spot as an aiming point and squeezed the trigger. Smoke filled the blind. When we could see the area around the bait, there was no cat. My impression of the shot was good, with the point of impact possibly slightly further back from the shoulder, while still in the breadbasket. We looked at each other and just as Martinus asked me how it felt, we heard a low moan from the cat. Grabbing his shotgun while I reloaded the muzzleloader, we headed in the direction of the sound. With flashlights in one hand and weapons in the other we found the leopard in a few moments. He was lying perfectly posed between two rocks as though he had found a comfortable place to rest.

He was in excellent condition. My shot hit squarely in the middle of his rib cage and he ran less than 40 yards. Martinus was as happy as I was with the beautiful cat. The first and most difficult hurdle on the way to taking the Big Six with a muzzleloader had been completed.

My buddy Jim and I visited Sandriver Safaris for a second hunt the following year. My quest was to hunt another leopard using a conventional rifle. A previous trip to Tanzania had been unsuccessful while using my .470 Nitro Express double rifle. The difficulty in seeing the rear peep sight and shrouded front sight while illuminating a leopard in a tree at 50 yards with just a flashlight proved too difficult. I was hoping that PH Martinus Robertse's luck with leopards would hold a second time and we could take another of the elusive creatures.

Martinus had hung baits a week in advance. Unfortunately without response. The baits were deteriorating quickly because of

the heat. On the afternoon of the first day, safari operator Johan Wolvaardt, Martinus, Jim and I were enjoying one of Sammy the cook's wonderful lunches. One of Johan's employees rushed into the dining room - there was an urgent phone call.

When Johan returned he was excited, and began by saying, "That was Simon calling from the other lodge. They have just found a freshly killed impala female at the edge of a field not far from the camp. There is leopard spoor all around the area. We must get over there quickly, build a blind and see if we can catch that cat. This is a fantastic opportunity which we can't pass up."

We quickly proceeded toward the other lodge, about a half-hour drive away. At the field we were met by Simon and shown the location of the dead impala. We hastily built a blind slightly less than 50 yards from the impala. We then wired the impala to the base of a tree to keep the leopard from dragging it off into the dense brush surrounding the site. When we completed the blind at 3 pm, Martinus said, "Let's get lost for an hour or so and let things settle down."

We returned an hour later and quietly entered the blind. Within minutes, we were attacked by hordes of mosquitos. We were in a low-lying damp brushy area not far from a swamp. We covered up the best we could with some sweat clothes, but the heat was oppressive. All we could do was tough it out and wait.

At approximately 5 pm Martinus give me an elbow. The leopard had arrived to feed. The awkward position we were lying in required two moves for me to get to the rifle and attempt to make a shot. On the first move to a sitting position, the cat froze and looked through the shooting port directly into my eyes. Both of us were locked in a stare-off. I hesitated to even lower my eyes. Seconds stretched and ever so slowly the cautious cat lowered his head and began to feed again.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Martinus nod - he was encouraging me to shift to my shooting position. Sure that another move might frighten the leopard into the bush, I hesitated. Martinus urged me again and when I shifted positions the second time, the cat spotted the movement and dropped the bait. We locked into another intense eye-to-eye stare down but this time the rifle was in my grasp and the scope was focused on the leopard's shoulder. The report of the .270 broke the silence of the blind and the cat rolled onto its side. The only movement of the animal was a twitch of the tail.

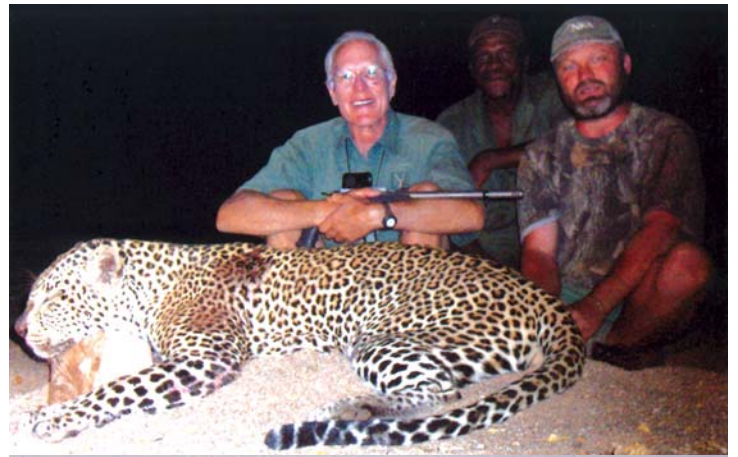
By the time we got the leopard loaded and back to camp a total of only five hours had passed from the time we first heard of the cat's presence.

I was back again with Marthinus in 2006, this time with a Thompson-Center Encore .375 H&H magnum. Marthinus was returning from checking a leopard bait, and as usual, his stoic demeanor revealed nothing. Finally he extended his massive hand and said, enthusiastically, "Congratulations, we have a fresh hit."

I was the last client to have taken a leopard at Sandriver Safaris in the fall on 2004. Since that time he had hunted and failed with seven other clients during the remaining season of 2004, the full season of 2005, and the 2006 season until this current hunt. There was no shortage of leopard on the concessions of Sandriver Safaris, but the difficulty was that the cats were extremely clever. On one hunt Martinus had hung 40 baits on two different locations. Both areas displayed an abundance of fresh leopard sign, but the cats proved elusive. On many occasions Martinus would find fresh tracks at a bait without the cat so much as even testing the meat. For a PH with a success ratio on leopards of about 60%, this had proven extremely frustrating.

Marthinus explained: "This leopard is cheeky, quite big, and extremely cautious. He came up from the riverbed and prowled all around the bait, feeding very little. Then he wandered around the hill just above the bait and left the area through the bush there. If we build a blind today I'm certain our scent will put him off, and he will not come back to feed tonight. Let's wait until tomorrow and see if he returns to feed more aggressively."

The next morning, at first light, we checked the bait. Marthinus'



The last of three leopards. Inset - The weapon was the T.C. Encore .375 Holland & Holland with 18 inch barrel and Leica red dot scope. Also used successfully for buffalo, lion, and elephant.

tactics proved true. The big cat had fed voraciously on the bait, and there was plenty of meat remaining. The cat seemed to have been at ease, and we felt the chances were good that he would return again that evening.

Orbit, tracker, driver and general right-hand-man to Martinus, proceeded to build us a blind. In the lower branches of a tree which hung close to the ground, he created a natural looking hide, slightly uphill from the bait. His attention to detail was flawless. The blind's location above the bait would allow any human scent to rise above the area of the feeding cat. We strapped my handgun to a parallel branch at the front of the blind just over 40 yards from the bait. With the Zeiss red dot scope switched on and focused on the bait, the rest was solid.

With the blind completed we left to hunt other game. We returned at 4 pm It is legal in South Africa to hunt leopard at night and Marthinus liked to use a floodlight instead of a spotlight. His other equipment included a backup light, high intensity flashlight, and shotgun. He checked and rechecked all the connections and fittings leaving nothing to chance. Martinus preferred us to wear soft clothes, drink nothing after midday and eat a banana before entering the blind. He believed this would keep any stomach noises at bay.

Hours passed after dusk had turned to night, and the stars slowly lit up the vast emptiness above. Marthinus' voice jarred me from my trance. "It's ten o'clock. Let's go back to camp."

The uneventful evening was typical of those spent leopard hunting, hours of waiting with no activity.

Checking the bait the next morning confirmed Martinus' theory, this was a clever cat, and had visited the bait sometime after we left.

Baits had been placed on two concessions. Checking the second area in the afternoon, we discovered a hit on a bait hung the day before. The donkey shoulder had been partially consumed and the spoor around the site was that of a good-sized leopard. We hurried to erect a preformed wire mesh blind, which Martinus carried in the back of the truck.

The distance from blind to bait was exactly 30 yards, much closer than usual. A slow moving stream ran between. It was

necessary that we clear a shooting path through all the streambank vegetation otherwise the density of the bush created a virtual wall between the bait and the blind. We slipped into our position at 4 pm and prepared for a long wait. Just before 7 pm, we heard the warning bark of a kudu, and moments later, much closer, the bark of a bushbuck, signs that a leopard might be approaching. Twenty minutes later, the unmistakable crunching sounds of a feeding leopard brought both of us into a sitting position. I curled around the cocked handgun which had been strapped to a branch and aimed at the bait. As I nodded to Martinus he gently rolled on the rheostat of the floodlight slowly illuminating the area around the bait. There was something there, but as my eyes tried to adjust to the light I couldn't be sure. After closing my eyes and shaking my head a second time the vague shape of a leopard became obvious. He was sitting on his haunches facing directly away from us. The red dot locked between the shoulder blades and the blast of the .375 left us stunned for a moment.

Martinius was the first to speak. In a low raspy excited voice he exclaimed, "You got him, you got him, you got him. He's down!" The husky male had fallen on his left side, his rear feet still in the same position as when he had been sitting in front of the bait.

Martinius' usual reserved demeanor became animated and exuberant. His spell of bad luck was broken. We high-fived and like a couple of kids rushing to a Christmas tree surrounded with presents we crashed through the brush to inspect the downed leopard.

He was a healthy male weighing approximately 120 pounds. His coat was in perfect condition. He was well muscled and had been well fed. My first of the Big Five with a handgun, he was a perfect trophy.

I think the credit goes to a competent, dedicated hard-working PH, who is willing to be creative in his hunting techniques, pay close attention to all of the smallest details, and is motivated to try and outsmart one of the most difficult dangerous game animals in Africa. My hat is off to Martinus! 🐾



A happy Martinus - perhaps the only PH who has guided the same hunter on three successful leopard hunts with three different types of weapons, a muzzleloader, rifle and handgun.

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