



# African Hunt - A Childhood Dream Come True

## Part I - Zebra at Rolling River Safaris

by Robert Dickerson



Bob with his trophy Zebra.

"Two big eland bulls were here this morning," Phil Oosthuysen whispered. He had just checked a sandy clearing for tracks.

I had to take his word for it. It was my third day of hunting with Rolling River Safaris in Zimbabwe and I still couldn't tell a big eland print from a small one. Phil, the professional hunter (PH), spoke briefly to Amos Imbanyele and Edward Sakala and the Mashona trackers assembled the gear we needed to follow the eland. It was almost 2pm, but Phil thought we could overtake the pair because eland don't usually move in the heat.

I thought about all the African hunting stories I'd read as a kid. In those old tales, professional hunters like Harry Selby, Wally Johnson, Donald Ker, John Kingsley-Heath, Syd Wowne and their African trackers could follow a month-old leopard spoor across solid rock by moonlight. In grade school, I looked for "spoor" in the dictionary but it wasn't there.

Half a lifetime's passed since I read those first stories but now, at a "grandfather's age", I was about to follow a spoor myself.

"This is why I came to Africa!" I thought. "Enjoy it, because only a lucky few get to live a childhood dream!"

Phil checked the wind and, with his nod, the trackers moved out. They walked quickly and had no trouble following the trail. (When I asked later, Phil said it was an easy area to track in). Phil stayed behind and to the side and I was on his outside elbow well clear of Amos and Edward.

We had been following the trail steadily for forty minutes when a zebra was spotted... let me restate that - a zebra was.. seen. I had a zebra on my list, so we changed course and followed the fresher spoor. "Spoor", by the way, is in my 1994 Microsoft CD ROM Dictionary.

Without saying a word, Phil and the trackers switched places. With a possible target ahead, Phil did the tracking with me at his side and the Mashona in the back. As we hiked, I turned and saw Edward looking ahead or to the right and while Amos searched more to his left. Phil would glance at the grass then study the bush ahead as he walked. The

switch was as well choreographed as a ballet and not a word had been spoken.

I had seen just one zebra but the wide trail indicated there were more. Phil easily followed the trail and, after a mile or so, pointed to a dozen zebra about 250 yards ahead. I expected to shoot at that range and was waiting for Phil to identify a target. Instead, he whispered, "We can get closer", and we started to crawl through the knee high grass.

Phil occasionally glanced back at the trackers, who hadn't advanced, and communicated with hand signals. I later realized this was standard operating procedure while stalking. Twice, when we glanced back, there was just an imperceptible nod by one tracker and we continued. On the third turn, I saw Edward give a slow hand gesture indicating we should angle to our right. Obviously, this was much safer than Phil sticking his head up for a peek.

I was having trouble keeping up while staying low. I tried to hold the rifle in my right hand and crawl, using just my left. This didn't work; I couldn't move well and the scope was taking a pounding. I put the sling over my back and let the rifle hang under my chest. This worked; I could crawl and keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction. Getting the gun into action would be desperately slow but I couldn't think of a better alternative.

No matter, we remained undetected and reached the cover of a tree about 90 yards from the herd. Phil squeezed his small plastic bottle of mopane ash and watched the white cloud drift away on the warm African breeze. Phil whispered, "Stand up slowly, use the tree as a rest."

It was a perfect setup. The tree had a convenient "Y" in the trunk at exactly the right height, the zebra were unaware, the range was short and the wind was in our favour. All I needed to do was make the shot. Phil studied the zebra, looking for the mature stallion that usually accompanies a herd. He was behind some mares so there was nothing to do but wait. As the time dragged, Phil must

have thought I was getting nervous because I heard him whisper, "Breathe." I thought I was OK.

A moment later, the stallion trotted to our right. Phil whistled sharply and the zebra froze. I centred the crosshair behind the front leg and concentrated on the trigger. The stallion bucked at the shot and ran into the bush before I could shoot again. I had felt no recoil and my ears didn't ring, a good sign! The combination of my focus and the terrific, hollow "WHOCK" of the bullet striking home convinced me he was dead.

I wanted to search for the zebra immediately but Phil insisted we wait, "I'm sure you hit him hard, but we'll let these guys sort him out".

I was so intent on the zebra that I didn't hear Edward and Amos walk up. Phil counted 102 paces from our tree to the place the stallion had been standing. Edward followed the blood trail while I paralleled his course, 15 yards to the right, with my rifle at high ready. Phil had taken his rifle from Amos and was ready to shoot as well. Zebra have a reputation for being aggressive and he was taking no chances. I saw the zebra first and Phil saw him a few seconds later. He had run about 90 yards.

We approached cautiously from the rear and Edward used a branch to check for a reaction. He was dead. The 225 grain Nosler Partition had punched right through both lungs and slipped between the front leg and ribs on the way out. If bone had been hit on the off side,

there would have been a much bigger exit wound. After reading about the vitality and tenacity of the zebra, I was pleased with the performance of the .338.

The hanging and skinning of the zebra ended the serious hunting for the day. The tracking of the eland and zebra had been impressive and I was determined to be more attentive the next time we followed a trail.

We took a ride that evening, as much to look at the ranch as anything else. By the dam, we saw an aggressive old sable bull chase two warthog that had invaded his territory. I had my rifle, and could have made a long shot when the hogs stopped running, but Phil didn't seem interested and we let the opportunity pass.

Rolling River Ranch is located on 22 000 acres in the centre of Zimbabwe about two and a half hours southwest of Harare. The ranch, like most of Zimbabwe, is on a high plateau and is covered with a hardwood forest. In some areas the trees are so thin that 300 yard shots are possible, but the brush can be so thick that visibility is limited to 10 yards. There was surprisingly little thorn. At an altitude of 3000 feet, the winter nights are cool enough for a blanket but the equatorial sun quickly warms the morning air and permits hunting without a coat.

Rolling River leases 25 000 additional acres on neighbouring ranches near the city of Kwekwe (Que Que on old maps). This gives the staff enormous flexibility. If an area is hammered hard, they can let it "rest" without

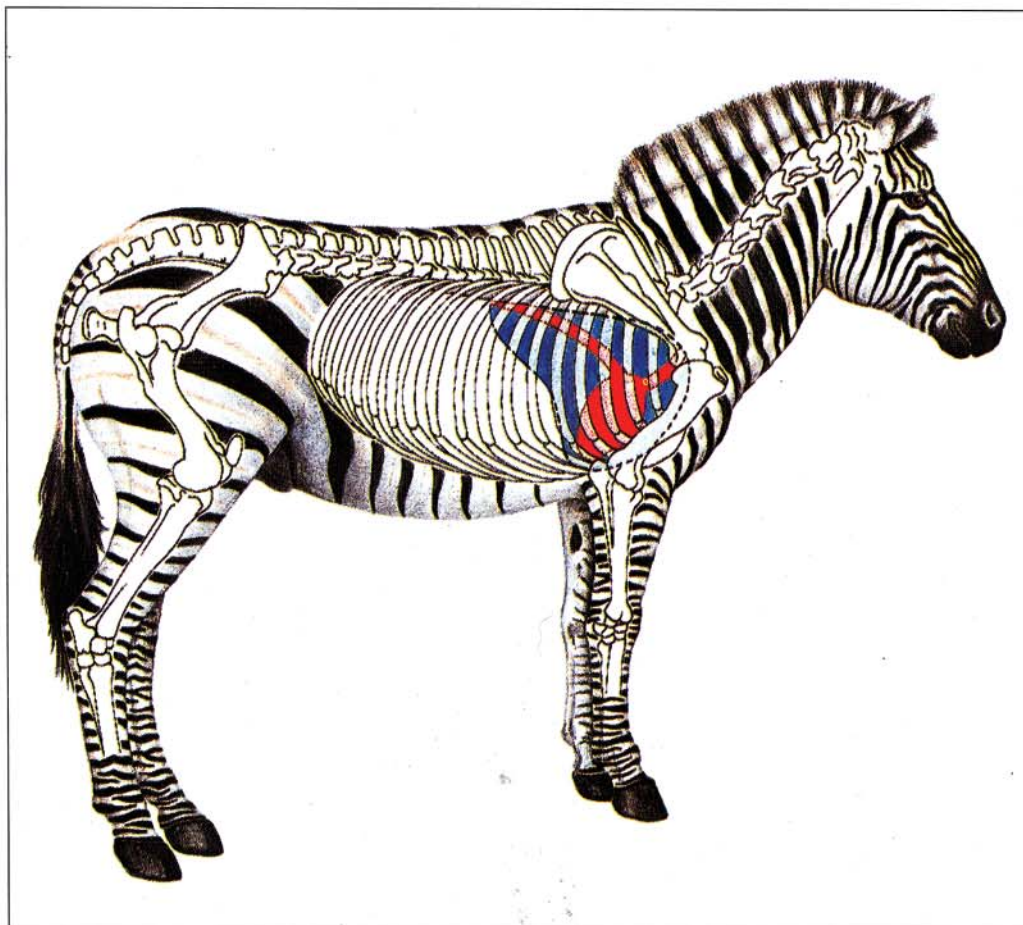
interrupting safari operations. It also allows them to accommodate four hunters at one time with no crowding. Certain species, such as the reedbuck and waterbuck, are more plentiful on other properties and are usually hunted there.

Cheetah are in residence at the ranch and an occasional buffalo, lion or leopard will wander through, but hunts for dangerous game are not conducted there. Leopard are hunted on the neighbouring ranches and buffalo are hunted on government leases. Traditional tents are used when hunting buffalo but at the ranch, guests stay in a two bedroomed private lodge equipped with hot showers and twin beds. After 25 days in the Bitterroot Wilderness Area in the past two seasons, it was nice to hunt in comfort.

**Editors Note** - Robert Dickerson is a photo journalist for the Cincinnati Post in the United States. Having hunted extensively throughout the United States for most of his life, his African experience brought together a wealth of knowledge, and a realisation of a childhood dream.

As a journalist, his observations and recollections of his safari with one of Zimbabwe's top plains game Safari operators, Phillip Oosthuysen, is both entertaining and educational in its portrayal, and any prospective or seasoned African hunter will surely benefit from his telling.

*In the next issue, we continue with "Bob" as he continues after his eland, and other species.* □



Zebra are grouped together with sable, waterbuck, wildebeest and kudu as a class C animal in the third schedule, and as such may only legally be hunted with a minimum 7mm calibre, producing 2220 ft lbs of muzzle energy. As the skin will often make a lasting trophy, consideration should be given to type of bullet used, avoiding those likely to create massive exit wounds (soft points). A .375 H & H Mag. shooting 300 grain Barnes X bullets is an ideal combination for zebra hunting.

Like most plains game, zebra are tough and are known to withstand considerable punishment, often disappearing into the veld even when heart/lung shot. Zebra will often become aggressive when cornered, and their viciousness - especially that of an angry stallion, should not be underestimated. The heart sits roughly in the middle of the "vital triangle", and any heart/lung shot offers the greatest success with quite wide margins for error. In prime condition zebra, the shoulder bone is not easily distinguished, and the easiest point of aim would be the topmost inverted "V" of the "American sergeant's stripe" pattern on the shoulder, roughly between a third and half way up the body on a vertical line with the front leg. A well placed broadside shot here will miss all major leg bone, enter the lung and possibly find the heart. Although not commonly taken, the brain shot is only advisable at close range, and should be placed roughly midway between the eyes and the ears.