



# African Hunt

## A Childhood Dream Come True

### Part 2 - Rolling River Safaris - A Lesson in Tracking

*By Robert Dickerson*



Half a lifetime's passed since I read those first stories but now, at a "grandfather's age", I was about to follow the spoor of Africa myself. Only a lucky few get to live a childhood dream!

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. Now with Phil Oosthuysen of Rolling River Safaris, Amos Imbanyele and Edward Sakala, the Mashona trackers, my safari had got underway with a prize zebra trophy (covered in Vol.4 No.1), although it started out as an eland stalk, an animal high on my list of trophies.

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. 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.

The afternoon after bagging my Zebra, at about 2.30pm, Amos or Edward snapped his fingers, the signal to stop the truck. Amos leaned down and whispered "eland" and pointed to the left. Phil climbed to the spotting seat of the Toyota and used his 10 x 50 Redfield binoculars to evaluate the horns.

"Two big eland bulls." Phil said as he dismounted. It was the second time in two days that he had used that phrase. Phil immediately located tracks where the pair had been standing and we followed. Round two!

As we walked, Phil eased over and whispered, "Look ahead. Scan the bush for movement."

While the trail was easy, Edward and Amos just seemed to stroll along. They would glance down every 20 yards, then look ahead for the eland. It looked like a walk in the park, nothing more.

Later, when the tracking became difficult, I

noticed that the trackers worked as a team. Edward would walk until he found a print, then he would stop and point to it. Amos would then pass Edward and search. When he found the next track or sign, he would stop, point and let Edward leapfrog ahead. The progress was slower but steady. Amos, in particular, seem to enjoy this kind of tracking. He would shake his head "yes" and point excitedly when he found the next clue. Phil continued to look ahead for the eland and left the tracking to the Mashona.

Half an hour later, we lost the trail. Phil, Edward and Amos fanned out and moved in small circles searching for the line. After watching him follow the zebra, I knew that Phil could track as well as Edward or Amos. You can't get a Zimbabwe Professional Hunting License unless you're an expert tracker. They had spread out over 120 yards when Amos located the trail. He gave a low whistle to alerted Phil and Edward. They carefully inspected the hoof prints, decided Amos was right and resumed operations.

We continued this way for almost four hours but couldn't catch the eland. Sometimes the



trail was easy, sometimes it was hard and sometimes it disappeared. But, every time the trail was lost, they would separate, move in circles and eventually find it. This was a more impressive display than the previous afternoon and I was beginning to understand how the mystique of the African tracker had evolved. On some of the harder ground, they located sign that was almost invisible. Once they pointed it out, I could see it, but without their help, I never could have identified it as a track.

With the sun low, Phil called off the stalk, saying, "The eland win this round." I said "I thought we were supposed to sleep on the spoor and start again at first light," quoting from the old stories. "You can sleep here if you like but I'm going home," Phil whispered. I knew the sun was low but couldn't believe we had been tracking for three and three quarter hours. Some hunters might consider a day like this a failure; just a long walk for nothing, but I disagree. To me, days can't get

the bush but the trigger squeeze wasn't good. I had let a distraction break my concentration on the trigger at the critical instant. I tried to hold the shot but my finger was already committed. It was similar to typing, when you're about to hit the wrong key but are not able to stop. At the shot, the kudu made a 120 degree turn and vanished. Phil thought the kudu had reacted as if it had been hit and I had to agree and Edward said he thought he had heard the bullet hit. We went forward but couldn't find any blood. A few minutes later, Phil called it a night and we headed for the vehicle. Prowling around in the twilight would have been a waste of time and we could have ruined the trail. I was totally disgusted with myself. It's neither a sin, nor a crime to miss but this was a "gimme" as far as kudu hunting is concerned. The Southern Cross glowed like diamonds on ebony but I hardly noticed. It was a terrible way to end what had been a splendid day. When the night finally ended, I saw that

Leatherman Tool. He saw me staring, held the stick up for inspection and said, "Tracking stick."

The hind prints of the new kudu were abnormally small compared to the front prints. This was the kudu's "fingerprint." Phil and I returned to the clearing where we had seen the kudu the night before. Using his new tracking stick, Phil parted some grass and pointed to the old tracks. They were a match: large front hoofs and abnormally small back ones. I had missed. I felt better knowing I hadn't wounded such a nifty animal. The kudu's prints seemed surprisingly small for such a big animal. I put a .338 cartridge in one print for comparison and it seemed no larger than a mature mule deer buck's even though the kudu weighs three times as much.

Thanks to Phil's ability to recognize a track, I still had a kudu ticket to punch but this was a secondary consideration. If we had determined that I had wounded the kudu, he would have become MY KUDU whether we found him or not and there's only one to a customer.

After a snack, we drove to the area where we had stopped tracking the previous afternoon. A herd of zebra caught our attention as we neared the location and Phil stopped the truck to study the herd. We were near one of the sandy spots that dot the bush, so the crew got out to look for eland tracks.

Less than a minute later, Phil called me over. "Two big eland bulls were standing here when we drove up," he said. "They ran when the car stopped. We didn't see them because we were watching the zebra."

This was too much. How could he know, positively, that "two big eland bulls" were standing right here just 90 seconds ago and that they took off running? Phil pointed out individual tracks and I tried to "read the prints". By the size and shape of the tracks, I knew two big eland bulls had been there. I saw where the initial lunge had sprayed sand behind the print and that the departing tracks were much deeper than the incoming. The animals had left at a run.

I thought that the sand at the bottom of the track looked a bit darker than that at the top. This is due to moisture beneath the surface. It was May and the bush hadn't dried out completely after the fall rains. If my analysis was correct, the tracks had to be fresh because the sun would bake the moisture out of the freshly exposed sand in minutes.

I wanted to ask Phil if I was correct about the moisture but he was at the car getting his Winchester out of its soft case. He could have just concluded that the tracks were just seconds old, but then I noticed where the eland had entered the grass. Some of the stalks that had been flattened seemed to be straightening very slowly. I put my rifle stock next to a blade of the trampled grass and over the next 40 seconds or so, it



*Philip (PH) consulting with Edward and Amos.*

much better. I had hiked for almost six hours with a powerful rifle in my hands and my senses on full alert. At any second, I could have had an opportunity for eland, kudu, impala, warthog, jackal or steenbuck. The fact that I didn't get a shot couldn't diminish the kick of being in Africa.

We were almost to the truck when Phil saw a bull kudu. Phil put up the shooting sticks as we waited for the kudu to clear some trees. Instead, the bull made a turn and eventually stopped behind a small bush giving me a 50 yard broadside shot. I'm never going to get an easier shot at a record book animal and I blew it.

The crosshairs were a little forward to avoid

Chenche Moyo had joined Edward and Amos on the spotting seat of the Toyota. He's Rolling River Safari's chief tracker but had been sick for several days. With my kudu mess to straighten out, Phil must have thought we needed everyone.

We found the place where the kudu had been standing but there was no hair or blood. The search had progressed 250 yards, and we had lost the trail, when I heard Chenche snap his fingers then whistle. He had seen a healthy kudu but, since he hadn't seen the first bull, he couldn't tell if this was the same animal. Phil walked over to examine the new tracks. He had a hardwood stick a yard long and was cutting off small branches with his



straightened almost an inch. This was a sure sign that the spoor was just minutes old. The story was crystal clear in the African dust if you have the skill to read it. (Later, Phil said my conclusions about the moisture were correct and that he had also judged the age of the track by the "crispness of the scuff marks").

We followed the trail with Chenche in the lead and made good time without the need to "leapfrog" like the day before. Half an hour later, we spooked a close holding duiker, which ran and spooked the eland. I caught a glimpse of the pair about 80 yards ahead.

Twenty minutes later, something, probably our noise, moved the eland again. Phil checked the wind for the hundredth time that morning and whispered, "They didn't scent us; they shouldn't go far."

Phil gave a hand signal for everyone to sit. Even I could follow his logic: the bulls had been pushed three times in the past hour and another disturbance might put them into eland overdrive and out of our tracking range.

The others sat and tried to nap but I was thinking about the trackers. I had noticed that Chenche didn't follow from print to print like Amos and Edward. The night before, when we discussed the missing kudu, Phil's father, Jay, had expressed a lot of confidence in Chenche's ability to find the wounded animal. It was clear he held him in high regard. Phil described him as a "natural tracker" and then later as an "instinctive tracker." That morning, I was seeing what that meant.

After Chenche got his initial direction from the tracks, he just seemed to follow what he knew was the right path through the bush instead of going from track to track. It appeared that he knew where the eland were headed. To be sure, he looked at the tracks for confirmation, but I got the impression he didn't rely on them to stay on the correct line.

Amos was at the other extreme. He wanted to see every hoof print. If we lost the trail then found it 60 yards away, Amos wanted to SEE tracks for the entire 60 yards. He was often on a knee or bending over parting grass with his hand to look for prints after the others were convinced they had the trail. Only when he was positive would he nod "yes" to himself and go on.

Edward didn't need to see every hoof print; if the new tracks were 60 or 100 yards apart that was OK. He would accept it and go on without backtracking to look for every print. He seemed to have a lot of faith in his ability to recognize whether a "new track" was "the track" he had been following. This was the result of an excellent eye, memorizing small details and thousands of hours following spoor.

Philip usually left the tracking to the trackers. He helped when the trail was lost but for the most part he concentrated on the animals. Peter Capstick wrote in "Death in the Long Grass", "It's impossible to hunt and track at the same time." This is one reason I saw the



dead zebra before Amos and Edward in spite of their better "game eye" - I was hunting while they were tracking.

Phil stood up after 15 minutes and Chenche took the point again. As we started, I asked Edward if he thought these were the same bulls we had been tracking the previous afternoons. He indicated "yes" with a single nod. I had to take his word for it, identifying individual tracks was still beyond my ability.

I don't want to leave the impression that all animals in Africa have to be tracked. The variety and number of animals that suddenly just pop up is amazing. We were hiking to the truck one morning when I saw an animal run for cover.

The range was close so Phil just said, "Shoot!" "Shoot what?" I whispered as I chambered a round.

Phil is seven inches taller than me and I couldn't see the animal through the grass. An instant later, the animal ran into the open and gave me a shot at less than 30 yards. The crosshairs were perfect but when the shot broke, he took off. Amos said, in Shona, that I had missed.

I told Phil, "The bullet may be back just a bit but he's dead."

We found him 25 yards away. The hit was identical to that on the zebra. Phil became excited as he examined the animal. He pulled out a tape, measured the tusks and said, "He should go high in the book!" I said, "That's great!... What is it?" I wasn't kidding.

Like everyone, I know the African "zoo" animals (lion, elephant, leopard, lechwe) but somehow I had missed the bush pig. I told Phil that I was glad it was such a good pig, but that I couldn't really get excited about it when I had so little to do with the entire show. I appreciate and welcome luck but I try not to confuse it with preparation and skill. The eland would be taken thanks to the skill of the trackers; the bush pig was luck. Of the eight

animals I was to take at Rolling River, three were tracked down and five were targets of opportunity.

A few days later, we saw the ultimate African "pig." We were riding along the Munyati River when Chenche snapped and Phil stopped the car.

"Grab your camera," Phil said as he jumped out. "There is a hippo on the bank."

We crept through some light brush for no more than 60 yards. Phil was being extremely quiet and placing each step precisely. He looked like a man hunting cobras in a mine field.

"See him?" he whispered.

The bush was thicker at the Munyati but I could see the curve of the hippo's back. He seemed impossibly large. When we were within 25 yards, I felt the wind shift toward the hippo. He gave a grunt/growl and ran for the river. For a 5000 pound animal, his speed was unbelievable. I had read that hippos stayed in the water during the day, and only came out to feed at night, but this guy was napping on the bank at precisely 12.30pm.

We walked to the river and I pointed to the tracks and proclaimed, "Hippo!" I had finally identified a track! The soft mud looked like it had been plowed!

**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 hunt with one of Zimbabwe's top plains game Safari operators, Philip Oosthuisen, 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" on the eland's spoor. □