



African Hunt

Part IV: Rolling River Safaris - Trophy Kudu

By Robert Dickerson

This African hunt had really started in one of America's great hunting areas, the Selway River Valley. I was near the end of my elk hunt with Shadow Basin Outfitters, Troy's hunting operation, when he asked me about my plans for next year. I said the three hunts I had made with him had all been great but it was time to do something else. I had Alaska in mind when Troy suggested Africa. The cost was less than Alaska and I had wanted to hunt in Africa since I was a kid.



Wilbeest taken with M-84 Fury XRG on Cawoods Ranch, Bubi.

A Childhood Dream Come True

When I expressed apprehension about making such a trip alone, he insisted it wouldn't be a hassle. Everything was perfect and I even got home five hours early! Troy and Lori Ginn can be reached at 1-800-808-HUNT(4868).

My travels brought me to Rolling River Ranch, which is located on 22 000 acres in the centre of Zimbabwe. The ranch, like most of Zimbabwe, is on a high

plateau and is covered with a hardwood forest. 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.

Only a lucky few get to live a childhood dream, and although half a lifetime's passed since I first read those tales by old time professional hunters, I was finally in Africa

Over the last few issue (Vol.4 No.1, No.2 and No.3), I have retraced my steps, bagging a zebra, bushpig and eland, all of which qualify for the record book. Under the able guidance of Phil Oosthuysen my PH, Amos Imbanye, Edward Sakala, and Chenche Moyo, the trackers, the hunt for that "grey Ghost" of the African veld continues.

With two days to hunt, we decided to concentrate on kudu for a day, then go

to a leased ranch to hunt reedbuck. A kudu on demand isn't easy and I had already blown a shot at a record book animal, so as far as I was concerned, Phil had done his job.

The next morning, a kudu was the only beast we didn't see. I had seen a lot of game at Rolling River but this day was off the scale. We started seeing animals as soon as we left the ranch house. In the first three hours we saw impala, tsessebe, warthog, eland, crocodile, sable, wildebeest and female kudu. The only players missing were the kudu bulls and zebra. I thought this rather strange because zebra had been one of the more common animals earlier in the week.

Phil slammed on the brakes suddenly, pointed and said in mock surprise, "What's that?"

I looked but couldn't see a thing except the trees. When one of the "trees" took a step, a giraffe popped into focus. With the dappled sunlight coming through the leaves, a giraffe's spotted coat is perfect camouflage. Phil had earlier pointed out a giraffe track but I hadn't believed him.

Phil was really responsible for my doubts. Early in the hunt, after we hiked up the only hill on the ranch, Phil had shown me a "Mountain Spider" which, he said, has longer legs on one side than on the other. This enables it to walk on the mountain side without tipping over. (At home, we have "Mountain Cows"). After that, I distrusted just about everything he said.

His accent also contributed to his lack of credibility. On the same day we saw the "Mountain Spider" he told me about the Lesser Money Bird. He explained that a particular bird we had just seen would lead you to money, but if you don't leave some for the bird, you'd have bad luck. He went on to tell about a guy he knew who actually followed a bird and did find money. His friend didn't leave any for the bird and ran into a cobra on the way home.

"How stupid does this guy think I am?" I wondered to myself. "I'm not buying this! How can money get out here and what would a bird do with it?"

We walked less than 10 yards and I thought, "Gee, I'll bet he said 'Honey Bird' not 'Money Bird'." I decided that this was possible and that I had simply misunderstood. With this, I laughed out loud. Phil turned around to see what was so funny but just shrugged. Maybe I belong on the "Stupid Client List."

We hiked for a while and followed a cold kudu trail but didn't see a bull. Phil gave me the option of stopping for a morning snack or hunting on. "I can eat snacks at home!" I said.

By lunch we had seen at least a hundred animals. Phil did spot two young kudu bulls but the varsity version were not around. Immature animals are not shot at Rolling River Ranch. The Oosthuysen Family realizes that the only way to produce trophy quality adults is to let the little guys grow up and trophy book animals are the goal at Rolling River. This is the foundation of solid game management and why so many of Rolling River Safaris animals qualify for the SCI Record Book.

Phil slammed on the brakes suddenly, pointed and said in mock surprise, "What's that?"

After lunch, we drove until we got bored, then hiked until we got tired. With less than two hours of daylight remaining, I was thinking of passing on the reedbuck the next day to try again for a kudu, when, of course, Phil spotted a kudu.

It was on the passenger side of the vehicle so Phil eased the shooting sticks to me, pointed to the kudu and nodded. He wanted for me to get out and set up the shot. I suppose he intended to drive off to hold the kudu's attention, but before I could get organized, the kudu vanished.

That's why he's called "The Grey Ghost". The kudu is one of the hardest African animals to hunt. Hemingway and Ruark enjoyed hunting him but it was Jack O'Connor who wrote the best description: "He is as cool and crafty as a whitetail deer. He can hear like a moose. He has the nerve of a professional gambler, and is almost as nocturnal as a burglar." And, "He can disappear like a shadow."

Spotting that kudu was the most impressive thing I saw on the entire safari. The bull was standing in deep shadows behind the setting sun and was partially obscured by brush. The kudu was on the passenger side, about 75 yards from the truck, and Phil saw it while he was driving. The bull's concealment was so good that,

after the car was stopped and Phil pointed out exactly where he was standing, I still had to use my binoculars to find him.

Phil parked the car and Chenche plotted an intercept course. His line was perfect. We walked at a quick pace for no more than 200 yards when Chenche slowed, then searched the ground closely. He found fresh kudu tracks almost exactly where he thought they would be. Walking slowly, we followed the spoor for no more than 500 yards when Chenche froze, staring at some bushes. Perhaps twenty seconds later he pointed casually to some trees and stepped back to give me room to shoot. At first, I couldn't find the kudu, but when Chenche pointed over my shoulder, I picked up a basketball sized patch of grey hide in a wall of green. It seemed like Chenche knew the kudu would be in that thick patch and had looked until he finally saw him. The kudu must have known we were there but he was holding tight in the heavy bush - faithful to his nature.

Phil moved to my side, set up the shooting sticks, then asked, "See him?" I nodded, and whispered, "What is it?" For an instant, I thought Phil might say, "Kudu," but he understood the question perfectly and answered, "It's the point of his shoulder, shoot."

This brought on a dilemma. But before the hunt started, I had decided to follow the PH's instructions precisely and he said "shoot." But Rule Four is: "Don't shoot until you're sure of your target" and I wasn't sure of my target. In other words, I knew it was a kudu but knew not what to do.

I wasn't going to spend another night worrying about a wounded kudu and had decided not to fire. Then, through my Nikon scope, I noticed a slight shudder on the kudu's hide and with that slight movement, saw the outline of his neck. I centred the crosshairs on the spine and fired. He jerked violently and dropped without taking a step. The range was just 35 paces. The entire incident, from the time Phil said "Shoot" until the kudu was on the ground took about three seconds.

His horns weren't as big as those on the one that got away but he was still a big impressive animal. I had read that the Greater Kudu is the same size as a bull elk but this one seemed smaller. We looked at the ivory tip on his horns then Phil opened the kudu's mouth and showed me the teeth. They were extremely worn. "He's an old bull and wouldn't have lasted much longer." Phil said, "That's exactly the kind of animal we like to take."

Well said! Try explaining that concept to an animal rights activist if you have time to waste.

“How sure were you that it was a bull?” I asked.

“One hundred percent.” Phil said. “I saw his horns above the trees. He was standing with his chin up so that his horns were down on his back.”

I examined the animal and was surprised to find that the bullet hadn't shot through the neck. I would have bet that a .338 Winchester would punch right through a kudu's neck but it didn't. Now I know why African professional hunters always recommend heavy bullets.

It was quite a day! I had seen at least 175 big game animals and shot a bull kudu. At this point, I was floored. First, Phil had seen the kudu and then Chenche had tracked it and put me in position for a close shot. The kudu is one of Africa's most crafty and secretive animals and very tough to collect - but they made it seem easy.

African hunting stories, old and new, sometimes paint a word picture that make African trackers appear almost supernatural. They would have the reader believe that some trackers can think like a zebra or put himself in the place of a leopard. After watching four African trackers for 11 days, it would be presumptuous for me to draw any conclusions when experienced African hands have strikingly different opinions.

The great Jack O'Connor wrote this of African trackers, “I have seen them do some excellent tracking, but none of them are magicians. None of them can track an animal across solid rock or perform any of the other feats that trackers are supposed to accomplish in the windy tales one reads.”

One of the famous African PH's of the 1950s was Don Ker. O'Connor wrote this after watching one of Ker's trackers on a lion spoor, “I don't think the Dorobo was a bit better at tracking than Don Ker and not too much better than I was. He certainly couldn't see any tracks that I couldn't see.”

Peter Capstick doesn't agree. He wrote this of a tracker who had done an extraordinary job of following a killer leopard, “When Deballo tracked leopard, he didn't think like one, he was a leopard.”

Admittedly, Capstick was an extraordinary story teller who often used exaggeration to make a point. He said this about Silent, his usual tracker, “Silent ruled out the possibility of this being another lion; one glance at a set of week-old prints and my gun bearer could tell you that lion's favourite colour as well his probable political leanings.”

Capstick's African experience was far greater than O'Connor's to be sure, but for twenty years, every PH and guide in the world knew that a mention by O'Connor meant instant fame. As a result, O'Connor got to hunt with guides almost as legendary as himself. O'Connor's career also lasted much longer than Capstick's and he hunted in many more places. When Titans like this disagree on whether a tracker can think like an animal, I'll keep my opinion to myself.

What I can say, without disagreeing with Capstick and O'Connor is that I think the trackers at Rolling River are good because they're smart, know animal

habits and what details to look for. They also have an enormous amount of patience, confidence and experience.

Consider their backgrounds. Phil's father has hunted at Rolling River since 1954 and his older brother, Richard, is also a professional hunter. Phil killed his first big game animal when he was six. He's been a PH since 1980 and he hunts with clients for six months each year. He's lived at the ranch all his life and knows the 22,000 acres and the animals like you know your back yard and your dog.

Chenche has lived at Rolling River since 1954. As a child, he did jobs around the ranch for Philip's mother, Patsy, and eventually got to go hunting with Phil's father. He proved to be a natural who needed little training and so he got a job as a tracker. During the off season he works on the ranch so, like Phil, he sees the animals year round.

Is it ESP or Experience?

Epilogue

At home, I found 80 rounds of 225 grain Nosler handloads on the shelf. There should have been only 10 rounds there. I pulled a couple of bullets from the ammunition I brought back from Africa for examination. By weighing the bullets and loaded rounds, I determined that I had taken 60 rounds loaded with the 210 grain Nosler Partition and that the extra 10 rounds were loaded with 250 grain Partitions. I had fired one of the 250 grain rounds the rest were 210's.

CHIRUNDU
1/4 P
B/W
REPEAT 4 - 3
(STEW POT)

The kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) is considered one of the larger African antelope, along with the eland, wildebeest, sable and waterbuck, and is one of the most sought after trophies. Common across most of southern Africa, its reputation as the elusive "Grey Ghost" of the savanna is unsurpassed.

An animal that will seldom provide the hunter with a decent opportunity for good shot placement, it will more than likely be taken in thick bush at close range, at an animal not ideally positioned for a quick killing shot. Often, only parts of the animal may be visible through the bush - a fore or hindquarter, parts of the neck or head, a flickering ear or the sun glinting off a shiny horn tip concealed in vegetation. As most trophy hunters will be looking for a shoulder mount, the brain or neck shot is not really an option.

For this reason, the use of a good, clear scope (2.5 or 4 power, or a low powered variable like a 1 to 4x or a 1.5 to 5x) makes distinguishing a camouflaged animal and selecting a clear unobstructed path for the bullet between leaves, twigs, branches and such easier.

A trophy kudu bull is a large well muscled animal, requiring a (large) calibre, (heavy, premium quality, controlled expansion soft point) bullet, and (modest) muzzle velocity combination that will be able to reach the vital organs from any angle, including the straight going away "Texas heart" shot. That requires big, heavy bullets of good sectional density at around 2500 ft/sec of muzzle velocity. A combination that will also do much to limit bullet

deflection in the thick bushy conditions that such a kudu will frequent.

A good mental picture of the position of heart/lungs in relation to the front leg bones, the scapula or shoulder blade, the point of the shoulder, where the humerus joins the scapula and the elbow joint are essential, with these bones easily visible beneath the skin on a broadside kudu. To hit any one of these bones while taking a side on heart/lung shot will result in a lot of wasted blood-shot meat. Rather place such a shot just behind the shoulder or in the middle of the wide open "V" formed by the scapula and the humerus. There is a crease of skin - the armpit - running vertically from above the elbow. Follow it upwards until

between a third to just below halfway up the body. That's the spot for the perfect heart/lung shot. A kudu's first vertical white stripe, often very faint, is just about on this armpit line as well. Notice how the spinal column dips downwards in the shoulder region, and take careful notice of its position within the neck. It is roughly in the middle of the neck where the neck joins the body. A shot placed there is highly effective and will drop a kudu.

The smallest recommended calibre for kudu is the 7x57, which used with 160 plus grain bullets is perfectly adequate. The .303 or .308 with 180 grain soft points are good choices, but steer clear of the military ball ammo. Kudu are seldom shot at long range so flat shooting magnums are not needed and if more knock down clout is required than that provided by the .303/.308/30-06 class rifles, then a 9,3x62 or similar will deliver all that could be wished for.

One of the finishing shots on the eland must have been the 250. This would explain why one recovered bullet was longer and heavier than the other. (The smaller bullet weighed 147.8 grains and the large one 174.9).

The two reasons most people cite for using a light bullet in the .338 are recoil and trajectory. On the day I shot the eland, I fired a 250 and 210 within seconds of each other and didn't notice any difference in recoil. I have no idea which shot was fired first. I've often read that recoil isn't noticed in the field. This experience seemed to corroborate the assumption. It was an ideal blind study.

Any time you put an eland, kudu and zebra on the ground with three bullets, it's impossible to whine too much about "bullet failure" but facts are facts. A 210 did flatten on the eland's neck and another 210 failed to give complete penetration on the kudu's neck.

On the other hand, a 210 did punch right through a 550 pound zebra and the eland's spine stopped the 250 grain Nosler as easily as it did the 210. Still, I believe that a 250 would have driven right through the kudu.

As Phil complained, when I told him I had brought 225 grain ammunition, "The 250 makes a .338 shoot like a different gun."

The 210 Nosler has performed well for me on bull elk. Twice it's punched through an elk's lungs and exited and once it went through the lungs, broke the off shoulder and exited. A fourth shot raked an elk from the right front shoulder to the left hindquarter where it was recovered against the femur. The 210 that I recovered from that elk weighed 190.0 grains. The bullet that flattened in the eland's neck weighed just 124.8 grains. The elk were all shot at long range, so we can assume the bullets had slowed and didn't expand as violently as they did on the kudu and eland.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have bothered with the 225's. I doubt there is any practical difference in the killing power of the 210 and 225 Noslers. If I use the .338 in Africa again, I'll take 250's. 🐾

***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, Phillip Oosthuysen, is both entertaining and educational in its portrayal, and any prospective or seasoned African hunter will surely have benefited from his telling over the last four issues.