



# Rolling Leopard



By Anthony Williams

*The dying African sun lay low on the horizon, its heat dissipating with the approach of a winter's dusk. A shaft of light cut through the gloomy interior of the blind, entering one of the portholes looking out over the bait.*

Laying down, both PH and client were getting comfortable for a long night's wait. Microscopic fragments of dust hung suspended in the air, highlighted by the stark sunlight as it burst down to illuminate Phil's book. They danced and swirled like a million miniature universes borne on the still air, each one a defined, bright speck of light. The hushed interior was almost oppressive, as the silence seemed to make the ringing in his ears louder. "Too many shots fired without proper protection" he mused as he quietly turned the page, using what was left of the fading sunlight to follow another hunter's exploits.

Phil expected a long wait. The timing was not quite right, the moon way past what would normally be ideal. And if the leopard came at all, it could be after a three to five hour wait. It is preferred to hunt over baits just past the full moon. During the dark period after sunset, and before the moonrise, the feline would skulk in under cover of swaying grass,

or the shadowy cut of a ravine. For three or four days after the moon, that period of darkness between sundown and moonrise lengthened, and the waits got longer. Now with the moon showing only half an orb and waning, the chances of bagging the large tom who had hit the bait a few days before seemed remote.

Outside, the African sounds were faltering, rising and falling like a symphony carried on an uncertain breeze. The night shift was coming on as the day critters prepared for the long night ahead. It always amazed Phil just how attuned one's senses become when sitting in a leopard blind, exposed and vulnerable in the African bush. Over the years, he had learned to discern a change to this tempo, a shift in the intangible mood, a warning that something was different... not quite right.

They had been in the blind for almost thirty minutes now, and as another page came to an end, a distant baboon bark - alarmed... echoed through the valley. Pausing, Phil glanced over at the client. Oblivious to what had just happened; his steady breathing betrayed his relaxed light sleep. But for Phil, even though common sense told him it was too early, something had changed, and his senses tingled as that familiar nervous knot fluttered deep in the pit of his stomach.

*The first sign of the big tom. A story printed in sand.*

Phillip Oosthuysen, a professional hunter with his family operated business, Rolling Rivers Safaris in Zimbabwe's midlands, and Professional Hunter, had hunted many leopard. It was not a job to be taken lightly, and despite some views on hunting over baits, it was one of the most exciting and challenging forms of the sport there is. Leopards are cunning, and have tenacity for life second to none. Many are the story of a "dead" leopard springing up and angrily mauling half a dozen full grown men amid a fusillade of gunfire. Judging by the oversized pug mark left in the damp river sand two days previous, this tom was big, the biggest Phil had seen in the area. It had fed hungrily on the first impala, on the very first night it had been hung, eating both hind quarters and most of the body. That was the day after the full moon, and although it had been back, Phil now doubted its continued appetite. A new bait was hung, and the client readied for the up-coming vigil. The leopard returned now to the fresh bait some eight days after feeding on the initial offering.

Over the years, there has been much discussion on the range of any given leopard. Usually heated, and often spiced by wildly opposing views, it is generally agreed that this single factor of a leopard's behavior is what should determine quotas and off-take. A single, cunning tom is quite capable of wreaking havoc over a wide range, often attacking livestock and wild game miles apart, sometimes spurring an increase in quotas on the assumption that many leopard are suddenly in an area. More now, hunters as conservationists are understanding the extent of a cat's range, and often reducing off-take to suit this. Phil believes the long pause between the leopard hitting the first bait, and returning eight days later, reflects the range these amazing animals cover.

The first morning after the feed, Phil had scouted the area. He does not like to sit over the bait immediately after the first hit, believing the leopard to be wary and skittish by sudden or dramatic changes in the landscape. "Assess the leopard's entry point, his approach to the bait, and his exit," Phil advises. "Build the blind, and leave it for a further day." Later investigation usually shows the leopard has noticed the new addition, and explored its purpose. Often, the presence of people at this stage will spook the cat, and the hunt is wasted. By the second day, the leopard is a little more comfortable with the structure, and will feed with only the occasional glance at the blind. "I never check baits before ten in the morning" comments Phil, believing that earlier, the leopard could still be close-by before finally moving off to lie up for the day.

Experience had shown that often the leopard would approach before nightfall, waiting patiently for its concealing cloak. Ever watchful, the cat would move in to dine, a blend of spots against the dark vleis. For this reason, Phil insisted that the client was settled in the blind by 4pm, even though it could still be five hours till the predator put in an appearance. Driving to the blind would run the risk of alerting the cat, so a brisk walk from a mile back was necessary.

Slowly the shaft of light began to lose its intensity, the defined edges softening, becoming velvety as it took on the warm glow

of the setting sun. Darkness descends with suddenness in Africa, and shortly there would not be enough light to read by. Although relaxed and comfortable, a niggling uneasiness still lingered at the back of Phil's mind. It was just before 5pm, "one hour gone, four to go" thought Phil. Suddenly, the deathly quiet of the blind was shattered as if by a clap of thunder. "It sounded like the crunch of a passing animal in the sand" recalled Phil. Discounting the noise as being another critter ambling through the river bed before nightfall; Phil resisted the temptation to take a peek, causing unnecessary noise.

Phil's pre-fabricated blind is made from a lightweight synthetic material similar to that used for parachutes. Measuring nine feet by six feet, by three feet high, once covered and camouflaged with grass and other natural bush material, it blends in very well with the surroundings. The material dampens sounds made within, as does the floor mattress in preference to creaking chairs or uncomfortable stools. It also contains much of the human scent so offensive to wild animals. Two portholes look out toward the bait, one for the PH, and the other for the shooter. Although a mattress offers some comfort, the long hours of vigil and forced inactivity are a marathon, even for the most disciplined.

Suddenly aware of a new silence which had descended over the riverine bush, Phil's nerves were instantly jangled as now the sound of a crunched leaf exploded in the silence of the blind. What seemed like an eternity later, but was in fact just brief seconds, another noise became audible. It sounded like the chaffing of wire on wood, made as the bait is moved.

Fighting the urge to sit bolt upright and look through the porthole, Phil mentally cautioned himself to the slow, deliberate movements with which he coaches clients. A leopard's sense of smell is good, but not remarkable, its hearing and eyesight though are another story. Research tells us that leopard have eyesight capable of seeing in one eighth the light required for human vision. With twitching ears rotating to scoop every decibel of sound from the air, their hearing is among the best of any beast, more so as a predator. Even with the fifty odd yards that separated the blind from the bait, and the camouflaged 6" x 6" sized peephole used to shoot through, a leopard will detect movement, especially if sudden. The "click" of a safety, as real and audible to a leopard as the shot itself!

With adrenalin filtering into his bloodstream now, Phil rose an inch at a time from his laying position, coming erect in one slow but fluid movement. Keeping slightly back from the small hole in the blind so as not to be highlighted by the ambient light, Phil peered out over the veld in confused disbelief. The surrounding bush was quiet, but the bait swung lazily from side to side. "Not that damn civet again" thought Phil. A previous night's watch had ended unceremoniously when a smaller cousin of the leopard had attacked the bait. At this early hour, Phil assumed it to be another imposter. Glancing briefly at the client - Sam Sanders - Phil again turned slowly to look out the peep hole. With his senses strained and focused on the pendulous carcass, he gazed blindly for his binoculars beside

him. He froze instantly. A sudden cold chill raced down his spine inducing an involuntary shiver.

Glowing gold in the dying light, a set of eyes framed in a large familiar head appeared from behind the tree trunk. Reaching from behind the trunk, like a playful kitten does for a dangled toy, the tom made his play. There, partially obscured by the main trunk, but stretching to reach the swinging bait, stood the biggest leopard he had seen in all his 20 odd years of hunting this ranch. Its head was massive and muscled body perfect in every proportion, the spots exquisite in their formation and contrasting golden colours. For the briefest moment, their eyes locked across the void that separated them. "I have never felt so vulnerable" recalled Phil with a small sparkle of terror still glowing in his eyes. "It was like sitting in the wide open, face to face with the ultimate killing machine ever spawned by nature. Those eyes look straight through a man, piercing the very core of his soul." It is said of predators, that a confrontation with man will usually only escalate if direct eye contact is made. It is at this stage that the predator truly perceives the threat, and accepts the challenge offered by the super-predator.

Obviously, the leopard, still a little wary at the presence of the blind, was suspicious, but had failed to recognize the man's eyes partially shaded in the depths of the blind.

Now, the baboon bark half an hour earlier made sense, and coupled with the oppressive silence which usually follows the path of a predator, the jig-saw fell into place. Sometimes it is the high pitch call of startled guinea fowl, the bark of a bushbuck, or raucous squawking of francolin that give this approach away. Being tuned to the bush is essential in this waiting game. The cat had been close for some time, and now could wait no longer.

Phil had selected the bait tree carefully, and positioned the blind to maximum advantage. Nature had been kind on this occasion, supplying the perfect tree. A large trunk standing on the edge of a slowly drying river bed supported two horizontal branches exactly the right distance apart to provide a sitting perch, and a hanging limb directly above. Angled slightly away from the blind, the cat would have to stretch to reach the whole impala which had been securely wired to the tree by the head. This would expose the vital triangle to perfection, lifting the elbow joint clear of the heart/lung zone. Well silhouetted against a light background, the killing would be swift and deserving of such an adversary. At the base of the tree, a small ant-mound had shielded the cat's final approach, while close-by gulleys leading away from the river bed provided a secret way in and out. It could not have been engineered more perfectly.

As they stared at each other across the open ground, time oozed like honey... infinitely slow in a deafening silence. Finally, the leopard focused on the bait. Phil reached over to Sam barely containing his anxiety, all pre-arranged hand signals forgotten. Shaking Sam gently, but urgently, Phil roused him. Startled, Sam's eyes fluttered open, the uncomprehending glaze showing that his brain had yet to kick in. He had only been in Africa



a few days, and the strange surroundings, smells and sounds made no sense. As so often happens when woken from that brief sleep brought on by fresh air and sunshine, a burst of adrenalin surged through his bloodstream, fizzing like soda over whisky. Trying to quell any sudden movement, Phil's hand on his chest held him firm to the ground, only adding more confusion. As the clouds cleared from Sam's eyes, Phil, daring not even to whisper mouthed "Slow and quiet. The leopard is here!"

As if on cue, and in spite of the cool evening, a fine sheen of sweat broke out on Sam's skin. Suddenly feeling clammy in the confinement of the blind, the beads on his upper lip grew as the adrenalin intensified. Now fully awake, Sam's eyes were screaming with the full force of emotions he felt. If predators were indeed telepathic, their cover would be blown. Sneaking a glance through the peep hole, Phil's spirits plummeted as only the swinging bait remained... no leopard. Still with his hand on Sam's chest, allowing a slow rise from his napping position, Phil applied pressure to stop him as the leopard again peered out from behind the tree... looking straight at the blind. Telepathy?... Maybe.

For the leopard, confusion and hunger had begun to dull his intuition. He had investigated the blind the night before, and although the putrid smell of man had been there, his danger senses had not detected anything amiss. That smell covered everything these days, and at the place where he dined on the occasional calf, it was never far away. Indeed, his territory... actually domain, was wrought with humans, and it was only by cunning and instinct that he had survived so long, expelling the other smaller males from his core range to reign supreme.

As was his manner, he had lay close to the meal for most of the afternoon, only stirring as the sun dipped behind the trees casting long shadows over the valley. The thick riverine bush shattered his cloak of camouflage, and few would detect him... even from mere feet away. Just as he so often did with passing humans, he had watched the troop of baboon stroll ignorantly past him in reckless abandon on their way to roost. Even as they were settling for the night, he had taken pleasure in stalking and surprising them. At another time, he may even have taken the time to turn one of the little man creatures into a meal.

Although instinctive, hunting such prey was a thrill and as his cunning grew... the thrill became addictive. He often stole into the clustered villages at night to mete retribution on the domesticated dogs. Although he sometimes ate of their flesh, the sheer excitement caused by the panic of these docile animals at his snarling attacks, made him return, even when not hungry. But tonight, he knew where food lay, its scent rich on the drifting evening breeze.

Confident by his previous night's feed, and recognizing the location from eight days earlier, he approached slowly through the gully to stand in shadow at the base of the anthill. Listening, looking, and feeling, he could sense no danger. After a few attempts at reaching the flesh, whilst trying to stay concealed from the man made structure, he could stand the hunger no longer. In one lightning move, he sprang easily onto the lower bough of the tree.

Sam had finally come upright, and looking over the still slanting barrel of the Winchester Model 70, 7mm Remington Mag. he sensed another feeling of disappointment. He did not truly believe Phil's whispered warning, and now with only swinging bait in a tree which should also contain a leopard, he thought Phil was playing a prank. Then, as if by magic, a leopard appeared in full view on the lower limb of the tree. Phil's fingers cut deep into Sam's upper arm, making him wince at the pain of the "still!" command. Again, the leopard was looking straight at the blind, or as it felt to Sam, right into the blind and the recesses of his inner being. Daring not to move, Sam's right hand was clenched over the rifle stock, about to lift the butt to his shoulder. His breathing had quickened, his mind swimming with all the pre-practiced procedure that would secure this trophy. The adrenalin was now unbearable, creating an audible buzz in his ears as a thin trickle of sweat broke from his hair line and ran like a ghost finger down his face. He shivered, and the hair stood erect on his neck and forearms.

Like shifting dunes on a desert landscape, the seconds ran silently into one another as man and cat played out the final moves of an intricate game of chess which had started eight days before. Between attempts by the leopard to rip the bait from the tree, and intense glances at the source of his discomfort - the blind - Sam managed to get the rifle up, and sited on the leopard. The tom, now sitting in full view

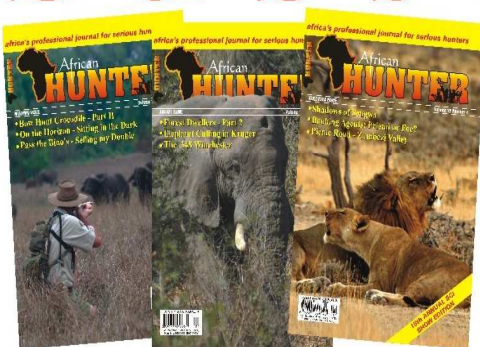
on the limb presented an excellent target, the vital triangle easily visible. Sam began to squeeze the trigger with all the restraint his years of hunting had taught him.

Sam Sanders had hunted all his life. From the little critters back home, to the bigger deer of his teenage youth, graduating from the mountain slopes of Alaska to the snow topped peaks of Kyrgystan in the ultimate quest for the magnificent Marco Polo sheep and now his second visit to Africa. He prided himself as a sportsman and observed the unwritten code of the chase. It came naturally to him. He was a man of honour, and of principle, and while the written regulations offered a guideline, his heart had never let him down. The magnitude of the moment in which he found himself now, was not to be taken lightly.

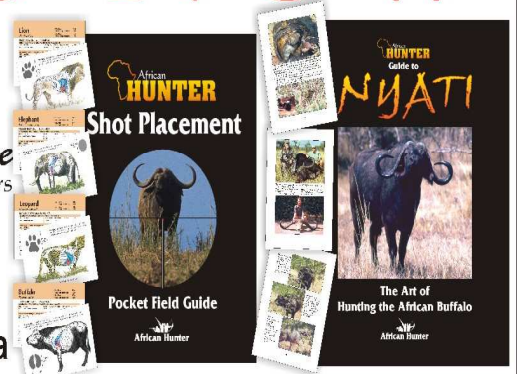
This was not his first leopard hunt. He had pursued this magnificent animal once before, also hunting from a blind. That was 18 years ago at a place several hundred miles north of where he sat now. Eighteen years, and the blind in Zambia now seemed like it was only yesterday. While this hunt had been primarily for leopard, he also wanted a kudu and the magnificent sable, as well as a few other trophies to take home. The leopard was his main prize though. His expectations had waned when Phil explained the chances of success this late in the month. It was a bitter pill to swallow. Endless nights over the years had been spent imagining this moment. Hours of planning, and considerable sacrifice had finally got him back to Africa. Constant practice with his beloved seven millimeter had given him an edge, and through all that had transpired in the previous few days, a dream was about to come true. This incredibly intense moment made everything worthwhile, and washed the fatigue of jet lag and anxiety away. The moment was but a muzzle flash away.

Phil's full attention was now focused on the leopard. In his peripheral vision, he had seen Sam lift the rifle, nestle into the butt and take aim. His nerves were strung to snapping point as he waited for the report that would bag the biggest leopard he had hunted. Instead there was silence. With his subconscious counting off the milliseconds, the alarm bells started to ring in Phil's head. Had Sam lost his nerve? Was there a problem? Looking over to prompt Sam, Phil's heart skipped a couple of beats. "I thought he was going to straighten the trigger" chuckled Phil. "Everything was

# Subscribe Now



For more info email:  
Jacqui: [fishunt@zol.co.zw](mailto:fishunt@zol.co.zw)  
Mickey: [adhunt@mweb.co.za](mailto:adhunt@mweb.co.za)







*The fabricated blind camouflaged with bush, and the bait hung some 50 yards away.*



perfect, timing, light, position, and the hunter.” It seemed that fate had foiled a perfectly staged check-mate.

As Sam brought the sights to bear on the animal, he began squeezing with deliberate s-l-o-w-n-e-s-s. Nothing happened. Thinking that he had misjudged the trigger setting in the heat of the moment, he continued to pull. Still nothing happened. Indeed, at this point, had the trigger been made of any lesser substance than metal, it would have snapped off! Mentally cursing, he tried desperately to make sense of the problem.

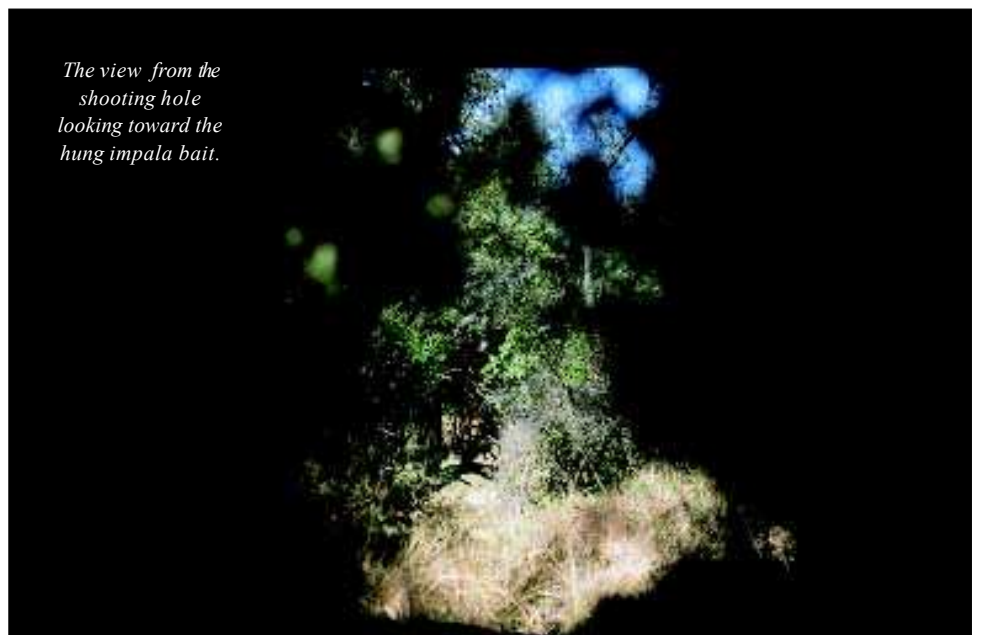
Against conventional practice, Phil had always coached clients once they were settled in the blind, to rest their rifle against the padded shooting crossbar with the muzzle protruding from the shooting port and then to cock the weapon and release the safety. It is just too much of an alien sound in the night-time bush not to be recognized by an alert leopard. Years of discipline on Sam’s part had unintentionally left the safety on.

With a sinking feeling, Phil kept an eye on the leopard and one on Sam. His rationale was beginning to waver too now. Sam, not believing he had forgotten the safety, cracked the bolt to check the chamber. Glistening softly in the now rapidly failing light, the magnum cartridge sat snugly in place. Phil shot a glance at the leopard, who was staring straight at them again. Squeezing Sam again, Phil cautioned him to “freeze”. Like melting ice, the seconds trickled by, and Phil’s grip slackened. As the bolt closed with its metallic click, the leopard stepped behind the main trunk. Sam flicked the safety off and took aim, all with a smooth practiced movement as the leopard again showed just a leg and its head. The cat was obviously filled with indecision and teetered on the edge of fleeing. Seeming to make a decision, he stretched forward and reached for the bait again. Hooking a dew claw into the swinging carcass, the big tom brought his immense strength to bear on the tethered impala.

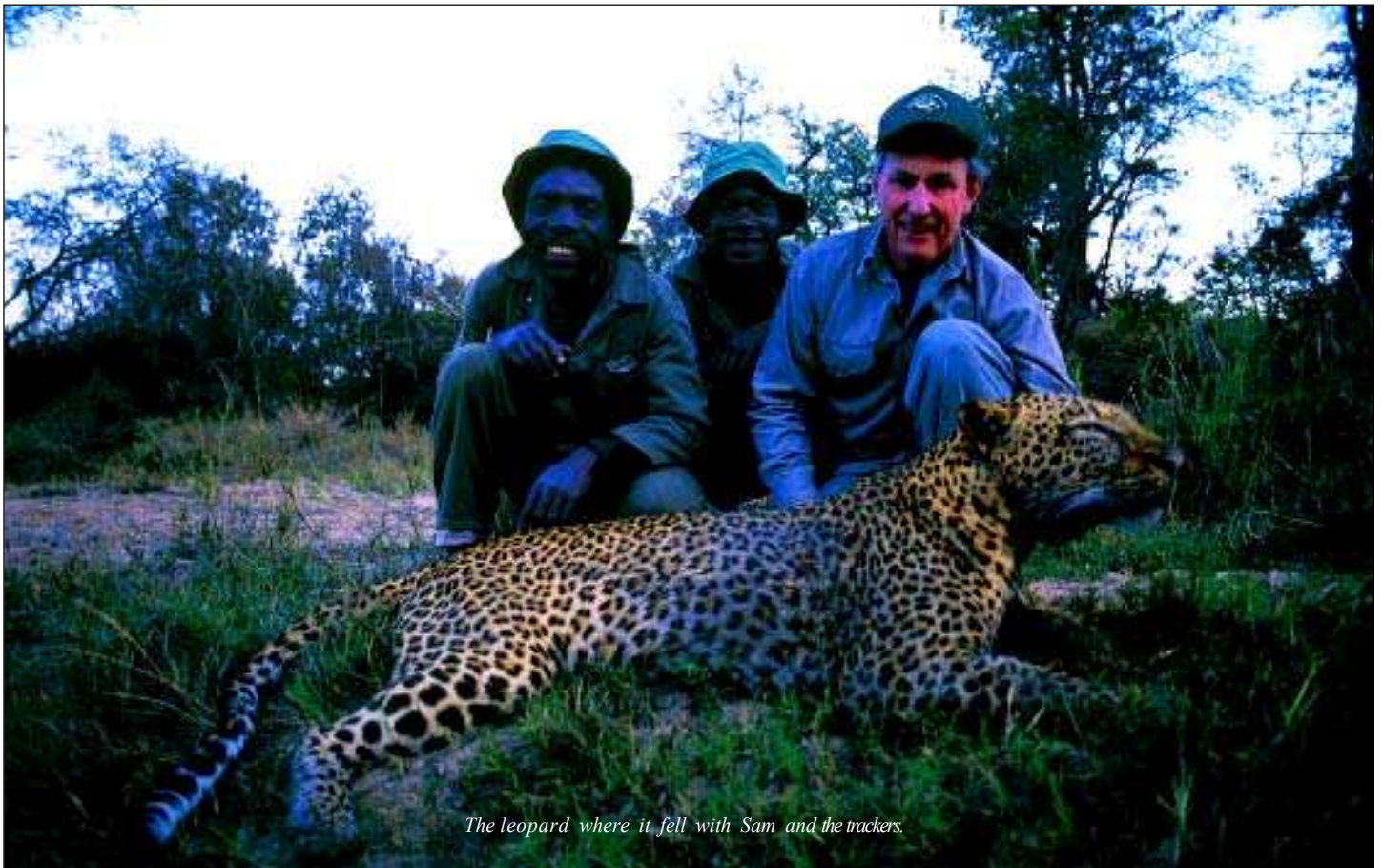
Lion are big and blessed with stamina, while Africa’s cheetah is known for its incredible speed... but the leopard is the ultimate African feline. Fast, agile and incredibly strong, this lone hunter has no rivals. The leopard’s strength when compared in human terms is like a six foot tall man, weighing 200 pounds, jumping seven or eight feet high in one graceful leap to land on his feet. A leopard can do this carrying 200 pounds of dead weight in its jaws! Often chased from kills by other cats and dogs of the wild - like hyena - it seldom faces a fight it knows it cannot win. A master of stealth, his nocturnal habits make him a rare sight to man and a skilful hunter capable of more than just instinctive reaction. There is nothing more unnerving, whilst shrouded in the cloak of night, to hear the sawing grunt of a leopard close at hand. It chills the blood and leaves an imprint the brain cannot erase.

From the blind, the leopard presented a perfect killing shot. Slightly quartered away, with the right paw hooked into the bait, and the far side leg slightly forward to offer leverage, the vital organs were clearly visible. Phil coaches his clients never to shoot at the leopard. The cryptic, rosette and spotted

*The view from the shooting hole looking toward the hung impala bait.*







*The leopard where it fell with Sam and the trackers.*

coat can become confusing, especially through a scope. On this occasion he instructed Sam to "Choose a black spot on the coat, about four inches behind the shoulder just below the middle of the body, and aim at that. Once identified, that spot becomes the target, not the cat" he says.

With the drama of the preceding few minutes behind him, Sam's confidence had returned. With the calmness of practiced procedure, the magnum cracked in the confined space of the blind, the ringing silence which followed confirmation of the shot. As is true of most hunters at that moment, Sam did not feel the recoil, or even really notice the explosion. His senses were focused down a tunnel, so pure, so direct, that little could distract him. He knew with the sureness of experience that the shot had been a good one, and the leopard was down. It was ten minutes past five. They had been in the blind for just over an hour.

Approaching cautiously, Phil and Sam were relieved to find the leopard laying in the gully behind the ant mound. Preferring his .416 Remington over 12 gauge shotgun, Phil had chambered a round in his .416 Remington in case the tom decided to wake up. "I do not like a shotgun as a back up on potentially wounded leopard" he says. "The .416 with 400g Swift A-Frame bullets has the stopping force, while heavy, it is



*Above: Phil Oosthuysen with Sam's Waterbuck.*



*Above: Sam Saunders with his 37 5/8 Sable taken during his hunt in July 2000.*

fast enough to totally destroy the animal." Sam's 7mm Rem. Mag. hurled the 170g Nosler Partition at a (hand loaded) 2600fps... a little fast for Phil's liking. It is well known that leopard have a highly developed nervous system, which is particularly susceptible to hydrostatic shock effect. The 170g bullet, on impact, would have carried sufficient force to send a shock wave through the leopard's system, radiating from the point of entry, killing it almost immediately.

What a magnificent trophy. Phil's estimates had been right, and even Sam had to agree whilst trying to lift the cat, that it was indeed a big leopard. Measuring a respectable 7' and weighing 70kgs, the (green) skull measurement clocked 16 11/16, placing it a potential 26 in the SCI record book.

With night now upon them, the Landrover rolled its way into the camp, dragging a dull smudge of dust behind. Above the drone of the turbo, the singing of the camp staff carried to Sam, the lyrics unknown, but the mood tempered by the deep African sound, unmistakable. Phil knew this to be a bestowing of considerable honour, the trackers and skinner well aware of the trophy Sam had secured. Looking back over his shoulder, Sam glimpsed the dull red glow on the western horizon, sucking the last vivid experience





Sam's 13 7/8 Bushbuck

from a day that would live forever in his memory.

As if an omen, the leopard hunt set the pace of the remainder of Sam's safari. He bagged his kudu and a sable worthy of a place of honour in his trophy room. Bushbuck, impala, waterbuck and zebra rounded off the safari, with days to spare. Africa had been good to him, and in spite of the political upheaval Zimbabwe was experiencing his hunt had been without incident.

Weeks later, as was his custom, Phil checked favored leopard sites for signs of their presence, even though they only hunted one leopard a year here. This self imposed quota, ensured good future trophy quality. It had been some weeks since Sam had taken the big tom, and Phil felt gratified by the appearance of new spoor. This new tom was also big... not quite as big as the original, but still big. A well known animal biologist had commented on Sam's daylight leopard, and the fact that another had already taken its place. In areas where this predator is scarce, the chances of even seeing one in daylight are rare. To actually see one over a bait, while the

sun still shone, supported Phil's quota theory. It felt good to be on the winning side.

Crouched at the edge of a trickle of water seeping through the coarse river sand, the

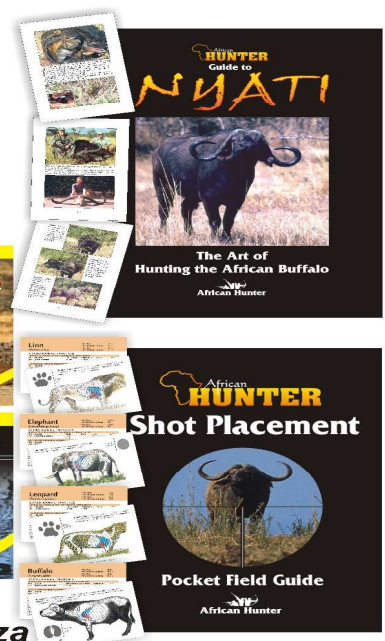
leopard lapped slowly. His eyes, darting this way and that, mimicked his swiveling ears as they strained for the slightest sound. Night had fallen, and although it had been weeks since last he had seen his old rival, he knew he was deep within his territory. Padding silently, he moved like poured gold down the gully toward the main stream. Magnified by the hazy atmosphere, a giant yellow moon crested the horizon, picking individual hairs out on the leopard's shoulder as the muscle writhed to his steps. Pausing briefly, the new tom peered up into the tree. The faint scent of rotting meat lingered and high on a branch, deep cut marks made by chaffing wire scarred the bark. Puzzled, the leopard turned to stare at a spot where once a blind stood. No remnant or record existed of its presence or function now, but deep within an instinct warned of something sinister. Like a mighty saw chewing through hardwood, he grunted his first tentative challenge to the night air, tearing a rent in the silence which surrounded him. Silence was the response. He now ruled the domain! 🐾



Sam's 52 6/8 kudu completing an outstanding trophy collection.

# Subscribe Now

**African HUNTER Magazine**  
Africa's professional journal for serious hunters



For more info email:

Jacqui: [fishunt@zol.co.zw](mailto:fishunt@zol.co.zw), Mickey: [adhunt@mweb.co.za](mailto:adhunt@mweb.co.za)