

Into Africa, 2022

Chapter 5 - Top Game

Having harvested my two designated trophies and more extra “in the way” animals than planned or budgeted, I was at a loss what to do with the rest of my time in Africa. Maybe I should tour the elephant sanctuary or hit the wine tasting trail like the rest of the tourists? No, I don’t think so. That’s not me. Bertus suggested we go back to his property and look for the fifty-inch bull kudu. Why not? Even if the big bull didn’t show we were guaranteed to see lots of game. Returning to the mountains would also give him an opportunity to check on his transplants. And there was always the possibility I could cull more management animals.

This time we would be heading to the high country where Bertus first spotted the big bull two weeks earlier when he and a crew of staff were packing out another client’s kudu. He was sure that bull would return to the same deep ravine and high mountain basin. We were on the property just as the clear morning sun was coming up: perfect conditions for spotting kudu. During the winter months they



often move to open spots at dawn to warm themselves in the sun. As big as they are (bulls can reach 700 lbs), kudu can be very difficult to spot even when standing in a clearing. Their gray-brown fur with vertical stripes blends perfectly with the rugged environment of the Great Escarpment. As often as not a bull’s long horns shining in the sun are what gives him away. This morning several cows and young bulls were spotted in the foothills as we drove in but the big one was not with them. After parking the truck in a secluded spot out of sight, we hiked to the base of the mountains. It was not easy going. The ground was covered with scattered jagged rocks, and as we climbed higher there was less brush to cover our approach. Bertus spotted a half dozen gemsbuck high above us crossing at the base of a cliff ... and they spotted us too. He decided we should get to a vantage point at the



end of a ridge where we could sit in cover and watch for movement. A deep ravine below us rose steeply to a small basin tucked behind a knob at the foot of the cliff where we saw the gemsbuck. According to Bertus the out of sight basin was filled with brush. It was a favourite bedding site for game, especially kudu. The brush provided cover and the near barren surrounding landscape made it almost impossible for anything to sneak up on them without being seen. He said our best bet was to watch both entrances to the basin rather than trying to look into it directly. From where we were stationed I was theoretically in range of both the ravine at the bottom and the gemsbucks’ saddle at the top. It might require long shots up to 350 yards but doable with my bipod and a good rest. Bertus’s strategy paid dividends. Before long a cow with two calves was observed coming down the opposite side of the ravine. Within minutes a lone cow appeared briefly on the same side but above the basin. A young bull came out of the ravine on our side and walked up the ridge towards the basin before disappearing again into the bottom. Then things quieted down as the day warmed up. Bertus told me to stay put while he and Lovemore returned

to the truck. Lovemore would be dropped off at the base of the deep ravine a couple of miles below and then he'd walk up through the bottom. Bertus would return and take a position on the next ridge below me where he could watch for anything Lovemore might push up on the other side of the ridge out of my sight. As soon as he could see Lovemore, Bertus would cross back over to me. While they were gone I watched the young bull come out of the ravine again and work his way down the steep opposite slope. He was clearly looking for company. Then I briefly caught sight of a cow coming up the very bottom of the ravine. Shortly afterwards Bertus returned and we waited for Lovemore. He saw three or four cows pushed up through the bottom but no bulls. It was now peak heat of the day and pointless to bother these animals any further. Best to leave and return for an evening hunt when it cooled down.

After lunch Bertus took me on a tour of the surrounding foothills. They could be nearly barren or covered with thick thorny brush, depending on the aspect and topography. The ground was invariably rocky with interspersed sand and clay. I found the geology perplexing. It seemed every kind of stone could be found just about everywhere: pillow basalts, limestone, shale, erratic shattered white quartz, pyroclastic debris, and sandstone. The one thing that seemed to be missing was smoothrock glacial till although there seemed to be some evidence of past glacial activity. Scattered among the veld's perplexing rocks, wildflowers were in full bloom. This was a delightful first for me. Though my previous two trips occurred at exactly the same time of year in



late August, almost no wildflowers were blooming then, only the tall aloe which were finished when I arrived this time. Unfortunately, I'm unable to identify any of the flowing plants except aloe.

Driving through the foothills we found a herd of a dozen blue wildebeest and briefly glimpsed a couple of spooky kudu cows. Bertus knew a group of springbuck frequented a particular high valley and we located them easily. Through the spotting scope he determined one ram was a candidate for culling so he parked and we started a stalk. The hillside we were on was southwest facing and relatively dry with light cover. Also the afternoon downslope breeze was just starting to kick up. It was a tricky stalk but we still managed to get within two hundred yards before the springbuck busted.

Unproductive but fun!

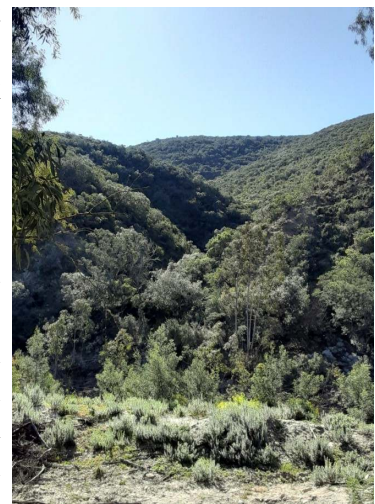
Late in the afternoon we drove back to the base of the mountains for the evening hunt. Clouds sliding over the tops of the peaks portended foul weather. The animals seemed to know it and were

on the move. Bertus and Lovemore were picking out kudu everywhere but not the one I was supposed to shoot. Then Lovemore pounded on the cab hard four times: “Oh, I like the sound of that!” He somehow picked out two nice bulls standing in a tiny clear spot almost five hundred yards off near the top of the opposing ridge. Bertus set up the spotting scope for a good look. “There he is! That’s your bull! Have a look.” I had trouble getting on the eyepiece but finally got a blurry out-of-focus look at them. And they were looking at us. Even from that distance Bertus could see the old bull’s hide looked ragged. “It’s too late to go after him today but now we know where he’s hanging out. It’ll only be a matter of time before you get a shot at him.”

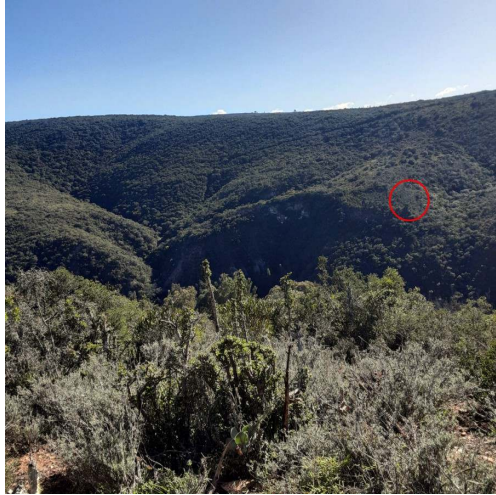
After dinner that night a call came in from the lodge owner still hunting in Zimbabwe. Bertus wrote something down on my copy of the trophy fees list. It already had several adjustments added to the margins. After he hung up Bertus sighed and smiled. “Okay, I know you said you didn’t want a nyala but ... look at this.” Hmmm. I gently thumped the table with my fist. “Darn you guys! You know it’s impossible to turn down an offer like that. Where is it?” The property was on the other side of the mountain range we had hunted that afternoon and Bertus admitted it was unfamiliar territory. Located on the rainy coastal side of the Great Escarpment, the property would have plenty of water and very heavy cover. Bertus expected it would not be an easy hunt. “That sounds good to me! Let’s see what we can find.”

We were off very early the next morning. It was a long drive and Bertus had to make a detour into town to pick up the gate keys from the owner. I got out of the truck to meet him. It’s common courtesy I think for an owner to know who’s hunting his property. Though a very successful businessman, he impressed me as a salt of the earth sort very much like Jani, the pipe-smoking farmer whose property I hunted for black wildebeest. I seemed to leave an equally favourable “unsophisticated” impression with him. Well, I hope so anyway. On the way to the property I delicately informed Bertus that shooting something wasn’t critical. “If we see a really nice animal *maybe* I’ll consider taking a shot. I’m already pretty much over budget on this trip.” He assured me his mantra is never let a client shoot at anything he wouldn’t want hanging on his own wall.

This property was more difficult than I expected. The hills, though not as high as Bertus’s kudu country, were steeper and the cover was extremely thick. Our small truck struggled over a single vehicle track that was narrow, overgrown, very rough, and often almost vertical. It’s a wonder Lovemore wasn’t pitched out of his seat in the back. Bertus parked at the top of the first hill to look over the country on both sides. We watched a herd of zebra and a lone kudu bull moving through the brush on the same side we just drove through. The bull might have been a shooter but Bertus didn’t have permission to take kudu on this place. On the other side a river ran through the canyon below us with a floodplain meadow that usually attracted a variety of game early in the morning. This would be our best bet. Stalking the dense bush on the steep hillsides and gullies would be pretty much an exercise in futility ... or personal injury. The difficulty with approaching the meadow would be finding a way to see what was there without being seen first. It would require



almost stepping into the meadow after descending a near vertical intermittently brushy slope for a half mile. Eyeballs in my kneecaps might make this stalk doable. Shortly after we started down the hill animals began showing up on the meadow. An impala grunted somewhere below us and we froze behind some cover. While we were waiting for it to settle down Bertus glassed the hills on the opposite side of the valley. “Four nyala cows just stepped out at the bottom of that opening near the top. They are looking uphill. Something’s coming down.” After several minutes of glassing Bertus was suddenly *very* excited. “There’s a bull above the cows and he is a BIG one! Probably the best



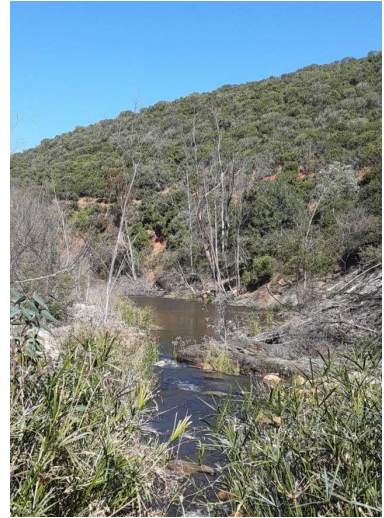
bull I’ve seen this year. You ARE going to shoot this nyala!” Well okay, if you say so! The cows started moving slowly downhill along the face of a cliff. Then they disappeared in the thick cover of a gully. Bertus decided we should move across the face of our hill staying concealed in thick brush, then drop down to the river where the gully joined it and wait for the nyala. He was certain they were headed downstream to the meadow. It was tough, miserable going: very steep and thick with thorny acacia. Then we ran into a boundary fence that dropped straight to the river. We’ll follow it down. Gripping the sheepwire in the fence to keep our footing, we descended literally hand over hand. Then Bertus stopped. I inched down next to him. We could barely see over the edge of a sheer cliff a few feet in front of

us. “This won’t work, Bertus. I left my parachute at the lodge.”

The new plan was to climb back to the top, find the track, and follow it down to the meadow. Staying on the track might expose us more but Bertus figured we could move quicker and more quietly. Speed was important now because it was warming up fast and the animals would soon be leaving to bed down in the shade of thick brush. He pushed me hard and my poor conditioning became painfully apparent. Embarrassing! Getting within range of the meadow was tricky. The animals on it had all moved to the shaded edge on our side. When we were about as close as we could get, Bertus picked a concealed spot with a view of most of the meadow a hundred yards below and we sat down and waited. A pair of nyala cows walked in and out of sight. An impala gently groomed her young one and then it groomed her. After a half hour Bertus admitted this wasn’t working. It was too late in the day. The nyalas we were after weren’t coming to the meadow. We needed to go to them. We’d leave the descending track and bushwhack across the middle of the hill below the cliff till reaching the gully’s junction with the river. Easier said than done in that thorny vertical jungle! At one point Bertus hissed at me to freeze. An impala on the upstream end of the meadow had spotted us as we crossed a small opening. I stopped in mid step and stayed motionless for five minutes. Finally she started feeding again and we moved on while her head was down. A few yards further Bertus halted to glass upstream and I looked over my shoulder to “check our six.” Two nyala bulls on our side of the meadow were walking away from us! Bertus didn’t need the binoculars to tell they weren’t what we were looking for. Onward.

After a half hour traversing the hill Bertus suddenly thrust out his arm, palm down. Stop! He pointed upstream. Barely visible on the other side at a bend in the river were four nyala cows. “That

bull is here somewhere,” he whispered. “Just gotta find him.” I moved up behind Bertus and stayed motionless. I let him do the glassing. Less movement to give us away. “Ah ... there he is! He’s bedded down a hundred yards below us in that dead stuff on the opposite bank. See the two white spots on his cheek?” My 10x42 binocs couldn’t pick it out. “Wait for him to move.” Finally I saw his horns tip forward. Only his head was visible. I turned the Springfield’s scope to 5x and got on the sticks. There’s no way I could shoot through that thicket even if the bull stood up. Fifteen yards downstream a two foot wide window provided the only possible opportunity for a clear shot. I set up on it. Then the waiting started. I told Bertus to check his watch. “Let’s see how long this takes!” Finally the bull got up, stretched, took a few steps, and started to feed. He turned and walked back upstream, then up the hill, then downstream. Bent over those sticks endlessly was killing my neck ... and the anxiety was doing a number on my blood pressure too. After an hour and a half the bull finally wandered up to the open spot, stopped short, and started browsing again. Argh! I straightened up to unkink my neck just as he started to walk forward again. When the bull stepped into the window I had him in the crosshairs. It didn’t look like he would stop so I shot him on the move. The impact was audible and the bull hunched up like he was hit in the boiler room. “He’s done.” Bertus agreed. The bull ran to the river, stumbled, got back to his feet, turned, and started running up the bank. I was off the sticks. “You better shoot him again!” So I did. The bull disappeared in the thick stuff. Then Bertus saw his tail twitching on the ground. “He’s down.”



Bertus wasn’t exaggerating: this was an exceptional animal. Its long ivory tipped horns were thick, evenly matched, with both ends turned out in a beautiful lyre shape. The first shot hit the left front shoulder a bit low, deflected downward, and exited his armpit without damaging anything vital. Good thing I did shoot him again! The second shot struck the bull’s midsection, disintegrating his liver and slicing one lung. That one killed him quickly. I had planned on only taking

the hide and euro skull but this old fella had an eight inch bald spot running down his spine. He was just too pretty to throw the skin away so I decided to take his cape instead. Bertus opened the bull’s mouth to check its age. All but two front teeth were gone and one of those was about to fall out. This was a very old nyala!

To be honest, when we left the lodge that morning I secretly hoped the day’s hunt would be a sightseeing trip. Instead I wound up with the trophy of a lifetime ... and the stalk of a lifetime ... at a once in a lifetime price. It was meant to be I guess.