

A South African Safari

Weltevreden July 2009

We'd been stalking a herd of Red Hartebeest for nearly two days and at long last it looked as though I might get a shot at one. We'd left the Toyota Landcruiser at Leopard Point, a hilltop which gave us a magnificent view over the miles of high veldt stretching westwards towards the Kalahari. Three of us, my son Mike, Trevor and I, followed closely behind Pete, our PH (Professional Hunter) as we slithered uncomfortably on our backs down a very open slope.



Uncomfortable terrain for crawling

Strewn with red rocks and with no cover other than the dried grass, barely 30cms tall, this meant that any attempt to sit up and take a look at the animals 400m away in the valley would have lead to instant flight, just as it had on several previous occasions. The air was very still and quiet. Any sound would have given us away and it was very difficult not to cause minor avalanches or stifle the occasional muttered expletive as bare hands or thinly covered buttocks encountered thorns or sharp edged rocks.

At last we glimpsed a solitary thorn bush ahead and very painfully and slowly crept towards it. Once under cover, Pete sat up and

risked looking through his binoculars. He whispered to me that two dozen Hartebeest and a dozen zebras were grazing in the valley and hadn't picked us up. Among the Hartebeest he had spotted two bulls, the smaller of which was our quarry. The other he'd christened "Harley Davidson" because of his massive horns shaped like handlebars. This animal was the herd bull and he did not want to see it shot.

I crawled over Pete to get into position and he passed me the rifle. This was a Blaser R93 with a sound moderator using 173 grain bullets, hand loaded by Trevor. I extended the bipod and tried to find a stable position among the rocks to set it up. This was not easy and the rifle rocked alarmingly until I finally found one. At long last I looked through the scope and could see the herd below. They were grazing peacefully, the two bulls widely separated with zebra wandering amongst the herd.

Trevor, peering through his rangefinder, whispered that our bull was 250m away and it certainly looked a long way through the scope. He was also standing among a group of cows and zebra. Because of the very rocky terrain (now digging painfully into my abdomen) I couldn't risk a ricochet and the possible wounding of another animal. Pete suggested that they might graze towards us and give me a shorter range shot. We were obviously in for a long wait, so I took the opportunity of some rock gardening and made myself slightly more comfortable.

The whole herd moved slowly to our right, necessitating some swivelling of the rifle and some re-arrangement of the rocks around the

bipod legs. When I looked again through the sights, all I could see was a branch of the thorn tree so Pete very gingerly did some pruning, cursing quietly as he pricked his fingers.

After thirty five minutes and an aching back, the herd had separated a little and I could get a clear shot at the bull, with only a pair of zebras on his right to cause me some concern. Trevor said that the range was now down to 221m and I felt comfortable that I could take the shot without endangering anything else. Pete said that normally he wouldn't let clients shoot anything over 200m but, if I was happy I could go ahead. He'd seen me shoot the previous year and the bipod was much steadier than the sticks normally used. We had a short discussion about aiming points. The Hartebeest has almost a target marker in the deep brown patch which ends on the shoulder just above the foreleg. Hitting the top of this patch would almost guarantee a heart shot and a clean kill. We had been a bit concerned when Trevor had been shooting earlier in the week that the heavy bullet was dropping significantly more than we expected at ranges over 150m. We decided that 6 inches above the brown patch would allow for this drop.

"Gently squeeze the trigger with the pad of your forefinger", "Don't anticipate the shot – be surprised when the rifle fires", "Follow the bullet to the target", "Take some deep breaths, then breathe out half way and hold it", "Remember to reload immediately". All these thoughts were rushing through my mind as I tried to calm myself and keep the reticule on the target.

I squeezed the trigger and was indeed surprised as the rifle fired. Using a moderator is a great advantage and I wasn't immediately deafened by the report. I held my breath and waited for the hit. After what seemed an eternity, I heard a solid "thwack" echo up

from the valley below and, as I reloaded, Pete said that it was a good heart shot and that the animal was going down. Finding it once more through the sights, I watched it take a few paces and fall heavily. A few brief kicks and it was still. Amazingly, until we stood up and revealed ourselves, all the others just carried on as before. Yet another example of the advantage of a sound moderator.

Mike, who is very experienced and an excellent shot, had been watching everything through his binoculars and rushed to congratulate me. "I'm proud of you Dad", he said. It is amazing the things we do to try to impress our kids!

We stumbled down the hillside, watching for any sign of movement in the animal, but there was none. Nevertheless, I approached it carefully, rifle at the ready while Pete looked for signs of life. Only now could I appreciate its size and the magnificent pair of horns it sported. After the obligatory photos, we struggled to load it onto the Landcruiser to take it back to the camp. After it had been skinned and gralloched, the carcass weighed in at 95kilos, a record for Hartebeest at Weltevreden. The meat, as with all animals shot here, would be collected and distributed to the villagers in the local area.



My Red Hartebeest

We had arrived at Weltevreden in late July, pretty well the middle of the South African

winter. Several of us had been here the previous year so we had an idea of what to expect. We landed at Johannesburg after a long flight from London to find that the temperature was below zero! After a short flight to Kimberley, we disembarked to find that there was a cold wind blowing and the temperature was even lower..

Peter, who runs Weltevreden game reserve, met us for the two hour drive west, towards the edge of the Kalihari. The camp had grown since last year and some new accommodation has been added. It is a very welcoming place with a number of small but very comfortable thatched cottages and a lapa, a sort of dining room, bar and lounge area – very atmospheric with the biggest Kudu head I have ever seen. These all surround a large fire pit, which is great to sit around as the sun goes down.

Water is provided from a borehole and pumped by wind power. Piping hot water comes from the “donkeys”, ingenious contrivances built of brick – one for each cottage and fired up at around 5pm each day. It only takes 30 minutes for a small wood fire to heat the water in a recycled bottled gas cylinder suspended in the brick chimney and connected to the showers and hand basins.



Bungalow with “donkey” water heater

Absolutely brilliant and very comforting after a hard day of walking. They even stay warm enough for a morning shave! Perhaps the greatest improvement after last year was the

provision of hot water bottles. I really appreciated this, especially as the temperature dropped to an unusual -5deg.

Peter and Alex had bought Weltevreden 12 years ago. It was formerly an old ranch supporting some 80 head of cattle. They invested heavily in the place putting up 27 kms of game fence around the perimeter and introducing a wide variety of animals – Ostrich, Black Wildebeest, Red Hartebeest, Kudu, Impala, Springbok, Blesbok, Gemsbok, Water Buck, Mountain Reedbuck and even a pair of Giraffes. In addition there were already record sized Steenbok and Duiker.

The Black Wildebeest were on the verge of extinction and have now flourished at Weltevreden into a large herd. They are astonishing creatures. If they feel threatened by a potential predator, they mill around, rushing in random directions. Apparently this is to confuse their main foe, the lion.

Because of the earlier cattle farming, there is piped water to various dams or large tanks which in turn provide drinking water for the animals. The last three years have also been unusually wet which has meant an explosion in the number of animals, particularly springbok and as there are no big cats in the reserve, hunting is the only means of population control. Having said that, jackals are a constant menace, preying on young and even adult animals, which may explain why shooting them is free of charge!

The hunting is carefully managed and judging by the healthy number of animals is very successful with a tremendous benefit to the local villagers in the provision of meat as well as containing a sustainable wildlife population.

The high veldt of the Northern Cape is a magnificent and unique area with rolling hills and a few sparsely wooded valleys. The most striking thing is the absolute silence broken only

by the occasional bird song, one of which sounded just like a mobile phone – so much so that I spent a good ten minutes searching our cottage for the origin of the ring tone, much to the amusement of the rest of the party. The walking is fairly strenuous since the terrain is covered with numerous sharp edged rocks which necessitate some really good boots. The scent of the wild herbs and flowers is really wonderful but don't get too entranced or you will snag yourself on a "wait a bit" thorn – a very painful experience.



Mother and baby

There are quite a few trees, but they are all dwarfed by the two giraffes which wonder around, looking for the entire world like telegraph poles or mobile phone towers. They are very photogenic and will allow you to get very close – occasionally too close. I was filming a wildebeest stalk and father giraffe became very inquisitive, bending down to peer at us as we crouched in the scrub. He took absolutely no notice of our muttered curses and persisted in following us, making a mockery of our attempts to blend into the landscape! Last year they produced a delightful baby which entranced us all. Most unfortunately, it was found dead only a few months ago. There has been much speculation about the cause of death, one possibility being botulism. Mother giraffe still visits the exact place where the body was found and both parents have been seen chewing the bones. Apparently this is not uncommon and is presumably

for the calcium and minerals they contain. Pete is hoping that, since the parents have shown no sign of disease, botulism can be ruled out. They are such amiable characters, everyone is hoping for another happy event!

We had started our Hartebeest hunt the previous morning when we spotted several of them in a clearing. It was another still morning and we circled the area trying to get downwind of them. Fortunately, we could follow a dry river bed which kept us out of sight of the animals who hidden behind some large thorn bushes on the edge of the clearing. Pete kept puffing clouds of talc to check the wind direction as we finally crept towards them, hunched double and in single file to present as low a profile as possible. (*If anyone was ever to ask me how to prepare for a safari in the veldt, I'd probably tell them to spend a couple of hours each day walking briskly while bent double – and throw in a few hills to climb just to spice things up!*) He turned and whispered to me, "there are two bulls there and they haven't rumbled us". I silently loaded the rifle while he set up the sticks, usually three broomsticks tied together near the top with a length of old car inner tube – heavy to carry but very stable. Most shots here are taken off sticks, either standing or kneeling, since the ubiquitous thorn shrubs or dead grass prevent prone shots in the majority of cases



Shooting off sticks

I still hadn't spotted the Hartebeest and was just sliding my rifle barrel onto the sticks when Pete muttered a curse. "There are a couple of Springbok off to our right and they've scented us". They started to run up the hillside, closely followed by our Hartebeest. Now that our cover was blown, we walked out into the clearing and watched them on the hillside through our binoculars. It turns out that there weren't just two, but a large herd of around twenty five females with a large dominant male and a few younger ones. They stopped about 300m away and all turned their heads to stare at us. Strange animals, with long mournful faces and those handlebar horns you couldn't really call them beautiful like an Impala, the dark blaze on their face contrasting with the rich red-brown of their hides. They are certainly striking and take their name from the Dutch word for *deer* and *beast*, although they don't resemble any of the species of deer that I have ever seen. Pete told me that they are one of the fastest running antelopes.

Off to our left I could make out two large pairs of curved lyre shaped horns, poking out of the top of a bush about 50m away. As I watched, the animals came into view. They seemed strangely unconcerned and stood watching us and quietly chewing. These were two male Waterbuck, part of a small herd which had been introduced a few years ago and were being allowed to establish themselves. They were breeding very well and obviously suited the conditions here. They are really stunning creatures with elegant horns and "teddy bear" like faces. Their only incongruous feature became apparent as they turned to head away from us, quartering up the hillside and showing us the white "lavatory seat" markings on their rumps.



Waterbuck

We started slowly after the Hartebeest, hoping that they would move up and over the skyline and once out of sight, lose interest in us. They seemed to have a tolerance radius of about two hundred metres and would let us approach to that distance before retreating altogether further up the hillside. Interestingly I've read that they appreciate the difference between lions and cheetahs. They will allow a lion to within 200m but a cheetah scares them at 500m



Small herd of Red Hartebeest with me in their sights

By now the temperature was rising and it was hard work climbing over the ankle breaking loose rocks, trying to avoid the worst of the thorns. We'd set off at 8 am and were looking forward to getting back to camp for a hearty brunch. Pete suggested contouring around the side of the hill now the animals were over the crest. He knew of a good lookout point called "the ambush tree" and we headed for this. It was a fairly large tree about 10m high and we crawled on our bellies towards it. He

went ahead to look over the ridge and turned and gestured for absolute silence. He slithered back and whispered to us that our herd was only about 50m away, grazing in company with a dozen zebra. I took the rifle from Trevor and crawled forward to join Pete and together we set up the sticks in the shelter of the tree. I could see various parts of animals sticking out from the bushes as they browsed but couldn't make out the smaller bull which Peter wanted me to take. They were all totally oblivious of our presence and I felt rather sorry for Trevor sitting below us who couldn't see this magnificent spectacle. Gradually the herd moved around to my right and we had to reposition the rifle to the other side of the trunk.

I aimed at the stream of animals just a short distance away and waited. As they appeared out of the bushes just 40m away, Pete said, "not this one, not this one, no, let that one go – it's the lead bull, look at the size of his horns – it's Harley Davidson". Finally my animal stuck his head out of the bushes and Pete said, "That's the one, take him", – Unfortunately, just as I was squeezing the trigger, two females appeared alongside him and three zebra just behind! No chance of a safe shot and I was just yards away.

I put the safety on and we watched them walk slowly away from us still unaware of our presence, my disappointment tinged with the thrill of having been able to observe such magnificent wild animals so close up in their natural habitat and with the satisfaction of having stalked so close to them.

Trying to ignore our rumbling tummies, we followed the herd back the way we had come, down into the valley and picked up the truck. We'd been walking and crawling all morning and brunch was going to be great. On the way back to camp we passed a small group of female kudu accompanied by a young male.

"The grey ghosts of the forest", they stood under a group of trees watching us warily over the shoulders, ready to spring into flight if we threatened them



Young Kudu – perfect camouflage

After a welcome meal of scrambled eggs, sausages, bacon and beans – and a brief siesta, we went back to where we left the Hartebeest who hadn't moved very far and there followed a frustrating trek of several miles, while they played cat and mouse with us, tantalisingly just out of range. Eventually we gave up, the sun would be going down soon and it was getting very chilly. We paused on the top of the ridge to take in the magnificent view and were rewarded by the sight of two Mountain Reedbuck, standing under a tree and watching us. The sunlight was streaming through the branches and they were quite hard to see. There were very few of these animals in the reserve. They had been introduced at the beginning but although they were healthy, they were suffering heavily from Jackal predation. For some reason, they don't exhibit the flight response of most of the other antelopes and though of a reasonable size (75cms at the shoulder) even adults can be taken by Jackals. They did look beautiful and we went back to camp, footsore and tired but having had a really wonderful day.

Back at camp, the "donkeys" had been lit and after a hot shower and several gin and tonics, we settled down to reflect on the day's suc-

cesses and failures. I felt no disappointment at not having fired a shot. The whole experience of walking in the veldt and seeing and stalking all those different animals was amazing and

who knows, tomorrow might be my lucky day!
And it was!

Alan Robinson

Weltevreden safari camp has thatched accommodation with an original South African feel to it, and a cosy bar/living area that is open for all to relax in. After a sumptuous breakfast, an average day can consist of a combination of events - photographic or hunting safaris, lunch out in the velt (game area) and sundowners at the end of the day, admiring the awesome sunsets. At the end of the day, you can soak in a hot bath with a drink, or chat around the camp fire under the stars – whist our friendly staff look after all your needs.

Weltevreden is reached by flying into Johannesburg or Cape Town and then a short hop to Kimberley, where you'll be met by our friendly staff for the drive to the reserve. All relevant documentation and entry requirements are dealt with before your departure and advice is provided as to what to bring and medical requirements for the trip.

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