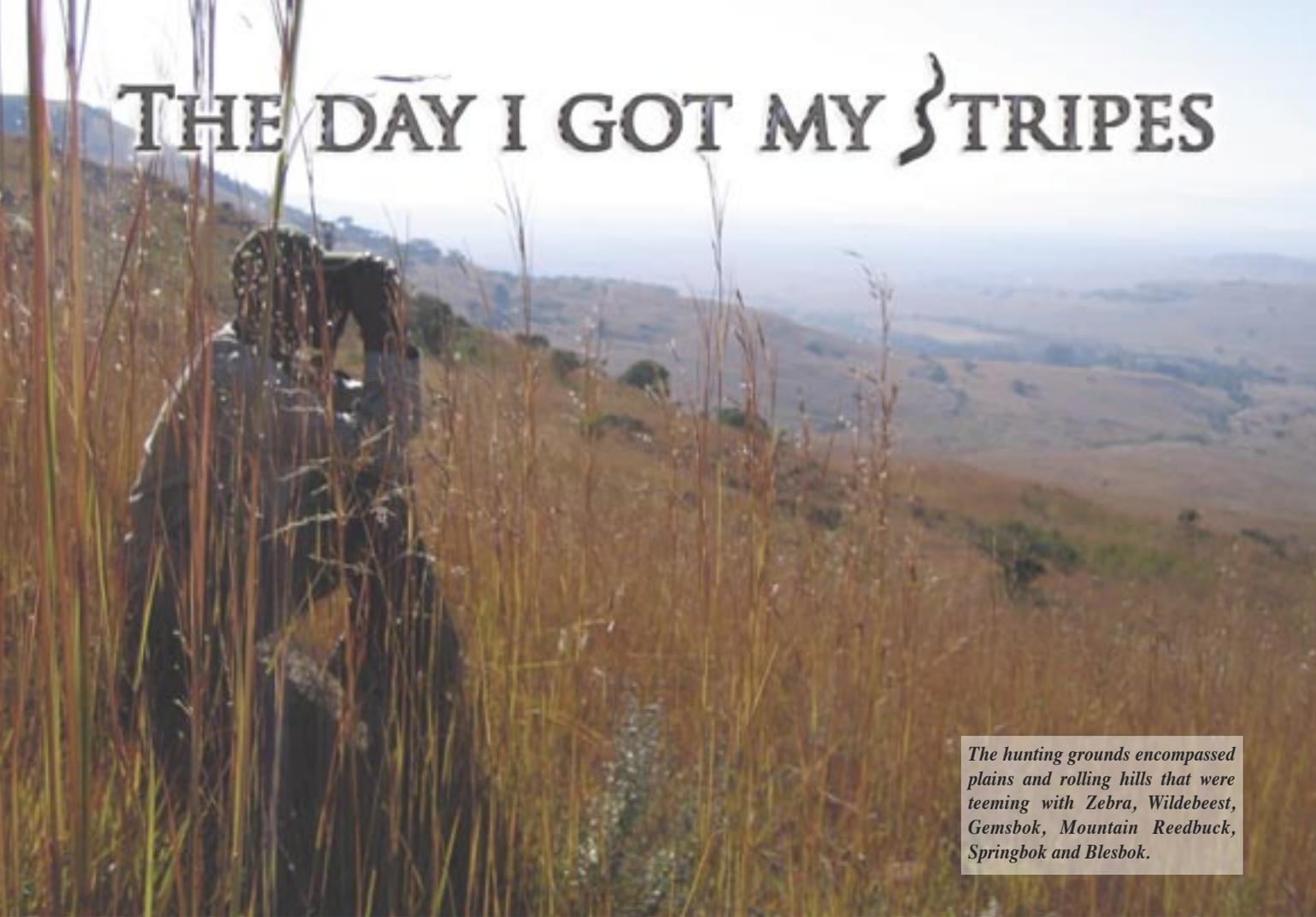


THE DAY I GOT MY STRIPES



The hunting grounds encompassed plains and rolling hills that were teeming with Zebra, Wildebeest, Gemsbok, Mountain Reedbuck, Springbok and Blesbok.

Hunting can be a cumulative process, requiring technique, experience and enthusiasm. You need it all to achieve your chosen goals, but it can still take a while to get there.

Text and photography by Brian Watson.

As I peered through the scope at the bush below me, the big Kudu bull slowly emerged from the tangle of shrub and small trees. Stepping into the smallest of clearings the magnificence of this fabulous antelope was revealed. The sun drizzled over the cunning camouflage of his coat like virgin olive oil. Wait, I willed myself, wait, just one more step. This is a defining moment in my life, I thought, 'please don't muck it up'. The pressure on the trigger of the heavy rifle tightened imperceptibly until the surrounding hills were shattered by the crash of the muzzle blast. A deadly mix of copper and lead sped towards its target.

The shooting trip I did last year was ostensibly to shoot the game birds of South Africa. Exotic bird shooting opportunities were stunning in terms of variety and numbers and challenges, but I was keen to extract maximum bang for my buck. That's when the thought that maybe some big game

trophy hunting could be included in the exercise. It was easy really, all I had to do was mention the subject to Ian Head and he practically had it organised immediately.

But, and there's always a but, apart from shooting a few sparrows with a daisy air rifle, and rabbit with a .22 all those years ago, I was not an experienced rifle shooter, especially since I



Author with his first ever trophy from Africa - a lovely Springbok.

Author with his hard won Kudu - "I felt a huge sense of humility in front of this animal. I was unprepared for the sheer size of it."



would need a rifle having considerable clout. Advice was required, so the knowledge of Phillip Taylor of Whitehorse Arms and his manager Dave Manly was sought. After long and fruitful discussion and numerous bottles of top shelf red, Phil and I shook hands on the purchase of beautifully maintained Browning chambered for the high velocity 7mm Remington magnum cartridge.

This round was chosen as the species to be hunted were all plains game animals that may have to be taken at distances up to 300 metres. Step it out, that's a long way for an amateur to be shooting. The beauty of this fantastic cartridge is that it shoots very flat over these extreme distances so your point of aim does not have to allow anywhere near as much drop. Consequently, less guesswork, a very desirable trait when your target may only give you seconds in which to take the shot. A 3-9 Leopold telescope sight and wide leather sling was borrowed from Steve Brown, a mate of mine who does a bit of deer shooting, to complete the package.

Next stop, off to another mate that has some large land holdings that includes a deep unused sand pit where I could safely become accustomed to the recoil of the rifle and then practice actually hitting a target. Shooting from a rest was practiced as well as sitting with elbows supported on your knees and, firing from a standing position. All of these moves had to be practiced, as I had no idea what to expect. The gun was zeroed in at 200 metres thereby meaning that little adjustment would have to be made in the field should the targets be from 50 to 300 metres as previously explained. Sounds simple, but how would I handle the real thing?

After thinking constantly about what was before me for about 9 months - I was there. I'd done the bird shoots, had some tremendously rewarding days and made some sensational new friends. The other guys that accompanied me on the bird shoots had left for a look at Victoria Falls before heading back to Australia while I was at the mercy of Richard.

Richard is of Zulu and Indian blood and fiercely proud of his ability to deliver a good hunt and top quality trophy to his designated clients. He is one of the few black Africans with a 'professional hunter' licence. He has a reputation for walking his clients into the ground in quest of that elusive trophy. Knowing this before I left home I religiously walked for an hour or two every day for six months prior to landing in South Africa. The first words Richard spoke when I was first pointed out to him was, "He looks like he can walk", so I guess it paid off.

The first animal we hunted was instantly recognisable as Springbok. We stalked a gorgeous specimen of this little antelope with the lovely lyrebird horns over gentle undulating hills behind the Zulu Wings Lodge our party stayed at. After some effort we got to within 200 metres when he stopped to eyeball us. The rifle was mounted for a standing shot over the shooting sticks. As this was the first time I had ever seen these things let alone shot over them, I was a little nervous, and when we're talking pinpoint, long range, rifle shots, nervous is definitely not good. I didn't set the sticks at the right height so my legs and forearm were bent. The shot was rushed.

The bullet whistled between the legs of the buck. He



(Left) Impala - the hunt itself was terrific, and the trophy wonderful!

jumped and ran away another 40 metres, pausing side on to have another look at us over his shoulder. I reset the height of the sticks, forced myself to relax, and took a deep breath. Bingo, straight through the rear of the shoulder and my first African trophy was a reality.

Hunting a Springbok was a late decision. I had come with the intention of taking a Kudu and an Impala. Richard told me that the Kudu would be the most elusive and difficult quarry, so that was what we would pursue next. Mark Haldane, the principal of Game Hunters Africa, explained it was the perfect time to hunt the magnificent blue-grey ghosts of the forest, as the rut had commenced and some big bulls would be coming in from the surrounding mountains to court the female herds that stay around the fringe of the plains.

The hunting grounds were approached via these plains and rolling hills that were teeming with Zebra, Wildebeest, Gemsbok, Mountain Reedbuck, Springbok and Blesbok. They were wary of the vehicles so moved away every time we came within 200 metres. After trotting away they would turn and face us, watching intently. As we got closer to the face of a large plateau we loaded up the saltlicks, which attract the game as well as help them in an area. The track we traversed was very rough, while the amazing grass was taller than the Land Cruiser we travelled in.

When we stopped at the base of the escarpment, two Zulu trackers, Mfana and Moses became the main focus of the hunt. To say their eyesight is amazing is a

profound understatement. In 10 minutes or so they spotted a Kudu herd consisting of a few cows and a big bull. The herd was busily feeding in the dense bush growing along the upper edges of the hills. What they saw with their naked eye I could not make out with a powerful set of the finest quality binoculars. Richard led me through the grass using the cover of boulders and bushes to a tree some 180 metres from the feeding bull. Using a fork in the tree as a rest for the rifle I tried to get a clear path for the anticipated shot. Unfortunately, there was far too much brush and grass in the way, meaning the risk of the bullet being deflected was too great. We waited. After 10 minutes, I turned on a premonition and saw two giraffe peering inquisitively at us over the top of a small tree from a distance of only 25 metres. Finally the darkness beat us so we returned to Zulu Wings, keen to continue the quest for that bull tomorrow.

On return to the same area the following day the trackers again performed their magic, locating the herd almost at the top of the escarpment. After a brief discussion about our options in getting to within shooting range of the herd we started a very steep climb up the escarpment to the plateau. On reaching the top we had to scramble over rocks and boulders by the hundreds. It was extremely rough going. About every 10 paces there was a rather large snakeskin that had been shed by its owner while basking in the warmth of the rocks. I found out later that they were cobra skins. And no, we didn't see any of the live and at you variety.

Moses led us around the perimeter of the rim to a point where we should be above the Kudu. Sure enough, they were directly below, at about 200 metres.

The cows were just visible in the thick entangled bush, their lighter tan colouring making them much easier to pick out than the grey bull. He was behind them ready to follow should they move. All that was visible of the bull was the shining tips of his horns poking out above the tree he was feeding on. Every now and then the tree would shake as he tangled those magnificent spirals around a branch to snap it off.

A quick decision decided the procedure we would adopt. Simply, sit tight on some extremely uncomfortable rocks, rifle at the ready, and wait for the bull to step out of cover. We also needed to be



(Left) Some of the beautiful décor of the rooms at Mzuzi Falls.

very quiet, because Kudu possess extremely sensitive hearing. This can be difficult if your nose itches or you need to sneeze while looking into a clear sunny sky. Placing my scarf on a rock to make a steady rest I sighted on the shadows below and waited. The time was 11:40am.

At 2:20pm the surrounding hills and valleys reverberated to the crash of the 7mm. I knew instantly that the shot was good but to make sure, the empty cartridge was ejected and a fresh round fed into the breech. The bull started to run and disappeared behind a large bush. As he came out the other side I fired the second round. He again disappeared behind cover. Anxiously I looked to Moses who was stationed on a vantage point to my right and was relieved to see him give me the thumbs up. A massive smirk on the face of Richard was another indication to me that this was a fabulous trophy down and ready to be collected. He was obviously satisfied with his days work.

After scrambling down the impossibly steep slope we stood beside the fallen Kudu. It was truly a fantastic creature. I have read the accounts of other hunters who have faced the spectacle of some major trophy they have just taken and they relate how the moment reduces them to tears. It was my turn now, not to weep, but feel a huge sense of humility in front of this animal. I was unprepared for the sheer size of it. I relive the moment today and feel a mixture of sadness and immense pride at my achievement.

Perhaps the most satisfying thing for me was the placement of two of the excellent Remington Core-Lokt bullets where I aimed, and only 40mm apart. Not bad for a rank amateur. On reflection the second shot was probably not necessary but better to be sure than lose a trophy as awesome as this. At the sound of the shots the other man came up from the vehicle below with extra manpower and a large tarp to get the beast down the cliff. Seven of us spent the next couple of hours manhandling the 250 kilogram body down to the truck for transport to the skinning shed and preparation of the skin and the horns for the Taxidermist. While all this was going on I took the opportunity to grab my beloved Dickson Round Action shotgun, a dog, and wander the fields. The bag on return included two francolin, one Spurwing goose, and a couple of quail.

Back at the lodge there was much backslapping and celebrating for a job well done. Mark came into the recreation room and said that it was a particularly fine set of horns that as well as measuring over 52 inches, had a really deep curl on them, and a perfect mid spread which heightened their appeal as a trophy.

I was a very proud hunter, but the wheels soon fell off. The next day we set off in search of an Impala, and, although the hunt itself was terrific, and the trophy wonderful; my aim was ordinary. Having to step from cover and shoot at a target that was partly obscured, culminated in a poor shot. The Impala died instantly but the bullet placement was too high and too wide. A similar thing happened with the Blesbuck, but I prefer the thought of that fabulous Kudu.

All that remains now is to have the final job of getting the trophies well mounted. They are now in Australia and in the workshop of our finest taxidermist. The moment of seeing them up on my wall at home is eagerly awaited. The memories of a superb hunting trip will be relived again and again. Oh, and I have already booked a trip to the Zambeze Delta area of Mozambique later this year.

Author hunted with Ian Head's WSX: www.worldsafarixpeditions.com



WSX

World Safari Expeditions

Hi. I'm Ian Head. I've searched the world to find you the best places to

HUNT or WING-SHOOT

Africa, Argentina, New Zealand & USA.

don't just take my word for it....

Ian Head delivered me an experience of a lifetime. An adventure that embodied a genuine taste of the REAL Africa. His passion for it was addictive, Ian makes sure you get hit with the Africa Bug too.

This was my first solo African Safari. I felt like an old friend from the moment I arrived. "Arrived as a customer left as a friend". The hunting was challenging, each trophy was hard earned & very rewarding. The trophy standard was high with a great deal of game available. Accommodation was relaxing with plenty of good food & drink. Book a trip and fulfill your African Safari dream.

The safari was straight out of Wilbur Smiths books on Africa with 4 star treatment thrown in.

TESTIMONIALS

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