

Into Africa, 2022

Chapter 4 - Shooting More Stuff That “Got in the Way”

That evening after our return from the interior of the Great Karoo, my PH was wondering what to do next. Well, there was that white blesbuck freebie that Jani wanted shot for his wedding feast. And we knew a monster kudu bull was somewhere on his farm. However, that blesbuck would generate no trophy fee for the lodge (though PH daily rate still applied) and even finding that specific kudu in vast unfamiliar territory could take four or five days. On the other hand, Bertus had a good idea where we might find the big bull kudu on his property so it seemed a good plan to leave Jani's blesbuck in the bank for now and go scout Bertus's property. After dinner we went to the loading bench and switched my bullets and powder to good cases. The lodge's Barnes bullets didn't group as well in my gun and I didn't feel good about shooting their stuff when components are so hard to come by. The lodge had plenty of brass so giving up a box of twenty empty cases wasn't a big issue.



The next morning we were back at Bertus's beautiful property. He wanted to check on the four released springbuck to see how they were getting on in their new environment. Also, he was keen to begin culling marginal local rams so the new transplants would integrate quickly and start breeding. I readily agreed to help with that project! Shortly after daybreak we were in the mountains at the

back end of Bertus's property scouting for the big kudu bull. Several cows and bulls were spotted in clearings on the hillsides as they warmed themselves in the sunlight just after daybreak, but the big one was a no show. Bertus expected delivery of four golden wildebeest bulls that afternoon so we hung around to look for “management” springbuck to shoot. I didn't have anything better to do. One large herd of thirty in the flats at the foot of a long ridge contained a couple of worthy candidates. But they were spooky little buggers with too many eyes and noses in the herd and too little cover to conceal us. We were unable to close the distance no matter what strategy Bertus attempted. Females were dropping babies and the little ones were having trouble keeping up so Bertus stopped pushing the herd after the second failed attempt. We went back to the top of the ridge for lunch and waited for a mistake to be made ... hopefully by a springbuck walking into range. We hid behind an ancient rock fence probably constructed a century and a half ago with the then essential, albeit ungentle, assistance of more than a few giraffe hide bullwhips. As I sat contemplating the story these walls could tell if they could talk, Bertus spied a lone “sh*t ram” on the back side of the hill attempting to cross to the herd on the flats. We moved to intercept and the ram ran over in full sight less than thirty yards. “Shoot him!” But I couldn't. My scope was still turned up to 9x from watching the herd and all I could see was a blur of fur. It was a silly mistake that only a novice should make. I laughed it off. Bertus stepped to the edge of the ridge to see where the ram went and quickly stepped back. Then he set up the sticks. The ram stopped barely fifty yards down the hill and was watching for us. As I got on the sticks Bertus told me to shoot it in the



head ... because that's all we could see. So I shot it in the head. The bullet entered the right side of the ram's nose and exited the back of its neck. This would be clean meat for the butcher and should bring a bit better price. It was good to know my Springfield was shooting where it was supposed to. It was also good to know I was shooting where I was supposed to. Because we both did our job properly, the ram died instantly: always the most desirable outcome when hunting.

That night back at the lodge the owner Brian phoned from Zimbabwe where he was hunting with a client for hippo and crocodile. A nearby property owner made him a good offer on gemsbuck. I already had a very fine female gemsbuck on the wall from my first trip in 2019 but they are wary critters and typically give a difficult stalk. The price was right (actually significantly less than right) and the animals were on another a property my PH hadn't hunted before. Sounded like a worthy adventure so I agreed we should at least have a look. This is exactly the kind of hunting I prefer: the promise of a difficult stalk, no pressure to meet some objective or agenda, and exploring rugged unfamiliar country in beautiful weather. Let's go see what happens! Arrangements were finalized and the following morning we arrived at the farmhouse just after daybreak to pick up a staff person who would show us the general area where gemsbuck were last seen. For the better part of an hour we drove through flat empty veld before entering the broken land where the gemsbuck were last seen. Along the way we crossed what appeared to be a large well defined section of land that was dominated by large prickly pear cactus, some big as trees. I knew from previous research that Boer settlers imported the plants to South Africa from the American Southwest. Prickly pear now grows wild everywhere. But this grove with many very old plants in a row appeared to have been cultivated. Why? Bertus explained that Boer farmers primarily used prickly pear as fencing but it was also useful for feeding livestock through times of drought. Apparently this section was cultivated as fodder. Nowadays it's pretty much an invasive species. According to Bertus, elephants love the stuff and have been used to control it in some places. A moth has also been introduced that's been very effective in reducing prickly pear (90% reduction in South Africa from 1930s to 2002).



The broken dry land where the gemsbuck were last seen very much reminded me of eastern Montana's Missouri Breaks: large networks of long brushy steep coulees and side draws. We drove on a rough track that cruised the ridge tops and occasionally wound its way precariously down to the bottoms of ravines and then back up the other side on trails barely wide enough for

Bertus's small pickup. The country was very rugged! We had just crossed over to a ridge at the top end of a huge coulee when our tracker Lovemore tapped on the hood of the cab. From his vantage point up high in the back of the truck he spotted a herd of gemsbuck below us over the edge of a ravine. But they had spotted him too and were on the move. Bertus grabbed the sticks and we ran to see if I could get a shot before they disappeared in the bottom. The herd of seven waited on the crest of a gully just long enough to make sure they were being followed and then they were gone. I had no opportunity for a shot. Back in the vehicle the staff guy assured us those were all the

gemsbuck remaining on this property. The landowner was a big time sheep farmer and was trying to get out of the game hunting end. Though gemsbuck can't jump a four foot sheep fence, this section of pasture was huge ... as in thousands of acres huge. Finding our herd again would not be easy. Maybe impossible. Oh well, it was a nice day for a drive in the country.

Bertus drove on into and out of several steep side ravines keeping the large coulee on our right. It was hoped the sound of the vehicle might push the gemsbuck up into view on the opposite side for at least a possible long shot. Eventually the track dipped into the bottom of the big coulee and Bertus turned onto a much less used trail that climbed steeply straight up the left side almost to the top. As we rounded a sharp corner near the crest of the main ridge Lovemore again tapped on the cab. The gemsbuck were in very thick stuff not thirty yards from the front of the truck! They stood long enough for us to get out but it was impossible to make out anything for a shot. Then away they went. Bertus and I followed while Lovemore and the staff guy drove on to the top. Hopefully they could turn the gemsbuck back to us or at least keep them from crossing the road and getting deeper into the coulee network. The plan worked. After we climbed out of the second shallow draw Bertus spotted the gemsbuck above us less than a hundred yards away. We had the advantage of cover and wind and they didn't know we were on them ... yet. They could hear the truck off in the distance in front of them and seemed to be trying to decide what to do next. Bertus carefully put up the sticks. "You're set up on a nice bull. He's the one behind that cactus. Take him in the shoulder when you have a clear shot." Getting a clear shot was the problem. Where the bull was standing a large limb of prickly pear covered the exact spot I wanted to shoot. Waiting and watching off the gun I could see a cow was looking at us. Uh oh! She started to walk and then everyone followed. The bull finally stepped into the clear and I had a small window of opportunity. I moved the sticks to get on him and fired the shot. The impact was quite audible and though he disappeared out of sight immediately there was little doubt he was done. We found him in the open less than fifty yards from where I hit him (note the prickly pear bush in the background). The bullet entered square in his right shoulder and took out the heart's ascending aorta. There was no exit (Lovemore found the slug when



field dressing). Again, I was delighted that everything went down perfectly: my gun put the bullet where it was aimed, the operator did his job, and the animal died very quickly.



Endings like that are great confidence builders, and confidence is essential when hunting. The hunter who lacks confidence or is unsure of his abilities tends to second guess himself. Then he often hesitates too long or overthinks the shot and misses or worse, messes up the animal.

We returned to the lodge, dropped the gemsbuck off at the skinning shed, grabbed a bite to eat and headed out to Bertus's property to check on the new arrivals. One of the springbuck rams was put on a large section of property on the left side of the municipal road. As we drove by a waterhole on the near corner of that property Lovemore pointed to a dark shape at the waters edge: "Nyala!" That

was my first ever glimpse of a nyala bull. He stood long enough for Bertus to get glass on him. “I know that guy. He’s young. Should have lots of potential in a few years. Not sure how he got here but I should find some cows for him or he may leave again.” Nyala are much sought after trophies and command a high price, currently \$2,500 to \$3,000. As we were watching him three kudu cows and a young bull were moving in the cover above the waterhole. Down the road a short ways we found the planted springbuck ram, still by himself. Driving into the large property on the mountains side of the road we quickly found a pair of the golden wildebeest. They were still worrying the fencelines. In the next enclosure one of the transplant rams had surprisingly found himself a girlfriend. That was a welcome sight. The other two springbuck rams were planted in the same area where I culled the scruff ram. We found them still hanging out together. On that back end we found the other pair of golden wildebeest, also staying on the fenceline. We tried again to put the sneak on the flatland herd of springbuck but gave up quickly when Bertus spotted two kudu bulls crossing a wide opening on the other side of the municipal road. We moved to the road to get a better view but they disappeared into a brushy draw and never came out. It was the perfect ending of a great day. Lovemore thought it was perfect too. No more animals to skin and hang. He’d be done and into bed early for a change.