

Into Africa, 2022

Chapter 6 - End Game

After returning to the lodge with my nyala, Bertus and I discussed over a couple of South African beers a strategy for my last three days of hunting. Jani's "on the house" white blesbuck was still an option ... and an affordable one for a guy who was already way over budget. Bertus also offered to take me back into the mountains to hunt that big kudu bull we had seen on his property the day before taking my nyala. Visiting with Jani and his wife was tempting but the lure of chasing elusive kudu in scenic high mountains tipped the scales in favour of the latter. Anyway, Bertus was confident we'd put that bull "in the salt" soon enough for another shot at Jani's white ram.

The next morning we were in kudu country just after daybreak. From the lodge the mountains look quite distant but they are actually only about a forty-five minute drive. I have to say, however, most normal folks would probably need well over an hour to make the trip. Bertus navigated that long stretch of dirt road with lightning efficiency.



Needless to say, my seatbelt was always buckled ... and my knuckles were often a little paler than normal. We first went to the high country looking for the big bull. Lovemore picked out a couple of kudu but nothing worth getting excited about. During the middle of the day we drove around the bottoms searching for a missing pair of golden wildebeest transplants and one of the new springbuck rams. I made another attempt to cull an unwanted springbuck from the same herd we chased around two days earlier. But they had things figured out and didn't let us get close enough for a shot.

For the afternoon hunt Bertus decided to check the country west of where we'd been scouting. As we crested one of the steep foothills Lovemore pounded frantically on the cab. The urgency in that sound could only mean one thing: he spotted the big bull. Even with his naked eye Bertus instantly picked out two kudu bulls in heavy cover on the opposite hill. His spotting scope confirmed one of them was the shooter we were after. Fortunately, we were obscured where we stopped and the kudu didn't appear to notice us. Outside the truck I was finally able to find them in my binoculars. They were moving slowly downhill nearly five hundred yards from us. Mostly all I could see was their horns moving through the brush. By now it was getting late with only an hour of shooting left. We had to come up with a plan fast. The hill we were on was too open. Driving any further and we'd surely be seen. If we attempted hiking down the near vertical face below us, the bulls would also likely see us ... or someone would get hurt falling down the hill. Bertus thought we should leave them alone and try again in the morning. I had another idea. "Bertus, how deep is that washout in the canyon bottom? Could we stay on top of this ridge for a couple hundred yards, slip into a side gully around the corner, drop to the bottom of the canyon, sneak into that washout, and run back down it to intercept them? Would we have enough cover in that ditch?" Bertus glassed the bottom of the ravine. "That just might work. If there's enough time and the wind stays in our favour and we can get into the washout without being seen, then we may be able to catch that big bull crossing the vehicle track that also runs through the bottom. Worth a try." Lovemore stayed at the truck to guide us with binoculars and a radio.

My plan worked. We made it to the bottom without being detected and the washout was

deep enough for us to run through it crouched, only briefly exposing ourselves twice when we had to jump out around thorny acacia barricades. Lovemore radioed that the bulls were almost to the canyon bottom and headed our way. Bertus shut off his radio. We would have to complete the stalk in silence. Ten minutes later we stopped so I could get a breather. He motioned for me to stay put while he slipped up to the rim of the washout for a look. Immediately up went the shooting sticks ... and my heart rate! Bertus whispered, "Hand me your gun. The big bull is right here." He set my Springfield on the sticks and checked to see if the scope was turned down to 3x (it was). Then he motioned me up. The bull was indeed "right here," only fifty-six yards away. Bertus told me to wait till he could get glass on it. "Do you have a clear shot? What about that stick?" We were looking at the bull's right side. It was standing not quite broadside, quartering slightly towards us. The other smaller bull was out of sight, but this one was clearly alerted. In the scope I could only see the big bull's chest and above. Everything below was obstructed by grass and brush. A single scrawny stick stood vertically in line with the centre of the bull's shoulder. I had to make a decision: risk being seen picking up gun and sticks to reset them or try shooting around the obstruction. The window for a shot was only a few feet wide. With one step the bull would be gone. "Bertus, I think I better take the shot." Centring the crosshairs just aft of the stick, I squeezed the trigger. The bull lunged out of sight.

"Did I hit him?" Bertus said he thought so but the impact "didn't sound right." Lovemore confirmed the bull was wounded and about to cross the road. We ran to intercept but were too late. The bull didn't go twenty yards beyond the track when Lovemore saw it lay down. Must be hit in the boiler room. Bertus was in front on the track when he spotted the bull. I ran up to him but couldn't see it. How frustrating. The bull jumped up and instantly was out of sight in the thick brush. Lovemore radioed it was down again about a hundred yards further. I removed the scope and set it on a flowering aloe next to the road. Lovemore guided us to the bull and this time I was in front. We were less than fifteen yards from it in dense acacia when it bolted again, bellowing at us. The brush was simply too thick to make it out. No shot. The bull didn't stop this time. It ran straight up the near vertical hill we had just descended. I could only make out movement in the brush as the bull ran over the skyline at the top. Then it was gone and the sun was setting. We'd have to come back and pick up the trail in the morning.

Back at the truck Lovemore told Bertus the bull was hit in the left front leg. How could that be? I didn't have a shot at the left side of the bull and we couldn't even see its legs. Didn't make sense. How could the bullet go that far awry? When I went back to pick up my scope, I returned to the spot where I took the shot. Rather than the stick in front of the bull's shoulder, it is more likely the deflection occurred closer to me. The debris covering the bull's lower half was not on his end: it was on my end at the edge of the bank I was shooting over. In the scope it looked like I had clearance. And I would have if the obstructions covering the bull's legs had been next to it. Because the brush was directly in front of me, I was undoubtedly shooting through it instead of over it. People make this mistake all the time shooting at targets while using their truck hoods as rests. Say hello to the body shop!

That night at the lodge I was very down in the mouth. Bertus and the lodge owner's wife encouraged me to drown my sorrows but I knew getting drunk would only make me feel worse: I stuck to cocktails of fresh orange juice and tonic water. In fifty-eight years of hunting I had only lost one animal, a raghorn bull elk lightly wounded in its right front leg back in 1975. A few days later two other hunters on the same mountain killed it. Now it looked like my near perfect streak might

be over. What upset me more was knowing a magnificent animal was somewhere out there in the night suffering terribly. Bertus was encouraging and expressed confidence we would finish the job tomorrow. He knew the land and he knew kudu. There was some comfort in that anyway.

The next morning the three of us were ready to leave well before dawn. The weather looked foreboding. A cold sky was overcast and light rain fell during the night. Things looked worse in the cloud shrouded mountains. Experiencing rain in South Africa was something new for me: my previous two safaris took place during a seven year drought. These conditions were definitely not favourable for tracking a wounded animal. At least I was prepared for the elements. Under my camo Frogg Toggs rain coat I wore a fleece jacket and vest. The "waterproof" hiking boots I brought with me actually were waterproof. Bertus was also considering a change of equipment: "Do you mind if I bring a rifle?" I replied that I would mind very much if he *didn't* bring a rifle. It made no difference to me who put an end to that poor animal's misery. The sooner the better. Bertus decided to take Butch, the lodge's English bull terrier, with us. Blood tracking conditions were certainly less than ideal but perhaps the little dog could give us an edge.

In the hills we picked up the trail where the bull crossed the road at the top of the ridge. At first there was no trouble following the blood in spite of the light drizzle. Butch was on the track intermittently but Lovemore seemed to follow it more consistently. Then the blood started to peter out. Not a good sign. About forty minutes in Lovemore thought he saw the bull briefly as it ran from a thick patch of acacia. He found fresh blood in the thicket where the bull had apparently spent the night. Bertus split off below us to locate better viewing from another ridge. I stayed with Lovemore, shadowing him on the uphill side. I knew I needed to avoid disturbing the trail behind him in case he had to backtrack and pick it up again. Been there, done that hundreds of times tracking moose and elk in snow. It was a slow process. Eventually the bleeding stopped altogether. It helped that the bull was on three legs and stirring up the ground more than normal. Somehow Lovemore stuck with the tracks until the bull jumped a low sheep fence. Then there was fresh blood to work with again. Not fifty yards from the fence we heard Bertus shoot ahead of us. He took a four hundred yard shot at the bull running over a ridge and missed. He confirmed its left front leg was spaghetti. Bertus and Lovemore went running in pursuit but I couldn't keep up. No problem. Go for it. I stayed high on the hill and thought I was moving parallel to them. They were talking on the radios about "white houses." I could see some structures around the corner ahead of me and continued in that direction. The buildings were on the other side of the boundary fence so I worked my way along the top of a steep adjacent canyon thinking Bertus and Lovemore must be somewhere in the area. It was great country for game. I kicked up a couple of duiker and saw tracks from lots of kudu, a small herd of gemsbuck, four or five wildebeest, and a lone eland. At one point the face of a white domestic cow was peering at me through the heavy brush in the canyon bottom. Then it vanished. Strange. Bertus never told me cattle were on the property. Turns out he and Lovemore were miles away in the vicinity of the property owner's ranch complex. After about an hour waiting and watching I heard our diesel truck on the top of my ridge and made my way up to meet them.

Now it was raining hard and Butch was having no luck staying on the kudu's trail in the brisk wind. Bertus thought the bull might be headed back over the top to where I'd shot it. After lunch he dropped me off in a saddle. Then he took Lovemore back to the top of the ridge the bull crossed the previous night with instructions to work his way towards me through the brush on my side of the hill. Bertus drove the truck down the mountain below us to a spot where he would have a clear view in any direction. I found a place out of the wind in a clump of wild plumb bushes and waited. It

wasn't much fun. In spite of my three layers I was quite chilled. Before long I could see Lovemore coming a half mile away. Then things started happening. First, a herd of impala came flying by me. I heard them coming just before I saw them. That gave me the idea to pull off my hood and turn up my hearing aids. The wind corrupted sounds a bit but the magnification proved to be advantageous. Before long I could hear something coming in the brush way off to my right. Then two cow kudu ran by below me very close, maybe thirty yards. Less than ten minutes later a big kudu came crashing through the broken rocks and acacia between me and the top of the ridge. All I could see was legs and parts of its chest. Given the size and colour I'm sure it was a bull but also fairly certain it was not my bull. It was running too smoothly. When Lovemore finally showed up, I took him to the spot and he found the trail. He was also convinced it was not my bull.

We returned to the last place Bertus and Lovemore saw the bull's tracks cross the road. By now it was nearly dark. The bull was bleeding again and they hoped Butch could stay on the track. We spread out following him downhill. I didn't have a flashlight and quickly figured it unwise for a worn out old man to be stumbling around in rocky terrain after dark. I returned to the vehicle where I could glass the open spots and road below us in case the bull doubled back. Darkness set in and the rest of the crew still had not returned. I was concerned they were looking for me. My cell phone could get out but I didn't have Bertus's number. The lodge's number was for the owner and it put me to his voicemail (he was hunting in Zimbabwe). So I called my daughter in Canada and interrupted her bachelorette party. She contacted the lodge owner's wife via Facebook who got in touch with Bertus ... about the time he showed up at the truck. Seems no one was ever concerned about me being lost. "We knew you can handle yourself alone in the bush."

That night at the lodge I was even more down in the dumps. My safari was almost over and Bertus had another client arriving the day after I was scheduled to leave. He wouldn't be able to spend any more time looking for it once I was gone. We must find the bull tomorrow or it will go to waste. Of even more concern to me was it would die a lingering death. Bertus was upbeat as always and confident we'd get the bull. He planned to pull out all the stops and round up as much extra help as possible. I was the only client at the lodge so the staff in the skinning shed were free to assist. Brian and Stefan were both gone which meant their trackers were also available. I mentioned the curious sighting of a white beef cow. "If we get your kudu bull tomorrow, you can hunt that Charolais cow. She escaped from the neighbour's place five years ago with a couple of calico coloured ones. I want them out of there but it won't be easy. They are wild as any kudu." "Hmmm. Bertus, how does Safari Club score polled cattle?" That made everyone smile ... a little.

The next morning we were back in the hills with our army just before daybreak. The plan today was to drop the five trackers off at the bottom of the big canyon where I saw the white cow. Bertus and Lovemore had scoured the area west of it the previous day while I was watching from the top. The trackers would push through the bottom of the canyon after Bertus had driven around to watch the other end. He felt certain the bull was in there and would try to go over the top to the area where we first saw him. We needed a gun at both ends so I went with the trackers. The ground in the canyon bottom was pulverized with animal tracks, mostly cow kudu (they are much smaller than bulls). I found one bull track but was fairly certain it wasn't made by mine. It wasn't tearing up the ground like a three-legged animal should. We walked up a road for about a half mile and then left it to do our push on the far end of the canyon. The trackers spread out four abreast and I followed behind with Stefan's Trevor. I needed his eyes. It was slow going with lots of thick thorny acacia. The trackers kept in touch with each other using baboon whoops (excellent imitations!). I think

everyone except me had radios but all went silent once the push started. We were only into the drive maybe forty minutes when Trevor's radio crackled. It was Lovemore. "Boss [or Bertus? - I could never tell which it was with Lovemore's accent]! Kudu coming to you." Perhaps a minute of radio silence and then one shot. I turned to Trevor: "That didn't sound like it hit." He said he was sure it was a hit. Then Lovemore came back on the air and confirmed my kudu was down. What a relief! I generally don't get too "happy" when an animal is killed. Just doesn't seem respectful. But this time I was downright elated ... for the bull, not for me. Its terrible ordeal of pain, suffering, and terror was over.

By the time I made it to the kudu, the crew already had it posed and ready for pictures. No opportunity for an "as it lays" photo, unfortunately. This bull was old and not in good condition.



Its withers were sunken and the hide was in bad shape. There was a large open sore about half way down the back and patches of fur were missing from its neck and shoulder. This would be a euro trophy and nothing more. Its horns were not as long as we expected but very nicely shaped: wide, turned out at the tops, and fine ivory tips on both sides. Last year's bull may be a bit longer but that rack was badly beat up and only the left horn tip was turned out with ivory. This bull won't

make the record books (not that getting in the books is at all important) but it's still a beautiful trophy and an old animal that was definitely a good one to harvest. Also a good one for *me* to harvest. I already have two capes waiting to be mounted and certainly no room in my little house for three shoulder mount kudu bulls. A euro skull was all I wanted (and maybe the back skin if it had been salvageable). Another client would almost certainly expect to have a shoulder or pedestal mount done but this bull was no good for that unless the lodge could find a cape from someone else's animal.

A field autopsy revealed my deflected shot had grazed the bull's neck (another reason the cape was ruined) and entered the offside shoulder where it deflected again and destroyed the socket. If the bullet had entered an inch to the left the bull would have bled to death almost instantly. If it had been an inch to the right, it would have missed altogether. Our trackers bundled the kudu up in a "sail" and carried it about a mile through thick brush to the road. They loaded it in the other lodge truck and we followed them out to the municipal road to unlock the gate. Now what should we do for the rest of the day? "Bertus, what's your property on the other side of this road like? We've never been over there. Why not go sightseeing?" It had been more than a month since Bertus had visited that section. He needed to find a good duiker antelope for his next client and some good ones were usually running around in those hills. We drove back down the municipal road and entered a gate near the water hole where a few days earlier I saw my first nyala. The track we were on skirted the base of a small mountain range. A brushy dry creek bed coursed through the wide valley below us with the municipal road barely visible beyond it. Almost immediately we were into game. Lovemore spotted the Kalahari springbuck ram Bertus had planted on that side a few days before. It was doing fine but still alone. Then we started seeing kudu. Lots of them! They seemed to be

around every corner, mostly cows and young bulls. At one point Bertus spotted seven bulls together cruising the brush next to the dry creek. Two of them were definitely shooters and a couple others would be ready in a year. Later I missed an opportunity to take a large male baboon. I couldn't pick it out in time. Shooting a baboon never turned my crank much ... until I saw the damage they can do to livestock and structures. They are *very* destructive! Generally, baboons are shot on sight (which is why they generally make themselves invisible). During our scenery tour we also found one large herd of springbuck and two herds of impala in the valley. Bertus glassed them and saw several candidates for culling we could check out later when returning to the gate.

The springbuck herd was, as usual, sticking to the open country. Bertus found a rough track around the back side of the brushy creek bottom that put us fairly close to the herd without being

seen. We parked and started a long stalk. The dry creek bottom provided good cover but it was a tangle of nasty acacia. I saw evidence many different animals had used that draw for shelter over the years: lots of tracks, poop, and bones. The final stalk was tricky. With so many sharp eyes and noses on the lookout we had to be very careful. After a half hour of sneaking around and through thorny bushes Bertus finally had the sticks up. It wasn't a difficult shot: two hundred yards and broadside. I had plenty of time to get situated and put a 165 gr Hornady Interlock bullet in the ram's boiler room. He ran maybe thirty yards before folding up. Looked like a heart shot. Bertus and I stayed put while Lovemore went back for the



truck and Butch. Bertus wanted to give the little dog a refresher course in undisturbed blood tracking. Butch found the blood and was onto the animal in the blink of an eye. Then Bertus used the springbuck's horns to jab at Butch and get him worked up. When the lesson was finished, Lovemore threw the little ram over his shoulder and carried it to the truck to dress it out. This was a very old springbuck. At one time it was a respectable trophy but now its horns were badly worn down from fighting: another over-the-hill animal that needed to be removed. We loaded up and went looking for the impala herds.

One herd had disappeared but Lovemore was able to make out a couple of animals in the larger herd as they moved through the thick cover in the washout. It was now the heat of the day and the impala were headed for shade. Bertus estimated fifty impala were in this bunch and they would be strung out on the move in the thick stuff. This had the potential to be a fun stalk: playing cat and mouse with a large herd of always spooky impala in thick brush. Very much like hunting Cape buffalo ... without the added excitement of possibly getting stomped into a steaming heap of hamburger ... or the non-excitement of writing a cheque for +\$10K once the animal is on the ground. During our first drive through Bertus saw two rams in this herd that definitely were management material and one really nice one that definitely was not. He wanted to save that ram for a new client coming in a few weeks. Very quickly this was sizing up to be a mission impossible worthy of Ethan Hunt. There were just too many impala and too few windows to shoot through. To move quietly we stayed as long as possible on an old track that ran along the opposite edge of the creek bed cover. Before diving into the acacia I removed the Springfield's bipod with attached sling and dropped it

in the road. I would have no need for either in this setting.

Cat and mouse describes it perfectly. Most of the time we shadowed the impala to our left as they moved along the upper bank of the wash. At different times we could see something that briefly presented a shot but never the right animal. Finally, ahead of us a bend in the creek bank brought some of the herd around to our front and into an opening about fifty yards wide. There on top in the middle standing frozen like the Hartford Insurance elk was the magnificent herd boss. He was a beauty with much longer horns than either of the rams hanging on my living room wall. But he was a no-shooter. Sigh! Several impala were milling about below him while others were still to our left wandering in and out of sight. We were nearly surrounded by impala and none more than sixty yards away! Finally Bertus slowly put up the sticks. Both management rams had just moved into sight in front. One youngster with a distinctive bent horn was more “manageable” than the other. “Take that one if you can but you better hurry. At any moment we could get busted.” The rams were not cooperating. Obstructions seemed to always be in the way, either females or brush (and I didn’t want to make the mistake of shooting through brush again!). Finally, the bent horned ram was clear ... but the damned shooting sticks were not right and I had to pick them up to reposition. Ugh! A female caught sight of the movement and I froze unable to get fully situated. She moved on and I finished sorting out the shooting sticks ... but now the shooter ram was almost facing towards me. I had a doable shot but it would make a mess of the animal. Management culling is for the butcher shop. It’s pointless to wreck any part of a small critter like that. So I waited for the ram to turn. And I waited! The instant he turned right I was ready and dropped him. The place blew up with impala running and leaping everywhere. My ram collapsed so fast I wasn’t sure the shot connected, but Bertus saw him go down. The bullet hit behind the shoulder with minimal damage to meat. I took an “as it lays” photo but it wasn’t very scenic. Like the springbuck, the impala ram was carried whole on Bertus’s shoulders to the truck before being dressed out. That kept the carcass cleaner with less blood and mess on him. On our way back to the lodge Bertus stopped the truck on a hill and unloaded the impala for a better photo with giant aloe and mountains in the background. He also wanted an nice image with Butch in the picture for the lodge’s website.



That was the end of my hunting in Africa. It is worth noting that after reattaching the quick detach rings, my scope held zero well enough to kill two animals with only two shots. The culled impala was less than seventy yards but the springbuck was out there a ways. Both bullets landed on the crosshairs. My return to Canada the next day was long and arduous as usual and *almost* uneventful. There were a few minor problems transporting the rifle. At the Port Elizabeth airport my credit card didn’t work when paying for the extra gun handling fee. My first thought was the credit card company had put a block on my card after I paid the big bill with it at the lodge the night before. I only had forty bucks US in my pocket that I’d need for meals during the return trip if my card was blocked. Bertus came to the rescue. When he produced his credit card, the airline’s machine miraculously decided to accept it. I have since learned this is sometimes a ploy to get passengers to cough up foreign cash for which the clerks never seem to have change (= tipping them

whether you want to or not). My credit card worked fine the rest of the trip home. When I arrived at Toronto's Pearson Airport my rifle was almost lost. Thanks to the AirTag packed in the gun case I was able to find a manager who could actually see a satellite image of where the rifle was located and retrieve it in time for me to get through customs and checked in for my final flight home. Though my daughter could see on her iPad that the gun went to the gate with my departing plane, for some unknown reason it wasn't loaded. My checked bags and the rifle didn't arrive here until two flights after I did. Oh well. If my gun had to be delayed anywhere, Pearson on the way home was the best place for it to happen. However, I did get a bit nervous when at one point the AirTag was showing up at the Toronto Transit bus sheds in front of the airport! Apparently it was just a momentary glitch in the tracking software.

I picked up a few tourist guano items at the Johannesburg Airport for my daughter and her family. Quite a few shops were open this trip with lots of African stuff to choose from. Seems I also picked up something for myself ... that I wished I'd left behind!



As soon as I was back at the house I started feeling "unwell." At first I wrote it off to jet lag. But after two days I was genuinely sick and only became worse as the week progressed. Symptoms were not quite what I'd expect for COVID but I tested myself twice anyway. Both results were negative. A week after being home, I was not eating and looked jaundiced. My daughter's wedding was that weekend and she felt it was time for some medical intervention. When I climbed into the Jimmy to drive to the ER, I bumped the back of my left leg on the car seat. Ouch! What the hell is *that*? I pulled up my pant leg and knew instantly what was wrong with me: African tick bite fever! The bite site was downright scary. An on-call doctor at the clinic was in the process of writing up the wrong

prescription at the exact moment the lodge owner's wife was trying to phone me from South Africa. My daughter had sent Sheryl pictures. She recognized it as ATBF and knew exactly which antibiotics I needed to take for it. Fortunately, the pharmacy had a nurse practitioner on staff who came in from the golf course and changed the prescription. Two days later I was recovered enough to proudly walk my daughter down the aisle.

My trophies won't be here for probably five months. This time I went with another taxidermist located in Port Elizabeth. Karoo Taxidermy in Graff-Reinet made a mess of the skulls in 2019 and ruined all but one of them last year. They also facilitated a \$2K rip-off by the shipping agent. Hopefully things will be handled better this time. I don't see how it could get worse. Before I left home my ten-year-old grandson Parker and I were watching a YouTube video of a young lad the same age hunting with his father in South Africa. Parker has now got it in his head that I should be taking him on safari next year. Of course the lodge is also very keen on the idea (why wouldn't they be?). We'll see. I need to get this trip paid off first.