

Into Africa, 2022

Chapter 2 - Day One: Jani's Property

The objective of the first morning's hunt was black wildebeest ... and anything else the farmer might want harvested. Stefan (PH), Trevor (tracker), and I set out before daybreak in Stefan's four-door Ford safari pickup. Our destination was a farm in the mountains about an hour from the lodge. This was the first time Stefan had hunted the property so we would need to first stop at the farmhouse for directions to what was where. The winding dusty road through the steep brushy hills to the property was rough and very narrow. At one point only a few miles from our destination Trevor thumped on the back of Stefan's seat: "Kudus! Big one!" Stefan stopped. They were on my side but at first I could only see a cow looking at us from the side of the canyon at about two hundred yards. Stefan grabbed his binocs and jumped out. "My God, that one is a MONSTER! Biggest bull I've seen in a long time." But I couldn't see him. Trevor and Stefan glassed them for several minutes, making exclamations in Afrikaans. Finally, the bull moved off and I got a quick look at his horns. Magnificent! Unfortunately, we didn't know whose property we were looking at and didn't have permission to take kudu in any event. The first animal I saw on my trip was the trophy of a lifetime. Surely, this was a good omen!

Driving on we finally arrived at Jani's farmhouse tucked in the hills against a picturesque creek. A farmhand (they call them "staff") was waiting at the gate with instructions. It is usually customary for someone from the farm to ride along to ensure that the right animals are harvested and anything wounded is paid for. And of course they will know the lay of the land and where the desired game have been hanging out. Often it is the property owner simply wanting to enjoy some company in this vast empty land. But this time we were allowed to go on unescorted. The farmhand sent us up a another winding road into more open high country, high enough to still have a bit of snow on the peaks. Suddenly, Stefan spotted a lone black wildebeest standing on an opposite hillside. He stopped and glassed it. "Young bull. You don't want that one. Wait ... there's another one way up on top. We better go have a better look at him." A short distance down the road there was a gate. Stefan drove through and parked in the brush near a dry creek bed. We could look back down the road behind us and see the young bull watching while we carefully worked our way up the creek bottom for a look at the other one. It wasn't easy going. Thorny acacia was thick in that draw and the creek bed was broken terrain with polished frost covered bedrock slabs smooth as glass. Then I heard something very close that sounded like a loud fart. "Wildebeest bull snorting. He must have seen us. Be stealthy or we'll be busted!" We never did see that one but soon got a look at the second one up higher. "He's an old bull with nice bosses but his horns are worn off short. We know where he is. Let's look for the other one that snorted at us." We continued to climb up the creek bottom. Finally Stefan picked out another bull up even higher on the mountain. While he was glassing that one I asked why these bulls weren't herded up. He explained that the cows stay in a herd and drift around to visit bulls who each have a designated territory they defend. This third bull was mature and had long horns but not old enough to have much for bosses. "So, what do you want, long horns or big bosses?" With a smile I replied "Both." Stephan smiled back and shrugged his shoulders. "Okay Stefan, which bull do you think is best?" He said the long horned one might look better on the wall and it would certainly be a more



challenging stalk. I'll always choose the better stalk! Due to the morning breeze flowing uphill, we would have to make a wide circle around to the backside of the hill and then come over the top to get close enough for a shot. It took about an hour before we were in position to creep over the crest. As always when close to animals, I was only a foot or so behind my PH. Best to have only one visible moving profile and only one face shining in the sun. A few yards over the top and he dropped



to his knees. I stayed down as he crept forward and slowly raised up with binocs to his eyes. Stefan was looking downhill right in front of us. He crouched down again, carefully set up the sticks, took my rifle and set it on them (everyone at the lodge uses quad sticks that hold the gun front and back), then he motioned me forward. "There's a bull laying down only a few yards away. That's the one you want. He'll stand up as soon as he sees you. Be ready to shoot fast and aim for the shoulder." I was barely on my gun when the bull stood up. As directed, I immediately shot him in the shoulder. He hunched up and ran downhill. I could tell it was a heart shot and no need for a follow up. Stefan saw him drop after thirty yards. He was beaming: "Well, you wanted long horns and big bosses and that's what you got!" Turns out it wasn't the long horned bull we had been stalking. This one was bedded on the back end of a small bench near the top of the ridge and not visible from below. He had excellent high thick bosses with unique

heavy ridges. Though there was evidence this bull was a fighter, his horns were still long enough to extend above the bosses when he was looking ahead. A very fine specimen.

Now the work begins. The truck was nearly two miles below us across very rough terrain. It would require more hands to get this big bull out of there. Trevor was still down at the truck spotting for us as we made the stalk. Stefan asked if I was okay staying with the carcass while he and Trevor went back to the farm for more help and equipment. Affirmative. "Are you sure you'll be okay?" I scoffed: "Stefan, I have hunted alone for more than a half century and in a lot wilder places than this. Don't worry." Forty minutes later I saw the truck go through the gate and down the road. By then the sun was warming things up quickly. After a while I decided to take a walk and see more of the country. To keep the birds off while I was gone, I unfolded the shooting sticks, propped them over the bull, and dressed them with my jacket. Then I headed up the mountain. At the very top a rocky outcrop ran across the crest. I couldn't see it from below but there was a boundary fence just beyond it. That was the end of my hike. A clump of acacia brush provided some shade among the rocks so I sat down thinking this would be an ideal place for my first encounter with a cape cobra. Fortunately, the snakes didn't cooperate that day. It's a good thing I put up a scarecrow because several crows were already worrying the carcass. The crows there have quite a bit of white plumage. As I was watching them I noticed movement seventy yards below. A lone blesbuck was walking across the hill. They are a shootable species on this property and I was fairly certain it was a ram but my PH was not there to give the okay. I am capable of judging an exceptional trophy and this was not one. Had he been a gnarly old heavy horned bugger, I probably would have shot him even without Stefan's approval. Instead I just watched. Soon he would catch scent of the dead wildebeest. Then what would happen? That ram about jumped out of his skin when he finally smelled blood. I'm sure by then he could also see the scarecrow. It was fun watching him walk back and forth tipping his head: "What the hell is that?" Finally he trotted off to the adjacent hill and stood

in a scree pile.

It took nearly two hours before the crew returned. I pointed out the blesbuck ram and Stefan confirmed it was not a shooter. Horns were plenty long but too skinny. “We’ll get you a better one.” The staff brought a “sail” which is a piece of heavy truck tarp about six by ten feet with handles on the sides. They also had two long poles. The plan was to put the wildebeest inside the sail, slip the poles through the handles, and carry the bundle on their shoulders. At first two guys tried to carry it but the load was too heavy. So with Stefan and Trevor on one end and two staff on the other end they proceeded to go down the mountain. They didn’t go far before Stefan removed his hoody and wadded it up under the shoulder of his shirt for padding. Trevor did the same. I had two extra layers on - a polar fleece jacket and vest - and gave those to the other staff guys so they could pad their shoulders. I carried my gun and the shooting sticks. After another hundred yards of stumbling over grass tussocks and sharp rocks, everyone stopped for a break. They had been carrying the bull headfirst downhill and I suggested switching the poles so the load would be sideways. That way the guys in back could see where their feet were going. It worked a lot better! The crew managed to carry that big critter all the way down the rugged mountain without even a sprained ankle. That seemed extraordinary to me but Stefan said they do it all the time and no one ever gets hurt.

We took the bull back to the slaughter shed at the farm complex and left it with the other staff guys to skin and hang in the cooler (Jani had a wedding coming up and needed the meat). Trevor wanted the liver and stomach paunch (considered a delicacy among the locals) so we dropped him off to hike up the mountain to the gut pile. Then Stefan and I went looking for some blesbuck to shoot for Jani’s upcoming wedding feast. We encountered farm staff moving herds of goats through the area and they gave us directions to animals they had seen. There was one white blesbuck ram Jani wanted shot that was very old and not doing well. Stefan spotted a small group of a dozen blesbuck uphill several hundred yards but they were on the move and quickly over the top. He parked the truck and we proceeded on foot around the mountain to where a bigger herd had been seen earlier by the goatherds. We found them but they were not alone. A herd of black wildebeest cows was with them, probably close to a hundred animals altogether. Too many eyes in country that is too open! We stayed hidden behind some brush and waited for the wary snorting wildebeest to settle down. Meanwhile the blesbuck herd split in two with some following the nervous wildebeest and some lingering behind. There were only a couple of good rams in the whole bunch. A few white blesbuck were in this herd but none were rams. The uphill half of the blesbuck herd gradually moved past us to catch up to the group with the wildebeest, bringing one of the shooter rams within range at about two hundred yards. They were spread out and I got a good clear shot at him walking. Down he went. As we approached his head came up. Stefan said we should “just give him time.” Eventually his head stayed down and we started toward him again. The ram appeared to be dead but when we were within twenty yards he suddenly got to his feet and started to stagger away. “Wait for him to stop.” He didn’t stop. When I finally had something else to shoot at besides his arse, I put a bullet into his ribs quartering away. That knocked him off his feet and he never got up. I felt badly the suffering went on so long. No need for it to be longer. I had a



helluva time getting on that moving ram with my gun straddled front and back in quad sticks. Not a fan of those. More on that later. The first shot hit a bit high in the Twilight Zone between the shoulder and spine. The Barnes bullet pretty much sailed through him. I think it clipped enough lung to probably kill him eventually. Second shot went through the ribs into the boiler room. That bullet didn't exit. I have it in my toiletry bag. He's a nice ram but not a show stopper. He will look good in the living room picture window well facing the skull of my first trip's blesbuck. We picked up Trevor on the way back to the farm. He said the big white ram was with the first bunch we'd seen run off over the hill. He didn't know we were looking for it.

We met Jani back at the skinning shed and he invited us over to the farmhouse. He insisted we have a beer and though at first I vigorously declined due to jet lag, eventually I caved in for fear of offending our host. Maybe that was a mistake! A South African can of beer is about twice the size of our stuff ... with about three times the kick! Perhaps due to the beer Jani and I really seemed to hit it off. Quite the character. While Stefan was finishing up the paperwork, he chatted with Jani in Afrikaans. I caught the word "kudu" and then Stefan started to draw a picture, apparently of road and creek. Jani said something and Stefan's jaw dropped. The big kudu bull we saw that morning was on Jani's property and we could have shot it. Nuts! Too late now. They would be long gone.

The birds at Jani's farm were the entertainment. His African grey parrot had the run of the house. That thing was a character. He LOVED Jani. It sat on his shoulder and groomed him most of the time. It would perform all kinds of tricks. And then there was the chickens. Jani's wife left the double-Dutch back door to the kitchen wide open while she made us a snack. I could see a bunch of white leghorn chickens parading back and forth outside in the doorway. Why don't those chickens just walk into the house? Well, soon a young one who didn't know better crossed the threshold. Immediately Jani's little blood tracking dog was right over there and put that bird in order. Out you go! When I finally drained my beer, Jani reached behind, opened a small barrel shaped cabinet, and pulled out "the good stuff." He makes his own hooch and quite proud of it. Though he insisted I sample it, I politely had to decline (repeatedly). I was barely conscious after finishing the beer. Even a thimble of that white lightning would have put me face down in my drool with a soggy bottom. When Jani got ready to light his pipe with that volatile bottle of booze on the table, I decided maybe it was time to make a run for it ... or find a fire extinguisher. He told me to come back and shoot the big white ram: "It'll be on the house." That was definitely in my plan but unfortunately some problems at the end of the safari made it impossible to return. I would like to have sampled his moonshine when I was physically more capable of handling a punch in the brain. Before we left, Jani gave us three frozen chickens to take back to the lodge. My gawd! Just the three of them barely fit in Stefan's cooler. One was a real whopper. Big enough to ravish an ostrich flat-footed. I would love to see those folks again. Someday I hope.



Tomorrow I would be getting a new PH (Stefan's grandmother was dying) and heading four hours north for a couple of days to hunt Barbary sheep and red lechwe.