

Into Africa, 2022

Chapter 3 - Day Two: The Great Karoo

Returning to the lodge from Jani's farm, I was surprised to find my replacement PH already waiting. Bertus had previously committed to inseminating several hundred sheep for a farmer during the first two days of my safari but the sponges fell out of most of the ewes (whatever that means) and he finished early. Stefan could now leave and attend his family emergency. Both young men and my previous PH Glen are about the same age and good friends. The plan for the following morning was to drive four hours north into the Great Karoo where Bertus and I would stay for a couple of days at another farm while hunting Barbary sheep and red lechwe, the only two animals that were specifically on my list. The Great Karoo is a large ill-defined semi-arid zone in the centre of South Africa. My lodge was on the southern edge of this region. The Karoo is mostly flat and dry but, like North America's Great Plains, it is also broken by rivers, hills, and mountains. I saw very little cultivated agriculture in the Karoo. Sheep farming (not ranching) dominates with the occasional cattle operation. Both wool and meat sheep were on the range, though the majority appeared to be Merino. Cattle were mostly mixed breed. The only purebred cows I observed were white Charlais. Angus are noticeably absent. Karoo summers are too hot for black cows. And of course, there were many game farming/safari operations along our route. It is one of the more productive uses for the sparse land of the Karoo. I suppose most folks from the American West would consider the Karoo a "wasteland." It is not. Quite the opposite in my opinion. The Karoo accommodates humanity without letting us overwhelm it. There are small towns but they are spread thin and the land between them has changed little over the last two hundred years. Indeed, even within many of those little towns little seems to have physically changed in a hundred years. Outside the towns it's common to look to the horizon in every direction and see nothing, not even a fence (except along the highway). Personally, I consider most of the American West a wasteland: good land clobbered up with highways, malls, urban sprawl, billionaire McMansions, ski resorts, golf courses, etc. Easy access to a near total lack of humanity is what brings me back to Africa and the Karoo. Alaska is the same ... except up there the sun doesn't shine as much or as long. It's no mystery why the Karoo has so much game: it doesn't have too much humanity. Yet.

We arrived at our B&B game farm shortly before noon. The farmer made arrangements for us to hunt Barbary sheep and lechwe at a couple of properties about an hour's drive away. It was too late to get started on the designated objectives so my PH went to work lining me up with a "something that gets in the way" hunt to keep us busy the rest of the day. The farmer had connections for a property with exceptional springbuck rams and after a conference call to my lodge owner, they put together a deal that was supposed to be hard to turn down. Springbuck are numerous in South Africa (they are the national animal) and trophy fees for them are typically about the cheapest. The "deal," though definitely affordable, was almost twice the usual price tag. However, this part of the Karoo was known for producing whoppers. I shot a very good Kalahari springbuck during my first safari and springbuck euro skulls do show nicely in pairs. They are small enough to display unobtrusively on both sides of a painting or mirror. So I agreed to go have a look, mostly to kill some time.

Springbuck, like pronghorns, can be hunted just about any time during daylight. We arrived at the hunting property very early in the afternoon on a cool clear day. I don't remember much about this hunt or the property. Getting old I guess. As I recall we chased around several skittish small herds

with one or two shooter rams in them before finding a couple of big-horned outcasts trailing a small group with a more virile younger herdmaster keeping them at bay. The “females”^{*} were starting to drop their “babies” at this time and a few of the little stinkers were running with the herds. Looking at the two old boys through my binoculars, I could tell even at several hundred yards these were very impressive rams. Bertus seemed especially keen on me shooting one of them. Well okay, a bit pricey but I guess I can afford it. If I remember correctly, the hunt involved a short stalk through a wide draw filled with brush before we were in range to shoot. Two hundred yards I think. The two rams were now alone and well behind the herd but moving with them. Bertus put me on his sticks, also the quad type. I had trouble keeping the moving ram in the crosshairs. It was chilly and I remember my legs were quite shaky, no doubt due to poor circulation from varicose veins and sitting on my butt almost the entire time the previous four days. Also, quad sticks do NOT work well with targets that are moving, even if just slowly. Bertus told me which ram to shoot and I shot him ... high in the front leg! Crap! That bullet should have hit him in the shoulder. Both rams took off running for thick cover and we ran to the vehicle to get in front of them. One ram came up out of a shallow draw and looked back before taking off again. His partner must still be in there. The B&B farmer handed me his fancy 6.5 PRC and we drove around to the head of the draw. The wounded ram was standing about a hundred yards away looking at us and I put him down with a shot in the chest. I wasn't pleased with my shooting but very pleased with the trophy. A massive springbuck! The ram's right horn measured 16" long. By comparison a very large Cape springbuck might have thirteen inch horns.



Back at the farm, the owner invited us to check out his shooting range. And some range it was! Besides two fancy shooting benches, the “clubhouse” had a beer fridge, loading bench with all the frills, and ... are you ready for this ... a large TV monitor with six split screens for each of the remote cameras at various targets ranging from 100 to 1,000 yards. I ran a few rounds through my Springfield at the hundred yard target and made some adjustments. I seem to recall it was shooting dead center and needed to be pulled up. Short on ammo, I didn't want to waste any more than necessary (especially since it was expensive stuff provided by the lodge) so the Springfield was put away quickly. Then the farmer let us play with his guns. Besides his 6.5 PRC, he also had a 300 PRC. I shot one round through the latter at the 1,000 yard target and placed the bullet about two inches right of the bull. Wow! The scope on that gun was something else. Pushing a little button at the top of the eyepiece made a 1,000 yard horizontal red line appear on the vertical crosshair. Magnification must have been at least 20x. It was an impressive piece of equipment but definitely not something for spot and stalk hunting. Very heavy! The farmer does a lot of culling and both guns would be excellent for that work.

^{*}To my PH, males of hunting species are bulls or rams. However, females and young of ram species were “females” or “babies.” I suspect this may be because he is so heavily involved in the sheep business and needs to avoid confusion in terminology in his everyday non-hunting conversations.

That night the farmer “treated” me to barbequed lambs tails. Though sheep meat wasn’t much of a treat for my PH (he runs 300 head on his property and eats the stuff on average four days a week), I hadn’t eaten lamb or mutton since my early 1970s army days. I found the meat delicious but my guts formed a different opinion. It didn’t make me sick in any respect but the next day my stomach growled so loudly I had to turn down my hearing aids. I made sure toilet paper was in my pack before we left the vehicle!

The goal that second morning in the Karoo was to find some Barbary sheep. Our host drove us the

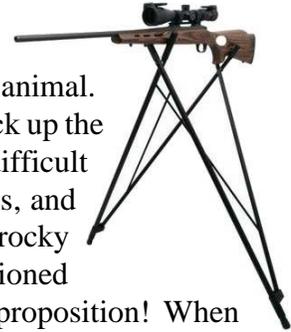


better part of an hour to yet another property in the dry hills. We arrived at sunup and shortly after going through the gate Bertus spotted a ram way off on the side of the mountain ahead of us. “He’s maybe a shooter but let’s not take the first thing we see.” I agreed. We drove up a steep rocky track to the top of a saddle between the mountains for a look around. In the valley immediately below

us stood a fine lone roan bull. “Something is wrong with that guy.” He was in terrible shape, didn’t want to leave, and was kicking at his ribs. Our host made a call to let the property owner know. Roan is a very expensive animal to lose! Ahead of the roan a wide brushy river bottom led to a large reservoir off to the south. On the edge of the brush we glimpsed two fine sable bulls before they made a quick exit into cover. According to reports from the landowner, a group of seven bachelor Barbary rams were hanging out in the river bottom. Finding them was our objective but it wouldn’t be easy. There was lots of country and cover for them to hide in and, as it turns out, lots of other animals to tip them off to anyone approaching. Three trackers were with us and our host spread them out to drive from the reservoir while I waited in ambush along the river at the other end. The trackers pushed up the rams a couple of times but only glimpsed them before they disappeared. We then picked a high spot and watched for the rams to expose themselves as the trackers worked their way back to the reservoir end. Up high we could see all kinds of animals moving below: red hartbeest, impala, eland, a herd of mountain zebra (a rare sight), another roan bull, and one fallow deer (antlerless by this time). But no Barbary sheep. We then drove the bottom area in the truck while the trackers pushed back through it again. At the reservoir a group of “dagga boy” Cape buffalo bachelor bulls feeding in the open became agitated at our presence and closed the distance uncomfortably. Most of the bulls were soft boss but two were very fine trophy animals. Beyond them, lechwe were feeding in the low water flats. Two were rams that looked fine to me but both Bertus and our host said they weren’t ready yet. A very large flock of francolin grouse flew from the trees next to the track while we watched the buffalo.

Back at the base of the mountains we started scanning for Barbary herds higher up. It didn’t take long to find them. Though their colour blends in perfectly, the size of the herds often gives them away. Sometimes upwards of a hundred sheep will be hanging out together. These would be breeding herds with one or maybe two rams. Hunting up there would be complicated. Very little cover was on those hills, the unobstructed wind blows constantly, and more than a hundred eyes

watch for danger. The biggest challenge would be getting a shot at a ram without hitting another animal. Barbary sheep pack together like sardines in a can, especially when alarmed or on the move. And unlike most other species, the rams don't position themselves at the head of the herd or at the rear. They stay right in the middle! My memory of stalking this first herd is a little fuzzy. I do remember that it ended with me being on the sticks a very long time before a clear shot presented itself. Again my legs seemed unsteady for some reason. I had attached a 9-13" bipod to the Springfield but it wouldn't extend above the brush. I would have to shoot off Bertus's quad sticks but the sheep were moving slowly and following them with those sticks was awkward to say the least. This ram would only give me a momentary window of opportunity for a clear shot. Meanwhile I had to keep moving the sticks to stay on him without any of the sheep seeing movement. With traditional African tripod style shooting sticks, the shooter readjusts *his* position to follow a moving animal. Because quad sticks hold both ends of the rifle, the shooter must literally pick up the sticks and reposition *them* to follow a moving animal. It doesn't sound that difficult and for an experienced shooter on flat ground devoid of rocks, holes, grass, and brush, it's doable. But for an unfamiliar hunter on the side of a steep rocky mountain with plenty of brush to get tangled up in, getting quad sticks repositioned while keeping the gun on both the sticks and the animal can be a very tricky proposition! When the brief window to shoot finally presented itself, I was struggling to get one leg of the sticks free from a bush. The bullet hit the side of the hill just above the ram's back and the herd took off over the mountain. Crap. We met the B&B farmer for lunch and developed a plan for the rest of the afternoon.



After lunch Bertus and I went back to looking for sheep in the mountains. Our host and the trackers returned to the river valley to see if they could push the bachelor rams up to us. It didn't take long before Bertus spotted more sheep on the face of a nearby canyon. This was a very large herd, probably close to a hundred animals. It took a long time glassing them before Bertus could be sure there was a ram worth shooting. Two adult rams were packed into the center, as usual, and one was definitely a shooter. The rest were either ewes, lambs, or very young rams. We tried stalking them across the mountain but an old ewe on the top fringe of the herd busted us and led them up over the top. It was like watching a flock of starlings flying in unison. Looking through the binoculars all I could see was a sea of moving heads. We slowly made our way over to the ridge for a look at the other side. No shots were fired so maybe this herd would settle down and give us another opportunity. By now the sun was drifting low in the sky. We better hurry. Peeking over the top Bertus spotted them on an opposing hillside about four hundred yards away and the ewes were watching for us. A breeze was blowing from our backs so there was no hope of continuing in that direction. The only chance we had was to duck back behind the hill, run up around the peak that joined the two ridges, slip down the other side of their ridge, and pop over the hill. If we worked it right, I should get a fairly close shot. After forty-five minutes of huffing and puffing Bertus figured we were about in the right position. Creeping quietly over the top he spotted a few ewes through a small window in the brush just sixty yards below us. He set up the sticks and I got my gun into position. I whispered, "Do you see the ram?" "No. We'll just have to wait and hope he walks through." The sheep shouldn't see us if we stood still and the wind was directly in our face so they couldn't smell us. I was on the sticks for probably a half hour watching sheep walk through right

to left. No need to worry about readjusting the sticks this time. They were set up for the only possible shot. Suddenly Bertus hissed, “There he is. That’s the one!” “You sure?” “Definitely. Wait for a clear shot.” Fortunately, the ram decided to stop and graze at that spot while lambs and ewes continued to walk through. First a ewe was



between us, then one behind the ram, then a lamb was right next to him. Argh! This seemed to go on for an eternity. Hunched over that gun my neck was absolutely killing me. Finally, for a brief moment no animals were behind or in front of the ram. “Shoot him now!” Bang! When the gun went off I momentarily lost balance and struggled to keep on my feet. Looking up I only saw a mass of sheep flying by. “Did I get him?” “He’s done. Good shot.” I thought to myself,

it’s about time! I hit the ram just behind the front shoulder and blew up his heart. What a relief! I was beginning to question myself. During our drive back to the lodge we heard from the landowner when he went out to check on the sick roan. The entire herd of bachelor rams was standing out in the open near the reservoir.

That night over tasty barbecued grumble chops (lamb), we discussed the next day’s plans for red lechwe. Our host had a line on a property with a good population but we would need to leave very early. These animals had been hunted and were wary. They would come out of the heavy cover along the river before light and feed on the lowveld plain for an hour before returning to hide in the thick brush. We would drive across the property along a boundary fence to the edge of the river brush. Then work our way downriver to a series of shallow ravines and hills the lechwe usually used to conceal themselves as they moved to and from their feeding grounds. Early the next morning at the farmhouse driveway we met the property owner’s lovely young daughter with a couple of extra trackers. She would give us directions to where the lechwe were hanging out and then take the trackers to look for a dart gun magazine her dad had lost. That girl was a doll. If I was thirty years younger, I’d be giving her my phone number! Well, okay ... maybe fifty years younger. Sigh! Shortly after dropping them off we spotted several lechwe spread out and feeding in the morning mist. Two of them were bulls and one was “very nice.” Our host drove us out into one of the shallow dips, stopped, and started tearing up sagebrush-like brush and stacking it in a semicircle. My PH also got in the act but I had no idea what they were up to. Then the two coolers were set inside the semicircle and the truck left. Okay, now I knew what this was about. Bertus and I would sit behind the brush pile and wait for the lechwe to return to the river. Not the way I would have done it but over there the hunter follows instructions. Turns out it was *not* my PH’s instructions. He is not much for ambush style hunting either. But it worked. We didn’t have to wait long before a hunched over silhouette came shuffling over the top of the hill. Lechwe have hind legs taller than their front ones which makes them appear to walk head down and neck extended like a hunting dog on the scent of a pheasant. It took Bertus just a few seconds to determine this was the shooter bull. I was up and on the sticks smoothly without making any sudden movements. The bull didn’t see me and kept coming towards us almost head on at a brisk walk. Bertus whispered, “Wait till he turns and you have a shot at the shoulder.” Well okay, but that meant I had to keep readjusting those damn sticks. This time the ground was dead flat and there was no brush to get in the way: it was all pulled

up and stacked in front of us. At seventy yards the bull veered to his right exposing a shoulder. I moved the sticks to an intercept point and waited for him to walk into the crosshairs. Down he went. Though not dead he wasn't getting up again. The bullet hit a little low and took out both front legs, while passing through his brisket. I quickly finished him with a neck shot. This was a very old bull with a fine set of 28" horns. A good one to harvest. The hunt was quick and not terribly exciting but no complaints about the result. Anyway, a sit-on-my-butt hunt was probably for the best. I was still dealing with lingering jet lag and the previous day's episode chasing sheep in high country had put me through the wringer.



The next morning Bertus, our tracker Lovemore, and I made the long trip back to the lodge pulling a trailer containing four very nice springbuck rams Bertus had bought from our host to restock his own properties. When we released the rams late that afternoon I had my first up close look at the distant dark peaks visible from the lodge. Bertus either owned or had leases on large tracts of land that surrounded and extended over much of the mountain range. This *must* be kudu country! "Two weeks ago when we were packing out a client's big bull I saw a fifty incher ... with *your* name on it." Oh no. Now I was hooked. I very badly wanted to hunt that place!

