

MILES & INCHES

By Roger Lewis

The hefty 950 grain Grizzlystik arrow flickered through the hot African air and covered the ranged 27 yards in a heartbeat. The shot and release felt good. The arrow appeared to have buried deep!

The single bevel broad-head hit with authority. The ancient old cow cape buffalo reared up on her hind legs and wheeled around. As the herd thundered away in a cloud of dust, I tried to keep my eye on the cow. At about 100 yards, the herd swung to the left. I noted the cow was off to the side and perhaps lagging behind slightly. I could see a huge round blood stain forming on her scruffy hide as she ran. I turned to Tinus and asked how the shot looked. He said 'good, but perhaps a bit high'. My heart sunk. I had traveled so far, thousands of miles by plane, hundreds of miles by truck and miles by foot in the searing sun. Would it all be for naught?

We were hunting about 5 miles from the Botswana border in Western Limpopo.

However, I'm really getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to the start of the day...

As the sun peeked over the distant hills to the east, turning the sky crimson, Tinus, owner of African Game Hunters, whispered that we first would check a nearby waterhole and look for fresh buffalo tracks. If none were fresh enough for Jotum to track, we would drive the dry dusty roads hoping to find fresh enough spoor to follow



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Above:
The authors modestly accommodating whilst hunting cape buffalo in Western Limpopo near Botswana.

with a reasonable chance of catching the herd bedded up for the day. With luck and the right wind, we would try to sneak in to within bow range.

On route to the waterhole, we saw a herd of about 8 buffalo. Contained within it was a monstrous, past its prime cow. Exactly what I was looking for. One of my lifelong dreams was always to bowhunt a cape buffalo. The steep price tag though for a bull with a massive boss always kept it out of reach for me.

Through luck and happenstance I found myself talking with African Game Hunters, a hunting outfit that hunts all over South Africa and neighboring countries. Tinus Ruthven, owner of AGHs, breathed new life into my dream. He suggested a cow buffalo hunt might fit the bill. He indicated they were big, bold, and could pack an attitude. In short, they could offer everything a bull hunt could, minus the much coveted Boss. He assured me spot and stalk hunting for a mature cow would provide plenty of heart pounding, adrenaline filled moments. The price was attractive and I was immediately sold on the hunt.

That first sighting is etched into my brain forever. It was a definite “pinch me” moment. Things got very real as I watched Tinus thumb those big 500 grain .458 bullets into his rifle. Stepping into the bush, I thought to myself, “ok, lets go bow hunt a cape buffalo”. My heart thumped and my palms were sweaty. I took a deep breath and tried to steady my nerves and thoughts.

Watching the tracker kick dry dirt into the air with his toe to monitor the wind, I gripped the bow and followed

step by step. We flanked the herd being careful to stay downwind. While still on the outside of bow distance, the hulking black animals appeared massive. Standing statue still while watching the buffalo jostle around, I was reluctant to brush a fly off my face. My throat was dry. I had a distinct copper taste in my mouth. I ignored the growing pain in my back that was screaming at me to adjust my legs. I cleared my mind. I tried to think only of the task that was at hand.

A fickle unsteady wind betrayed us and the buffalo turned in unison and charged off in a rising cloud of water starved red dust. I exhaled a deep breath and sucked fresh air into my lungs. I fought the urge to sit down. You only get to stalk a herd of buffalo for the first time once I thought to myself. I purposely decided to take careful note of that exact moment in time and deposit it into my memory bank. Tinus and the tracker spoke a few words. It was decided that we would give them an hour and then take up the track. With luck, they may not have been too spooked and we might be able to catch up with them.

When the 60 minutes ticked off, we began to track the herd. We found ourselves amongst them twice throughout the long hot afternoon. Despite the heat and miles, we dogged them throughout the afternoon. Two things became apparent to me.

Tracking cape buffalo is a lot of walking. Trying to get a bowshot, even while in range, is difficult due to the thick scrubby bush the buffalo live in. Once, at a distance of about 30 yards the herd busted. I can tell you this

for sure, when an animal as big as a buffalo crashes off, there is a brief moment when you are not sure if they are coming or going away from you. It is reassuring when you hear the 2nd or third snap and it confirms they are retreating.

Deciding to give up on the trail we backtracked to the Landcruiser. The heat was building and no water ever tasted as good as the bottles we downed upon reaching the truck. I didn't realize how nervous I was until back at the truck. The rush of tracking cape buffalo was everything and more I hoped it would be.

Day two provided an opportunity that is etched into my normally forgetful memory bank forever. The sun was low in the west. Long shadows were forming. We were thirsty, hungry, and tired but we dutifully pressed on. We had one more play left before darkness fell. We went to a waterhole for the remaining hour of hunting light.

Before long we saw buffalo heading to drink. The wind was decent. They would hit one side of the water while we were on the other side. Crouched down behind a dry riverbed bank I watched the herd approach. With each step clouds of dust would rise from the big black hooves. Before they hit the water, they all stood at attention.

Jamming their big black noses into the air. Big pink tongues licking their noses to help detect danger. The golden sun setting behind them made for an unforgettable sight.

I clipped the release onto the string. I double checked to make sure the arrow was seated on the rest properly.

Odd as it may sound, I was startled when I heard one plow knee deep into the water. It snapped me into reality. The range was 57 yards across the water. Not a distance I was comfortable with. We hunkered down and went into “wait and see what happens mode”.

The buffalo watered. We waited. Everything went into slow motion. Eventually they began to work around the waterhole. Closer with each step and with each step I felt more exposed. For whatever reason, each and every buffalo went on high alert. They bored holes right through the river bank and into my soul. They continued to circle us. At one point, they were 40 yards away and staring right at us. They were clearly nervous and perhaps even slightly agitated. Once every few seconds one would step forward, almost as if it was looking to encourage others to follow. When no others followed...it would step back into the safety of the group.

It was quite likely the most intense hunting situation I have ever been involved in. I was apprehensive. I glanced at Tinus and he motioned to stay still and quiet. I was glad to oblige. After what seemed like an eternity, the buffalo turned and walked off. I'll admit, a part of me was glad they turned and a part of me was disappointed.

Fast forward to day number four. It began like the others. Breakfast at 6 am. Discuss the day's plan. Load the ice box with water, boxed lunches, and copious amounts of ice. This dawn broke chilly and with a blustery wind. We checked the same waterhole as we did on day one but no spoor was fresh enough to take up a track. With the lack

Below:
Being able to drive up to the authors fallen beast allowed the hunters to make the full use of his downed buffalo.



of fresh sign, we decided to save some time and hopped into the back of the Land Cruiser electing to cruise the dry roads hoping to find where a buffalo crossed the road. If fresh enough, we would track them.

After driving many miles, just as I began to think we may not find the herd, the hunting rig slowed to a stop. In a language I could not understand, Tinus and the tracker spoke in a low hushed tone. While unable to understand the individual words and short sentences, I had no doubt, we were about to go tracking. Standing by the hunting rig, kicking dirt into the air it was apparent the wind was swirling. As if on cue, a dirt devil formed blowing a tornado like spiral of dust high into the air. We held tight for about 30 minutes waiting for the wind to settle or at least take a prevailing direction.

Eventually, the wind seemed to back off. With some concern, we tiptoed into the thick acacia brush. With sweat stained shirts and thorns grabbing at our bare legs, we picked our way along the track. Nearing an especially thick patch of brush, offering a bit of shade, we came to a stop. Through years of experience, Tinus glassed this likely resting spot. Sure enough, the herd was bedded. I dared not make any unnecessary movements, so I just scanned the thick thorny brush with my eyes and left my binoculars in my pack. Every once in awhile I could see a big tattered ear flick. We were close but not bow shot close. More wind checking with dust confirmed our worst fears. A fickle wind. But, for the moment, the herd held.

We backed off and mostly because we had no other choice, we decided to try, what we hoped, would be an approach from a quartering wind. We hadn't gone very far when the wind betrayed us and the herd thundered off. Another heart breaking encounter ending in the buffalo's favour. Frustrating for sure, but the excitement was overwhelming. A quick meeting was convened. The wind, coupled with the already nervous buffalo, prompted Tinus to suggest we back off the track. In his estimation, we wouldn't likely get in bow range of the herd on a day like this coupled with a herd already on edge.

He suggested, for the remainder of the day we go back to the hunting rig, grab our lunch and hit the nearest waterhole in the hopes the buffalo would water there before sunset. There were only two waterholes within a few miles, so our odds were 50/50 of seeing them again. I was game for that. With each close but failed stalk, I was getting a bit more jumpy. He indicated that waterhole had a blind on it. We could eat our lunch and get comfortable while concealing our movements. The interior was great to keep us hidden. The benches were comfortable. The interior was hot when the sun reached midday high. We kept hydrated. We kept chatter to a minimum. We idled the afternoon away just enjoying the moment, scenery and other animals that came to quench their thirst.

After 5 hours of sitting, our patience was rewarded with seeing black hulks ghosting in. They came quick, stopping only once to test the wind before continuing. Two hundred yards became one hundred. Tinus motioned for me to get ready. He felt they were comfortable

and committed. Tinus pointed out which one I needed to keep an eye on. I tried my best. At the water's edge, I briefly lost track of the target buffalo. Due to her size, I was able to relocate her. My eyes never lost her again. She was almost perfectly broadside. Tinus ranged her at 27 yards. That was 2 yards farther than I wanted to shoot. I weighed the distance, my excitement level, with all the practice arrows I had shot in preparation for this moment back home. I indicated I would take the shot. Instinctively my bow arm came up. Tinus whispered to wait, 'she was not perfectly broadside'. We wanted a perfect shot. I held the bow up until my arm began to tremble. I had to let down.

I stared at the ground and regrouped my thoughts. I adjusted the death drip, I suddenly realised I had on the bow. I rolled my neck ever so slightly to relieve some tension. It didn't work. I just told myself to remain calm. Do not rush the shot sequence. I have no idea how long the buffalo had been in. Time meant nothing. In fact, the only thing that mattered was that buffalo in front of me and making the shot. Finally, the words I had waited to hear most of my adult life in regards to cape buffalo echoed through my ears and into my brain. "Take her" uttered Tinus.

To pick up from the opening paragraphs. As the dust settled and the African

brush was silent again, we reviewed the video Tinus had taken. The shot was decent albeit slightly higher than perfect. We both saw the growing blood stain on her as she ran. We surmised that the arrow caught the top of both lungs. We knew from visible evidence it wasn't higher than the spine. We deducted from audible evidence it didn't hit the spine. We checked the time and decided we would wait an hour and then call for the truck and trackers. I tried to eat some more lunch to kill some time. I watched the video over and over. The more we watched, the better we felt about the shot. Eventually I heard the truck grinding along the dirt road. We shared the video and story with the tracker. Accompanying the tracker was Tinus's dog Sniper to help assist in the recovery.

With all due caution we started. Despite the hot sun, the drought stricken soil, and the time that had elapsed, even I could spot some dark damp spots that were clearly blood. The tracker would periodically point them out to me. Every once in a while he would stop mid stride, survey the ground and then gesture with his hand as to which way they travelled. Both Tinus and him would nod in agreement every now and then. I took that as a good sign.

Even with my limited tracking skills I could clearly see the buffalo had slowed to a walk. Our steps became more carefully placed. The pace had slowed to a crawl. We would move thorns out of the way so as to avoid having them snag on our clothes. One way or the other, I felt like I was going to be reintroduced to my buffalo friend very shortly.

At about the 125 yard mark I could see Sniper through the thick brush 50 yards out front. He appeared to be

bouncing up and down but staying in one spot. Tinus raised his glasses and I saw a smile form on his face. I knelt down and I could see Sniper tugging on something big and black.

We semi circled to approach from the front. I refrained from celebrating prematurely. Especially noting that Tinus had his big 458 at the ready as we inched forward. We stopped. Tinus told me in a hushed voice he thought it had expired. He said that if it still had any life, Sniper would be barking. He was quick to add though, buffalo have an uncanny knack of coming back from being 'dead'.

We approached with the big gun at the ready. We inched closer and closer until he reached forward with it and was able to touch the buff's eye with the cigar sized

end of the barrel. She was done! After handshakes and congrats I walked around and checked out the shot. It was indeed a killing shot, taking out both lungs, resulting in a short recovery and a one arrow clean kill. With a jolt though, it struck me the hit was 4 inches high. I shuddered to think another 4 inches higher and the ending would not have been as rosy. It was then I realized of all the thousands of miles travelled, fulfilling this dream ultimately came down to inches. I knew right then and there what the title of this story would be.

Notes: Equipment Used:

Grizzlystik-950 grain arrows Alaskan Single Bevel

Broadheads Bear Cruz Bow @ 68lbs

PH Tinus Ruthven African Game Hunters

www.africangamehunters.com

Below:
The end result of the authors long time dream to hunt African Cape buffalo.

