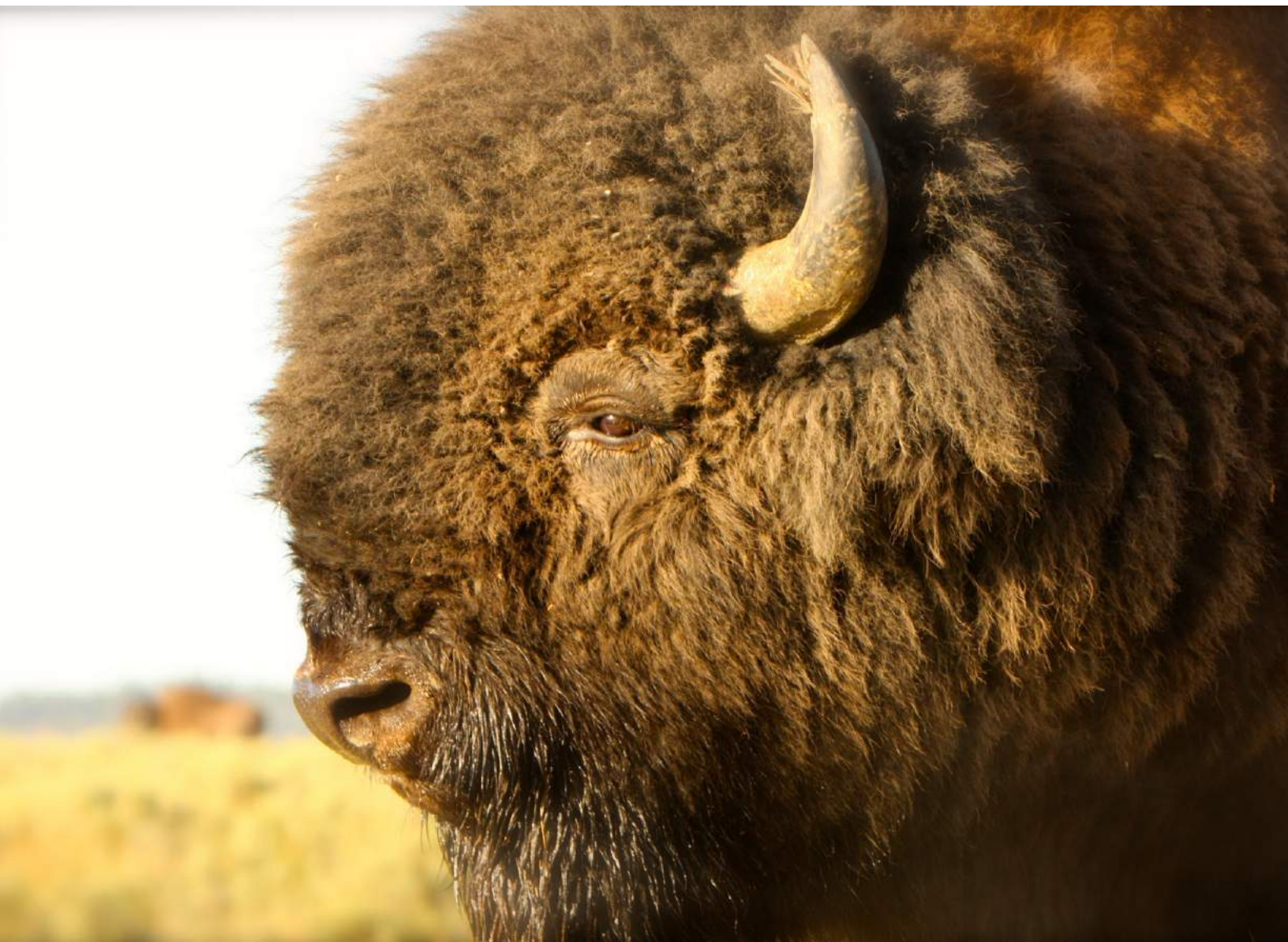


HUNTER'S ★ HORN™



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CAPE BUFFALO

THE GUNFIGHTER OF AFRICA

This issue's installment looks at the gunfighter of the African bush—dressed in black with piercing eyes that dare you to challenge him on his own ground.

BY JOHN WOOTTERS

FOR A GUY LIKE ME, A WORDSMITH WITH A romantic streak and a fondness for drama, it's just about impossible to keep from assigning colorful (and lamentably anthropomorphic) characterizations to the dangerous big-game animals of Africa. I know it isn't scientific, but it's fun, and—what the heck, nobody takes it seriously, anyway, least of all me. It isn't exactly like Bambi, whose creator asked us to believe that his animals actually thought, felt, and reacted emotionally as human beings. All I'm doing is thinking up descriptive parallels with stereotypes of human characters, not making the animals into people.

For example, I think of the lion as a proud, hotheaded, aristocratic duelist, quick to challenge any imagined slight to his honor, a nobleman whose courage is as bright as his weapons—and as deadly! One does not trespass on or insult him without being prepared to defend oneself.

The leopard, on the other hand, is an assassin of the night, the kind of fellow who might have been secretly in the employ of the Borgias, silent, cunning, quick, unseen in the shadows. He seems remorseless, without conscience, a lethally efficient dagger-man who prefers to strike from behind, without a trace of the lion's flair for heroics.

The elephant? Easy! A sumo-wrestler samurai type, intelligent and slow to be provoked into unleashing his unimaginable power. Like many giants, gentle, tolerant, and restrained—seeking to avoid combat until it's foolishly forced upon him. Then...

look out! A muscular mountain of shrieking fury, awesome as an earthquake and irresistible as an avalanche.

That brings us to my favorite of all of them, the Cape buffalo. He has to be the cold-eyed gunfighter in the street at high noon, dressed all in black, arrogantly placing himself in harm's way, witlessly convinced of his own invincibility. His reputation draws the would-be gun hawks from around the world to test themselves against the old pro, and he awaits them—us—confident, his chin up, his figurative gun hammers unstrapped, menacing and ready—always and forever ready—to fight. He will not draw first, but his retaliation against an uninvited attack upon him is so certain and so terrifying that no challenger approaches without intimations of his own mortality.

The Cape buffalo fascinates me as few other game animals ever have. In my wanderings in Africa during the last 14 years, I have been privileged to hunt and take most of the glamorous game of that continent, and I'm proud of every trophy. Each of them—lion, leopard, elephant, kudu, sable, and the rest—is a bright memory. Many of those species I once hunted so avidly, however, I will never shoot again. I'm not certain how the distinction is made in my subconscious mind; I only know instinctively that my hunting for many of these beautiful beasts began and ended with the first trophy collected, and I am content in that knowledge.

There are a few species in Africa and elsewhere, though, which have captured my imagination forever. These I will hunt as often

and as long as they are legal game and I have the strength to follow them. The reasons are diverse. Some, like the greater kudu, carry such an ambience of elusiveness, of mystery, that they lead an obsessed hunter on like a phantom from a fevered dream. They challenge his soul and spirit as well as his skill. The buffalo is different. He doesn't challenge; he dares an armed human to come after him. The challenge is to the heart. If you have the heart to hunt him fairly, on foot, on his own turf and during his business hours, you will sooner or later come face to face with yourself, and you will surely learn something about yourself that, in this modern world, you will not often have the opportunity to find out.

When you step out of the hunting car onto the sunbaked earth of Africa and check the chamber of your rifle before a buffalo stalk, you will have descended from the glassed-in, air-conditioned, electronic world mankind has created and planted your boots on the soil of reality. You will have escaped into the world that was before *Homo sapiens* picked up his first sharp stick, where muscle and guts and sweat still count, where blood is blood (and not TV catsup), and death—real, honest-to God death—is a normal penalty for failure, weakness, sluggishness, overconfidence, or a lapse in alertness.

For those reasons, some African professional hunters quite often cheat during the buffalo part of the safari, these days, chasing them with the car and urging the client to shoot from the vehicle. Daily safari costs being what they are, the professional hardly has time to get to know the temperament of his hunters, and placing inexperienced clients in very dangerous situations is a good way for the professional to find himself out of business. Furthermore, proper buffalo hunting takes time, hours and days that the client may not be able to afford.

Nevertheless, it's cheating. The buffalo is cheated of his chance to defend himself naturally, to be a Cape buffalo, and, worse, the client is cheated of his chance to be a hunter, taking his chances and measuring himself in mortal combat against a real, live Cape buffalo bull.

If the professional hunter judges that the client is not up to it, physically or spiritually or otherwise, then the Cape buffalo hunt should be canceled, money or no money. The chance to really hunt a Cape buffalo should, in my judgment, be something a hunter earns, rather than purchases. But... enough of sermons.

Buffalo are among the most common of the larger game animals everywhere in Africa where habitat is suitable, and they are generally not hard to find. They tend to be grazing in the open at dawn, and to retreat to shaded places for a siesta during the heat of the day. Late in the afternoon, the herds may appear once more in the meadows, most often feeding in a slow, surging movement toward water. One of my most memorable African moments was huddling near sundown on a large termite mound that stood like an isolated, round hillock on a plain in Mozambique, entirely surrounded by a sea of Cape buffalo, hundreds strong, as they grazed toward a water hole. The air was redolent of the smells of a herd of dairy cows, and the evening was so still that the tearing sounds the animals made as they cropped the coarse grass merged into a great, eerie, sibilant murmuring, like a distant surf. Some passed almost close enough to poke with a rifle's muzzle. The bull I wanted wasn't among them, however, so we simply waited for the tide of hard-muscled black bodies to flow past us in the flaming sunset.

Where terrain and visibility permit, a favorite buffalo-hunting tactic is glassing known feeding meadows and pans after dawn and before twilight. The close encounter in Mozambique was



a somewhat more intimate variation on this technique. More common is spotting a herd from the hunting car and mounting a direct stalk, or trailing fresh spoor discovered along hunting tracks or around water holes. It runs into work, and gets frustrating, especially when bands of sharp-eyed zebras, elands, or other antelopes are commingled with the buffalo. These alert critters make it even tougher to sneak up on a buffalo herd—and it's tough enough to begin with, Cape buffalo having no noticeable deficiencies in their own sensory early-warning systems. Their eyes, ears, and noses are all excellent.

Crawling into the midst of a relaxed herd nooning in the shade on a hot day, trying to sort out the master bull, is an itchy business, even though massed charges or even single charges by unwounded animals out of a herd are exceedingly rare. With that many tons of beef all around the hunter, however, unpleasant images of being caught in a stampede keep passing before his eyes.

Although trophy bulls have occasionally been culled out of big breeding herds by hunters, my luck (in four African nations) has not been so good. Every one of the outstanding trophy bulls I've seen has been a "solitary" or a member of a bachelor band of two to no more than eight males. The conventional thinking about these smaller groupings is that they are comprised of overmature males that have been driven out of the breeding herds by stronger bulls in the prime of life. Sometimes they wander alone, and now

and then they seek the company of a few fellow veterans. In any case, these animals can be dangerous even when unwounded, and their existence is one of the reasons you never walk around in the bush without a rifle. Since they are old, a very high percentage of them carry the scars of encounters with humans, especially native poachers or inadequately armed meat hunters.

These old boys seem to be mad at the world anyway, perhaps understandably, and they have little patience with people in general. They kill and injure a number of hapless natives each year, which, judging from Americans' reaction to the odd grizzly attack in our national parks, would bring forth an outcry for their total extermination in this country. I was told in Mozambique in 1972 that the known toll of citizens killed by buffalo amounted to about one a day, nationwide, and that the authorities believed the unreported cases to exceed the known ones by a considerable margin.

Geoff Broom, an old professional hunter friend of mine in what is now Zimbabwe, was once charged by a rogue buffalo bull as he drove innocently along a hunting track in his Land Rover. The animal drove a horn through the aluminum fender of the vehicle, leaving a hole Jim Plunkett could throw a football through at 20 yards, and almost upset the car. There had been no provocation, no buffalo hunting had taken place in that area recently, and no reports of a wounded bull had circulated. In other words, the solitary buff apparently was surprised at close range by the Land Rover and decided to kill it. Bear that in mind when someone tries to tell you that a Cape buffalo is as harmless as a Hereford until you hurt him.

That's usually true enough—but the exception can kill you just as dead as the rule.

In his great book, *Classic African Animals; The Big Five* (Winchester Press, 1973), Tony Dyer, one of the most experienced and respected professional hunters of his generation, reported that the previous decade had seen three professional hunters killed or savagely mauled by elephants, three by rhinos, five by lions, five by leopards—and 10 by Cape buffalos. If you ask veteran professionals the ancient question, "Which is the most dangerous?" they will disagree, often answering with the animal by which they or their close friends have most recently been injured. I've been asking it of men who should know for many years, and as many have nominated the buffalo as have the other four of the Big Five combined. Even more interesting, when I asked them to rate the Big Five in order, the buff has never finished worse than second. It may be futile to speculate on which is the most dangerous game animal on earth, but there can be no question that the Cape buffalo is at least among the leading contenders.

He is intelligent, incredibly brave and gallant, and—when wounded—among the most vindictive and determined creatures on this planet. Like that black-clad gunfighter in the dusty street, if you draw on him you'd darn sure better kill him first—he is impossible to turn with a nonfatal bullet and the difficulty in stopping him is simply incomprehensible to a hunter who has not seen it with his own eyes. The stopping bullet must reach

the brain or spine, period. Simple as that. No alternative. Brain him or die! Because he will kill you, nine out of 10 times, if he gets to you.

No sporting-rifle cartridge yet invented is powerful enough to overwhelm a Cape buffalo's life systems with shock or punish him enough to make him break off his charge. Even a charging bull elephant can often be turned with a heavy bullet that misses the brain, but not a Cape buffalo!

My first professional hunter, a Portuguese, once told me, "The hard thing about buffalo hunting is to just stand there and shoot and shoot and shoot, in cold blood, while he keeps on coming!" True—but, then, you haven't much alternative; you can't outrun or outdodge him, and if you climb a tree, he will simply wait there below until either he dies or you fall out.

Okay, so the Cape buffalo is acknowledged to be perhaps the most dangerous, and thereby one of the most exciting, game animals alive, when hunted fairly. Does that also make him the greatest?

It may be remembered by some readers that I wrote the first article in this "Greatest Game" series, in which I nominated the mature whitetail buck as number one. And, of course, there can be only one number one. Have I since changed my mind, revised my judgment? No.

When I first suggested this series, I offered to kick it off with the whitetail article. I also suggested that, when we were finished with the North American game, we might do a similar series on foreign game, and that, if that came to pass, I'd like to reserve the Cape buffalo for my very own, since I admire and dearly love the scruffy brutes and have shot some 20 of them, so far. Thus, I suddenly found myself assigned both animals, with one editor grinning evilly at me and saying, "I'm dying to see how you get yourself out of this one!"

Here's how: The above-mentioned Tony Dyer closes his chapter on the buff with the sentence, "The buffalo, hunted in the sporting manner, is the finest trophy animal in the world, an adversary of the highest caliber." Dyer has hunted more buffalo than I've even dreamed of, and he ought to know. And his sentiments are loudly echoed by dozens of veteran world-class big-game hunters, and who am I to contradict such an accumulation of experienced opinion?

Neither Tony nor those others write for Petersen's HUNTING, however, so it's up to me to state the case as persuasively as I know how, and I have done so in all sincerity. In my opinion, the Cape buffalo is the number-one game animal—as an adversary. "Adversary" means an opponent, someone or something to be fought. You don't fight a whitetail buck. You hunt him.

And, of course, I've hunted more big whitetail bucks than Tony Dyer has ever dreamed of. By the standards and qualifications I established in that first article of the series, the Cape buffalo is the greatest dangerous game animal, the greatest African animal, the greatest foreign animal, the greatest horned animal—and almost the greatest game animal.

But not quite! ★

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Mr. Wooters, a former HSC President, passed away in January of 2013. HSCF greatly appreciates his wife, Jeanne McRae Wooters, for sharing his legacy and wisdom. | www.johnwooters.com