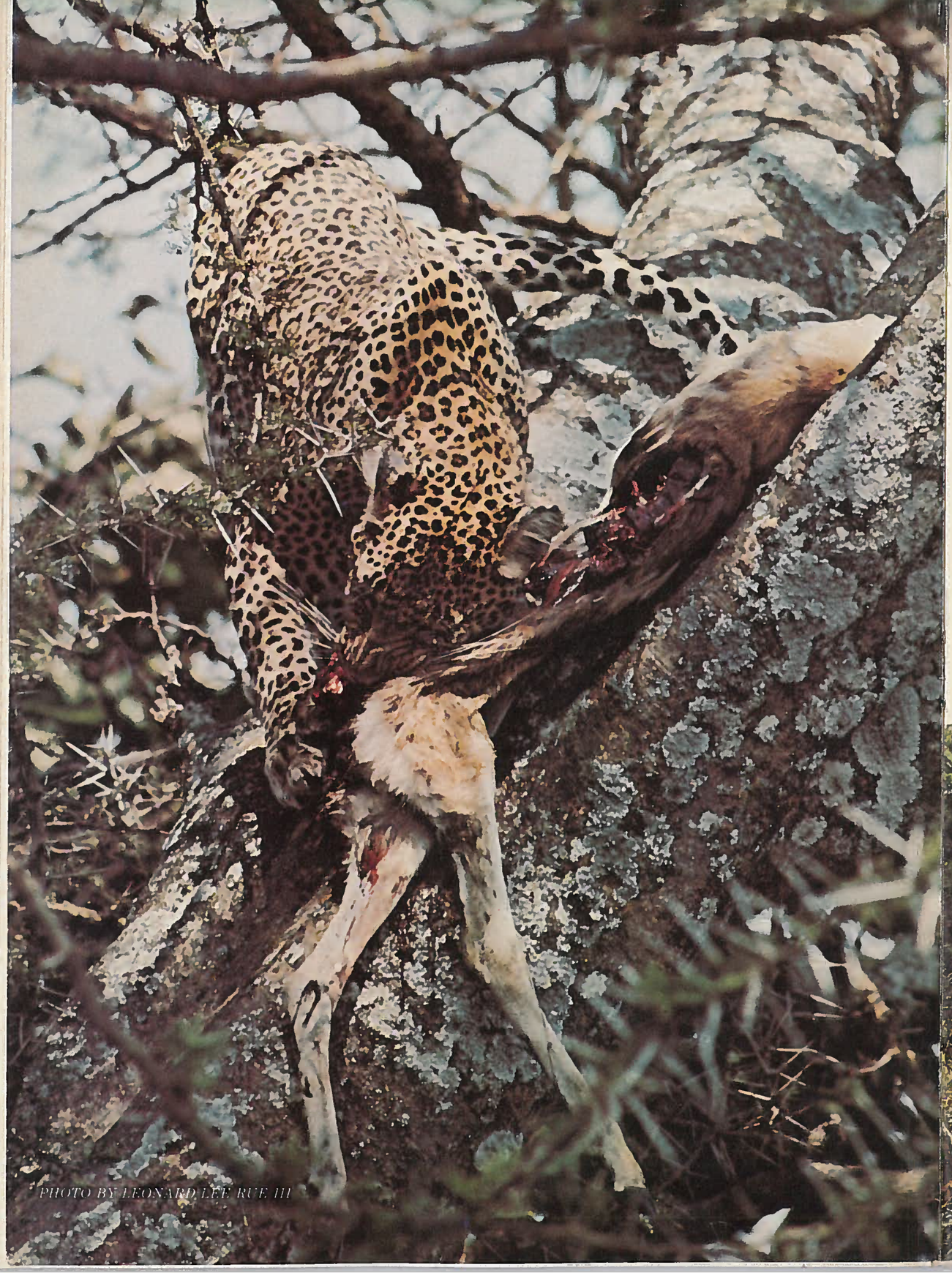

PHOTO BY LEONARD LEE RUE III

I know how it feels to be the target of automatic weapons fire in infantry combat. I have seen the eyes of a drunken man, armed with a machete, bent on taking my life. I've looked a wounded Cape buffalo bull in the teeth at just 15 yards. I've endured the stunning silence after a light airplane's one engine quit without warning. I once had the reserve air valve of a scuba tank jam and leave me literally breathless 85 feet below the surface of the Caribbean. Altogether, I can recall a lot of times when the seconds seemed to drag by like a convict's weeks . . . but *the* longest ten minutes I've ever lived through were in a blind in an African dusk, listening to a leopard feeding just 45 steps away!

There was more to it than just the knowledge that I was in the presence of the animal I'd dreamed of since boyhood and traveled 12,000 miles to meet. There was more to it than my white hunter's admonition that more hunters

Leopards are night hunters, venturing afield at twilight. Thus, it is unusual indeed to just see a leopard in broad daylight, let alone to get close enough to photograph him while on a recent gazelle kill. The exceptional photo at far left captures the natural beauty and savagery of this truly magnificent cat. Waterholes (above) are good spots to search for signs of previous night's activity. Author Wootters (below) is justifiably proud of his prize trophy. The huge old male measured seven feet, four inches long, a cinch for Rowland Ward's book of African records.

THE NHAMARUZA LEOPARD

From baiting to bag, this magnificent game animal provides action and suspense second to none.

BY JOHN WOOTTERS

Our leopard camp in Mozambique, named Nhamaruza, typical of the permanent camps maintained by Safrique on government hunting concessions. The crew left camp at dawn for a check of our baited trees.

The big male leopard made tracks almost like a lioness. This was understandable when the prize trophy was examined—7'4" long!

miss easy shots on leopards than on any other species, or his warning that I might have no more than 10 seconds to fire, once I raised the rifle. Nor was it that I knew this was my last chance to legally import a leopard trophy into the United States, or that I knew I was very lucky to have this one chance, at the worst of all possible seasons to hunt leopard in Mozambique.

What bothered me, I believe, was the knowledge that baiting and bringing a leopard under the gun is a fine art and a team effort involving a dozen people. Each of them had done his job expertly, and now it would be up to me; all I had to do was shoot straight, but if I failed when the chips were down, three days and nights of cunning, hard work by the crew would go down the drain.

The four of us sat there in the blind, motionless, listening as the big male leopard slashed huge mouthfuls from the stinking waterbuck ham. It was the only time I could remember when the aroma of rotten meat was like perfume to my nostrils; it meant, of course, that the faint evening breeze was still holding steady, from the cat to us. At last, when Mario judged that the leopard had settled down to his meal with his attention focused on filling his belly, the professional hunter handed me the loaded rifle, gave me a searching glance, and gestured for me to stand up and shoot.

Mine was the last move in an intricate and prolonged drama which had begun on the first day of the safari, when the first shot I fired at game in Africa killed a bush pig (which more or less accidentally turned out to be a Rowland Ward record) for the express purpose of leopard bait. On that day and the next, my companion, Houston businessman Jack Carter, and I had collected a number of baits, mostly warthogs and chacma baboons, and a couple of the safari boys took over Operation Leopard while Jack and I went after some of the glamorous antelope. The boys consulted with local natives for word on a leopard, and scouted the sandy hunting tracks in the region. When they found sign of a leopard crossing, they drove away, rigged a bait as a scent drag behind the truck, and dragged it up to a carefully selected tree, where they hung the meat too high for hyaenas or lions.

Not just any old tree would serve. Each bait tree was chosen for its size, location, and conformation. It had to have a limb, big enough but not too big, at such an angle that a blind could be built downwind to blend with the surrounding brush, and the ideal limb would show me the leopard, if one came, skylighted and broadside. When each bait was hung, the boys brushed away the leaves around the base of the trunk so that any animal would leave clear tracks in coming and going. From such tracks, it turned out, they were able to predict both sex and size of the cat with astonishing accuracy.

We were in Mozambique in October, which is a bad time to bait leopards. The grass is dead, the antelope are concentrated around the waterholes, and the living is too easy for a leopard to be very interested in a bait. The previous season, some Texas acquaintances had hunted this same area with the same safari company, Safrique of Beira,

The blind must be solid and large, with all debris cleared from the floor to assure silent movement. Nothing is left to chance.

and had several leopards walk right under hanging baits without bothering to climb for them. But recent laws passed in the U.S. meant that if I didn't get my leopard on this safari, while the trophy could still be imported lawfully, I was out of luck. It was my first and last chance, and the boys responded by tripling their efforts and maintaining ten baits, rather than the usual three or four.

This meant that every day at dawn, the crew was up and away from camp, making their miles-long circuit of the baited trees to see what the night had brought. All but one day, that is, when their truck stalled in a dry wash and they spent the night there, afraid to try to walk back to camp unarmed. We found them early next morning, and they reported that when they had approached one particular tree that day, the meat was swinging from the hurried departure of a leopard! The cat had not fed, apparently having been disturbed by their arrival, and no one could say whether he might come back.

But he did. He returned and fed heavily. The boys then replaced the bait with a fresh one, wiring it firmly to the limb with heavy iron baling wire. That night the cat came back and actually tore the wire away, stealing the whole ham of a waterbuck. When this fact was reported to our professional hunter, one Mario Damião, he issued orders for another bait to be placed in the same tree, making certain that the leopard couldn't take it away.

At this point, an agreement between Jack Carter and me, reached days earlier, was beginning to take on new importance. Since lion were scarce in our *coutada,* or hunting concession, and it was the wrong season for leopard, we'd taken out only one license for each cat. Jack preferred the lion, and my choice was the leopard, so we'd agreed that he would get a lion and I any leopard we might be fortunate enough to encounter, regardless of whose turn it might be to shoot when that chance came to pass.

This was why my heart sank at a remark made by Mario when we went to look over the situation at the bait tree. After careful examination of the big pug marks in the brushed sand, Mario said, with a very straight face, "This is not a leopard; this is a lion!" It was his way of emphasizing the huge size of the leopard we were dealing with, but for a moment I took him literally.

At this point, Mario personally took command of the operation, supervising construction of the blind and certain modifications of the tree.

The blind was large enough for four men to sit in folding armchairs, not for comfort so much as because cramped men cannot remain absolutely still. It

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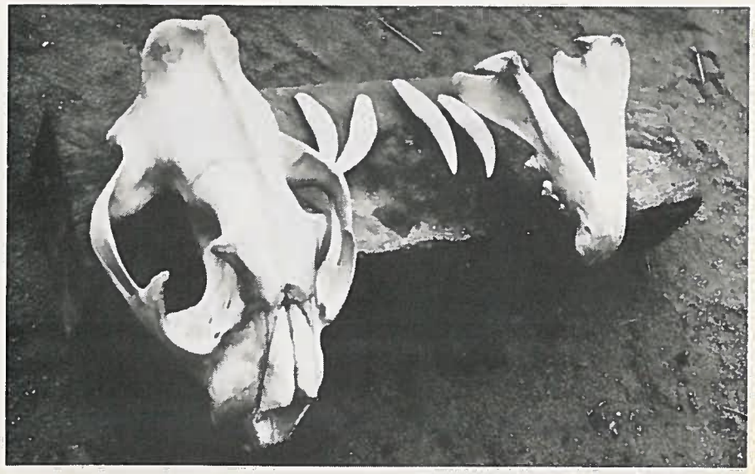
Can you find the author (above) with his rifle in shooting position? This is a leopard's-eye view of the completed blind.

Locating a leopard's beat, selecting a tree, and hanging baits is a fine art in Africa (right). Once the tree is baited, leaves are brushed away so a cat will leave tracks.

A prize leopard's skull (below) is measured for length and width. Length runs from the tip of the jaw to the base of the skull. Width is the distance ear to ear.



THE NHAMARUZA LEOPARD *continued from p.45*

was quite sturdy, with a limb lashed horizontally across the front at just the right height to serve as a gun rest for a six-footer like myself. There were no peepholes; we would do all our hunting by ear. Every leaf was removed from the sandy floor of the structure, and every twig and blade which protruded on the inside was snipped off, lest it scratch on a sleeve as one of us moved. The blind was, of course, down the prevailing evening wind from the bait tree, and was four-sided, with a narrow door in the rear.

The tree itself stood on the edge of a clearing in the forest, exactly 45 long paces from the blind. One large limb was hacked off to force the leopard to use another, about six inches in diameter, to reach the meat, and the bait was hung so that he could not easily get at it but would have to reach down, hook the heavy ham with his claws, and pull it up to get a bite. The object was to force the cat to concentrate on his feeding, hopefully blunting the edge of his incredible alertness and wariness long enough for me to get my shot in.

All other limbs on the bait tree and on a couple of trees standing behind it which might confuse the animal's outline against the sky were trimmed. When Mario and his expert crew were finished, it would be physically impossible for the leopard to present anything but a perfect, broadside shot . . . provided he came again to the bait at all.

I stepped into the blind, laid my rifle in position, and aimed at the limb, bare in the African sunlight, and tried to imagine 150 pounds of spotted cat in my crosshairs. The suspense was already building in my guts.

When Mario was satisfied with every detail, we went back to camp and enjoyed a leisurely lunch. It was then that the professional hunter told us that leopards are the most commonly missed animals in all Africa, even though the shots at them are invariably simple.

"We will have to be absolutely still," Mario coached us. "A leopard can hear anything, even a sigh. He will become aware of you the instant you put up your rifle. He can see the slightest movement and sometimes it seems he can even see through the wall of the blind. When he sees you, he may jump from the tree instantly, but usually he will hesitate, maybe five seconds, maybe ten seconds at most. You must shoot as quick as you can, but you must kill him with that shot. A wounded leopard is one of the most dangerous animals in the world. Which rifle will you use?"

"The .45-70 single-shot," I replied, pointing to the Ruger No. 1 standing in the corner with its 3X Leupold scope.

"Why the single-shot?" Mario asked, seriously.

"Why not?" I replied. "You say I will have only one chance anyway. Besides, I know and like the rifle well, and I shoot it well. I have confidence in it."

"Good," he returned. "How is it sighted?"

"It should be a trifle high at 50 yards with my handloaded ammunition," I figured, "but all the same I'd like to check it now."

We paced off 45 yards and Mario put up a makeshift target. I knelt and triggered the 400-grain Barnes bullet . . . and obliterated the center of the bullseye. If I could do as well on the leopard, that bullet, traveling almost 2,000 feet per second, would surely be enough. Mario grunted approvingly. I carefully cleaned the scope lenses, handed the rifle back to a tracker, and went into my bungalow for an afternoon nap.

I'm sure you can imagine how much I slept on that hot afternoon, wondering if the old tom leopard was also stretched out in the shade of a thicket somewhere, lazing away the hot hours until the evening breeze sprang up to tell him it was time to feed. As I tossed and turned on my cot, I thought of all the things which could still go wrong. First, the cat might not come back at all. Or he might come on a route which would bring him too close, or downwind, to us in the blind. Or all the activity in the area that day might alert him. Or somebody might cough, or sneeze, or . . .

Or I might just miss the bastard! I've been shooting a rifle at live game of some sort for almost 40 years, and my business of freelance gun writer requires me to fire something like 8,000 rounds of centerfire rifle ammo each year. I'm really not a bad shot . . . but an African leopard is not exactly a paper target, nor even a whitetail buck! Trying to ignore the lump in my belly, I told myself that it was preposterous that I could miss something that big and that easy at less than 50 yards. No way, Wootters . . . you hope?

We arrived at the blind about 5:00 p.m. Mario had admitted that there was some danger that the cat might have come earlier, but said it would be unusual in such warm weather. He had not come. Jack left his cigarettes in the hunting car, and I left pipe and tobacco there, too. Mario's penchant for detail was revealed when he produced chewing gum to soothe the pangs of nicotine denied, and cough drops, just in case. He had me load my rifle and set the safety, and set it aside in a corner of the blind. When using the Ruger one-shooter on game I usually carry two rounds of ammo between the fingers of my left hand, but Mario limited me to one, to avoid the chance of clinking them together at the crucial moment. Mario, Jack, Ferreira, the chief tracker, and I settled down for the vigil.

We were lucky; neither mosquitoes nor tsetse flies were bad that evening. We sat there and listened to the sounds of Africa, preparing for the coming night. Ibises croaked raucously nearby, restless on the roost. Gradually, the sounds died down and the sun slipped below the tops of trees across the clearing. We'd been there about an hour, silent as four statues in the gathering dusk, when Mario suddenly cocked his head and lifted a hand to make an unnecessary signal for quiet. Later, he said he'd heard the leopard on the ground, very near the blind. Jack and I heard nothing, at least nothing until the first mouthful of waterbuck was ripped off the bait! Mario didn't move, and neither did I, externally. Inside, there was something, maybe my heart, swelling and throbbing and almost choking me.

Then came those terrible, fantastic ten minutes, listening to the great arrogant cat feeding. And then Mario handed me the rifle.

It was so dark in the blind that I was surprised when I stood up at how well I could see the leopard. I didn't have long to admire him, alive on that limb, but I shall die with that picture vivid in my mind's eye. They told me later that I took not more than three seconds to fire, but it seemed forever to me. Finally the Ruger bellowed and the blind turned into bedlam!

The leopard's great strength is shown by its ability to carry a carcass weighing 150 lbs. to a height of 15 feet, up an African tree.

PHOTO BY LEONARD LEE RUE III

Mario was pounding me on the back and shouting "Bravo! He's dead! *Bravo,* BRAVO!" Ferriera was jabbering in his native Sena language, and Jack was whooping like a Comanche and sputtering with a spasm of coughing he'd been strangling himself to suppress for the past fifteen minutes.

As for me, I don't think I said anything. I only knew that cat had to be dead, because the crosshairs had been precisely right, on the point of his brawny shoulder, and the trigger had broken smoothly.

He was stone dead, probably even before he started to topple off his limb. He never heard the roar of the rifle. Nevertheless, we approached with care, covering the great spotted body with a buckshot-loaded magnum 12-gauge as well as my rifle. Then we dragged the animal out into the clear so that Mario, who was exclaiming over the leopard's size, could measure him. The rough measurement went 88 inches, seven feet, four inches, and was performed twice just to be sure. Under the old rules of Rowland Ward's, that was enough to put my trophy in the record book, but the new standards also require a skull measurement. Later, my big tom passed that test, too, with room to spare.

While we were gloating over the kill, the hunting car came rolling up, with the safari crew yelling and clapping with delight. They had left us at the blind and retired with the car to a distance at which they could hear the rifle's bellow in the African night. After all the necessary photography, congratulations, reconstructions, and reveling were complete, we loaded the 175-pound carcass into the hunting car and sped toward camp, supper, and a celebratory toast of Royal Salute hoarded for just such moments in the safari.

On the long road home, the boys were singing and chanting, with accompaniment on the car's horn and the famous Mozambique lion-calling tin trumpet.

Every member of the team had performed his share of the total task to perfection. They had brought this wonderful, glowing beast before my rifle muzzle, as if by magic but really by hard work, skill, and consummate understanding of the animal. It was, as it turned out, the largest leopard collected by any Safrique client during the 1972 season, which includes 125 hunters, 15,000 square miles of Africa, and 7½ months of hunting. It was a boyhood dream come true for me, but this leopard was as much the safari crew's trophy as mine; all I'd had to do was shoot straight and fast. Five days of work by a dozen people had, at last, come to hang on three seconds' performance on my part. And I hadn't missed!

It's odd, but the memory of that is almost as important today as the life-size mount of the old leopard himself, on my den wall.