

Outdoors

Lion in camp!

Zebras get no respect. They’re common and widespread, and aren’t classed as dangerous game.

Oh, yeah? Ask Harry Selby, the legendary professional hunter, about the time his client dropped a zebra and Harry drove the safari car close and got out. The “dead” zebra leaped up and charged. Selby remembers the black lips peeled back from those big yellow teeth. Unarmed, he turned and ran around the truck, yelling at his client to shoot. But the client’s rifle was not at hand, and the safari crew could do nothing. Selby, running around and around the truck, could only try to keep ahead of the furious animal until its wounds took effect.

He could imagine his fellow professional hunters, hoisting their glasses at the bar of Nairobi’s Shepherd Hotel in memory of “poor old Selby, done in by a bloody zebra!”

In 1967, I was accompanying Harry Manners, Jr., on a routine supply flight in a Cessna 207 over Botswana’s Okovango Delta. It was almost sundown when we noticed a column of dust rising in the still air a mile or so off our route. Manners altered course and we sighted two zebra stallions in a mortal battle for breeding dominance. I’ve never witnessed a more savage fight between wild animals. Even from the air we could see that both were covered with blood. When we resumed our course, the exhausted gladiators were still locked in combat beneath their towering dust cloud.

Zebras are not considered major trophies, but every African safari hunter needs a couple for their beautiful hides; nothing says “Africa!” in a trophy room like a zebra rug.

I’m told that French clients sometimes wish to taste zebra meat, presumably because of the traditional French fondness for horse meat, but zebra is one of the few animals that I haven’t tried. Not even the natives eat it, and anything they won’t eat, I won’t touch.

Zebras are big, tough animals. A big stallion weighs up to 900 pounds. Most zebra rugs are from mares, however, because the males’ fighting leaves their hides so scarred that they make unattractive rugs.

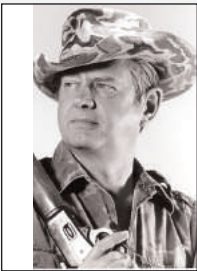
Lions, however, love zebra flesh and constantly harass the herds when they are concentrated along seasonal rivers in the Kalahari. My wife and I were over-nighting in an unfinished safari camp on the Botletle River one evening, where only our sleeping tents had yet been erected. We were eating dinner outside by the light of



Photos by John Wootters

Wootters says zebras are large, tough animals, very alert and wary, and deserving of more respect. Their dramatic black-and-white stripes make them one of Africa’s most distinctive trophies.

Currently Outdoors

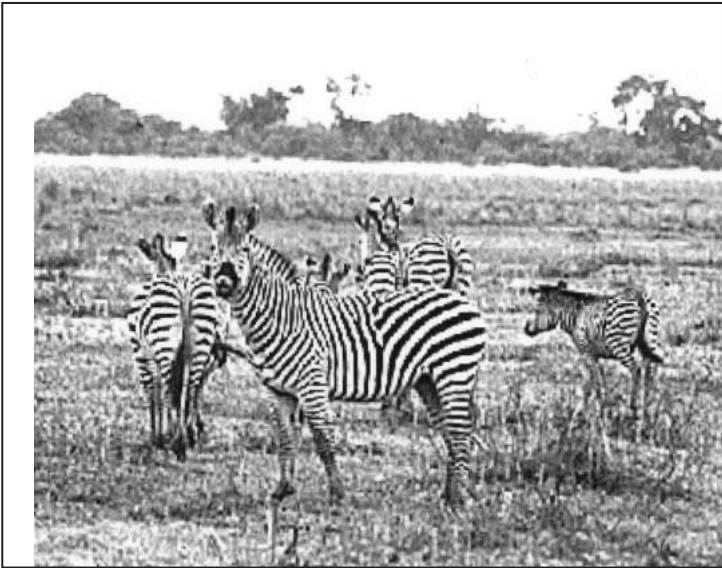


John Wootters

pressure lanterns, when we heard a sound like dogs barking out in the darkness, along with pounding hooves. Our host explained that the plentiful lions were harassing zebra herds concentrated along the river. The hysterical barking was the alarm calls of the frantic zebras.

Earlier that afternoon, I’d shot a big zebra mare a mile or so from camp. Skinning a zebra is a time-consuming process; the hide has to be literally whittled off. Our PH, Charles Williams, decided to haul the zebra back to camp whole and turn her over to the camp skinner. She was too heavy to load onto the truck so we field-dressed her to reduce her weight and man-handled her onto the truck. Driving to camp, we dropped her off beside the skinner’s bedroll and went looking for a kudu. While we were gone, the skinner removed the hide and dragged the carcass out of camp.

About midnight we were awakened by a great commotion outside our tent. I grabbed my rifle from its usual night place under my cot, and eased a .416 cartridge into the chamber before poking my head through the tent flap. There was much



This photo illustrates how confusing the seemingly garish zebra pattern can be in the eyes of a predator.

yelling in African languages. Charles’ head appeared at his tent door and he rattled off questions and commands in the same lingo.

“What’s up, Charles?” I called.

“The skinner says there’s a lion in camp. He probably had a bad dream. I told him to be quiet and go back to sleep. Don’t worry about it. Sorry they waked you.

Next morning, however, he showed me where the skinner was sleeping outside, on the ground. There, inches from the man’s pillow, was the fresh track of a big male lion!

By carrying the opened zebra carcass in the truck, we had unintentionally dribbled a mile-long blood trail straight to the skinner’s bed. He’d waked in the night to find a full-grown male lion standing over him. Contrary to TV wildlife documentaries, man-eating lions do still exist in Africa, and the tribesmen have a visceral dread of the

big cats.

Fortunately, the maker of that track wasn’t one of the man-eaters.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen’s Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.