

Outdoors



John Wootters photo

One of the toughest – or luckiest – shots of the author's whole hunting career was this fine red lechwe ram.

Lucky shot or unlucky lechwe?

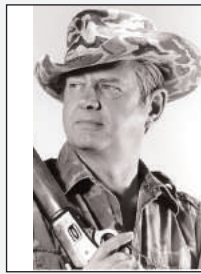
It came as a shock to me, as I browsed a recent issue of *Sports Afield* magazine (for which I used to write occasionally), to notice the red lechwe listed as one of the most endangered antelopes in Africa.

The reason for my surprise was that on my visits to Botswana's great Okovango delta in 1974, 1976 and 1987, the red lechwe was arguably the most abundant antelope present. In 1974, glamour game like sable and roan antelope were fully protected, but licenses for red lechwe were available and relatively inexpensive.

I didn't know a red lechwe from a purple rutabaga, but I bought a license ... and had to make one of the most difficult shots of my career (described below) to fill it.

The lechwe belongs to the kob group of antelopes – which probably will not enlighten many readers. It's an antelope about the size of a large whitetail, bright chestnut in general coloration without distinctive markings. Rams – as the males are called — carry elegant,

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ridged horns with a compound curvature, rising backward from the brow and then bending forward again. A 32-inch is a big one.

On that safari we saw red lechwe by the thousands. The hunting crew, including professional hunter Lionel Palmer, showed little interest in them. It was as if lechwe were so common that they were saved for the latter days of the hunt, after all the "important" game was in the bag.

Yet I found them beautiful and interesting animals. They are extremely aquatic (second only to the situtunga), consuming aquatic grasses and weeds and actually browsing with their heads submerged,

as moose often do.

Lechwe range in herds which may number in the hundreds and they literally live in floodplains. They run rather awkwardly on dry land, and I seldom saw them there. When startled, they instinctively make a bee-line for water, and they follow the margins of seasonal floods, preferring water depths of eight to ten inches for both forage and safety.

In 1987, I spotted a huge leopard atop a termite mound entirely surrounded by shallow water. Our arrival had chased a small herd of lechwe into the lagoon, and the leopard was watching them with a laser-like intensity. When they reached the water, they relaxed and began feeding. The leopard still eyed them hungrily, but made no move to stalk them in the water.

My professional hunter at the time, none other than the renowned Harry Selby, stated that this leopard was the largest he'd ever seen in 50 years of spending at least 10 months a year in the bush ... but I had no leopard license!

The red lechwe was the last big-game animal taken on my '74 safari, but he was worth waiting for. Seeing our vehicle, the herd ran out into a flooded pasture as usual, throwing sheets of spray in all directions. But this time they stopped to look back at us from about 250 yards out in the lagoon.

Two-fifty is a reasonable shot for an experienced rifleman with an accurate rifle ... IF he can find a decent shooting position.

I couldn't; in fact, the only place from which I could even see the animals was standing, practically on tiptoe, on the flat hood of the vehi-

cle. My time was running out, and it was now or never for a lechwe. I mounted the rifle and tried to settle the crosshairs on the male. A fitful wind didn't help, and I watched the reticle weaving and waving back and forth across the tiny figure in as I wobbled in my offhand stance. I was remembering that if I only wounded the ram, it would be impossible to trail him in the water, and if not recovered he would still count against my license and I'd have to pay the fee.

I lowered the rifle and took several deep breaths, then tried again. For just a second, the crosshairs seemed to pause against his chest ... and I slapped the trigger. The rifle bucked against my shoulder, and I think every man present, none of whom could see the lechwe, held his breath, listening for a hit.

At last the faint thump of a striking bullet drifted back to us! Lionel who, standing with one foot in the car and the other in the hands of a stout tracker, had gotten just high enough to find the lechwe in his binoculars, exclaimed, "Good Lord! you GOT him! He's down in his tracks! That was a helluva lucky shot!"

"Lucky?" I snorted, "Why, Lionel, which other lechwe did you think I was shooting at?"

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.