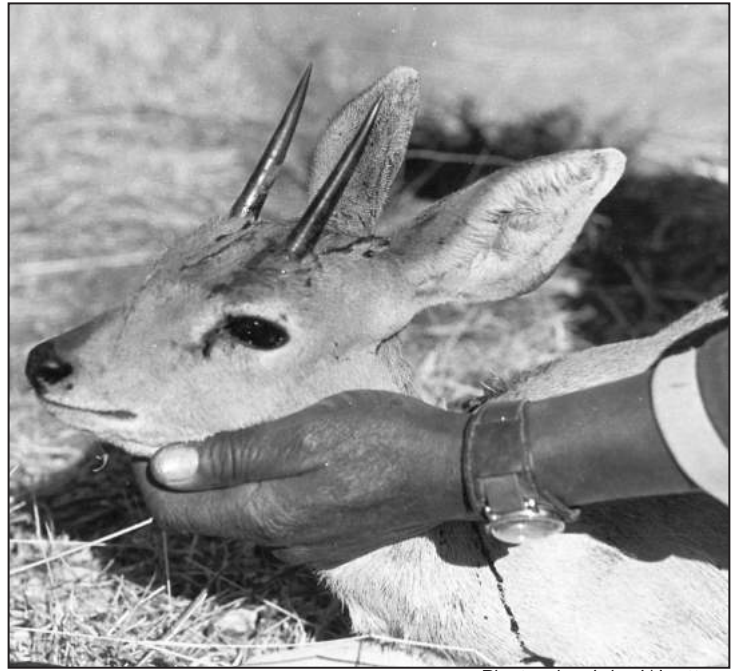


Outdoors



Steenbok are classic pygmy antelope. A large adult female like this one, photographed in Mozambique, stands only 20 inches tall and weighs perhaps 20 pounds.



Photos by John Wootters

A good male steenbok, collected for meat in Botswana, is known from other tiny antelope species by his smooth horns, short muzzle and oversize ears.

The littlest game

An aspect of African hunting you've probably never heard of is the so-called little antelopes. When you see the word Africa, you rightly enough expect lions and leopards, buffalo and elephants, or maybe the big, glamorous antelopes – kudu, sable, oryx and such.

Surely these animals are the reason for traveling 9,000 miles to go hunting ... but there are many other classes of African game, each with its own distinctive charm. One of these is the group of "little antelopes" – several species of duikers, royal and pygmy antelopes, grysboks, dik-diks, klipspringer, steenbok, oribi and suni.

The operative word is "little." The tiniest of them – royal antelope, suni and blue duiker — may weigh less than 12 pounds when full grown; the largest — red duiker, steenbok, oribi – reach perhaps 25 pounds or a bit more. The royal antelope is no bigger than a rabbit. A record-class suni male stands about as tall as your housecat. Yet these creatures are full-fledged members of the antelope family in perfect miniature. Every feature of the family is present – horns (seldom exceeding three inches) with which the males fight each other savagely, tiny cloven hooves that make dime-sized tracks in the dust, short tails and plain tan or rufous coats without markings. They're pygmies in a world of giants.

One wonders how animals so small and fragile could possibly exist on a continent teeming with the most fearsome predators on earth. One

Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

answer may be simply that they're not a big enough bite for a lion or leopard to bother with. Another is that their size allows them to occupy habitat niches denied to larger species, to utilize cover that other prey animals cannot. A third may be that they're super-alert and watchful, with razor-sharp senses and a well-developed vocal early warning system.

Surprisingly, these little fellows are by and large not skulkers creeping from hiding place to hiding place. Instead, they're quite bold, active and even sprightly. They also have a knack for disappearing as if by magic in heavy bush at any hint of danger.

They are – or once were – legal game animals for hunters. I've been fortunate enough to hunt many of these forest gremlins and have collected the red duiker, oribi, steenbok and suni. Hunting them on purpose – rather than merely shooting specimens encountered by accident while seeking grander game – has provided delightful interludes in safaris and some of my most unique African memories. The suni, one of the littlest of the little antelopes, is my favorite.

Jack Carter (later to found the Trophy Bonded Bullet

Company), my safari companion in Mozambique in 1972, and I hunted suni in the area that has produced most of the record-book trophies. It was a magnificent hardwood forest with a brushy understory. We hunted on foot, carrying 12-gauge shotguns along a winding logging road.

Behind us walked our professional hunter and his No. 1 gunbearer, each lugging a .458 Winchester Magnum elephant rifle at the ready. It must have made an amusing picture – two Americans tiptoeing through the woods being guarded by a couple of heavily armed guys apparently there to protect us from a charge by a maddened, jackrabbit-sized, bull suni!

In fact, it was a very necessary arrangement, because that forest also happened to be a favorite calving ground for the then-plentiful Mozambique elephant herds, and one never knew when he might amble around a bend in the primitive road and come face to face with an elephant cow with a newborn baby.

The man who said that a mother elephant is the world's most unreasonable animal may never have met a mother grizzly bear with small cubs, but his point is still well-taken.

The underbrush seemed literally alive with Lilliputian antelopes. The difficulty was that female suni were not legal game, yet both sexes grow horns. This meant that,

having located a promising specimen, it remained necessary to maneuver for a view of the rear end before firing. The usual result was a piercing alarm call by an elfin animal that resented having his privates inspected, followed by the patented suni vanishing act.

It was frustrating but fun, producing plenty of laughs and one each record-book suni male for Jack and me, with no mistakes and no outraged mama elephants. The then-world record Livingstone's suni had horns just over 4-1/4 inches long; my trophy stretches the tape to 3-3/4 inches — record-book size, but it has never been officially measured.

And all along you thought that safari hunters' main problem was dodging being trampled by buffalo, smashed by elephants, eaten by lions and impaled by rhinos. Oh no, those hardly hold a candle to trying to sort out an indignant 10-pound antelope's gonads with binoculars at close range in dense thickets.

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 the NRA, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.