

Outdoors

The majesty of the leopard

Back in the 1930s, nine-year-old boys with imagination and a flair for the dramatic were wont to assume superhero personas (and costumes) and go about the neighborhood rescuing damsels, battling evildoers, and generally standing up for truth and justice. Decked out in a spotted cape and hood made from a bedsheet, I haunted the back alleys of Houston's River Oaks under the pseudonym "The Leopard", assuming (in my dreams) the big cat's grace and power. It goes to show how long ago the leopard captured my imagination.

Today, 68 years later, he still commands it as no other wild beast in the world can. The leopard has it all - danger, mystery, power, beauty, and cunning. He is not the largest of the big cats, seldom exceeding 180 pounds, but he is arguably the most dangerous when aroused, and the most charismatic.

Mammalogists call him an "obligate carnivore", meaning that, like all felines, to survive he must consume certain enzymes and amino acids found only in red meat, and he is a supreme survivor. He can live inside large African cities, dining on dogs and other pets, rarely being seen. Some famous Indian leopards ran scores on human victims as recently as the 1930s that would shame any self-respecting man-eating lion. (For a hair-raising but factual read, look up Jim Corbett's gripping book, "The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag".)

My obsession meant that someday I must face a leopard, so I made him my top priority on my first safari in Mozambique, Portuguese East Africa, in 1972.

Surprisingly, leopards were as common in that country as bobcats in South Texas, and it didn't take long to get action on a couple of baits. On the fifth day of a 22-day hunt, we had a big male feeding on a waterbuck ham in a tree.

That morning a ground blind was built exactly 50 steps downwind of the tree. The crossbar at the blind's



Photos by John Wootters

This is a photograph of a lifelong dream come true. With his silly grin betraying his exhilaration from the hunt, the author poses with his seven-foot, four-inch African leopard and the single-shot .45-70 caliber rifle used, in Mozambique, East Africa, in 1972.

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top was established at the correct height for a gun rest, and all twigs and leaves protruding to the inside of the blind were carefully amputated to avoid any possible scraping against a sleeve. The dirt floor was swept clean, and all human tracks and signs in the area were brushed out.

The tree itself was trimmed to force the leopard to crouch broadside to me on a certain limb in order to get at the bait.

Back at camp for lunch, we re-zeroed the little Ruger .45-70 single-shot rifle at exactly 50 paces. My ammo was a handload delivering a 400-grain bullet at 1,960 feet per second. After lunch I laid down, but excitement made a nap impossible.

The hunting car took us to the bait tree about 5:00 p.m. After we had quietly slipped into the blind, the safari crew drove away singing and shouting, hopefully to con-

vince the leopard that all the humans had departed. In the blind there was to be no smoking, no eating, no talking, no noise. If the leopard came, I was to stand up and shoot very quickly. The professional hunter insisted that I kill the cat with one shot; a wounded leopard is among the world's most dangerous animals.

You'd think that a 175-pound animal, stationary and broadside at 50 yards, from a rest, would be the easiest shot a hunter would ever face. Maybe, but I knew that the leopard is the most-missed animal in Africa ... and, from my emotional state, I knew why!

The leopard came at last light. Before going up the tree he completely circled our blind while we sat frozen, hardly daring to breathe. Then the leopard was in the tree; we didn't see him climb - he simply materialized there on the limb.

We let him settle down to his meal, and for ten minutes listened to him ripping great mouthfuls of rotting meat from the bait.

Then I stood up. My first look at this magical animal was almost paralyzing. Then years of experience took over and I went on autopilot. I found my sight picture, picked a rosette on

his glowing hide, and began the trigger-squeeze. My muscles were functioning but my mind was struck dumb at the sight of this legendary creature, live and wild, standing arrogantly against an African sunset. I was a little boy again, actually living my most treasured daydream.

The rifle seemed to fire itself, and the leopard wilted, toppling off the limb. He never heard the gun go off.

My last case of buck fever had been in childhood, but as I stood there under the bait tree, looking down at my - MY! - leopard sprawled dead at my feet, I was shaking uncontrollably.

All that happened 35 years ago, but I still feel a little gut-twist whenever I look up at my leopard, prowling across the wall over my fireplace here in West Kerr County.

And not a day goes by that I don't look at him.

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.