

# Outdoors



Photo by John Wootters

The situtunga is a fairly normal-looking member of the spiral-horn antelope family ... until you come to the feet.



The hooves of the highly wetlands-adapted situtunga have evolved to help support the animal as he moves across the soft marshy ground which he inhabits, including masses of floating vegetation.

## Weird wildlife II — the situtunga

After having begun this occasional series with the African pangolin, I'm having second thoughts: for sheer, all-around weirdness, the pangolin is a tough act to follow.

Still, there are different kinds of weird, so let's have a look at the situtunga, an African antelope of which I'm told some Hill Country game ranches have a few specimens.

That seems incongruous because the situtunga is the world's most aquatic antelope and the Texas Hill Country is not exactly the world's most aquatic habitat.

In Africa, the situtunga lives in swamps and marshes, and is never found in dry upland situations. I hunted my situtunga in Botswana's fabled Okovango Swamp, which is nothing like our American concept of "swamp." The Okovango is actually a river delta on top of a desert, if you can imagine such a place. The Okovango River originates in Angola and is the largest river in the

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world that has no outlet to the sea. After the annual rains it fills and flows out of Angola down into Botswana, the flattest nation on earth, consisting mostly of the Kalahari Desert. All these features combine to stop the river in its tracks. It flows out onto the Kalahari and into a large, shallow lake, and simply stops.

Being seasonal, the river never carries enough water to push through the desert to the ocean, but it works magic on the desert ecology. Its crystal-clear waters overlie a clean white sand bed and teem with fish — as well as crocodiles and hippos. It forms lovely lagoon systems, connected by

random, winding waterways surrounded by palm forests. One can drive almost anywhere in a hunting car with little fear of getting stuck in the mud; there is almost no mud.

As you might imagine, the Okovango is a paradise of game and bird life. It's an enchanted place, unique in all the world, and having seen it, it's hard not to keep going back ... which is why I've made three safaris there. One of my principal Okovango goals was the elusive situtunga.

This creature is so totally water-adapted that he will hide himself in the swamp by submerging completely except for his nostrils until danger passes. He also grows specialized hooves, with seven-to-eight inch, webbed toes to support his weight in marshes and mats of floating vegetation. Situtungas feed very early and late, rarely presenting themselves in the open in decent shooting light.

Hunting is done from a makoro, a dugout canoe poled by a couple of experienced natives of the local Mambakush tribe, which themselves live a semi-aquatic life in the swamps. The hunter has little to do except photograph the abundant lotus blossoms and bird life while the men pole the craft noiselessly through the towering papyrus.

But heaven help him if he becomes careless — or bored — enough to set his rifle out of reach. When a situtunga bull is spotted, the men use

all the English they know, which consists of "Gude wan, shoot ... quick!"

At this point the hunter has mere seconds to locate the animal and deliver a fatal bullet. There's no time for judging horns — he must rely on the guides and be prepared to shoot if they say "Shoot!" — and little time for leisurely aiming, either. At the shot both pole-pushers leap out of the makoro, and, ignoring crocodilian possibilities, go splashing off after the animal, leaving the stunned hunter alone with no idea of what's happening out there in the swamp.

Fortunately, years of jump-shooting whitetail deer in East Texas thickets had honed my gun-handling skills so that I felt OK with the shot, rushed as it was. Even so, I couldn't know the outcome until my two grinning companions came wading back to the canoe, dragging a very respectable defunct male situtunga.

Surely, situtungas offer one of the most exotic hunting experiences in the world, for one of the oddest of antelopes.

**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.**