



# A Birthday Present Fit For a Prince

*By PH Rolf Rohwer*

*This story is dedicated to the memory of His Imperial Highness Prince Abdorezza Pahlavi – one of the finest sportsmen of our generation – who passed away in 2004. Having hunting with him twice in Zambia in the 1970s, the safari we planned for Tanzania in 2005 will never take place here on earth. Perhaps in that other happy hunting ground, we will again meet.*



***Our objective this misty morning was sitatunga – the semi-aquatic ‘water kudu’ that seems an appropriately adapted mix of bushbuck and lesser kudu.***

River flats to seek Kafue lechwe, then finally to the swamps of the enormous Bangweulu system. This lake/swamp/floodplain occupies a substantial area of north-central Zambia and shares its watershed on the western side with the Luapula River, which is the beginning of the Congo basin river system. We were hunting for black lechwe, which in all Africa occurs only in this vast swamp, and Zambezi sitatunga.

Our objective this misty morning was sitatunga – the semi-aquatic ‘water kudu’ that seems an appropriately adapted mix of bushbuck and lesser kudu. The adult male is a uniform greyish-brown with varying white spots. The face sports the classic white chevron below the eyes, so characteristic of the spiral-horned antelope family. Weighing around 220 lbs and standing some 45 inches at the shoulder, they closely resemble lesser kudu in size, but their habits are closer to that of bushbuck. When pushed, they submerge under the water surface, the nose protruding only when they need to breathe. Sitatunga are found throughout Africa wherever their habitat of aquatic plains with large reeds known as papyrus, or similar dense high grass vegetation, and forest openings with short grass exist. The combination of dense reeds/bushes and

digestive systems of other antelope, because they take small amounts of water with virtually each bite. Their specialized hoof structure – wide-spreading, elongated hooves – allows them to walk unimpeded on semi-floating vegetation, giving them access to food and shelter not available to other antelope, while simultaneously allowing them to escape virtually all forms of predation – except crocodiles.

There is, however, a downside to overspecialization, for their hooves are a great impediment for running on hard ground. If encountered on hard open ground, these antelope run in a slow, ungainly way and are easy prey for all the major predators – including man. In fact, a reasonably fit hunter can simply run down a sitatunga if it’s caught away from its dense aquatic refuge. For that reason they are severely affected by drought because without swamps in which to hide, they are easy prey to predators that simply seek them out, corner and dispatch them.

Having already seen large herds of black lechwe, by the fifth day of our hunt HIH had decided sitatunga must be our top priority although this physically demanding and dangerous hunt had already nearly cost him his life. Several days previously, during a mid-day stalk on a black lechwe ram, we were using a floating path through a papyrus clump. I had already cautioned him regarding the danger of falling through the floating sudd mat, explaining that if he started to fall through, he must immediately turn his rifle horizontally in order to use it as a ‘break’ to stop his descent into the murky black waters beneath the vegetation mat. Otherwise, it is likely he would simply

**A**t 5:30 a.m., the mist was hanging thick and grey over the vast Bangweulu Swamp as HIH Prince Abdorreza Pahlavi and I sat in a dugout canoe belonging to one of the local Bemba Chieftains. All around us was the morning concert of bird sounds, varying from the eerie call of the shoebill stork to the wonderful variety of noises from the myriad of ducks, cormorants, waders and smaller birds just taking flight. The huge walls of thick papyrus reeds closed in on either side of our narrow watercourse. These dense green walls, some four metres high, combined with the heavy mist to amplify the sounds of the swamp.

It was the fourth and final week of our 28-day safari that had taken us from Kasonso-Busanga in the north-western corner of the Kafue National Park where we had hunted plains game, leopard, bushbuck and blue duiker, to the vast Kafue

*Our destination was a large floating mat of relatively low grass that bordered the papyrus reeds. Once there, we would abandon our canoe and walk on the floating vegetation mat to seek our quarry.*

short grass allows these shy and elusive antelope the food and shelter they require.

Sitatunga have also successfully colonized the rain forests of West and Central Africa. There, they live in the dense riverbank vegetation, venturing out onto muddy forest tracks in search of the short rich grasses that form their preferred food. In studies conducted in Zambia in the 1960s, biologists determined that the tips of these succulent swamp grasses were very high in protein, sometimes exceeding the food value of alfalfa. Sitatunga are able to consume this high-protein diet, which would actually cause damage to the

disappear, caught under the mat with no chance of climbing back out for air. A frightening thought indeed!

We were half way through the papyrus clump and I had just again cautioned HIH to be sure to exactly follow my footsteps when I was suddenly aware of a small cry, rather like a bleat from a small lamb. I turned to see him rapidly disappearing down into the swamp! Fortunately he immediately heeded my instructions and turned his rifle horizontally. Although HIH disappeared completely, his rifle suspended him at upper arm’s length, which allowed him to pull his head up and out of

the water to breathe. I lay down on the vegetation mat next to his entrance hole. Between us, we were able to slowly pull his body out of the hole and back upon the floating mat. HIH said that he had taken his eyes off my tracks for just an instant to have a look at the lechwe when he had stepped into the black hole. He assured me that he would not lift his eyes from my tracks ever again!

Now, several days later was HIH's birthday, and I was extra alert and enthusiastic to locate an excellent trophy for this most famous of hunters. Although as a PH I was known for specializing in elephant, lion and leopard, my real interest was in the smaller antelope, and sitatunga provided exactly the type of elusive quarry that attracted me on a personal hunting level.

I had recently opened sitatunga hunting in Zambia by combining it with the licence for black lechwe, and world-

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renowned hunter Glenn Slade had already successfully taken both with me. This special permit was the third I had obtained.

Having also hunted sitatunga in Congo and Tanzania, over the years, I have established that, although difficult, stalking them at dawn and dusk is the best, most rewarding, and certainly the most sporting method to use. We approach into the sudd (floating vegetation) on foot, quietly, just at dawn, then slowly (and rather clumsily) make our way along the edge of the openings. Although we take the utmost care not to make unnecessary noise, I have found that sitatunga bulls are surprisingly calm and appear to ignore unusual noises in their feeding areas. Even if the bulls spot you first, they stand and look for some time – usually long enough for a shot – rather than bolting, except when they receive a direct gust of wind with human scent. Instead, after appraising the situation with some aspect of dignity, they make a slow but determined retreat as rapidly as their long legs and strange hooves will allow.

We left the canoe shortly after dawn, walking very slowly in the unusual light along one of the semi-floating vegetation paths used largely by the sitatunga. These narrow paths separate the high papyrus reed-beds from the bright green, shorter grass feeding areas favoured by sitatunga. I carried my usual armament, a Bemba fishing spear some two metres long, with a typical, very narrow spear point on one end and a blunt, iron-covered point on the top, which allowed more penetrating power if the spear were used for hunting black lechwe or sitatunga. For me, the spear provided some support for walking on the uneven surface of the swamp and could be turned horizontally to prevent my own descent into the swamp waters. It could also be used as a simple, yet effective, shooting stick.

We slowly continued our walk along the path surrounded by large water-lily blossoms and other wondrous aquatic plants, observing the multitude of birds and listening to the sounds of the swamp. Gradually, the mist lifted and bright daylight replaced the eerie gloom of morning. We had walked about one kilometre when I spotted the movement of a dark brown object just behind a large clump of papyrus. We moved around the 300-yard wide clump with all the speed possible. Excited and breathless, one can imagine our surprise and disappointment when the 'brown object' turned out to be exactly that – a clump of old papyrus slightly moving in the morning breeze!



*Prince Abdorezza with the black lechwe he took with PH Rolf Rohwer in Zambia's Bangweulu swamps – the only place in Africa where it occurs.*



*The Prince with his bushbuck taken in Kasonso-Bursanga in the north-western corner of the Kafue National Park with Rohwer.*



*The Prince with his Kafue lechwe taken from those vast river flats in Zambia with Rohwer.*

Zambia: 1971



*"I'd seen record-book sitatunga before, but never one like this 30+-inch one – in 1971, the largest taken in 40 years."*

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We walked on in the now bright sunlight as carefully as the treacherous floating mat of vegetation would permit. After another half hour of creeping along another mat just next to a papyrus wall, there, just in front, some 50 metres from us, grazing with his head down, his horns protruding above his shoulders, was the largest sitatunga that I had ever seen! I had seen record-book sitatunga before, but never one like this!

I slowly stuck my spear into the floating vegetation mat and turned to HIH, whispering that he should use it as a shooting stick and take the sitatunga as soon as he was set-up. He shot the antelope before it even lifted its head from grazing, dropping it where it stood. I grabbed my spear and jumped over a small water channel and immediately sank up to my armpits! I turned the spear horizontally as I sunk and was able to gradually pull myself back onto the floating mat, then slowly crawled and splashed my way to the antelope. I could not believe my eyes: The sitatunga had horns like a nyala – long, perfectly spiralled, and over 30 inches!

I was able to drag the magnificent trophy by the horns the short distance back to our floating path, and we arranged it for photos. Preliminary measurement showed it to be the largest sitatunga taken in 40 years – a fine birthday present, indeed, for a Prince!

*PH Rolf Rohrter began his hunting career in 1966 when he left his post as Chief Cropping Ranger in the Game Department of the newly independent Zambia to join Norman Carr and Peter Hankin in Luangwa Safaris. He later became a full partner in Zambia Safaris Ltd. Rolf has a degree in wildlife biology and has consulted for the World Bank, FAO, SCI, and the US Fish and Wildlife as well as independent contractors. Rolf currently hunts as an independent outfitter in Tanzania. He and his wife, Carole, have two grown children.* ☺