

MBLUE Mountain BULLS

*Recollections of an exciting hunt for one of the
world's rarest and most unique game animals.*

by Anthony Davis



Memories quickly fade, they say. It may be so, but after three decades, my recollections of ten days pursuing a most interesting quarry in the jungles of southern India remain as vivid as yesterday's. The overarching image is of the mountain setting itself, one of rare delight for an uncommon adventure. Other memories are similarly sharp and clear – of stalks repeatedly frustrated by intruding elephants and vagrant breezes, and of the skill and single-minded tenacity of two trackers without whose help I would have no story to relate.

The Western Ghats are a chain of lofty mountains running along the western edge of India some fifty miles inland from the coast.

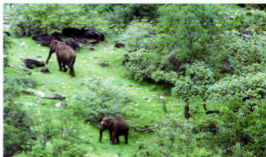
Located 200 miles from the country's southernmost tip, their highest summits rise above 8,000 feet. Here, they merge with the Eastern Ghat range in a wedge-shaped massif of high peaks, broken tableland and rolling green downs dotted with dark patches of evergreen forest. Their western flanks drop in spectacular vertical precipices to the coastal plains. Viewed from the Malabar coast sixty miles away, these mountains seem to float above the constant haze like a mythic image from a different world. They loom misty and blue, hence their name, Nilgiris, or Blue Mountains, which belie the popular image of a swarming, sweltering India. Morning frosts touch their ridges from January to March.

The first European to record his visit to the Nilgiris was the Reverend Ferreira, a Portuguese priest, in 1602. He followed a route ascending eastward "over steep and rugged mountains infested with elephants and tigers." By the late twentieth century the elephants [many] and tigers [fewer] were still present but protected. But it is for two other species, the Nilgiri ibex, actually a tahr, and the Indian Gaur that the Nilgiris have been best known to sportsmen.

In the summer of 1975, during my second year as attaché at our American Embassy in New Delhi, I met a south Indian businessman and hunter who painted an alluring picture of the Nilgiris' mountain splendor and his encounters there with wild gaur. I had seen gaur in Nepal, but never hunted them. When he said my prospects were good for obtaining a license, I was instantly hooked.

Unlike other areas in India, shooting rules and permits for the Nilgiris District were handled by the venerable Nilgiris Wildlife Association, a quasi-official organization. The NWA had set a quota of three bull gaur to be taken that year. Applications for permits were being accepted on a first-come basis, with a "royalty" fee of 500 rupees (about \$60 U.S.) for a successful hunter.

Thus educated and inspired by my new acquaintance, who promised to join me on the hunt, I arranged for two weeks' leave and applied for the license. By September 20th I found myself in the Nilgiris with a shooting permit in hand for one "mature male gaur."



Elephants graze across the rolling green downs of the Nilgiris mountains along India's west coast. Opposite: Author Bertram Dunn with Indian bear and above, the shikaris pose with his magnificent bull gaur taken on the ninth day of his hunt in the mid-70s.

The Indian gaur (*Bos gaurus*) inhabits other areas of peninsular and northern India and Nepal, while its cousins range southeastward to Vietnam. After a disastrous rinderpest epidemic in 1967-68, the herds had increased throughout the Nilgiris. NWA rules defined a "shootable" gaur as a male with horns of at least thirty-three inches spread and measuring eighteen inches around the base. The accepted method for identifying a trophy gaur involved maneuvering for a front or rear view to see whether the outer curves of both horns extended noticeably beyond the ears. If so, the head was probably legal.

Few experiences in the Indian jungles can match that of seeing a mature male gaur. They are large, extremely wary animals that stand over six feet at the shoulders and weigh in excess of a ton. They have acute senses of smell and hearing, a pronounced roman nose, a high shoulder hump and glittering black skin. A tremendously muscled neck supports a classically bovine head that is set off by eyes of palest blue. All this magnificently sculpted bulk is borne about on white-stocked legs that appear much too small for their task.

Horn spreads of up to forty-four inches and shoulder heights of more than six and one-half feet were reported in years past. At the time I hunted, however, any head over the minimum thirty-three inches was considered good.

Gaur hunting demands patient searching with binoculars and careful planning of your stalk. Older bulls, sometimes accompanied by an immature male, tend to wander over many miles, drifting from herd to herd. No well-defined rut or breeding season has been documented, so there is no time when they are especially vulnerable. Occasionally, however, gaur will remain in one area for several days, moving from water to salt lick to grazing ground. By exploiting this behavior, my trackers and I were able to locate and finally come to terms with a trophy bull after eight days of searching over an area of some sixty square miles.



One constant obstacle when hunting in the Nilgiris is the presence of wild elephants. On one occasion, now more amusing than when it actually occurred, an Indian friend and I were concealed with our two *shikaris* on a hillside, focusing our attention on several gaur in the valley below. Earlier we had marked several elephant

cows foraging about with their calves near the base of the hill. We were accompanied by a young goat-herder who had briefly left his charge to join us while viewing the gaur.

One of the elephant calves wandered away from its mother and began munching his way up the steep slope toward us. It had approached within about ten yards of our hiding place when the goat-herder picked up a stone and nailed the baby elephant's trunk, apparently intending to chase him away as one might a pesky village cur.

The baby let out a squeal of alarm, which drew his mother and her friends charging up the slope and giving us scant time to seek cover among some huge boulders. Trumpeting loudly,

the elephants marauded about for nearly two hours before we could safely and less than gracefully retire from the field, minus our stone-throwing friend who was sent on his way with a considerable boost from one of our trackers. The gaur had, of course, long since fled.

Another time a cow elephant charged our jeep on a narrow jungle trail. This precipitated what was possibly an all-time record sprint by a jeep in reverse, during which we narrowly outraced the irate mother.

Over the first week of our hunt, elephants interrupted three or four other stalks, any of which could have led us to a shootable gaur had we been able to get in position.

Our usual morning routine was a pre-dawn reveille, several quick cups of tea and a drive to the jumping-off point for that day's hunt. By daylight we would be climbing the ridges and glassing likely areas where earlier reconnaissance by our trackers had turned up hoof-prints and other sign. We would continue searching during the gaur's favored grazing time, typically from dawn till mid-morning. After that the big animals almost invariably retired into thick cover. This was our signal for a mid-morning brunch from the basket prepared by our hosts at the delightfully named Bamboo Banks guest

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farm where we were staying.

We often stretched out these breaks and turned them into what we jokingly termed informal *shikar* seminars. Lying there in the cool shade of the rhododendron, or blue gums, eating, smoking and drinking tea, we compared notes on the different hunting environments and practices between one end of India and the other. I knew next to nothing of the Nilgiris, but had logged considerable time in northern India and Nepal, and to the great interest of my companions, in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. So we yarned and learned from each other during some of the most enjoyable days I have ever spent afield.

Without doubt, the Nilgiris countryside left a profound impression on me. Everything here still reeked of the orderly and civil, if somewhat detached, British hill station atmosphere. Further, the clear air at this altitude, the sweet and musty-smelling forest, much of it evergreens, its variety of exotic birds, and the abundance of elephants, langur monkeys and other strange creatures – all imparted a very special feeling. It was easy to imagine that one might be afloat on the blue mountain island far above the rest of South Asia.

We frequently took time out to hunt wild pigs, or to make a beat for partridge or the ubiquitous red jungle fowl, the results of which would appear in our brunch basket on following days. Of course, when we spotted gaur, we avoided disturbing the area with any diversionary sport and quietly holed up until we could plan a stalk.

During the first six days we spotted several large gaur while glassing the foothills and ridges on the northern flanks of

the Nilgiris. But we remained unsuccessful, either because of elephants or some last-minute uncertainty – usually on my part – that we might find a better head just over the next rise.

Near the end of the seventh day we were glum as we headed back to Bamboo Banks. We stopped at a road junction in the gathering darkness to pick up one of our trackers who had been scouting a nearby game trail. He told us that he had just crossed the fresh tracks of two bulls accompanied by several cows moving toward a high ridge lying west of us. Judging from the tracks, one of the bulls was apparently quite large. Both trackers were certain the gaur would overnight on the flanks of the ridge and could be located with certainty the following day. Our spirits rose as we digested this happy prospect and we sat up late planning the next day's hunt.

The following morning we arrived early at the junction, where we dispatched the two trackers to bracket the mountainside and narrow the area of our search. One returned at nine o'clock to report he had sighted the two bulls. They were grazing on a course that would probably take them to a salt lick in a deep ravine that cut northward along our side of the mountain.

Extremely dense vegetation and shifting breezes made it virtually impossible to get close to the salt lick. Instead, we decided to keep watch from a rock outcrop near the head of the ravine, hoping to ambush the gaur later in the day when they returned from their grazing grounds. By early afternoon we were concealed among some shaded boulders where we could have a quiet lunch and wait out the warmer part of the day.

About four p.m. the man we had posted off to our right flank signalled that something was

heading up the ravine in our direction. A few minutes later we detected movement in the thick growth of the ravine. We waited, hoping for a clearer view when the animals reached an opening just below us. But when the gaur finally came into view, they were sixty yards up the opposite slope on a meandering, brush-choked trail.

There were four of them; two cows in the lead followed by the bulls. It appeared likely that one might qualify as the big bull I was hoping for, but try as we might we could not verify the size of his horns. We could only strain our eyes as the group climbed farther and farther up the bank to a more open area along the ridge. At that point, the trail turned sharply away from us, which might give us a good tail-on view of the horns and ears.

First the smaller bull and then the larger one appeared, and through my rifle scope I could clearly see that its horns extended well beyond his ears. The bull was now about 125 yards away, but presented only a rump shot, his body partially screened by overhanging branches. I was carrying my "all-purpose" rifle, a Rigby Mauser in .375 H&H caliber fitted with a Weaver scope. So equipped, I could surely make the shot in the fading light, but with no assurance that the 300-grain solid [FMC] bullet would reach a vital area.

Considering my appreciation of the animal's size and disposition – gaur weigh almost as much as cape buffalo – I declined the shot. While gaur are normally seen as placid bovines, a wounded bull is something to be avoided. I had no desire to take a chance shot, especially in the fading light.

As the gaur dropped from view, we momentarily shared a bitter taste of disappointment and lost opportunity, but this soon dissolved into more practical thoughts about what to do next. There was

no point in thrashing about in the underbrush trying to follow animals we couldn't see and would only spook. We now knew the big bull was not just shootable but an excellent trophy.

Our senior tracker, Doddan, a wizard of an old gentleman, picked up our spirits by cheerfully and convincingly arguing that since we now knew exactly where to begin, he and his sidekick, Chikka Bunta, would surely track down the bull on the morrow. This agreed, we accepted Doddan's advice to enjoy an early dinner and bed-time.

By dawn of day nine we were back in the same area. My companions and I scouted the lower reaches of the mountain, while Doddan and Bunta ranged singly and higher up toward the grazing grounds favored by the bulls. When we rendezvoused later that morning, Doddan explained that the gaur had taken a long and circuitous route from their

up the ravine to where it lifted and leveled out into a park-like bowl about 200 yards to our left.

Doddan had observed the flick of an ear farther up the ravine and frantically urged me run as fast as I could to where I might get a shot. I quickly reached a spot where I could cover the gaur as they emerged from the ravine.

The big bull was in the lead and turned toward me at a range of sixty yards just as I dropped to one knee. Apparently catching my scent, he stopped, lifted his nose and stared in my direction. As he lowered his head slightly and looked straight at me, his left shoulder was framed precisely in the "Y" fork of a sapling. I fired immediately and heard the *thunk* of a solidly placed shoulder shot, then saw him leap into the air, pirouette to his right and disappear with a crash into the thick undergrowth. There were a few more crashes, then silence.

With my rifle chamber recharged and one of my companions joining me, we moved toward the thick cover, circling carefully to leave enough space in front should the bull charge. My companion caught a glimpse of the bull's back, raised his .470 double and loosed off a quick shot, which we found later only split the skin on his shoulder hump. Seconds later I spotted the bull's back and I could see that he was lying on his side. I fired just as he was shifting his weight, hitting him squarely between the shoulders. As it turned out, the shot wasn't necessary because my first solid had broken his left shoulder, raked through the lung cavity and exited from his right rear flank, a killing shot that had required a bit of time to drop the one-ton animal.

The bull's horns taped 35 inches between the outer curves and were 19 ½ inches in girth at the base. He was about six and one-half years old, in magnificent condition, and measured 5 feet 11 ½ inches at the shoulder.

Anyone suddenly confronted with the carcass of a moose downed far from the road will have some idea of the challenge we now faced. Fortunately, a quick summons to a nearby camp of Toda tribesmen brought much-appreciated help. In exchange for the price of a gallon of country-made palm liquor and the promise of a portion of the meat, they reduced the carcass to manageable portions. While I paid particular attention to caping out the neck and head for the mount, the Toda, well-motivated and lubricated with ruki, managed to complete the butchering by one o'clock in the morning. They then helped carry the head, hide and several hundred pounds of prime meat to our vehicles.

All that remained on our agenda was the preparation next evening of a magnificent gaur roast back at Bamboo Banks farm and getting the rest of the meat into cold storage. The next day I took the caped head and hide half a day's drive north to Mysore for processing by the venerable taxidermy firm of Van Ingen and Van Ingen, who did their usual superb job mounting the head and seeing to the tanning of the hide.

Today, few tangible mementos associated with the hunt survive, just some photographs and a leather gun case and cartridge bag crafted from the gaur's tanned hide. And then there are the four polished hooves distributed among my sons; cherished, I trust, in spite of the occasional callow remarks by them and their sisters about "the cow Dad shot." Unfortunately, the mounted head was destroyed in a fire fifteen years ago, so the Van Ingen brothers' handiwork is gone now, rendered by fire into the ashes and dust we shall all become. But, like "Papa" Haydn's music, memories of the hunt linger, as crisp and clear as a Nilgiri morning. 🐾