

Dagga Boys on Mount Gelai - Tanzania

By Thomas Newcomb

The sun was at our backs and the wind in our face. Fifty yards in front of us we could see the back of the buffalo's head. His horns weren't wide but they were thick and shining in the sun. He was asleep under a tree, mostly obscured by thick bush. We waited for him to turn so as to get a better look at his boss – until we were certain he was a mature bull, we wouldn't shoot.

For 30 minutes we painstakingly stood in waist-high stinging nettles... waiting. Suddenly a second, larger bull we hadn't seen stood up next to the first. The wind shifted and we heard the clash of horns on a tree limb as the two bulls evaporated. In breaking out of the thicket the second bull gave us a clear view of who he was – a big and old dagga boy!

Natie exclaimed, "Let's go!" – and the chase was on. We ran parallel to the bulls hoping to catch them when they stopped. Ploughing through the waist high nettles our legs were on fire, but we caught up with them at the next impenetrable thicket. They knew we were after them and they were ready for us the second time.

Panting in the thin air, lungs and legs on fire, I couldn't have been happier. This is what I had come for.

I have hunted in Africa many times and shot my share of Cape buffalo. But I was in search of a new challenge. Professional hunter and old friend, Natie Oelofse, suggested we hunt on Mount Gelai. Gelai is located in the Lake Natron Game Control Area in Northern Tanzania, or Masailand, close to the Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti. With dense thickets at its peak of

10 000 ft, it is like a little rain forest above the clouds. From the top you overlook Lake Natron, a soda lake that is home to thousands of flamingos. Natie and I have hunted buffalo together in the Maramba Delta of Mozambique, the hills of the Selous Game Reserve, and the thickets of Masailand where the buffalo are so elusive and dangerous they call them "Ninjas". So when he said this would be a challenging hunt, he got my full attention.

Natie is the part owner and managing director of Wengert Windrose Safaris, based in Arusha, Tanzania. It has been one of the premier safari companies in Tanzania for many years, and Natie & his wife, Corné, are continuing the tradition.

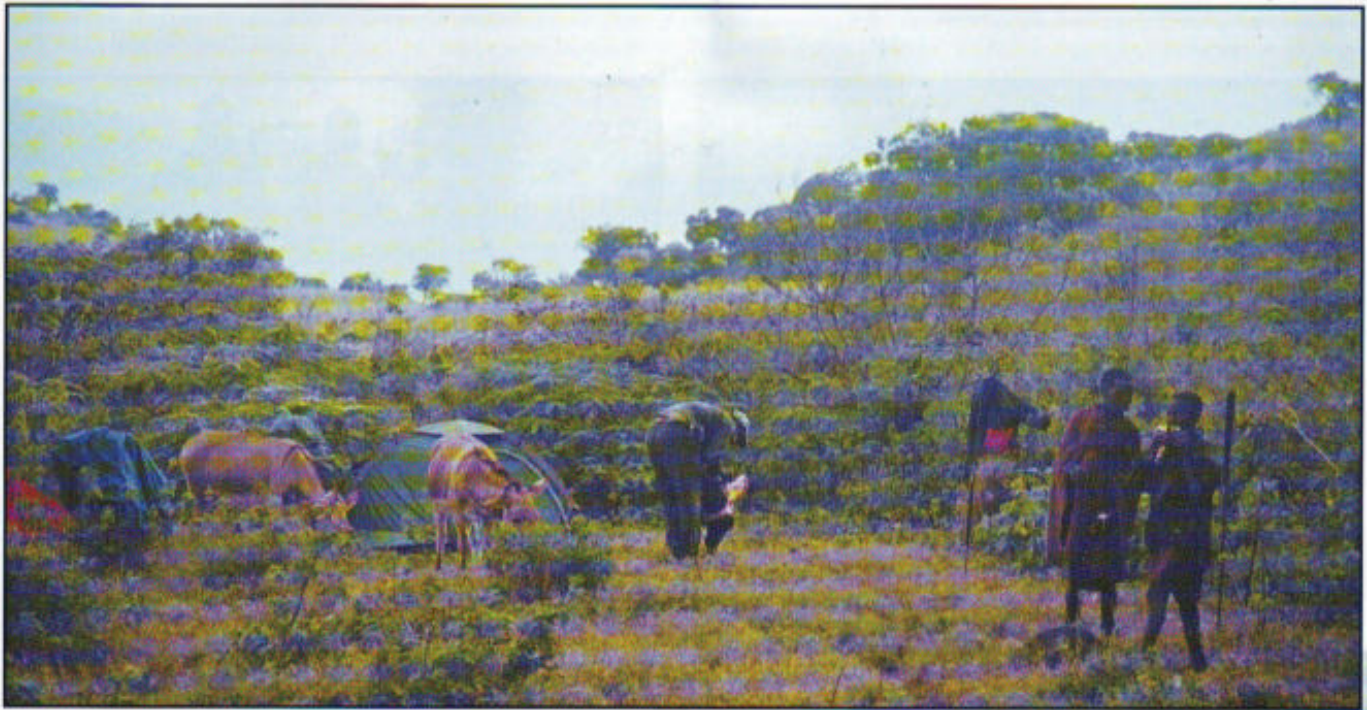
Natie is 34 years old and has been a professional hunter since he was 18. His first memories of hunting began when he was seven, riding in safari cars in Namibia and other places in Africa with his father and his uncle. He believes in ethical hunting and manages the hunting areas with great care. For a young man he has a lot of experience with dangerous game – sixteen years.

Natie stressed that we would need to be in shape for our mountain hunt. We would be climbing high enough to where we could look down on the clouds, and the air was going to be thin.

Due to the steep terrain, the use of vehicles was out of the question, so we would be on foot the whole way. Natie had made prior arrangements with the local Masai to hire some of them and their donkeys as porters.

My wife, Vickie, was going with me, as was Natie's wife, Corné. Vickie was hunting buffalo and Corné wanted a good bushbuck, of which





there are many on Gelai. The four of us have hunted together long enough to know how each other thinks, and we get along splendidly.

My wife and I began our fitness program that alternated running with weight lifting, and climbing. We shot my .470 and .416 on weekends, and after a few months we were ready. Natie and Corné spend a lot of time in the bush and are always in good shape.

Natie and I both shoot .470 NE double rifles, custom built by Constantine Constantinou of Conco Arms. My wife was carrying a custom .416 Remington bolt action rifle, built on a Winchester action by Conco Arms.

On our second day out my wife made a perfect shot on an old bull. He ran about 50 yards and lay down. We circled above him on the side of a steep hill. Vickie shot him twice more and her hunt was over. So far so good.

People often ask me why I continue to come to Africa to hunt Cape buffalo. It's one of those questions that if you have to ask, you won't understand.

The answer that I've come up with is that buffalo are great animals to measure yourself against. They have no weaknesses, and all their senses are excellent. They are extremely dangerous when wounded. They have the heart and the will to fight back, and they are not discouraged by heavy bullets.

In our modern world everything is a shade of grey, and everything is negotiable. Buffalo hunting is black and white. It's an absolute. If you push a buffalo he will charge you and you will have to kill him or suffer the consequences. Such clarity is hard to come by, and once you experience it, most other hunting is bland in comparison.

Natie and I have been lucky and have hunted buffalo together a lot. We both have great respect



for the animal and are in awe of its power and cunning. Yet when we hunt them we are exhilarated, there is no fear, we are the predators, and we can't wait to get close with them, smell them, and be in their space. We rely on each other when we are shoulder to shoulder together in a thicker, .470s in hand, looking for buffalo. There is nowhere else we'd rather be.

That's where we were then. Looking for the two

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bulls. Standing in brush so thick we could only see a small patch of black. We knew they were there and they knew we were there. Who was going to make the first move? I watched the left edge of the thicket, Natie the right.

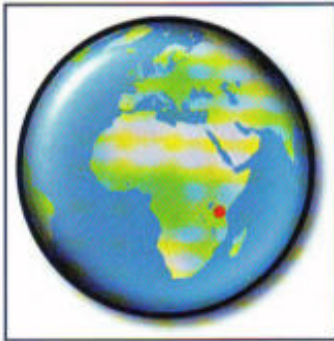
Suddenly the young bull crashed out to the right. Natie ran to see him clearly and I was right behind him. The old bull was quietly trotting straight away from us. Was the young bull acting

as a diversion? It appeared so.

I fired two quick shots, we heard the thumps, and knew I had hit him. But as quickly as he appeared he was gone, lost in a tangle of brush and thigh-high stinging nettles. Hurrying to where we had last seen him we found bright frothy blood – a lung shot. That was good news. It was easy to follow the blood trail as it went straight across a semi-open area and into another thicker.

Now it was a question of who would see who first. We knew the old bull was waiting for us, and would continue to do so until he was within sure striking range before charging. If we could see him first we would have the advantage. Suddenly we heard crashing, and didn't know whether he was coming for us or running away. Fortunately he was going away and I fired quickly... more thumps. I was definitely hitting him yet he just kept going.

Once again we hastily followed the blood trail to the next thick patch of brush. On seeing him, we realised he had circled back around on his trail and was now hunting us. He had had enough. Natie saw him first as the buffalo moved his head



around a tree preparing to charge – then I too saw him and shot and hit him under the right eye. He was instantly down, yet remarkably he was back on his feet just as quickly. I shot him again through the shoulders, and he turned to run. I reloaded quickly with the shells between my fingers, but he disappeared in the thick brush. Cautiously we followed the heavy blood trail, ready to shoot at any second. On parting the thick, leafy foliage, our veins surging with adrenalin, we saw him. He was dead.

The bull was old with heavy, worn bosses and thick curved horns. A beautiful trophy.

Vickie, Corné and the trackers joined us, and after much hugging, laughing, and back slapping we took pictures and reflected on the afternoon's excitement before heading back to our tents on the side of the mountain. It was quite a day.

Hunting on Mt Gelai is definitely a different experience. I've read about old timers hunting on Mt Kenya and this is much the same, with dense bamboo forests, rolling grassy slopes, steep hillsides and thickets full of stinging nettles. The views from the top are breathtaking. We could see Mt. Lengai, the "holy mountain" of the Masai, Lake Natron, and vast expanses of Masailand. Looking down upon the clouds, one feels on top of the world.

The hunting is challenging, the air thin, and the terrain tough. The buffalo are smart and the rewards are great. It is not necessarily the place for a first time buffalo hunter, but more a place for the experienced hunter to work on his Master's degree in buffalo hunting.

Buffalo are truly great animals to hunt. Their cunning, bravery, and vindictiveness if wounded are in my opinion beyond compare in the animal kingdom.

For a different, exciting and challenging hunt, I definitely recommend dagga boys on Mt Gelai.

