



Typical mountain nyala terrain. Note the two saplings in the foreground which have been cut down to facilitate glazing.

Mountain Nyala – One of the Top Two African Trophies

By Peter Flack

Saturday 19 January 2002. I lie awake in the tiny, two man tent in our fly camp. It nestles in the tree line under the crest of the 9 000 foot high Otmenna Mountain, in Odo Bulu, at the south-eastern tip of the Bale mountain range, in Ethiopia, some 480 kilometres, or nearly nine hours by vehicle, from Addis Ababa. It is a crisp, cold, clear night.

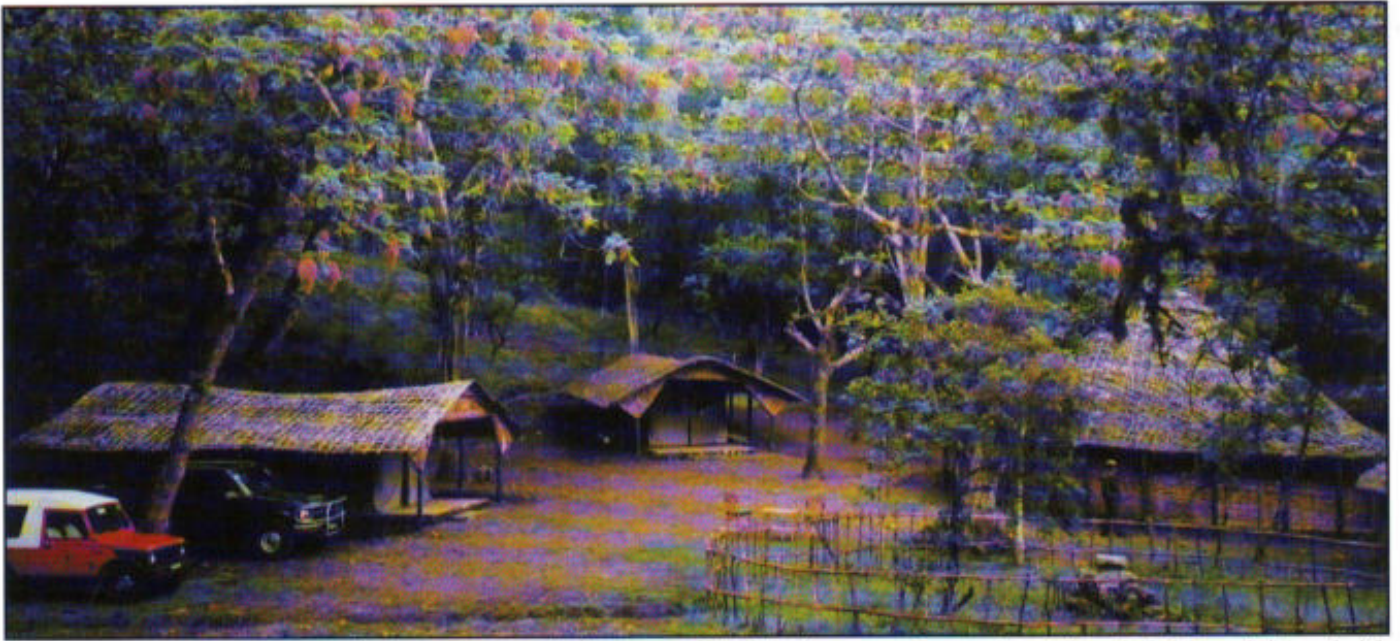
I wear my medium weight, Capilene longjohns as pyjamas and am grateful for the blankets and duvet covering my camp stretcher. Close by, I hear the clear, piping, melodious calls of a tree hyrax. Far, far away, so far I wonder whether I am imagining it, I hear the haunting, lonely whoops of a single hyena. It reminds me that

“Odo Bulu” means “the place where I slept alone” in the local Oromian dialect.

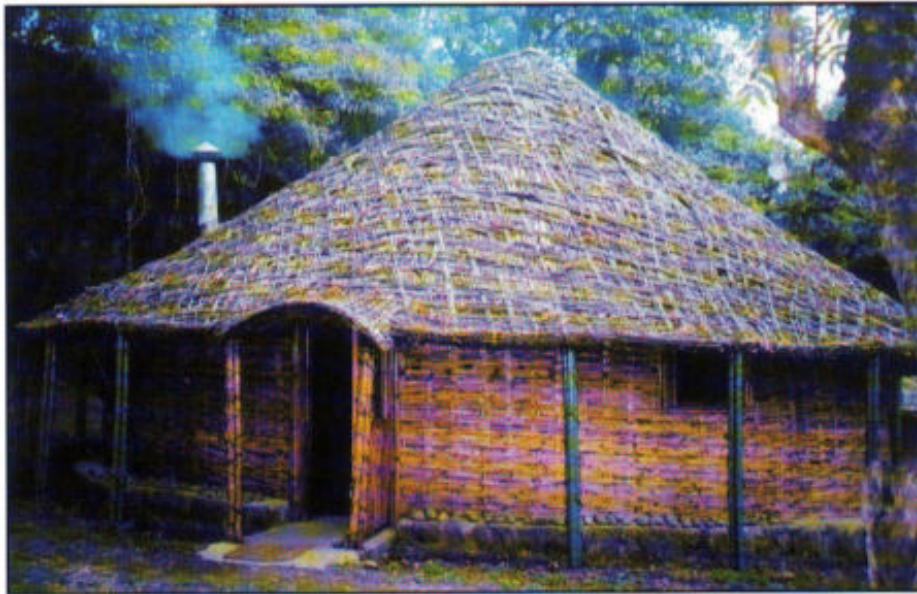
Six days earlier I had picked up a charter flight at the long, dusty, dirt strip at Hannah, in south-western Ethiopia. It's a difficult three hour drive, over a tortuous donga of a road, across the Plains of Death that separate the Sala river concession of Nassos Roussos' Ethiopian Rift Valley Safaris, from Hannah. I had been hunting for oribi, Neumann's hartebeest and Nile buffalo out of a simple tented camp on the banks of the Sala River to the immediate north of Mago National Park. It's a huge, unfenced, 3 000km² concession, and the hunting had been thoroughly enjoyable, but now it was time to move on to the main reason behind this my third trip to Ethiopia – mountain

*A high mountain beather nyala – note the difference in the coat and
horns to the forest mountain nyala I shot.*
PHOTO: Nansen Rouanos





Our base camp in amongst the Kosso trees at Odo Bulu. My tent was the one in the middle and the dining tukul is on the left.



Our dining tukul at our base camp at Odo Bulu. It was bitterly cold at night and a fire was most welcome in the evenings



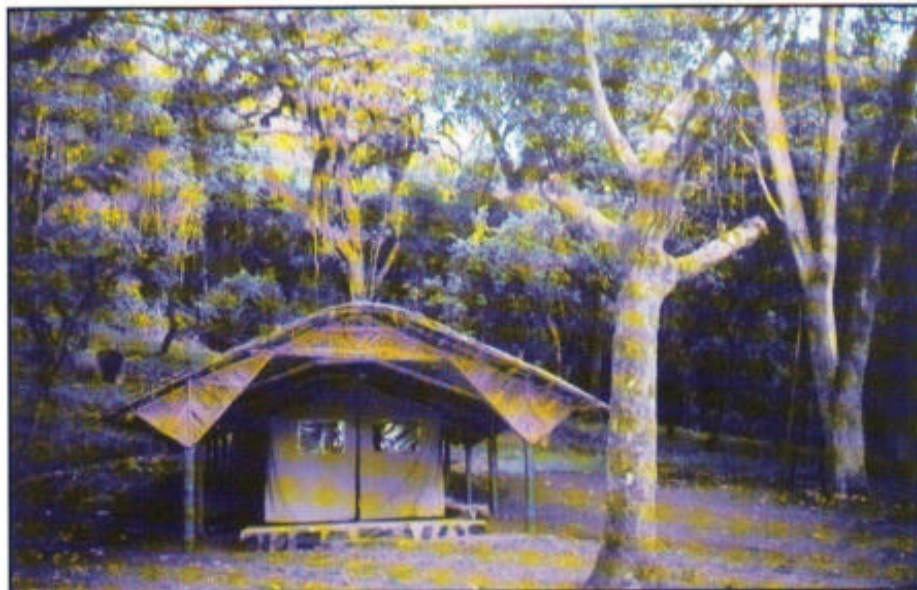
nyala – that magical, mystical, mysterious beast of the high mountains.

In the morning, after the charter flight deposited us in Addis Ababa, we set off in Nassos' Chevy 4x4 double cab, loaded to the gunwales with food, drink and equipment. The nine hour drive, to the south-east of the country, would take us through a host of little villages, over an 3 500 metre pass in the Bale Mountains, on through the Bale Mountain National Park itself, through the large town of Robi, and on to our final destination at Odo Bulu.

As we weaved our way through the barley fields close to our destination, little children ran out of round, thatched tukuls, or rondavels, shouting hello in Oromo or "Feringe", the Amharic word for stranger, derived from the time the French built the main railway line from Djibouti to Addis.

Up we ground. Up and up. Slowly we left the people behind. Then the natural Odo Bulu forest enveloped us. Big kosso trees with their red fruit hanging down like gigantic bunches of grapes and which form the basis for all anti-tapeworm medicine. Vines, mosses, ferns, flowers, orchids and grasses. It was as if we were suddenly immersed in cool, crystal clear, calm green water.

The neat, well thought out and constructed camp came into view. There was the familiar smiling face of Seeum, our camp waiter, emerging from the large, central, dining tukul. And Daniel



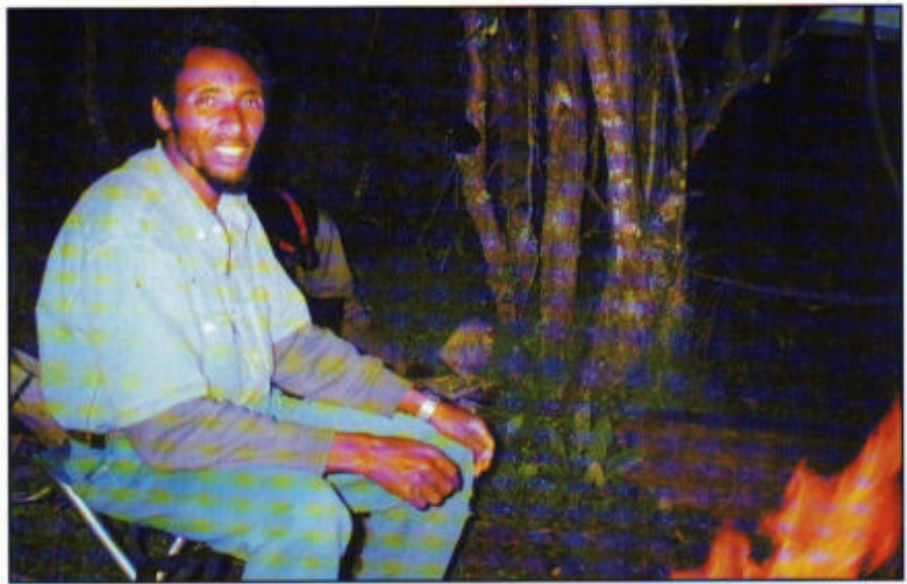
My tent topped with a bamboo bark "fly" at our base camp at Odo Bulu.

the cook. Both of them remembered the South African who had given them springbok green, warm, woolly hats with the South African flag emblazoned on the front at the start of my second mountain nyala hunt in the Munessa forest. I almost felt as if I was returning home and, after a lengthy, hot shower – the water piped from a spring near the mountain top over-shadowing the camp, via a Rhodesian boiler – to spacious safari tents, roofed over with a covering made from bamboo bark, I felt ready to take on the task at hand.

Mountain nyala hunting is like no other kind of hunting in Africa. There are two basic kinds – the high mountain heather hunt and the forest hunt. Not only was the type of hunting different due to the separate kinds of terrain and habitat, but the animals looked and behaved differently.

Forest nyala are a darker grey versus a minky brown, are bigger in body, eat differently (forest nyala are browsers whereas their up country cousins mainly graze), and their horns are shaped and constructed differently. Most of the forest variety have a very prominent ridge running around the horns and detailing the spiral. They curve sharply in and sharply out to create an acute angled lyre shape. The high mountain nyala lack the prominent ridge and have thinner more gently curving horns.

Hunting methods also differ quite markedly. In the high mountain heather, the nyala is more exposed to view and, in a way, the hunting is



Sayfon, our local chief tracker sharing our campfire on return from our successful mountain nyala hunt. Sayfon is an ex-poacher who now channels his passion for hunting into more lucrative, legal and sustainable pursuits.

simpler if not exactly easier. Teams are dispatched to high points and, with binoculars and spotting scopes, can scan a large area quite quickly and easily. Even when the nyala bed down, typically between 10:00 and 15:00, they still stand out amongst the heather.

As an aside, bedding down times depend on a number of issues. For example, if the weather is good and the moon is full, the nyala will feed at night and bed down earlier and remain there longer. On the other hand, in the cool, canopied, natural forests, away from people and the attendant noise and commotion, nyala may bed down later and for a far shorter time, particularly

in a dark moon period or when it has rained in the night, both factors limiting their ability to feed at night. In essence, therefore, booking a hunt during a dark moon period makes sense.

In the high mountains (they can reach over 4 000 metres – in the Bale Mountain range, the highest mountain is a touch shy of 4 400 metres and is the second highest in Ethiopia), the hard part is stalking close enough and quickly enough, before the bull ups and leaves. In the thin air, where a 500 metre climb can leave even the fittest hunter gasping like a goldfish in an empty bowl, this is much easier said than done. The shots are also invariably long ones and, on average, in the



Nassos Roussos sitting outside my tent at our fly camp at 9 000 feet beneath the crest of Otmenna mountain in the Bale mountain range of south-east Ethiopia.



After three-quarters of a day, a young mountain nyala bull emerged from this broccoli-clad mountainside and wandered in and around the bare patch in the middle of the photograph.

region of 250 metres.

On the whole, however, having experienced both kinds of hunting, forest hunting is probably the more challenging. For instance, where in the whole broccoli clad morass of grass, moss, vines, creepers, shrubs and trees should you start looking? The terrain on the lower mountain slopes where the forests are found, normally consist of a series of steep, narrow, serrated, steak knife-like ridges, separated by deep river bottomed ravines. This makes it difficult to glass much more than two square kilometres at a time and, therefore, a detailed knowledge of nyala movement and habits is essential. For example, the drier it is, the higher the nyala move on the mountain. They prefer to spend the night high on the mountain, preferably in an open area, and then descend and browse to the lower rivers before bedding down and reversing the process in the afternoon. They have a limited sense of territoriality but, when in a given area, tend to use the same routes to and from their resting and browsing areas. Then again, although nyala are born all year round, the peak birthing period is around October and November and, therefore, January and February are the months when the bulls are most likely to lose their inhibitions, inasmuch as this ever happens to these cautious, clever beasts.

There is something very special about hunting one animal and one animal only. A bit like putting all your money on zero at roulette. No distractions. Totally focused. Winner takes all. On

the other hand, as day after day clicks by with not a bull sighted, there is no light relief to help keep up your spirits. Like all the top trophy animals of Africa – you hunt them with your head – and it is so important to stay positive and not let your head, nor those of your team, droop. I often take small gifts for the hunting team for just such an eventuality – T-shirts, woolly hats, pocket knives. It's amazing how the appreciation you show for their efforts, coupled, sometimes, with an afternoon off, can help lift the whole team and you as well.

And so it was that mountain nyala hunting slipped into a steady rhythm. Up at 0:h15. Out of camp, on foot, in the dark, at 06:00. Two to four hours per day on horse back to reach and return from the chosen ravine. One to two hours per day climbing and clambering into and out of the extremely steep lower reaches which the horses could not reach safely. And hours and hours of looking. And I mean really looking, not scanning. Good quality 10 x 40s are the best binos for the job and it is important to minutely quarter every aspect of the sight picture before moving on. And despite the fact that you have carefully examined an area, looked through every shrub and bush, checked and re-checked every shadow, nook and cranny, you need to do it again and again. You never know when a nyala is going to rise up, like a phoenix from the ash gray shadows, as the sun moves and exposes his cool nook to its hot, penetrating rays. You also need to concentrate. Focus on the job at hand and not let your mind

wander. Once it starts to do so, you may think you are still looking, but you aren't really doing so.

Day one – nothing but two stunningly beautiful Menelik's Bushbuck ewes glowing like bright, reddish tan jewels amongst the shades of green on green – almost like miniature bongo – the only rival to mountain nyala for the top spot of Africa's premier trophy animal. Day two – nothing. Nothing at all. It's a constipated day, says Nassos. Nothing came out. Day three – one young 20" male mountain nyala cavorts along the steep slope of the opposite ravine wall, quite oblivious to the fact that his every move is watched with bated breath by six pairs of anxious eyes. Where are his two elder brothers that Walde, one of our four Oromo trackers, saw in the same spot before our arrival? Day four – nothing. A strong wind whistles up the chosen ravine, strengthening as the day wears on. By 16:00 we pack it in and climb out into the comparatively sheltered forest.

Riding through these ancient natural forests is like something out of *Lord of the Rings*. The overhead canopy blocks out the sun. It is quiet, dark and still. Beneath the canopy it is clear and you can invariably see around you for a radius of about 80 to 100 paces or so. The humus underfoot softens all noise. Everyone moves quietly. It's as if the forest casts a spell over everyone. Even the odd clingle of a bit, whiffle from a horse, only seems to enhance the sense of peace and calm. Involuntarily, I find myself



The picture was taken from the spot from which I shot the mountain nyala which appeared next to the horizontal strip of shadow near the foot of the glade.

thinking of elves and leprechauns as I duck beneath a moss encrusted branch with creepers, vines and old man's beard trailing downwards. Almost spooky, if you have a vivid imagination.

Day five – we decide to establish a fly camp at the south-eastern end of the concession. It is a three hour horse ride to the chosen area. We leave in the dark as per usual. As dawn lightens the track and I can see sufficiently to ride, I mount my mule, called Mbeki by Nassos. "He's just as stubborn as your president," he says. "He still

believes you get AIDS from the lavatory seat or something, doesn't he?" he queries. It is a memorable trip. First, we pass a "hob" of hyena caterwauling off to the left of the path, which is littered with their tracks and those of at least one female leopard and a civet. Clearly there has been a kill close by. Undeterred by the serenade, two small bushbuck ewes gaze at us curiously from about 50 paces before skipping off into the undergrowth. The trip tests my inadequate riding skills and I am nearly decapitated as I find it

almost impossible to duck forward while riding steeply downhill. I repeat to myself like a mantra, "Nothing bad happens unless you fall off, nothing bad happens unless you fall off." I really, really do not want to fall. It is almost three months to the day since I fractured two vertebrae in my back and, although I have mended well, it will still be some weeks before my recovery is complete. Somehow I stay on, even if somewhat inelegantly and, as we climb out of a deep valley, past stands of tall, green bamboo, I recover my equilibrium



This was the first mountain nyala I shot in the Munessa forest en route from Addis Ababa to Odo Bulu. When my taxidermist cut my full mount skin in half and mounted the cape on a lesser kudu, I knew I had to return to Ethiopia and try again. I am really glad I did.

and thoroughly enjoy the eight Menelik's Bushbuck rams and 12 females we see en route.

Us hunters part company with the camp staff, who go on to erect our fly camp, as we want to continue following a fresh, big, bull track from earlier that morning. We end up looking down a steep slope, through a narrow gap in the trees, at the dark brown patch of a salt lick. It is 10h00 and I do not rate our chances highly, although the tracks have led us this way. The lick is on the edge of a patch of ground on the crown of a small, round hill that previously served as home to a small village and the hut remnants are still visible. The area on the hill top has been stripped bare of trees for fire wood and the grass eliminated by over grazing. Every kind of nettle, thorn and thistle has encroached creating a horrible, impenetrable, intertwined mess. And yet, strangely, the nyala bulls seem to like these spots and we have often seen their fresh tracks near these matted, twisted, inhospitable areas, where every plant seems to want a piece of you and your clothes. Certainly the nyala did not appear to eat any of the noxious weeds and I can only speculate that they may use the dense thickets as protection when bedding down, much as I had seen them do in the Munessa forest.

We leave Sayfou, our head tracker, to watch the lick with Walde and break for lunch and to

discuss tactics. Hard boiled eggs, crisp, dry toast, cream cheese and delicious spicy meat balls were on the menu. If you like hot, spicy food, then Ethiopia is the place for you.

Nassos decides to leave Walde, armed with a small, two-way radio, at the lick with Mesfin, our national game scout, and head further down into the valley with Sayfou and Kinkino, to an open grassy glade, surrounded on all sides by forest. We arrive at just after 15:00 and sit amongst thick, pale green, panicum-like grasses and dark green shrubs, at the foot of a huge kosso tree. We are on the uphill side of an elongated clearing, shaped like a rugby ball, about 80 metres at its widest, which stretches away for a distance of some 265 metres. We are a little exposed and quickly and quietly cut two leafy branches which we plant to our front to act as camouflage. As usual, I immediately take readings of the distances to a series of reference points, near and far, in and around the clearing, with my Leica Geovid 7 x 42 binoculars. I pull out the legs of the bipod attached to the specially reinforced front sling swivel on my rifle and practise aiming at my various reference points.

Owing to the steep slope of the hill, the only way I am comfortable is by resting the feet of the bipod on the tops of my strong, waterproof, Italian hiking boots which, originally maroon in

colour, have thankfully settled into a dull, reddish brown and black.

There is not a lot to do now but wait. Given the smallness of the area exposed to view, there is not even the necessity of glassing to while away the time. Cycadas buzz and burr and the warm winter sun is absorbed by the dark, olive green of my shirt-covered back. It feels good. My muscles relax. I tilt the butt of my rifle 'till it rests on the ground. My arms drop. My head droops and drowsiness creeps stealthily over me...

Sayfou's hoarse, low, anxious whisper broke into my daydreams. As I whipped my baseball capped head off my knees my heart lurched. There, at my 160 metre mark, a massive mountain nyala stood broadside, energetically horning the mud beneath his forefeet.

A young male and beautiful, dove grey, mature female stood like statues, face on, staring at the impressive performance of the bull.

Where had they come from? How had they got here so suddenly? While I was slowly and carefully mounting my .375, I simultaneously turned my head towards Nassos. "Wait," he whispered urgently. "Wait, I want to check his horns. Be calm, he will pick his head up again. He must."

To fix the crosshairs of the telescope on the bull's left shoulder meant I had to tilt my feet on which the bipod was resting, upwards, as far as



A happy band of hunters – from left to right: Mesfin (national game scout), Kinkino (regional game scout), Sayfou (tracker), the author and Nassos Rousos.



This superb Rowland Ward quality mountain nyala represents the end of a quest which has taken 3 safaris and 33 hunting days to realise. If I look quietly pleased it is because I am.

they would go. I was excited but not unduly so that it affected my aim. I was confident. At this distance, with this size target, nothing could go wrong, go wrong, go wrong.

Still the bull kept up his Oscar winning performance. My calf muscles eventually started to tremble ever so slightly. I could feel the tension building in me. I wanted to take the shot on offer. I was ready. I wanted to shoot now!

I dropped my feet to the ground while still holding the rifle firmly with both hands, the butt tucked into the nook of my shoulder. Oops! The right hand leg of the bipod slipped off my boot. At that precise moment the nyala looked up. He was majestic, muscular, proud. He looked directly to the front, ignoring his audience. "Okay, he's a good one," whispered Nassos, awed as I was by the huge, thick, lyre shaped horns covered with mounds of moist, black turf, sprouting from the noble, Roman-nosed head of the bull. As the sights settled on its shoulder, I immediately squeezed the trigger. In my eagerness, not as gently as I should have. However, my last recollection of the picture in my sights was all dark grey shoulder and ribs as the bipod seemed to simultaneously slip off my boots again.

I was in time to see the nyala turn unhurriedly and regally to its right and, in two huge, powerful bounds, disappear up the steep bank and into the long grass and shrouding shrubs. Nassos raised his hands, palms open and facing the sides of his head, "You missed him! Oh my God, you missed him!" he said, a look of pain and disbelief written clearly over his tense deeply tanned face.

Clutching his head in his hands he exclaimed, "Oh no, oh no, not with such a bull. Please, not with such a bull!" I looked back at Sayfou and Kinkino who looked down at their feet and would not meet my gaze. I was in shock. Seeking an excuse for the inexplicable miss I muttered, "I think the bipod must have slipped off my boots as I fired."

In a state of helpless bewilderment, aghast at what I had done, I stumbled down the hill in the wake of Nassos and Sayfou, towards where the bull had stood, ignoring the dumbstruck cow and young bull as if they were a bad smell at a posh dinner party. Only when we reached the spot did the two mountain nyalas reluctantly move towards the treeline.

There was no blood. Nassos urged Sayfou to pick up the tracks and follow them. There was an urgency to everything he said and did. His eyes burned holes in my head when he looked at me. "What have I done?" blurted involuntarily from my mouth.

As we followed the tracks in the hope that the bull was not spooked too badly and would seek to rejoin his companions, any hope that I had hit the bull faded. Thirty, forty, fifty, then sixty metres wound slowly past as we head up the bank. No blood. Just big, deep bull tracks scuffing globs of still damp black turf from the ground as it effortlessly cantered up the steep slope.

Suddenly Nassos pointed to down at the tracks. "Blood! You hit him!" I bent over to examine the tiny splotch of bright red blood gleaming against the emerald green of a fallen leaf over which it was

splattered. Hope surged through my chest. I had barely digested the information when Sayfou ran towards me, arms outstretched, shouting "Shoot! Shoot!" I stared wildly around me. Where was the bull? I couldn't see it! My head swivelled frantically like the turret of a demented tank. Sayfou grabbed me by the shoulders and a torrent of Amharic flowed over me. He turned me to my left and pointed, shaking me in the strange passion which gripped him and turned him into an uncontrollable maniac.

"There he is," shouted Nassos. "What a monster!"

"Where? Where?" I queried frantically.

Eventually, I followed Nassos' gnarled, nicotine-stained forefinger as he pointed to the ground two metres away. There, on the ground, stretched out on his right side, as if fast asleep, lay the most magnificent mountain nyala I had ever seen, a bright buttonhole of blood precisely marking the position of its heart on its left shoulder.

We went crazy. Berserk. We hugged. Shouted. Shook hands. Ran in circles. Even danced a little. For a few moments we were drunk. Delirious. In a world of our own. The ponderous arrival of the overweight Kinkino, the regional game scout, brought us to our senses. Sort of...

I cannot begin to explain the complex array of emotions that rampaged through my brain, body and being. It had been the longest 70 metre walk of my life. If a hangman's noose had been waiting for me at the end of it, it could not have been any longer.