



A Cape buffalo in thick (!) cover, near the Great Rift Valley. The author took this photograph from the only angle where he could even see the buffalo through the thorns. One would not want to go into this stuff carrying a single-shot .45-90 – or a single-shot anything, for that matter.

The Un-Caped Buffalo: *With a .45-90 Among the Ghosts*

A few years ago, while testing some bullets, I found myself with room for one more shot in the penetration box, and decided to try out a practice round that I use in my .500 Nitro Express.

The cartridge fires a 515-grain hardened lead bullet at about 1200 feet per second – a load not unlike most of the old heavy blackpowder rounds that hunters in Africa used routinely in the 1880s. The big bullet hit the water-soaked, compressed newsprint in the bullet box, and bored a purposeful 30-inch tunnel all the way to the bricks and plywood that braced the paper in place.

This is excellent penetration, considering a good 500-grain expanding jacketed bullet from a .458 Lott penetrates two feet or less. Intrigued, I took one of the lead loads with me to Africa later that year and fired it into the carcass of a Cape buffalo. We traced its path for more than two feet through the buffalo's chest before losing it in the gore.

All of this started me thinking that it would

be interesting to actually hunt Cape buffalo with this rifle and this load — partly to see what it would do on a living, fire-breathing *mbogo*, and partly to emulate the hunters of old in a paroxysm of nostalgia.

Then I came to my senses.

An appropriate dangerous-game rifle is not a gun that will kill buffalo under ideal circumstances, it is one you would carry into the

bush after a wounded animal under the worst circumstances. For that, my .500 with lead bullets is marginal at best.

Over the years, any number of people have taken weird weapons to Africa to hunt Cape buffalo or elephant, solely to prove it is possible. Animals have been taken with bows and arrows, handguns from .44 magnum on up, and a few reportedly with Paradox guns firing shot and ball.

When it's been a visiting client intent on such heroics, there has always been a professional hunter armed with something big and menacing to back him up. Most professional hunters of my acquaintance regard such frolics as stunts and charge accordingly. I know personally of some intrepid South African bowhunters who have taken Cape buffalo with bows, single-handed, although they have always had a big rifle in reserve for emergencies.

It is worth remembering, when such thoughts cross one's fevered mind, that when Rigby introduced the .450 Nitro Express in 1898 it was embraced, joyfully and wholeheartedly, as 'The Answer.' There was a reason for this, and it was not because lead bullets propelled by blackpowder were wonderful for dangerous game. They left a lot to be desired, and the nitro express filled the gap.

Last winter I was invited to hunt bison on a ranch in Colorado, the American 'buffalo' that is roughly the same size as the Cape buffalo. While it is not as routinely truculent, the bison is a rough customer. He does not take kindly to harassment and is more than willing to mix it up with anything that comes along.

One object of the expedition was to try out some of the latest Uberti reproductions of classic American buffalo rifles such as the Sharps and the Winchester High Wall. One was a .45-70, the other a .45-90. The latter was loaded with 500-grain lead bullets at 1250 fps – a load remarkably similar to my .500 NE practice round – and one that was used to great effect on the plains in the 1870s and '80s.

Altogether, we took four bison bulls weighing from 1800 to 2200 pounds. All were stalked to within 75-100 yards. Dan Deuter, the bison guide at Scenic Mesa Ranch, is also an historian and artist, and he drew us a detailed anatomical sketch of the bison to show where we should try to place our bullets.

The bison is one weird beast. While it appears immense viewed from the side, it rather resembles a flounder – long and tall from the side, tall and narrow from the end. Its parts are in odd places. For example, the shoulder is not where you would expect it to be, and the spine has some odd curves (not unlike the Cape buffalo). The heart is very low in the body. Where a correct shot on a Cape buffalo is directly above the front leg, a third of the way up the body, on a bison you try to shoot behind

the leg and lower down to take out the heart. It is possible, if you shoot too high, to miss both heart and lungs and inflict a wound that is serious and ultimately fatal; but before the buffalo keels over he will have led you a chase of eight or ten miles across the high, sagebrush mesa.

Where the Cape buffalo has short hair and a clearly defined body (assuming you can see him through the thorns), the bison is clad in a thick, woolly robe. The top six or eight inches of his head is really just a tangled mop. The whole top half of the animal, above the spine, contains nothing vital.

We were on foot, stalking a half-dozen bulls in an area of scattered sagebrush and tall grass, covered with a foot of snow. My problem, shooting from a kneeling position with a set of shooting sticks, was seeing where the bison's lower body actually began! In the end, I gulped and forced myself to shoot lower than I instinctively would have, aiming through the grass. The soft heavy bullet took out the bull's aorta. Ten seconds later he keeled over, struggled to his feet, went down again, and stayed there. Even trying to shoot low, I still shot slightly above the heart and it was lucky that the bullet hit the one spot that would put him down so quickly.

Two other hunters took two other bulls that I did not witness, but one absorbed about six shots over the course of a few minutes while the other went down at the first shot, stayed down for five minutes or more, then got back up and took more lead before finally dropping.

The second bull I saw shot was a carefully considered attempt to do something very difficult: a neck shot. Joe Coogan was the hunter – a veteran African professional who said he would never recommend such a shot to a client, but wanted to try it in the interests of science. Joe and Dan studied the anatomical diagram very carefully indeed before we headed out for parts unknown to find a group of big bulls.

As with my heart shot, the bison's long hair obscured the line of the neck, and just shooting for the middle is not good enough. To make matters worse, the animals were milling around, changing position. Since it was virtually certain the bullet would pass through regardless, we could not shoot with another bison behind our target.

Finally, presented with an instant's opportunity, Joe pulled the trigger. We heard the bullet strike, but the bison showed absolutely no sign of being hit. We waited and watched as they milled some more. It was as if no shot had been fired. In fact, we lost sight of our bull and had difficulty picking him out again. A neck shot is win or lose. We lost.

We circled around to put them on the skyline, and finally picked out the bull in question. Joe

settled in, fired again, and this time the bull went down with a crash. He lay there with all four legs stuck out rigidly, like a fighting bull when the matador puts the sword perfectly into the spine. He was not getting up again.

Exactly what this all proves is open to debate. Personally, I am quite satisfied that I do not need to take my .500 NE to Africa and hunt Cape buffalo with lead bullets, nor am I tempted to do the same thing with a .450 blackpowder rifle.

Leaving aside the obvious differences between Cape buffalo and bison, both undoubtedly tough, admirable animals, I strongly suspect that had we been hunting Cape buffalo with those .45-90s, we would have had some truly exciting moments.

As Dan Deuter explained, a bison is a herd animal whose first instinct is to kill or drive off any obviously wounded herd member to avoid attracting predators, so a wounded bison's first instinct is never to show weakness for fear of being attacked by his erstwhile friends. A Cape buffalo, taking a bullet like mine, would have jumped and lunged for the nearest cover, and we would have waited outside for the final dying bellow – or not, as the case might be. And if it did not come, I would not have wanted a single-shot .45-90 in my hands going in after him.

That realization tells me everything I need to know about hunting Cape buffalo with vintage rifles and rounds, for the sake of nostalgia, ballistic research, or to make headlines. One is liable to make headlines of a completely unwanted sort. ♪



The line-up tells the story. On the left, the (by comparison) diminutive .45-90 beside the blackpowder .450 No. 1 Express and the .500 BP Express. Both are substantially larger and more powerful than the .45-90, but neither is (or was) considered adequate for Cape buffalo. The .450 Nitro Express (r.), huge compared to the .45-90, was the first cartridge smaller than .577 considered fully adequate for dangerous game. But not with lead bullets.