



The Fair-Chase Lion Hunt That Made Us Wiser... and Older

By PH Hans Vermaak

The stars glistening brightly in the African sky and the two lions roaring at 40 yards reminded me of our insignificance in the universe as I prayed for daylight to creep over the mountains. Darkness generates primal fear; it makes our instincts ask: "What on earth are we doing here?"

We had a trophy lion to hunt. They were close, and as we sat motionless, we all wished for the same thing: that daylight would come soon to bring us comfort and some control over a dangerous situation.

The previous day my client, Sherwin Scott, and I had tracked two lions on a wide rhino trail high into the mountains. It was early when the lions had started roaring. We left the trail and headed for the roars that echoed through the valley, picking up the pace as we could tell they were on the move. Sherwin carried an exquisite .450 No. 2 double rifle that once belonged to an

Indian prince; it made my hands tremble every time I held it.

We were hunting in a 162,500-acre state park of open plains, mountains and valleys in the North West province – one of the few places in South Africa that offer true fair-chase hunting for lions. Trophy hunting here is strictly controlled, and the quota each year is limited to one or two – and sometimes zero – lions. The result is that their trophy quality is phenomenal. Coenraad Vermaak Safaris has had the exclusive hunting rights in this park since 1997.

Climbing the steep mountains covered with loose rocks hidden in the tall grass was tough

going. The summer rains had been exceptional and now, in April, it rained every day – mostly tropical thunderstorms late in the afternoon. As we approached the crest of a hill my stomach told me we were going to encounter the lions.

I was right. Loud roaring boomed down the mountain passes and valleys. When we reached the top and peered over the tall grass, all hell broke loose – only 60 yards away were four massive lions – every one of them 'shooters.' Nevertheless, both Sherwin and I immediately picked up on the male that stood out the most. Although they had not seen us, they fled in pairs, one pursuing the other, thunderously

roaring as they ran.

The lions disappeared out of the shallow valley, heading over another crest that led into a deep bowl at the edge of the northern escarpment of the mountain range. 'Our' lion was one of the two aggressive males in pursuit of the others. This was clearly a territory takeover that could lead to the death of any one of the lions. There was no telling how far the lions would go in this frame of mind, so I made no plan to circle or intercept them. Our only option was to follow directly behind them.

Lions, like us, prefer the easiest route, so we were back to moving fast down the rhino trail. My trackers, Patches and Robert, had no trouble ensuring that we never lost the massive pug-mark tracks, which were also a reminder that we needed to proceed with caution and not just speed.

When we reached the crest of the bowl, the roaring stopped. Other than the tall grass rustling gently in the wind, our surroundings were eerily quiet. We glassed the bowl and saw no sign of the lions. They must have dropped off the escarpment to an area of flat acacias, tall grass and tamboti thickets, about a thousand feet below the escarpment. As we moved down the steep slope into the bowl, the world suddenly exploded 45 yards in front of us and to our right. The two pursuing male lions, primed for a fight, had been resting after their morning's over-exertion, and were now deeply distressed that we had invaded their space. They mock charged us in a blur of black and tawny, and disappeared over the escarpment into an area known as 'the springs' directly below us.

Instead of pursuing them on foot, better judgement prevailed, and we decided that a fresh bait strung up near the springs would be our next plan of action.

The zebra was perfectly set, hanging upside down, nose five feet above ground, from a medium-sized acacia. We built the blind next to an acacia tree 40 yards away, due north of the bait, and made a perfect drag that circled the springs and covered the foot of the mountain where we presumed the lions had descended. My guess was that, unless the aggressive newcomers continued their pursuit, the lions would come to the bait. Normally, a willing lioness in heat is the only thing that will keep a male lion away from a good meal.

With the scene set, we called it a day, and around the campfire that evening pondered our next move to hunt the species I so especially admire – lion. It's not the actual killing that hunters enjoy, but the privilege of being in pursuit, of being part of the rawness of the bushveld, to have limits tested, and to experience heart-stopping situations. Very few people get to experience the rush of adrenalin and other instinctive human emotions that fill hunters and that lie dormant in most of us.



Sherwin Scott and PH Hans Vermaak with Sherwin's lion that scored 27 8/16, making it the SCI #1 lion in the South Africa/Namibia category.



Sherwin and his .450 No. 2 double rifle, where the hunting party encountered four 'shootable' male lions during a territorial dispute.



Hans's trackers, Patches and Robert, had no trouble keeping the hunters on the big pugmarks of the two male lions. But sometimes caution is more important than going fast on the track.



Sherwin Scott and PHs Hans Vermaak and James Quin with a truly spectacular free-ranging trophy lion.



Sherwin's lion had a massive head and body. The fact that its ears are not visible indicates a truly good mane.

Soon enough, we'd be back in our flimsy blind, sitting in total darkness, surrounded by the unexpected, except the knowledge that the lions would surely be there.

With my 3.00 a.m. coffee and cigarette around the campfire, the smell of moisture and clean air made me look down and notice how wet the ground was. We packed the Land Cruiser in the faint light of a kerosene lamp and fired up the engine.

Twenty-five minutes later, the vehicle's lights swooped over the bait – devoured, except for the rump. Although there was no sign of the lions, they had to be nearby. We drove directly to the blind and parked the vehicle broadside, right at the entrance of the blind. We slid quietly out of the vehicle, through the spongy soil and into the blind. The vehicle gave a feeling of comfort, but as it pulled away, all that remained was the blind, the darkness, the eerie silence, and the lions.

I was sure I heard a grunt. Then I heard it again to our right, about 40 yards away. First

one lion started, then the other joined in almost instantly, sounding like a slightly out of tune duet. It was so loud that it felt as though they were in the blind with us. It lasted only minutes, but it seemed like an hour. As the roars petered out into familiar grunts, I wondered what they would do next. The sudden, deafening silence meant that we didn't know where they were. Minutes passed in silence. Why was the sun taking so long to appear?

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of squishing footsteps and heavy panting coming closer to my side of the blind. The sound of a 500-lb lion with a full stomach walking through the mud, panting deeply, is unmistakable. I looked over at the game scout. His eyes looked like white dinner plates. And the way he looked at me made me think my eyes looked the same! Despite my trusty .458 Lott between my legs and the .450 in Sherwin's capable hands to my right, no amount of fire power can make you feel 100% secure when you're in the path of a lion with an agenda.

The footsteps kept getting closer, and the panting louder. Then there was heavy sniffing of the blind itself. With every muscle clenched and no one blinking or breathing, we waited for the lion's next move. After what seemed like an eternity, the lion flopped down onto his side, five yards from the blind. Soon his grunting and heavy panting started again. The gentle breeze picked up, and the acacia bush that we had cut to close the back of the blind blew over, exposing us completely! In the deathly silence, the sound of the bush toppling over sounded like a ton of bricks hitting the ground.

The lion grunted, jumped to his feet, and headed straight for the fallen bush. Why had I not secured it more securely! I have never made that mistake again. By pure miracle, the lion didn't stick his head into the doorway. Had he done so, it would have been a 50/50 situation: fight or flight. Our heads were turned 180 degrees, watching the door, rifles at the ready. Nobody was breathing. But the lion, satisfied that everything was in order, turned around and walked back to his resting spot, and then started a totally deafening roar that reverberated through our bodies and touched the cores of our souls. We didn't hear the roar, we felt it!

Soon, the other lion joined in. I could make out that he was already at the bait. Our lion then picked himself up and made his way to the bait. I kept hoping for those first rays of light to burst over the mountain. First light finally arrived, and we could now clearly see the two lions at the bait. The smaller one moved aside and let the bigger male take control of the carcass.

Sherwin squeezed off his rifle. The lion grunted, bucked, and took off into the thickest bush, directly to our right. The shot, although well positioned, was a fraction low for a perfect heart shot. We waited for about an hour before following up the tracks, hoping they would lead us to dead lion. But we knew this was wishful thinking.

The objective now was to stay together, take it slow, and stay focused every second. In most situations like this, many PHs prefer to go in alone and leave the client behind, out of harm's way. But Sherwin was a seasoned, experienced hunter and excellent marksman; he knew what the next hours would entail, and it felt good having him at my side.

The tracks indicated that the lions were travelling together. This meant that once we caught up with them in the very thick bush, it might be difficult to quickly identify the wounded lion. Visibility was no more than 15 yards at the most, with plenty of obstructions. In situations like this, you try to predict the various scenarios that might be thrown at you and imagine how you would deal with them. But when two lions charge you simultaneously in thick cover, there is no plan. You react on

instinct only. The brush in front of us exploded. We could just make out the shapes of two lions tearing through the bush, coming right at us. By a pure miracle they stopped just short of us, spun around, and disappeared back into the brush. Although we each had marginal shots, we could not fire – not knowing for sure which one was the wounded lion.

I decided we needed more firepower and I radioed PH James Quin back in camp, who was, no doubt, enjoying his first cup of coffee of the morning.

Bent low, James, Sherwin, the trackers and I cautiously approached an extremely thick clump of bush. We decided that going around it was better than going through it, and hoped to intercept tracks coming out the other side. As we rounded the bush and reached the same line we'd been travelling, we realized that either the lions had not exited or they had taken another trail. Then, just as we turned to walk away from the thicket, the bush behind us erupted into the now familiar sound of angry lions. Again they came. Again they stopped short. Again we had no clear shot. Reflecting on this later, we concluded that the healthy lion had been leading the charges, which thankfully turned

into mock charges. The weaker, wounded lion was following his lead, and for this we are, to this day, very grateful, indeed.

The bush went quiet again. The lions had disappeared completely from our view. After following the tracks for about 20 minutes, we saw that the two lions had separated, breaking a bond that had probably been formed when they were cubs. The healthy lion could no longer take the pressure, and the wounded lion was surely going to make his last stand soon. We'd been on their trail for close to ten hours, and the sun was dropping slowly towards the horizon. Time was running out. We came to a small clearing surrounded by heavy brush.

We were walking directly into the sunset. A shaded area with three-foot tall grass was directly in front of us, on the far side of the clearing, about 30 yards away. When the lion saw us, he growled, stood up, lurched forward, and launched into what would be his last stand. He was weak, and Sherwin, James and I were expecting him. Three heavy-calibre bullets hit him simultaneously, stopping him in his tracks, killing him instantly. As the last echoes of our rifles resounded off the nearby mountains, we were all flooded with relief, and

with emotions running high, we hugged each other. We were ecstatic to walk away unscathed from a truly dangerous sequence of events that left us physically and mentally exhausted. We also felt a deep sadness and respect for the spectacular lion we had just killed.

In the fading light we took photographs and admired the outstanding trophy. That night around the campfire we relived the day, and toasted the lion for humbling us, and the many privileges and camaraderie that we, as hunters, were able to experience. It was a fitting celebration for this lion that still, today, is the #1 SCI world record in the South Africa/Namibia category.

At the end of Sherwin's safari, we left knowing that the safari had made us all a little wiser ... and probably a little older too.

PH Hans Vermaak is Managing Director of Coenraad Vermaak Safaris, which operates in South Africa and Botswana. A PH for 14 years, he has hunted in South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Mozambique, and is on the Executive Committee of PHASA, the Professional Hunter's Association of South Africa. Hans and his wife, Sarah, have two small children, Emily and Caleb. 🐾