



An African sunset in Tanzania's northern Masailand silhouettes a distant Ol Donyo Lengai – an active volcano regarded as the 'home of God' by the Masai. By Joe Coogan



Handling the Danger Factor

To hunt dangerous game, “you have to be scared enough to be cautious and brave enough to control your fear.”

—Robert Ruark, *Horn of the Hunter*, 1953

Africa's mystique involves danger. Danger is what makes Africa's Big Five—elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion and leopard—so exciting to hunt. But the element of danger adds a whole new dimension to the hunt, and requires a hunter to assume a responsibility to make sure an animal is hunted properly and dispatched effectively.

Because of the risks involved with dangerous game, caution and common sense are key to a successful hunt. Adhering to a few basic principles ensures that an animal, no matter how dangerous, will be killed quickly and cleanly.

In a perfect world, a hunter would work up gradually to hunting dangerous game, but most hunters travelling to Africa have neither time nor opportunity to gain experience progressively. A licensed professional hunter provides experience and expertise, but even when accompanied by a PH, safely approaching animals that can bite, scratch, gore, or step on you, requires both physical and psychological conditioning.

Physically, you need to not only perform the normal hunting activities, which can be strenuous, but do so while also handling a big-

bore rifle that weighs 10 pounds or more.

Mental preparation is equally important. It means adopting an attitude and resolve that allows you to overcome your natural fear, exercise good judgment, and ultimately focus your efforts exclusively on the task at hand.

Fear is natural when facing danger, whether perceived or real. Fear plays an important role in hunting dangerous game by checking hasty decisions and careless actions. When confronting danger, fear should not leave you sweating and shaking, but rather lend a heightened awareness of the situation and your surroundings.

When approaching dangerous game closely, respecting the danger factor is vitally important because a spontaneous charge, although not common, is always possible.

Take buffalo hunting: When something goes wrong, it usually happens in a hurry, and split seconds can mean the difference between life and death. I remember one time in Botswana, looking over a herd of Cape buffalo, at close range in thick cover, when a bull charged out of the bush without warning, straight at us. The bull meant business, and with a reflexive reaction



Are you up to tackling the game that can fight back? Physical, as well as psychological preparation is vitally important for hunting dangerous game safely and successfully.

Continued from page 128

much like snapping off a shot at a flushing quail, I aimed and fired instinctively.

Fortunately, my bullet found its mark with immediate result: The 500-grain solid slammed through the bull's brain, his legs buckled, and his nose shovelled into the sandy soil exactly seven feet from where we stood. It all happened in a flash of movement and reaction—far quicker than the recounting of it. I found the bullet under the ropey folds of skin at the back of his neck.

When an unwounded animal comes at you like that, his strength and stamina are fuelled by a fierce determination, and he presents a formidable threat indeed. I've had to stop a number of wounded buffalo during more than 30 years of African hunting, but having to shoot a charging unwounded buffalo only happened once in all that time. But when it did happen, there was no margin of error. That is when you need to be sure of yourself and your rifle, and know exactly where to aim.

Philip Percival, the dean of East African professional hunters, and Ernest Hemingway's guide on his 1934 safari, said, *"I don't care a damn about these people who can split a pea at three hundred yards. What I want to know about a man is how good he is on a charging rhino at six feet."*

I began hunting buffalo with my father in Kenya in the late 1960s. As residents, we hunted often, progressively gaining the experience that prepared us to tackle the most formidable game. Kenya was very strict about issuing a licence for any of the Big Five, and it was only after one acquired sufficient knowledge of the game, guns, and hunting areas, along with actual hunting experience, that the game department would issue a licence for a dangerous animal. There were both written and oral examinations, with final consent for a licence given by the chief game warden.

One of our favourite hunting areas was Block 21-A, several hundred square miles of acacia bush and grassy plains along the eastern boundary of Tsavo East National Park. The muddy waters of the Galana River formed the area's northern boundary and drew game like a magnet during the dry season. This part of Kenya was classic big-game country: Fearless lions, ornery black rhinos, and bad-tempered buffalo were common, while its large tuskers were legendary. Herds of zebra, eland, impala, and fringe-eared oryx roamed the grassy plains, and the elegant gerenuk and elusive lesser kudu frequented the nearby woodlands.

On this particular trip, we were hunting Cape buffalo—*mbogo* in Swahili—the tough, gnarl-horned, sometimes foul-tempered African bovine. A herd of buffalo grazing on an open plain may seem as formidable as Jersey cows, but follow *mbogo* into thick bush and the situation



'Stopping power' attempts to define calibre in terms of the size of game it will stop. Here, the Cape buffalo charge was stopped with a Winchester M70 rifle in .458 Winchester Magnum, a calibre capable of stopping the world's largest game.

changes dramatically.

Contrary to many breathless descriptions, the buffalo is not indestructible. But he is intimidating, and hunting him requires plenty of respect and knowledge of where to shoot. It's also important to know how to reach the vitals of a buffalo from different angles to avoid wounding him and having to follow up in thick bush.

The optimum shooting distance is less than 100 yards, and the closer the better for making a lethal shot. The debate over guns and calibres for hunting dangerous animals has filled many books and generated lively debate around many campfires. A good rule is still to 'use enough gun,' which means as much gun as you would want if you were tracking a wounded buffalo. There are accepted minimums, either determined by common sense or, in some countries, required by law. Kenya set the .375 H&H as the minimum for lion and leopard; for elephant, rhino, and buffalo, .400-calibre was the minimum.

No matter what you use, however, correct shot placement is the key to killing cleanly and eliminating the dangerous follow-up.

For a broadside heart shot on all sizes of game, your point of aim is one third up from the bottom of the animal's chest in line with his front leg. This will put the bullet through the top part of the heart every time, with margin of error provided by the surrounding shoulder and lung area. No matter how big or dangerous the animal, if your bullet penetrates his heart, he will die before he can give any trouble.

'Karamoja' Bell, the famous hunter who shot hundreds of elephants with a .275 (7x57) Rigby, preached precise bullet placement. He insisted that, if the bullet is placed so that it disrupts a vital organ, whatever is used becomes less important. Hit the brain or spine and you

paralyse an animal, most likely dropping him in his tracks. But always be ready for a quick follow-up shot in case the animal struggles back to his feet. Brain or spine shots are not recommended for dangerous game – they are too easy to miss, leaving a wounded, energetic, vengeful and highly dangerous beast.

Dad and I located the tracks of two old bulls early one morning. We loaded our Winchester Model 70s, chambered for .458 Winchester Magnum, with 500-grain solids and, along with our Waliangu trackers, started following the spoor. The morning warmed rapidly as we followed them through thick bush. After about an hour we heard a cracking branch up ahead followed by a buffalo grunt, indicating the bulls were less than 50 yards ahead of us.

We were easing forward when one of the bulls suddenly stepped into view, not 30 yards away. I brought my gun to my shoulder and Dad motioned to me to take the shot. I placed the bead on the bull's shoulder a third of the way up from the bottom of his chest. Before I could shoot, the buffalo angled away, changing to a rear quartering shot. I waited and, when he again turned broadside, I pressed the trigger.

The shot shattered the stillness and the buffalo lurched forward just as my father fired. He crashed into the brush, then all went still. We waited for about 30 minutes and then took up his tracks. The follow-up was short and breathless but, fortunately, uneventful: The bull was down and I fired one final shot to make sure he stayed down.

That buffalo was my first, and he provided as exciting a hunt as any could ask for. It remains firmly etched in my memory, and the buffalo's horns have a place of honour in my home. Looking back at the experience now, I see it as a sound and successful buffalo hunt, and the key was that first shot, correctly placed. ♡