



HUNTING THE AFRICAN LEOPARD

by Paul Roberts

Paul Roberts is Managing Director of J. Rigby & Co and has many hours of experience in hunting the leopard while field testing his company's products. The advice he gives here to novice hunters would take many safaris to learn and his experience and views will also be of interest to professional hunters.

Leopards have always held a unique fascination for big game hunters whether in Asia or Africa, and leopard hunting has always been one of the greatest challenges for the true sport hunter for the following reasons:

1. Leopards are predominantly nocturnal and are rarely encountered in daylight.
2. The leopard's natural camouflage makes it very difficult to spot in almost any surrounding.
3. The leopard is by nature an extremely cautious and wary hunter and is diffi-

cult to get into a rifle sight.

4. Being feline in build, it is easily missed if shot incorrectly.

One of the aims of this article is to emphasise the importance of using the best possible equipment for the job and making your shot 100% accurate. Wounded leopards are very, very dangerous and by far the most common cause of injury and even death in big game hunting. There is hardly a professional hunter in Africa that has not had a problem with a wounded leopard. Having followed up 7 or 8 leopards in

the last 25 years, I can vouch for a slightly more exciting time than watching Gladiators. The leopard is called "chui" in East Africa and "ingwe"- in Southern Africa, it is not normally an aggressive creature until wounded – then watch out.

Where To Hunt Leopards

Now that it is no longer de rigeur or politically correct for every wealthy girl in Milan, Paris, Rome and Munich to have a leopard skin coat, leopard poaching has fallen dramatically and there has been an explosion in leopard popula-



PHOTO: HORST KLEMM

vious hunt in Tanzania where leopard was a prime trophy produced a 7ft male for my hunting partner on the second evening. This was not a set up but the result of a very experienced hunter, N'dorobo trackers and the sheer good fortune of spotting leopard tracks at a water hole by yours truly on the first day of the hunt. The biggest problem we had was persuading our two N'dorobo trackers to part with the duiker we used as bait. Patty shot the leopard that evening and I must admit that the 1½ hour follow up in the dark was a little hair raising. The shot with a .300 Win Mag using a 180 gr Nosler bullet was almost perfect. Almost perfect meaning 2 or 3 inches further back from the shoulder rather than "perfect". This resulted in a 200 yard death run and a very tense period to follow.

To illustrate just how important shot placement is, 2 or 3 inches further off target would have resulted in a battle in the tall grass in the dark with a 120-140lb cat – NO JOKE.

Botswana has again become an interesting place to hunt now that baiting is permitted once again. Whilst not advocating hunting made easy, to hunt leopards other than using baits is not really a worthwhile operation, especially to someone with a limited time allowance. Nowhere in Africa can produce a leopard in daylight with any degree of certainty without the use of baits. Some very large leopards are being shot in Botswana at the moment.

South Africa and Namibia are home to the world's smartest and biggest leopards. Certain parts of South Africa have ranch living really difficult to hunt very large leopards. They are usually 100% nocturnal and will not come to a bait twice. This is the place to look for 150lb plus cats but be prepared to shoot by spotlight; also be prepared for a blank hunt.

In the past years Zambia has produced some very good leopard hunting, including some exceptionally large cats. Friends who have hunted there recently have all succeeded in taking their trophies but with more difficulty than in the past.

Mozambique and Kenya may be opening up for leopard hunting in the not too distant future. Both countries have produced some superb trophies in the past.

And finally excellent trophy leopards have come from the Central African Republic. The savannah areas in particular have produced good animals of late.

How To Hunt Leopards

TRACKING: Tough but possible in the desert areas of Botswana and Namibia. First rate indigenous trackers, such as the Kalahari Bushmen, are essential. Two important reminders – be ready for

a fast accurate first shot and an angry cat at the end of a hunt.

PASS HUNTING: This is a term used when a leopard is spotted by chance during the course of hunting another quarry. I have always found this sort of situation a problem because when a leopard is crouching in grass cover it is difficult to verify whether it is an immature female or a full grown male. This sort of situation does not give the hunter the opportunity to fully enjoy the sport of leopard hunting which is unique in African big game hunting, the tourist hunter can participate and become more involved in leopard hunting than any other form of "the Big Five" hunt. He has the opportunity of helping to look for signs, shoot, help drag and position baits, choose the location of the blind etc. All of this participation gives a great deal of personal satisfaction if the hunt is successful. It will particularly appeal to those whose early hunting was woodland stalking in Britain because of the dawn and dusk element. It has a lot of similarity in some respects to foot stalking roe, sika and fallow.

BAITING: This method is by far the most popular and successful. It falls into two categories, (i) in daylight hours only and no use of artificial lights and (ii) with spotlight assistance which is permitted in certain parts of Africa, such as private land in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

The most important part of baiting for leopards is reconnaissance and more reconnaissance. Check pans and water holes for tracks and the larger trees overlooking water holes for claw marks. There are certain shaped trees with sloping trunks that look like "leopard trees". Check these for claw marks and hair. I recall looking for a suitable place to hang a bait during a dry August in the Zambezi Valley in Zimbabwe. There were old leopard tracks around a pan but nothing fresh. I turned to look for a leopard tree and, seeing nothing within a 150 yard radius, I walked over to a likely looking tree which I had previously ignored because it was too far from the pan to use as a lookout tree. On climbing the tree as far as the first fork I found fresh claw marks, hair and many other leopard signs. Furthermore, there was a tunnel of vision through the trees to the far side of the pan. We baited on that day, revisited the following morning and there was a fairly large female leopard. We did not shoot but the example shows the need for good reconnaissance and preparation before setting a bait.

Rifles For Leopard Hunting

There are two primary features of importance for the ideal leopard rifle. First, good optics; by this I do not mean magnification but clarity. Nearly all European telescopic sight manufacturers

tions. I remember in the early 70s, it was extremely difficult for your PH. to get you a shot at a leopard and the success rate was far less than 50/50.

Zimbabwe, in my experience, today offers as good a chance as any African country for a successful 14 day leopard hunt. On the six occasions I have hunted leopards in Zimbabwe, I have bagged four, lost one, wounded one and on only one occasion not shot.

As far as Tanzania is concerned we have a situation that has improved tremendously. At present, most leopard hunts that are properly conducted now either end in success or at least the opportunity to shoot a leopard presents itself. On my last hunt in Tanzania with Luke Samaras in the Selous Game Reserve, whilst I did not shoot a leopard, I was not in fact specifically hunting leopards. I did however have three opportunities to shoot adult leopards. We believe that all three were female so I did not shoot. The pre-

produce a 1.5-6 vari-power usually on a 30mm tube and I consider this ideally suited to the purpose. It also doubles as a very good all round African hunting scope. The power at which it is set for the shot depends on the distance to the bait. If under fifty metres 2½ - 3 power and if a long shot of seventy to eighty metres is required, then 4 power should be fine, but 5 or 6 power may be better. It is important to use as little magnification as you are comfortable with as this helps instant picking up of the animal when the PH says "ok take him". Many a leopard has been lost because the shooter had the scope set at 6 or 8 power and is wiggling the rifle muzzle around looking for the leopard. Any unnecessary movement is deadly in leopard hunting. Scope light gathering quality of the best makes such as Zeiss, Swarovski, Kahles, Schmidt & Bender and Doktor are universally good. Having used them all in poor light I really cannot give any preference, however I feel it only fair to mention that the new Doktor scopes with aspherical lenses, which cost a little less than some of the other brands, seem to give superb resolution in poor light conditions. The second most important point concerning rifles is that they are zeroed for the distance you will be shooting the leopard at, ie: if the blind is sixty metres from the bait, point of impact should be dead on at that range. A two or three inch error is not acceptable for a shot at a leopard. Leopards are very supine creatures and sometimes, as the light is fading, you have to take a shot that offers you a very small target. We are looking to kill instantly if possible, so we must have absolute accuracy.

Ideal Calibres For Leopard

In fact the bullet is more important than the calibre. I have seen very successful shots being made with .270 Win., .308 Win., .30/06, 7mm Remington Magnum, .300 H & H, .300 Winchester Magnum, .338 Win Mag and .375 H & H. I personally have shot leopards with .300 H & H, .300 Win Mag, .350 Rigby and .416 Rigby. The most successful brew I have used for instant kills has been .300 Win Mag with the 180 grain TUG bullet. Being a controlled expansion bullet one feels that it should not have performed as well as it did, ordinary Winchester Power Points seem to work very well and the Nosler Ballistic Tips would make a good choice in the .300 calibre. I am a little reluctant about them in .270/7mm calibres because of their over rapid expansion. I have used Nosler Partition bullets and found them to work well despite the semi-solid base. I think it is because I used them in High Velocity .300 calibre and their initial expansion worked well enough to make a clean instant kill.

The bullet should always be one of the

heavier weights available for the calibre such as 180 grain for 300 or 160 grain for 7mm. Leopards are not hard to kill if hit exactly right but will show tremendous determination to stay alive if hit slightly wrong, especially with too hard a bullet. I know my friend Jack Carter of Trophy Bonded Bullets will forgive me for saying that they and similar types such as Swift and Bitterroot are not the most suitable for shooting big elastic cats called leopards. The problem is that these bullets are ideal for most of the other African game and as for a lot of African shooting, the same rifle you will be using for leopard will be the one used for other game at greater distances and normally set a couple of inches high at one hundred yards. I strongly recommend taking great care and re-zeroing with the "leopard load" at sixty metres before taking the shot.

The Zeiss and Schmidt & Bender "dial a range" scopes really are useful in this area.

The Follow Up

This is the most exciting experience in Africa. After the "take him now" signal from the PH – the leopard's reaction to the shot is the most important thing happening in your life at that point in time. The reaction we all like and hope for is the "sack of potatoes, feet in the air, fall off the branch". The one we dread is the "leap off the branch and scuttle away". The "hunch up, grapple and fall" is usually quite good but sometimes indicate a hit a bit back. The "take the bullet, teeter and slowly fall" is usually instant death but unfortunately a very rare occurrence. So what next – it's called the "FOLLOW UP". Now, there are a lot of different points of view and I have a very definite opinion on this matter. It is absolutely no

use the hunter following up or even investigating the outcome of a shot at a leopard in semi-darkness with a scoped bolt rifle. So either stay out of the way or prepare to carry one of the following into the blind as well as your hunting rifle:

- .44" Magnum cal. pistol
- 3" Magnum 12 bore or 10 bore shotgun
- D/B rifle in 9.3mm or bigger

If the shot is taken at first light or the follow up is taking place in the morning then a bolt rifle with scope set at no more than 2½X or with iron sights is of some use but still not my first choice which is a short barrelled 10 bore D/B 3½" Magnum loaded with 2oz double 0 buck in one barrel and a slug in the other. Presuming that you have the correct armaments and the PH permits you to come along, by the way this may not always be the case, his instructions under these circumstances are law. You will have a serious falling out if you do not concede to his wishes. Follow the PH's instructions, do not try and follow any blood trail unless told to, in all probability your job will be to cover the trackers. Ask (quietly) what the status is if you have to otherwise keep quiet and use sign language. After 100 yards the probability of a dead leopard gets less and a live one much more likely. At 200 yards you have a problem on your hands. I have twice found leopards dead at quite a distance, the last being last season in Zimbabwe about 150 yards away, mostly up hill. This was a large female weighing circa ninety pounds, shot two inches back from perfect with a .375 H & H., the other, Patty's Tanzanian leopard. In both cases the shots were just good enough to kill but just bad enough for a 150 - 200 yard dash. So if, after 200



"The most important part of baiting for leopards is reconnaissance and more reconnaissance". The late Alan Lowe, a great leopard hunter, looking for a suitable tree to hang a bait. We shot the leopard from the tree on the right.

yards, you still have a blood trail be very careful. The cat is almost certainly going to be alive if you find it. Normally however if you have made a good shot the leopard will be found dead within 50 yards or less of the tree.

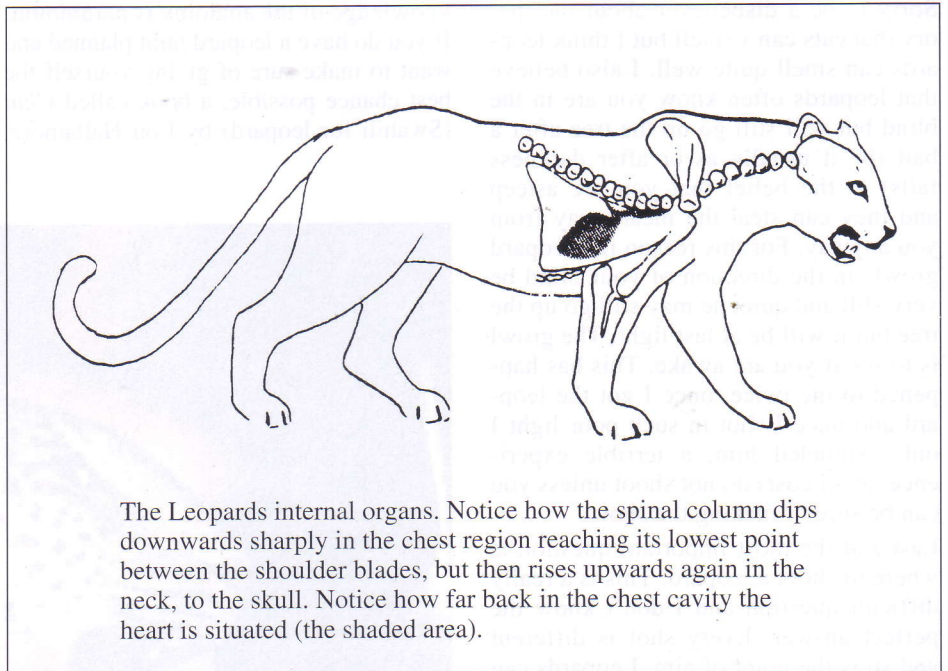
Equipment Required

In addition to the rifle you are going to take the shot with, you will need your back-up weapon. As pistols are now very difficult for British people to own, a double shotgun or double rifle is the best weapon. Some very fine ex-wild fowling 3" D/B shotguns by good British makers can be purchased for a fraction of their worth. Shortened to 25" to 27" re-choked with multi chokes, Nigel Teague does a superb job for circa £350, reproofed for 3" magnum, you have now got a really excellent leopard back-up and all round African shotgun. Mine is a W C Scott and it shoots slug very accurately as well as the buckshot loads and has the advantage over my 10 bore that it will shoot normal 2½ and 2¾ shells for bird shooting.

Next most important item is a really good torch. Do not go into a blind in the evening without one of these, Maglites have a very good range to choose from; also take your binoculars plus a camera with a flash. Also take into the blind a heavy jacket, perhaps it is too hot to wear but you will put it on quick enough if you have to help with the follow up. Gloves are also useful as it may get chilly as the evening goes on and also if whilst you are aiming your hands may be visible through the peep hole in the blind.

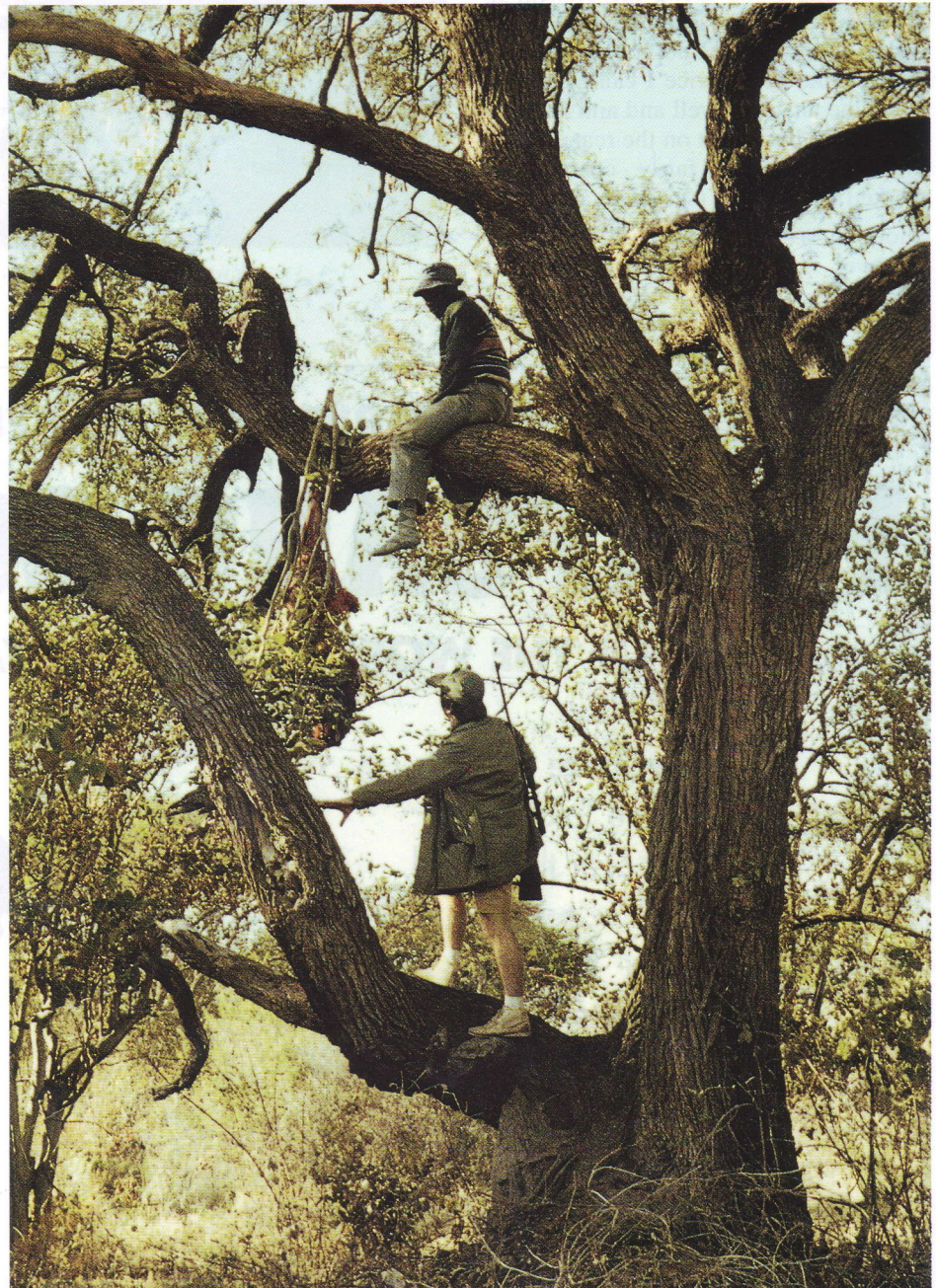
I remember once in the Zambezi Valley abandoning my 20X Zeiss binoculars which were on trial and just using the rifle scope as a viewing aid. I heard the guinea fowl getting cross with something and my friend and PH John Mells looked at me with a "something is happening" look and as I put my hand on the forend of the rifle to line up on the bait I found myself looking straight into the cornflower blue eyes of a very big male leopard who had picked up the movement of my left hand. Fortunately I was wearing green suede shooting gloves and by keeping stock still for five minutes, or was it half an hour – it seemed like it – the leopard stopped staring at me from all different angles and turned to look at the bait long enough for me to shoot just behind the shoulder. I have always felt that this particular leopard would not have been in the bag had I not been wearing those green gloves.

Additional items to take into a blind are: water, a book and a few sweets – smoking is definitely out. As far as insects are concerned, I am not too keen on spray as I feel it may give off too much scent.



The Leopards internal organs. Notice how the spinal column dips downwards sharply in the chest region reaching its lowest point between the shoulder blades, but then rises upwards again in the neck, to the skull. Notice how far back in the chest cavity the heart is situated (the shaded area).

COURTESY: ZIMBABWE HUNTER



"On climbing the tree as far as the first fork I found fresh claw marks, hair and many other leopard signs."

Sorry to be a disbeliever about the theory that cats can't smell but I think leopards can smell quite well. I also believe that leopards often know you are in the blind but will still go up the tree after a bait (be it usually as or after darkness falls) in the belief that you are asleep and they can steal the meat away from you anyway. For this reason if a leopard growls in the direction of your blind be very still and quiet he may still go up the tree but it will be at last light. The growl is to see if you are awake. This has happened to me twice, once I got the leopard and once I shot in such poor light I only wounded him, a terrible experience; at all costs do not shoot unless you can be sure of making the shot.

Last and the most important question is where to shoot a leopard. This is a really difficult question and I don't know the perfect answer. Every shot is different and so is the point of aim. Leopards can be asleep in the branch, lying on the branch, stretching along the branch, in the fork of a tree, sitting on the branch and in every case the point of aim is different – the best advice I can give is to study the anatomy well and aim forward rather than back, just on the rear edge of the shoulder and fairly central has worked well for me (see illustration).

Shooting a leopard in full broadside however is a rare occurrence so good

knowledge of the anatomy is paramount. If you do have a leopard hunt planned and want to make sure of giving yourself the best chance possible, a book called *Chui* (Swahili for leopard) by Lou Hallamore,

the very experienced Zimbabwean PH has a great deal of very useful information concerning all aspects of leopard hunting. It is available from Holland & Hollands book shop. □



"if you have made a good shot the leopard will be found dead within 50 yards of tree."