

Zambia: 1972

If the lion is King of the Jungle, then surely the sable antelope, with his aristocratic look, regal stance and head crowned with magnificent sweeping horns arching gracefully over his back, is the Prince of the Forest. I didn't realize this until I was older and wiser... and a PH.

By PH Geoff Wainwright

Xola & the Sable of my early days

The nostalgic memory of a particular sable hunt lingers in my mind, back to my early days in Zambia where I grew up in the Copperbelt mining towns of Kitwe and Nkana. The pulse of life was slower in the 1970s. Kitwe sprung up in 1932 from a collection of corrugated iron shacks that sat on top of rich veins of copper that provided its lifeblood. The mining community was surrounded by bush, animals, and the tribespeople that lived there. Father's sporting goods shop catered to the miners' outdoor activities, selling fishing tackle and firearms for Europeans, Indians and Africans from all over the country.

One day he presented me with an ageing B.S.A. 7x57 rifle. The bluing worn off the barrel and stock badly scratched, I handled it with loving care. One of his regular customers was a wizened old black man named Xola, whose arms and neck were decorated with beads, his face marked by tribal scars. His fame spread far and wide amongst the pioneer hunters of the day as an elephant tracker. With his ancient muzzleloader bearing the fading hallmarks of a Birmingham gunmaker named Howell, he captured my imagination. Providing him with a cheap supply of powder from the shop, we soon found common ground and started hunting together.

Our only means of transport into the hinterlands of Zambia was an old, battered African bus. We spent many exciting days stalking and shooting game in the dense miombo forest near a cluster of grubby village huts on the outskirts of Solwezi. One day my father, a keen fisherman, introduced me to an exciting new area. After a 10-hour drive in an old Land Rover, accompanied by his ageing friends, we finally reached Mumbwa, a government-controlled Game Management Area (GMA) set aside for hunting. We set up camp under a stand of shade trees. As night fell, twittering nightjars and hooting owls enriched our surroundings.

The next morning, with perfect casts and lures splashing into the water, my father and his companions reeled in fighting fish, while with my binoculars I scanned the opposite bank into the Kafue National Park.

My eyes feasted on a wealth of game during the day as puku, zebra, roan and sable plodded down to drink, my mind running wild at the prospect of a good day's hunting. I eagerly set out to explore my

We spent many exciting days stalking and shooting game in the dense miombo forest near a cluster of grubby village huts on the outskirts of Solwezi.

immediate surroundings for any signs of game and found fresh evidence of buffalo, sable and elephant and vowed to return someday with Xola as my tracker.

Three years later, with Xola sitting on the pillion seat of my powerful motorbike, haversack strapped to his back and fear breeding in his speech, I released the clutch and the machine rocketed forward. Xola, with a vice-like grip clung onto my leather jacket as we roared south on tarred roads flanked by miombo forests. With my

We broke the morning stillness firing up the bike, and took to a dirt road, bouncing over the potholes to the game post.

rifle strapped to the handlebars, we headed for Mumbwa GMA, occasionally stopping for fuel and food, speeding through villages and scattering chickens until we skidded to a halt at twilight on the outskirts of Mumbwa town. Tired out by the journey, we fell asleep under a velvet sky awash with sparkling stars.

Before sunrise, the village dogs barking in the distance, we broke the morning stillness firing up the bike, and took to a dirt road, bouncing over the potholes to the game post. The game scout, dressed in a smart jungle

green uniform and Aussie hat, saluted, clicked his heels, and after checking our licence raised the boom to let us pass.

That night, a yellow moon arched over the Kafue River. With the motorcycle headlight casting moving shadows, we spread our bedrolls on the ground and pulled our blankets over our heads to guard against the whining mosquitoes. When the rising sun burned the mist off the river, Xola's clanking pots woke me as he prepared a traditional African breakfast of maize porridge and black coffee. We ate in silence, then packed up camp, hiding the rucksack amongst some boulders. With Xola holding my rifle, his axe wedged over his shoulder, we rode away from the river, nursing the bike over broken ground down dusty game trails littered with animal dung into a landscape of rolling hills covered in miombo forest.

Twice spotting duiker, I stopped the machine, hoping for a shot. The duiker's legs bellied up beneath him as he bounded into the forest with long leaps to disappear amongst the trees. Then Xola fashioned a duiker call by rolling a leaf round a porcupine quill drawn from his crinkly hair. Cupping both hands round his mouth, he blew diminishing bleats, the sound penetrating deep into the forest. From nowhere a duiker suddenly leaped into view, stopping on dainty legs, tail twitching nervously. It

dropped dead to the boom of my rifle, the sound rolling over the hills and into the blue beyond.

Without warning, 200 yards distant, three sable bulls appeared, standing stock-still, their eyes locked onto us in drilling suspicion. I cranked the bolt back and chambered a new round, my sight picture over the iron sights coming into focus on the beautiful black bull that offered a perfect shoulder shot. Shocked into action by a breeze that carried our scent, they wheeled about, hooves thundering against the ground, muzzles pointing slightly downwards - a magnificent sight to behold. They disappeared - fleeting glimpses of movement, then nothing. Xola, a smile creasing his face, nodded his head.

We hid the duiker from a lone vulture circling overhead and took up the tracks, winding our way through the silent forest, rifle loaded and safety snickered on. The only sound was the rustling of fallen leaves underfoot. The tracks, at first bold and easy to



Copyright SA Tourism

follow where the animals had bolted together at speed, fanned out as they walked at a steady pace in the opposite direction. At one stage Xola stopped on the spoor and scuffed the ground with his canvas shoe, kicking up dust to check the wind, the dust filtering into our faces. We continued as the sun began to establish its reign overhead.

Some time later, Xola bent down and picked up a handful of oval droppings, crushing them between his fingers. He stared into the forest, his jaundiced eyes trained to perfection by years of hunting experience, locking onto our prey. We slowly sank onto our haunches, then sat down. At first I could see nothing, my eyes trying to focus, searching between the trees. The pieces of the puzzle gradually began fitting together to form the bulls that blended in naturally with the fire-blackened tree trunks that camouflaged their bodies with mottled shade. They stood looking back, aware of our presence, but not our whereabouts.

I remained dead still while Xola, a calming influence, leaned against the closest tree and quietly rolled a cigarette from old newspaper and village tobacco. His head wreathed in smoke to keep the pestering mopane flies away, we waited patiently for the sable to bed down. Time dragged by. Then without warning, the leaves started to whisper, then rustle loudly. The wind betrayed our presence and the sable stampeded away deeper into the forest. Disappointed and thirsty, we plodded back to the motorcycle, and with the dead duiker draped over the tank, we headed for camp, the thought of grilled meat and a swim in the river urging me on.

I opened the throttle wide to escape the tsetse flies, and we sped along a well-worn game trail, the grass on either side slapping our faces. Hitting a stump, I lost control of the bike. The duiker slid off the tank and we catapulted over the handlebars, landing heavily in a cloud of dust and a jumble of flaying arms and legs. I staggered to my feet and silenced the revving engine. Xola, despite age weighing heavily on his shoulders and blood flowing from his wounded foot, hobbled over to retrieve my rifle. He carefully examined it for any signs of damage while I righted the machine. The tension broken by his gravelly laughter, we remounted and continued.

At his command, we stopped to gather medicinal shrubs for our aching bodies. We reached our campsite in time to witness a massive crocodile slide into the river and vanish below the surface. Xola limped awkwardly down to the river and sat alert on a rock while he bathed his foot amongst

colourful butterflies and wasps floating in the air. Together we applied sap from the scrubs onto the wound, bandaged his foot, and fixed his shoe by wrapping it with bark string. With only the fire lighting our faces, we dined on grilled duiker and maize meal, serenaded by the loud honking of resident hippos.

In the soft light of morning, Xola greeted me by placing a steaming cup of coffee alongside my head. On enquiring as to his well-being, the old man, in a voice laced with regret, complained that he was unable

to hunt, but insisted we should not leave empty-handed. My rifle over my shoulder, I left camp, following the river, the damp air scented with rotting vegetation. I walked past a giant baobab tree sprouted from a seed from a time we didn't even know existed. Alone with my thoughts, I took comfort knowing that Xola was resting in camp.

My daydreaming was suddenly shattered by a waterberry tree exploding in a blur of flying wings and falling feathers as green pigeons burst out in flight. Taking stock of my surroundings so as not to lose myself,

my shoulder and with trembling hands settled the bead on his shoulder and slowly squeezed to take up the trigger slack. Suddenly the sable wheeled about, but not before my rifle recoiled into my shoulder. I saw sable hair fly from where I had aimed a 170-grain soft point bullet. The sable lurched forward, stumbled momentarily in stride, and took flight. Hooves beating the ground, it flashed away, dodging between the trees, preventing me from putting in a snap shot. It vanished into the forest. Panicked thoughts entered my mind when at first I found no sign of blood. Then a few drops confirmed the shot, and finally a steady stream glistened in the sun. To my relief, they led me to the dead animal lying on its side.

Overcome with excitement I fondled the horns, stroked the body, and looked into the glazed eyes that held no life - a twinge of remorse tugging on my heartstrings. Perhaps a piece of me died with the sable, but I also felt proud that the hunt had been successful, and headed back to camp with a spring in my step. Xola and I toiled hard on that joyful day and salvaged every scrap of the carcass. A drying rack was built, and we spent the remaining days lazing in the sun, fishing, curing the meat, and reminiscing about past hunts and others still to come.

Years later, back in my hometown Kitwe, although the hunt had faded in my memory, it was still familiar in the heart, and I decided to measure the horns, now covered in dust - not because it was important, but because they just happened to be there, begging for recognition. The magical sum - over 50 inches per horn - give testament to a trophy worth remembering. To the older and wiser PH, they hold a proud place on my wall to this day.

Geoff Wainwright was born in 1945 in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, then moved as a child to Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. A PH since 1974, Geoff has hunted extensively in Zambia and central Africa, and is actively hunting Tanzania today. A born storyteller, his book, Hunting for Trouble, is being published by Safari Press. Geoff is a Full Lifetime Member of IPHA and a member of APHA.



In the SCI Trophy Book, Geoff's sable, taken in 1972 in Mumbwa, Zambia ranks #3: 50-5/8, 50-2/8; 10, 10 = 120-7/8 SCI points.

I headed away from the river, cresting a high bank into the forest. As I rounded an anthill flanked on one side by low bushes, a loud snort not more than 50 yards away jolted my senses, followed moments later by a second. My emotions ran wild at the sight of a magnificent jet-black sable that trotted out and stopped. The bull had the aristocratic look of a chess piece, his head erect with horns sweeping down to almost touch his sides. He stood sideways, facing me, then challenged my presence, his hoof stomping the ground.

Knowing my bullet would possibly rake through the lungs, I eased the B.S.A. off