



Solitary gemsbok bulls stake out their own territory in hopes of attracting females.

Photo by GaryLewisOutdoors.com

Desert Warrior:

Hunting Gemsbok in the Red Dunes of Namibia's Kalahari

By Gary Lewis

We stood on the crest of a dune as the sun slipped toward the horizon. An evening wind blew spirals of sand off the tops of the ridge and beat a rhythm in the tops of the canvas tents. For the past week we'd hunted kudu, mountain zebra, red hartebeest and warthog in the highlands north and east of Windhoek. Now, after a six-hour drive south, we were in the Kalahari to seek gemsbok.

It is a land of primary colours: red rolling sand dunes and yellow grass under a cobalt blue sky. PH Hannes Steyn of Kalahari Trophies knows this thirsty country, perhaps as well as anybody alive. "My father farmed and hunted this ground, and his father before him," he said softly. "The Kalahari is the longest continuous stretch of sand in the world. Some say the dunes were pushed up by high winds. In the rainy months, water gathers in the pans and game gathers to drink of it while they can. Tomorrow, we'll see springbok and hartebeest - and lots of gemsbok. We'll drive and glass until we find a herd with a good bull. Then we hunt."

After dark, we gathered in the dining tent - the hunters, our PH and our cook, an elegant woman, Ruth, from a neighbouring farm who had prepared springbok steak and gemsbok heart to eat by candlelight. In the morning, the hunt would begin.

The desert is desolation, perennial heat and dryness, whose animals and plants survive by adapting to the temperature and infrequent rains. Here, for thousands of years, the Stone Age desert Bushmen hunted antelope with poisoned arrows and stored water against thirsty days in ostrich eggs.

In the summer, when the skies bring the much-needed moisture, the desert blooms with yellow daisies and pink- and white-laced everlastings. Tsamma melons and gemsbok cucumbers grow, storing the moisture that will slake the thirst of the region's animals through the dry times.

Grey-green camelthorns and the flat-topped shepherd's trees provide the only shade and relief in the landscape. Gha grass grows in the 'street' between the dunes, and yellow dune grass grows just below the crests of red sand.

Here, the desert air may be the purest and driest of anywhere on earth. Without pollution and no streetlights for hundreds of miles, the night stars stand out in unmatched splendour. Using my binoculars, I could count the moons of Jupiter.

The languages of the Kalahari are Afrikaans, English, Nama and other tribal tongues. Towns are separated by kilometre after kilometre of empty gravel road. The people here are self-sufficient; public electricity first came to the desert in 1989.

If any animal is well-suited to this country, it is the gemsbok. A large, heavily built antelope with a thick neck and long rapier-like horns, they call him the desert

warrior. Aggressive and dangerous when cornered or threatened, this grazing animal survives and thrives without surface drinking water for months.

Both sexes carry horns. Males have the thickest bases, and older females often sport the longer headgear. *The SCI Trophy Record Book* scoring is easy: The length of both horns plus the circumference of both bases are summed to come up with a final score. For the *Rowland Ward* score, only the length of the longest horn is measured. Since every animal in the herd has horns, and trophies of either sex are eligible for record book entry, the hunt is difficult and exciting.

While feeding, the herd is constantly on the move. At rest, gemsbok relax on the side of a dune, testing the wind for the scent of danger, while keeping their keen eyes trained on the expanse before them.

For an hour we drove and walked and glassed and mounted again to scout another herd. We found single bulls, small groups of gemsbok, and a herd of 20 or more. Hannes glassed every animal before we moved on. We were in the Toyota once more when we spotted the herd of 30. We watched them cross a dune and disappear over the top before we followed on foot. Maybe we'd catch them at the next dune. Or the next.

They were still on the move, putting distance between themselves and danger.



"From here we go on hands and knees," said my PH, Hannes.

Photo by GaryLewisOutdoors.com

Keeping our heads below the tops of the grass, we watched the herd walking away. "There's a big cow, probably 40 inches or better," Hannes whispered. "And a good bull that should go 38 inches." With my 8x42 Alpen binoculars, I could make out each animal. Young bulls, cows, and a big bull or two.

Hannes thought he knew where they were headed. But we'd have to move fast to get in place in time. And we'd have to top out on a dune before making the shot. "From here, we go on hands and knees."

He looked at me and I could see the question in his eyes. Would I make it? My mouth was dry; I'd drained the last of my



When approaching a downed gemsbok, use caution. Photo by GaryLewisOutdoors.com



Gary Lewis with his 38-inch bull gemsbok that fell to a .375 H&H Magnum. Photo by GaryLewisOutdoors.com

Warm to the touch, the sand was clean and red. We skirted the top of the ridge, slipping in and out of the depressions below the shepherd's trees and the camelthorns. Here a hartebeest had bedded within the last week. There a springbok had succumbed to last year's drought.

This is how a leopard hunts, I told myself - in stealth, close to the ground. Surely we were narrowing the distance, I thought, but I dared not look up.

We'd crawled to the crest of the ridge. Here we'd leave one rifle and all our unnecessary gear while we made the final stalk. I shed my binoculars and pack. Hannes kept his binoculars; one pair between us would be sufficient. "Now we leopard-crawl," he said.

Here the crest of the dune sloped downhill. The gemsbok, 30 of them, were spread out before us. We'd be exposed all the way. The nearest animals were within 400 yards now, but the bull we were after was on the far side, 100 yards farther. At least 150 yards to go to get within range.

We went on our bellies now, as low to the ground as we could get, moving as one man. With the wind blowing in our faces, we closed the distance, pushing ahead with our toes, moving from grass clump to grass clump. Ahead I saw a skinny, gnarled camelthorn tree. If we could just make it there before the animals caught our scent or glimpsed movement, maybe there'd be a chance.

We crawled on, my tree growing ever closer. I examined it. There was a branch halfway up. I could put the rifle on the limb

water an hour ago. And could I make the shot at the end of it? If there *was* an end to it. If there *was* a shot.

I nodded. His face bore the lines that spoke of the years he'd spent in this Kalahari sand, of the good, hard work and the laughter around a campfire. I'd make it and I'd stand up to the rifle when the time came.

"How far are they now?"

"600 yards and moving away. We're going to see if we can catch them, but we've got to go fast."

This was the closest we'd been all morning. I dared to look over the top of the dune grass and could see their grey and black bodies, the whites of their faces and the glint of horns in the sunlight, shining like upraised spears.

We crawled, our rifles in our right hands raised above the ground to keep from fouling the bores with sand. From tree to tree, from bush to bush, keeping our heads below the top of the grass, we kept moving.



Base camp in the Kalahari. Photo by GaryLewisOutdoors.com

New No. 1 Namibian Gemsbok in 2004

and steady it for the shot. There was 30 feet of open ground between us and the scant cover of the tree trunk. Could we make it that far?

"There're two on that far hillside," Hannes said. "The one on the left is a nice bull. He's the third animal from that big, green tree. The one to his right is a cow with long, funny horns. I want you to take the bull, but you'll have to wait until he is apart from the cow."

Slowly, we inched over the barren, red sand until we were in the shade of the tree. Hannes handed me the rifle, a .375 H&H Winchester Model 70 with a 6X scope. I set it on the bottom branch and found the bull. "Now!" he said. My heart pounded and I shook so much I couldn't make the shot.

"How far?" The herd was feeding away. "300 yards or better."

I held high on the shoulder, waiting for the cow to move away from the bull. There. Another chance. He stood still, broadside, the crosshairs found him, two-thirds of the way up the body. I felt the punch of the gun in my shoulder. There were gemsbok everywhere now, their horns flashing like black sabres. I struggled to keep the bull in my sight, jacking another round into the chamber.

"He's hit," Hannes whispered. "Get ready to shoot again, if you get the chance." The big bull ran 90 yards, coming toward us, then stopped, head down, broadside.

Steady now... 250 yards away, I told myself. I fired the second shot and the bull went down. Hannes left me alone then and walked to the top of the nearest dune to radio our driver. I approached the bull from behind, amazed by the length of horn and the powerful muscles in his shoulders.

As I unloaded the rifle, putting the live rounds back into the sleeve on the stock, my hands shook. Finally, I touched the horns and felt the dagger points. Here, halfway around the world, I'd reached my goal. Sitting in the sand, with my hand on the great bull's flank, I could feel the pounding of my own heart and the heartbeat of the Kalahari.

Later, when Hannes ran the tape along the black horns, they measured 38 inches on each side with thick bases, which added up to a 'record book' animal, a trophy, and a hunt I will treasure my entire life. But for the moment, none of that mattered. Tonight we'd eat gemsbok steak and tongue, and stare up at the stars as desert hunters have done for thousands of years.

Outdoor writer Gary Lewis lives in Bend, Oregon. He is the author of "John Nosler Going Ballistic" (www.garylewisoutdoors.com). This was his first safari in Africa, and he's ready to return in 2006.

In the early hours of April 2, 2004, retired pilot Art Frontczak and PH Hannes Steyn were glassing herds of hartebeest, springbok and gemsbok from the Land Cruiser. At mid-morning, Hannes spotted a large herd of gemsbok relaxing on the western slope of a dune, about 1000 metres away. Through his binoculars, he counted close to 130 animals spread out over the red sand.

A few clouds floated in the blue sky and a stiff wind blew from the north. From time to time, an animal would stand and stretch and test the wind for danger. Leaving the vehicle, the two hunters began their stalk, hoping to get into position before the wind changed.

Using the sparse available cover, the hunters managed to get close enough to the herd to take a better look.

For two years, Hannes had been watching one particularly long-horned animal. But never had he found an opportunity to get a hunter close enough to take it. A barren cow, quite old, she carried horns he thought would measure in the high 40 inches, putting the animal well up in the *SCI Trophy Record Book*. Today, he wondered if she was with the herd. Several big bulls and a few long-horned cows grew nervous, and the herd began to drift away one by one.

On foot, the hunters trailed the herd for two hours over the dunes. Hannes, patient, kept watching and waiting for the right animal to give them an opportunity. Several times during the stalk big bulls offered shots, but as Art made ready to shoot, each time they gave the hunters the slip. The wind, though it made the animals nervous, kept the sand cool enough for the hunters to lie on their bellies.

Finally Hannes saw her. "There she is," he whispered. Hannes slipped below the

dune and helped Art find a spot just below the crest. Using a camelthorn tree for cover, they set up the shooting sticks. "170 yards."

Art couldn't be sure he was looking at the right animal. Suddenly one gemsbok stood up. The one long-horned female Hannes had been hoping to see was standing alone, broadside, while the others remained bedded.

Art settled the butt of his .338 into his shoulder, compensated for the heavy crosswind, and tightened up on the trigger. At the shot, animals came to their feet all around her, running, stopping, looking around. The big female ran 60 yards and went down.

When Art put the live rounds back in his pocket, his hands shook. Hannes couldn't hold his binoculars for his hands were shaking too, but there was a smile on his face. As they made their way through the sand to the gemsbok, Hannes could barely contain the excitement in his voice as he explained the greatness of this animal.

Art, who had learned to hunt in Germany, bent to run his hand through the coarse hair on the animal's back and touch the needle-sharp tips of her black horns. Kneeling, Hannes took a small clump of grass and placed it in the animal's mouth, offering it the traditional 'last bite,' out of respect for the animal, and handed one to Art who put it in his hatband. "Weidmann's heil," said Hannes. "Weidmann's danke," Art answered.

In the field, the horns measured 47-4/8 inches on one side, and the tape stretched to 50 on the other. After the 60-day drying period, they measured 47-4/8 and 49-5/8 with six-inch bases for a total 109-1/8 SCI, making it the (pending) new No. 1 for Kalahari Gemsbok (Namibia). Its longest horn also made it a new potential No. 1 for Rowland Ward. Art Frontczak had taken the trophy of his life. **GL** 🇳🇦



PH Hannes Steyn congratulates Art Frontczak Jr. on the trophy of his life: The new No. 1 Kalahari Gemsbok (Namibia). Photo courtesy Art Frontczak, Jr.