



Lechwe Legends

Kafue Lechwe – introduced to the plains of the eastern Cape.

By Peter Flack



Kafue Lechwe.

I stood on the concrete-grey remains of a brittle termite mound, surrounded by pale fawn, head-high dry reeds. The indifferent, blustery midday breeze puffed and rustled leaves and stems against one another. Otherwise, silence reigned supreme. Nothing else moved.

My spirits were low and sinking lower still. I felt a hollow, leaden feeling creep across my insides. What had happened? What had gone wrong? I replayed the shot in my head:

The lechwe bull had been lying down, broadside on, in a small clearing amongst the reeds, looking to my right. He had not noticed me as I silently skirted a dense stand of reeds at the edge of the opening to the clearing and so I edged carefully back behind the reeds I had just passed.

I slowly sat down, wrapped the broad khaki webbing sling from my .375 around my left biceps and forearm, rested my elbows on my knees and sighted through the standard, fixed 4 x Bushnell Scope. Only some 80 metres separated me from the bull, and I could clearly make out the coarse, reddish hairs on his shoulder.

Yes, I was a little uncomfortable, but not unduly so, about taking the shot with the animal lying down, as I was not sure what the bull's posture would do to the positioning of the internal organs. Nevertheless, the ground was almost bare between the lechwe and myself and instinctively I found the crosshairs glued low on the bull's shoulder. The opportunity was too good to pass up. For the last two weeks, whenever we found a good lechwe bull it was invariably standing in water, over 300 metres away, with no prospect of us getting any closer. Besides, I had just bought the .375 and had not learnt its limitations, or mine, for that matter. I mean, this was a rifle that the pros used to shoot buffalo and elephant. Provided I put the bullet there or thereabouts, I felt sure it was bound to do the job. All these thoughts rattled around my head in a moment, and before I knew it I found my right forefinger tightening almost involuntarily and curling itself around the two-and-a-half-pound Timney trigger.

As I recovered from the recoil, expecting to see a dead lechwe stretched out on the ground, I was in time to see the animal leap to its feet and gaze intently in the direction in which it had been originally lying. Before the crack of the 270 grain Winchester Power Point bullet had fully dispersed, I ejected the empty cartridge case and replaced it with another. At the second shot the bull leapt convulsively forward and vanished into the thick curtain of surrounding reeds.

Like puku and sitatunga, the first lechwe was "discovered" by Livingstone and his companions Oswell and Murray who travelled with him in 1849 on his first journey to Lake Ngami. After leaving the lake, and descending the valley of the Zougga River, he wrote, "We discovered an entirely new species of antelope, called lech' or lechwi. It is a beautiful water-antelope of a light brownish-yellow colour. Its horns – exactly like those of the

Aigoceros ellipsiprymnus, the waterbuck, or tumoga of the Bechuanas – rise from the head with a slight bend backwards, then curve forwards at the points. The chest, belly, and orbits are nearly white, the front of the legs and ankles deep brown. From the horns, along the nape of the withers, the male has a small mane of the same yellowish colour with the rest of the skin, and the tail has a tuft of black hair."

Oswell sent a specimen of the newly-found antelope to his friend Captain Vardon, and it is referred to in the minute book of the Zoological Society of London on 11 June 1850, and was included in Gray's "Synopsis of Antelope and Strepsicerces" which was read on the same evening. Dr Gray played a role in the naming of another lechwe, the Nile or Mrs Gray's Lechwe, the Latin name of which was at one time *Kobus leche maria*, the "Maria" part being his wife's first name.

Selous provided a full mount to the British Museum of the lechwe shot by himself along the Chobe River in 1881, although he referred to it as a "Leegwee" antelope. In his paper, *Antelopes of Central South Africa*, he wrote that, "This Antelope is first met in the marshes of the Botletie River, and is very numerous in the open grazing plains which are always more or less inundated by the Tamalakan, Mababe, Machabe, Sunta and Chobe Rivers. It is also common along the upper Zambezi in the swamps of the Lukanga River about 150 miles to the south-west of Lake Bangweulu, which I visited in 1878. There I found the Leegwe Antelope in large herds.

"After Spek's Antelope (sitatunga)* the Lechee is the most water-loving antelope with which I am acquainted, and is usually to be seen standing knee deep, or even up to its belly, in water, cropping the tops of the grass that appear above the surface or else lying just at the water's edge. As is the case with *Tragalephus spekii* (sitatunga), the backs of the feet are devoid of hair between the



hoof and the dew-claws, whilst in the Pookoo, as with all other Antelopes, this part is covered with hair. In some parts of the country Leegwee Antelopes are very tame, in others, where they are persecuted by the natives, they are excessively wild. When they first make up their minds to run they stretch out their noses, the males laying their

horns flat along their sides, and trot; but on being pressed they break into a springing gallop, now and then bounding high into the air. Even when in water up to their necks, they do not swim, but get along by a succession of bounds, and make a tremendous splashing. Of course, when the water becomes too deep for them to bottom, they are

forced to swim, which they do well and strongly, although not as fast as the natives can paddle; and when the country is flooded, great numbers are driven into deep water and speared."

There are two basic kinds of lechwe. The first type, the common lechwe, is separated into three sub-species: the Red Lechwe *Kobus leche leche* from Botswana, described by Livingstone and Selous, the Black Lechwe *Kobus leche smithemani* of Lake Bangweulu and the Kafue Lechwe *Kobus leche kafuensis*, which is the intermediate sub-species situated geographically between the two others.

Richard Estes in his book *The Behavioural Guide of African Mammals* says that, "The Kafue population, which possibly numbered half a million a century ago, numbered 50 700 in 1987, a sharp drop from the 100 000 counted in 1971, before construction of hydroelectric dams that altered the natural flooding cycle and The Black Lechwe population, estimated at 150 000 in the 1930s dropped to probably below 30 000 when the water level at Lake Bengweulu rose in the late 1940s, eliminating much of its habitat, but increased to 41 000 by 1983, despite poaching. Smaller populations of the red lechwe inhabit the flood plains bordering other major rivers and swamps of Zambia, Angola and Botswana."

The second member of the species, the Nile or Mrs Gray's lechwe, *Kobus megaceros*, is completely separate from the other types of common lechwe,



A flood plain in the Okavango swamps – typical Red Lechwe terrain. In fact, we found a small herd on the island in the photograph.

Hunting



The author and Derek Carstens with Derek's Lechwe as described in the story. Note the sweat after the long chase and the wet trousers after following the wounded animal through the water.

and is found in the southern Sudan and adjacent marshlands in the Gambella region of western Ethiopia.

Estes states that, "An estimated 30-40 000 Nile lechwe live on both sides of the White Nile in the Sudd, the most extensive papyrus swamps in Africa & The mature male Nile lechwe is tied with the white-eared kob as the gaudiest member of the tribe. It turns a dark chocolate brown with a broad white saddle on neck and shoulders as well as white neck, face, and leg markings. This species remains unstudied."

The soft grey soil on the edge of the open pan in the middle of Botswana's Okavango Swamps was crossed, criss-crossed and crossed again by thousands of lechwe tracks, and soon even our brilliant old Bushman tracker became confused when we lost the tracks of the bull I had shot for the umpteenth time. I climbed a low termite mound in the hopes that the elevation might show me something. To my utter amazement, from my vantage point I could make out the tops of the horns of the bull facing me, not 100 metres away. I knew I had maybe ten to fifteen seconds to make a decision and, for whatever reason, I assumed that he was standing broadside on, looking at me with his head turned to the right. Without hesitating, I shouldered the .375 and in desperation let drive at where I thought his right shoulder was. As the bull turned and clattered and battered his way through the enveloping reeds, it was immediately apparent that he had been standing facing me and my shot had missed by at least two feet (60cm).

When we reached the spot, our tracker confirmed that this was "our" lechwe. The tracks now clearly showed the bull running hell for leather for the nearest water. My hunting companion Derek, took off running hard in a wide circle to cut the bull off from the water, and with the now widely-splashed "V" tracks clearly distinguishable from the surrounding patterns, we also set off in hot pursuit. Amazingly, within less than 50 metres, the lechwe seemed to slow to a walk and headed off into the thickest part of the reeds. Tracking once again became painfully slow.

The tracker and I had to part the reeds by hand and force our way through. It was difficult to see the ground through the intertwined, finger-thick reeds. Suddenly, from up ahead, I heard a strange sound, "Wha!" and then silence. We stood stock-still and listened. There it was again. "Wha! Wha!" The sound was coming closer. I climbed onto a nearby earth mound to try and trace the source of the noise. Soon I could make out the clatter of reed on reed. Then my friend emerged. He was holding his rifle in front of him using it to part the reeds, while every now and then making the weird call we had heard. He started when I called out to him, "What in heaven's name do you think you are doing?"

"Well," he replied, "ever since that snake crawled onto your jacket, I am not taking any chances, and this is my snake-warning shout. In snake language, it means get out of the way, there's a big thing coming."

I had to laugh. Two days previously, after eating our lunchtime



Kafue Lechwe on a game ranch in the northern Cape.

sandwiches, I had spread my goose-down jacket in the shade of a wild fig tree overlooking one of the numerous pans making up the swamps. Wary from a pre-dawn start, I lay down and was lulled to sleep by the droning insects and cicadas. When I awoke I read for a while, and when the time came to leave, fortunately I merely rocked forward on my heels and stood up. As I turned to pick up my jacket, curled up in the middle where it had been resting tight against my rear end, was a 30 inch (75cm) puffadder. Grabbing a nearby stick, I tried to remove this most unwelcome visitor. In response, the snake curved into its classic "S" shape attack position and struck the stick, leaving a saucer shape of damp venom on the lining of my coat. Suddenly I found myself twenty leaps away, with a spine like ice.

For someone who had had few unpleasant experiences with reptiles of any kind, that year in Botswana made up for it. Prior to this incident, I had nearly trodden on another puffadder, then some long green snake had whistled between my legs as I walked through the bush to set up a target for

Hunting

sighting-in purposes, and to top it all, another had fallen across my bare arms as I sat in a makoro while being poled to a large island we wanted to explore.

At any rate, Derek's arrival both lifted my spirits and changed our luck. Not forty metres away we found the lechwe as dead as the proverbial dodo. The two .375 rounds had hit within a finger's breadth on the point of the big bull's shoulder. Amazingly, neither bullet had exited, nor was there any blood from the bullet wounds. This was my first lechwe, and I mentally saluted the tough, proud animal, and promised myself that in future nothing less than a well-aimed .375 bullet would do.

Two days later Derek borrowed my 7mm Remington Magnum loaded with 175 grain Hornady Spire Points, to shoot a big, classic lechwe bull. The animal was standing up to his belly in the middle of a lily pad-covered pond, with a cheeky African Jacana tiptoeing along in his wake, eating what he disturbed. Now Derek is an outstanding hunter and an excellent shot, and as I watched through my 10 x 25 Leitz binoculars, the shot seemed spot-on the shoulder. Two kilometres later, struggling through thigh-deep water, sludge and sand in the wake of the bounding and fast-disappearing lechwe, we were



Kafue Lechwe (middle) and Red Lechwe (right)— in my study.

not so sure. This time, however, the muddy, disturbed trail left by the powerful leaps of the bull made tracking much easier. We eventually found him at the water's edge on a long, finger-like spit of land. A cove of trees on the bank allowed us to rapidly close the gap, unseen. Even

so, despite an excellent second shot, the bull still managed four or five convulsive leaps into the water before he fell lifeless.

We learnt another lesson from that encounter. My rifle was a Brno, customised from a 7 x 64 calibre rifle. The thumb safety-catch to the right

of the bolt worked on the basis that full forward was safe, whereas the rear position was to fire. Derek's Winchester rifles worked on precisely the opposite basis. There had been a moment in the two-kilometre chase when the lechwe had offered a ten-second shot. Chambering a fresh round, Derek instinctively pushed the safety catch forward, and then almost straightened the metal trigger in his efforts to get off a second shot. I will never forget the bewildered look he flung at me as the animal took off, and the realisation of what had happened hit me. It is one of a number of examples that has persuaded me that all my working rifles should be put together in exactly the same way, regardless of calibre. The same stock with its Monte Carlo cheek piece. The same pull – 14,5 inches from the trigger to the rear of the butt plate. The same recoil pad. The same trigger and trigger pull (two and a half pounds) and so on. In the heat of the moment, there is no time to think about your reaction to differences inherent in the operation of different weapons.

I shot the Kafue lechwe in my collection in, of all places, the Eastern Cape of South Africa, far from its natural habitat. Spinage in his *Natural History of Antelopes* notes that "lechwe exploit a unique habitat that is unused by any other large mammal herbivores, namely, the water meadow

grasslands. These are semi-floating grasses and sedges which collapse when water recedes, forming a thick cover from the ground and offering green food throughout the year."

According to Rob Hockley with whom I was hunting in 1954, his neighbour had been given two Kafue lechwe cows and one bull. Rob first made the acquaintance of their progeny when the selfsame neighbour asked him to come and cull his "rooi bokke" (the Afrikaans colloquial name for impala). Using his staff on horseback, the old farmer drove the lechwe towards Rob and would not accept Rob's explanation that these were not rooi bokke and should not be culled. Shortly thereafter, the old man apparently dropped his fences and chased the animals out of his farm onto a neighbouring property and from there they have spread throughout the Eastern Cape. I know one game rancher in the area who sells an average of 200 Kafue lechwe a year, and has been doing so for 20 years, all derived from the original three zoo escapees.

Rowland Ward's *Record of Big Game* states that the overall colouration of the Kafue lechwe is similar to the Red lechwe but the upper parts are of a richer, reddish hue, the fore parts on the shoulders are blackish, and the horns are considerably longer. This can be seen by the fact

that the minimum entry into "The Book" is 29 inches in the case of Kafue lechwe, 26 inches in the case of red lechwe, and only 21 inches in the case of black lechwe. The biggest lechwe ever shot was taken by Mr Schneider in 1980 in Zambia, and measured 37 inches. And, God willing, Zambia is my hunting destination in September next year to hunt the two lechwe sub-species available there in their natural habitat.

Over the last eighteen months, Nassos Roussos, of Ethiopian Rift Valley Safaris, using his own funds and those of three hunting friends, has explored the region of western Ethiopia known as Gambella. He has surveyed the area on the ground and from the air and is convinced that there are sustainable populations of Nile or Mrs Gray's lechwe available to be hunted. The final game count will be conducted on behalf of the Ethiopian Department of Nature Conservation in April of this year and, should it confirm the previous surveys, there are high hopes that this magnificent animal, right up there with the sable in my opinion, may once again be available to trophy hunters. I cannot think of anything that would be more calculated to ensure their continued existence and it is the only thing that will ultimately save them from the stomachs of the Dinka tribesmen across the border in Sudan.



The author in his study with a Red Lechwe immediately to his right and a Kafue Lechwe to the right if that.

In that magnum opus of African Hunting, *African Hunter* by James Mellon, Colonel Owen wrote as follows, "As one reaches the far shore, two miles from camp, and debouches from the fringe of reeds, some black shapes, with that tell-tale white patch on the shoulder, are certain to attract one's attention; more shapes will begin to show up beyond them; and one is among the Mrs Gray & I had made Lake Nyubor and was being propelled by the nonchalant strokes of a Dinka's punt pole over its soupy waters to the hunting ground.

Sure enough, the quarry was there, and in force that year, straggling across the flat landscape. But there was not a stick of cover nearer to them than 300 yards. I watched as a Dinka passed a herd of lechwe half a mile away and his dog gave chase to the nearest group. They scattered and ran, not seeming much disturbed and re-forming again after their pursuer had tired and returned to his master. The dog had, however, driven part of the herd nearer. Using the rushes along a boggy runnel as a screen to get within 300 paces, and then starting from scratch, I proceeded Nebuchadnezzar-like on all fours onto the open and, like that graminivorous monarch, occasionally stopped, putting head to ground, in the hope that the Mrs Gray would imagine this to be a new kind of fellow ruminant and accept him into their community.

I need not have worried – they took not the smallest interest, never gave a glance. At 150 yards, I sank to my belly and proceeded in the guise of a serpent, approaching obliquely, using the smallest depression and scarcely-visible furrows for cover. Still there was no sign on their part, and it was only when I was within some 70 paces of the herd that the first heads went up. But, having gone up, most of them went down again. At 50 yards interest became more general and there was a restless movement among the animals nearest me. But the movement was not one of fright; it was one of curiosity. Scattered individuals drew closer. I lay on my back and wiggled my feet in the air. The lechwe shied away for an instant, then turned and drew even closer, fanning into a semi-circle I crawled on, with intermittent heeled wiggling, until I was within 25 yards of them. Several of the ladies came forward with delicate, mincing steps to inspect the unsightly, unaccountable creature. The nearest one approached to within 14 yards (I paced it afterwards). Having finished my film, I lay for a long time, fascinated by that shifting tapestry of grey-brown or blackish, white-patched bodies and sweeping horns. When it was time to leave, I rose and bowed to the Mrs Gray politely. They did bolt then – perhaps for 30 yards – after which they turned to make another unhurried inspection."

I doubt, however, that with all the persecution they have suffered, given the starving populations of Dinka in the south of Sudan, that they will be anything other than extremely weary today. I have, however, booked a hunt in the first quarter of 2004 in the hope that, by then, they will be on licence.

I find all lechwe to be extremely attractive, tough animals, with Mrs Gray's lechwe, being one of the most beautiful of all the beautiful animals our African continent has produced. To me, they are top contenders for "Male Model of the Year", along with sable.

On the other hand, because they are not particularly wary, they are not that difficult to hunt, except, as SCI points out, when they are deep within a swamp. As such, there is not the same degree of romance attached to hunting them as there is for species such as Bongo, Mountain Nyala or even Sitatunga.

As the *SCI Record Book of Trophy Animals* goes on to add, "It is often possible to drive or walk to within moderate rifle range with no attempt at concealment. When dealing with a herd of lechwe, the hunter's principle problem is to evaluate horns (and keep track of them) in the milling mob of animals, and to make a clear shot at the one closest without hitting others."