

# Panthera leo

By Ganyana

**There is something unique about hunting a super predator. About hunting an animal that may well be hunting you. It is not as if this is a common occurrence, but it happens often enough just so that you know it's not a myth.**

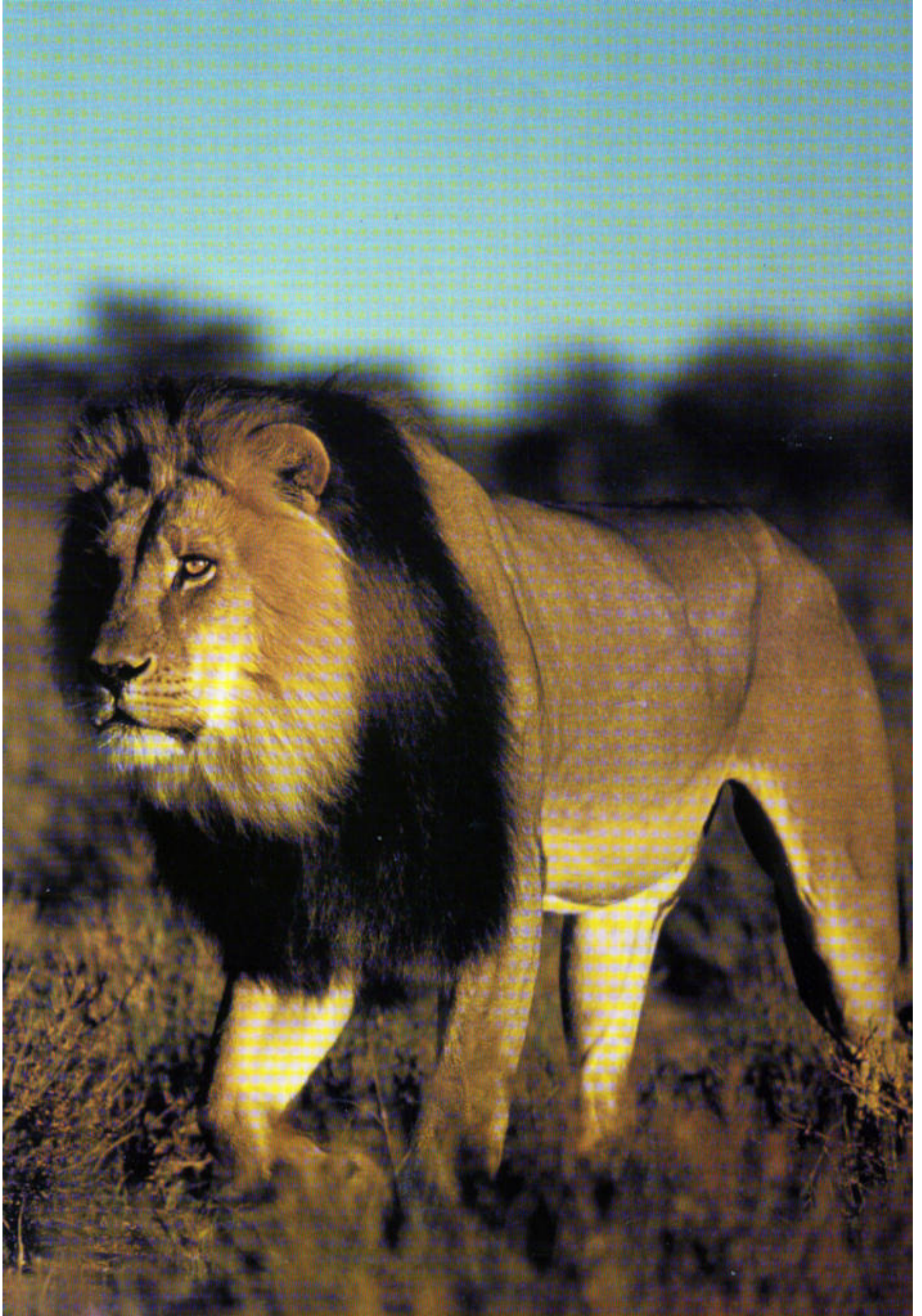
The last three instances in Zimbabwe were when a hapless tribesman fell asleep while tending his cattle, another when a National Parks game scout was walking drunkenly back to his house after the inevitable "first Friday night after pay day", and the third when an English tourist on a back-packing safari didn't zip up his tent door on the one night in the year when he needed to. On my last visit to South Africa, the Citizen newspaper carried a leading story about a lion that killed a border jumper and then dragged his body through a northern province town just to boast (and got away with it). In the past decade there have been two notorious man-eaters in Zimbabwe which munched about a dozen people, but most of the incidents seem to be "one-offs". Several hunters have been injured by lion, but it is a long time since I heard of one not making it home.

My introduction to lion hunting came as a boy. My father ranched cattle and there was a constant problem with lion. Every two or three months a pride would cross over from Botswana, kill a few steers in the ranches on our side of the border, and then slip back into the wildlife area on the Botswana side. Very occasionally one of them would get cheeky and take a herdsman instead of a cow just to keep people on their toes. A couple of farmers made a serious effort to control the lion, but most simply asked the keen ones to deal with the problem if it occurred on their properties. My father was singularly contemptuous of lion.

"Mangy, smelly, flea-ridden, lazy, cowards by day," he would comment. Indeed the bushmen

over the border would often chase lion off their kills to get the meat simply by shouting and throwing sticks. A small group would move forward with much shouting and waving of arms, whilst the lion would "defend" the kill with much roaring and short, mock charges. After getting hit by a few well-aimed sticks, the lion would give up and slink away leaving the bushmen to the meal. I saw it for myself, twice, and my father strongly suspected that the bushmen obtained much of their meat by following the lions around, waiting for them to make a kill and then driving them off it. It was only after being harried and robbed of their dinners for weeks on end that a pride would decide to risk a foray over the fence into the land of rifles and strychnine. One of my father's San herdsmen limped into the house one day, a little the worse for wear. Six lion had killed one of the cows he was looking after. Rather than let the lions get the meat, especially as at least one of them was likely to get shot he decided to chase them off by himself. Using his "issue" catapult he let go a barrage of small stones. The lionesses gave up easily, but the pride male was a different story. He had obviously had enough of being disturbed from his meals that his mistresses had worked so hard to obtain and put in a determined attack. The little bushman saw the charge develop and knew this one was for real, so, no convenient trees being handy to climb, he merely lay down and protected his neck with his hands. The lion stopped on top of him, clouted him a few times with his paws and even tried a chew on one leg before losing interest and moving off. As my mother patched him up, the herdsman explained that he had often done the same when he was growing up, and even pointed to some old scars on his back, which came from a similar incident at least 20 years earlier.

My father's technique for problem lion was very simple. He would ask one of his San herdsmen to track for him and they would follow the pride from the kill to where they were resting up. He would then shoot one, and the remainder of the pride would depart at speed for the border. His rifle was a standard 7.9 Mauser, model A, and the Kynock ammunition worked just fine. In over 50 lion that I remember him shooting, I do not recall him



needing more than one shot. It wasn't always that simple though. Lion may not be bright animals but they aren't totally dumb. They knew that one particular four-strand cattle fence and the road running alongside it spelt safety. Occasionally a pride would figure out the plot and stage sneak attacks across the fence at night, making a quick kill and dashing back before daylight. Greed always got the better of them though, and they never could resist a bait staked out just over the border. In the war days when any nocturnal movement was little short of suicidal, the carcass was poisoned. With the coming of peace, more active steps were taken by some to eradicate the lion. My father steered clear of these night-time efforts to shoot lion.

"I don't have the rifle for it," he said, "and they own the night. The lazy coward by day becomes a fierce killer the moment the sun sets. You need at least a .9.3 and preferably a .404, and it must wear a good scope if you are going to try night work," and he left it at that. In retrospect it would appear that most of his neighbours held the same view and it always seemed to be the older boys rather than the older men who sat in the blinds near the border waiting for the lion to come in.

I was nearly 15 before I was invited along for a night hunt. Six cattle had been taken in a fortnight by a small pride that had figured out the quick in-and-out-by-night trick. One had been ours but the rest was the neighbour's, and his 18 year-old son was determined to sort the problem out. I can't say that my father was enamoured of the plan when I told him what I was up to. He went and had a look at the blind to make sure that it was properly built – it was. Schalk's father had built it and had used 3" steam pipe to reinforce the front. He also borrowed a 'scoped .375 for me to use. To say that that hunt was an education would be masterpiece of understatement. Both of us went into it with supreme confidence. Both of us had seen plenty of dozy, well-fed lion shot by day and, really, there was nothing to it.

We were comfortably settled into the blind well before dusk. A drag had been carried out (illegally) up and down the border road (it was on the Botswana side of the fence) and the quarter-eaten remains of their last kill tied with a chain to a suitable dead stop sunk deep into the sand. Neither of us really expected anything to happen since at least 90% of these excursions seemed to end in failure. It was barely dusk when the strong smell of lion wafted in on the almost dead-still night air. They were right there, somewhere ... It was still light enough to see most things, but nothing moved. Absolutely nothing...even the bats seemed to be giving the area a wide berth. To compound matters there were no night sounds either. The crickets, cicadas and nightjars had suddenly stopped calling. The king was around and all the creatures of the bush respectfully shut up and sat tight.

As it grew darker I became acutely aware of the need for a really good torch. It was the night of the dead moon, and although the sky was clear the starlight simply served to make the bushes cast even darker shadows in the gloom. We had hung a light with a red gel over it from a spindly tree next to the bait. It was operated through a rheostat and the idea was that I would gradually turn it up until Schalk could see to shoot. Both of us had torches but in the days before Mag-lights, the little square two-cell light job from the front of my bicycle was about as good as they came, unless you rigged a tractor lamp to a car battery or some such plan. Given that the bicycle torch threw a good beam for all of 3 metres, and Schalk's was no better, and that we had a small car battery in the blind to work the light over the bait it wouldn't have been too difficult to rig up a decent shooting lamp. For that matter I could have brought along a couple of the carbide lamps that were once used down the old mine on our place, which my father used when fishing. Instead of sitting in the dark with the heavy odour of lion smothering us like a wet blanket, any sort of decent light would have been worth swapping one of the rifles for.

Schalk nudged me and I gradually turned up the red light above the bait to a very dull glimmer. Schalk looked through the 'scope on his rifle but there was nothing to be seen. A small breath of air made the leaves move, but barely. If we were not so tense we probably wouldn't have noticed it at all. Now, though, it seemed that the whole bush was alive. Schalk nudged me again and I turned the lamp up to full brightness. All that this achieved was to make black shadows even darker and the eerie red light seemed to heighten any stirring of a leaf or blade of grass. Suddenly there was movement near the bait and a huge, absolutely monstrous lion pulled itself up into plain view, materialising out of grass not even 6" high. Both of us grabbed our rifles. At this point Mrs Lion decided that if the family was to enjoy an uninterrupted night's feed, she had better get rid of these two pesky pseudo-hunters watching her dinner. As our concentration was riveted on the lion in front, she stuck her head through the canvas flap that served as a door at the back of the blind, and roared. I don't know about Schalk but I honestly don't think more than my toes touched the ground anywhere between the blind and the Landrover which was parked a mile or so away. The only thing that I do know for certain is that Schalk reached the vehicle sufficiently before me to smoke half a cigarette and do serious justice to the medicinal bottle of brandy in the tool-box.

Daylight told the real story. There had been only three adults and four small cubs. The male with the pride was a youngster, with hardly any mane to speak of. He certainly was nothing like the 6-foot-high-at-the-shoulder giant that I had seen loom out over that carcass. The female with the cubs had

been hiding in the bush to our left about 50 metres away, while paw prints and scuff marks showed how the second lioness had carefully stalked us. From the time we first smelt them to the time she told us to please bugger off, was nearly two hours. How long had it taken her to silently slither into position and how had she co-ordinated the move with her mate so as to ensure maximum surprise value? None of them had taken any further interest in us and the two females had then stopped being stealthy and had casually walked up to the kill and begun feeding. They hadn't even bothered to leave one of them as a sentry as they occasionally do when heavily persecuted. They obviously knew we wouldn't be back that night!

I now had a completely new perspective on lion hunting, and my personal opinion of them differed considerably from my father's. He had simply laughed at the story told in the sand the next morning and commented that, "A little fear brings prudence, but you mustn't let it dictate events," and that if I really wanted to be a lion hunter I had better learn about blinds and lion habits. Unfortunately our nocturnal lion hunting forays were soon at an end. "Dissidents" as the new guerrillas were known, put an end to any movement at night outside the security fences around the houses, and farmers went back to the old Rhodesian war day-plan of putting strychnine in a carcass. This certainly killed a few lion, and also killed several dissidents as well who thought they had found a free meal. Unfortunately I didn't learn much more about lion hunting, although during the next five years of spasmodic war and through a few buffalo culls, I learned never to panic at anything, and once action started to file fear out of the way in the furthest reaches of the mind.

My next encounter with lion occurred while I was a cadet at university. I was invited along to help deal with a man-eating lion that was beginning to attract national celebrity status. He was a "midzimu" lion, the spirit of a chief or witchdoctor in animal form out to extract revenge for insults during his life. As he was said to greet his victims before killing them (possibly whilst in human form) and most of his meals were collected in the late afternoon he was known as 'Maswera sei' (the afternoon goes well, in the local Shona language). He certainly had good luck – at our first brush with him, he walked into a reed bed, definitely didn't walk out, and yet wasn't there when 50 armed men encircling the bed set it ablaze. This more than put the wind up the National Parks game scouts who refused to track for us any more. Funnily enough, it seemed to take the fight out of many of the local farmers as well who suddenly felt that this particular problem lion was best dealt with by a government officer, and spare hands and rifles evaporated as surely as 'Maswera Sei' had done out of those reeds. We never did find him, but three lionesses that he teamed up with put in a determined charge when

confidence in my ability to deal with lions, but youth knows no bounds. My next encounter with cattle-killing lions was an entirely different affair.

The farming areas in the highveld extend up the edge of the Zambezi Valley where the tsetse fly had been eradicated or kept in check at least. From time to time, however, the denizens of the valley move up the river courses, following the dwindling water supplies and the resultant concentration of game. When they arrive at the top of the stream courses, there is food in abundance. Fat, devoid of horns, and bewildering in their stupidity, the cattle present a veritable smorgasbord to a pride of lions.

Such a pride moved into the Doma farming area north of Sinoia (Chinhoyi) town. A male, two lioness and four half-grown cubs can consume a lot of beef and they proceeded to do just that. I was called in after colleagues had accounted for the lioness and four cubs. This left the male, who, having grown accustomed to the easy pickings, stayed on despite the loss of his companions. He had, however, got smart, and I pursued him for two full weeks.

I tied young sheep up in cages and sat in uncomfortable trees for nights on end. I tracked him from sun up to sundown. Parting the reeds on the Rikuti River with my rifle barrel we came up on him several times, but all there was was a warm patch where he had lain. I resorted to poison with capsules of strychnine and atropine; he sicked them up and carried on except now he would not come back to a kill. I tried trap guns, a single barrel Greener set off by a trip wire, without success, and eventually went to my head office in Sinoia to collect a set of Canadian Bear Traps as a last resort. While I was there I learnt of the death of my friend and mentor Len Harvey, killed by a lion at Wankie.

It was late when I arrived back at the farm, and Hugh and I left to set a line of trap guns along an old road where we had seen the lion spoor several times. I had three guns to do, and we were setting the third in the headlights of the Landrover when a gun went off. Damn, I thought a wild pig. Then we heard a coughing grunt. Back down the track in the headlights we found a large, almost maneless lion, lying in the road, a pattern of AAA shot neatly behind his shoulder. All together, the pride had killed nearly 35 head of cattle over a period of 5 weeks. We arrived back at the farmhouse where it took us a while to convince Hugh's wife that we were late for supper because we had the killer lion in the truck. It tipped the big scale at 475 lbs.

I moved to Wankie National Park from the Zambezi Valley area and it wasn't long before I had to go out on another problem-lion hunt. Near the railway village of Dett, lions had moved in from the National Park and proceeded to terrorize the local villagers by killing their goats.

Senior Ranger Willie Koen and I, accompanied by Japan, one of the finest trackers I have ever worked with, went to investigate. We saw where the lion, two males, had managed to extricate a goat from a stoutly-constructed stockade and eaten the beast. With Japan on the tracks we headed off at a smart pace. A while later Japan eased off, and waved a hand telling us to slow down. We halted and looked at him enquiringly. Then I heard it. From about 30 yards away in the grass and scrub came that sound - a growl laced with evil. Try as we might we couldn't make out a single hair of the lion, and all the time the challenge went on. Japan moved in between Willie and I, and we edged apart to try and catch a glimpse of it. Then, abruptly, silence. We waited and then moved towards the spot, every sense heightened and at red alert.

We followed the tracks for another hour, when I spotted the one lion about forty yards (36m) distant, about to cross the fence line back into the park. The 375 Jeffery came up, and click - a misfire! Willie could see the lion but had a difficult shot with his 458. It caught the lion back beyond his ribs, and in a confusing whirl, the lion charged. I barely had time to work the

*To this day I can hear the growl the rustle of grass and see the tawny apparition break through a small bush. All seemed to take place in slow motion but Ken hadn't even managed to get the safety catch off his 458 when it was all over.*

bolt and fire, with Willie dropping the animal five yards (3.6m) from our little group. In the confusion, Japan who had carried my 450 Double, was frantically patting the ground around his feet for the cartridges while keeping his eye on the now recumbent lion.

We took the body back to Main camp and it was placed in the cooler room until a National Museums team could collect it for mounting. It still forms part of the display in the Museum in Bulawayo.

The next time I was subject to the infamous growling salute was as Warden in the Matetsi Safari Area. During the guerilla war everyone moved around armed, and this lead too much illegal shooting for meat or for fun or bravado. I had been in residence barely a week when I received a radio message that a road maintenance foreman had been attacked by a lion close to the headquarters. None the wiser but expecting a problem, I took my double 577 loaded with soft points, and accompanied by Den Mason, a ranger on station, went to investigate. Finding tracks from the previous day we tried to decipher what had happened, as we had no witness to the event. Coming across

an area in the short grass that had been flattened, we could see that there were dried patches of blood and short lion hairs sticking to the congealed blood. We decided to do 4-5 a 360 sweep to try and locate tracks exiting the general area. I walked in front with Ken paces behind. Because it was fairly open, with patches of short grass and scrub mixed with clumps of young palm trees, there did not appear to be any danger. I had just walked up to an area of short grass when I heard the growl.

Time slows so that milliseconds seem forever. I backed up two paces and when the lion burst from cover twenty feet away (6m), I shot it once in the shoulder. To this day I can hear the growl, the rustle of grass, and see the tawny apparition break through a small bush. When I left National Parks in 1980 I went into the only field I felt qualified in, Professional Hunting. This occupation has the added hazard in that you have the responsibility towards a client while hunting dangerous game, as happened in a hunt I did with an American client in the Westwood area near Victoria Falls. We were hunting lion, and were fortunate to come across fresh tracks of two big males. We followed them and found a Kudu bull only just killed - the tracks indicated that the lion had seen or heard us, and decamped.

We proceeded to build a hasty blind nearby with leafy branches. Once this was done we retired for lunch, certain that the lion would be back for theirs later in the day.

Leaving the vehicle a mile or more away, two hours later we walked up the track and then cautiously entered our blind on all fours, as silently as we could. Peering through the cover, I swore as I realised that the Kudu had disappeared. Away from the blind we could see where a broad trail had

been left as the lion dragged the Kudu further up the hill. We slowly followed the drag mark until almost on top of the ridge. There lay two large maned lions in the shade of a Teak tree. Peering through binoculars I could see that they were two magnificent specimens. A whispered consultation took place, with the client wanting to know which was the biggest and best. I was certain that the two were evenly matched, as is often the case when male lion pair up, but to avoid argument I said, "The one on the right." Now the client was an excellent shot so when the shot went off and the right-hand male jumped to its feet, I was a little concerned. Not as concerned as the second lion who was decamping at marvellous speed but right at us.

The client then fired at this lion which carried on until my 577 broke its neck close to where we stood. Not visibly impressed with the situation I asked the client to explain whereupon he replied "I wanted to see for myself so I shot above them into the tree so that they would stand up".