

Sable Sagas

By Peter Flack

I suppose everybody has their favourite animal and I would be the last to argue with someone who chose a statuesque kudu bull, an arrogant nyala ram, or a dainty Chobe bushbuck.

For me, however, a sable bull is what it's all about. Its pride, its power, its stark colour contrasts, its courage, its majestic sweeping horns. It is one of the most mythical, magical, beautiful creatures on this planet. Rowland Ward's Records of Big Game has this to say:

This animal, with its stately bearing and magnificent colouration, is one of the most beautiful of all antelope. Its courage is proverbial, and Selous relates how a pack of strong dogs was either killed or wounded within seconds after attacking a wounded bull... A good sable is a spectacular trophy that is essential to any African collection. As it tends to be belligerent rather than wary, a sable bull is usually approachable.

Shot placement is very important, as is the calibre used, because sable are 'hard' animals. May be dangerous when wounded.

Pity that I only bought the book later, much later. I could have used the advice, as you will see.

The first white person to discover the typical or common sable was Sir William Cornwallis Harris. When encamped on the Cashan mountains (in what is now the north-western part of the Northern Province of South Africa), in 1836, he wrote the following in his volume on "Wild Sports in Southern Africa":

"Our party were in full pursuit of a wounded elephant, when a herd of unusually dark-looking antelopes attracted observation in an adjacent valley. Reconnoitring them through a pocket-telescope from the acclivity on which we stood, I at once exclaimed that they were new; and having announced my intention of pursuing them, if requisite, to the world's end, I dashed down the slope, followed by the derision of the Hottentots, for my unsportsman-like attention to an "ugly buck," one specimen of which, however, I assured them I would rather possess than all the elephants in Africa! In an instant I was in the middle of the herd, which was then crossing the valley – nine chestnut coloured does leading, and two magnificent coal-black bucks – all with scimitar-shaped horns – bringing up the rear. Hastily dismounting, I was delighted to observe them stand for a few seconds within fifty yards, and stare at me with amazement. In vain was it, however, that I pulled the trigger of my rifle; three times the heavy machinery of the lock descended with alarming vehemence, but no report followed the concussion; and the herd having in the

meantime ascended a steep hill, I fairly rode my horse to a standstill in the attempt to overtake them. Cursing my hard fortune as I dashed the hateful weapon to the ground, I hastened to the camp to repair my rifle; armed with which, and mounted on a fresh steed, I returned with my companion to the spot, where, having taken up the footmarks, we followed them, with unwearied perseverance, among the hills, during the whole of that and the following day, without attaining even a glimpse of the objects of our quest. At noon of the third day, however, peeping cautiously over a bank, our laudable assiduity was rewarded by the gratifying sight of the two bucks grazing by themselves, unconscious of our approach, in a stony valley.

"Having disposed our forces, after a moment's consultation, so as to intercept the game from a tangled labyrinth of ravines, the attack was made. The hind leg of the handsomer of the two was dangling in an instant, and in another he was sprawling on the earth. Quickly recovering himself, however, he led me more than a mile over the sharp stones ere he was brought to bay, when, twice charging gallantly, he was at length overthrown and slain."

However, in that magnum opus on hunting, *African Hunter* by James Mellon, the main focus of attention is the royal or giant sable *Hippotragus niger variani*, named after H.F. Varian, a British engineer who built a railroad through Angola and 'discovered' them there in 1913. Although typical or common sable receive a mention in a number of chapters, it is only in passing. And yet, there is not that much difference between the two and, certainly as far as body size is concerned, the typical sable is, if anything, actually a little bigger. This, of course, enhances the dramatic size of the royal sable horns, although the world record for typical sable, at 60 inches, is only three inches shorter than the world record for royal sable. The difference, however, is that the top twenty-five royal sable entries in Rowland Ward's Records of Big Game all exceed sixty inches or more, whereas only one typical sable beats this magical mark, the second





biggest being a touch over fifty-five inches.

Probably the most important single visual difference, other than horn size, between the typical and royal sable, is the face pattern. In the typical sable, a broad white stripe extends from near the base of the horns downwards, in front of the eyes and along the muzzle, to meet the white of the lower parts of the face at the nostrils. In giant sable, although they have the white stripe from the base of the horns extending in front of the eyes, it stops shortly below the eyes and does not extend to the nose.

Unquestionably, the most important difference from a hunting perspective is, sadly, the concern that royal sable may no longer exist in their natural habitat in Angola. In the 30 year conflagration that has consumed the country, it is likely that the royal sable, never plentiful at best, has been eaten and destroyed despite the fact that, every now and then, rumours filter into the hunting domain that this or that reliable person has seen signs of the 2 000 to 3 000 royal sable that, according to a 1970 survey, existed in north central Angola. Much as I want to believe these stories, to date, conclusive proof of their continued existence has not been established. And even though the country is now slightly more settled after the death of Savimbi, the huge proliferation of land mines, almost total lack of infrastructure and rampant corruption makes access to, let alone hunting in, Angola an ephemeral goal.



The author's fourth and last sable bull, shot along the Rungwa River and measuring 43 1/2 inches – held here by the author's guide

Both record books quoted in this article also recognise a third sub-species, the smaller, "seal-brown" coloured Roosevelt sable, named after the son, Kermit, and not the more famous Theodore of US presidential fame. This sable can only be hunted in the massive Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania. Annually, some 70 to 80 animals are allowed on quota out of the some 10 600 animals counted in a 1998 aerial survey of the reserve and its surroundings. The longest horns, for record book purposes, measured a fairly decent 44 inches.

I have been lucky enough to hunt typical sable

in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Tanzania and in that order. But my sable hunting career did not begin auspiciously.

I was in Gravelotte, just south of Phalaborwa, Limpopo Province, South Africa, on the last day of my third hunt, to try to outwit one particular sable bull. Why one? Well, for reasons known only to the game rancher, he only had two sable bulls – no cows – and was prepared to let me have the bigger of the two at an affordable price.

I had spent the best part of a week tracking the sable. The closest I came was a brief blur of black



The second Matetsi sable bull and the author.



The authors second Matetsi Sable bull in his office – cum – trophy rooms in the Karoo.

through some mopane scrub. I was fast running out of time. In fact, it was mid-morning on our last day. To make matters worse, I had lodged our Land Cruiser firmly in a dry riverbed while trying to recover my hunting partner's Rowland Ward red hartebeest. The riverbank over which I drove caved in and left us well and truly stuck. The tow hitch and back bumper hung from the riverbed, leaving the rear wheels suspended in mid-air and the front bumper stuck in the sand. Jogging back to camp to fetch the tractor – hot, sweaty, and frustrated – the last thing on my mind was sable. As I bumbled through the entrance to the camp, I saw the ranch owner's vehicle. He had decided to pay us a visit on our last day to say good-bye. As he saw me, he started waving and came walking towards me.

"Come quickly," he said, "I've been waiting for you. Your sable is in the bush just off the road to

the gate." With that, a friend of his arrived and confirmed the news.

Hesitating for a moment, I picked up my 7mm Remington Magnum and some 176 grain, spire pointed, Hornady softs and ran to the friend's open Jeep. Derek, my hunting partner, jumped into the back and we shot off in a cloud of dust. As we approached the spot where the friend had seen the sable, we slowed down and, with the motor barely ticking over, approached the spot. We all saw the bull at the same time, standing in thick bush facing directly toward us. In his excitement, our driver missed the brakes and we rolled past the sable. He had been standing to the left of a large, dark tree trunk, which now obscured him totally. Our driver was beside himself with excitement.

He started mumbling to himself, "Oh my God, he's going to get away – shoot, shoot!"

I had never seen "buck fever" in a driver before, but if this wasn't it, it was the next best thing. Before I could get out, he jammed the Jeep into reverse and we hiccuped backward. The tree now obscured the left side and foreleg of the sable. By now our driver was incoherent. I could see the sable was tense, looking to its right and ready to run. I had to make a decision and quickly. Various thoughts flashed through my mind as the Jeep rocked around as our driver squirmed in his seat, no longer mumbling but almost shouting to me to shoot the animal.

Now I hunt on foot, and mostly on my own or with the help of a tracker. I had spent days hunting this sable on foot and, at last, here he was. I did not want to shoot him from the Jeep and yet I did not want to lose him either. The whole situation seemed surreal to me. I swivelled in my seat, rested my elbows on my knees, and looked



The author's first sable bull (a representative animal) on the wall of the author's study. Opposite – a member of the Hippotragus family, an excellent southern roan, the third biggest shot in South Africa.

through the sights at the sable, the crosshairs bobbing around the chest area. At 150 metres, I knew I could not miss but I was scared of the tree. In one of my worst hunting decisions, I let the shot go. The sable bolted frantically through the bush and I could hear the brush breaking and crashing. I had aimed for the heart and the frantic burst from the sable seemed to confirm it. Our driver was now out of the vehicle, running after the disappearing sable bull, shouting that I should shoot again, that I had missed it, that it was going to get away.

Derek ran up behind our driver and grabbed him by the shoulder. I could see anger written all over his normally amiable and friendly face. "Shut up, just shut up!" he said. "Go back to the vehicle and wait."

I thought he was going to hit him.

Turning to me he said, "Come on, Pete, let's see what has happened."

After about 500 metres, we caught sight of the bull walking slowly away from us. I knew I had hit the bull. My only thought now was to make up for the previous shot and kill the magnificent animal as quickly and cleanly as possible. I took the only shot available to me, and from a standing position, aimed at the base of the spine and fired. The sable staggered, half fell, and was up and running as I fired a quick second shot. The situation had reached nightmarish proportions.

"How was the shot?" Derek asked.

"Good," I said.

"Listen, I think that rifle is just too light for the sable. I am going back to camp to get your .375 and I'm going to take this fellow with me."

Derek said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at our driver. "You stay on the tracks and just mark your trail. I'll find you."

Quiet descended over the bush as the sound of the Jeep faded away. The sun baked down and the heavy midday silence settled. I was thoroughly shaken by the whole experience, and with a conscious effort, dragging a stick behind me, I took up the tracks. At times I had to cast around but, fortunately, there was enough blood for me to pick up the tracks again. The tracks went on and on. My shirt was soaked through with perspiration.

The tracks became confused, and at times, the blood spoor seemed to dry up. Afterwards, we worked out that the sable had joined up with the other bull. Much later, Derek and Alfred, an excellent tracker, caught up with me

and handed me my .375.

"I'm going up ahead to check the cut line in the direction that the bull is moving," Derek said. "Fine," I answered. "If he comes that way, please put him down."

In the end, I nearly walked right into the sable as it lay in the shade of some wilting vaalbos. The bull struggled to its feet. I dropped to my knees, cradled my favourite rifle to my cheek and immediately squeezed off a shot aimed at the point of the shoulder. The sable crumbled. To my absolute horror, he started to struggle to his feet again. What does it take? I asked myself in desperation. My old habit of re-chambering my rifle immediately after a shot saved the day as I put a second bullet within an inch of the first. At last! It was all over.

Afterward, I asked myself how I could have made so many elementary mistakes. How, after years of hunting, I had allowed myself to be chivvied into the folly in which I had become involved. And never again did I hunt anything the size and toughness of a sable with my 7mm Remington Magnum, although the rifle still plays an important role in my battery. Whether it was a poor shot placement, too much velocity from too close, the bullet striking a bone, poor bullet construction, or whatever, the 7mm bullets failed to hold together and penetrate sufficiently to hit a vital spot. Only the 270 grain Winchester Power Points from my .375 held together and penetrated in a straight line through the heart and chest cavity, stopping under the skin of the off foreleg.

While that sable hunt haunted me for years, it also served to reinforce so many basic lessons that I have learnt over forty years of hunting – to hunt ethically on foot, to hunt on my own or only with close, tried and trusted friends, to use the right calibre weapon and the right bullets, to only take a shot once I was totally convinced that it would result in a humane and immediate kill.

Over the years, although the hard-learned lessons remained, the horrible unhappy memories of hunting that magnificent animal partially faded. I became, I believe, a better hunter, more thorough, more careful. And I decided it was time to try to put the bad memories to bed when I was offered the opportunity to hunt sable in the Matetsi area of Zimbabwe, one of the best sable areas in the world.

How did I now this? Well, after six years, three attempts, and many thousands of dollars, I had eventually succeeded in computerising, on an interactive basis, the SCI Record Book Of Trophy Animals. This allowed me to plot, on a map of Africa, which I could enlarge, where every animal in the record book had been shot. I could also then cross-reference this to the hunter who had taken it and the outfitter or professional hunter with whom he had hunted. At the time, Zimbabwe accounted for 508 common sable entries, almost double that of its nearest rival, Zambia. Of these, the Matetsi region accounted for nearly half of the Zimbabwean entries and included five out of the top twenty specimens, the biggest being a massive bull with forty nine inch, sweeping, scimitar shaped horns.

Being in such a great sable area, I felt I should not take the first, mature, representative bull on offer as I often do when the hunt has lived up to my expectations of what a fair chase, walk and stalk encounter should be. As such, I specifically asked John Oosthuizen, the professional hunter with whom I was hunting at the time, to promise that he would not let me take a shot at any sable below the tough Rowland Ward Trophy standard of 42 inches.

Sable are fresh grass grazers and depend on water. According to research referred to by Spinage in *The Natural History of Antelopes*, sable are never found more than one kilometre from water and drink daily. They crop grass, taking only leaf, at a height of 40 to 140 millimetres (roughly 1 to 5 inches) above the ground and rarely feed at a height above sternum level. And this is useful to know as a hunter when trying to isolate the habitat most likely to attract big bulls.

In this study, only two browse species were recorded in their diet and they are, therefore, to all intents and purposes, exclusively grazers. Taking all these factors into account, this makes the sable an extremely selective feeder and limits its available habitat. As Spinage says, they are "of restricted distribution, nowhere can it be said to be a successful species in terms of numbers." And so we chose the area around the Singuja Hills, along the Bingwa Loop and down the Deka River. The choice was a good one and we saw herd upon herd of these magnificent animals. I took my time. I studied the difference between herd bulls and territorial bulls. I saw how the biggest territorial bulls staked out the best territories and tried to retain the nursery herds that entered them. I looked over the odd bachelor herd made up of young bulls that had left the nursery herds but who were not old or experienced enough to establish their own territories. I watched and watched; the little ones, still brown with spiky, devil-like horns, nudging their mothers; the herd bulls standing with their forelegs on termite mounds to make themselves look even bigger and more imposing. It was a wonderful experience. However, the big 45 inch bulls for which Matetsi is renowned eluded me, and the days started to slip into one another.

It was midday. We were picking our way through a sterile area of impenetrable bush, which the locals call gussu. The sun was pounding. My head was hanging. My blood sugar level was low. I was hot, sweaty, sticky, and tired. I hadn't eaten since 5.00 a.m. and my thoughts were centred on an ice-cold drink and not my surroundings. The thick, soft, red Kalahari sand was cramping my calves.

Suddenly, James, my tracker, grabbed my arm and pointed. John, not exactly known for becoming excitable in any hunting situation, pointed and in an animated way exclaimed, "Take him!" At first I could only see a vague, black form through the bush ahead but, as the animal turned to the left to pass behind the trunk of a midsize baobab,



I caught the briefest glimpse of the elegant sweep of a sable bull's horns. It did not seem aware of our presence, although we were only some seventy paces away. It too had a bad case of the phloids.

Moving out from behind the tree, the bull had a mere five or six paces to travel before it disappeared into the gussu. I had only a few seconds to aim and fire before the sable disappeared. Festina lenae, quickly, but without haste, I cradled my faithful, old .375 to my cheek, found the spot on the bull's shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The bull collapsed instantly, killed as quickly and cleanly as could be by the devastating spinal shot that Derek had taught me – nine to ten inches down from the top of the shoulder and in line with foreleg. And that was that!

Now, I have known John Oosthuizen for half my life. In fact, long before he became a professional hunter, he and I hunted our first buffalo bulls together in the South African lowveld. One of the things I have always loved about John is his downright decency and transparent honesty.

Looking up from what I thought was a spectacular sable bull, he said, "Sorry, Pete, I got it all wrong. I was taken in by the length of the horn tips and didn't notice it had no height in front. This bull will never make 42 inches. I'll pay for

this one. He's mine now. Let's go back to camp and see what I can negotiate with Charlie."

I was not present during the course of that discussion but, when John returned to camp in time for the afternoon hunt, he jumped out of the open Land Cruiser and, with a big smile on his face, raised his right hand and showed me a circle circumscribed by his thumb and forefinger. We were in business.

During the course of the hunt, Derek and I had listened with interest to Lou and John discussing where to find the biggest sable bulls. The discussions centred on whether the biggest bulls were found in a mixed herd, bachelor herd or amongst the solitary bulls. Lou argued that the biggest bulls were the territorial ones. John, on the other hand, argued that, in his experience, the biggest bulls were taken from within the mixed herds.

It made no difference to me. I preferred not to hunt animals out of a herd. I am a trophy hunter and concentrate on old, lone males, outside the breeding cycle who, when shot, do not stress the herd or interfere with it in any way. I suppose, if you want to be cynical, it is also usually easier to hunt the lone males as there are fewer eyes watching, noses smelling and ears listening. On the other hand, they are much harder to track

than a herd, especially through difficult terrain.

One of the many reasons that sable are sought after is their scarcity value. Apart from their selective habits, I also attributed this partly to the fact that the big bulls are not that difficult to hunt. While I am no fan of anthropomorphic thinking, I agree with Millais, who in his marvellous book *A Brush from the Veldt* wrote that they were fearless, noble animals. In that they were fearless, they are used to standing their ground and there are many stories written by reliable observers that talk about the bravery of these animals.

Territorial bulls are used to defending their territories either by displays calculated to intimidate or, if this fails, by fighting. Fighting often consists of dropping to the knees and sparring with the horns. This is sometimes accompanied by bellowing and much clashing and slashing of horns. Severson-Hamilton, the first warden of Kruger National Park, noted a case where a serious territorial fight led to the death of one of the contestants. Their long horns, with their sharp points, are clearly deadly weapons.

Bravery and belligerence seem to be part of their behaviour pattern and anyone who has hunted them regularly will probably have a picture in his mind's eye of a coal black and

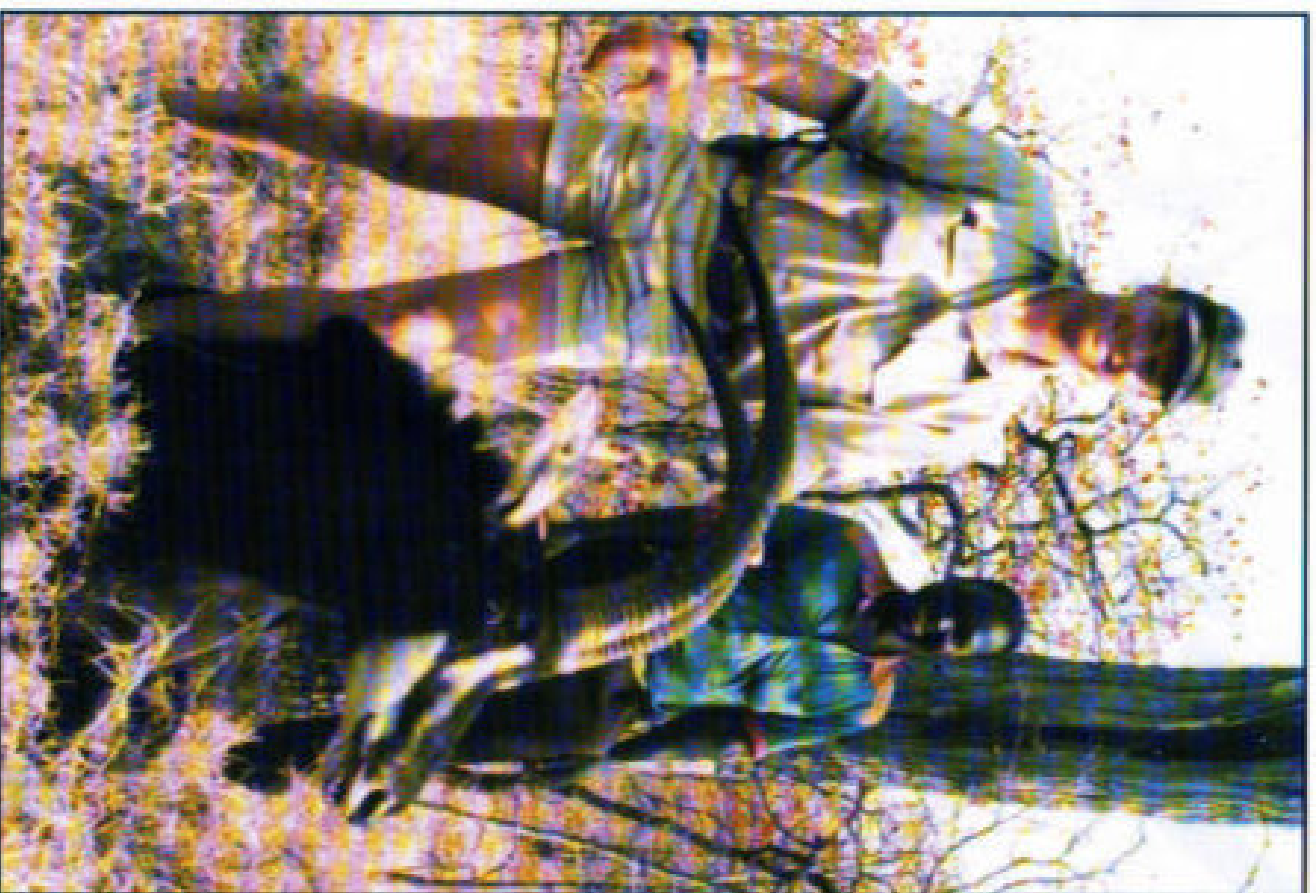
washing powder white bull standing head on, within rifle range, forefoot on an ant heap or a rise in the ground and looking down his nose at the hunter.

At the end of the day, that was how I found my second Mateusi bull. As I clambered up the side of the hill towards the sable he seemed enormous. Imperious. Unafraid. Immobile. Like a massive black and white chess piece.

"Once bitten, twice shy" John whispered in my ear "He seems a nice one but I cannot guarantee that he is 42 inches. It's your call." The bull was less than 150 paces away. I was steady, calm and had a good rest. The crosshairs of the 1 x 6 power Zeiss Diavari scope were fixed unwaveringly on the junction between the sable's neck and chest. From this angle, below the bull, if the shot held true, I should be able to drop the animal in its tracks.

While these thoughts were working their way in a reasonably logical sequence through my mind, for half a second the bull turned and looked to his left. Was he having second thoughts about the confrontation? I could clearly see the height in the front, the classic, graceful sweep and the tapering tips of its horns. I could also see why John was unsure as, even though most sable bulls have a face length of 13 inches, which helps when estimating horn length, they are difficult animals to judge and this one did not have that, 'wow' feel about it. That "forget the binoculars, let's get on with it" feel.

The veteran .375, loaded with 300 grain Nosler soft points by Federal, almost fired itself and, as is often the case when my shooting works like this, the bullet hit within millimetres of the aiming point and the bull thumped to the ground, crumpled by the penetrating power of this classic cartridge. I was happy with the hunt and happy with my 41 inch sable bull. Along the banks of the Rungwa river in Tanzania, a young sable bull was born that year which, in eight years time, would walk across an mbuga, burnt as black as he was, to become the magical plus 42 inch bull that I had sought for nearly twenty years and which would be the last of these noble, proud, handsome animals that I would ever hunt.



The author's first sable bull as mentioned in the story, with Alfred standing in the background