Bongo
Africa's Top Trophy

By Peter Flack

"So vare are you going hunting zen?" the German-sounding voice asked from behind me. I was standing next to my aluminium gun case in the lobby of the Sofitel Hotel (on the banks of the Oubangui River, in Bangui, Central African Republic) waiting for my lift to catch my charter plane. I turned to see a tall, unshaven man, with a long, doleful face, wearing rumpled, nondescript clothes that looked as if they'd been slept in. "In the east near Mboki," I politely replied.

"Vat are you hunting?" he demanded. "I hope to try for bongo," I answered. He flung his head back, rolled his eyes and in a sing-song voice, said, "Grong place, grong time, no chance." I looked at him in utter amazement and tried not to let my rising irritation show. Even if he was the world expert on bongo-hunting, his remarks were, at best, tactless and, at worst, deliberately cruel. Mercifully, our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of his lift, but not before he tucked his business card into the top pocket of my olive green shirt.

The remarks of the man bothered me more than I cared to let on. To begin with, I was way outside my comfort zone. This was my first major hunt outside of Southern Africa and, although I had prepared and trained harder for this hunt than any other, a lot of my preparations had only served to confirm how risky this venture was. For starters, the country was terminally unstable, and the closest South African embassy or consulate was in Ivory Coast. If I landed in trouble, I was on my own.

And then the lingua franca was French, and, although I had gone for lessons and listened to language tapes, any serious conversation was beyond me. At the other end of the scale, I was about to hunt an animal I had never seen except in photographs, with a young man with whom I had never hunted before. As for the terrain and hunting conditions in the equatorial rain forests where bongo are found, my knowledge was confined to what I was able to glean from books and from lengthy conversations with two professional hunters and the only other South African hunter (amateur) to have hunted there. Now I was confidently and forcefully being told that my homework was all wrong and that I had chosen the wrong part of the country at the wrong time of year.

As I stood in the lobby contemplating the next three weeks, I wondered what had possessed me to book the hunt in the first place. Well, at least I knew the answer to that one. Mister J.A. Hunter was to blame. I had read a book by the famous East African pro on his attempts, over thirty years, to shoot a bongo in Kenya. I was intrigued on two accounts; firstly, that an expert hunter like him could devote thirty years to a quest and not succeed, and secondly, that I had not the faintest idea what a bongo was.

First stop was the bookshelves. Rowland Ward had this to say: "This magnificent antelope was originally discovered in West Africa in the first half of the 19th century, and was found later to extend across to Mount Kenya, the Aberdares and the Mau escarpment in Kenya, wherever there was thick forest consisting either wholly or partly of bamboos. The eastern form has been separated as a distinct race on account of differences in colouration. In the 1860s du Chaillu named this antelope after its local (Fanti) name of Bongo, although it had actually been described from a pair of horns some 25 years earlier and was then referred to as the 'Broad-horned Antelope.'

Its body colour is a bright chestnut red, becoming darker in the old bulls, although this varies somewhat, according to the race. The body is marked with 12 to 14 narrow vertical white stripes; there is a white patch on the chest, a white chevron between the eyes, and two white spots on the cheek below each eye. There are some white patches and dark markings on the legs, and the underparts are black. The female is smaller and her ground colour is orange rather than chestnut. The tail is tufted. The ears are broad and large. The horns, carried by both sexes, are large and massive in the bulls, forming an open spiral, and are brown, becoming lightish buff at the tips. The colouration of Bongo from the Sudan is different, having a darker reddish brown body colour, and it seems to be more of a bush dweller."

The SCI Record Book of Trophy Animals (Tenth Edition) made the following remarks, "The bongo is one of the top game trophies of the world, and many experienced hunters consider it the premier African game animal. It is very shy, wary and elusive, and a full safari must be planned for this one animal, with success uncertain. It is probably safe to say that more bongos have been taken on the second or third safari than on the first. The classic, most sporting, and individually rewarding hunting method, is to find the large track of a solitary bull and follow it on foot, which can take all day and often results in failure. To follow a track, one should be fit enough to walk for hours in 100° F. (38° C.) heat with high humidity, supple enough to quietly bend and twist through

Equatorial rain forest

tangled vegetation, and have toughened feet that do not blister. Bongos also are taken in drives (after one has been located), and from tree-stands near a salt lick. Another method that is much used today is to trail and bay them with dogs. This is lawful, has a high rate of success, and allows the hunter to be selective; however, in this author's view, the real essence of bongo hunting is lost when dogs are used. Given the usual hunting conditions, low-to-medium-velocity calibres in the .375 to .458 class are ideal, as shots are often taken through thick vegetation at a fleeing animal. A good practice is to load a softpoint in the chamber and solids in the magazine. A bongo can be very dangerous when wounded. Great care must be taken not to shoot females by mistake, as they are similar to males in appearance and are likely to be encountered in thick cover where visibility is poor."

It was not long before interest in this amazing animal turned to fascination, and, unknowingly, I crossed into a new hunting world of spiral-horned antelopes that previously I had not known existed. It was to change my life in more ways than one, but at the time all I was looking for was a change.

It was one pale and anxious, lanky, Johannesburg businessman that climbed out of the twin-engined charter plane onto the dark brown, dusty laterite of the dirt strip near Mboki, in south-eastern C.A.R., about thirty kilometres from the border with Sudan. The aircraft's GPS had failed and we were well into Sudanese airspace before the pilot discovered the problem. It took twenty anxious minutes before we found the Mbomou River which separates C.A.R. from the Congo and which allowed us to navigate by more conventional means. More importantly, however, the concerns raised by my Germanic acquaintance were exacerbated by the endless, wall-to-wall, green broccoli that covered the country from west to east, like a seamless carpet. How could you find anything in that morass, let alone a bongo?

It was a long, five-hour drive to camp over eighty-four kilometres of the worst donga-filled track I had ever traversed. The advantage was that it allowed my professional hunter's boyish enthusiasm and tales of successful hunts to banish the worst of my fears. I mean, if the previous hunter, a racing driver from America, could shoot a bongo, albeit a small one, why couldn't I? Hunters have got to be the most optimistic clan known to man!

I remember as a schoolboy listening to the coach of that incredible Australian athlete, Peter Snel, the then 800 and 1500 metre world record-holder, explain how important it was to visualise every step of a race. If you wanted to win it, you had to see yourself do it in your mind's eye. Secondly, he explained how important it was in training to always complete your pre-determined schedule. If you gave up prematurely, you helped condition your mind to accept failure and, when the chips were down in the winning straight, and your body was taking unbearable strain, this subconscious conditioning could lead to your downfall. Both these factors are important, if not vital, when tracking bongo on foot without the help of dogs, which, I am sad to say, is how most bongo are killed today.

The first lesson is important, because it is rare to see the whole animal in the often-claustrophobic confines of the green-on-green intertwined mix of shrubs, trees, vines, leaves and cloying

You can see the red shirt of Achim, our driver, to the left of the tree behind which the Bongo stood.

vegetation that make up the rainforest habitat of these elusive animals. So you need to be able to "see" the whole animal in your mind when you can visually only make out a part. And you must again "see" in your mind how you are going to take that shot. Visualise all the different positions. Will you shoot off your PH's shoulder, rest against a tree, or kneel and shoot off your knees? It is too late when that brief, ten to fifteen-second opportunity presents itself, to then start the thought-and-decision-making process.

The second lesson is just as important. You need to hunt every day – from dawn to dark. You need to try and pick up tracks as early as possible to give yourself the most time to haul in the bongo before he begins his figure-of-eight meanderings (which routine he invariably follows) before he beds down and the fickle midday breezes literally blow your chances away. You need to be up early, every morning, no matter how weary the spirit, no matter how sore the body, no matter how battered the brain. And make no mistake, bongo hunting, the old-fashioned ethical way, is a bruising encounter. Apart from chance encounters, the usual method is to visit as many saltlicks and open glades as possible in the hope of picking up fresh tracks. The bongo visit these places, usually at night, to socialise and to eat the mineral-rich mud which, I believe, they need in order to supplement their vegetarian diet from a soil leached of minerals by the extremely high annual rainfall. More often than not, the good places are deep in the forest, and reaching them is not easy.

More thought and careful planning is required for a walk and stalk bongo hunt – before, during and after the hunt – than any other type of hunt I know. Because you can usually only see for about twenty to thirty paces in the rain forests, that dictates the distance you will need to be from the bongo when you shoot. Clearly then, the correct clothing is critical. It must be the right colour – dark, olive green is good – and must allow you to move as silently as possible. Anything that can hook or become entangled must be discarded or taped over, and your rifle should be the largest calibre you can handle quickly, accurately, and in a confined space as, inevitably, you will need to shoot through something in order to hit the vitals of a bongo bull.

Although every member of the hunting party usually carries a pair of gardening cutters or secateurs to silently snip a way through the forest, making quiet progress is difficult. Very seldom can you walk upright, unhindered, for more than a few paces. Bend, crouch, crawl, stand, step, lie, slither, and then repeat the process again and again and again. And all the while it seems as if every vine, creeper and plant-tendril is conspiring to ensnare every one of your appendages. To compound the discomfort, the best time to hunt is in the rainy season. It makes tracking easier, allows you to move more quietly and the drip, drip, drip after a rainstorm helps camouflage any noise you make.

There is nothing to see in the forests. No animals, birds or insects. No flowers, orchids or coloured plants. Only green on green on green. No one talks. And it is tiring both physically and mentally. The mental part is caused by the necessity to concentrate, and concentrate hard – not only on avoiding and evading the vegetation which ensnares your rifle, hat, legs and arms, not only on trying to move as quietly as possible, but on being aware. Aware that at any moment you may be offered that one chance, that one, ten-to- fifteen-second chance that could crown a hunting career. In truth, if you hunt elephant with your feet, you hunt bongo with your head.

We were really tired. The giant eland had led us a merry dance ever further from the vehicle. In fact, when we spooked the twenty-strong herd for the third and last time, and they started that rhythmical, mile-eating jog-trot that they can keep up forever, the GPS showed we were eighteen kilometres from camp and twenty-four kilometres from the vehicle. We were also sopping wet, having been caught in an

Our driver, Achim, decorates out vehicle to carry our Bongo back to camp– a local tradition. This is accompanied by traditional songs and branch-waving and, that evening, a Bongo dance in which the hunter must participate.

unexpected equatorial thunderstorm, which is a little like having a very large bucket of water tipped continuously over your head for about fifteen minutes. Although not as miserable as we looked, and a bunch of drowned cats would not have been an inappropriate description, humour was not at the forefront of my mind.

To make matters worse, the route to camp meant we had to cross one little stream after another and my water-softened feet had started to develop blisters. As we trudged along, head down, mind in neutral, enduring the discomfort, we cut through a tongue of forest, maybe two hundred metres wide, as it protruded into the savannah. I bumped into the back of Martin, our Zande tracker, and steadied myself on his outstretched arm.

As I looked up, the most amazing sight met my eyes. A thick pipe of late afternoon sunlight filtered through the overhead canopy. Motes of dust sparkled in the stream of bright, golden yellow light. Like a stage spotlight it threw a circle around the burning, tan-bright and toothpaste-white stripes of the bongo as it drank from the clear, tinkling stream at its feet. I still remember the drops of water dripping soundlessly from its beautiful black and tan muzzle as it gazed at us with its big, calm, brown, curious eyes. To date, it is still the single most astonishingly-beautiful sight I have ever beheld in the bush.

What followed was a circus. Martin had my rifle. I wasn't sure whether it was loaded or not. The PH wasn't sure whether the bongo was a male or female – both carry horns. While we at the front could see and were stationary, the others at the back blundered forward. The stage whispers were deafening. What a mess. In amongst all the loud whispering, rifle-cocking and people jostling, the bongo, well, let us just say that the bongo left.

As Martin and I left the large, canoe-shaped glade and walked off into the enveloping gloom, the other three members of our hunting team stood as still as Sodom-like salt statues. There had been no real rain for three days and the forest was drying out and becoming noisy. After a brief debate, it was unanimously agreed that the other three would stay behind to reduce the disturbance we made to the minimum. It was our tenth day on the tracks and this was our best chance so far. It was a few minutes before 0600, and the mud was still settling in the huge bull

Everyone wanted to see the Bongo in tha back of the truck. No-one wanted to touch it, and some of the women looked distinctly apprehensive, as they believe to do so causes leprosy.

The author and the Bongo. If I look quietly happy it is because I am.

tracks that marched across the thick, glutinous, grey mire and into the surrounding forest.

We followed the bongo as he walked down the middle of a tiny, ice-clear feeder stream trickling into the glade. Here he stopped to eat the white flowers of a gardenia shrub. He left the stream and walked steadily uphill. We were slow (Martin did not take a step forward without a track to guide him) and very quiet. An unseen colobus monkey exploded from the tree-top above us, and battered and chattered away through the branches with his raucous "harrr–harrr–harrr" alarm call ringing out to all and sundry. Loud as it was, it could not absorb the drum-beating hooves of the bongo. We had been less than forty paces away!

Two and a half hours later, we emerged from the dim forest into the shockingly white light of a sun-filled savannah, the light reflecting off the pale yellow head-high grasses. I caught my feet in a tangled twist of roots and involuntarily stumbled noisily. Martin looked round and scolded me softly. "Lentement." (Slowly.) "Bangena ici." (The bongo is here.) How he knew I will never know, but Martin with his incredible and seemingly intuitive skills had long since made a believer of me. I did not question his statement, but merely redoubled my care and concentration.

A few hundred paces of patient, painstaking progress later, a tearing, twig-snapping rip of noise erupted to my right. The sound travelled from right to left in an arc across our front. Through a tunnel of tangled undergrowth I glimpsed a white-striped tan hide, and a suspicion of huge, amber-brown, thick, lyre-shaped horns. As suddenly as the noise started, it stopped. The only evidence that was visible was eighteen inches of rump protruding from the shrub clustered around a tall tree about eighty paces away, the trunk of which obscuring where I imagined the forequarters of the bull to be.

Instinctively, the .416 Rigby notched itself into the nook of my right shoulder. Without taking my eyes off the bull for a nano-second, the eyepiece of the 1.5 x 6 Zeiss Diavari 'scope snuck up around my right eye. The crosshairs were there, right there where I was focused – where I "saw" the bull's left shoulder. The rifle fired itself by remote control. "Il es mort. Il es mort!" Martin repeated again and again, half in awe and half to convince both of us that, after ten, non-stop, bush-bashing, brain-draining days, we had done it. And he was right. The heavy, 400 grain Bearclaw bullet had bisected the tree trunk and the bull's shoulders. The bongo dropped in his tracks.

Martin eventually left to fetch the others. Alone with this most magnificent of all the many wonderful trophies that Africa has to offer, my uncontrollable emotions overflowed. As a brindled butterfly alighted on the noble head between the huge, thick, thirty-two inch, perfectly matched, lyre-shaped horns, tears tumbled in a steady stream down my cheeks. One emotion crowded the other out of my head and heart – sorrow for the death of the magnificent bull, relief that I had passed my self-imposed test, a quiet sense of peace and happiness that we had won the contest and so on and so on.

The feelings stayed with me for days, and, particularly the next day, I had the weirdest sensation that I was walking effortlessly a foot above the ground. I have never had this sensation before or since, but I know it changed my hunting life. For the first time I sensed, more than knew, that this might be the essence of what hunting was really all about. I still sense the same thing to this day, and the difficult challenges for giant eland, mountain nyala, East African sitatunga and western kudu that followed, have only served to confirm my feelings.And by the way, by return mail I received a gracious letter of apology and congratulations in response to the photograph which I sent to my German-speaking hunting adviser. We have since become friends, and I contribute, every now and then, to the magazine he publishes.