

THEY ARE THE MOST COMMON OF THE MOUNTAIN SHEEP AND GOATS OF THE HIMALAYAN MOUNTAINS. THEY ARE FOUND IN THE HIMALAYAN MOUNTAINS OF INDIA, NEPAL, AND TIBET. THEY ARE THE MOST COMMON OF THE MOUNTAIN SHEEP AND GOATS OF THE HIMALAYAN MOUNTAINS. THEY ARE FOUND IN THE HIMALAYAN MOUNTAINS OF INDIA, NEPAL, AND TIBET. THEY ARE THE MOST COMMON OF THE MOUNTAIN SHEEP AND GOATS OF THE HIMALAYAN MOUNTAINS. THEY ARE FOUND IN THE HIMALAYAN MOUNTAINS OF INDIA, NEPAL, AND TIBET.





The sable is elusive game. In the heavy forest cover he disappears like a ghost.

LONG STALK FOR A SLY SABLE

Brought up on pronghorns, an American plains hunter goes after one of Africa's trickiest antelope—the glamorous sable. What happens? Hunting pronghorns was never like this!

BY J. C. RIKHOFF

■ The slow steady purr of the Land Rover was interrupted by a sharp, yet muffled, knuckle-rap on the cab's metal roof.

"Stop!" and then with more urgency, Luis Cardozo whispered, "Sable! About 20 of 'em, maybe 300 yards over there in the grass by that grove of trees. There's two bulls at least."

"One of them looks pretty good to me," I answered with excitement. "Should we try for him?"

Luis and the two trackers, Jofrice and Alfonso, held a hurried council. The natives silently lowered themselves from the truck. Luis motioned me to follow.

"This grass is too high to get a clean shot from here or I'd let you squeeze one off," Luis whispered again. "We've got to get closer."

Silently, we moved forward through the grass. Luis and Jofrice, the old man from the Gorongora country, in the lead. I followed with Alfonso, the quietly dignified giant from the great coastal plains stretching to the Indian Ocean. The truck—with its silent crew of remaining natives—stood still and alien behind us.

Since the grass was head-high to everyone except the giant Alfonso, we could no longer see the sable, but could only hope that they remained unafraid and unmoving where we had last seen them. For a time, we were able to look back to the truck for a silent signal indicating the sable were still there, but soon that was lost from sight as well.

The grass spread across the plain in all directions. A dark fringe outlined distant forests bordering the great plain. Forest for refuge; the plain for food. It was a perfect combination for game—especially antelope. The country looked somewhat like the great plains west of Kansas. No jungle here. An occasional acacia tree—its wispy foliage hanging like Spanish moss—or a bright yellowish-green fever tree marked the only interruption in the interminable grass. While the country bore resemblance to some of the American West, the similarity stopped with the land—and didn't extend very far into animal life.

America has one true plains animal—its native pronghorn, falsely dubbed antelope. Africa has literally scores of species. I have always loved plains hunting in its best sense: the long, careful stalk in sparse cover for a wary, always

alert, devastatingly swift quarry in its own environment.

But my plains hunting has been necessarily limited by seasons and availability. Since I moved to the East from Arizona some five years ago, I have managed but one long hunt to Montana in 1960.

Then Joe Simoes entered the picture. An old friend, Joe is the owner of Simoes Safaris in Beira, Mozambique. During his last visit to New York, in early 1962, we had lunch together. And we indulged our favorite pastime—the comparison of the virtues of American hunting versus the African variety.

I never entered my head that I might someday enjoy an African hunt, any more than I might stroll out to purchase a spare yacht or two for a weekend sail. Hence, I argued hard and vigorously in defense of American game and hunting, as only a man can who realizes that he has to love it best—for it's the only hunting he will ever enjoy. Finally, after a particularly spirited skirmish over our respective plains hunting, Joe turned to me and made a startling challenge.

"You know, Jim, safaris don't have to be all that expensive." He gave me a long look and suddenly smiled. "If you really want to experience the greatest hunting in the world, you can—with a little planning and sacrifice. I have a cancellation in June. Come on over."

At first it seemed an impossible plan, but then I began to think: why not—it will probably be the only chance I'll ever have to go back to Africa. The world and game situation was not noticeably bright and the future was dubious at best. But Mozambique was an island of tranquility in a continent of unrest and ferment. Its game supply was one of the best in Africa. Transportation, once so costly in both dollars and—more importantly for the man of limited vacation-time, had been simplified by the jet age and economy fares. Alitalia could pick me up in New York in the evening; have me in London the following morning; Rome at noon; Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, the following day. Salisbury was only about an hour and a half's air time from Beira, Mozambique.

I went home to pack my bag and my .264 magnum Winchester Westerner. I had already tested the rifle on pronghorn during my Montana hunt, but it had been in enforced retirement for the past year.

BEIRA, MOZAMBIQUE

LONG STALK FOR A SLY SABLE

When I arrived in Beira in June, Joe had put me in the capable hands of his cousin, Luis, and two of his best trackers, Jofrice and Alfonso, all of whom had been alerted to show me the best Mozambique had to offer. They had asked what I wanted most—lion, leopard, elephant or buffalo?

"Antelope," said I. "Kudu, nyala, but above all, the sable."

Now, 10 days since my arrival in Beira, we were in the main Simoes camp in the central concession, 250 kilometers northwest of Beira in the Sena River country. We had seen game every day—scores of waterbuck, rebeira, reedbuck, warthog, small bushbuck and the diminutive oribi, large eland and curious kongoni, secretive duiker and belligerent buffalo.

We had been lucky: we had seen leopard and heard lion. I had already taken a number of good trophies—one reedbuck we were sure would make the records and a warthog held the same possibility in its huge tusks and elongated skull, all whitening in the African sun at that moment. And I had taken a leopard and a buffalo—two of Africa's "Big Five"—plus a number of other trophies. Now, everything in me was pointed to one objective—the taking of trophy heads of nyala, kudu and sable. The sable was number one on the list.

Suddenly—with a return to reality—I realized the sun had burnt off the morning mist and damp coldness. The grass still left beads of fine, powdered moisture on my old New England canvas-faced brush pants, but the air was already warming up to the strong heat of midday Africa. It was 10 o'clock. I was uncomfortably aware of the sweater I wore under my bush shirt.

We continued through the brush, silent and careful in the choice of each step. Luis quietly slapped the back of his leg ahead of me. I looked down. A small warthog hole, half-hidden in the grass, wanted to twist my ankle. I sidestepped it, slapping my leg for Alfonso, who, of course, had already seen the hole.

Twenty minutes passed. We reached a small knoll—and carefully worked our way up the far side away from the sable. Luis motioned us down on our knees and Jofrice crawled forward, parting the grass ahead with skillful fingers. He seemed to insert himself—as into some sort of

green envelope—through the grass rather than actually crawl. A minimum of grass stalks were broken with each movement. There was no noise, little motion. We crept behind him, keeping 10 or so feet to the rear and well below the skyline. With extreme care Jofrice slowly raised his head, and parting a blade or two of grass with one dextrous finger, fixed a searching, darting eye on the glade some 200 yards ahead. He made no sound, no movement, no sign.

A moment passed. Another moment added to still more seemed to stretch for an eternity. Jofrice remained unmoving, almost a part of the land. Carved out of native ebony and just as hard and valuable, I thought, Luis remained equally motionless.

The plainsman, Alfonso of little words and strong feats, lay on his side behind us. His eyes seemed unseeing as they gazed glassily through and passed us, fixed on something known only to his own mind. That mind seemed in another world, but I knew—even from only 10 days of hunting with him—that he was intently involved with our immediate problem. Alfonso, who could outrun certain small antelope on his native plains, lived for hunting. When the time came, his curious, introverted absorption would produce some softly, shyly tendered bit of advice that would contribute mightily to our success.

Jofrice glided backward and downward with a sublime economy of movement. He shook his head and with a fast eloquent gesture of his hand made it painfully clear that sable were gone. With a carelessness that told us the large antelope were out of sight and sound, he and Luis rose up on their haunches and gazed out over the knoll toward and beyond the trees below. I joined them. Alfonso remained as before. It was not yet his time to participate and he wasted no movements or energy.

"They've moved out," Luis said. "Now, what we don't know is how they moved out. Under a full head of steam, or simply grazing down the valley." Luis had gone to school in South Africa and had picked up a full range of English slang and colloquialisms.

"How about moving down to that grove, using it to cover us, and getting a look-see from there?" I suggested.

"Better than that," Luis said, getting

up. "Jofrice and Alfonso can probably pick up their trail there."

"Let's get going," I suggested. "It's starting to warm up and those sable will be heading for some big woods before too long—or so you told me a couple of days ago," I added.

"You're starting to learn—so you remember what I told you for a change," Luis laughed and picked up his hat. He and Jofrice started down the slope toward the grove. As they moved out, I removed my sweater and handed it to Alfonso who tied it by the arms around his waist before we followed.

We entered the small patchy woods below us and Jofrice and Alfonso cast about sniffing like two old veteran bird dogs hot on the scent. They moved slowly about in ever-increasing circles. Occasionally they stopped, closely examined a leaf or blade of grass. In a few moments they held a conference, reached a quick decision, referred their opinion to Luis, who obviously concurred, and then led us out of the grove into the surrounding grassy plain. Even I could follow the trail then. Although the sable seemed unalarmed, they had moved at a steady gait, perhaps a bit faster than normal grazing would allow. They were quite out of sight and sound. As we worked our way through the all-encompassing grass, the heat asserted itself with increasing discomfort. I looked at the sun. It was almost overhead.

Jofrice stopped. Luis motioned me to halt. Suddenly a head popped up in front of us. The animal stood fascinated and stupidly transfixed in her attention. She looked—and acted—like a Montana muley.

"Kongoni," Jofrice grinned. We started moving through the grass again. The Kongoni twitched a nervous ear, cocked its head, then jumped away in the curious goatlike gait peculiar to the species. We waited for a frozen minute to see if she would spook any hidden sable. She proceeded in her strange bounding fashion until she crested a small grassy hill and was lost to sight. Nothing joined her in flight. With a relaxed sigh, I followed Luis as he and Jofrice again picked up the trail. Alfonso followed, eyes and ears alert for sounds and sights unknown to my senses.

A half hour [Continued on page 104]

Long Stalk for a Sly Sable

[Continued from page 63]

passed and became an hour. At each half hour we would stop and rest five minutes under a solitary tree—if one were available—in silence dictated more by heat than necessity. My shirt was soaked with sweat in half-moons stretching back under my armpits to join a dampened splotch spread across my back. I took off my bush hat. My ankles itched. They were covered with bites and scratches. *What in God's name am I doing here?* I thought.

Boy, what I wouldn't give for a great big drink of something cold. With real ice. Frosted sides on the glass. And inside? Now let's see, that's the most important ingredient—no, the ice is—but what should be in the glass? How about a Cuba libre? Sort of sissy drink in some circles,

but you have to admit that it can be the most refreshing damn drink in captivity. Let's see, I could use a really big glass—about a 12-ouncer—with some of those raw, jagged chunks of old-fashioned ice chopped off a 25-pound block, then a jigger or two of very fine white rum—a "silver label" at the least—and a quarter of fresh lime. Then top it all off with a full ration of chilled Coke or Pepsi. Hot damn! Or rather, cold damn is more like it.

"Come on, Jimmy," a hand gently squeezed my arm. We got up and with silent consent resumed the ordered file of our march.

I wish we had brought some water with us. The truck isn't all that far so there's no danger, but I wish that we had brought the water, warm or not. Suddenly a thought slipped into my mind. This stalk is taking longer than they intended! They didn't think it would take

this long. Probably guessed we'd pop that bull when we topped that first rise. They hadn't counted on this anymore than I had. I glanced at Alfonso striding quietly behind me. No, that one knew, I'll bet. And I'll double or nothing he knows we're nowhere near them now. He looks like he couldn't care less.

"Where's the sable, Alfonso—are they gone?" I asked.

"It's all right, boss—a little more time and we see them. Don't worry."

"Thanks."

Alfonso nodded. I didn't flatter myself, but I knew he liked me. He liked me for a very basic reason: he knew I liked and respected him and I had shot sufficiently well in his opinion that my estimation meant something. It was that simple. We got along. If Alfonso said things were going to be all right, that was enough for me. Suddenly I felt very strongly that we were going to find the sable and I was going to let the hay out

of that big bull.

I forgot the sun, the bites and the scratches, the nagging thought of half-gallon frozen Cuba libres in air-conditioned bars in Beira, Rome, Princeton, Columbus, Ohio and Glendale, Arizona. It was 1 o'clock. If we didn't catch them soon, they'd be too deep in the woods for us to ever get close enough for a shot without spooking every animal for miles around. No need to worry though, Alfonso knew.

But we kept walking and the time kept ticking by in a relentless march. One-third. Two o'clock. Two more breaks and nothing was said. I looked at Luis. I wondered if he was beginning to think how he could begin to feel me out about breaking it off and going back to the truck. The situation is really international I thought. Every year in every place where men come to go out with other men to hunt game the same thing happens again and again. The time comes when the guide begins to add things up in his mind and he realizes that the point of return has been reached.

Then comes the diplomacy; the measure of the expert guide who knows how to measure his client. Now, can he turn to him and say simply "let's go back—it's a bust?" Or must he keep going on until the client is so tired and miserable—and bored, maybe mad—that he doesn't give a damn about the hunt anymore but only wants to get back to camp as soon as possible? Then the client either sulks a bit or, if he's halfway decent, sheepishly comes around with hopes and plans for the next day.

"Well, Jimmy, it looks like we've had it," Luis stopped and, pushing his hat back to wipe away the sweat, turned to Jofrice, who with a solemn nod gave his assent.

"They're traveling bastards today, aren't they," I offered cigarettes around. "What say, Luis, shall we head back?" I'd do my part and make it easy.

"Well, it's almost 3 and they're sure to be holed up in the deep shade by now—probably over there in that forest to the northwest," he gestured to the darkened edge of the plain a few miles ahead. "The way this wind is shifting they probably got a whiff of us somewhere along the line and kept moving. That's probably why they never stopped to graze a little more."

"You're the doctor."

"I hate to stop now, damn it. We've almost shot the day. Look, it's too late to go back to camp for lunch. Let's head back to the Land Rover. If we move out sharply, we should get back in time to skirt that big patch of woods bordering the plain on the other side on our way back. Maybe we'll see something before dusk." He was trying to salvage something out of the day. His professional pride was a little out of joint.

I bent down to tie a lace and, straightening up to sling my rifle, I saw Alfonso. He was standing to one side of the beaten-down path we had made through the grass. His lips were pursed and his cheek muscles taut. His eyes were distant and almost clouded over. He was listening for something. No, he was smelling! I saw his

wide nostrils twitch. Jofrice, who was urinating to one side, turned to watch Alfonso. Luis paused and appraised Alfonso with a careful scrutiny.

"Hold on, Jimmy," Luis murmured. "We may be on to something after all. Alfonso, what is it? Good luck?"

"Water, boss—sable." He lapsed into a native dialect with Jofrice, who, after a moment's argument, shrugged his shoulders and gave what appeared a reluctant agreement. Luis walked over to Alfonso and held a rapid, almost unintelligible exchange.

It turned out that we were standing in a drainage area. Covered with high grass now, it was a runoff stream in the rainy season.

"When the rains stop and the grasses grow, the stream disappears here," Luis explained. "But a lagoon remains in that woods up ahead where this trough ends in a big dip. Alfonso says there is always a little water there—even in drought."

"A water hole for game, I take it," I said.

"Yes, and for us a particularly good one. Alfonso says that the sable are there right now, holed up, and taking on water at the lagoon just inside the woods instead of going deep into the forest for a steat. They'll probably come out again at dusk or later."

"What will we do—it might be too dark by then for a shot, let alone getting back to the truck?" I asked.

"Alfonso says we should head for the woods about there," Luis pointed to a jutting peninsula of trees that was closest to our party. "We can come up on the sable by the lagoon."

Luis started striding toward the woods. Alfonso quietly and swiftly moved up ahead of Jofrice and then Luis. He had taken over with Luis' full consent. This was the business he had been trained for and he had learned his lessons exceedingly well. In a short time we were in the first trees on the edge of the forest. Alfonso changed his course abruptly and, threading phantomlike through the brush and trees, carried us on an angled path that brought us a little deeper in the forest with each step while carrying us closer to the lagoon at the same time. The sun was well in the West and the shadows deepened in increasing darkness in the forest.

A few birds, awakened to the dusk and our intrusion, shrilled a scolding warning and curiously quieted in a few moments. The forest then remained hushed, seemingly barren of life.

Alfonso's movements became more deliberate and—if possible—more silent. He began to pick each step with extreme, almost gingerly care, passing every few yards, then feet, to listen and smell. Finally, he stopped dead. We, who had almost unconsciously attempted to duplicate his pattern of tracking in our own fashion, stopped as well. He stood, tall and immobile, but slightly bent as his head cocked to one side, nostrils flared.

Now, for the first time, Alfonso brought his eyesight into play and we knew that we were very close. His eyes methodically searched the impenetrable fastness of the woods, vines, brambles and bush about

him. He suddenly froze all movement—even of his eyes. We knew he saw—perhaps only sensed—the immediate presence of game. We saw nothing and remained rigid.

He waited another moment or two and then slowly stooped until one hand touched the ground. He carefully ripped a clump of dried grass from the earth and crumbled it in his strong fingers. He brought the powdered fragments within sight of his straining eye and slowly released them. They gently floated downward in haphazard seasaw drifting until, ever so slightly, they began to glide a bit to the rear. A little wind coming from the right direction. A small smile played about Alfonso's lips. He straightened and motioned Luis and me forward. Jofrice hung in the background. With a silent, almost imperceptible movement, Alfonso raised his hand and pointed.

"Sable," he said simply.

They were spread around the near edge of the perimeter of the lagoon. Perhaps two dozen sable antelope—the most beautiful animal in the world to many, and certainly to me at that moment. All of the animals, both male and female—except calves—had horns, but the females' horns were relatively small. Perhaps they went a foot or so at most. The cows were a chestnut red running to a dark brown. A young bull, its tail automatically switching flies, moved among a group of four or five cows on one side of the lagoon. I followed Alfonso's nod and found the big bull. He stood to one side as an anointed leader should. The white markings about his face stood out in startling contrast to the magnificent glossy black of his coat. His huge horns curved scimitarlike back over his body in two large graceful curves. They looked as if they should just make the records.

"Now," Alfonso whispered.

I swept the lagoon with my 4x scope, taking in animal after animal, until the crosshairs rested on the shoulders of the bull. He stood—facing to my right—in the tall grass, but his shoulder joint was clearly in view where the grass broke to either side. I pushed the safety off.

The rifle cracked sharply through the forest. For a second the herd stood transfixed, but its leader had already dropped in a crumple. As the remaining sable bolted, some crashing through the brush, others splashing across the lagoon, the big bull staggered to its feet and lunged into the bush. For a moment he was lost from sight. We dashed forward, oblivious to the cutting edge of briar and thorn as it lashed our plunging legs.

"There!" Luis grabbed my arm and pointed in the bush.

The sable's head was silhouetted above the brush line against the background of the forest. I shot again. His neck dropped forward in a swift, climactic swing and he lay still. He was lost to sight in the undergrowth, but we knew it was all over.

We all stood, unmoving and unspeaking. We could hear the last clomp of hoofs and rasp of thorn brush as the sable finished their escape. And then, very suddenly, there was the complete absence of sound. Utter and total silence. I ejected the spent cartridge, jacked in another and

slipped on the safety. A hand touched my shoulder.

"Very good. You shoot and kill. First shot kill too."

Alfonso was indeed my good friend.

"It's a damn good one," Luis said quietly. "Let's go check his horns. You may just make the records. I'd say that shot was just about 150 yards. Not bad—for a forest shot!" he laughed and Alfonso grinned, a rare occurrence on any day.

We walked forward through the grass and by the lagoon to the sable. It was a magnificent animal of some 400 pounds. Luis took out his tape measure while I examined the two wounds. One 140-grain bullet had gone directly in at the shoulder, making a small slitlike opening where it entered and leaving no exit. It must have broken up inside the lung cavity. My second shot made an identical entrance in the neck, but had exited on the far side with a hole about the size of a quarter. Both wounds were fatal.

"Well, this is it, Luis. I don't think I'll ever take another head of game that means as much as this one. It's the most beautiful animal I've ever seen. I've got to admit it—we haven't anything like this

back home. Heck, it makes our elk look drab in comparison!" I was babbling like a 4-year-old with a new prize.

"I do believe you're pleased at that," Luis laughed. "Let's see now. No, just a shade under 39 inches, has to hit 40 to be in the records. But they're magnificent horns. Look how thick they are around the base."

"And that hide. Talk about ebony black! I've never seen a blacker hide on anything—and I don't see any scars on it anywhere," I said.

"That's rare in a mature bull. Usually they've picked up a few tokens of combat," Luis was carefully examining the bull's coat.

"I could go home now—if I had to—and be completely satisfied. Tonight's the night we crack that bottle of brandy. Boy, I can just see that head in my hallway now! And that devil Alfonso," I turned to thank the plainsman, but he was gone.

"He's gone back for the truck," Luis anticipated my question. "There's a lot of meat here and the boys will eat hearty tonight."

"I just wanted to thank him for the

great tracking job he did," I said.

"Track, hell," Luis snorted, "that lean old hunter didn't track these sable. He *sensed* they were here—and don't ask me with what sense!"

My hunt was to last for another 10 days and I was to take a total of some 20 animals of various species. I was to spend six days of vigorous, often discouraging, hunting before I finally bagged a good representative head of the rare nyala, the forest phantom.

Through misunderstanding and downright stupidity on my part, combined with a little bad luck, I would turn down an easy 100-yard broadside shot at a magnificent kudu bull with horns of at least 55 inches. (I would see no more kudu that trip and the memory of what easily might have been still haunts me. But perhaps that is the way it should be; we should always leave one to come back for.)

I would have many more experiences. But the sable—the ebony black bull with the huge, curving horns—holds a special place not only in my memories of Africa but in all my hunting experiences in any land, in any time.—J. C. Rikhoff

The author bagged his sable after a day-long stalk. Here he and tracker Jofrice pose with the trophy bull, a head with horns just under 39 inches. The keen senses of a second tracker, Alfonso, were the margin of success.

Queen of Beasts
The author bagged his sable after a day-long stalk. Here he and tracker Jofrice pose with the trophy bull, a head with horns just under 39 inches. The keen senses of a second tracker, Alfonso, were the margin of success.

The author bagged his sable after a day-long stalk. Here he and tracker Jofrice pose with the trophy bull, a head with horns just under 39 inches. The keen senses of a second tracker, Alfonso, were the margin of success.

