

The Horse That Murders

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

At long, bloody last, it was one of those nights. A moon the size and color of a whole wheel of Swiss cheese plated the surface of the river along my camp in new bronze while the lovely, lowering chill of evening scampered deliciously up my spine. The sweat and pore-filling grime were gone, sluiced off under the perforated canvas bucket hung from the muSassa tree behind my tent. As the hot water pouring from my unbarbered hair began to turn from reddish brown to clear, even the knotted cables in my back began to unwind. It had been a 30-mile walk, round trip, before I caught up with the bulls, an old, broken-tusked jumbo and a younger sidekick. Nothing dramatic. A pair of frontal brain shots, and the local crop marauders became nothing more than two good reasons why the tribesmen wouldn't bother to poach for quite a while.

Night was coming down like a deadfall just as I had pulled into my camp with Silent and Invisible, dropping off four plump francolin with the game guard who had the insane idea he was a cook. The little Browning .22 was perfect for close head shots and kept me from going completely off my nut on a solid diet of buff and impala. After the shower and a fresh tunic with a cashmere turtle-neck underneath, I attacked all four francolin, successfully washing them down with a rare gift of Cape wine, the whole works preceded by a couple of judicious jolts of man's best friend. The radio had been mercifully mute, and nobody had pitched up demanding government protection from anything eating their crops, wives or children.

After dinner, I unfolded a camp chair and lit a smoke off an ember from the campfire, sitting well back from its glow,

the heat of the burning mopane logs radiating off my face like a welcome fever. Lord, but it was good sitting there. Fatigue crept soothingly over me as the distant roars of a pair of lions blanketed the dark, chill bush. Closer, a coven of hyenas told bad jokes to each other, and the bark of an apprehensive zebra echoed sharply through the night. Oh, yes. It was one of the great nights. What I didn't



Photo by Leonard Lee Bow III

realize then was that it was almost *the* night.

It happened so quickly that now, as I look back on it, the memory is almost a flashing rush of underexposed movie film running at top speed through my brain. There were three loud shouts from the grass shelter that I dignified with the term "kitchen," and a deep series of grunts as Silent, Invisible and the game guard darted away like a covey of flushing guinea fowl. Support poles cracked as a

tremendous lump of movement demolished the kitchen hut on its way toward me from across the fire at my right front. As I flipped over backwards and started running for the notched log that served as a makeshift gun rack, the fire seemed to explode into a million scattered fragments of flaming debris. Over my shoulder, I saw a bull hippo the size of a mobile home heading straight at me like a bowling ball thrown by an irate Dick Butkis.

That part of the film is Super Vistavision clear, the mouth open and looking like a hall closet with curving, white tusks. He was 10 yards away, and I was the undisputed center of his attention. Going flat out for the guns, the sensation was that of trying to run through a quagmire in a nightmare. I forced my mind off the gaping jaws and tried to decide — if I reached the gun rack at all — which gun to grab. The Evans .470 Nitro double was nearest. No good there. The chambers were empty, the business ends of the cartridges stuck loosely in the muzzles as plugs to keep out insects. Forget the shotgun and the .22. That left my .375 H&H Mag Mauser, a custom job by Continental, with a tip-off mount. It, too had a round loosely stuck in the muzzle, but I knew there were four more stacked in the magazine. A glance over my shoulder, on the other hand, made things look fairly academic as it was now obvious that the hippo and I were going to end up at the rack in a dead tie. And with a bull hippo that is mad at you, that *really* means dead.

I still was not certain whether to keep going for the guns or to sheer off at an angle in hope of giving the bull the slip. Or maybe I could pull a John Wayne by grabbing the Mauser and rolling out of the

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*Hippo Means Horse In Greek, But These
"Horses" Are The World's Most Underrated
Man-Killers.*



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way while I worked the bolt. Ideas — all bad — poured through my skull like a tap left open, yet there was one fact that wouldn't go away. In about four seconds, I was going to get recycled. You would think that terror would be the predominating emotion in a fix like mine. Not me. I'm too dumb. It was irritation, fury at my own laxity. How the hell had I let myself get 40 yards away from the guns? I was supposed to be a pro, and professionals just don't make that kind of mistake and live to lose as much hair as I have. Why not at least a lion or an elephant, something respectable to do the deed? I could visualize the Lusaka newspaper now: NITWIT NIMROD HAMMERED BY HIPPO. Oh, brother, I know all this sounds screwy on paper, but the things that race through your brain with incredible speed when the pressure's really on are downright odd. Well, consider the source. . .

Now, it's apparently true that Guardian Angels spend a lot of their on-duty hours hovering around idiots and drunks, but very few draw game officer assignments. That's one reason I keep Silent and Invisible around. And, as a furious, honking bawl from close behind me indicated, they were earning their beer money. Magically, the hippo had sprouted two thorn-wood spear shafts roughly in the middle of his left side. With whoops and howls, my men were shouting, waving and throwing sticks and clods of earth they snatched up from the ground, trying to draw the big bull off me. It worked. The bull changed direction, angling away from me toward them with the lithe grace of a locomotive turning onto a siding. I reached the rack, pulled out the stopper round and jacked the bolt of the Mauser, sliding home a 300-grain Kynoch solid. No choice. Swinging on the hippo as he quartered away, I fired, going for the big ball joint in the hip. The wicked little slug punched through, collapsing him like a cargo plane with a blown tire. Scampering off to the side, I stuck another quickie into his ear hole, and he never moved again except for shivering under the impact of the just-to-be-sure shot.

After we got the scattered fire under control so it wouldn't burn the whole camp down around our ears, I ordered a beer ration and something a mite more substantial for the Bwana, who had had a hard evening. Both Silent and Invisible were irked that the hippo had been so inconsiderate as to fall on the spear side, which would mean a lot of axe work to recover the heads. I, however, was quite pleased with the outcome. Any time you come out of an unarmed, nighttime difference of opinion with a bull hippo,

you're way ahead of the game, chum.

It didn't take much more than a glance to see why our late, lamented friend had gotten into such poor humor. His back was slashed in five or six places. The long, oozing cuts looked like Toshiro Mifune had been trying out a new Samurai sword. He had gotten them, naturally, from another bull in a territorial battle and, who knows but that he had been the winner!

Africa's hairier game is usually lumped into that unholy quintet known as The Big Five: elephant, rhino, leopard, lion and buffalo. Some writers, whom I very much doubt ever have had to follow up a wounded one, have the audacity to exclude the leopard from this heady company simply on the basis of his lesser relative size. This would make it The Big Four. In my opinion, however, there should be a "Big Six," expanded to include the hippo. Why? Because he kills far and away more people every year in Africa than any other herbivore. Crocodiles, of course, lead the list of man killers among the carnivores, but relatively few hunters are included on its hit list. The Hippopotamus is, without any doubt, the most incredibly underrated dangerous animal in the world.

This slight may come from the fact that the hippo suffers from a terrible image problem, not helped by the fact that he looks like a big, fat, slow, good-natured slob. Most of the uninitiated think of hippos as being, well, kind of "funny-looking," an impression enhanced by the cartoonists who make their livings humanizing animals. If, however, you ever get an irritated hippo breathing down the back of your neck, you will have a lot of impressions — if you happen to survive — but none of them will be that the multi-ton mountain of murder is "funny-looking."

The incident I related earlier took place on the upper reaches of Zambia's Luangwa River a couple of years back, and it was the third time that I nearly have been killed by a hippo. Once, while doing safaris for the old Luangwa Safaris, Ltd., I almost got the literal deep-six from another bull. It had sneaked up a channel to the edge of a shallowly submerged sand bar I was standing on, covering my men from crocs as they butchered another hippo. I saw the water bulge just in time to be ready as the second bull's charge exploded from beneath the surface some 10 feet from where I was standing. I was very damned lucky to snap off a round into the right eye to drop him almost at my feet. Considering the red tape from having killed an animal off-license, even in self-defense, I have often questioned whether I should not have gone ahead and let him get me.

Another time, I was charged at night in a heavy patch of riverine grass and again got lucky with the .470 Evans with a reflex

hip shot. I wish hippos weren't always trying to bite me. You can take the word of Allan Root, the Kenya wildlife photographer who got badly mauled but managed to survive: It's not a pleasant experience. Despite gangrene, a forest-fire fever that even had his mattress sopping and a tusk hole in his calf that would accommodate a beer bottle, he made it and is, at least at last reports, still a biped.

Considering the hippo a game animal, at least in the context in which most people see him, would appear on the surface to be ridiculous. The reason is that, during daylight hours, he is usually in the water, protecting his skin from the drying sun. The thought of simply executing him with a bullet through the noggin while he stares placidly at you is not exactly consistent with the concept of sport hunting. On the other hand, what the Fellowship of Disney doesn't tell you is that the hippo is not an aquatic feeder. Actually they leave the water after dark to eat terrestrial grasses and shoots, often travelling 10 or more miles a night in search of the forage to keep their rock-hard, thick-skinned bodies going. In many African reserves and parks, overpopulations of hippos have destroyed the habitat for miles on each side of the rivers, necessitating the cropping of excess animals.

When a hippo leaves his aquatic home and is no longer in the security of his watery territory, he becomes as homicidally neurotic as Son of Sam. And that's just when he's healthy. If he's recently had a slashing, blood-foaming battle with a rival and is in terrible pain from the long cuts and gouges left by the knife-sharp fighting tusks of his enemy, his temperament is about like that of nitroglycerine heated in a double boiler. Definitely, shall we say, unstable.

Most big game is decidedly unpredictable but not so much as the hippo. If you manage to blunder your way between him and the water, he will usually charge. A decent-sized bull hippo will shade 2½ tons, and if you're under the impression that he's either slow or clumsy, you had better stay away from any African water bigger than a damp sponge. He can put that 5,000 pounds of muscle into overdrive as fast as any rhino or Cape buffalo and, if he catches you, you'll probably be a lot worse off. He has four fighting tusks as thick as pick handles and as sharp as the edge of this page. Whetting against each other as they do, they stay sharp throughout the animal's life. On a normal bull, the exposed portion of the lower tusks will reach from gum line to tip about the same distance as between your elbow and your wrist. They will also penetrate your chest with the greatest of ease, which you might consider undesirable.

I hope I have not given you the impression that a hippo will not leave the water to chase you if you bother him, or

even if he just gets it into his mind. He will, indeed, particularly if there isn't much of a bank. And, herein lies the more interesting aspect of hippo hunting, especially if you happen to be gifted with diminished capacity, extensive ignorance or garden variety stupidity. It doesn't take all that much to goad a hippo into a charge, which is really the only sportsman-like way to hunt him. Just walk or wade up as close as your nerve allows and tell him he has bad breath. Say something rude about his sister. Mention a few vile things about his appearance. Then just stand by.

A hippo charge from close range gives the feeling of being attacked by an oversized grand piano with the lid open. The mouth will open, exposing the tusks as he gathers speed, throwing a wake like a landing craft. Some I have seen were making more noise than a Moog synthesizer with a major short circuit; others completely silent. Noisy or silent, he'll have your absolute, undivided attention — I promise you.

If you have the guts to stay put, you'll have to place your shot perfectly. There will be no retakes in this scene. Since his mouth will be open, any fair chance at the brain will be obscured. It's a small brain anyway; if you are inciting hippo charges on purpose, it's about the size of your own. The best bet is to feed him a full-jacketed hors d'oeuvre right between the adenoids, breaking the neck. If you hit a touch high, you'll probably hit the lower brain and cables of nerves there. If low, you had better reload in one mighty big hurry.

You might get lucky with a chest shot from a very heavy rifle, but I wouldn't want to have you owing me any money if that is your choice. Remember, he's more than twice the size of a whopper Cape buffalo. When any big animal is mad enough to charge a natural enemy such as man from close range, he's for sure got enough STP, adrenalin and heaven-knows-what boiling around in his system to cover 50 yards — maybe a lot further — before his brain runs out of oxygen. And this is even though his heart and lungs may look like chopped-up spaghetti. If you happen to be 25 yards away and he can cover 50, you'll directly get the drift of my advice. Considering that there are records of single hippos tearing 10-foot crocodiles in half, I don't suppose it would be especially constructive for me to detail what happens if you aren't very lucky.

To tell the truth, the best part about African hunting is the incomparably wide variety and number of dangerous game to challenge the hunter under honest conditions of fair-chase confrontation. Elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo, rhino; they're all great. But, from now on, you can have all my hippos. You see, I wouldn't want to be selfish. ■