



Hwange Bulls by Harald Wolf

Hwange (or Wankie) National Park of western Zimbabwe is the largest and most game-rich reserve of the country. Not far south of the splendid Victoria Falls of the Zambezi River Hwange Park used to be the greatest tourist hot spot of Zimbabwe, featuring lots of magnificent sightseeing lodges before the tourism collapsed. Hwange Park used to be world famous for its huge elephants, black-maned lion and high concentration of sable antelope. Also the local blood-line of buffalo is renowned for its huge body size and trophy potential. As well as the elephant they truly deserve the

honorable title Hwange Bulls. Although the area is rather dry the local Sweetveld-grass offers quite a rich pasture, and in combination with superior genetic potential the wankie buffaloes probably produce larger trophies on average than the rest of the country.

To the East and Northeast the Bulawayo-Vic Falls railwayline forms the boundary of the National Park. Some species, such as elephant and lion do not hesitate at all to cross over this artificially man-made thing. Buffalo do not like to walk across it but readily do if the water and grass situation looks more promising on the other side.

Some entelope however, seems to have an inbred shyness against the railway line. Nevertheless, the areas adjacent to the Hwange National Park are teeming with wildlife. Some of the so called railway farms accomodated such rich game populations that sightseeing lodges popped up like mushrooms after a warm summer rain a few years ago. These properties were lost to hunting, of course. We experienced a similar movement towards sightseeing tourism in some of the best hunting areas of neighboring Botswana. Non-consumptive wildlife utilisation, such as sightseeing tourism and hunting are virtually impossible on the same spot - so the hunters loose out in the most prolific game areas.

I have been to Zimbabwe many times, but always concentrated on hunting the Zambezi Valley and escarpment as well as



private ranches/conservancies of the Lowveld. I had paid a brief visit to Hwange Park, but I never had a closer look at the surrounding hunting areas as yet. Shortly before I left for Zimbabwe I contacted Hwange Safaris, the new operator of the government-owned safari concession of Deka, adjacent to the north of Hwange Park. The Deka concession is split in half and Hwange Safaris is operation in the so called Deka-tail, bordering the park boundary on 45 km. I had the idea to focus on sable hunting, thinking that the entire region accommodates a good sable population. However, Allan Banks and Karel Strydom, the managing directors of Hwange Safaris, told me that I was wrong. Sable antelope are mainly concentrated between Gwayi River and the eastern park and in Matetsi, to the Northwest of Deka. For unknown reasons the Deka-tail itself never had any resident sable population. If clients want to hunt sable as well, Hwange Safaris cooperates with one of the remaining railway farms towards the Gwayi River. This property is not fenced and the game moves freely to and from the national park Unfortunately for me, a bush fire ran through this property lately and destroyed the grass, so all the sable moved back into the park. Alternatively Karel tried his best to secure a sable permit for me in Matetsi, but it did not work out at short notice.

The best option would have been to hunt elephant in Deka, since the area litterally experienced an invasion of elephant. Alas, Hwange Safaris had already two elephant hunters in camp and my scheduled time in the area had been set with sable on my mind and not for time-consuming elephant hunting - my pocket money was equally not set for elephant hunting either. However, my African journeys are not really focused on my own shooting any more but rather to gain fresh first-hand information for Hatari Times, plus a few nice photos. So I decided to see as much of Deka and try to hunt one of those Hwange buffalo bulls, if a good chance would show up.

It seems that the buffalo populations in the hunting areas north of Hwange Park are slightly lower than in good areas of the



A typical Hwange Bull with a towering huge body and short, thick tusks. Those, who are not used to the gigantic size of these elephant, usually underestimate the ivory weight.

Zambezi drainage system. However, I had the impression that the average buffalo trophy is a trifle larger than in the Zambezi Valley. After examining quite a few trophies I also had the impression that the horn configuration of these Hwange Bulls has its peculiarities as well. The horn enlargement of the boss tends to extend further down, almost into the curl, so that the tips appear to be more slender than they actually are. If you compare typical Zambezi Valley buffalo heads with those from the Hwange Park area, you will notice the difference at once. While specialized buffalo-only hunts in the valley are usually marketet as one-week hunts, I reckon one should rather book 10 days in the Hwange areas to bag a good trophy bull. Most of the hunting areas north of Wankie Park are conviniently accessible by road in a 1 to 1 1/2 h drive from Victoria Falls International Airport. Those, who react allergically to insect bites will appreciate that there are no TseTse-flies in the area.

The hunting area of Hwange Safaris consists of the Deka-tail, which is government-

Two typical Hwange buffalo bulls at a water point.





Most of us are familiar with the size of African buffalo. If you consider that the bull elephant is walking behind the buffaloes you might have an idea of his enormous proportions.

owned land, and a communal area stretching northwards up to the limit of the small mining town of Hwange. Theoretically, that makes for 500,000 ha, but as with many hunting blocks, not the entire expanse provides an equally good hunting potential. The buffaloes are more concentrated closer to the park boundary, while the vicinity of the Hwange coal mines receives a seasonal migration of elephants in quantities late in the dry season. Typically for most Zimbabwean big game concessions, this is predominantly a buffalo and elephant area, with only a limited amount of plainsgame, such as greater kudu, impala, warthog and duiker. Along the dry riverbeds there are good bushbuck and klipspringer are found on the many rocky outcrops. Leopard hunting should be no problem, but eland and waterbuck are rare. Particularly the latter had been overhunted by the previous operator. Sable, zebra and wildebeest elude the area. To cut a long story short, the Hwange Safari area is a typical concession to hunt the Big Four - if lion would be on quota.

The hunting blocks adjacent to the northern fringes of Hwange Park used to be the prime lion hunting areas of Zimbabwe, which were famous for their heavily maned lion. Alas, obviously by bribing high officials a South African safari booking agent recently had his clients shoot five times more than the allocated lion quota. When the scandal surfaced all lion quotas were suspended in the entire region for three years. A recent research in the northern park sections

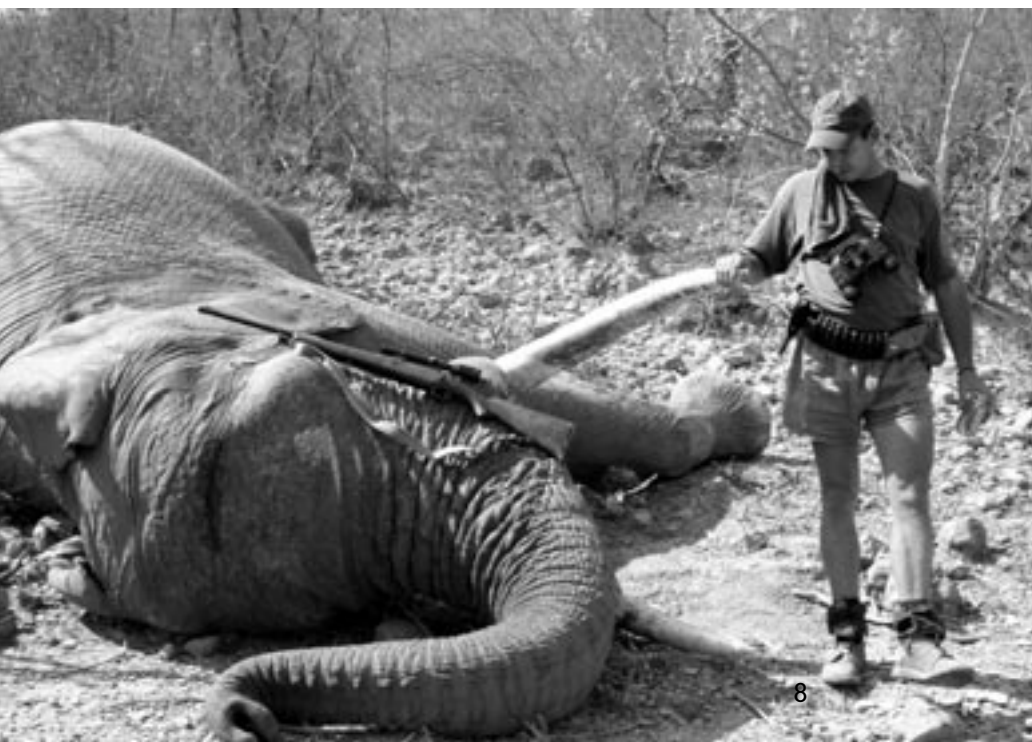
verified that the current population of adult male lion is far too low. Even if we neglect the illegal overshooting by a criminal operator insiders reckon that the official lion quota around Hwange Park has been too high for years.

While the two elephant hunters Casper and André have to leave camp at 3:30 a.m. to reach a very remote corner of the hunting area at first light, I can turn around and continue noosing for another hour. However, I have to get out on the buffalo tracks also at first light, that Goodness closer to camp, since the temperatures will reach an unpleasant level around 10 a.m. This is the disadvantage of a late season hunt. I personally do not mind the heat, but in hot weather the buffalo tend to lie down rather early, and it is fairly difficult to approach calmly ruminating buffaloes, which hear the slightest sound of a hunter's approach.

My guide Craig Coid is an interesting fellow. He is a free-lancer, who does not guide hunters on back-to-back safaris throughout the season. He also conducts personally guided river tours on the Zambezi, and he is one of the few Zimbabwean PHs who has been abroad to other countries on several wildlife projects. He has been to northern Cameroon and even the Pantanal of Basil on behalf of an ecotourism project connected to jaguars. So we do not run short on topics to talk about.

The first herd of buffalo we manage to stalk closely is surprisingly calm. Unfortunately, there are no shootable old bulls amongst the 50 or 60 buffaloes. Almost on every drive when Casper and André leave or return to camp they bump into groups of old buffalo bulls, close to the road. However, the same Dugga-Boys are continuously outwitting me. They obviously know that I am not having an elephant tag in my pocket and that my gun is loaded with soft points to shoot buffalo.

Contrary to the Zambezi Escarpment, where predominantly so called sourveld grows - grass which is only palatable when



PH Craig Coid with Casper's 55-pounder.

lush and green - the sweetveld of this area remains nourishable when dry. This is why you do not burn sweetveld areas. If late season bush fires run through sweetveld areas the game moves out or by necessity travels over long distances between water and remaining pasture. If you pick up fresh spoor in the morning under these conditions you have to walk long distances too to catch up with the buffalo. More often than not you will catch up with them too late. It is much easier to approach buffaloes on the move than trying to stalk them when they are laying down. When they find a suitable place to stay for the heat of the day, they usually walk in a semi circle back to their own tracks, particularly after they have been hunted for some time. If you teckling your game, you expect to see it up front. All of a sudden, you hear a warning snort and see the buffalo stampeding to your left or right or even behind you. Clever bastards they are!

Late season buffalo hunts are usually difficult, particularly old bulls becoming pretty cunning after being hassled and hunted previously. Additionally, the unstable late season wind makes things even worse. After my first day of buffalo hunting I realised that four days would be insufficient to bag a good old Hwange Bull. Remember that my time frame was originally set to hunt sable antelope. Only a stroke of very good luck would have solved the problem. I should have made my homework well before heading to Hwange.

On one of my buffalo tracking excersises I had a very unusual encounter. Suddenly a huge animal crashed through the thick bush a few paces in front of us uttering a loud weird sound like a combination pig-like queeling and snorting. When I saw the vanishing contours of a huge gray something, I realised that I had flushed a sleeping black rhino. A few seconds later we found the characteristic black rhino toilet where these rare creatures mark their territory.

Throughout the entire Hwange Park as well as in the adjacent hunting blocks water is a rare and precious commodity. Due to the desolate financial situation of Nat. Parks the waterholes are not constantly refilled by pumping up groundwater any more. The elephant are forced to wander far into neighboring Botswana, and some of the old bulls never make it back to the safety of Hwange Park. Buffaloes do not move that far and loose condition in prolonged times of drought. Many of the yougsters die. Fuel is presently difficult to buy in Zimbabwe, no matter how much you are prepared to pay, but yet Hwange Safaris feels the urge to pump water with a Diesel pump. The water troffs are a good starting point for tracking buffalo and elephant. One water place close to the railway line showed fresh footprints of three enormous bull elephant, but these wise old tuskers only visited the water under cover of the night and always returned to the park well before dawn. There were also a couple of small pools left in the dry riverbeds of the Lukozi and Pongoro rivers. Only along the so called Paradise Road there was a chain of still running springs.

However, the surrounds did not look like paradise at all. Countless elephant had passed through recently, rendering all trees into mere skeletons. Since there was still water aplenty further north in the communal land up to the Hwange coal mines, this part of the hunting area became overrun by elephant. There were elephant behind every bush. There were so many that tracking a single animal became impossible due to too many criss-crossing and overlapping spoor. I really regreted not having enough funds on hand to go after elephant.

Our elephant hunters returned to camp in a jolly good mood. Casper had shot a very nice bull with rather long tusks weighting 55 pounds each. A very respectable trophy bull these days. Since tracking an individual bull was not possible they had just walked carefully through the thick Jesse and luckily bumped into a group of old bulls.

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Where herds of hungry elephant went through the vegetation looks like a heavily bombed battlefield..



We flushed a black rhino and found its typical territory markings.



right: Three Hwange Bulls, two buffalo + Karel Strydom, M.D. of Hwange Safaris.
left: The moisture of a short shower made a python leave its hiding place.

If you have watched 300 or 400 natives cutting up the carcass of an elephant before, you think you have experienced the wildest and bloodiest frenzy possible. Far from that! Casper's and André's elephant each attracted crowds of at least 1,500 meat hungry people from the nearby coal mines. Even Game Scouts firing warning shots in the air and a couple of policemen were utterly helpless and could not keep the mob under control. Words are not strong enough to describe the scene. Ah, too much nyama!

On our way back to camp a first thunderstorm built up, precursor of the rainy season. The accompanying shower was a short one, though. Nevertheless, one could feel the great relief throughout the vast bush. A undiscrivable sweet and pacifying odor arose from the burnt dusty ground. The moisture lured out a lovely patterned python from its hiding place. My attempts to take some close-up photos horrified my trackers. Like all Africans they were terribly frightened by any snake, even a harmless python.

André with his enormous Hwange Bull. The short and thick tusks went 50 pounds each.



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