

Dande-North

The Magic Buffalo Triangle of Zimbabwe

von Harald Wolf



Dande-North is a 320,000-acre hunting block in northern Zimbabwe, roughly triangular in shape, the apex reaching the mighty Zambezi River. To the west the concession borders the mountainous Chewore block and the eastern boundary is the international boundary with Moçambique. The southern limit runs along the Angwa-River. The Dande is the magical triangle for buffalo of Zimbabwe. No where else in this country can the buffalo find such favorable conditions. Although Dande-North is not the largest wilderness concession, the buffalo population is estimated at some 5,000 animals, a density of 1 per 64 acres. Depending of quota allocations, some 70 to 100 buffalo are shot each season in Dande-North. The success rate on grand, old buffalo bulls is almost 100%.

The terrain consists mainly of rolling hills covered with Mopane woodland, interspersed by a few flat valleys, originally floodplains of the mighty Zambezi River in former times before the Zambezi was tamed by the massive dams at Kariba Gorge and Cabora Bassa. The neighboring concessions to the west and south feature steep hills and even true mountain ranges. The buffalo seems to love Dande-North, and where you find lots of buffalo you will also find a prolific lion population, too. Plainsgame are well represented by numerous zebra, greater kudu, impala, warthog plus duiker and grysback. The smaller game species attract leopard, of course. Sable antelope are resident but are not numerous. Everywhere along the Zambezi River are many hippo and big crocodiles. In fact, a good friend of mine shot the SCI world record hippo in Dande-North some years ago. As with most Zimbabwe's wilderness concessions Dande-North is home to a large elephant population. However, this part of the country is not renowned for really big tuskers.

A stampeding buffalo herd is flooding from the dry riverbed to higher grounds.

Daryl Meredith of Swainson's Safaris, the present owner of Dande-North, believes that the generally recognized big game hunting season for buffalo, cats and plains game, from May through to November, is perhaps not the best time to look for elephants with big ivory. During the "green season" of the rains, from January though to March or April, when the meager crops ripen around the few villages, there is a large influx of wandering bull elephants from Chewore and Mozambique. Specialized bull elephant hunts should preferably be timed during the harvesting season. Those hunters who are able and willing to walk on the trail of elephant should get a decent tusker at any time at that season. However, I feel we should be realistic about the weight of ivory tusks taken throughout the Zambezi Valley and Escarpment areas. Although a few larger tuskers are bagged each season, the average tusk weight rarely exceeds 40 pounds, though a special green season elephant hunt might slightly advantageous.

Throughout Zimbabwe the trophy fees for bull elephant





For one reason or the other, the kudu bulls were not sky at all.

range from US\$ 10,000 to US\$ 15,000. If you add the daily rates for a 14 to 18 day hunt for a trophy bull elephant, it is not the cheapest safari on the market. For those who just want to enjoy the experience of an elephant hunt and don't need the trophy ivory, the much cheaper tuskless elephant hunt may be an interesting alternative. In fact, I was also planning on a tuskless elephant hunt in the neighboring Chewore Safari Area, after my visit to Dande, but unfortunately I had to cancel that hunt because of my tight travel schedule. A tuskless elephant may be a cow or a bull elephant, but in reality tuskless bull are exceedingly rare, so a tuskless elephant hunt is usually a cow elephant hunt.

Tuskless African elephants are generally considered genetically inferior and shooting them should benefit the elephant population. Also, it is suspected that the elephant population of Zimbabwe is far too high, so taking out tuskless cows of breeding age should be seen as a good management tool.

I personally believe there is too much hunting pressure on trophy bulls in Zimbabwe, which results in a continuing decline of trophy ivory weight. So, if trophy ivory is not the prime goal, a tuskless elephant hunt might be an alternative to consider. Tuskless elephants are thought to be socially handicapped throughout their lives, being constantly bullied by other family members who sport sharp

tusks, which results in the short tempers of tuskless elephants. This adds some salt to the soup of tuskless elephant hunting, as they tend to charge readily, at the slightest provocation. The combination hunt of tuskless elephant, buffalo, a cat perhaps with plains game is becoming quite popular in Zimbabwe these days.

Dande-North is one of the remotest hunting areas of Zimbabwe. A disadvantage is that you have to book an hour air charter out of Harare, to get there. Due to the presently debilitating and chaotic economical situation in Zimbabwe, poaching throughout the country recently reached untenably dramatic levels, and Dande unfortunately is not a "happy island" out of the reach of these problems. Dande-North is divided in half by an uninhabited wildlife area under National Parks Management and a sparsely settled communal area, with a few small villages. A clear advantage of not being connected to good, all weather tarmac roads, is that poaching is still kept at manageable levels. It is mostly in the form of snare-lines along the periphery of the few small villages in the area. Fortunately, the logistics are not favorable for commercial meat market poaching.

My friend Ewald had suggested that I join his annual buffalo hunt in Dande. Since the brothers Daryl and Cyril (nicknamed Squirrel) Meredith took over the Dande-North concession some eight years ago, Ewald has been a loyal repeat client coming out once or twice a year to hunt buffalo. For him, hunting in Dande is rather like visiting friends. I don't know where he puts all the buffalo trophies, which he bagged already, as I believe his personal buffalo bag must be close to 50 heads already. My wife, who usually has a good understanding of a hunter's needs, asked me specifically before I left for Zimbabwe not to bring any more buffalo skulls home! Since I intended to do more photography than shooting on this trip I had no problems to confirm agreement on this plea. Only after Ewald had taken his buffalo bull I would give it a try to hunt an old buffalo cow. As with tuskless elephants, hunting buffalo cows makes for good and demanding hunting, although not producing any noteworthy trophy to bring home. The trophy fee for a buffalo cow is usually less than a third of the cost the fees for a trophy bull.

During our charterflight to Dande we passed high above what was once the heartland of Zimbabwe's agriculture production, but saw only a gray-brownish dustbowl far below. Here was no sign of former irrigated fields or indeed any sizeable areas of cultivation. Where are all the people to get their staple diet - maize meal? Certainly not from the local small-hold farmers, who plant only enough for their own subsistence. And, if the current drought continues they won't even harvest enough to feed their numerous families

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The old matriarch did not like us and performed a brilliant mock charge.

through the coming year. With the outrageous inflation of the Zimbabwe \$ even the urban people will not have the funds to buy imported food. A disaster seems inevitable in this once self-sufficient country.

Shortly before sunset the Cessna taxied down the landing strip beside Pedza Pasi camp. This Swainson's Safaris camp is not situated on the banks of the Zambezi but further inland, where the buffalo are concentrate in late season. Ewald, who had had a very tiring, long flight with many stop-overs, immediately became awake again. He knew everybody and everything in camp from previous safaris and was very glad to escape his hectic business at home for a few days of genuine recreation in the African bush. Soon, long glasses were filled with ice cubes for a perfect cocktail of gin and tonic for a refreshing African sundowner. Generous supply of ice cubes were indeed badly needed, as even after dusk, the heat weighed heavily on us. I had been in Zimbabwe already for two weeks and was used to it, but Ewald still had to be acclimatized to the high temperatures. With a peaceful, comforting silence the deep blue night sky soon blanketed the country. We were in the very center of a true hunting and wildlife paradise.

But, what about Zimbabwe's future should the chaotic political and social conditions deteriorate further? My unhappy brooding over Zimbabwe's omnipresent problem came to an abrupt halt when I heard snapping twigs from the waterhole just behind the camp's fireplace. A troop of buffalo was coming to drink under the sheltering cover of the night. The surrounding bush was so silent that we could hear the huge animals sensually sucking in the precious water.

Ewald had not brought along his own rifle and was keen to try my new prototype bolt action rifle in .444 Schueler caliber. After years of dangerous game hunting in Africa he had settled on his much loved .450 Nitro Express double, but after test firing my heavy bolt action he felt just as comfortable with it also. First of all we wanted to check the different water points in the area to get an idea of the current buffalo movements. The brain and heart of our hunting crew was the old senior tracker George, who was blessed with real eagle-eyes. He could see game at impossible dis-

Stalking a troop of buffalo resting under the shade of a tree.

tances, when we still could not see anything through our 10-power binoculars. Now in the late dry season I did not expect to find many small waterholes still pouring clear water from the ground in Dande. I had expected most of them to have dried up, but I was wrong. Once the Mopane trees shed their leaves one realizes how much water they have drawn from the ground. When the leaves are gone the ground water level rises considerably and the wells start running again. Grass and browse had become scarce but surface water was abundant again.

Driving from one waterhole to another we flushed three old Dugga-Boys who just wanted to cross the dirt road. They all had horns worn down horns below the 36 inch mark and since Ewald only wanted to add another big buff to his already impressive trophy collection; we did not bother them. Nevertheless, it was a most promising sighting, to run into a group of old Dugga-Boys on the first hour of our safari. Although not shy the three bulls decided to retreat into thicker stuff and let us pass.

On passing a large clearing in the Mopane woodland we saw a herd of elephant on the far side and stopped to take some photos, to the obvious dislike of the old matriarch. She screamed, unfolded her large ears and performed a brilliant mock charge, kicking up quantities of dust and gravel as she came for us. Following her example, the entire herd, including tiny calves, joined her brave cavalry attack, which was nothing but a display of power to make us move. However, the leading cow came closer and closer, and old George did not like the situation, forcing Daryl to urgently leave the place. He was always very concerned about angry elephant cows. We heartily enjoyed the brave matriarch's onslaught and let her come fairly close until we finally drove off. On foot and level ground with them we would have retreated much earlier, as you never know with elephants, if a mock charge will suddenly turn into a real dangerous situation.

We had been driving through higher hill country for some time. Several large buffalo herds had crossed the gravel road and left lots of footprints and dung. However, all signs were a few days old and not fresh. Even in the best buffalo areas you don't see them standing behind every second tree. Surprisingly, we saw quite a lot of greater kudu en route, which are normally rather shy and elusive animals. The kudus of Dande are obviously slightly smaller in body size than their cousins from the Zimbabwe Lowveld, but they do have some very nice horns. During our buffalo hunt in Dande we saw a couple of kudu bulls which were in the mid 50 inch class. Neither Ewald nor I were interested to hunt kudu, and maybe the shy antelopes sensed that we were harmless for them and posed within





Seeing the elusive civetcat at broad daylight was a very unusual experience.

easy shooting range. Though, if you are seriously after kudu they usually turn into spooky gray ghosts.

It was already late afternoon. Daryl had obviously been keen to show me most of his concession in one day, as we had done a considerable mileage on bumpy bush roads. At the last spring, nestling secretly in a narrow, steep valley, framed by large green trees we approached on foot. Golden late afternoon sunrays were filtering through the foliage, flooding the crystal clear pools with a warm, soft light, creating a lovely fairy tale atmosphere. No less than six old buffalo gentlemen were enjoying a healthy cool drink at this natural spa. But, none of them had horns to made Ewald's trigger finger itch. A couple of thirsty elephant eventually approached the scene. However, the old Dugga-Boys obviously considered their gathering as a closed party. The foremost elephant received an unfriendly challenge and backed off, obviously surprised about the rude manners of the old Dugga-Boys, which were disinclined to share their private watering hole. Its a pity that due to adverse light conditions such lovely scenes on a safari as these are sometimes only possible to



capture in our mind's and cannot be preserved on film. The sun was now very low and about to disappear over the distant ridges to the west, pouring that magic warm golden hue of the vanishing day over the landscape.

On our way back to camp we see two lonely Dugga-boys walking over the crest of a ridge. We immediately stop the car and make a quick semi-circular approach on foot to lay an ambush. Tracker George is full of passion, buffalo hunting is a thing of his heart. As we quickly advance he silently points to the direction from where he expected the buffaloes to appear. We take shelter behind a large anthill and wait. George was right. Slowly, slowly, as if bearing a heavy burden, the two bulls walk into sight, taking a direct route towards our anthill. You cannot have a better setup for a close range perfect shot, but again the trophies are not what Ewald wants and we decide not to worry them. Although there are some leafless bushes in the way, I manage to take some nice photos from less than 20 meters distance. If we kept still and quite the Dugga-Boys would pass our ambush at arms length. However, Daryl is not keen to risk a point blank encounter and greets them with hoarse "Hallo." Very startled, the two bulls turn quickly on their heels and thunder off for a 150 paces or so, before stopping to look back, to seek out what or who had so rudely disturbed their peaceful evening walk.

On the third day we are leaving camp very early at very first light, since by 10 a.m. it would be already extremely hot, making long distance tracking quite an exhausting exercise. Not far from camp we surprise a huge herd of buffalo. The main body is just walking out of sight over the next summit, taking no notice of us whatsoever. However, there is still a small group of stragglers, maybe five or six buffaloes, on the other side of the bush road. Two of them are old bulls, and after a quick glance we all get very excited, since one bull is truly magnificent - even the spoiled Ewald is thrilled. It all appears too easy, as the stragglers stopped some 80 meters from the road looking straight at us. However, I have experienced similar situations on many safaris. Chances, which often appear too easy at first often turn out to be very long and difficult hunts.

The group of stragglers does not stay for long. As soon as we get off the vehicle, they turn and with a lumbering trot try to catch up with the departed herd. We quickly try to cut them off but fail, as the buffaloes covered the ground too fast, to disappear in a thicket. Although all the leaves are gone the bare sticks of the shrubs are standing thick like brushes. George is leading and carefully approaches the thicket hunting by his sense of hearing, as even his eagle-eyes cannot penetrate the dense bush. At the distance we can hear the muffled sound for the main herd moving, but from the thicket directly in front of us there is a sinister silence. No doubt, the group of stragglers is right there, looking back, not moving an inch. They know for sure that we are at their heels. To penetrate the thicket blindly would be entirely pointless.

George pauses, listening intently, with open mouth. He is convinced that he has located the position of the buffalo. Ever so slowly and carefully we advance, step by step, avoiding any dry leaves or twigs on the ground. Eventually, we get down on our knees, hoping to gain a better view from under the shrub. But, the more we strain our eyes, the more confused we become. If you think you have seen the black leg of a buffalo and look at the very spot through your binoculars for several minutes, it eventually turns into the stump of a small burnt tree. It's similar to a curtain-draped window. The buffalo can see from the inside out, but we cannot see from the outside in.

If we make the slightest fault the buffalo will see our movement and take off. And they of course, strain their acute senses of hearing, sight and smell towards us as well. The entire scene is still, a cocoon of total silence, as we can feel the vibration of excitement in the air. Suddenly a cough breaks the stillness. Daryl turns around

The old Dugga-Boy almost walked up to us in the late afternoon.

and looks askance at me, an angry reproachful expression on his face. But I am not the culprit, it was the damned Game Scout behind me, who could not control his nervous cough. A faint rustling in the bushes indicates that the buffalo have moved a few steps, then turned back again.

George is absolutely sure where they are and Daryl seems to have caught a glimpse of them as well, but cannot see any details. We cannot see or advance any further from this angle, so we slowly back out again and try a new approach from another side. A narrow sandy stream-bed serves as a convenient and silent stalking route. Hopefully we will get a better vision from the flank. Time drifts by in slow motion. We are sweating from the excitement and strain in the intense heat, which is increasing by the minute.

The buffalo play a cat and mouse game with us for almost two hours. Every now and then they move a few meters and stand still again, while we try not to lose contact, hoping patiently that they eventually make an offer a chance of a shoot. At last, the big bull commits a fatal error and takes a step or two forward, facing us through a window through the scrub at about 120 meters. It is quite a difficult shot at a small target, but Ewald is an experienced buffalo hunter and a good marksman. With a 430grain bullet through his heart the big bull makes a desperate death run of some 50 meters and then topples over, uttering a moaning death bellow. He is done; Ewald's finishing shot is not really necessary but is as always it is a safe and sound idea to give the *coupe de grâce* to a dying buffalo.

Ewald's old buffalo had a wide and solid boss and massive horns right into the curls - he cannot have asked for more. Our buffalo hunt in Dande was also compressed by our short, tight travel schedules, but then Ewald had already bagged numerous good trophies, so he was not overly trigger-happy when he arrived for this hunt. He did not pressurize himself or his team, but when he finally saw the right one he went for it with all his passion and skills. Right from the beginning his goal was to shoot an old Dugga-Boy, one with a rewarding trophy. This is what buffalo hunting is all about, I presume.

The tremendous pressure, which had continuously built up during the long drawn out, tense, lurking, crawling stalk is lifted all at once and everybody jumped for joy. A massive old Dugga-Boy, a dream trophy for the serious buffalo hunter, is down for good.

Big old buffalo bulls of this distinguished class usually walk alone or with one or two companions of the same age. Only occasionally do they join breeding herds for a few days when the cows are in heat and that was his mistake. Unfortunately, these days, far too many younger good looking trophy bulls, with genetically superior potential, are shot well before reaching a truly mature age. "My taxidermist will fix it", is the commonly heard excuse when a soft bossed buffalo trophy arrives at a hunting camp. The negative side of this practice is certainly detrimental to healthy buffalo populations because the genes of the truly magnificent trophy buffalo do not get a chance of being

A formidable old buffalo bull with wide and solid boss and massive curls is down.



We encountered several different elephant herds every day.

passed on to future generations of buffalo. Every experienced African hunter can identify the really good, mature trophy buffalo hanging in a trophy room, no matter how much cosmetic fiberglass the taxidermist has applied.

Considering the high hunting pressure throughout all buffalo populations of Africa one often doubts whether there are still any old bulls of top trophy quality around. But there are a few of them seen now and then; living elusive lives in quiet secluded places. It takes time to find these old trophy bulls, a bit of luck and a good deal of searching to find them, and the patience not to shoot the next best bull encountered, fearing there won't be a better one. I personally believe that there are no real hotspots for big buffalo left in Africa today. Big buffaloes are simply where you find them, anywhere in suitable buffalo country. On the popular short buffalo hunts both the client and the PH are under heavy pressure to produce results, which all too often leads to the shooting of inferior, too young bulls. Even in the best buffalo areas one might hunt one or two days without finding fresh buffalo spoor, and when the remaining time is running short, hunters tend to make compromises in trophy quality, which many of them later regret.

Now, with a good trophy in the salt, we had time to have some fun, and the joke was to be on Daryl's young apprentice hunter Anthony. We asked him to cut the testicles of the buffalo. Some peo-





Young Anthony believed that we were merely joking when we told him that he had to eat raw buffalo cojones in the evening.

ple want to preserve these as ash trays or dice cups (certainly not my taste), but we had a different plan. In Spanish testicles are called cojones, and this word is commonly used as a swear-word by Spaniards. Now we told Anthony that the proper initiation of a young professional hunter definitely demanded the eating of buffalo cojones. So, the main course for him that tonight would be buffalo testicles, served raw, sliced thinly with salt, pepper and a squeeze of lemon juice, like oysters - a sort of "Zambezi Sushi." At first poor Anthony thought that we were merely joking and pulling his leg, but as the day progressed he realized that we were determined to insist on our evil plan, and leave no escape gap for him.

While loading Ewald's buffalo bull and throughout the entire afternoon hunt we never stopped talking about raw buffalo cojones and "Zambezi-Sushi". As the shadows grew longer and the moment of truth drew nearer poor Anthony began feeling uneasy and started complaining, but we would not listen. If he wanted to become a professional hunter, he would have to swallow the raw buffalo cojones - there was no way out! Finally, he was ready to meet his fate but asked for have a stiff drink before the event.

In the afternoon, while teasing poor Anthony, I tried to hunt an old buffalo cow. After a demanding and exhausting stalk Daryl and George got me into a good position. The only problem was that we had to take a final step into the open and the buffalo

would certainly see our movement at the same time, which meant I had to shoot rather quickly. All went well. An old cow posed broadside at approximately 80 meters, actually an easy fool-proof shot. But, instead of collapsing on the ground with my big bullet, the buffalo took off after the shot.

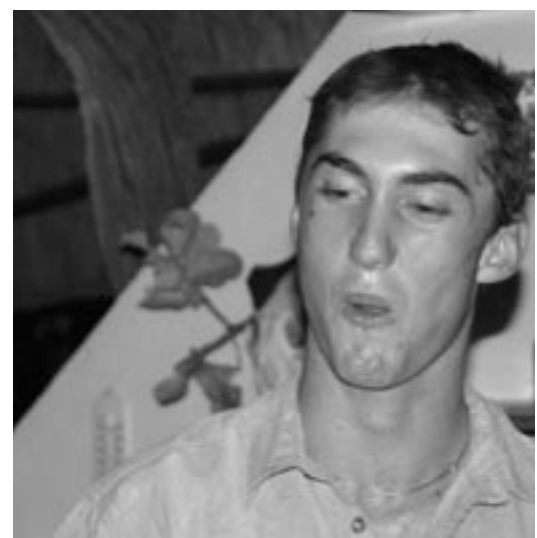
We followed the herd for some time but could not find a single drop of blood. Immediately after the shot George already said that I had missed, as he saw the bullet going low, knocking off bark from a tree behind. We concluded that my shot passed an inch under the buffalo's armpit, not even cutting a hair. I was so upset with my poor shot that as a penalty, I volunteered to join Anthony with the Zambezi Sushi. Meanwhile, I had better checked my 'scope. As it turned out next day, the 'scope must have suffered a knock while loading Ewald's buffalo in the morning and was shooting considerably low. But, at the time of shooting, I had thought that I had flinched, as I could not believe I could miss a broadside buffalo at 80 meters.

Back in camp poor Anthony's face turned slightly pale, while we were about to hone our knives for cutting thin Sushi slices. Unfortunately, the camp cook had a kind heart and took a pity in the young hunter. Against our clear instructions, he had cut the testicles in pieces and fried them. Of course we did not tell Anthony that fried balls actually taste like liver

So, with a disgusted expression on his face Anthony took the first piece and started chewing, just to find out to his relief that fried balls are good eating. I reckon a raw "Zambezi-Cojones-Sushi" would have been a different story though. A young Spanish lady, who was conducting some scientific studies on the local people of Dande, was sharing camp with us. We warned Anthony that in order to protect the lady we would have to lock him up in his room for the night. Daryl told him that he did not want any scandal in camp, fearful that after eating such a concentration of reproductive hormones, anything could happen to a young man.

Hunting buffalo cows makes for quite good hunting, although you rarely bag a trophy to write home about. Occasionally however, very old cows can sport a surprisingly wide spread of horns. Selecting a suitable cow is usually more difficult than hunting bulls. Of course, you have to take care that the cow you have chosen does not have a calf. Old bulls usually live on their own, or in small groups, or if they join a herd they tend to stay at the periphery. Thus, they are often easier to approach than cows. Also, bulls seem to be aware of their physical power and are more relaxed, while cows are constantly alert seeking for danger.

We had just started tracking a buffalo herd, when we heard a wild melee of howling and growling from a distance of a few hundred meters. Obviously, a mob of hyenas and some lion were in a dispute over a kill. I would have loved to watch it, but it was our last hunting day and we were trying hard to shoot a buffalo cow. Since time was precious we carried on tracking the buffalo herd. We already had been in an encounter with this herd and had seen an outstand-





ingly huge cow, which we endeavored to find again.

George thought that this herd was heading for a certain spring and that we could save some time by leaving the spoor and go straight for the water. At a brisk pace we walked up a dry, sandy streambed, scattered with granite boulders. All of a sudden George and Daryl in front of me leaped to the side. At first I thought there must have been a snake amongst the rocks, but then my eye caught the rare sight of a real night dweller. In a rocky cave was a huge civet cat looking sleepily at us. I had seen civet cats before, but only occasionally as they crossed a road in front of the vehicle at night. I had never seen a civet at broad daylight. The civet is almost as large as a medium sized dog with a long bushy tail. I feel the designation cat is misleading as the civets viverridae rather seems to be members of the marten family of predators such as the wolverine or badger. The civet looked at us for a few minutes and then took off to safer grounds almost passing between our legs. You only experience things like that if you silently walk through the bush.

As I mentioned earlier on, Dande-North consists equally of uninhabited government land and lightly settled communal land. The hunting quotas are set separately and are not transferable from government to communal land or vice versa. We were more or less the last clients of the season and the buffalo quota for the government section was already exhausted. Now the reality of the quota system fell in place. After quenching their thirst, the buffaloes went straight back to the government section, so we had to quit the spoor. Daryl decided it would be the best option to drive deep into the communal land where he knew of a large herd, which would not evade us by traveling across the border.

In the meantime it was already 10 a.m. and the broiling heat of the day had set in. Not far from a small village we bumped into the buffalo herd, which was on its way from the water towards the hills of the dry coun-

try. One cow offered a perfect broadside shot, but as I lined up my gun, a calf showed up at her side. "Don't shoot", hissed Daryl. The herd, approximately 100 head strong, was quite nervous and would not stand for more than a second or two, but quickly ran off into the hills. We followed in hot pursuit to catch up with them, if they would stop to look back. However, the weary cows at the tail-end of the herd saw our approach and again the whole bunch made for the next hills.

Although we tried to move as quickly and as carefully as possible, the same story repeated again and again. These buffaloes must have been badly harassed by the villagers or even worse by poachers, as they were extremely timid and would stampede at the slightest hint of danger. After two hours of pushing them, almost at running pace, I felt so hot that I badly needed a short break and a sip of water, as my throat was burning. Although the conversation took place in the Shona language, George seemed to have a dispute with our second tracker. As it turned out the man was convinced that we would never get close enough to these shy buffalo to get a shot, so he suggested to give up on them and try to find another herd. Mentally, I agreed with his opinion, having visions of an ice-cold beer under a shady tree, but I kept quiet. George obviously felt insulted by his colleague's words and suddenly became very determined. He sent the second tracker back to the vehicle, along with everyone else that was dispensable, then proudly stated that we would shoot a buffalo now. Let's go!

When we caught up with the herd we found them spread out over a large area. Some of the buffaloes were already lying down in the meager shade of some leafless trees. The problem was that they had chosen a fairly open spot, which had been cleared by a recent bush fire, making for a very difficult approach. As with Ewald's buffalo bull the day before, we had to stalk them very slowly with extreme caution, only to find that we had to retrace our steps and try again from a different direction. At the same time we were plagued unmercifully by a cloud of Mopane flies, which took advantage of our sedentary position, yet we could hardly move our hands to fend them off.

Eventually we picked out a suitable old cow, big bodied but in poor condition, with her hip bones noticeably gaunt under the skin. My shot rang out, but the bullet again went too low, smashing the front leg where it joins the chest. There was no doubt; my scope was shooting low. With a badly broken leg the old cow did not get far and a finishing shot brought her down for good.

As we carefully approached the dead buffalo cow and Daryl touched her with the muzzle of his .470 NE double, to make sure that she was really dead, a bush exploded right behind the carcass.



Buffalo cow and bushpig - an interesting bag, indeed!



My first tigerfish. Beware of the razor-sharp piranha-like teeth.

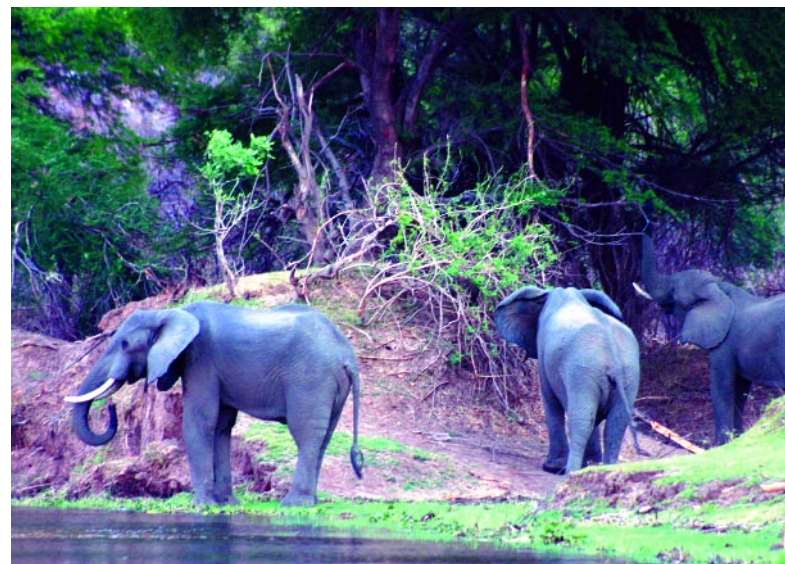
Out dashed two bushpigs in panic flight and in top gear speed. In a quick reflex Daryl's gun came up, swung through and "karawong", one pig rolled like a rabbit caught at full speed. "It was too good an opportunity to resist", said Daryl, and we all had a good laugh. Dande-North has a liberal bushpig quota but few of these creatures are ever harvested. A buffalo and a bushpig taken on the same spot, with virtually a left and right! We were in a happy mood, despite the many Mopane-flies.

After loading buffalo and bushpig, we made straight for Swainson's Masall camp on the banks of the Zambezi. A few years ago, also in late October, I had been hunting in Zambia's Rufunsa block, just opposite Masall camp. Back then the Zambezi was much lower. I was a bit puzzled to see the high river flowing strongly so late in the dry season. Apparently the desperate Zimbabwe government is running the turbines of Kariba dam at full tilt, since they have no funds to buy additional electricity power from South Africa. I was told that the water level of Lake Kariba is already at an all-time low. If the headwaters of the Zambezi will not receive substantial rains in the coming rainy season, the generators of Kariba will have to be stopped, leaving this unfortunate country without power.

After a prolonged siesta to escape the hottest hours of the day, we went on a leisure boat trip on the Zambezi. Neither Ewald nor myself are by any means fanatic fishermen, but we tried to catch some of the famous tigerfish with those awe-inspiring toothed jaws. Many enthusiastic sportsmen fly around the world to enjoy tiger fish-



My friend Michael with the tusks of his world record hippo taken in Dande a couple of years ago.



ing on the Zambezi. In fact, the Meredith brothers run a fishing camp next to Masall camp.

When I entered the boat it was with a distinct feeling that Lady Luck would smile on me and before long I caught a decent sized tiger-fish. Ewald caught one too, so our serious fishing only lasted for half an hour. The rest of the afternoon was spent floating down the mighty Zambezi River, watching snorting hippos and elephant coming to the shore to drink. The mild late afternoon sun and the lovely peaceful river scene soon calm even the most nervous mind. There is still excellent big game hunting available in Zimbabwe at lower cost than in other classic African hunting destinations. But if the country does not return to law and order soon, particularly considering poaching, the present spell of wildlife destruction will take its toll.

Where is this potentially vibrant and beautiful, now politically bankrupt and economically destitute country heading?

Back in Harare I spent two days visiting old friends, learning about their fateful misfortunes. On boarding my plane to leave the country a rainstorm poured down - the first substantial rains since January 2005 - let us hope it was a good portent.

At Masall-Camp on the banks of the mighty Zambezi-River.