Out of the brush, only a few yards from me, came a monstrous bull nilgai, crashing and blowing as if pursued by the devil

When I signed a contract to teach in a college at Kabul, Afghanistan, I wondered if it would be worth while to take my .270 Winchester. True, I had got deer with it in Oregon and Washington, but I had a lot to learn about hunting and I knew nothing about big game in Asia.

However, I had no place to leave the rifle, so I decided to take it along. This was in 1948, and the rifle collected the plentiful Kabul dust until the summer of 1949. Then, in the mountains of northern Afghanistan, two kills on running ibex—one of them a great piece of luck out at 250 yards—gave me some idea of what I could do with that .270 if I worked at it.

So that winter I went on the Great Hunt, two months in the Terai of northern India. And there, after an unpropitious start, I found that the great faith and confidence I had in the rifle was not misplaced.

My hunting headquarters in India was in the village of Kashipur, some 15 miles from where the foothills of the Himalayas rise abruptly from the Ganges plain and perhaps 125 miles northeast of New Delhi. I was fortunate in being the guest and protege of A. D. Mukerji, director of a couple of land-colonization projects and the best hunter I have ever known. A tall, powerful Brahmin of the highest caste, he is a synthesis of much of the best of the East and the West.

As a youth he won the All-India trapshooting championship at Calcutta, in competition with many of the best wingshots in the British Empire. After the war he settled near the Terai and divided his time between collecting rents and killing leopards. When the partition of India rendered millions of people homeless, and the government undertook to clear the Terai forests for resettlement, Mukerji freely gave his services to this work—also to the necessary thinning out of the abundant wildlife. In the two years following the events of this story, he killed more than 20 tigers.

The Terai is a lowland plain with intermingled patches of high grass and broadleaf forest. In variety and quantity of game it rivals the highland savannas of East Africa. Invariably, the first game newcomers to the country seek is the blackbuck, a beautiful antelope weighing not over 100

The .270 and I

In India they gaped when it killed a blackbuck at 200 yards with one shot. They hadn't seen anything yet

by TED SHATTO

ILLUSTRATED BY RICO TOMASO

pounds. Adult males are dark on top and white underneath, sporting magnificent long, spiral horns which make them admirable trophies. But it is the blackbuck's speed that makes him unique. I've had one pace my automobile at an indicated 65 miles an hour and then, with no apparent strain, cut diagonally in front of the car and cross the road ahead. Nobody has ever found out just how fast a blackbuck can go.

My first victim was a young buck, shot through the neck with a 130-grain pointed expanding bullet—an old Peters load—at 200 yards. This one shot put the .270 and me in the good graces of the local boys. Shooting tradition in India is derived from long British usage, which limits chamber pressures to about 40,000 pounds and calls for a heavy, slow bullet fired from a double-barreled rifle with open sights. Good sportsmanship demands that no shots be taken at a greater range than 150 yards—the equipment just won't produce consistently at greater ranges. That explains why my first shot with what was contemptuously called "the little peas-shooter" was an astonishing success.

Mukerji provided me with an oxcart and driver. This two-wheeled vehicle, drawn by two bullocks, can go almost anywhere in the forest or grass. Because it is the common carrier of India, its appearance does not ordinarily frighten game. The hunter can sit more or less at ease (though walking is far more comfortable) and see over the grass to spot game. Then he can slip over the cart's side and make his approach.

Alone at dawn one morning, I spent half an hour stalking a herd of elk-size sambar deer, hoping for a glimpse of one of the huge stags. I was concentrating on the deer when I heard the crash of a large body in the brush behind me. Some animal was rapidly approaching. Tiger? I swung around with the .270 half-raised. I had told Mukerji it could handle anything in the Terai. But a lump collected in my throat, my lungs stopped functioning, and a vacuum took over where my stomach and accessories had been.

Out of the brush, a few yards from me, came a bull nilgai, crashing and blowing as though pursued by the devil. I just stood there, weak-kneed and gulping, while the great blue bull paused, wondering what I might be.

I knew what he was, all right—a grotesque half-ton antelope that looks to be part horse, part cow. Hunters despise him as a trophy—not worth the cost of a bullet—because of his ludicrous eight-inch horns. Hindus consider him a cow, so to eat his flesh is taboo. Even tigers pass him up in favor of the more succulent deer.

For a few seconds we faced each other, the 1,000-pound monster and I, then he wheeled and ran off toward safety. He'd have made it, too, except that suddenly he turned 90° and offered a broadside running shot at 50 yards. This glimpse brought me quickly to life, and my 150-grain soft-nose bullet tore through his chest and sent him tumbling in the dust.

I went on with my sambar stalking, but it was too much to expect that the wary forest deer would stay out in broad daylight with shooting going on. I followed their tracks until I lost them in the grass. Then I stillhunted back to where the nilgai lay concealed in a small patch of hip-high brush that was pretty much out in the open. On the opposite side of the brush patch were several nilgai cows—fantastically homely creatures with fawn-colored horse bodies, goat-like necks, small heads, and extra-long forelegs. With each cow were one or more tiny brown-

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and-white calves, and the whole bunch milled back and forth, testing the wind from my direction and trying to reconcile the strong smell of their lord and master with this skinny upright figure that was approaching.

As I drew to within about 200 yards, hoping to get a picture, the herd broke and ran, leaving what I thought was a calf standing there by himself.

I noticed his back was unusually black for a nilgai. Then I realized that this was no calf but a fully mature and shootable blackbuck that had been satisfying his curiosity along with the nilgai cows. I sat down to assume my favorite shooting position, but the grass hid the buck even when I was kneeling. I got up, raised the rifle, flexed my left biceps to tighten up the hasty sling, and was delighted to find the crosshair sitting quietly on the center of the buck's chest. He flipped over at the report of the gun. I set out through the brush to pace off the distance.

It took 210 strides to reach that kill. There was a tiny red hole smack in the middle of his glossy white breast. I hugged the .270. What a gun!

My first record-class trophy was purely a gift of the gods. While prowling the Terai one day I saw a pair of remarkably long blackbuck horns moving through the high grass several hundred yards away, and set out to investigate. After about 500 yards of stalking, I saw a beautiful buck, his erect ebony spirals so long that his black-and-white body was dwarfed. He was about 200 yards away, grazing placidly, moving at a walk as he fed.

I crawled on hands and knees down a path that paralleled his course and encountered an unforeseen difficulty. Due to the waist-high grass and a slight roll in the land between us, I could not get a clear shot, except from a standing position. I was breathing too hard for that attempt, so waited to catch my breath.

While I was resting, the buck moved out of sight. So we played a game, the buck peacefully but rapidly grazing and I scooting along in a crouch, hoping for a clear space in the grass that would invite a sitting shot.

The buck moved into a patch of heavy grass and lay down. Rising cautiously, I could just barely see his horns. A barren field perhaps 100 yards wide was between us, and heavy grass extended over a large area behind him. If chased into that patch, he would be lost. While thinking it over, I lit a pipe and waited about 20 minutes in order to be perfectly relaxed. Then I crawled toward him until the grass cover ended. Resting again for a few minutes, I got

up and walked straight at the buck, the .270 held at ready in front of me.

He didn't see me until I was within 50 yards, and then he made the mistake of facing me as he stood up. The 130-grain bullet hit him right at the juncture of his throat and chest, and I was the proud possessor of a blackbuck trophy with 24-inch horns—the longest taken in the Terai in modern times, I understand.

Opportunites for long-range shots there in the Terai taught me a lot about the steady hold and the gentle squeeze. Shooting offhand because of the perverse height of the grass, I once nailed a big swamp deer, or barasingha, at 300 yards. These stags are lordly animals, almost as big as an elk, with great spreading antlers. Later, at the same range, another fine stag fell, but my use of a rest made the shot comparatively easy.

The longest shot—and the luckiest—was the one that got a wolf as it stood watching our well-loaded jeep along about sundown one evening. We all piled out to look at the distant critter and Mukerji, translating the excited jumble of Hindi, estimated the range as 400 yards. He gave me some careful advice on how to make my stalk, but I promptly ignored it. With the gun sighted in at a little under 250 yards, I figured on about a 20-inch drop from the line of sight. I held some eight inches over the distant figure silhouetted by the sunset, and touched off a shot.

The wolf crumpled and the whole gang howled with glee, including the possessor of the .270. Mukerji paced off 412 long strides to the kill.

One day I saw a large herd of swamp deer bedded down in the sandy waste of an ancient watercourse. Crawling to within 100 yards, I had a clear view of the several stags in the herd. I was pretty certain which was the largest, but could not decide if he was big enough to be worth shooting. After half an hour had passed and none of the males showed signs of getting up for further inspection, I stood up abruptly. One of the watching does sounded a snorting alarm and in an instant the whole herd was off, running in panicky flight into the forest.

At once I saw that I had made a sad mistake in judgment—the big stag was indeed a monster. I whipped up the .270 and swung the crosshair with his bounding shoulder. I could see dust fly off his ribs and plainly heard the bullet strike, but the stag didn't even break stride as he led his herd into the sheltering woods.

My two assistants from the oxcart came running up. Alas, they chattered, the gods had not been smiling, for surely the bullet of the noble sahib had missed its mark. But the noble sahib shook his head and smiled as he lit his pipe. The gods were smiling, he said. Did not the worthy junglis hear the bullet strike the beast? Wait a few minutes, and then surely the quarry would be found within 200 yards.

For once the noble sahib was right. We followed along the broad avenue of

The day Mrs. Shatto got an Afghan urial

Author and blackbucks—one a 24-incher

hoofprints for exactly 178 paces and came upon the big boy stone dead. He weighed well over 500 pounds, and I figure that if the horns had been three eights of an inch longer the .270 would have collected a new record for the species.

Back in Kabul in the spring of 1950, my wife and I discovered an abundance of wild sheep on a mountain near our home. Within a year from that time, Mary and I went on more than 40 hunts in search of the ram of our dreams. Sometimes we were joined by an Afghan gentleman and sometimes by an eager American or by a European member of the Kabul foreign colony.

I learned two things rapidly. The first was that, by using the Tirolean carry, with the .270 slung upside down under my left shoulder, muzzle to the fore, I could lean on the gun as I climbed. The second was that even the dumbest ram on the range was a lot smarter than I. He knew just the range at which I might risk a shot, where I was, and where I planned to be after the next hour of scrambling up the steep slopes.

These rams were Afghan urial, a variety of the common sheep of central Asia. Adult males grow a long black ruff that covers their front from throat to mid-chest. The ruff is fringed with white, and the contrast to the fawn color of the back and sides makes this animal probably the most beautiful of sheep. Big rams may weigh from 150 pounds or more, and horns on the record head are 41½ inches long.

One night we bivouacked on top of a high ridge. A herd of sheep overran camp just before dawn, waking us up, but all the sheep escaped, even though I went charging after them barefoot and clad only in a thin pair of shorts, to the accompaniment of loud shouts of advice and encouragement from shikaris and porters.

But in the end I had to hobble painfully back to bed over the sharp, cold stones.

After breakfast Mary wandered off about 50 yards to spy down on the slopes below. She was carrying her scope-sighted .250/3000 Savage lever action. She soon beckoned the rest of us to her to watch a small herd of sheep playing about 300 yards off. Two young rams were engaging in mock combat. After observing them awhile she decided to have a try at the largest ram. Her shot made dust fly up directly behind the ram, and the whole herd ran off.

"Missed," I muttered. I lined up the crosshair of my scope on the hindmost ram, swung the rifle gently, and touched off a shot. Dust flew up on the far side of the animal and again I croaked, "Missed." Through our binoculars we watched them run. What foolishness, I thought, to fire at a running beast at 400 yards. But then the ram I had shot at slowed—and then collapsed, head wobbling as he fell.

It was nearly a mile downhill and cross-country to where the trophy lay, and even our eagle-eyed Afghan hunters had trouble locating the exact spot. I found the ram first and instantly noticed the tiny exit hole, about .35 caliber, well back in the rib cage. The Core-Lokt bullet from Mary's little .250 would have opened up more than that, due to the exposed lead. But how do you explain all this to your wife when she's just fired at her first ram—especially when your shot was a fluke at 400 yards?

"Congratulations, honey," I said. "You've got yourself a ram."

"But—but how do you know that you didn't kill it?" she asked.

"I saw dust fly up behind him when I shot" I answered, and she was ready to buy it. What with all the big rams around, I figured to tell her the truth after she'd shot a big trophy for herself, and that happy event took place several months later.

We got a couple of other rams that summer and autumn, youngsters offering such easy shots that they weren't proper challenges for the .270. And still the big pappy rams grazed on their heights looking down on me.

I decided to climb the almost vertical cliffs at the north end of the mountain. Rough going, but I knew the paired telescopes that the sheep carried around for eyes could not detect my approach, and I could ascend nearly to the top of the mountain unseen. The idea was good and I found a small herd of sheep grazing contentedly some 200 yards off. The ram, however, was a junior model, and I was faced with the eternal choice between what was at

hand and what might be in the bush. I decided against giving away my strategic position and chose to lie quietly on my stomach, watching the sheep until they moved slowly out of sight.

It was pleasant to enjoy the cool mountain air and to let my back soak up the early morning sunshine. For the moment I felt too lazy to worry about even a big ram. Then the sheep returned, stopping on the very crest of the ridge below, looking behind them. This time they were joined by a huge male—just what I'd been hoping for for months.

His black ruff, fringed with creamy white, waved in the gentle breeze as he stood broadside to me, and I thrilled to see his heavy neck and shoulders. And his horns—great sweeping curls of about a turn and one quarter each. Urial horns are slenderer than those of a bighorn and the curl is not nearly so tight. In my opinion, the greater sweep of the urial is the more majestic.

Even as I was taking in all this, the crosshair was settling on the ram's shoulder. The bullet, a 130-grain Peters, entered the chest cavity and he died in his tracks, never knowing of his hidden assailant.

In a little more than a year, I had hunted from the half-mile-high mountains of the Afghan Hindu Kush to the lowlands of the Indian Terai and back again. Except for tiger, bear, and sambar, the .270 had taken at least one of every major species of game in those parts. Three of the trophies were local records, and a fraction of an inch more on the horns of one would have meant a new No. 1 world record. Two of the kills were at about 400 yards, three were at 300, and many were at ranges more than 200.

The 130 and 150-grain bullets were of several makes and lots. Both the Peters and the Western 150-grain bullets did excellent work, but the old 130-grain Western hollow-point and Peters pointed expanding bullets did even better, especially on the smaller animals.

Most of the time I shot Peters 130-grain Inner Belted hollow points—the only controlled-expansion bullets used. They gave the best performance of any, somewhat slow on smaller game because they didn't open up well, but deadly on larger beasts. They penetrated well and held together fine.

I managed to improve my marksmanship to a point of consistency that I sometimes still find hard to believe myself. In India the last 19 out of a couple of dozen kills were made with one shot each from the .270, and most specimens fell in their tracks. For accuracy, for killing power, what more could any rifle do?

THE END