

## Africa

### The First Safari

My first safari was this past summer. It was everything I hoped it would be and nothing of what I expected. I wanted to make sure I remembered everything. Here is my journal exactly as I recorded it daily:

#### 2014 African Safari Journal

Gary Gardner & Hayden Gardner

August 2nd – August 19<sup>th</sup>

#### August 2, 2014

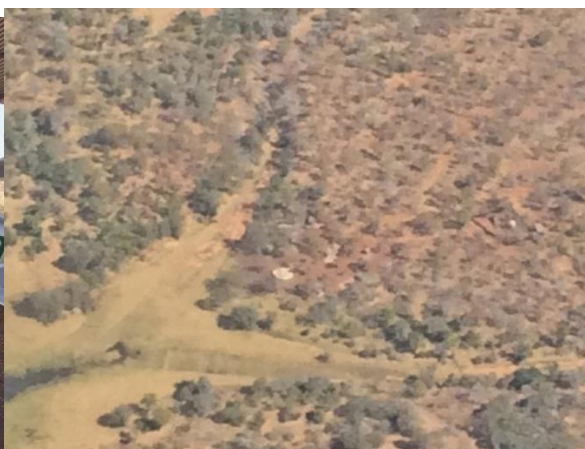
*Flew to Johannesburg from Houston. Expected to stay in Pretoria but not enough fuel for the charter flight to Zimbabwe so stay in Ellisras with Frans' parents. They are 3<sup>rd</sup> generation South African. Their Great Grandparents came to South Africa in the mid to late 1700's. Very cool.*

*Flew Delta to Atlanta then straight to Johan. Roughly 26 hours to get here then a 4 hour drive to Ellisras.*

#### August 4, 2014

*Booked a buffalo hunt but when we got here Frans offered a Leopard and an Elephant for such a good deal that we decided to hunt all three. Hunting the Big 3!!! Very Excited.*

*Flew Frans 4 seater Cessna to a game ranch near camp. Then a 3 hour drive to camp. Tent camp on a lake. It is exactly what we were hoping for.*



### August 5, 2014

*First day of hunting. Sighted in rifles first and then headed out. Stalked 3 different groups of zebra and wildebeest but never got a good shot. Went to a great little river that had been dammed and could have shot a good Klipspringer but passed hoping for something better. Had a good opportunity at zebra but PH wasn't comfortable with the shot. Saw Egyptian Geese and leopard tracks.*



Mateke Hills Camp

### August 6, 2014

*Long day. Chased zebra and the tracker "stepped" on a Mozambique spitting cobra. No one was hurt but we saw it and it was damn scary.*

*Chased zebra first and then a herd of buffalo. Could hear them but never saw them. Went to a back property and saw a huge baboon but couldn't get a shot.*

*Stalked another herd of wildebeest for bait but still no shot.*

*Trying hard to get a zebra so we can hand leopard bait. Found fresh leopard tracks near a fresh water spring on the back property. Good tree there.*

**August 7, 2014**

*Killed a zebra right out of the camp. Happened really quick. Made it seem easy but after 2 days of nothing you know it isn't. Hayden had a chance at Impala but never got a clean shot. Hung 4 leopard baits from the zebra. Very cool how they go about it. Should be interesting to check the baits.*





**August 8, 2014**

*Nothing on the leopard baits except a Janet (not sure what that it)!*

*Went to the dam and found where the big buffalo we had seen before had been back to drink. Followed his tracks back into the Kopi and other thick stuck and found where he bed. Fresh dung. Very intense.*



*Went to the Kopje we go to for phone signal and saw 6 giraffe and 3 kudu cows. The giraffe were all young bulls. We left the Kopi and Nick saw a herd of buffalo.*



*My first stalk into a herd. We got within 50 yard by crawling and looked them over. Chris (PH) didn't see anything he was excited about so we left.*

*Very exciting getting close to the herd like that.*

*We formed a plan to go after the "dugga boy" tomorrow. Everyone is excited about that buffalo!*

## Day 5

*Went to the dam to chase the dugga boy with no luck. Jumped a Nyala bull and went through a troop of baboons. Scary sound they make!*

*Hayden stalked up on a herd of 35 impala but no shootable males in the group. Found a shootable male right at dark but he was gone too quick to get a shot.*

*Stalked an Eland bull through some thick cover but he got into so thick cover and couldn't get to him.*

*Trying for the dugga boy again in the morning.*



## Day 6

*Long day. Started earlier than usual and went to the dam. The dugga boy we are chasing had not been to drink again. We are afraid we have disturbed him and he has moved on.*

*Two of the leopard baits have been hit by female leopards. Hopefully they will attract some males.*

*We chased two herds of buffalo today. After 4 hours and 10 miles we never saw the first one.*

*We found the second one after the boys followed a bull elephant track and came across the tracks. We tracked them and caught up to them after 1-1/2 hours. We got close 3 times and finally found the herd bull who was a good one. We ran out of light and could not get a shot. We will try to find them first thing in the morning.*

### Day 7 (Hayden's entry)

*After 7 days of hard hunting we are growing less confident in the area and are considering moving to another concession. My perspective has become more of a glass half empty and is in need of a change in scenery. Although game is scarce and the hunting hard I see what a beautiful place this is and how lucky I am to see it first hand before civilization taints it as I'm sure it someday will.*

*A frustrating day of hunting is soon forgotten as I sit by the fire and watch the moon glimmer on the lake. Where crocodiles try to find a meal. It is refreshing to see the bounty of life in its most simplistic nature. I miss home and the ones I love but this is surely a time and place I will not soon forget.*

*I can now say I have seen the Southern Cross.*

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## Day 8

*Exciting day. Stalked buffalo twice. Came on a small group of 4 which had a cow with a collar who had come from Kruger National Park. No bulls.*



*Later found a large herd of 30 that had the large bull we had seen before. Got within 50 – 60 yards and got on a kopje for 1-1/2 hours watching them. Finally decided we had to make a move and stalked up to within 30 yards. Was all cows between us and the bulls. The herd finally spooked and we chased them. We got close one time and they spooked again. We were walking out because it was getting dark very fast and Chris didn't want to push them too hard in the dark.*

*As we were walking out we found the herd feeding. They were within 50 yards. Two bulls turned and were feeding towards us and got within 30 yards when they spotted us. They weren't the big herd bull so we let them go. It was nearly completely dark at this point and it was very exciting. Chris said that at that range the one shot would have almost certainly charged. Exiting!!!*

*Leaving tomorrow for a new concession at Save Conservancy. Looking forward to new territory. Extended the safari by 6 days. More PG at Save too.*

*Went to a nearby village to make phone calls. Have to balance the phone on a post in the village to get service. Crazy .....*



## **Day 9**

*Drove to Savuli Camp in the Save Conservancy. Left at 5:15 AM and arrived at 8:30 PM. Long day.*





*Went to Mosvingo to get the game permits for Save. Took a long time. A lot of bureaucracy in Africa. Drive was really long but very cool to see the country side. Passed a village where people must have walked for 10 – 15 miles to be at a bar where everyone was gathered.*



Mosvingo Market Across from the Game Department

*Broke down and had to replace a belt on the Rover. Hayden found a millipede that was at least 6" long. Got to camp and it is awesome. Reed covered buildings with a great dining chalet with a fireplace. Disturbed a group of baboons who sleep on the river next to the camp. They are eerie sounding animals!*

**Day 10**

*Savuli is awesome. Heard a leopard last night when I woke up because the baboons were going crazy at 4:00 AM. He was sawing and every time you heard him the baboons went nuts.*





*Right out of camp started seeing game. Went to the dam by camp and found dugga boy tracks and a bushbuck carcass in the river that appears to be a croc kill.*

*Saw a kudu bull, impala and wildebeest everywhere. We are the first people to hunt here and the game is not jumpy. Found two bull tracks by the river and followed them. Amazing to see how good the trackers are. We found the bulls and were within 30 yards of them for 20 minutes while the wind was in our face. The big bull was laying down facing away in some thick brush and we finally got where we could get a shot and as I was about to pull the trigger he stood up and moved. He then was in a position I couldn't shoot and the wind changed and they ran. We followed them but then decided to leave them because the wind wasn't good. The biggest bull looks to be big with huge bosses and deep curls.*

*On the way back to camp saw a small group of elephants. Cows and calves, no bulls.*

*Went back out in the afternoon. WAIT!*

*Forgot to say we jumped a sable on the way back to camp. Watched him for a minute and Chris said to "take him." Had to thread the shot next to a mopane tree but he fell right where he was. He is beautiful! Chris thinks a little better than 40" which is a very big sable. 10" bases at least. Now.....*







*Went back to find the buffalo and he was standing 20 yards off the road in the open. He never moved when we drove by and he was huge!!! We stopped 300 yards down the road and stalked him. We figured he'd still be standing there but he was too smart. He had crossed the road and we spooked him. Never got another opportunity. We'll try again tomorrow.*

#### **8-15-2014 Day 11 – Hayden Gardner entry**

*This morning started after 2 dugga bulls whose tracks we spotted down by the dam. A track so large even an untrained eye could see the seriousness of this animal. A 4 hours stalk only resulted in 2 buffalo breaking brush in the opposite direction after they winded us.*

*This place is alive in wildlife. We saw a pack of Painted Dogs, which is something we will likely never see again.*

*The forest is scarred with the fallen trees from disgruntled elephants, who are the epitome of walking tornados. Their destruction has no rhyme or reason and is evidence of their presence.*

*On the road we saw lion tracks which in their silhouette displays a print which is only suitable for a top predator.*

*This place tastes of Africa, which is all you can hope for and allows for a boys dreams to become a man's stories.*

*Chapter title "This shit matters"*

## 8-16-2014 Day 12

*It has been a day of days. The morning was uneventful but the afternoon was something to never be forgotten. First we saw a group of cow and calf elephants at close range. No more than 30 yards at one point and one of the youngsters got agitated and bluff charged a few steps and flared the ears but the old girls weren't too alarmed. We got to watch them for perhaps 15 minutes before they moved on. Unbelievable how they can move so quietly for an animal so large. When they are feeding though they leave a wake of destruction in their path.*

*Next we saw the rhino cow with a calf. A white rhino I believe. Incredible that we have seen both African Painted Dogs and now a rhino. The porcupine quill, we have three now, is working!*



*The day was winding down and we were on the way back to camp taking a new road. I had told Chris at lunch that I had stalked enough buffalo and if this one came easy that would be fine with me. The quest for the dugga boy was beginning to feel like Ahab's quest for the white whale.*

*As we started to bullshit because light was fading fast we came across two dugga bulls standing 20 yards off of the road. Like last time they didn't run off so we changed tactics and stopped next to them. Chris and I jumped off the truck and ran around to the front of it and one of the bulls was in a spot where I could see him. Chris put up the sticks. I had him and asked Chris "shoot him?" and Chris said "shoot him."*



*One quick second to make sure I was on his front leg and in the bottom quarter and the 404 Jeff went off. I never felt it. I saw the bull hunch up and take off. He went 40 or 50 yards and fell. We could hear him kicking. Then we heard the death bellow. Everyone was going crazy. The boys were so relieved.*

*We had walked over a hundred miles stalking and chasing buffalo. We had been within 30 yards on three different occasions but it never worked out. The joy and relief was overwhelming for everyone. There was much hugging and hand shaking going on. We went up the kopi so we could find him and his buddy was still with him but he ran off after he saw us.*

*He is a massive old bull. A true dugga boy in every sense of the word. Worn down tips, huge mass and bosses that are probably 14". 37" spread according to Chris but we haven't put a tape on him yet. The tape doesn't matter! He's old. Chris thinks 12 or 13 and at the end of his life. He's got a puncture wound under his neck from a horn. Probably where one of the youngsters kicked him out of the herd. He is a trophy that will feed my memories for the rest of my life. I may kill bigger ones at some point but this one is special. I didn't compromise and shoot something that wasn't worthy of being shot. That's important!*







*Duplicating the Ruark pic!*

*It was too late to take proper pictures so Major and Day slept in the bush to keep the hyenas and lions off the bull. These guys and this place are amazing. Savuli camp is what I had dreamt Africa to be.*

*The people in the bush are happy and friendly. When you go to the city you see the same stress and misery on the faces of the people that you do in places like New York, Houston and Chicago. A simpler life, that's what we should be striving for.*

*A boyhood fantasy fulfilled!!!!!!*

### **8/17/2014 Day 13**

*We started the day with the buffalo. Taking pictures. Everyone, even the cook Caroline, came to be part of it. I think the entire camp was feeling the pressure and was extremely relieved and genuinely happy for me too. These people are wonderful to be around.*

*Chris is a walking encyclopedia of knowledge about all of the animals and plant life. He has a degree from the University in wildlife management and spent a number of years as a PH for the Zimbabwe Forestry Department.*

*His #2 guy is Major. Major is 40 years old and is johnnie on the spot with everything. These guys have an incredible eye for detail. Both in making sure everything is as it should be and in spotting animals and*

*tracking. Major was so happy when I shot the buffalo that he threw himself on the high rack seat and started kicking his feet in the air. I asked him what he was doing and he said; "I am just so happy!"*

*Nicholas "Nick" or "Nicho" is the tracker and was born with binoculars for eyes. His vision is incredible. Hayden and I have given up trying to spot animals because Nick misses nothing. He is the most genuinely happy person I have ever met. He has a huge smile on his face all the time. When he found out he was going to Savuli with us he jumped up and down with excitement.*



*Oliver was our game scout at Meteke Hills but he didn't join us in Savuli. He was a notorious poacher who got caught and the land owner offered him a job. He did so well that he was promoted to Game Scout and became too notorious at catching poachers and had to leave. Now he works for the land owner at Mateki Hills.*

*Day is the game scout at Savuli and he may have a better eye for game than Nicholas.*

*Caroline is the cook and she is amazing. She makes a pie sandwich with meat inside with a crust much like a croissant and they are delicious! She also cleans our tent/chalet every day and her attention to detail is spot on. She is a single mother with a 5 year old daughter.*

*Today I got kudu fever. Zebra, one shot kill. Sable, one shot kill. Buffalo, one shot kill. Kudu, swing and a miss. Day saw two big bulls and I grabbed the gun out of the case. Had a brief broadside shot and squeezed the trigger. Click. Now I went into panic mode. Worked the bolt and then hurried the shot as it went around a corner and a clean miss. Thank God I didn't wound him. I felt horrible but we saw 4 kudu today so I am optimistic I will get one.*

*Hayden continues to struggle with impala. He has seen several good ones and always there is brush or does in the way and he doesn't feel comfortable with the shot. Chris was messing with Hayden about the last one because he felt Hayden should have taken the shot and Hayden got really pissy for a while. Today hopefully we will get the impala early.*

*I have told Hayden he can shoot either the bushbuck or the waterbuck, whichever comes first since I am not optimistic we will get an opportunity at an Eland.*

*Another great day in Africa!!!!*

**August 18, 2014 Day 14**

*The leopard was terrorizing the baboons last night and they were going crazy. So loud it was hard to sleep.*

**Hayden Gardner Insert**

*That morning we set off in search of my impala, which Chris had expressed his frustration with my failure to sling lead at already. Two hours into the drive a good impala presented himself just 40 yards to the left of the truck. I quickly chambered a round, took aim and jerked the trigger. Dust flew over his right shoulder and he gleefully pranced away with his girls. To say I was frustrated was an understatement.*

*We went back to camp and enjoyed some lunch then decided to sit over a watering hole that evening. First a troop of 70+ baboons made their way to the water and lounged about as baboons do. Soon after I heard excitement in Chris's voice when a mature ram impala made his way to the water. I quickly repositioned myself in the blind and placed the crosshairs of the 375 on his neck. As he turned away from the water with careful aim and a gentle squeeze the rifle fired and the ram fell where he stood. I had become an African hunter.*





*That afternoon we continued to see baboons and an even larger ram came to the water but was shortly run-off by 6 cow eland. Six tons of the best meat Africa has to offer and we watched them drink and return to the bush at dusk. The day was good and filled with game and life. Long memories were made yet again.*

### **Day 15 – The Last Day**

*The last day is in the books and it is bitter sweet. The focus was kudu. Gotta find a kudu!!! We drove, we sat in the blind. No kudu. Saw 7 dugga bulls in group. Three really good ones. Chris wants to stay and look and I want to keep moving. Gotta find a kudu.*

*Harry (or Varnwell – meaning warthog) has planned a brie (bbq) down at the river. Gotta head that way. I hand the binoculars to Hayden and tell him to put them up because light is fading fast. Just before the turn to the river – 4 kudu!*

*I take careful aim at the shoulder and there is bush in the way. Bullet nicked a branch and went through the front brisket and didn't hit anything vital. We followed him until dark and although he was bleeding badly we decided to come back in the morning and not push him.*

*What a rollercoaster of emotions! Utter despair when I thought the hunt was over and no kudu followed by unbridled excitement when we found the four kudu. This was ultimately my downfall because if I had calmed down I would have taken a neck shot and I would have had my kudu.*

*We followed him for the entire day. (Actually we followed till 11:00 AM and then left Chris, Nick and Day in the bush.) They never found him. Sheer disappointment but he stopped bleeding after he lay down and my guess is he will survive.*

*The bbq down by the river the last night was awesome. Harry really went out of his way. Everyone actually went out of there way the entire trip to make sure everything was perfect.*

*The experience was not everything I had built it up in my mind to be but in retrospect it was better. The hunting was harder than I thought and upon reflection I think that is good. I didn't want to go to a high fenced game ranch in South Africa where the hunting is guaranteed. I wanted wild, untamed Africa and I got it. Elephants, rhino's, wild dogs..... those are encounters that are rare and special and I had them all. I think it turned out exactly as it should have, with me wanting more.*

*Gary Gardner*

Booking my first safari was the most arduous part. Agonizing over “did I pick the right outfitter”, what can I afford to shoot, what should I try to do, where I should go?

After looking back I know that the prep was important and I got most of it right upon reflection but other parts wrong. I am by no means professing to be an expert but simply relaying my perspective so take from it what you will.

### **What I think I did right**

- Zimbabwe
  - Had been told it was in too much upheaval, too dangerous, etc. Drove across much of the country and never felt unsafe.
- Dangerous game first safari
  - Personal choice but I am glad I did it.
- Buffalo, buffalo, buffalo
  - I have killed a lot of things but I have never really hunted until buffalo. Addictive.
- 404 Jeff
  - Phenomenal performance and easy to shoot.
- 375 H&H as a back-up.
  - Perfect for all the plains game and no need to worry about a dangerous game rifle if the other fails.
- Superior Ammunition Hand loads
  - 404 Jeff ammo is difficult to find so this was an obvious choice and they were great.
- Take EVERY bullet and cycle it through your gun to make sure they will feed. I found a 375 factory load that wouldn't.....
- Five hour energy
  - For the first 4 or 5 days we drank a 5 hour energy around 11:00 AM to ward off jet-lag, worked like a charm.
- Paying for the charter flight
  - Had plane problems and had to make the drive across the country when switching concessions and that really made me appreciate the Cessna.
- DSC show to find my outfitter
  - Spent two days talking with 20 or more outfitters looking for a connection and found it with Frans. Great to work with. A lot of great people at the DSC but just like life you connect with some people better than others and you spend a lot of time together so genuinely liking the other person is important I think.
- Sitatunga Safari's & Frans Troskie
  - Smaller outfit but very personal attention and hand holding for a first time safari goer.
- Bringing my son
  - This really added additional expense but sharing it with him was the best part. Wouldn't have been nearly as special by myself.

- Travel Express
  - I had trouble with another travel agency and it cost me \$3,200 because they didn't follow-up as promised ( you can find the thread here if you look.) It got me wondering why even use a travel agent, just book on-line and save the fees. I learned why you book with Travel Express and Lori Ginn. Because she has been there! Booking on-line doesn't do you any good when you are talking to your agent to rearrange travel from the tree branch in the village which is the only spot where you can get signal for 20 miles.
- Doing my walking with a 15 pound exercise bar to simulate carrying my rifle.
  - I carried my rifle the entire trip. Didn't matter how far or how high, I carried it. Didn't want to miss an opportunity because my gun bearer was out of reach when the chance came.

#### **What I did wrong (or at least could have done better)**

- Should have gotten in better shape.
  - The Kopje's are a killer. I live on flat land and should have been walking up bleachers every day.
- Not stopping by the store and buying more scotch
  - I like my sundowners. I should have been more realistic about how much scotch I needed in camp. The "store" isn't exactly right around the corner.....
- Accounted better for how much the "extras" were going to cost.
  - Budgeting for all the ancillary costs like charter flights, ammunition, "having" to buy two guns because it was my first safari, buying clothing that wasn't camo, shell holders, etc.
- Culling belt.
  - They look cool but get damn heavy when loaded up with 404 ammo. The Galco Safari 5 ammo holder was better but I cut the flap off.

#### **Additional thoughts:**

I estimate I walked, crawled and ran 125 miles chasing buffalo in Zimbabwe. I can feel the addiction starting. It is exhilarating beyond anything I have ever experienced. Crawling into herds is a rush and the slow stalk after a dugga boy through thick mopane and tall grass is intense.

The first several times you take out after a track you feel like the gullible city boy being led on a snipe hunt. You will walk for miles with only the occasional nod from you PH as he points to something on the ground that you cannot see. You will nod knowingly, knowing that you know nothing.

For me it took a while before I began to really trust my trackers. I finally realized how good they were when we were tracking two dugga boys that had crossed the road the night before. We were 4 or 5 miles in when the dugga boys crossed a bedding area where a large herd had bedded down the night before. After nearly an hour of circling the bedding area Nick softly whistled and pointed to some tracks. Everyone converged on the area and all agreed this was them so off we went. Two hours later, when I



was certain this was a wild goose chase, Nick jumped back behind a bush, motioned for us all to crouch down and pointed around the bush. The PH and I stuck our heads around the corner and sure enough, two big bulls laying down looking into the wind, which thank goodness was away from us.

There was too much bush between us and the bulls so we slowly maneuvered to within 30 yards and found a hole in the brush to shoot through. After some back and forth between myself and the PH I finally understood where he wanted me to hit the bull. In hind sight we should have sorted out this communication ahead of time. Careful aim, take off the safety and at that exact moment the bull stood up and walked 5 yards to the side and lays down again. Some sixth sense told him he needed to move because he was not alert but just relaxed and chewing his cud.

My PH whispered to me, lets' get closer (remember we were already at 30 yards) because this wind is beginning to swirl. No sooner had he said that when a wisp of wind hit me on the back of my neck. Nothing more than had a girl walked past you in the bar and barely blew on the back of your neck to flirt with you. It was enough. Their sense of smell is like a Labrador on steroids. The two bulls were up and gone in the blink of an eye. Ten plus miles of tracking over 5 or 6 hours and nothing. This is buffalo hunting. I stalked into numerous herds and chased one old dugga boy around his bedding area for two days with nothing to show for it. Saw good bulls in herds but somehow the big boy was always in the back. They just know.

The bull I shot was anti-climactic, except for the fact that we had been chasing bulls for days before we got our bull. He was a great bull OLD, worn down tips 37 inches with huge bosses. It was just he and his askari hanging out just off the road. He had a fresh wound in his neck from the fight that I guess finally settled the argument that it was time for him to leave. He was 20 yards off the road when we drove by. We stopped the rover and snuck around to the front and found him in the brush. I got set up on the sticks. He took a few steps forward into a shooting lane and I took him on the shoulder at 17 yards. He hunched up and ran 50 yards and lay down. We circled around and come up on him from a small kopje and his buddy was standing over him. The buddy saw us and took off for friendlier territory and we came up behind my bull to put one more in his spine. Death bellow and he was mine.

Major, the lead tracker, lay on the ground shaking his feet in the air and screamed. I asked him; "what in the hell or you doing" and he just smiled and said "I'm just so happy." Wow. It was incredible. I think everyone was feeling the pressure of this having gone on so long. We had tracked and climbed and crawled an incredible amount to finally get to this moment. I had almost become a quest rather than a hunt. We saw plenty of buffalo. I had done everything I had come to do. Crawled to within 20 yards of three herds. Only to leave one because it was too dark and to have the other two thunder off because we spooked them. We did find one of the herds again as we made our way back to the truck at dark and have two younger bulls, almost ready but not quite, break off from the herd and feed directly to us. At around 30 yards they suddenly realized there was something standing there and we had a Mexican stand-off for a few seconds that was pretty exciting. I had my cross-hairs in the middle of the closest ones chest and kept wondering when the PH was going to take notice. Instead he kept glassing the herd looking for the big boy and telling me not to shoot that the big buy was in the back. They always know.....

I know there is controversy surrounding Save Conservancy and Savuli Ranch in Save. TIA, This is Africa. I am glad I saw it. Who knows if there will be another chance. The fact that elephant is no longer exportable from Zim into the U.S. is troubling. All the decisions being made abroad, not based in science, make you wonder what parts of Africa will be available then next time.

Headed to DSC in 2016 to book for 2017. Thinking elephant, buffalo and leopard this time. Got to get my kudu and would like a waterbuck and a bushbuck. Priority is the elephant. If stalking into a herd of buffalo is exciting I can't imagine stalking to within 20 yards of an elephant. Just typing this I am getting excited about the planning. It really is a big part of the whole experience. The 404 Jeff will do the job but I'm thinking you should shoot your first elephant with a nice double rifle, maybe in 470 NE .....  
And the fun begins!!!

Thanks again to Ruark, Hemingway and Capstick who fueled a fire that I am blessed to be able to throw gasoline on. Thanks most of all to a loving and indulgent wife who allows me to chase my crazy dreams.

*Gary Gardner*

*Feb 26, 2015*