



Calibre Choices for Dangerous Game

By Ganyana

A client coming hunting in Africa does not require a stopping rifle. He is hunting - and , provided he does his part halfway decently - there will be no scratching around in the thick stuff for something wounded and nasty. If it does come down to that though, it is the PH's responsibility to handle any stopping that needs doing.



There are few things that hunters seem to argue over more than calibre choices for use on dangerous game. The Web is full of chat forums where the most commonly debated topic is some variation of “what to bring to Africa”, and over 50% of the e-mails I receive are along the same theme. America has always loved Bigger and Better and most of the conversations revolve around calibres well over .40 - but increasingly I hear of African Professional Hunters having to shoot their clients’ trophies for them. I have several good friends in the industry who are brilliant hunters who have reached the conclusion that it is better to automatically back up the client on lion, buffalo or elephant than to muck about looking for wounded animals. Or, or even worse, risk losing the trophy. Over the years I have watched many men turn from enthusiastic young PH’s to more cynical, staid men. The evolution of a PH goes something like this. When he first gets his license, he works hard, getting the client into a good position for the perfect shot at the animal in question. If the client wounds it, he puts in days tracking it down and doing his level best to ensure that his client gets his trophy. Then his enthusiasm begins to wane as he sees his older colleagues doing half the work but earning far more in tips than he is. It begins to dawn on him that a good trophy in the salt is worth far more in his wallet than a fantastic follow-up with a heart stopping charge at the end of it. Even worse, the older PH doesn’t even work to position the client for a good angled shot. He finds the right animal and relies on his bullet to deliver the results if the client cannot - and as a result he is often more successful than the harder-working but less-savvy juniors. Finally the young PH gets tossed or scratched by something nasty and all pretence goes out the window, and he learns to hang on the trigger so nearly simultaneously as the client that the client doesn’t even know that he has been backed up!

Personally I have issues with shooting my clients’ animals, but after many years in the game, I fully understand why so many of my mates do so. A lot of it though, is the client’s fault. They arrive over gunned or, occasionally, under gunned for the game being hunted and cannot deliver the goods when the time comes. I also hear and read of just how “tough” African game is compared everything else in the world. I am not convinced. My father is an old professional ivory hunter from the 1940’s and 50’s and used an 8mm Mauser for everything- including the elephants. By the time I was growing up his main quarry was cattle raiding lion but included the odd recalcitrant elephant bull that kept breaking the dip tanks or raiding the orchard. I never saw an animal need a



Left to right - .375 H&H Magnum, .458 Win Mag, .416 Rigby, .425 Westley Richards and .470 Nitro.

second bullet (although all got a ‘finisher’ just to be sure). As a young cadet National Parks officer I started out with a .458 only to suffer bullet failure on my first ever elephant and had to finish it off with my 7mm Mauser. I graduated to a lightweight .375, but after my first buffalo cull found a nice 9,3x62 which served me well on subsequent buffalo eradication culls, and the rest of my Parks career. Several facts stand out in my mind from those years of dealing with problem animals - namely, shot placement and bullet construction are far more important than calibre. I very nearly received a quick face lift and tummy tuck from an angry lioness that two of us failed to stop. I was using a .375 and my senior colleague a .458. The cat took four reasonable hits and came on - but both of us had run out of soft point ammunition in dealing with two other lionesses and were down to using solids. I can emphatically state that a .458 Win with solids makes far less impression on a lion than a good 7mm soft point! I have also killed elephant and buffalo with 7.62mm NATO military ball when necessity dictated instant action rather than returning to station to pick up a heavier rifle. Of course, a National Parks officer isn’t hunting. It was shooting for rations or dealing with a problem animal. Sport be damned, only results mattered and with the least expenditure of time and energy possible. Still the ultimate objective of both visiting sportsman and Parks officer are the same- a cleanly dead animal. I have, consequently carried those prejudices across from Parks to professional hunting.

I must point out that there is a world of difference between a hunting rifle and a stopping rifle. Elephant cows and wounded lion, leopard, buffalo or hippo in thick cover constitute the domain of the stopping rifle. Anywhere, in fact, where you can be attacked from a range of ten yards or less and the brush or grass prevents a clear shot

at a vital area. In Parks, each station had a “jesse gun”. An 18" barrelled Army & Navy double rifle chambered for .500NE. They were short, handy and in matters of self defence, the recoil was hardly noticeable. They lacked the penetration necessary to take a big bull elephant from the front, but that is not what they were made for. They had a tendency to double on you, but that was fine as well considering the circumstances. I never used one. I owned a .450 NE and a .404 as stopping rifles to back up my 9,3 but never used either of them on an animal. When things went wrong I had either my 9,3 or my 7.62 in my hands and those are the rifles that sorted the problems out. After each close call though, I went over to carrying the heavy rifle for a while but soon drifted back to using the 9,3 - until the next time!

A client coming hunting in Africa does not require a stopping rifle. He is hunting - and , provided he does his part halfway decently - there will be no scratching around in the thick stuff for something wounded and nasty. If it does come down to that though, it is the PH’s responsibility to handle any stopping that needs doing. If a client is truly after a great trophy it is imperative that his chosen calibre be able to put a bullet into the vitals from any angle. I have had clients arrive on elephant hunts carrying a .45-70, without appreciating that the round, no matter how hotly loaded, will not penetrate a big bull elephant from a frontal shot- which is the shot presented in at least 30% of the cases. By all means, use your favourite lever rifle if that is what you wish to do, but understand the limitations that you are imposing on yourself - and the PH! For elephant and rhino the criterion for a client is penetration- followed by penetration. For our elephant culling programmes we used .30-06 Springfield with 220gr A Square monolithic solids or Soviet armour piercing 7.62x 54R ammo. 30,000 elephants in a decade says this



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combination works. At the same time, our .500NE jesse guns proved they were not up to big bulls. From the short 18" barrels they just didn't drive a .570gr bullet fast enough. Come to think of it, even from a 24" barrel they are marginal and require a good bullet to be considered satisfactory. For a client on an elephant hunt, a .40 calibre rifle is perfect and a .375 perfectly adequate assuming good bullets.

On buffalo, penetration is often vital as invariably the bull you want is always standing at a funny angle. For many years, European clients would arrive with boxes of Winchester Silvertips as their "premium" ammo for buffalo hunts. You could safely take a buffalo bull with a .375 Silvertip - provided it was absolutely broadside on. As soon as the angle wasn't perfect, it was going to need a PH's bullet to prevent a long and messy follow up. Many of the old time PH's recommended nothing but solids for use on Buffalo, and consequently calibre choice started with .416 and .404. In the 21st century there is no earthly reason to use a solid on a buffalo unless you are using something marginal (like a client last year from the UK who bought a Martini Henry BP rifle). There are enough good bullets out there, and it is simply a case of matching the rate of expansion of the bullet to the impact velocity. For rounds that have a high impact velocity, like the .375 I have a distinct preference for monometal hollowpoints like the Barnes TSX. For slightly slower rounds like my 9,3 or .416 the Woodleigh protected points and Nosler partitions are fantastic - and there are many other very suitable choices. Why am I so strongly opposed to the old advice of solids on buff? Mainly because I have sen how

long they can live with a hole through the heart. A .375 round-nosed bullet makes a very small hole, which seals each time the heart pumps. I have seen more than one buff still full of fight 20 minutes after taking a heart shot with a solid. As a PH this isn't good for my nerves and also increases the chance that I will have to put a bullet into the client's buff. A good soft point (or monometal HP) will deliver a dead buff within 100 yards or so. No awkward follow-up, close enough to hear the death bellow. Give me a quickly dead animal any day!

Hippo? For a client shooting one in the water, any good HP or soft from any rifle from .300 mag up will do the job adequately. Shooting one on land at dawn, dusk or in the fields at night? I must say I like big, flat nosed solids in my own rifle. For a client? If he is using a rifle like a .375 then I would still advise a bullet like the TSX. If he is using something like a .458 Win, then the flat nosed monometal solids (like a Barnes Banded solid) would be my advice. The .40 calibres? I think the old idea - often also applied to buffalo that one should start with a soft and have solids underneath in the magazine in case of a charge or follow up shots on a fast departing animal is probably the way to go. Using a .416 double, I of course have the luxury of a soft in the right barrel and a solid in the left and can choose as the situation arises!

Lion and leopard? Two different animals. Soft as anything you are likely to encounter when taken unawares, their chest muscles form quite a considerable barrier to bullets if they charge. They are also distinctly susceptible to "shock"

(however you wish to define it) from a high velocity rifle. Slow expanding bullets like the Barnes TSX seldom open on a lion who is shot over bait and even less so on leopard. I have enjoyed good success with the Norma Oryx bullet on lion from my 9,3 but the average American would tend to recommend something along the lines of a swift A frame or Nosler Partition. Guaranteed to open, and will also make it through under any situation from any angle. Neither of the cats requires a particularly powerful rifle, and a .300 win mag would be my advice for leopard and a .338 Win or .375 H&H would be all anybody will need for lion. Bullet impact speeds make a significant difference on cats. Ideally you want the bullet to land at over 2250fps (i.e. velocity at 80yards, rather than muzzle velocity, must be over 2250fps). Like with buffalo, this is an important consideration for a client. It is always much more satisfactory for both PH and client to have the animal go down virtually instantaneously where you can see it, rather than experience the joys of a tense follow-up. Clients may find a follow-up exciting. For me, the novelty has long since worn off. Bring a high velocity round and dump the cat where I can see it please.

So, at the end of the day, If you are buying a rifle for an African hunt, what would I recommend? The answer is simple. The biggest calibre you can shoot well with. For most people this is a .375 H&H. Most African big game hunting is not a long range affair, and flat trajectories are largely irrelevant. Consequently, the old .450/400 or .404 loaded to original specifications (400gr bullets at 2150fps) - both enjoying a wide resurgence - may be better choices for the "average" African buffalo or elephant hunt. In terms of recoil they usually offer less felt recoil than a similar weight .375 due to their lower muzzle velocity, but definitely hit harder on elephant or hippo than the smaller round and about the same as a .375 with good bullets on buff. Of course, the .404 can be loaded up quite a bit and then there is nothing to choose from between it and the .416 Rem/Taylor/Rigby/.500/416, etc. The .416 class of cartridges offer a noticeable increase in stopping power over any .366/.375 round, and to me this is the dividing line between a "hunting" calibre and a "stopping" one. By all means, bring bigger if you wish, but ONLY if you can shoot it well - offhand and from shooting sticks. What you can achieve from the bench is irrelevant in the field. There are many new and interesting cartridges available for the man who wants something a bit different- and I for one, now carry a .500/416 as my main rifle when backing up clients. But the reality is the .375 H&H and .450/400 are still the best choices for a client coming to Africa for big game. Same as they were a 100 years ago. 🐾