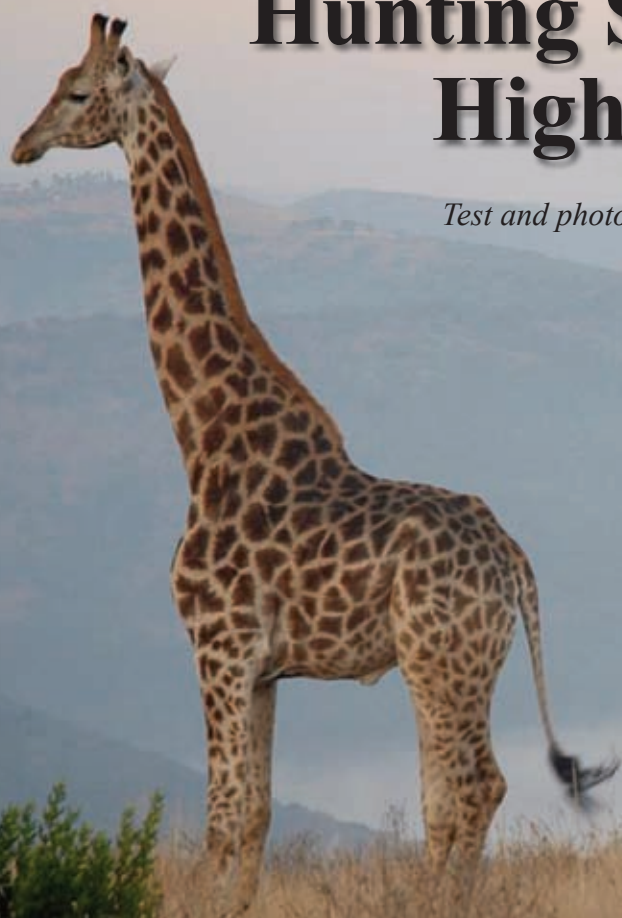




Hunting South Africa's High Country

Test and photographs by Robert E Zaiglin



Our trip to Africa was much more than a hunt as my girls and their husbands were able to visually indulge in all of its raw wild beauty.

It was our dream to share Africa with our children - a dream that turned into a reality and enforced my belief that the quality of a hunting experience is gauged primarily by whom it is shared with. That is what hunting is all about.

My heart rate escalated upon each and every labourious step up the steep rocky slope. If I did not know better, I would have thought I was hunting sheep in Wyoming, particularly with the presence of snow, but I was now over 10,000 miles from my Texas home in search of the unique Vaal rhebok in the Stormberg Mountains of southeast Africa.

Borrowing a quote from F. Vaughan Kirby in a publication titled *Great and Small Game of Africa* published in 1899, "no other antelope in Africa affords truer sport than the rhebok for none is so shy and difficult to approach." Kirby referred to the Vaal rhebok as the "sport of princes" and only through "perseverance and good physical condition will one enjoy success." I found his description of this smallish gray antelope which stands at 28 to 35

inches and weighs 40 to 50 pounds to be spot-on.

I first learned of Vaal rhebok back in 2005 when I accidentally tuned into a TV show on the subject. By the time the show was over, I was researching the animal and planning another trip to the Dark Continent in order to pursue this magnificent animal.

It was at the 2008 SCI convention in Reno that my wife Jan and I met Chris Broster and Andrew Pringle, owners of Crusader Safaris. Following a short visit with them, I knew they were the kind of people we would enjoy hunting with. Once they ensured me that all their hunting was conducted on open range, we booked the safari for July, 2009.

For Jan and I, this was our fourth trip to Africa - we have hunted in Zimbabwe twice and Tanzania once. With three Cape

buffalo, a huge sable, several kudu, and numerous other trophy memories, the Vaal rhebok remained high on my priority list, but what made this trip even more special was the fact that my daughters Beth and Nan and their husbands Justin and Paul joined us.

After spending close to 24 hours in aircraft, we arrived at Johannesburg on July 19 for a short layover before hopping another flight south to Durban, but our luggage didn't make it; more importantly, neither did our guns. We spent our first night in a beautiful bed and breakfast lodge on the Indian Ocean.

As the sun rose the following morning, Jan and I were walking barefoot on the deep sandy beach of the Indian Ocean. By mid day, Chris and Melinda Broster escorted us two hours out of the huge city to a secluded tent camp on the Umkomaas River.

South African Airlines delivered our luggage shortly afterwards, and my girls went to work.

Jan connected first with a heavy-horned Cape bushbuck right on the Umkomaas River, and Nan wasted little time taking a 22-inch impala and a blue wildebeest. Nan's husband Paul hunted kudu with a bow, but failed to have one of Africa's grey ghosts approach within arrow range.

Over the first four days of hunting with PH Andrew Pringle, I looked over eight nyala, four within shooting range, but none met our benchmark of 29 inches, so I passed up the magnificent animals.

On the last morning in Zululand, our fifth day, Paul and I remained to hunt nyala, while the others parted early for the five-hour trip to our next destination in the Stormberg Mountains. We spotted a 29 to 30" bull, but by noon, following a long stalk, the animal simply vanished as did my chances of taking one.

As a sudden, unexpected cold front dropped temperatures to below freezing, Paul and I were escorted south through some of the most breathtaking mountain vistas in all of Africa. Admiring the jagged snow-covered peaks on the horizon made the trip go by swiftly.

By dark we had arrived at Chris's family ranch and were graciously greeted by our families, along with Chris's Mom and Dad, John and Cheryl Broster, followed by some exquisite mountain reedbuck stroganoff prepared by Chris's Mom.

As a fluorescent orange sheen silhouetted the Stormberg the following morning, PH Scott de Villiers, tracker Elvis and I drove to another ranch 40 minutes away in hopes of seeing an exceptional horned Vaal rhebok that they had spotted earlier in the year.

The first mountain valley we glassed was devoid of the secretive animals, but Scott spotted the ram we were after straight off in the second deep, more rugged valley, and as they say in Africa we "made a plan".

Feeding on a winter wheat field planted for sheep in the bottom of a huge bowl, they appeared to be just where we wanted them. With the wind in our favour, we initiated a stalk that turned out to be much more challenging than I expected.

As we employed the large rocks encircling the valley below us for cover,



Nan with her first Impala.



Accompanied by Chris Broster, Jan proudly displays her first Cape bushbuck.



Paul and Beth wasted little time convincing Chris to take them out at night after one of Africa's most unique animals—a porcupine.

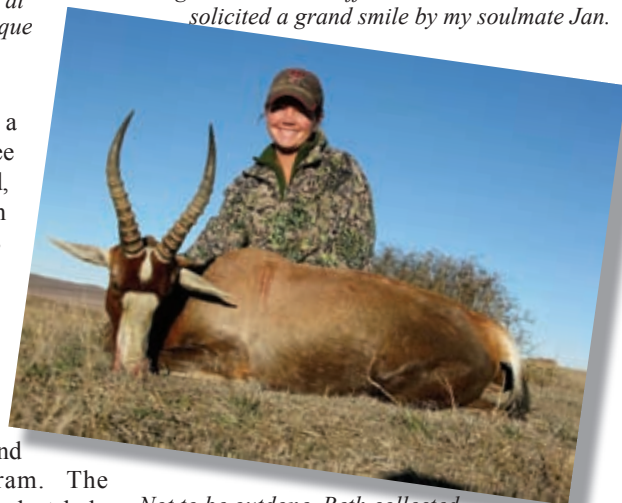


Making a one-shot kill off the sticks on this blesbok solicited a grand smile by my soulmate Jan.

we crawled some 50 yards to a point from which we could see the antelope. Some were bedded, others fed below us, but the ram accompanying the 12 ewes was not visible. Our only option was to wait for the ram to move into the open.

Our plan came to an unexpected and disheartening end when the ewes exploded from their resting positions and dashed off along with the ram. The antelope's alarm sound of "tshuh, tshuh, tshuh" could be heard resonating off the rocky canyon walls as the herd effortlessly dashed up the opposing steep slope only to pause in a position facilitating an excellent vantage point.

Our second stalk ended when we realized we couldn't get any closer than 400 yards, and a third stalk approaching the overly cautious animals failed as I simply couldn't find the ram in my scope before it dashed off. We virtually spent the entire morning crawling over that mountainside, yet the animals' keen eyesight prevented any chance for a good shot.



Not to be outdone, Beth collected a fine blesbok.



My girls proudly accompany Mom with her springbok.

We decided to break for lunch and let them settle down.

Upon our return to camp headquarters, I was greeted with a wide grin on the face of my wife Jan as she proceeded to tell me how she and PH Chris Broster stalked a beautiful blesbok, and with one shot off the sticks at over 300 yards she dropped the magnificent ram. She was on a roll and now turned her attention to a springbok for the evening hunt.

After enjoying a fine lunch Paul and I returned with Scott to the area we last saw the ram I was after and found them feeding below the rock-covered kopje that we crawled over all morning. I was confident we would get a shot under 200 yards this time as we proceeded to crawl up to the ledge overlooking the feeding animals. As we approached a good shooting position the unbelievable occurred; an African wild cat erupted from the bunchgrass pursuing the ram, forcing it a considerable distance from us.

Once again the herd was unsettled and alert. Suddenly one of the ewes spotted us, and before I knew it, the entire herd was running off only to pause at the base of the bluff they chose as an escape route. Misjudging the distance, I placed the post of my duplex scope on the ram's back and fired, shooting over the animal. The ram bounded off pausing once again, and I shot a second time only to watch in despair as the herd disappeared over the rock-strewn kopje and into the next valley.

Returning to camp after dark, I once again was greeted by the smiling faces of my girls as I listened to how Jan once again made a tremendous shot, this time on a beautiful springbok, while Beth took a fine blesbok and Nan a springbok.

The following morning things fell into place as we were able to narrow the distance between us and the herd, and I was afforded the privilege to take one of South Africa's crown jewels—an 8.5"-long Vaal rhebok.

By noon we were making the third leg of our African adventure. This time we were heading to the Baviaans River Valley in the Eastern Cape.

Following our arrival and a light snack, Beth, Paul, and I along with our PH Scott negotiated our way through several deep valleys, pausing every so often to glass kudu coming down the dry mountainsides to feed on the lush



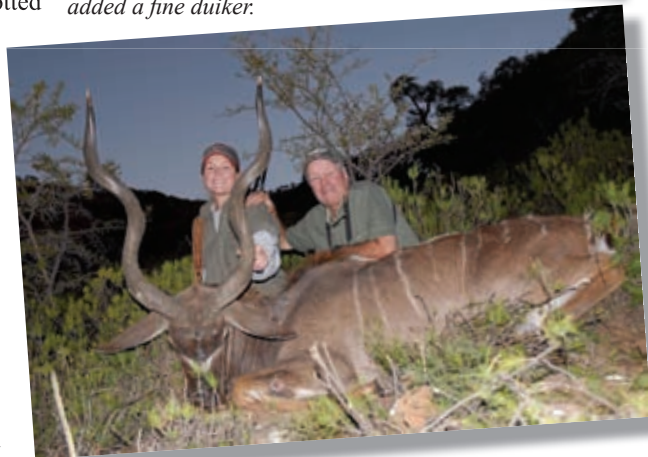
After much effort, I finally connected with South Africa's crown jewel — a Vaal rhebok.



With my lucky charm at my side, I collected this beautiful gemsbok.



Attempting to keep up with the girls, I added a fine duiker.



The grand smile on Beth's face confirmed the fact that a quality hunt is measured most by whom it is shared with.



Paul waited until late in the hunt before collecting his first African animal, a fine gemsbok.

vegetation in the bottoms. Seeing five or six nice bulls before dark had Beth really pumped up as a kudu bull remained number one on her African wish list.

Just as the sun dipped below the mountain ridge above us, we spotted what appeared to be a huge bushbuck, but when we approached the area where the dark-caped animal last stood, it was nowhere in sight. As luck would have it, we spotted a duiker with horns in excess of 3.5 inches, and once again I was able to collect an impressive trophy.

The following morning Beth and I traveled with Scott to investigate several isolated valleys known to attract big kudu bulls. We spotted two mature bulls in the first valley we visited, and Beth and Chris made a long, arduous stalk on one of the animals, but came up empty-handed.

As they negotiated their way around the rock-laden mountainside, I saw a bush pig, my first, appear behind them while the bulls below demonstrated as much caution as any whitetail I have ever witnessed. We were focused on the kudu, but getting close enough for a shot was going to be a real challenge.

Beth's first attempt at Africa's grey ghost took the better part of the morning so we decided to return to camp and make a plan for the evening's hunt. Shortly after lunch, we were glassing from a ridge top affording us a panoramic view of the Baviaans.


As we glassed from above, Scott had one of the trackers walk through the valley below, and as he did, mountain reedbuck exploded from the heavily-thorned acacias and dash over the opposing ridge, but only cows and immature kudu bulls were to be seen.

Returning to our vehicle, we drove to another vantage point and before the tracker was even deployed, we spotted two nice bulls below us. Once Scott decided that one of the bulls was mature, he and Beth initiated a long stalk, taking them around the mountain where they could proceed down a shallow pass and cut the distance between them and the bull. I remained on the ledge where I could observe both the hunters and the kudu. Exercising much caution, Beth and Scott made their way to within 220 yards of the bulls, and as I saw them preparing for a shot, I focussed on the larger bull.

After what seemed like an eternity, I suddenly saw the bull leap forward almost a full second before I heard the rapport of Beth's rifle. It staggered only a few feet before falling over backwards when I let out a loud "Yeeha!", echoed by Beth on the opposing slope. Rushing around the mountain to them took around 40 minutes, but upon my arrival a huge smile and grand hug from my daughter enforced my belief that the quality of a hunting experience is gauged primarily by whom it is shared with. With one dramatic stalk complemented by a great shot, Beth realized a dream come true as she beamed, holding her outstanding bull as I snapped some memorable photos.


The following day both Justin and I made a great stalk on some gemsbok and both of us took outstanding animals. Paul's gemsbok came on the last day as he and Scott followed a herd almost a mile before they settled down, and with one well-placed shot, Paul collected his first African trophy.

It was our dream to share Africa with our children - a dream that turned into reality and we still savour the memories each and every time we get together. That is what hunting is all about. 🐾



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