

By the same Author

AFRICAN BUFFALO TRAILS
ABYSSINIA TODAY AND YESTERDAY
FAMOUS FIGHTS AND FIGHTERS
AFRICAN JUNGLE MEMORIES
AFRICAN ADVENTURES
AFRICAN CAMP-FIRE NIGHTS

MY FORTY YEARS IN AFRICA

by

JOHN F. BURGER

ILLUSTRATED



ROBERT HALE LIMITED
63 Old Brompton Road London S.W. 7

1960

1-195, ~~196~~

WHAT ORDER THE BIG FIVE?

THE OLD PERENNIAL 'Which is Africa's most dangerous animal?' still crops up as regularly as ever amongst the hunting fraternity. It is a question that can never be settled to the satisfaction of all parties to the dispute, but a study of the views of some of Africa's best known hunters throws a lot of light on the subject.

I know of no man who has made a closer study of this subject than my friend, Mr. J. C. Smuts (son of the famous Field Marshal) who, at my request, has prepared this chapter on the subject.

The relative hazards involved in hunting the dangerous beasts of Africa (writes Mr. Smuts) has always proved controversial. While there has seemingly been little agreement, a critical scrutiny reveals that this is only so because differing conditions have rendered the comparisons unfair. Take, for example, the dangers as expounded by hunters of the old school, like Cumming, Baker, Harris, Oswell and so on to Selous and compare those with the views of later times. In the first place the old school usually hunted on horseback, in a country relatively open and teeming with unsuspecting animals. Their weapons were underpowered black powder smooth bores, but whenever these got them into difficulties they simply dug in their spurs and disappeared in a cloud of dust. The artists Wymper and Wolf in the Badminton Series, and later Millais depict these old-timers in many a daring escape from charging animals.

The generation of hunters that followed, typified best perhaps by the knights of the Lado Enclave, in the early cordite years before the turn of the century, were confronted

by a changed world. By that time animals had become more wild and wary and had retreated into the denser bush and hunters were no longer able to use horses. Game, too, had grown much scarcer and bigger risks had to be taken to secure results. Obviously, shooting under these changed conditions was more hazardous and quite different impressions were gained in the pursuit of trophies.

But even since then considerable further changes have occurred in hunting conditions. Some idea of the magnitude of the change becomes evident when we look back on the feats of W. D. M. Bell and see how simply and effortlessly he disposed of his thousand tuskers with a small .276 Rigby Mauser. In more recent times continued survival with that rifle would have proved distinctly problematical. So, even accounting for Bell's superb marksmanship, which incidentally stood in sharp contrast to Selous' unpublicised mediocrity, the conclusion is that animals reacted very differently in those days. Let us, therefore, consider critically the views of all those who operated before the First World War.

Having cleared up these introductory points one might well ask on what basis we are to compare the buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion and rhino. In making these comparisons let us assume that the hunter is adequately armed and that he is a person with some experience. That is, that the calibres he uses are sufficiently heavy, that the weapons are reliable and that he does not indulge in foolish practices. Recklessness and low-powered rifles have been the great killers over the years.

Quite clearly, the dangers involved in hunting depend on a variety of factors, and whatever the normal hazards may be, they are multiplied many times when we venture into really dense bush or tangles of grass or reeds or equatorial bamboo, for here the restricted visibility and time for taking defensive action nullify whatever advantages the hunter may normally enjoy. In general, the risks involved in the day's shooting would depend on the following factors: First, the likelihood of being charged unexpectedly, without provocation, even though no shot has been fired. Although this is not a frequent occur-

rence, a charge at close quarters can prove disastrous and we cannot disregard it. About the only animal sufficiently stupid to molest one is the surly rhino, but he is so noisy in his dislikes, that one usually has ample warning of his intentions. He can, however, prove a very nasty customer at close range in elephant grass. Also dangerous may be the rare occasion when you stumble inadvertently on to a lioness with cubs, or lions feeding on a kill, or even when you find yourself in the middle of a trumpeting, hostile herd of elephants with young. In all these circumstances your predicament will be very real, but they are no more likely than blundering accidentally upon a wounded buffalo left behind by somebody else, or some other dangerous abandoned animal.

The danger in this charge-before-you-think group I would rate in diminishing order as rhino, elephant, lion, buffalo and leopard.

Next, let us consider the chances of being charged immediately after firing a shot. The elephant, buffalo and possibly the rhino, would usually have the inclination of making a precipitate charge knocked out of them, the elephant less so than the buffalo. But the lion (and more so the lioness) and leopard are as likely as not to turn nasty, especially if the range is short.

This brings us, thirdly, to the dangers of the follow-up of a wounded animal. This is the most crucial factor in hunting. Here the lion, the leopard and the buffalo show a superior cunning at setting up ambushes. The leopard, being very small, is particularly difficult to detect, while even a 400-lb. lion can blend uncannily with the smallest tuft of grass or cluster of bushes. The bigger, more conspicuous buffalo has to arrange his ambush more carefully, but proves himself a sound tactician and deadly earnest gentleman. He is a past master at doubling back on his tracks to catch the unwary hunter from the rear, turning off behind some suitable dark bush and waiting patiently. His headlong charge, accompanied by a series of grunts, is made at point blank range, leaving his victim little time for manoeuvre. If there is very dense bush about, the

elephant, too, can prove a very dangerous adversary, for though he is monstrous in size he is silent of movement and often very hard to see, and in addition, his I.Q. is far above average. I would rate the animals in the order in which I have discussed them, with the mercurial rhino in the rear.

The next and very crucial point is the difficulty of stopping or turning a charge, for the life of the hunter hinges on this ability. The charge of the lion may take place at over forty miles an hour (though seldom at much over thirty) and he does not present a particularly big or easy target, but he does give a slight advantage to the hunter by commencing his rush a rather long way off.

The elephant is the easiest of all to hit and a relatively well-placed heavy bullet will almost invariably turn him. The same applies to the rhino. The buffalo is the toughest, most determined and most invulnerable of all. He comes with his nose straight out in front till the last moment, his horn sweeps covering his shoulders and a massive shock-absorbing dewlap masking his chest. Nothing will turn his charge, and nothing short of disablement or death will stop it. That is why experienced hunters advocate that only the heaviest rifles should be used on buffalo. But at least you can climb a tree in a scrape and if you are six feet off the ground you will be safe.

Not so with the lion, leopard or elephant. The leopard has all the courage and determination of the lion and buffalo and comes on like a flash in a series of bounds, affording a most difficult target, but with a steady nerve he can be hit at point blank range, where the handiest weapon would be the shotgun. If this last shot fails there is still the chance that penicillin can save you.

In this difficult-to-stop category, I would place the lion first, followed by the buffalo, leopard, elephant and rhino.

This brings us to questions of ease of hunting or shooting the various animals, or the ability to fire a telling first shot. The sense of scent and hearing of these animals varies immaterially, but the sight of the elephant and rhino is notoriously poor. The elephant can barely discern a moving object at fifty yards

and he is normally shot at under thirty, at which distance a shot can be placed with complete accuracy. There will be no need for follow-up.

By contrast, lion and buffalo hunting is much more difficult and as often as not, the animal has detected you first. The range is seldom close and the animal invariably much obscured, making the accurate placing of a shot problematical. The time left for a shot is very limited, again not conducive to rigid accuracy. The result of this haste and confusion often leads to a dangerous wounded beast, which has to be followed up and despatched according to the hunters' code. As I have remarked before, the lion is not a very tough animal and a heavy calibre soft nose bullet usually writes finis to his troubles. Conversely, the buffalo is as tough as they come, though a good heavy bullet broadside into the shoulder usually nails him on the spot. But that and the more flukish brain or spine shot, are about the only ones that will drop him in his tracks.

So my rating in the category of firing a telling first shot is: buffalo, lion, leopard, rhino, elephant. Bear in mind that the great thing in hunting is to fire a telling first shot. Subsequent ones do not have the same shock effect and can be embarrassingly difficult to execute.

Naturally, the various issues at stake we have discussed are not of equal value. For example, the ability to cope with a charge is of far greater importance than most of the others. Our final assessments will have to be weighted accordingly. If one is foolish or impetuous or careless, the hazard in lion and buffalo hunting is undoubtedly very considerable. For the novice there is the danger of looking upon the buffalo as a mere super ox and not on a par with elephants or lions. There is a similar dangerous tendency to under-rate the leopard because of his size. Naturally, I speak here only of hunting in the sporting way on foot, and not from a jeep or tree platform or by aid of traps.

How do these comparisons agree with the casualty statistics of hunting? First, take the elephant and you will find that at least half-a-dozen people have had bags of over a thousand and

lived to die of old age. Mickey Norton is said by John Burger to have exceeded 4,200 in his day, and Robert Foran credits Samarki Salmon with over two thousand. John Hunter (1,400 elephants) and a few others have passed the thousand mark in rhinos, and Hunter, Burger and many others have run into four figures with buffaloes. The reason why casualty figures for buffalo hunters is not much bigger in view of the numbers shot is because they were hunted as meat and not as sporting trophies. The subtle difference is that meat shooters seldom feel constrained to hunt up wounded animals and so escape the major danger in buffalo hunting.

Proportionately, rhinos have probably produced a higher percentage of casualties than elephants or buffaloes. With leopards this type of comparison is not fair because of their scarcity and nocturnal habit. I doubt if anybody has obtained a bag of anywhere near a hundred by ethical means, and for the casualties involved (only some of which prove fatal) his danger rating must be very high. Lions, though never plentiful, were certainly at one time more numerous, and here again the number of white crosses testifies how dangerous he has proved. Stevenson Hamilton is generally credited with the biggest total of lions, though I believe he put his figure at only a little above three hundred.

I doubt if any other person by fair means has exceeded that figure, though John Hunter says that Leslie Simpson in one year accounted for 365, but this would undoubtedly be by a variety of methods. The same applies to Yank Allen's 425. There are no four-figure lion men, and I would guess precious few with three figures, obtained sportingly, on foot and without dogs. Very few have been lucky to escape like Stevenson Hamilton without scars.

The stage has now been reached where we can sum up our opinions, taking account of the type of country in which animals occur nowadays, the difficulty of firing a crippling first shot, the dangers of the follow-up and the hazards of stopping a charge. Weighting these in reasonable proportions I would give lions pride of place, followed by buffaloes,

leopards, elephants and rhinos, the latter two on a par. Not all sportsmen, of course, will agree with my order.

It is clear from the observations of everybody that there is little agreement on what constitutes the most dangerous animal. Each beast under different conditions could prove most dangerous, and it would therefore be prudent as a generality to group them all together and to treat them with equal respect and circumspection.

6

ON THE LION TRAIL

LION HUNTING AS a sport, in common with many other forms of hunting, has fallen on evil days. With the introduction of further restrictions in Tanganyika recently, there are now only a few places left where Leo can still be hunted on an open licence. But that does not mean that general interest in the subject has died a natural death. During the years when I was actively engaged in the big game hunting business I must have answered a thousand questions about the technique of the game. Since 1947, when I finally abandoned hunting of all kinds, the same questions have poured in at almost the same rate.

It is quite certain that only a very small number of those who ask these questions will ever go on a lion hunt, but that does not mean that these good people are not interested in knowing something about the little side-shows of the game (there are many facets to these 'side-shows'—such as a sound knowledge of bushcraft) that a few reflections on the subject may be of interest, not only to those whose hunting is never likely to extend beyond the armchair stage, but also to those who may be fortunate enough to overcome the existing obstacles that prevents the average hunter from indulging in this fast declining sport.

The first requisite for success in lion hunting is a sound knowledge of the bush and your subject. Most worth-while results can be obtained only by experience. Failing actual experience, a good deal can be learned by reading first hand accounts written by men who know their subject. In this connection however, it is simply amazing how easily one forgets oceans of book-learning when a sticky situation arises—