



Marvelous, Warren and Darren Maughan with the eland.

## Sooner Lucky than Good

The fire at our feet glowed cherry red. Wini, my wife, long since bored with talk of ballistic coefficients, feet per second and such, had drifted off to our tent. My own eyelids were growing heavy. "I think I'll finish this cigar and my drink, then totter off to bed. What's on tomorrow's slate, Darren?" "Oh, another go at waterbuck, I should imagine," answered our PH.

During our drive out next morning, I studied my surroundings and wondered how closely they resembled the scenes that had greeted the early hunters like Selous, Neumann, Stigand and the like. Certainly there were more animals then. Not everywhere of course, some areas were naturally bare of game at certain seasons. During the early foot safaris, the difficulties those hunters experienced in keeping their multitudes of porters fed, filled many pages of their journals. Much the same was true of the early American West: the men of the Lewis and Clark expedition had gone mighty hungry in areas where I've hunted elk in recent years.

On the open back of the bakkie, the trackers, wearing jerseys, woollen hats and scarves, sat huddled together to escape the chill wind, but their eyes were constantly active. When I spotted a brownish blur, they had already identified the animal's species and sex. The smaller antelope like impala were generally out where they could catch the first rays of the morning sun. They, too,

By WARREN EASTLAND

were cold. The larger antelope like kudu were usually hidden behind thick screens of brush. The tiny antelope species and warthogs were almost always hidden by tall grass. From our elevated vantage point on the hunting seat, we could see just their backs, but from the ground we'd have seen nothing.

We had just driven past a thick stand of riverine reeds when Marvelous leaned forward and called out, "Waterbuck." "Eh? Where?" Darren responded as he lifted his foot from the accelerator and let the thick sand in the tracks drag the truck to a stop. "New track," said Marvelous as he and Nicolas pointed back the way we'd come. "This morning," Marvelous added. Darren pulled the hunting car off the track into the tall grass and cut the engine. The trackers stripped off their extra clothes, leaving the truck's seat looking like a jumble sale for used clothing. We formed into hunting file and followed the trackers as they set out on the spoor.

For over an hour we tracked the waterbuck bull and his harem. The bush along the river was thick, the reeds with their evil sharp points were dense and tall. Only where the riverbanks were high could we see over the reeds, and our view of the opposite bank was of more reeds backed by

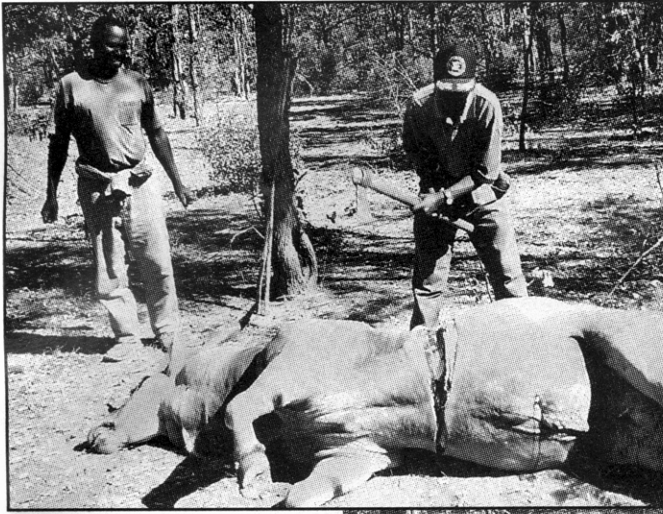
tall trees. On our side, grass, some waving chest-high, and bushes, mostly with thorns, covered the area shaded by the trees, and vines stretched from the ground to the canopy 50 feet above our heads. The only vistas which opened up to us came when we followed the tracks off the bank and across the river. The river bed was mostly loose sand with occasional pools of muddy water.

The waterbuck seldom paused, and never long enough, or in a suitable place, to offer a shot. They were alert as they fed along – not only for human hunters but also for the leopard that were thick in the area, which was why I was carrying my .375H&H. Wini had her .270 for the waterbuck.

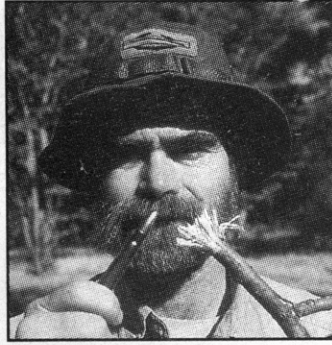
The trackers were working well together. Where the tracks mingled with others, both Marvelous and Nicolas would lead. Marvelous would point at some obscure spoor with the shooting sticks and Nicolas would look, then wave his hand in the direction he thought the waterbuck were headed. Or Nicolas would point at the ground and Marvelous would touch the sign with the sticks, then sweep the sticks up in the direction we should go. Darren and Wini followed the trackers closely, watching them and looking for any movement ahead. Where the sign was clear, Nicolas would drop back with me and bring up the rear.

The tracks left the jungle along the river bank and entered the mopani grassland





**Above:** I've seen the butchering of a lot of big animals, from moose to musk ox, but I'd never seen one butchered sideways before. It makes for easier loading in a confined space. **Right:** Just getting the head into the bakkie was almost more than four healthy men could handle.



**Left:** The stub of the mopani branch severed by my bullet, with a .375 cartridge to show thickness.

eyes roving as I looked for the bull. The lead cow snorted quietly, then trotted off followed by two others. The remainder stood milling about, unsure of what to do.

The bull was directly in front of me about 50 yards away, but I couldn't see him as some mopani trees were blocking my view. The bull realized that something wasn't right ahead, so he reversed his direction and walked slowly to my left, back the way he'd come. He passed a narrow opening in the bush and I checked his horns through my scope. There was no need for Darren to tell me this was a good trophy; I liked what I saw and shifted the crosshairs to his heart area.

He kept walking slowly, but still bush blocked my view of his lower body; I could see only his back, neck and regal head. I shifted my aim to the centre of his massively thick

where visibility was measured in tens of yards rather than mere feet. We walked along the meandering tracks trying not to rustle the leaves. Finally Marvelous stopped and conferred quietly in Shona with Nicolas. Darren joined them and heads shook as hands pointed in several directions. Wini and I moved forward to listen when a sudden grunting noise silenced us all. I had no idea what made the noise, but it sounded like the grunting that ends a lion's roaring in the nature shows on television. "Lion?" I asked. We had encountered lion tracks somewhere not too far away.

"Mpofu," Nicolas said. We left the waterbuck track and moved in the direction of the grunting eland bull. Waterbuck spend their time in a relatively well-defined area of a square mile or two. We knew we could return to this area and pick up the waterbuck track. Eland, unlike waterbuck, are wanderers. They may spend a day or two in one area, then go somewhere else several miles away. I wanted an eland, so it was Wini's turn to move to the rear.

We hadn't gone far when we began to see tan shapes moving through the trees. The eland were milling ahead of us. We stopped, and Darren leaned against a tree to steady his binoculars. Marvelous spread the shooting sticks, just in case. The tree wasn't big enough to shelter us all, so Wini hung back and I stood to the side of the group at the tree. Animals started moving toward us. I sank to one knee, as the bush was thin enough for me to shoot from a kneeling position. They moved closer and closer until there was no more underbrush between us and them. Cow... Cow... Cow... How many were there? Where was the bull? I knew these animals would soon realize that we weren't odd clumps of brush, and be off.

"Bull," Darren whispered. I swivelled my head slowly to the left, where he and the trackers were looking. To my right, at least seven eland cows were passing slowly through the open area. I stood up, took a single pace left, and rested my rifle on the shooting sticks. The cows stopped and stared. Now I was again motionless, with only my

neck, mentally picturing where the spine would lie beneath the muscle. There was a slight blur of some leaves in front of me... not much, but I could see dense green appearing at the left edge of my scope. He'd soon disappear. I squeezed the trigger and, even with the recoil, saw dust fly as he dropped. I lowered my rifle and grinned at Marvelous, who was grinning back. Nicolas was smiling from behind Darren. But Darren said loudly, "Oh, no! Reload! Reload!"

I had already cycled my bolt, but I didn't raise the rifle again. "He's down, Darren." I was echoed by the trackers. In the silence following the roar of my rifle and the stampeding of the cows, Darren could hear a slight shuffling sound. "Let's go," he said, "before he gets up." I led the way, my rifle half raised in readiness for a shot at a suddenly running eland. We ran around some scrub mopani to find the eland lying on its side, its hind legs moving feebly. "Finish it," Darren said. I gave it a heart shot and the eland shuddered a last time. Darren allowed me a few quiet moments to gaze upon and admire this giant beast, then he turned to Marvelous, "Let's set him up for photos before he stiffens up, then you and Nicolas can go and get the bakkie."

Wini watched as we struggled and shifted the eland to a position where it would photograph well. We looked at the hole in the neck. The entry hole was oblong, not round, indicating bullet instability in flight, and there was no exit hole. Nor had my second shot exited, and it was fired from about eight yards. Both were 300gr Swift A-Frames. Eland are huge animals. "That first one keyholed," Darren said. "I thought you had missed or wounded it. All I saw through my binoculars was a mopani branch full of leaves dropping, and eland going everywhere. I thought he took off with the cows. I imagined us spending the next week tracking." We walked back to where we were when I fired and began pacing off the shot. At 30 paces, we passed under a low mopani tree. There, lying on the ground, was a branch about three-quarters of an inch thick, severed by my bullet. Sometimes it's better to be lucky than good. **■**