On Safari with an Academic—Part V: Blesbok and Gemsbok

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“So you don’t like shooting from the Land Cruiser, eh? Well here’s your [expletive] chance to get a little exercise! Grab the rifle and let’s bust a blesbok.”

And so with Frikkie’s version of a Jack La Lane workout, the chilly morning of Sunday, July 24, 2005 began. This was going to be a little different than our previous hunts, because this time we had Esak, our tracker, right from the beginning. We’d also be going in on foot. With a primitive shooting stick, the four of us exited the rickety Toyota and began our stalk of Damaliscus dorcas phillipsi.

I’ve got to admit that of the six animals I had licensed for, I knew the least about the blesbok. But, since I figured this was to be the one and only safari of my life, I wanted to bring home trophies that had distinctive horns. Animals like the zebra held no interest for me.

The blesbok derives its name from the Afrikaans word for blaze (bles), which refers to a very prominent white patch on the forehead. This patch is divided in two by a brown band just above the eyes. The legs, belly and rump are lighter in color than the rest of the body. Blesbok are tough characters. The males get to be about 155 pounds and average about 37 inches at the shoulder. They are territorial, and have a social structure with two distinct kinds of herds. One is the bachelor herd. The second is the breeding herd that comprises a dominant male with his females. This indefatigable, agile antelope of the grasslands is particularly jealous in matters regarding his harem. If challenged he will perform an impressive ritual of threatening behavior to warn off any rivals. Taken from the script of a Sergio Leone spaghetti western, the blesbok stares down his opponent by standing very still, with its head held high. It then proceeds to issue a salvo of snorts, lowers its head, and then leaps into the air clashing horns with its adversary. The dominant male marks his territory by making dung heaps and also by rubbing its face, which contains scent glands, against blades of grass. Expectant mothers stay with the herd and give birth to single calves in early summer. These animals are quite resilient, and calves are able to stand, and to run with their mothers, within 30 minutes of birth!
But we were the ones running now. Esak had spotted a herd of about 30, but they weren’t hanging around to see if we were trouble; I think they already knew it. The morning air had a snap to it, and I wished that I had brought more long-sleeve shirts, but there was little I could do about it. Esak, on the other hand, was dressed for arctic conditions. He was wearing a cap, heavy winter coat, gloves, coveralls and thick warm boots. Despite the garb, he was gliding across the dried ground and not making a sound. Because of his Spartan lifestyle, he wasn’t breathing hard either. Bob, Frikkie and I were forced to trot, bent over, so as to keep us behind the shrubberies, at the same time hoping to close the distance without being spotted a second time. We paused to get a better idea of a possible trophy. The three of us were breathing hard; each of us thinking silently to ourselves of the many gastronomic/liquid sins we had committed, and how in our youth we could have easily done this with a hangover.

“At least I gave up cigarettes,” I thought to myself.

Frikkie had spotted a really nice male. It was not going to be easy, though. They were moving very quickly.

“Okay, I know exactly what they are going to do. They’re making for that hill and once they cross it, we’ll never get them. Let’s run for that knoll—you’ll get one chance,” Frikkie said a little breathlessly.

So off we went; running at a good clip this time, dodging branches, jumping over ant hills, and pausing for a few seconds to pull one of those “wait a bit thorns” from my safari jacket. We finally made it to some high ground, and way below, trotting in single file, but on the other side of a very long hedgerow, was our quarry.

“Cholly, this is what you do,” said Frikkie. “There is a break in the bushes, a gap of about four feet. When you see an all-white blesbok, get ready, because the next one is a gorgeous male. Drop him.”

My heart was pounding and I was taking very deep breaths to get myself under control. This would be the longest shot so far on this safari; 250 yards at a trotting animal. The reader may question how I solved the “parallax” issue that almost cost me an eland and the
answer is quite simple. At every opportunity I would snap the Valmet to my shoulder and look through the scope. I must have done this dozens of times until I finally figured out just where I had to keep my distance from the tube. It wasn’t comfortable by any stretch, but it was working.

Frikkie handed me his shooting stick. It was the non-adjustable kind and when I put the rifle in the “V” it was so high that I thought I was going to be taking a shot at a flying crow.

“This is a piece of crap, Frikkie.”

“Yes I have heard that from a number of my clients, but that’s all I’ve got. Hurry, shoot him!”

There was no way on God’s green earth that I was going to hit a moving blesbok at 250 yards free hand. I let the stick drop to the ground and crawled over to a scrawny, but sturdy, tree. For the first time on this hunt being left handed was in my favor. I leaned into the “V” of the tree with my right handed, and used my right hand to not only hold the forearm of the rifle, but with my thumb, hook a small branch.

Although I wasn’t panting as hard as before, I still had breathing issues to contend with, as well as Frikkie’s constant harping about shooting and shooting fast. I snuggled the rifle into my left shoulder and had no trouble with the sight picture. Holding on the gap in the bushes, I watched them pass by at a pretty decent gallop. Frikkie was whispering about how many more would be coming by before I’d see the snow white one.

“Three more to go, then the white one. As soon as it clears get ready,” he said under his breath.

“This is going to be one hell of a shot cugino (Italian for cousin, but a term of endearment between Bob and me). It’s at least 250 yards,” Bob commented, with just seconds left before I’d shoot.

I slid the safety off and held tight. One by one they came and then there appeared the white one. As it passed by, the nose of the big male was already making its way into the gap and I gave it just a half second longer before I squeezed the trigger. The Valmet broke
the stillness of that crisp morning and for the first time I heard the ‘thwap’ sound myself.

“You nailed him cugino!” said Bob looking through his binoculars. “He’s already falling behind the rest of the herd.”

Frikkie started jabbering in Afrikaans to Esak, who took off like a beagle after a rabbit. Once more we were running through the dry grass and keeping a watchful eye on our tracker. It didn’t take him long to locate the blesbok and start whistling. The animal was down and could not get up. If Esak hadn’t been so quick it would have been dead by the time we got there. My bullet entered just above the right shoulder and exited the other side. Frikkie put a mercy shot into him and then turned to me.

“Where did you learn to shoot like this?”

“Frikkie, I have my own private gun range in the back yard. I hand load everything and I probably fire a few thousand rounds a year of pistol, rifle and shotgun. I’ve been shooting for almost 40 years.”

Our PH looked at the ground for a while. Something was on his mind. He rubbed his chin and glanced around a bit, and then finally he turned about and looked me right in the eye.

“Okay. I’m going to stop yelling at you.”

Well, that was a relief anyway. It appears that a lot of people who book a safari are what I call “casual” shooters. They get out their paper targets and just before they leave for Africa, they bench rest their rifles and if they hit the paper and the group is decent, they are satisfied. No one ever tells them that there are no benches to shoot from when you are in the bush. As a matter of fact, you shouldn’t even count on “shooting sticks” because some outfitters don’t use them. Then there is the chance you will have to take a few shots free hand, so you really ought to practice these different positions and styles before you head into the veldt. I was certainly thankful that I had.

We propped up the blesbok by putting a forked stick under his chin. He really was a beauty. Esak took some sand and carefully sprinkled it on the exit hole the bullet had made. As we began taking
pictures, Esak high tailed it back to the Toyota, which was about three-fourths of a mile away.

“This is what I call hunting, Frikkie,” I told him. “Getting off your rear end and heading into the bush and having to work for it.”

This early morning hunt reminded me of a 1957 story in Field and Stream by Robert Ruark, entitled: Earned and Collected. In this superb tale he relates the trials and tribulations of going after a really fine cape buffalo. He writes: “So you walk. You walk four miles, carrying your double rifle by the barrels, plus a spare gun with scope if the grass is short and you might have to take a long shot if you can’t crawl any farther. By crawl I mean crawl.”

All right, you get the picture; it wasn’t that dramatic, but it was a lot more satisfying than shooting from the front seat of a Toyota. Esak drove up with the Land Cruiser and we heaved the blesbok onto the
truck bed. Back to camp we went. A quick breakfast for us; another skinning and gutting job for Esak and Alfred.

“So Frikkie, tell me, who were the worst clients you ever had on safari?” I asked, in between pouring the mango juice and coffee.

“Two separate incidents come to my mind,” Frikkie said between bites. “One was a group of Americans, the others Spaniards. With the Americans I sorted it out, but with the Spaniards, I sent them home early.”

Seems like the group from America (about seven hunters total) was organized and paid for by a millionaire from Colorado. He took care of virtually everything. He also thought he knew everything. From the moment they were all settled in, this arrogant Coloradan began telling Frikkie in front of the entire group that he didn’t know what he was doing. For example; he said Frikkie didn’t have a clue how to set bait, that the blinds were in the wrong position, that the equipment was inferior. This went on and on through lunch and then again at dinner. It was getting so obnoxious that the other hunters began to look down at the floor whenever this guy opened his mouth. But none of them had the guts to reprimand him either.

Next morning the group headed out. Frikkie set everyone up in their spots, but for the malcontent he found the “ideal” blind. It was camouflaged to perfection, and up on a hilltop about 40 yards away, you could just barely see the rim of a water hole. All day this fellow stayed put. When the pick up time came near dusk, Frikkie made sure to get him last. Everyone else nailed something that first day, but the blowhard saw nothing. At dinner that night he was even worse, brow beating Frikkie that he was incompetent and that he shouldn’t have been skunked.

Frikkie shrugged. This is hunting after all; so he convinced the guy to give it a try just one more time. At dusk on the second day Frikkie made his rendezvous with the millionaire. He had a completely dejected look on his face. The conversation went something like this:

“Did you see anything?”

“Not a damn thing, Frikkie. What in the hell am I doing wrong?”
“Oh, you actually want my opinion?”

“Well uh,” and looking rather sheepishly he said: “Yeah, I do.”

“Let’s take a stroll to the rim of the water hole.”

Uphill they walked and when they crested the top, it all became quite clear.

“This water hole is bone dry. I’ve been sitting next to a dry waterhole for two days!”

“That’s right,” said Frikkie, looking him dead in the eyes.

What followed was one of those long pauses when a man, even one whose strong suit isn’t humility, takes stock of himself and his situation. The next thing he utters is going to make or break the entire safari.

“I’ve been a real [expletive] Frikkie. I’m sorry, tell me what to do.”

The rest of the hunt went just fine.

This could not be said of the four Spaniards however. Only one of them spoke English, and he wasn’t very good at it. Frikkie took them all out in the Land Cruiser and had the one fellow translate the shooting protocol. Only the guy in the front seat shoots!

Away they drove. Frikkie and the shooter (the one who spoke a little English) were discussing and pointing out some eland bulls when the three hunters on the elevated bench just opened up with rifle fire.

“It was like a bloody broadside from one of those Spanish galleys,” Frikkie told us, laughing now, but livid then.

Between the muzzle blasts and the bullets whizzing over his head, Frikkie was fit to be tied. When all the yelling was through, and the cursing played out, they finally got down to some serious translation. Short answer; they couldn’t just sit there and do
nothing—they had to kill something! Things got worse on the next day and the day after.

“They couldn’t stop talking, even when we were closing in on a fine kudu they were jabbering away! I sent the crazy bastards home. I lost money on that hunt, but at least I was alive at the end of it,” he said smirking.

Brunch was finished, and the day was young. With the blesbok now butchered and put away, Frikkie was anxious to get going on another animal. This was the gemsbok, although some people refer to it as an Oryx.

“So when do Esak and Alfred get a day off, Frikkie?” I asked.

“They don’t. The rule is simple. When there are hunters in camp, they work. Since you are here for 12 days, they will work 12 straight days in a row. I cannot run this business without them. But, when there is a lull between clients, then they get those days off. But never more than say two or three. There is always a lot of work to be done on safari.”

Esak and Alfred certainly have it tough, but as I mentioned in a previous article they are a lot better off than their peers. One thing I did before I left the States was inquire as to whether or not either man had children. Alfred didn’t, but Esak has a three-year-old girl. Now most guys who go on safari think they are being generous by leaving some of their clothing and gear behind as gifts to the skinners, trackers, camp cooks etc. (Esak was wearing a cap that said Lexus). And although this is very appreciated, what is really needed are items for children. I asked my two daughters to go through their closets and toy chests and pull out every trinket and piece of clothing that either didn’t fit, or they got tired of playing with. By the time I left Minnesota, I had one full suitcase of clothing, including a child’s winter coat and toys for Esak’s little girl (who, by the way, I only got to see twice and never discovered her name). Also in the mix I brought small bags of ground coffee (without chicory), aspirin, footwear, pens and paper. Neither of Frikkie’s employees could speak English, but we were informed that they were very grateful for the gifts we brought.
The four of us headed back out in the Toyota in search of gemsbok; Oryx gazella. This very large antelope has a most striking appearance, specifically its long spear-like horns. These ringed horns can grow in excess of 30 inches and make for formidable weapons. Bulls can measure about 47 inches at the shoulder, and can easily weigh over 500 pounds. These animals feed mostly on leaves, grasses and herbs. If faced with drought-like conditions they will dig for succulents such as tsama melons. They have black and white facial markings, black side stripes on their flanks and a long black tail. Both bulls and cows have horns, the males being somewhat shorter and thicker.

We drove around for about 45 minutes. Three of us were using binoculars, but Esak used the naked eye. Perhaps this is a good spot to mention just a few words about optics. We all know the great brands, and the great prices they command. I've used them and yes, there is a difference. But in my situation, where the animals were in the 100–250 yard range, a pair of $125 binoculars worked out just fine. The only time I can honestly say they failed was at dusk. The higher end models gathered the last few bits of light and made seeing game possible, whereas my binoculars were like looking into a black hole.

Esak spotted a small herd of gemsbok, and made this “weesh, weesh, weesh” sound and started waving his hands, in order for us to notice.

“There’s a really nice bull in there, Cholly. See him? He is on the far left.”

Using the binoculars, I got a really good look at this fellow. Frikkie switched off the ignition and the four of us slowly made our way towards them. Esak, unflappable, was in the lead. He impressed the heck out of me now, but in a few days’ time he would blow me away with his talents. He was on the spoor and we began winding our way around bushes, shrubs and small trees. There are some unsettling aspects to walking about the sands of South Africa. One of the things that really bothered me was the number of holes and burrows we encountered. At any moment I figured some ornery honey badger, or some other desert devil that I couldn’t even hazard a guess at, would just come screaming out of one of those holes and make a bee-line for me. Though nothing happened, I
never let myself linger in front of one of these openings for more than a few seconds.

Esak started waving his hand again, but there were no “weesh, weesh, weesh” sounds this time. I duck-squatted my way towards him and he pointed out the bull for me. This would be a free-hand shot of about 100 yards or so. The wind was right and my snap practicing of the Valmet paid off as the sight picture was crystal clear. On the crease of the left shoulder I placed the crosshairs and squeezed. The majestic bull dropped in his tracks, tried to get up, and then fell down again: stone cold dead.

We took our photos and between the four of us we got him into the truck. This “One-Shot Bwana” moniker might actually come true, I thought. I can only hope that with two animals left on my list I would continue this lucky streak.
I had taken the best bull Frikkie had to offer, and Bob wanted an Oryx as well. Time to go to Madiakgama and pay our respects to Jimmy and Linda. But it was late in the day and you don’t just “drop in” on these people. With his cell phone Frikkie made the call and the arrangements were set for early the next morning.

Bob and I kicked back in the beautiful lounge area. The scotch, Famous Grouse, was sliding down pretty effortlessly. We both marveled at how well things were turning out for us. The Cape buffalo was very unfortunate, but as Bob pointed out, hunting is not a controlled laboratory experiment; things go wrong and in our case that’s just what happened.

Frikkie made a grand entrance with four long racks of pork ribs. It was going to be another night of carnivore heaven. With the wood fire crackling, and the oil for the Frikkie fries heating up, we were in for another grand meal. This time, a leaf salad was part of the menu and it was so nice to finally have some greens again. Every night, Little Frikkie would dine with us. He was going to be a PH like his dad. Although only three years old, his grasp of Afrikaans was pretty impressive; however, his English was almost nonexistent. In preparation for his career as a professional hunter he already had quite an array of toy guns.

“I took my first animal at age five,” Frikkie told us. “I want Little Frikkie to get something at age four-and-a-half.”

Based on what Bob and I saw, we have no doubt that he will top his father’s childhood record. As it was, Little Frikkie would ride with us at every opportunity, especially when we brought the game animals in. He had appeared fearless when he posed with me next to the eland.

As the ribs came off the grill, Frikkie brought out two bottles of barbecue sauce. I only mention this because they had the weirdest of product names. One was called “Gorilla Brains” and the other was “Monkey Glands.” Bob and I tried both, and although they were okay, neither had the “punch” that we both expected.

The meal was winding down, the cognac was poured, and the cigars lit. A great hunt in the veldt for all parties concerned. Bob and I
were just about to say good night to our PH when the entire place was plunged into darkness.

“Those [expletive] incompetents!” railed Frikkie. “God knows when the power will come back on.”

Little did we know how profound and prophetic that statement would be. As the new black government has taken over the reins of power in South Africa, they are trying to fill positions that were formerly held by whites only. One of the areas that needed beefing up was the electric company. So a lot of whites were fired, and quite simply, a lot of blacks were hired. Problem is, the on-the-job training they received was pretty lackluster. As a consequence, power outages can go on for hours, sometimes days!

Frikkie returned with candles, and Bob and I finished our Martel cognacs and Monte Cristo cigars in the flickering light. The darkness also brought out those miserable cats again. We did our best with a BB gun, but firing into the dark was probably going to break a window. We called it quits a little early that night, and with our small flashlights made our way to the huts. There would be no hot shower before bed this evening. I got into my sleeping attire but I could feel the dirt and grime. “Oh well, all part of the adventure,” I thought.

Monday morning I awoke without Frikkie’s assistance, and gazed out the window. Still total darkness. The power had not been restored yet. I decided to risk it, and took a really fast shower, if for no other reason to get the trail dust off. The water was tepid, but I got through it. With flashlight in hand, I made my way over to the dining hall. Frikkie had set up a propane tank with a top-mounted circular heating element.

“Hot coffee or tea is all we can hope for this morning. Still no power, and I don’t have the means to cook a proper breakfast,” Frikkie informed me.

I sipped some scalding hot tea, and putting those “dog biscuits” on the right side of my mouth, chomped down, so as to get some sort of organic matter into my system. Bob joined us a few minutes later and he sipped some instant coffee. All in all it was one of the more unpleasant mornings.
We packed up the newer Land Cruiser, and with Esak in tow we headed out for Madiakgama. I rode in the cab with Frikkie, and Bob sat on the bed of the truck with Esak. There was little for them to talk about, but even if Esak could speak English, it wouldn’t have mattered as the road noise was deafening.

“Got to get some diesel,” said Frikkie, and he pulled off into a service station. Almost all stores in South Africa that sell fuel offer “full service only” for their customers. A gas jockey comes out, pumps your fuel, washes your windshield and even checks under the hood. I hadn’t seen this sort of thing since the early 1970s. But I suppose at $6 a gallon it is the least they can do! But those dog biscuits were not going to hold me for very long, so I left the truck and went into the little store to buy something. There wasn’t much available, but on the counter I saw little bags of dried fruit. I purchased two, and headed back to the vehicle. Off we went for another visit to Jimmy and Linda’s.

“Care for some dried fruit, Frikkie?” I asked my PH.

“Dried fruit? What the hell are you talking about, that’s biltong!”

Sure enough, it was biltong (jerky). It looked like dried fruit to me. I’d never had it before, so what the heck, I gave it a try. I’m not going to say that it was great, and I won’t say it was inedible; but it was very chewy and far too fatty for my tastes. But to quote from a passage by Victor Hugo; “an empty stomach has no nose.”

The ride to Madiakgama, as always, was a memorable one. This time, and for the only time in my entire stay, I was starting to get carsick from the bouncing we were doing. After what seemed an eternity we made it to the front gate, and I started to exit the truck.

“What the hell are you doing, Cholly?” Frikkie asked me.

“I’m opening the gate so Bob and Esak don’t have to climb out of the back of the bed.”

“Sit down,’ he said to me rather reproachfully. “When Esak is riding with us, he opens the gate.”
Now I didn’t want to start in with my PH about etiquette, so I said rather innocently that I would respect any time-honored traditions and let it go at that. However, the more I thought about it, the more I began to realize that if I had opened the gate, Esak would have “lost face.” Simply put, it is his job to do this. It would have been just as insulting if I had told him that I prefer to skin and gut my own animals.

Eventually we wound our way to the main house. “Jock,” the bull terrier, and his pals were there to greet us. As he approached me, he rolled onto his back and I began to give him a tummy rub. His little stub of a tail was wiggling back and forth like a pendulum on steroids.

“He likes you Cholly,” said Linda, who, with a cigarette dangling from her mouth, had come out of the main house upon hearing the Land Cruiser.
“Linda, I love this dog. He’s so nice and gentle. I’d like to bring him back to the States with me.”

“You can have him, but it will cost you about four thousand dollars for the permits to get him out of here.”

“I don’t love him that much. But I still think he is adorable.”

“Let me tell you something. Jock is one tough s.o.b. About two months ago he grabbed a black mamba right behind the head. He bit it and shook it for about fifteen minutes. No amount of yelling on my part could break his grip. Eventually it died. The snake was about 10 feet long.”

So much for my idea of a gentle animal!

Linda had her blacks pack the truck up with ears of corn and bales of alfalfa. We were going out quite a distance to one of their better water holes. This particular spot attracted just about every kind of animal they had there, except for the rhino, who, for reasons known only to them, had staked out a different spot to quench their thirst.

On and on Linda drove. I am, as I write this, still in awe of the animals we saw along the way. But of the many that scattered at our approach, the family of giraffes seems to stick out for some reason. They are so massive, and much like an ostrich, they ran a wee bit, hid behind some flora for cover, and then gazed down at us from the treetops.
This particular water hole was fed by a series of underground pipes. Because of the drought they could only keep about six water holes going on 40,000 acres. This meant some stiff competition, and a certain pecking order as to who could drink first. We would observe some strange drinking habits, but I don’t want to get ahead of myself.

As Linda eased her Land Cruiser near the water hole, about 20 animals, which had been loitering about, scattered. However, they didn’t run off that far; perhaps about a hundred yards or so. As the blacks scattered alfalfa and corn, Bob, Frikkie, and I scurried up a primitive wooden ladder and entered a “tree house” of a hunting blind. How the ladder held Frikkie I’ll never know. There were three lawn chairs inside and we settled down for what very well could be an all day siege, waiting for the many animals to return. We made sure the walkie-talkie was in working order, since we were a long way from the main house. The noise and distraction Linda and her workers made covered any sounds the three of us produced setting ourselves up. With a wave of her hand, Linda drove off, and now we began Bob’s hunt for an Oryx.
I had made a promise to Bob that since I could never pay him back for his generosity, I would keep a journal, and when we returned, I would compile our adventure just for the two of us. As a consequence, I had already filled over 50 pages with notes and observations. I carried five pens and two notebooks in my backpack. Even the smallest of details I recorded.

Frikkie, like he was hitchhiking, made a pointing gesture with his thumb in my direction. “So what’s up with Cholly?” he said to Bob. “I’ve never seen anyone write so much. I’ll bet he got beat up a lot in school.”

Little did I know that when I returned to the States, I would be asked to chronicle this entire safari for the world to see, via the website of Blue Book Publications, Inc. I smiled at Frikkie, but continued to put pen to paper.

In about 30 minutes the creatures of Madiakgama began to slink out of the brush. The wart hogs, “tough little bastards,” as Frikkie described them, came in first for a drink of cool water. According to our PH, when their head is down and they are slurping away, that is the best time to drop one. The sounds made by lapping up the water drown out their auditory senses, so it is at that moment, especially with a bow, that you take your shot.

Suddenly there appeared the eland. Now the eland is a real slob when it comes to water holes. Where everyone else observes a sense of decorum and etiquette by standing in the dirt, and then dipping their heads to drink; the eland is like an uncouth dinner guest. They actually stand with all four hooves in the water, and drink until they feel satiated. At 1,500 pounds, there’s a lot of drinking to do. Take the big five out of the equation, and the eland is the king of the water hole. After they had their fill, they sauntered over to the corncobs and now the gemsbok, wildebeest and then impala, slowly approached for their turns.
“Look at that gemsbok, Frikkie,” I whispered, slowly pointing to one who was nearing his way closer to drink, “The perfect birth defect.”

“He will live a long life if he can avoid the lions and leopards. No one will ever want him for a trophy.”

This Oryx may have had an inferiority complex like Rudolf the Red–Nosed Reindeer, but he didn’t know how lucky he was. Although he had one very long nicely pointed horn; the other one was bent way backwards, and seemed to almost follow the curvature of a half moon. A non–trophy for any serious hunter, but almost guaranteed longevity for the freak.
We were about an hour and a half into this hunt when a very nice gemsbok sauntered its way in. Frikkie immediately glassed him and whispered to Bob that he was the nicest in the lot. So Bob put down his Nelson DeMille novel, and slowly got his act together for a shot. There was so much smacking between the corn cobs, alfalfa and water slurping that I could hear it up in the blind. It was going to be about a forty-yard shot however, as this bull refused to come over to the far side of the hole where the corn and alfalfa were. He stared into the blind and took quick short sips. He didn’t like something, but he wasn’t sure what it was. The animal finally turned away from us, and this is when Frikkie gave the “do it” nod to Bob.

Bob drew back, put his pin on him and released. This old bull didn’t get old by being careless. He “jumped” the arrow, and it caught him behind the shoulders and high towards the spinal column. As he snorted and jumped, the entire entourage went scurrying. As our bull ran off, he shed the arrow, and with his pals, they made their
way into the scrub brush. A non-lethal shot for sure. But blood was drawn, so Bob “bought it” no matter what happened next.

“He’ll come back,” said Frikkie. “Hunger and thirst are very motivating forces. But we will have to wait a long time.”

And wait, we did. While some of the animals drifted back, the herd of gemsbok was nowhere to be seen. Hours passed, and I had not had any solid food in over half a day. The three of us were making so many gastric rumbling sounds, that if it weren’t for the feeding noises, nothing would have ever come back.

“There they come,” said Frikkie, as the gemsbok made a return visit. “Let’s see if we can find the one you hit. He should have a trickle of blood on the left side.”

One by one they came in towards the blind, and cautiously began drinking or eating. But the big bull was nowhere to be seen. Then we saw movement about 60 yards out behind some bushes and sure enough, there he was; a small stream of blood on the left side. From where he was, he could survey the entire situation. You could almost hear the mental thoughts of the three of us as we were trying to coax him in to take a drink. He moved a little bit toward us, and then to our astonishment, plunked himself down on the ground, and just lay there. We felt like the Three Stooges.

It was getting toward the hottest part of the day and the corn and alfalfa weren’t going to last much longer. But that gemsbok refused to move. He was watching the proceedings very carefully; looking for just one wrong move, just one little detail out of place. The thought of his pals eating and drinking to their hearts’ content must have been torture, but still the bull refused to move. Frikkie may swear like a savage, but he has the patience of a saint when it comes to hunting.

“He’ll come in, Bop. It’s too great a temptation for him to just lie there,” he whispered.

Another fifteen minutes passed and then suddenly our bull got to his feet. His senses on overdrive he slowly came towards the water hole. Bob had his bow ready and Frikkie was going to squeeze his
arm for the moment to release. I had the camcorder going and from my comfortable position had everything in the view finder.

Our PH gave the signal and the arrow went screaming on its way. This time the old bull’s reflexes were not fast enough. The arrow went in very deep just over the shoulder. He was off and running, as was everything else, but he was doomed.

The walkie-talkies went into action and Linda, along with her trackers and Esak, were headed for the blind to pick us up. About ten minutes passed before the Land Cruiser showed up. As we put our gear into the truck the three trackers were off in pursuit of Bob’s Oryx.

If ever I was an escaped convict, there’s no way in the world I would want Esak and his two pals after me. I don’t care how fast you can go, or how clever you are, they are going to find you. An arrow
wound is unlike a bullet hole. There isn’t that much to go on sometimes, and our bull had run off with the herd. How these guys could pick up who was who, and follow it in this maze of hoof prints, is a sight to behold. I’ll never know what the conversation was between this trio of trackers. Perhaps there was a disagreement; perhaps there was some other minor detail. But whatever it was, they were relentless. In about 20 minutes they had found the Oryx. He had gone off the trail and into the bush and settled down under a shrub where it expired. Bob’s arrow was dead on this time, right through the heart and lungs. By the time it had decided to lie down it was leaving quite a blood trail. I’m sure that the last few yards of tracking Esak could have done blindfolded.

Photos were taken, and the gemsbok loaded up onto the truck bed. All of us rode back to the main house. Esak had to skin and gut, while Frikkie, Bob and I had lunch with Jimmy and Linda. These folks sure know how to put on a spread. There were three different kinds of meats, plus fruits and coffee (real coffee, not instant) and mango juice. After a little over 15 hours of hunger pangs, the three of us were eating like condemned criminals. Oh, and by the way, there’s no such thing as a non-smoking area at most of these places.

Jimmy however, was a bit upset this fine day.

“Someone came in last night and stole ten head of our cattle. I found the cut fence and the tracks leading out,” Jimmy said with a sigh of despair.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Jimmy! You’ve got cattle rustler’s way out here?” I asked incredulously.

“Oh sure,” he replied. “It happens more often than you think.”

“Well, since you have the best trackers in the world, why don’t you just track these guys down?” I persisted.

“It’s not that simple. We have to notify the authorities and they conduct the investigation. But by the time they get here, the animals are loaded up onto lorries and they are miles away.”
Frikkie, never one to mince words, interrupted Jimmy’s next sentence.

“In the old days we hunted the bastards down and then we shot them,” he said, munching on a sausage. “Things have gone to [expletive] in South Africa!”

It was getting on mid–afternoon. We were stuffed, Esak had finished his processing of the gemsbok and had been fed, so there was nothing left to do but head home. The ride out of Madiakgama was never easy, but somehow this time it didn’t seem quite so bad. In about an hour we were back at Frikkie’s main camp.

Bob and I had a nice intermezzo before dinner. Kicking back in the lawn chairs, smoking a few cigars and enjoying some bourbon, we got down to dredging up some of the more pleasant memories we have shared these past three decades. It seemed like we were always laughing, and I can only wonder what the hired hands must have been thinking.

Frikkie came out of the main house and approached us. He had a strange look on his face.

“I hope you guys like Africa, because you just may be here longer than you think,” Frikkie said matter–of–factly.

“What in the world are you talking about?” Bob asked.

“Natasha just got it off the radio. South African Air went on strike. There are no flights coming in or going out. Thousands of people are stranded at the airport. It seems like they do this every other year. This time, it is the flight attendants who walked out. But don’t worry, they usually settle in a few days.”

We had five glorious days left on our safari before we headed for Johannesburg and home. Surely everything would be worked out by then. Bob poured us both another bourbon. Life in the veldt was getting better every day.

“So Frikkie, what’s on the grill tonight?” he asked.
Coming Next Month: Part VI– Impala, Wildebeest and the Long Journey Home