



Hunting Buffalo in the Luangwa Valley, Zambia

By **Glaeser Conradie**

This hunt was a dream come true, not only for my clients, but also for me. As a former field guide in the Luambe National Park in the Luangwa Valley, Zambia, this last frontier of Africa immediately came to mind when John McLaurin and Patrick Henry mentioned to me in 2006 that they would like to hunt buffalo in 2007. The Luangwa Valley is a land of unspoiled beauty and plentiful wildlife.

During my two year contract working in the Valley, I was overwhelmed with its wildlife and remoteness. Whilst guiding clients on photographic safaris in this paradise, I did not imagine that in a few short years I would hunt one of Africa's most dangerous and formidable beasts in the same area.

After several discussions with a local professional hunter, concession owner and friend from my time in the Valley, I structured a two-on-one buffalo hunting safari for August 2007. After a few years of hunting together, John, Patrick and I had become close friends. The mission of this safari was simply to create an unforgettable hunting experience that would meet my friends' wildest expectations.

It was dark and cold, a typical rainy winter morning in August as only Cape Town could produce. As I was boarding the plane for Johannesburg, I was struck by the thought that within a few short hours I would be in one of Africa's best kept secrets, the Luangwa Valley.

By pre-arrangement I met John and PT at the Oliver Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg. We caught a flight to Lusaka, the capitol of Zambia. From Lusaka we flew to Mfuwe, the only airport in the Luangwa Valley. Upon our arrival, at around 4:00 PM on a slightly humid 32 degree Celsius afternoon, we first caught sight of the mystic Luangwa River, slowly making its way through

Glaeser Conradie

Web: www.africanecho.co.za • E-mail: glaeser@adept.co.za • Cell: +27 (83) 456 1934



green African forests . Carried on the breeze was a lush, still familiar smell that had been engraved in my soul five years ago, when I last set foot in the Valley.

At the airport we where met by the local guide and professional hunter and three members of the camp staff. Anxious to get into the bush, it didn't take us long to load our luggage on the Landcruiser and be on our way. Our lighthearted conversations and jokes melted away into quiet appreciation as the lush African bush and the typical African villages around us worked their magic. I think that we all had a growing awareness of the exciting hunt that was about to begin.

Roughly an hour and a half later we arrived at our well equipped bush camp on the eastern banks of the Luangwa River. The camp is surrounded by cathedral like arches created by Mopane, African Ebony, Tamarind, Natal Mahogany and gigantic Figs. This particular hunting block in the Game Management Area is situated directly across the river from the famous South Luangwa National Park and directly south of the Nsefu National Park.

Our first night were filled with the sounds of Africa's three tenors, the staccato huh-huh sounds of hippo's as they left the water, the echoing laughter of spotted hyena and roar of lions that stunned the night with a primal awareness. What a trio they make! During the course of the night I could hear PT auditioning for a spot in the choir every now and again.

Our first early morning hunt brought a few surprises. Only three minutes out of camp we had to slow down for a group of elephant cows with their calves, which were feeding alongside the road. We watched them for a while as they tested the air with their flexible trunks to get our scent. Elephants' vision is not that acute, so they rely mainly on scent to analyze whatever crosses their path. This was a highlight for PT, as it was his first time seeing elephants in the wild.

Continuing on our way, we soon spotted two old buffalo bulls, known locally as "dagga boys," minding their business about 150 meters from the road. Buffalo were our main focus on this hunt, so we stopped and observed them for a while. Since this was only the first morning and we still had a few days to see what the



bush had to offer, we eventually carried on, already impressed by what we had seen.

About 15 minutes later we spotted a female Leopard walking across an open area on the forest floor. Seeing a Leopard in the early morning in this beautiful riverine forest has to be one of life's great pleasures.

Shortly after the leopard we spotted a 150-strong Buffalo herd crossing an open plain about 400 meters ahead of us. That was quite an impressive sight and it got more impressive as we approached them on foot. The wind was favoring us and we managed to get within about 70 meters of the herd. They were constantly testing the air, but remained unaware of our presence. We took our time scanning them for an outstanding trophy. The problem with such a big herd is that once spotted, an individual animal can easily disappear into the group, not to be seen again. After a good hour we decided to leave them and continue farther down the river.

When we returned to our Landcruiser, PT informed us that a pride of Lions had walked by, not too far from the vehicle. And, he had the photos to prove it. We followed the lions for a few minutes and easily caught up with them. We just sat there, amazed by what was offered to us by Mother Africa. We couldn't ask for a better start to our safari.

John was very keen on getting a Puku, as it was one of the few animals that he hadn't yet hunted. Although Puku are not common in the Southern African countries, they're plentiful in the Luangwa Valley. They seem to be lazy animals, not very interested in running away. A half an hour later, we spotted a good trophy. After a short stalk, John was on the sticks with a 7x64mm rifle and, as usual, there was nothing wrong with his shot placement. We took quite a few photos of his trophy and headed back to camp. Everybody was hungry and it was getting hot. It seems that 11:00 AM would be, temperature wise, the cutoff time for our morning excursions.

We enjoyed a well prepared lunch, had a nap, and around 3:30 PM again headed out in the Landcruiser. Close to where we had spotted the big buffalo herd in the



morning we saw two really old dagga boys. With very impressive bosses, they were watching us from beneath the shade of a Sausage Tree. Looking at them through my binoculars, it occurred to me that these guys didn't get this old by being stupid. If we decided to take one of them, we would have our work cut out for us. PT slowly turned to us and indicated that he wanted one.

So off we went, PT carrying a .458 Winchester Magnum rifle loaded with 500 grain solids. For backup we carried a .470 Nitro Express double. It became obvious that these old timers were indeed clever, as they gave us the slip. As the

light was fading quickly and we had a week left, we decided to call it a day. What a day it had been! Watching the sun set over the Luangwa Valley after an exciting day in the bush, complimented by a Mopany camp fire and with an ice cold Mozi beer in hand, was one of the highlights of my life. I think that we all felt the same way.

Getting up at 5:00 AM, enjoying a well-prepared breakfast at 5:30 and leaving camp at 6:00, followed by an afternoon session starting at 3:30 PM quickly became our daily routine. On the second morning we spotted a herd of roughly 300 buffalo. After stalking them for about three hours and setting up four times to try for a clear shot, we got PT into a good position the fifth time. An old bull with extremely good bosses was standing broadside at about 70 meters, watching us while chewing some grass. PT was ready and pulled the trigger. At the shot, the bull took off with the rest of the herd.

Knowing that PT's shot was good, we followed, ready for anything that might come our way. Following a wounded buffalo with all the possible scenarios in mind is truly an adrenaline filled occasion. We found him 80 meters farther along, lying on his side, but not yet dead. PT had placed his first shot well, but the buffalo lived up to its reputation as one of Africa's toughest animals. PT gave it a heart shot and that was followed by a death bellow. This was PT's first dangerous game hunt and a great moment for all of us. We took our time taking photos from all possible angles. In anybody's hunting career a moment like this is one of the greatest!



We spent the afternoon baiting for crocodiles not too far from camp. We spotted a few crocs swimming closer, but none fed. I saw a few African Skimmers flying low over us. When feeding they fly just above the surface of the water, skimming for food with their lower beaks. One off Africa's many interesting birds.

The next afternoon, a bit farther away from the river, we experienced another highlight of our safari. While stalking a herd of about 250 buffalo in the late afternoon we were confronted with a once in a lifetime situation. We were slowly walking up to the herd through Mopany woodland. As it was late August, the forest floor was covered with dry Mopany leaves and the crushing sound that accompanied each step slowed us considerably. A strange and eerie stillness curtained the forest around us and we could sense that something was wrong.

Although there was a very slight breeze in the air, it was in our favor. Still, the Buffalo were extremely restless and alert. They were constantly staring to our right.

After carefully examining the bush to our right, one of the trackers indicated to me that we were not the only hunting party around. A pride of nine lions, consisting of females and a few younger males, also had their eyes on the buffalo. This is something that will stay with us for the rest of our lives. It would be difficult to come closer to a primal African hunting experience.

The next morning we drove north-east in the direction of the Nsefu National Park. We made our way through a dense riverine forest. The trackers had to jump off the Landcruiser several times to open up roads for the vehicle. This is prime Chobe bushbuck habitat and there was elephant and buffalo sign all over the place. We spotted a very old dagga boy on our right, about 50 meters from the vehicle. Although he had very impressive bosses, John was looking for a 40 inch buffalo so we didn't pay too much attention to him. Then Mother Nature taught us another lesson; Never lose respect or casually disregard a member of the dangerous game family. We heard a shuffle of branches and we turned our heads back to the old timer just in time to see him charge. Everybody started



shouting, trying to scare him off. Luckily for us, it worked. He stopped, not too far from the vehicle, then grumpily returned to the thickets.

A little later we again had to stop so that the trackers could open the road for us. We got off the vehicle to stretch a bit. As we walked along the newly opened road, we spotted two big buffalo bulls straight ahead of us. One of them had a pair of really impressive horns of great width and with beautiful curls. I didn't have to say anything, because John was already on him. A perfectly placed heart shot followed and the buffalo didn't run more than 50 meters. No follow-up shots were necessary.

John, who grew up in Mississippi, was as comfortable with a rifle in his hand as a yuppie with a cell phone. The only problem was that the other buffalo bull did not want to leave his friend behind. We had to wait several minutes before it was safe to start taking photographs. As the two buffalo were the main priority of the safari, I must admit that I was a bit relieved that we had two good trophies in the bag and that the Luangwa Valley had lived up to its reputation in all respects.

We spent the afternoon hanging some hyena bait close to a dry lagoon about a half an hour from camp. We spotted several Livingstone eland, Thorneycroft giraffe, impala, puku, elephant and big herds of buffalo along the way. Yellow baboon and vervet monkeys are plentiful in the Luangwa Valley and nicely supplemented the already large variety of species we had seen. To top this, we spotted two leopards walking down a dry sideline of the Luangwa River through thick brush. This was simply amazing to see during daylight and two of them together is an added bonus. That night, unfortunately, we were notified that, for the time being, all hyena hunting had been canceled by the Zambian Wildlife Association.

The next day was a Sunday and it became crocodile day. This time we drove south, along the eastern bank of the river. The Landcruiser was loaded with chairs, bait and all other necessities necessary for crocodile hunting.

Not far from the spot we originally had in mind to put up the bait, we saw two monsters lying in the sun across the river. They were about 350 meters away



from us and we slowly and very quietly made our way to the river's edge. We got into position and now the crocodiles were roughly 150 meters away, straight across the river. After explaining exactly to John where he should hit the reptile--at the end of the "smile"--he prepared himself for the shot, choosing the 7x64mm Brennecke.

This must be a clinically placed shot, because if the spinal cord is not broken or the brain is not hit, the crocodile will surely go back into the water and then a waiting game will begin. Although John is a great shot, this was still a very small target at 150 meters. Just to make sure, we positioned PT with the .458 Winchester Magnum to take a follow-up shot, if needed. Both shots went off fractions of a second apart and the big croc disappeared with a lot of commotion into the water. A moment of silence followed, as we slowly accepted the fact that most of our Sunday would be spent at the river.

After negotiating a price with the local fishermen, we rented one of their dugouts to go and look for the crocodile. There was a possibility that he might be dead not too far from the opposite side of the river. One of the trackers and I spent a good half an hour probing for him with a bamboo stick. We had no luck and eventually made our way back to the eastern bank of the river.

Surprisingly, it wasn't more than about twenty minutes before the other crocodiles began resuming their places in the sun on the opposite bank. I remember hunting crocodile in the Revuma Valley, where the river forms the border between Mozambique and Tanzania. After a shot the crocodiles would disappear for hours and even the hippo would keep a very low profile for quite a while. That wasn't the case here. The hippos just turned their heads and kept on "chatting" after the shots.

We decided to stay in our position, sitting on plastic garden chairs, and wait for our big boy to again show himself. One of the original monsters resumed his position, so then we were just waiting for number two. All available scopes and binoculars were focused on the opposite bank of the river. This would be, literally and figuratively, a long shot.



I took a long walk northwards along the riverbank to see if the crocodile had decided to sunbathe a bit farther upstream. The only river inhabitants I saw were hippos. After rejoining the rest of the hunting party, the local guide and I glassed downstream. I spotted a big crocodile slowly making his way towards the bank on the opposite side. This crocodile was a good 180 meters away from us. After pointing him out to the guide, we both saw the pink mixture of blood and water blowing out of his nostrils. This was our croc!

We quickly got everybody into position again and this time we decided that all of us should take a shot. A wounded crocodile doesn't give away follow-up shots for free and we didn't want to waste this opportunity.

The crocodile didn't move after the salvo of shots were fired so we had to assume that it was now dead. Two trackers and I got into a dugout and started crossing the river, armed with a rope and the 7x64mm rifle. PT immediately started taking photos and jokingly reassured me of their support in his typical humorous way. A funny guy and good friend. I remember looking back as we paddled across the river and seeing PT taking photos and John, about 50 meters away and wearing his sunglasses, with a slightly concerned look added to his usually calm expression.

I must admit that the hippo and croc filled water took away the romantic idea of a boat trip down the river. The crocodile remained motionless as we approached

it. After a very careful examination we confirmed that he was indeed stone dead. We tied a rope around his neck and proceeded to try to tow him back across the river with the dugout. This didn't work. Although floating, the nearly 800kg, 13 foot long croc was too heavy for a dugout to pull. We realized that the only way across was to pull him ourselves. The water was only about three feet deep in this part of the river. Technically, this was possible, but the technical problem of negotiating the river was the least of my worries. Anyway, rifle loaded and in hand we started our journey. In the event, we arrived back at our hunting party without any problems and several photos were taken. This had been a good day so far!



On the way back through thick riverine forest PT shot a big male yellow baboon. We saw a big Chobe bushbuck, but he was already running when we spotted him. We spent the evening beside the campfire reliving the day's adventure and laughing more comfortably about all the "not so good" scenarios.

The next day we took a four hour journey eastwards towards the escarpment. Entering Miombo forest, which consists mostly of Braxesticia trees, we were consistently climbing higher in altitude as we got closer to the escarpment. Our main focus was to get PT a Lightenstein hartebeest. We saw quite a few roan antelope on our way, but we had no luck with the Lightenstein hartebeest. We had a light lunch and a nap in the fly camp and then headed back to our main camp in the valley. That evening we were joined for supper by some Zambian Wildlife Officials. We enjoyed a nice meal and discussed Africa's future over a few cold ones.

The next day John's Cookson's Wildebeest was our priority. Our search for the wildebeest was interrupted when we spotted a big bull elephant a few hundred meters from the road. He had quite good tusks and we drove a bit closer to take a look. He was very impressive and we took some photos.

A few kilometers on down the road we saw John's wildebeest. He was an old loner and we immediately started a stalk. Wildebeest have a reputation of being quite tough animals, so we tried to get John as close as possible, but the open Mopany forest made a close approach difficult. John's a sniper, so we set up the sticks at about 150 meters. A well placed shot with the 7x64mm rifle followed and the Wildebeest didn't run far. We took photos and the surrounding Mopane

trees with a colorful floor of dry leaves made a beautiful background. On the way home John also shot a big male yellow baboon.

We spent the afternoon searching for Chobe Bushbuck. We saw several females and a few young males. A single good male made his appearance, but he gave us the slip. Although disappointed by not getting a bushbuck, we were grateful for what the Luangwa had already given us.



As we only had a seven day hunting permit, we spent our last day wandering around the curio shops in Mfuwe. Although rustic and primitive, the stores have a lot to offer and the items are very reasonably priced. At Tribal Textures we found colorful wall hangings, duvet covers, etc. fabricated by local artists. These made impressive presents to take home. We had a light meal at a riverside lodge and returned to our hunting camp for a relaxing afternoon. We had to get up early the next morning to leave for the airport, so we used the spare time to pack.

Our last sunset in the Luangwa Valley was quite nostalgic and we watched quietly as night fell and the moon rose. It was weird to think that tomorrow at this time we would all be in big cities somewhere, going our separate ways. I think that all of us tried to make time stand still, just for a while.

The next morning we packed the vehicle, said our goodbyes and headed for the airport. As we boarded the plane, I turned around to take one last look at the surrounding forest. I remember an eager American lady telling me, as the plane got airborne, about her experience the previous night on a game drive in the South Luangwa National Park, but my thoughts were far away. I noticed John and PT also quietly staring out the window and I knew that we had shared an unforgettable African hunting experience.

