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Hunting in the Tracks of Selous

By Phil Massaro

Vaughn Blom, the young, hard-working, diligent apprentice professional hunter who had laughed with us in the back of the cruiser for the past three days, became instantaneously serious.

“Phil, there’s your bull.”

The light-hearted atmosphere of the entire safari hardened almost immediately. There were eight of us, and this wasn’t our first stalk. This time, we knew we had all the necessary components to achieve our goal: the wind was right, the light was right and most importantly the elephant didn’t know we were there. The young man had seen him from several hundred yards off, and when we glassed him we knew he was the one.



Photo: Tom Martineau / TheRawSpirit.com

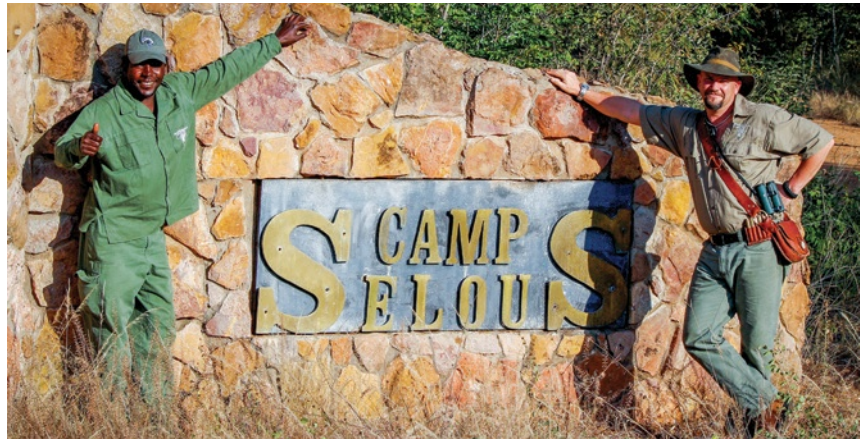


Professional hunter “Cowboy” Tim Schultz had a short, inaudible conference with his head tracker, M’Butha, which culminated in a smiling nod I quickly came to appreciate. M’Butha lit a cigarette, to check the wind, and grabbed the sticks with complete confidence. Rifles were loaded, safeties were checked and the parade was formed. My hunting partner Dave deMoulpiéd, who owns the company I’d booked through, deMoulpiéd & Son Outdoor Adventures, checked the video camera and leaned in close to my ear: “Buddy, this is the one. Make it happen.” PH Danie Wingard, who’d joined us from South Africa, produced a wide grin and gently nodded. The game was afoot.

I did my best to keep a loose but sure grip on the Heym Express .404 Jeffery bolt rifle. I knew I’d be fighting nerves and emotion, but if I did my part the beautiful rifle that printed tiny little groups would settle the affair. When M’Butha spread the sticks, and Tim eased my shoulder toward the bull, time stood still. It’s funny how that happens: In moments of extreme pressure, seconds seem like days.

Hunting History Itself

In the early 1870s, famous hunter Frederick Courtney Selous—then in his early 20s—obtained permission from King Lobengula



The author, right, and head tracker M’Butha stand in the exact spot where F.C. Selous once pursued elephants more than 100 years ago.

of the Matabele to hunt for ivory in the area west of the Gwaii River, northward toward Victoria Falls. His legendary adventures are well documented in his 1881 book, “A Hunter’s Wanderings in Africa,” which is a staple among any serious fan of Africana. He goes on at length to describe the hunts in the Dett (sic) Valley, and the place where he made camp is still there, along the east side of Hwange Park, not far from the railway. When Dave and I actually saw Selous Camp, the hair on my arms stood on end: To be hunting elephant in the same exact area that F.C. Selous did 140 years prior was

an honor beyond comprehension. The fact that the bull we were following was quite easily a descendant of the bulls that Selous hunted made for a sense of connection to the past that we safari junkies are always seeking out, and to do it with a caliber of such heritage as the .404 Jeffery made for a very special event. Upon booking with deMoulpiéd & Son, the excitement began to simmer as I did my research into the history of the Dete Valley, and when I put the whole puzzle together, I had trouble sleeping at night. When we got to see Selous Camp, and take a photo in front of the very

Photos: Author

tree that Selous describes in his book, it all came together.

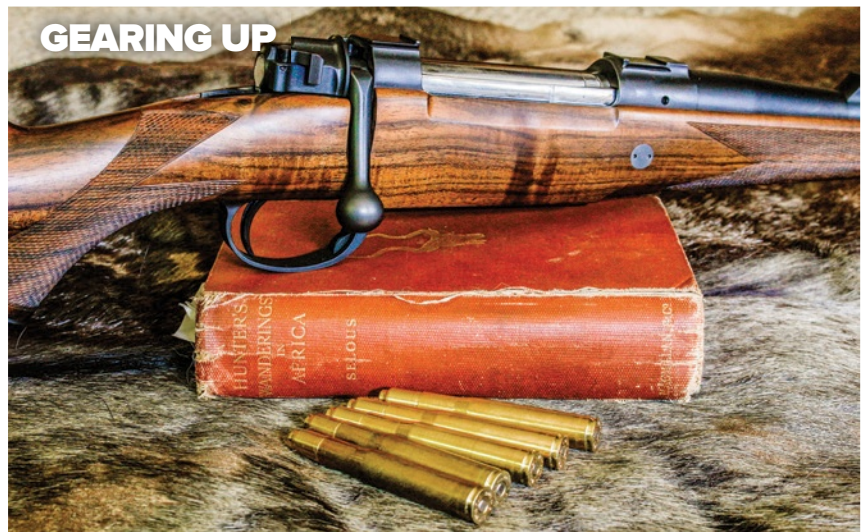
The Area

We were situated in a comfortable safari lodge, at a place called Dete Valley 3, and had access to hundreds of thousands of acres of land adjoining the easterly side of Hwange National Park. Consisting of low scrub and mopane forest, the hunting area is among the finest Zimbabwe has to offer. The land is teeming with elephants, almost to the point of overpopulation. Also there is lion, leopard, hippo, Cape buffalo and a wide variety of plains game—literally a hunter's paradise. The farms are mostly untended, and the wildlife inhabits the land. We saw dozens of elephants every day, moving back and forth between the Hwange Park and the surrounding private lands. The railroad forms the park boundary on the easterly side, and the area surrounding Kennedy Station is especially good for elephant.

Even though our safari took place in the first week of May (not an ideal time for hunting as there is still much green vegetation and available water), the buffalo sign alone would inspire me to return to this place. Lions roared every evening, and we were even chased by a pride of five lionesses while riding on the cruiser one evening—not something one soon forgets! The entire Dete Valley has a good feel to it: slight rolling hills rising up to the northeast, and enough brushy thickets to pique the curiosity of any buffalo or elephant hunter. There is a good network of sand roads and Tim Schultz and his crew know the region very well. I've been on multiple safaris, in different countries throughout southern and eastern Africa, and these folks put on a show as good as it gets. The sweet sounds of the red-eyed dove, singing in counterpoint with the go-away birds and rumbling of elephants, is enough to make any man forget the civilized world forever.

Friends Made

It was a rather short safari, the second leg of a two-country journey that Messrs. deMoulpiéd and Wingard and I had set upon, starting with a plains game hunt in the Waterberg District of South Africa. That hunt had resulted in a blue wildebeest and impala ram each for Dave and I, and a beautiful zebra for Dave. This little jaunt proved the accuracy and power of



The Heym Express bolt-action rifle is among the nicest rifles I've ever used. A proprietary, controlled-round-feed action, which is built specifically for the cartridge it will be chambered for, is affixed to a 24-inch Krupp barrel. The stock is along the lines of a vintage British rifle: fine cheekpiece, proper drop to use the express sights easily, and a fine fore-end that leads to a quick-pointing rifle. heimusa.com

Heym has the balance of this rifle nailed. It shoulders and swings like a fine double-barrel shotgun. There are 19mm bases machined into the top of the receiver, for use with Talley detachable rings, and that setup worked very well with the **Swarovski 1x-6x-24mm** scope; it returned to zero no matter how many times it was removed. The Heym trigger breaks crisply at 4 pounds, with no creep and little over-travel. swarovskioptik.com

The rifle liked all sorts of factory ammunition, from Nosler to Norma to Hornady. I decided to handload for this hunt, as I wanted to use **Woodleigh Hydrostatically Stabilized solids**, which are not loaded by the factory ammunition companies in .404 Jeffery. I cooked up a handload using 80 grains of Alliant Reloder 15 powder in Norma cases, sparked by a Federal GM215M primer, and it printed three shots just under an inch at the 100-yard mark. When it came time to perform on the elephant, I got full-body penetration on a heart shot. Considering that the bulls of the Hwange area are similar in size to the huge Botswana bulls, that's impressive performance. woodleighbullets.com.au

For a binocular, I settled on the **Swarovski 8x32EL**. Lighter than most in the EL series, it proved to be perfect for this area of Zimbabwe. I had no problem identifying the smaller antelope in the thick bush, yet watched the vultures circling thousands of feet above the ground. It wasn't cumbersome to carry, and was rock solid when I needed it.





the Heym .404 Jeffery; both of my animals were taken at more than 150 yards, and both fell quickly to a single shot each.

I was shooting the Heym rather well when we arrived in Bulawayo, and after clearing Zimbabwe customs and taking a three-hour ride to camp, I knew the Swarovski scope had to be removed, as elephant hunting is best done with an iron-sighted rifle. The fine express sights on the Heym Express hit where I pointed them, and as long as I did my part, things should go well.

Cowboy Tim's crew consisted of two apprentice PHs, head tracker M'Butha

and second tracker Sylvester. Danie Wingard was along as a helping hand, and Dave traded his .416 Rigby that he used so well in South Africa for a video camera. Eight merry fools sauntered off into the bush to track elephant, where the trials and tribulations of blown stalks, swirling winds and hard work made for lasting friendships.

Those moments that surround the actual kill shot, the cold beer, hot sun, good meals and never-ending campfire talk—those are the things that define a safari to me. Time spent with a crew of strangers that shortly become kindred spirits—that, to me, is what becomes the

precious memory, not a few inches of horn either way or five pounds of ivory, up or down. Being chased by lions and sidestepping unseen, but not unheard, snakes of any species—those experiences make for an unbreakable and unforgettable bond. The gentle smile on M'Butha's face when I'd offer him a cigarette, the wide grin Sylvester would get when I'd do my best to crack a joke in N'debele, and the quick wit of Thulani, the other apprentice PH, made for a relationship between hunters whose cultures are a world apart. Somehow, in Africa, you can find a common language, irrespective of skin color or native country.

HOUSTON SAFARI CLUB TAKES ON HBO'S 'REAL SPORTS'

HBO's "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel" aired a report Nov. 24, 2015, that focused on dwindling numbers of the African elephant. The episode focused needed attention on poaching as a primary cause of the animal's decline, but in doing so also linked regulated hunting with poaching, confusing viewers who otherwise are ignorant of the issues.

In response, Houston Safari Club (HSC) pointed to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which on Sept. 28, 2015, published a report indicating African elephant numbers decreased from approximately 550,000 to 470,000 from 2006-2013, primarily as a result of "increased ivory poaching pressure," according to HSC. "Habitat loss and fragmentation due to landscape-level land use changes also pose significant immediate long-term challenges to elephant conservation," said the group.

HSC also took issue with a reference in the episode to an "HBO Real Sports"/Marist poll, and responded as follows:

Poll Statement: "A majority of Americans, 56 percent, oppose hunting animals for sport; most Americans, 86 percent, consider big-game hunting to be especially distasteful;

65 percent of hunters disapprove of big-game hunting." HSC Response: "Of the 1,095 adults surveyed, only 11 percent were actually hunters or had hunted within the past two years."

Poll Statement: "Seventy-five percent of gun owners disapprove of big-game hunting." HSC Response: "The survey question was posed as follows: 'What about big game hunting, do you think hunting big game such as lions and elephants for sport is wrong and should be prohibited by law, is something you personally disapprove of but don't feel it should be illegal, or it is acceptable to hunt big game for sport?'"

"The '65 percent' was derived by combining responses from two separate questions: 'Wrong, should be prohibited by law (34 percent)' and 'Disapprove but don't think it should be illegal (31 percent).' To classify and represent big-game hunting by two species (lion; elephant) is not an accurate representation of the category. Also, not all gun owners participate in hunting. HSC adamantly objects to any inferred connection of regulated, ethical hunting with poaching."

J. Scott Olmsted, Editor in Chief

the brakes and pointed to the middle of a freshly cut cornfield, as flat and open as a soccer field.

“There’s a big one,” he deadpanned.

He wasn’t kidding. There, 400 yards before me, was one of the largest turkeys I’ve ever seen. I could see his thick beard easily with my naked eye.

Like a fire drill we dove into the bar ditch and surveyed the situation. Heath also had attended tail-fanning school, and so he broke it out. He gave some loud cutts to get the giant’s attention, and the ruse worked. The behemoth began walking toward us. My Eastern turkey was in the bag ... until I missed.

Folks, when I miss, I miss big. I am embarrassed to say that I missed a large turkey with a large-gauge shotgun. I’m not sure how, but I’m sure I did. And it gets worse. As the turkey flew off, I missed twice more. But I saw where he landed and ran into the woods and so I chased him. Finally, I flushed him and I missed him several more times. I never did find that turkey.

Dinner in camp that night was a never-ending affair fraught with insults and ribbings piled much higher than the mashed potatoes.

After a few days of hard hunting, we finally heard a gobble late one morning, and the chess match began. We’d call, and it would move. We’d call and it would get a little closer, so we’d get ready, and then it would move away. This kept up for an hour. Finally, Heath motioned for me to ease down a steep little finger ridge toward the bird. He stayed back to call.

I crawled into position 50 yards ahead and finally saw movement. The bird paced back and forth, up and down that ridge in an attempt to call us to him. Typical of an old Eastern, he wouldn’t budge. Heath would call, he would fire back. But he wouldn’t commit. I shifted angles and finally spotted his red-and-white head through the trees, 45 yards out.

“Boom!” wailed the Mossberg.

“Did you miss again?” yelled Heath.

“Yes,” I replied. But I was kidding. My mission was complete. My turkey education, however, is to be continued.

The Lesson: Know the land to make subtle moves on a gobbling bird. Try the buddy calling system for hung-up gobblers: Send one guy ahead silently, while a partner calls from farther back. **ah**

gratitude; if that were to happen to me, I’d hang up the rifle for good. But with my first elephant there was a different feeling altogether. The same bundle of emotions I experienced—gratitude, pride, respect, perhaps a touch of remorse—are a common thread among elephant hunters. But, when you see the big picture, the scene makes sense.

The Hwange Elephant Situation

According to the hunters in Zimbabwe, the Hwange Park has a carrying capacity of 35,000 elephants. However, the latest survey indicates the elephant population there hangs at around 77,000 elephants. Now, I can’t attest to the actual numbers, but I can attest to seeing not only huge numbers of elephants (we saw dozens every day) but the destruction they caused: downed trees, guarded waterholes, set after set of fresh tracks, not to mention the nightly migration out of Hwange Park. This is no good for the elephant, or the other game species. In my opinion, sport hunting selected elephants is a much better option than government culling.

My bull was taken at 7 a.m., and a team of skinners and butchers was brought in shortly thereafter. By 3 p.m., there was nothing more than a few bones left on the scene. We had given approximately 3 tons of meat to the local village, a population of people that are extremely protein-deprived. The bull had well-worn feet, an indication of old age (Tim estimated it to be between 35-40 years). The fact that the locals had seen this particular bull raiding the corn crop two days prior made them happy to be rid of him.

While there is a ban preventing sport-hunted ivory from being imported into the United States from Zimbabwe, my bull was taken on a non-trophy tag so all the parts, including skin and ivory, belonged to National Parks. I did get to take photos of my bull, and experience watching Sylvester chop out the ivory so I could measure it to have reproduction tusks made here in the States.

I was honored to have hunted the same patch of ground that F.C. Selous did, and to have the privilege of hunting the African elephant. I hope that wise conservation and common sense will result in my grandchildren having the same opportunity to hunt the giants. **ah**

CLOTHING



Elephant hunting is a game of walking; it’s often said that you walk a mile for every pound of ivory taken. I can attest to the fact that you will need comfortable shoes. I have been a fan of the **Courteney Boot Company**, which makes fantastic safari shoes right in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The tire-tread sole is whisper quiet, yet provides plenty of traction. These boots are comfortable enough to spend the entire day tracking elephants and will not cause blisters. courteneyboot.com

I chose some pre-washed canvas pants from Eddie Bauer for this hunt. They were cool enough in the heat and quiet in the thornbush. Quiet is of utmost importance when hunting elephants, as you’ll be up close and personal. Having gone bald years ago, a good means of sun protection is imperative to me. I chose an **Outback Trading Company Flinders Reef wide-brimmed hat** in a neutral green color. This kept the sun off my noggin, and my head dried quickly even when sweating in the tropical sun. cabelas.com

