

## **Of Bovines and Pachyderms.**

Hilton Gary Sanders

A gentle breeze carried the faintly sweet scent of fresh dung to our nostrils. The advance was painstakingly slow as we headed up the ridge towards the unseen herd. Oh we knew that they were there, as we had spotted the herd from another ridge about a mile (1.6 kilometres) away. After dropping into the intervening valley we had begun our slow and final approach to what we all hoped would be our final stalk on Africa's bovine like member of the Big Five, the magnificent, obstreperous and tenacious Cape buffalo (*Cyncerus caffer*).

For the previous two days we had found good bulls in herds of about 30 to 50 head and for one or other reason we had had our stalks busted. It was either the swirling wind or a couple of fighting White rhino bulls that came crashing and snorting down and across the slope straight onto our position. It was a case of forget about which Buff our client, Lawrence of Singapore needed to shoot and rather a case of lets beat a very speedy retreat to get out of the way! At the price of Rhino's today, discretion was definitely the better part valour

A Safari is always supposed to be an adventure and fun, otherwise why the hell go on safari. I always think of a safari as a living organism, an organism that as a whole; lives, breathes and feels its way across the African landscape. An organism that evolves transforms and grows as it progresses from commencement to culmination. This safari was no different it was made up of a bunch of very interesting and easy to get along with people from a bunch of different backgrounds all on a journey together.

We had returning client, Lawrence of Singapore and his sister Veronica of Perth Australia on her first ever safari in Africa, and then there was Martin our cameraman who was to capture the safari on DVD in order that it is preserved for many years to come. Then there was Shane our charter flight pilot, who became a very helpful and meaningful member of the team both on the ground and in the air. Last but definitely not least in any way was Jason van Aarde; my long time friend and fellow writer, outfitter and PH then as always there were all of our camp and field staff.

After Lawrence's 2010 safari; where he had successfully hunted a Lion, a Buff and a White Rhino as well as done a bunch of bird shooting, the planning for this his 2011 Safari had gone it to full swing. The coming together of Jason and I is a fairly common scenario, that has seen us hunt all over South Africa together as well as in neighbouring countries. We combine our areas, resources and talents to provide our clients with a tip top African Safari experience.

Lawrence was after Croc, Hippo, and Elephant then if time allowed another Buff. The safari would start with the hunt for the Ele' up on the Botswana border and then the remainder of the safari would be down in Zululand. The Ele and Croc sections of the hunt had gone well, but you the readers will have to wait for a future article to read about the rain, thunder, a seven yard (6,4m) encounter, gun smoke and mud. The joys of an early or late season safari.

The Hippo (*Hippopotamus amphibious*) or Seekoei (sea cow) as it is known in Afrikaans is an odd looking fellow with an odd way of life. It is known that some Hippo can and have lived to up to forty years of age. Hippo in South Africa as well as in the rest of the Southern African region has a greatly reduced distribution as compared to what they had say 150 years ago. However I must also state that with the advent of "game ranching" and a heightened awareness by the various parks departments we are seeing Hippo being re-introduced to areas where they once occurred.

One only has to look at the various names of rivers and places in South Africa to see the extent of the Hippos distribution in times gone by. The Umsinvubu River (Hippo River in Zulu and Xhosa) in what was formerly the Transkei. Sea Cow Lake a place up stream from the finish of the world famous Duzi Canoe Marathon on the Umgeni River; now a part of the greater Durban metropolitan area to name but a few.

One can read in the KZN newspapers from time to time about Hippo that leave their homes in the rivers and lakes of Zululand and Maputaland and head south, down South Africa's East Coast only to take up residence in an estuary further south. I am no scientist but I am prepared to bet that this is some ancient calling that is triggered in the wanderer's inner most being in order to perform some ancient migration or exchange of genetics.

Size wise they fit in between the average White Rhino and the average Black Rhino, weighing in at around 1500kg (3300lbs) for males and 1335kg (2950lbs) for females. Some of the bulls can weigh well over 2000kg (4410lbs) and stand a healthy 150cm (60 inches) or more at the shoulder.

Now even if you have never seen "a live Hippo in real life" as my kids would put it, you can imagine in your minds eye their bulky size. This bulk is supported on four short little legs that always look to me like they are way too small for the Hippos size. Their feet appear even punier than do their legs! An interesting feature of their feet is that they have four toes that are fairly splayed out. This feature as compared to the Rhino's compact feet is to aid them in the soft mud that they spend more than half their lives walking in and by the way they do not have webbed toes.

Let not their bulky body and little legs lull you in to a false sense of security. These mamas and papas can up sticks and skedaddle with an unbelievable burst of speed. Many is the intrepid hunter and wandering tribesmen and woman that has learnt this fact to his consternation and a fair number have not to relay this fact verbally but rather by having their story told in tracks, blood and scattered entrails.

I think that the vast majority of fatal and near fatal encounters between Hippos and people is due to the feeding habits of the Hippo. Now lets quickly clarify this statement firstly Hippo eat grass and not people and secondly the fatal part of these encounters applies to human fatalities. Hippo need to consume approximately 10% of their body weight every day in order to sustain them selves in peak condition.

In the dry season when the rivers tend to dry up and only sporadic deep pools are left in the now trickle of a former swollen river, the Hippo herds which are normally small family groups of from six to twenty odd and some change, start to congregate on these pools. This has several effects on the normal way of life for the Hippo, bulls that would not normally come into close contact with each other end up engaging in vicious battles for dominance of the pools as well as their neighbour's wives. Then on top of this the feed reserves close to these remaining and now overpopulated pools gets hammered.

The results of the above two factors leads to the Hippos being stressed and having to wander further a field for food. This then increases their chances of coming into contact and conflict with man. Many a person has stumbled upon a Hippo far from the nearest water often with disastrous results. Another factor that is related to feeding inspired conflicts between man and Hippo come into being when the Hippo take to feeding on crops such as sorghum, maize or sugar cane. In areas bordering the Kruger National Park in Mpumalanga this is an ongoing story.

In the case of the battling bulls; injured bulls with deep suppurating wounds inflicted by the huge canines of a rival bull are often driven from the pools by their victors. Those that stay in the pools also tend to head up the bank and away from the continuing nuisance of fish constantly nibbling at the exposed flesh of their wounds. Almost all of the trophy bulls hunted by clients carry the deep scars on their almost hairless bodies of territorial clashes, some old and healed and some not. These scars add character to a mount.

These bulls then seek out as much shade as possible and retreat to these spots to try and recover from their wounds with out being pestered by the victors or the tormenting fish. Now to say that these bulls are not in a very good frame of mind is an understatement to my way of thinking. These guys are seriously hacked off!!! So when a person happens to bump into one of these jolly fellows all does not go to well for one of the parties and generally it is the human that comes off second best.

Most of us have read the old accounts and seen the old pen and ink drawings or lithographs done by the early hunters and explores as well as missionaries of Hippo attacks on their boats as they navigated the rivers and lakes of 18<sup>th</sup> century Africa. Most of these attacks occurred on the traditional Makoro's (dug out canoes), these are generally very leaky and unstable craft let alone with out the added turbulence provided by an enraged Hippo.

In the hunting field there basically two ways that one can hunt Hippo, in the water or on the land. I personally prefer to hunt them on land as it is not only challenging but also pretty exciting when the Hippo does not go straight down! Both methods have there pros and cons.

When hunting them in the water one generally needs to make a reasonably long shot depending on the amount of cover and the shot placement needs to be good as one is more often than not going for a brain shot. A Hippos brain is about as big as a man's fist. If you are hunting in a large body of water and the shot placement is not good, the client stands a fairly good chance of loosing his trophy and the PH is in for a heap of hours patrolling the banks looking for the missing bull.

A further complication to shooting a Hippo in the water is the extraction. It is a good rule of thumb that where big Hippo occur so to do Crocs of an equal and proportionate size! This fact coupled with a hacked off pod of Hippo makes for the lively passage of a little wobbly rowing boat, makoro or wading PH or tracker!

Of the two methods, the hunting of them out of the water often requires one to get up very early in the morning, long before first light and get into a position between the river and ones intended quarry when he and his pod are still in the bush feeding. Knowing the routes that the pod is taking on leaving the water to go and feed and by which way they return. This all takes doing a bit of home work. Hippos leave a double parallel track with a slight middle mantjie (raised hump of soil) between both tracks.

I have also used this method in the late afternoon especially on cloudy days when the Hippo leaves the water early to feed. A few years ago a client managed to shoot a big bull hippo at about 11am on a cool and cloudy day late in August. The bull had come out to feed and was feeding slowly toward the bush line about one hundred and fifty meters from the rivers edge. The client hit the bull a bit too far forward and the bull headed straight back to the water where it died in the shallows. On moonlit nights we have had good success hunting Hippo in the sugar cane fields when they decide that cane tastes a whole lot better than grass!

Now back to Lawrence's hunt. We had been working the Msenene and Mshlosinga rivers as well as their confluence for a couple of days looking for tracks and the visible sights of a good Hippo bull. There was relatively good deal of evidence of both big Crocs as well as Hippo. We found one pop in a very long and deep pool however the only way to have got to a shot at them would have been to go up stream in a kayak as the bush was very, very thick on the banks and would have required a lot of noisy clearing. Lawrence who is an adrenalin junkie was not keen on the kayak idea!

We continued our search and found a pod slightly further down stream comprising of six animals in total, one of them a very impressive bull. We slowly made our way towards the basking pod, all of a sudden when we were almost in the position that we had chosen to make the shot from the wind swung a full one hundred and eighty degrees and with an explosive snort the pod matriarch led her family into the deep green grey pool in a splash of water and shower of mud!

We waited for at least an hour and a half and all we could see were the hairy nostrils of the Hippo as they took turns to surface and inhale fresh air. After a further twenty or so minutes both Jason and I agreed that the pod had been well and truly spooked so if we waited until sunset we would probably be wasting our time. A trip back to camp and sundowners followed by an early dinner and a good nights rest would probably be more profitable.

The following morning saw us back at the rivers edge nice and early ready to resume our quest for a trophy bull Hippo. The conditions were perfect the wind was light and steady and in our favour! Using the cover of thick growth along the rivers edge we managed to get set up about thirty meters from the pod that was resting in the shallows on the edge of a big pool. The huge old bull with his scared body and “tusk pockets” on either side of his nostrils was easy to distinguish from this attendant cows and two calves. There was however a slight problem.

One of the cows was on heat and would not leave the bull alone (every man’s dream!). I mean she was making an absolute pest of her self; nudging the old boy resting her head on his back from his rump to the top of his head and she as even mounting him. This was making the chances of a safe shot very difficult. The more she pestered the bull the more time he started to spend in deeper water submerged! This was definitely not what we needed nor wanted.

After a good hour or so the bull once again started to give us more of a view of not only his head but his shoulders and back. The cow was also starting to give us a tad more space by resting her head on the middle of his back. Lawrence got ready on the sticks and carefully drew a line from the bull’s eye to his ear and then held his aim one inch low. On the slow expulsion of his breath Lawrence squeezed the trigger that sent a 300gr .375 H&H Mag round hurtling through the bulls head.

The bull’s hind quarters sagged and his eyes closed as the bullet entered his brain, he was dead of an instant. This bull was a magnificent bull and had been taken cleanly. Those were the pros for this hunt now for the cons! Steep banks and an on heat cow that was as bent on revenge made for an extremely difficult recovery. This cow charged up the bank twice!

Slowly we crept forward to wards a small guarri bush (*Euclea natalensis*) with appy PH Chris Beaukes in the lead (that’s how young guys learn). Just in front of the guarri bush was a warthog hole, which we inspected carefully to make sure that no one was home! We settled in behind the bush and looked out over the herd of Buffalo, all of whom were

bedded down on the edge of a small wallow. The wind was picking up but still directly on to our position. We were 40 yards (36,5m) from tranquil herd. There is something special about being close to big game on foot or on your bums like we were now.

We sat like this soaking up the sun for about three quarters of an hour. In all that time the only changes at the wallow was a cow stood up and stretched and the lay down again in the exact same spot as where she had been lying before and then a second cow and a young soft bossed bull stood up and stood with noses close to the ground alternatively dozing or chewing their cud.

In a little while most of the herd was up and doing just the same as the young bull and cow had been doing, with the odd animal relieving its bowels or bladder. Jason and I both looked at each other and Jason raised the shooting sticks, I took the .375” from Lawrence and gently put it into the sticks as all three of us rose silently. It took the resting herd at least two minutes to notice that something had changed on their immediate horizon.

Slowly they spread out before us in a fan like manner. We singled out a bull that was quartering slightly towards us presenting his left shoulder and flank to us. He was a grand old fellow with a hard and reasonably wide boss, not too shabby hooks and a spread of about 39” and a bit. Lawrence asked in a whisper that if he shot this bull would it mean that we would stop walking after these big black buggers, for this safari any way. Both Jason and I grinned and nodded.

Lawrence then said “well then shoot him I will!” We told him to shoot the bull on the point of the shoulder and aiming for the last rib on the opposite side at the same time. Lawrence nodded and leaned into the rifle. The bull was craning his neck toward us with nose held high in that characteristic buffalo pose of you owe me money. The riffle boomed and the bull’s shoulders shuddered on the impact of the round. He swung first to his right and then back to the right with a trail of pink foam and scarlet droplets fanning out from his muzzle.

With a lumbering and shakily ponderous lope the bull followed the departing herd as best he could. The other bulls in the departing herd slowed and turned towards the stricken bull. A bull with a wide spread but soft bosses pummelled the now very wobbly bull in the side which brought him down on to his knees. No sooner was he down when a second bull, this time an old boy with tightly curled horns drove the dying bull to the ground.

By now a lot of cows had turned and were standing with the aggressive bulls and watching the bull breath his last breath which rattled out in that deep haunting death bellow. It was done all was now over barring the photos session and caping.