

Stubborn unto death

Hilton Gary Sanders

It was mid-afternoon and the heat was oppressive and exacerbated by the high levels of humidity, yet this was bearable as we sat hunched up behind a low bush. It was the myriad of small, foul-tasting flies that buzzed around our heads with the ultimate aim of piling up in the corners of our eyes or up our noses that was pushing both my client, Bernard Dere of France, and I to the edge of distraction.

We kept encouraging each other that it would not be long before the slow-moving herd would come out of the thick bush and into the more open savannah and within range for a shot. We had decided not to go in after the herd as there was a herd of Burchell's zebra as well as a herd of impala, all grazing together with the blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus taurinus*). Another reason for waiting ahead of the slow-moving herd was, as Bernard had said, "I'm 76 years old and not the height of a three quarter grown pygmy and therefore I will not pass well under those thorn trees!"

The blue wildebeest, also known as the brindled gnu or black-tailed gnu, is a close cousin of the black

wildebeest (*Connochaetes gnou*), also known as the white-tailed gnu. Both these species are a common sight on most game farms throughout South Africa as well in Namibia. In Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, southern Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe one will also find the blue wildebeest munching on the short grasses of floodplains, valleys and hillsides, and then searching for a shady retreat to wait out the midday heat in the shade of acacia or tamboti woodlands.

Further north one comes across a few more cousins of the blue wildebeest. The first of these is the Nyasaland gnu (*C. t. johnstoni*), found in northern Mozambique, north-eastern Zambia, southern Tanzania and Malawi. This subspecies is recognisable by the 5cm (2") white band that runs across the face just below the orbital glands. The second is the Cookson's wildebeest (*C. t. cooksoni*) in the Luangwa Valley of Zambia. To me their bodies are a paler shade of grey and sleeker looking than their blue cousins. The white-bearded gnu (*C. t. albojubatus*) is almost identical to its blue cousin but has a white beard and often has a dirty white to tan "V"

stretching from the base of the horns to between the eyes. This species is found in Kenya.

Many a young hunter has accounted for a blue wildebeest cow or old bull with a rifle belonging to dad, Uncle Piet or even granddad as one of their very first large game animals after having hunted grey duiker, impala, blesbuck or springbuck, and many an older hunter calls the blue wildebeest the poor man's buffalo due to their similarity in looks. No matter how you look at these critters, I just like to hunt them, with or without clients!

With the bulls standing at about 150 cm (67") at the shoulder and weighing in at about 250 kg (550 lbs), these deep-crested animals are an impressive sight, whether they are trudging along through the veld, often on well-worn trails to and from waterholes and their grazing grounds, or taking off in an ungainly, ground-eating canter. The endless swirling and rushing to and fro of the black wildebeest, which is common to all members of the wildebeest clans, has earned them the nickname of "clowns of the veldt".

An interesting feature of the

Bernard Dere and his blue wildebeest



Connochaetes species and the various subspecies is that next to the various species of zebra and wild ass they are the only animals in Africa that sport a dorsal mane from the top of their heads to the top of their shoulders. It is the extra height of the mane together with the long beard that often causes hunters to place their shot too high on the shoulders with the bullet going through the "scoff". These shots then result in a lot of walking as the wounded animal makes a speedy departure.

Some years ago I was guiding another client from France on a blue wildebeest hunt. Although he was a very nice guy, he was not big on taking advice and always wanted to make shots at distances that far outdid his ability at shooting straight. This was made worse by the fact that he shot a Weatherby 338.378 that he was scared of! All of these factors led to the bull that we were hunting taking a round through the lower front right leg.

I immediately told him to shoot it again, higher this time, which he promptly did. This time he sent his bullet through the top of the unfortunate animal's scoff. This shot knocked the bull flat; he then sprang up and took off at a rate of knots that left my client astounded. He then asked me in a dismayed voice with a heavy French accent,

"Hilton, now what?"

"Now we walk and walk some

more!" I replied rather irritably.

Yes, walk and walk some more is exactly what we did. At first there was a blood trail, then it became scratchy and then it vanished. Shibas and Mvelase did a sterling job of staying on the wounded bull's tracks. After four and a half hours and some 12 km (7½ miles) we finally caught up with the bull as he was walking away from us up the other side of a narrow gully. My client took a dead rest over my hat, resting on a rock and dropped the bull in his tracks with a shot to the spine between the shoulders. Other than the dried blood on his shoulders and lower leg one would never have said that this bull had been wounded as his gait was steady and strong! Hence the old adage, "They get stronger with every shot!"

Before I carry on I want to relay one more incident involving this same client and blue wildebeest. This client and his 80-year-old father were hunting with PH Gerrit Craffert who hunts for us. They were in a mixed thicket of *Acacia karroo* trees and Natal aloes (*Aloe spectabilis*) and after a fairly impressive impala ram. Gerrit set the elderly father (who speaks no English) up on the shooting sticks and asked the son to tell his dad not to shoot yet as there was a blue wildebeest further back and behind the now browsing impala ram. "Oui, oui, I do not see anything," replied the son, who then promptly told his father to shoot!

No sooner was the shot fired than

one could hear a blue wildebeest bellowing; yes, it was down and dying! The impala ram – well, he got a good fright and that was all!

Even when using enough gun, you need to place the bullet correctly and where it will do the most damage, especially on big old blue wildebeest bulls as they are tough as nails. To my way of thinking anything less than a .300 calibre is asking for lots of leg work somewhere along the line. I have seen a bull, and not a particularly big bull, that still kept going for another 80 m (87½ yards) after taking four well-placed rounds from a .30-06. He was dead on his feet but stubborn unto death!

Wildebeest of any persuasion are gregarious by nature and form breeding herds consisting of cows, young animals and calves with attendant bulls. Bachelor herds also occur that are loosely held together for periods of time with members being added or subtracted as the fortunes of the bulls running with the breeding herds change. One also finds mature bulls that stake out a territory for themselves and service cows that happen to pass through their area in the breeding season. It is often these bulls that make for good trophies.

Rowland Ward lists a minimum measurement for entry into its *Records of Big Game* as 28½" for blue wildebeest and 28" using method number 12 for the white-bearded gnu as well as the Nyasa wildebeest and the Cookson's wildebeest. The black wildebeest requires a minimum measurement of 22⁷/₈" using method number 13.

It is spectacular to see the vast herds of migrating wildebeest in East Africa as they follow the patterns of rainfall and grass along with permanent water as they are dependent on water. These vast herds are in fact made up of numerous smaller herds numbering from some 30 odd animals up to about 100 animals in all. These huge migratory herds can number a million plus animals.

In Botswana the herds have historically made several smaller and not such spectacular migrations as are seen in East Africa. However, these migrations are no less important to the survival of the herds of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Unfor-



Barry Cole took this huge 32⁵/₈" blue wildebeest in the Colenso area of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Note how the animal's left horn is nearly twice the thickness of the right horn at the base and in overall size.



Barry Cole hunted this Nyasa wildebeest in Tanzania.

tunately the veterinary cordon fences that have been erected to protect the country's thriving beef exports to the EU from foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) have spelt a slow death for thousands of these migrating animals – these fences cut right across the migratory routes, blocking access to both water and pasture for these migratory animals.

While on the subject of the wildebeest herds, it is worth mentioning that these herds, when in a relaxed state of feeding or travel, are very vocal. A lot of lowing and grunting sounds are made by the adult members of the herd and the young calves make a plaintive bleating-like noise. About seven years ago while hunting with a Portuguese client we followed the sounds of a herd that was slowly feeding in a wide, recently dried-up river bed. The vegetation was rank and lush.

We had neither seen the herd nor any signs of its passing. We had only heard the calling of the individuals in the herd as they stayed in touch with each other. Slowly we crept in from the western side of the feeding herd with the wind quartering towards us. After about an hour we spotted the first members of the herd. We spent an enjoyable 25 minutes watching the feeding herd move past us without even knowing that we were there.

Now back to a fly-crazy pair sitting on their butts behind a small blue guarri bush (*Euclea crispa*), waiting for the wildebeest to show themselves. After about an hour and fifteen

minutes the first dark shapes began to materialise on the edges of the bush. Diana, goddess of the hunt, was smiling upon us – not only were the wildebeest heading our way but the baking sun was now behind the hill and a slight breeze was pushing the little flies away from us and drifting the sweet cattle-like smell of the wildebeest onto us.

After another 15 minutes or so the majority of the herd were spread out before us, grazing on the ankle-high grass under the huge paperbark acacias (*Acacia sieberana*). I had spotted a bull that was a good couple of inches larger than any of the other seven bulls in the bachelor herd. This bull was standing looking straight on to us.

I motioned to Bernard to shoot the bull squarely under the chin. Bernard took aim carefully, let his breath out slowly and then squeezed the trigger on his Sauer in .300" Weatherby Mag. There was a very audible "thwack"; as the round drove home the bull wobbled backwards, then found his footing and stood splay-legged. As the blood began to pool on the ground beneath his now lowered muzzle his front legs buckled and he sank onto his chest and rasped out a death moan. And so ended the final chapter in the saga of life and death for the hunter and the hunted. 🐾

**The Box H Big Game Hounds
Specialist Hunting Outfitters
Email: theboxh@umvoti.co.za
Web: www.huntingtheboxh.co.za**

Zarco™
ZARCO™
SAFETY CAMOUFLAGE

Normal human vision



Colour blind vision



Deer vision



100% South African
Suid-Afrikaans



Tel: 012 430 4341
Cell: 082 903 6949
Fax: 086 619 8963

E-mail: abraham@safetycamo.com

For online sales:
www.safetycamo.com
235 Hilda str, Hatfield,
Pretoria, 0083