

Elisabeth and the bull mentioned in the article, June 2010.



The King of

*Hearts*

*Alcelaphus caama*

## Hilton Gary Sanders

**We were making our way slowly down a winding, steep-sided, dry stream bed, a few yards at a time, as we cautiously picked our way through the loose water-worn rocks.**

Our goal was to get into shooting range of a herd of red hartebeest (*Alcelaphus caama*), also known as Cape hartebeest. This herd was grazing along the eastern side of the stream bed in and amongst a bunch of sweet-thorn trees (*Acacia karroo*). We had been working this herd for most of the afternoon after being busted by a herd of blue wildebeest.

The afternoon was cool and slightly overcast. It was in fact the

first sign of inclement weather on this 9th day of the 14-day safari with French client Elisabeth de Beaumont. This was Elisabeth's first safari in the province of KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa, for that matter. She had hunted in the Central African Republic on an earlier occasion where she bagged a magnificent western hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus major*), amongst other species.

The red hartebeest is one of my very favourite plains game animals to hunt. Yes, these ungainly but beautiful creatures are truly a plains game species. Their preferred habitat is savannah, lightly wooded plains, grassy plains, vleis, areas around pans as well as the rolling, grass-covered dunes and "streets" of the Kalahari desert.

In addition to the red hartebeest and the western hartebeest already mentioned, there used to be a further six species of hartebeest in Africa. The bubal hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus buselaphus*), which occurred right across North Africa, was the first hartebeest known to the Western world. The bubal was even >>

American huntress, Linda Donahoe, hunted this bull with the author earlier this year in the Estcourt area of KZN.





◀ Texan client, Marl Blahitka, hunted this bull with the author in the Free State whilst on safari with Madubula Safaris, August 2010.

>> domesticated by the ancient Egyptians, where it was both a sacrificial and mythological beast. The Romans also kept them in their lavish gardens in Rome.

When one speaks to French clients, hartebeest of all types are referred to as bubal. What a pity then that by the early 1900s they were only found in small numbers in the remote regions of the Atlas Mountains. In 1923 the last surviving member of this species, an old cow, died in a Parisian zoo. A very sad day for Africa and the world as a whole! Other species include Coke's hartebeest (*A. b. cokii*), Lelwel hartebeest (*A. b. lelwel*), Tora hartebeest (*A. b. tora*) and Swayne's hartebeest (*A. b. swaynei*). These species are scattered across East and north-east Africa.

The Swayne's hartebeest was found in Somalia, where it is now extinct, as well as in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia the Swayne's hartebeest has not fared too well. The reason for this downward spiral in Swayne's hartebeest can be attributed to poaching and habitat loss.

In 2002 it was estimated that there were only 150 Swayne's hartebeest left in Ethiopia, most of these being found in the Senkelle Sanctuary. With stepped-up conservation efforts the numbers rose to an estimated 220 animals in 2005. However, the present situation seems to indicate that the numbers are once again in decline due to poaching.

There are some sources that list two other species, namely Neumann hartebeest (*A. b. lelwel x swaynei*) and the Kenya highland hartebeest (*A. b. lelwel x cokii*). However, I am not familiar with these species or their supposed genetic make-up and therefore cannot pass any comments on them.

The last member of the hartebeest family is the Lichtenstein's

hartebeest (*A. lichtensteini*). This species is probably the next most known to those of us residing in South Africa. They are found in the north-eastern corner of our country in the Kruger National Park, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania.

Back to the hunt . . . I eased myself down the side of the steep bank of the stream bed to see if our attack strategy was going according to plan. I wanted to see if we would be able to get a clear shot at the bull or if we still had a way to go. Carefully sliding back down, I told Elisabeth and my tracker, Shibas, that the herd had strung out and was now feeding away from the sweet thorns. The hartebeest were feeding in a north-easterly direction with their noses into the wind. This was good for us as we were coming at them from a south-westerly direction.

Red hartebeest are predominantly grazers, preferring the sweetest climax species of grass such as red grass (*Themeda triandra*). They will, however, feed on leaves whether these are still on the trees and shrubs or whether they have dropped to the ground. If water is available they will drink regularly. Recently, when hunting in the Kalahari, we saw what looked to be the same breeding herd of about 12 individuals drinking at the same pan three days in a row. On every occasion it was at about 14:45.

Like other members of the hartebeest family, red hartebeest are gregarious and are generally found in herds consisting of a few cows and their calves plus an attendant herd bull, up to breeding herds of 20 to 30 animals with a bull. In Botswana herds numbering into the thousands have been reported in some years.

Solitary old bulls or small bachelor herds of bulls of varying ages are often encountered. In fact, I bumped into such a herd in the southern Kalahari earlier this month when hunting with an >>



📍 This photo of French client Bernard Dere and his bull was taken from this angle to show the magnificent colouring of the red hartebeest.

>> American client. The herd was made up of 17 bulls; half of them were shooters. We took a respectable bull out of the bunch.

I mentioned earlier that the red hartebeest is one of my favourite plains game animals. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, I like their markings of dark brown to almost black on the upper legs, face and the eye patches and tail set against the chestnut red of the rest of the face, neck flanks and back. These colours are then complimented by the pale cream to almost yellow rump, back of the rear legs and belly. The skin of red hartebeest makes for great flat skins and panelling in a pedestal mount.

I also like their almost goofyish long faces, topped off by their heart-shaped horns stacked on top of their heads. It is this "heart" shape of the horns when viewed from the front that gave these majestic animals their collective name.

When alerted, their high-stepping action and prance with all four feet off the ground at once is extremely graceful and stands in total contrast to their ungainly posture of high withers and sloping rumps. They have a shoulder height of about 120 cm (47½") and weigh in at about 150 kg (330 lb). Many a hunter is surprised at how small a hartebeest looks when dead in comparison to when he was standing on his own four feet!

We covered a further 120 m (131 yds) before I again eased out of the stream bed and peered over the edge in search of the feeding herd. The whole herd had their heads up and were looking intently off to our left. I looked in that direction and saw a herd of four bachelor bulls about 80 m (87 yds) from the breeding herd. With head held high and the leg action of a pedigree Hackney stallion the herd bull pranced out from his harem towards the four bachelor bulls. He then broke into an extremely fast gallop and scattered the bachelor bulls before him.

All hartebeest of the genus *Alcelaphus* along with their cousins of the genus *Damaliscus*, of which there are seven members – Hunter's hartebeest (*Damaliscus hunteri*), Korrigum or Senegal hartebeest (*D. korrigum korrigum*), Tiang (*D. k. tiang*), topi (*D. k. jimela*), tsessebe (*D. lunatus*), blesbuck (*D. dorcas phillipsi*) and the bontebok (*D. dorcas dorcas*) – are very fleet-footed and classed as the fastest antelope in Africa. The tsessebe is the fastest of them all. Red hartebeest are able to keep up a fast lope for fairly long distances. Then they come to a standstill, often on a slight rise in the landscape, turn broadside (often way out of range!) and gaze back for any signs of pursuit. Incidentally, these animals have very keen eyesight and when in a herd of mixed species they will be the first to see danger. Then, with a swish of their black tails they will be off again.

The herd bull came trotting back from seeing the bachelor bulls off with his tail held high to show his bevy of beauties that he is by far the best choice they could have made!

He then went from one cow and subadult to the next, sniffing each in turn. I am sure that this behaviour is to check that his family was all present and correct and that none had snuck off to join the bachelor boys!

Whilst the bull was busy with his herd inspection and distracted, we carefully crawled out of the stream bed and drew alongside a termite mound and small sweet thorn. These would break our outline. I set the shooting sticks up and got Elisabeth to settle her Browning in 7mm x 64 in the V of the sticks. We were now set after a good couple of hours of working the herd.

I told Elisabeth that when the bull presented a good broadside shot she was to shoot him in the centre of the shoulder. The bull turned and presented a perfect shot but there was a cow and calf behind him. Elisabeth waited patiently. After what seemed like an eternity he stepped to our right and clear of the cow and calf. The rifle boomed in the late afternoon stillness. The bull reared up on his hind legs and swung to the left. When his front legs came back to terra firma they gave way and he landed on his nose; both shoulders were broken.

Elisabeth quickly put a second shot into the bull. This shot traversed the body and exited out of the left back leg. Elisabeth was over the moon, having hunted her second member of the hartebeest family. This was one photo session that would be completed in the dark. 📸

**The Box H Big Game Hounds Specialist Hunting Outfitters**

Email: [theboxh@umvoti.co.za](mailto:theboxh@umvoti.co.za)

[www.huntingtheboxh.co.za](http://www.huntingtheboxh.co.za)