

Valley of the Spiral Horns

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Baauuu! Baauuu! Baauuu! The deep guttural bark of a nyala bull ricocheted down the valley below us. It seemed impossible that this bull had heard, seen or smelt us; it must be another predator such as a leopard. We had seen the tracks of a female leopard earlier a little further up the game path that we were walking along.

We were hunting in the greater Umkomaas Valley in the western parts of the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, South Africa. My client was a young guy by the name of Pero, a gentleman and avid hunter. We had started the safari in the coastal dune forests of KwaZulu-Natal's North Coast where Pero had bagged a magnificent blue duiker (*Cephalophus monticola*) ram with his .375" H&H Mag, firing a 300gr solid.

The shift to the Umkomaas Valley had been made in order for us to find a top-notch southern/Cape bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus sylvaticus*) and nyala (*Tragelaphus angasii*) for Pero. Pero has hunted throughout Africa in his quest for trophy animals for his vast collection. He already has a harnessed bushbuck (*T. s. scriptus*) and Chobe bushbuck (*T. s. ornatus*) so we would do our best to add the southern subspecies to his collection.

Many people think that if you have good numbers of nyala you will not have good numbers of bushbuck as they compete with each other for food. However, in the Umkomaas Valley system we have high numbers of both species as well as good quality trophies. Personally I think that the competing story is a bit overdone on the whole.

The Umkomaas Valley is named after the mighty Umkomaas River that rises in the southern Drakensberg and ends in the Indian Ocean. There are a whole bunch of other rivers that drain into Umkomaas and form part of the greater valley complex – rivers such as the Hella Hella, Nkobeni, Lufafa and the nHlamvini, to name but a few.





Pero bagged this bushbuck on the same hunt as his nyala.

The area we were hunting lies in the middle reaches of the nHlamvini River.

On our first afternoon in the area we had seen many nyala does, young rams and youngsters. We also spotted at least seven bushbuck does and two non-shootable rams as well as a ram with horns measuring at least 15 inches. On closer inspection, however, we saw that his right horn was broken off at about two inches in length. It is interesting that one tends to see far more bushbuck rams with broken horns than any of the other spiral-horned species (*Tragelaphus*) on a percentage basis. My thoughts on this are that bushbuck rams are far more territorial than any of their cousins and display a very high degree of aggression towards each other. I have often seen kudu as well as nyala bulls sizing each other up but can count instances of having seen them locked in combat on one hand. However, in the case of bushbuck I would say that at least 50% of all challenges between two rams will end up in battle.

Not only are bushbuck rams aggressive towards each other, they will also not hesitate to use their lethal horns on a dog or a human if wounded or if they feel trapped. Late in the 2009 safari season I had a client wound a bushbuck ram on this exact same concession that Pero and I were now hunting. The clients were due to leave camp at 6 am the following morning and then fly home. It was now 5 pm and the light was fading fast. The ram had been wounded in the front left leg, a non-fatal wound, but enough of a wound to make the animal a bit grumpy! The bush that he had taken refuge in was very thick and full of thorns; one could not walk upright and to make things worse the terrain was very steep. I decided to head back

and fetch Rambo the fox terrier and put him on the blood trail.

To make a long story short, Rambo found and bayed the ram in the pitch dark. When I crawled in with a Maglite flashlight to make the shot, the ram flattened Rambo in order to get at me. Rambo was fine, I got bowled over and a horn tip into the middle of my forearm but did manage to get a shot into the ram that then went even deeper into the thicket. We gathered our wits and followed the ram up and this time it was our turn to flatten him. Do not trifle with a bushbuck ram!

The second day saw Pero and me sitting on a large rock when the barking nyala bull moved out into a clearing followed by two does. I never cease to marvel at how regal a nyala bull looks, dressed in his fine grey coat with long fringes of white hair that form both his beard and mane, which in turn compliment the white stripes running from his spine to his brisket, and the white facial markings. The bright orange stockings give him the air of a medieval castle guard. The does are bright orange with white stripes but do not boast the manes and beards of the rams.

I informed Pero that this bull was a respectable 27½", making it a candidate for entry into *Rowland Ward's Records of Big Game*. I also told him we should sit tight and see if we could not find a bigger bull as I knew that they were in the area. He agreed and we continued the search for a big bull.

Late that second afternoon we spotted a good bushbuck ram feeding along the side of a small, lightly wooded hill opposite our position. I estimated the ram at about 15½" with good form. With a nod Pero indicated that we

◀ **Oliver Rolin of Belgium and his valley nyala**



Mike Parton took this ram with its abnormal left horn in the Umkomaas Valley of the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, South Africa.

should try for this ram. The wind was in our favour, so off we went. I took the lead with the shooting sticks, followed by Pero and my head tracker, Shibas, bringing up the rear and carrying my rifle.

By using the lay of the land and by only moving when the ram had his head down feeding we had managed to close the range to about 200 m. I advised Pero that, by the way the bull was moving, we should now move obliquely across the slope that we were on as this would bring the shooting range down to about 150 m. He agreed and we slowly angled closer to the ram.

After what seemed an eternity we had Pero set up on the short shooting sticks, watching the ram for a clear shot. Instead of presenting us with a clear shot the ram moved into a leafy bush underneath a buffalo thorn tree (*Ziziphus mucronata*) and lay down! We looked at each other and shook our heads; I wanted to laugh as the situation appealed to my quirky sense of humour. We must have waited for at least half an hour before the ram got to his legs, stretched and stepped out into the open once more. He was however facing directly towards us and both Pero and I thought it would be better to wait for a better shot to present itself. Then, as the ram turned up the slope and to the left, Pero fired his beautiful Holland & Holland .300" H&H Mag, a mate to his .375" that downed the blue duiker.

"Thwack!" resounded the shot on impact and the ram crumpled nose first into a clump of turpentine grass

(*Cymbopogon plurinodes*). I turned and shook the hand of a beaming Pero. It took us at least 40 minutes to get around to the now long-dead ram. Two things struck us as we looked him over. Firstly, his horns were closer to the 16" mark and secondly, he was very thin indeed. On closer inspection he was found to have the sum total of only three teeth! I personally do not think that this ram would have lasted more than another six months.

That night we sat under the great star-filled sky listening to the fierynecked nightjar (*Caprimulgus pectoralis*) and the occasional haunting call of the black cuckoo (*Cuculus clamosus*), wrapped up in our own thoughts.

The following day, after an uneventful morning, we headed to camp for a late brunch and a respite from the high humidity and heat that is common at the beginning of the season in South Africa. I suggested that we head back to where we had spotted the 27½" bull on the first afternoon and see if we could not find a bigger bull in the area. We agreed to do exactly that after a siesta.

At 3.30 pm we were once again perched on the same rock, scanning the bush and two little valleys that met 100 m below us. It had been no more than 10 minutes when Pero drew in a sharp breath and asked if I could see the three black blobs out in the open, way off in front of us on the top of the third hill. This hill was at least 5 km distant from our position.

"Those are nyala bulls! Let's get ourselves over there!"

I replied with great exuberance. We headed back down to the Toyota hunting truck with a good dash of speed.

We needed to get near those bulls before they disappeared back into the thick bush. Time was now of the essence as I eased the hunting truck carefully over the rough rock-strewn mountain road. I planned to drive behind the hill that the bulls were on and try to stalk in from there.

That is what we planned in theory.

The ridge that the bulls were on was at one point visible from the road that we were using to get behind them. As we drew level with the small clearing on this road Shibas tapped on the roof, telling us that the bulls were slowly walking away from our present position and that they were heading over the hill. We now had to revamp our plans and attempt to perform a stalk on the bulls from the clearing that they had just vacated.

We all agreed that this would work well as the wind had also shifted slightly in our favour. I told Pero that we would need to leave the rig and proceed on foot at right angles to the departed bulls. On the other side of the ridge, there was a stream and some big trees under which I had seen

nyala bulls dozing on several occasions over the past few years. My bet was that we would find the bulls under the trees after taking a drink.

After a careful stalk with a nice and wet stream crossing and cautious footwork amongst the loose rocks we got to the eastern side of the tree-studded clearing where I expected to find the bulls. We carefully glassed the area – nothing, not a thing! Then, no more than 30 m from our left out broke the three bulls! I made a hasty head check of the loping bulls. “Shoot the one at the back, he is very good. Shoot him!” I instructed and Pero did just that.

His .300" H&H Mag had spoken and the bull fell headlong into the grass and was dead in seconds. This bull was a great specimen indeed and measured 30⁵/₈" wet! Pero had added two more spiral-horned antelope to his collection.

Spiral Horn Valley had lived up to its reputation once more! The following day we moved Pero's safari to my home and hunted bushpig over our hounds for the next two days. Pero bagged a fine pig with his Rigby .470" NE Double Rifle. So ended a classic safari conducted with classic rifles.



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