

THE 5 TH DAY

Hilton Gary Sanders

It was 8 pm on a cold and rainy night when PH and outfitter, Graham Jones of Graham Jones Safaris, rolled up to the entrance steps of our home situated at York in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands (KZN) in his Toyota Hilux hunting truck. Graham had booked us to conduct the KZN section of a safari for his clients, Ramon and Cha-cha Gonzalez of Washington DC, USA.

The beginning of this safari had been conducted in Limpopo Province with Graham for a Livingstone eland, which Ramon had bagged the Friday before their Saturday transfer down to us. Ramon was after several more difficult-to-get species, namely a bushpig (*Potamochoerus porcus*) and a caracal (*Felis caracal*). After getting everyone

settled into their lodgings, we all headed for the dining room and a scrumptious meal prepared by Robyn, the lady who is definitely my better half!

Ramon wanted a bushpig for his trophy collection as well as to score gold in SCI's *Pigs of the World*. The caracal would give him a diamond in SCI's *Cats of the World*. Ramon has hunted extensively all around the world and was now on his 15th African safari. On six of his previous safaris he had tried to bag a bushpig but to no avail. Now that he was hunting with us I hoped to rectify the situation.

The cold grey dawn arrived a lot quicker than I think any of us would have like it to – we were all a tad tired after an evening of chatting and laughter around the dinner

A pigeon pair for Ramon on the fifth day.



table. We were bound for two properties in the Wartburg area. I knew that we would definitely find pigs there as we had done a recce for tracks during the week.

Bushpigs are nocturnal, notoriously difficult to hunt, very wily and some people even think them to be nearly as intelligent as humans. I must admit I have known the odd person or two during my lifetime that could learn a thing or two from the bushpig!

However, if a sounder of bushpigs finds a site that they like in a peaceful (not necessarily quiet) neighbourhood, they will make use of this spot as their nest for the duration of the daylight hours for weeks on end! We had found such a spot the week before on our recce and were now on our way there on this grey morning with intermittent drizzle.

After turning off from the tarred road onto the boundary between the two farms we were to hunt, we made a quick stop. My tracker, Shibas, and Graham's tracker, Last Born (Bono), locked the front hubs on my Toyota hunting truck and climbed onto the bullbar. This would be their eagle's lair from which to spot fresh bushpig tracks while we drove the roads, contours and waterways that laced the sugar-cane fields.

Slowly we trundled down the boundary road, eyes peeled for tracks, diggings, fresh dung, rolling and pieces of cane that were chewed and spat out. We neared where we had found tracks and diggings in a waterway. Here two pigs had uprooted a bunch of arum lilies from the deep black mud. This was the previous evening's handiwork. We were in business!

Whilst I sorted out the tracking collars for the hounds our apprentice, Geoffrey, got the picnic basket out and we enjoyed coffee and muffins on the go. Was that coffee good on such a chilly, wet morning! Shibas and Bono started to follow the tracks of the two pigs. It was not long before my radio crackled and Shibas announced that the tracks had crossed the tarred road. "No, not good!" were the unspoken words that ran through my brain. Even though the other side of the road was owned by the same landowner as the portion we were hunting, the landowner had requested us not to hunt on that side near his home. I asked Shibas to make very sure that the pigs had stayed on that side of the road and had not looped back on the side that we were on. His reply was that both he and Bono were 100% certain that the pigs had decided to lie up in a panel of tall, thick, mature cane right next to the tarred road, but just on the wrong side of it!

I informed both Graham and Ramon of the developments and told them we would have to shift our search to the rest of the farm and the neighbouring farm on the "right side" of the tracks. We were to look for pigs of the correct lineage! They both agreed and Ramon said he could not believe that bushpigs would lie up right next to such a busy road with traffic noise.

I told Ramon that we had on many occasions found a sounder of bushpigs and even a sow with very young piglets lying up in a panel of sugar cane right next to a labourer's compound, despite the noise and human traffic. I think the essence of the story is that so long as no one ventures into the cane and disturbs the sounder they feel safe.

We spent the next two hours driving and searching for tracks. We found the tracks of a sow that had three tiny piglets in tow. I explained that we do not run our hounds on sows with piglets. There are two reasons for this – firstly, it is unethical to hunt such young piglets and secondly, the sow is understandably ultra-protective, which in turn puts one's hounds in jeopardy. We decided to move farms, this time heading for a property near the village of Dalton and its accompanying sugar mill.

The ominous grey clouds seemed to lower their pregnant bellies closer to the earth with every minute as we neared the next farm that we were going to hunt. Yet one cannot let things like these dampen one's spirit. Slowly I eased the rig off the tar onto the gravel road that would take us up a hill where we had often found pigs over the last 12 years.

After a half an hour of slow and methodical traversing of contours, waterways and ridge roads, we had only found a bunch of week-old tracks. Then, splat, splat, followed by a hundred more splats of heavy raindrops. In less than a minute both trackers and Geoffrey were chilled and soaked to the bone. It was now absolutely pointless to continue as all signs, let alone scent that the hounds could follow, would be washed away.

Our second day saw us heading for a couple of properties in the Fawn Leas area. We followed the same procedure as the previous day. Soon we found a set of good tracks and what's more they were headed for a block of tall cane. We were now all in high spirits and excited as to what looked like a sure thing. The tracks meandered all over the place, across sprouting cane fields to a waterway where the first pig had been joined by a second. A little further down the waterway the grass was flattened and twisted into a bunch of grubby "plats" – evidence of a roll-over party! Again the tracks were going straight in the direction of the big block of mature cane.

On the corner of the topmost block of cane the tracks ran straight into the cane. Without wasting any time we sorted out the tracking collars and put them on the hounds. We were ready to put the hounds on the tracks. Away went Soot and Chase, bawling on the nose-filling scent. They worked methodically straight through one block after the next, heading for the valley.

We drove around to the bottom of the blocks and waited, listening to the approaching hounds. There, almost at the centre of the contour along the bottom of the lowest block, out popped the hounds! They cast to and fro, then picked up the scent again and aimed for the steep and heavily bushed valley below. We zipped around in the rig and cut the hounds off. Sure enough the two pigs had moved into the valley for their day's siesta.

We checked the rest of these two properties and found the tracks of two other sounders; one had a sow with piglets and the other consisted of three big pigs. Yet both these sounders had dropped off into the bush to rest. Due to the steepness of the terrain as well as the very thick bush that contained a lot of *Acacia ataxacantha* (flame acacia) I decided it was not the place to try and run a pig for a 72-year-old client! This flame thorn is hell on one's clothes, skin and ears.

We shifted our focus to another property in the



Harburg area and found the same scenario, with the pigs lying up in a deep gorge. I think at this late stage in the cane harvesting season the pigs had grown tired of being disturbed by cane fires and decided to lie up in a more peaceful neighbourhood.

On the third day we set out for an area on the KZN North Coast; here I had high hopes of finding a sounder in the cane that would contain a pig for Ramon. The sugar mill down at the coast had closed for the season and the cane harvesting had come to an end. This meant that the pigs should be back to living in the cane.

It took us no time at all to find the tracks of a sounder of five pigs. They were living in a block of carry-over cane

below an old, abandoned compound. Soon the hounds had a huge sow up and running. Like a flash of lightning she ran from one end of the long hill-hugging panels to the other. This went on for about 20 minutes and then the sow literally took to the hills.

We saw her heading for a macadamia plantation way in the distance. The long and the short of it is that this sow led the pack on a long run for four hours before she crossed the boundary onto a neighbouring company-owned property where hunting is not allowed. We intercepted the hounds and pulled them off. Yet another good but frustrating day's hunting in Africa had come to a close.

Day four saw us battling the elements with an early-morning shower that killed the scent for the hounds. We held a counsel of war and decided that as tomorrow was the fifth day and we still needed to get up to northern Natal to hunt a caracal, we would hunt bushpig until 12 noon the following day, being Thursday. This would leave us with Friday and Saturday to hunt a caracal.

We started the day earlier than the previous four days and were soon working out the meanderings of two bushpigs that had been knocking over green maize, checking for ripe cobs. The tracks led us to a thin strip of bush between the maize lands and cut sugar-cane fields. There is a small river between the bush and the cane fields. Above those cane fields ran another ribbon of bush.

I told Ramon and Graham I thought that once the pigs were "put up" by the hounds one would break away and look for a way out of the bush. This would mean head-

You cannot let a 72-year-old client hunt behind the hounds in this!



ing down the river valley or out across the cane fields. If the trackers and Geoffrey positioned themselves above the bush with the wind blowing from them onto the bush there was a very good chance that the pigs would head out over the cane fields.

Once we had positioned ourselves across the valley from the bush, halfway down the cut cane fields, I radioed Geoffrey and Shibas and asked them to put the strike hounds onto the tracks. We heard the hounds, Banjo and Jackson, working the scent down into the bush. The next instant they were standing baying at the nest and the deep, guttural grunts of the pigs could also be heard! After about a minute a pig broke from the nest and ran in a circle of about 50 m (53 yards) with the bawling hounds in tow, then back to the nest.

A brief stall followed and then Fudge and Crackle, the two hounds that Geoffrey had just released, reached the nest with a roar. The hounds took off straight down the slope towards the river. I looked across the cane fields to work out where the pig might go. Then I spotted not one but two bushpigs flying across the open field towards the next ribbon of bush.

I shouted to Graham and Ramon to run for the truck as we needed to get up above that ribbon of bush. We drove up and around the end of the ribbon. I parked near a huge compost heap and told Ramon and Graham that the pigs would probably head for a wattle plantation to our rear. We then positioned ourselves in between the ribbon of bush and the wattle plantation.

There they come! The pair had broken cover and was running diagonally across the open cane field towards the

wattle plantation. Going down on our knees we awaited the advancing pigs as they bobbed their way across the field.

"Steady, steady, let them get closer, shoot now!" I ordered.


Ramon fired at the leading pig, the boar; he then turned to the left and fired at the sow as she turned to pass to the left of our position. He quickly reloaded and fired two more rounds at the fleeing sow. I saw her swaying to the left and she started to slow down. We followed the sow, which the hounds had now stopped. She was down and dead. At last Ramon had his bushpig!


Graham said that he was sure the boar had been hard hit as he too had visibly slowed down on the first shot. I walked out towards where the boar had been when the shot was fired. I found the tracks and, looking to my right, saw the collapsed boar lying with his back to me. Ramon was going to take a pigeon pair back to the States with him! It was now 11:45 on the fifth day. What a relief that what was probably my most difficult bushpig hunt had such a great outcome!



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