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Richard and his blue wildebeest taken with the .500 S&W hand cannon.



Hand CANNONS

Hilton Gary Sanders

Cautiously my client Richard Eales and I worked our way towards the yet unseen but very vocal blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*) that we not only could hear but smell. Blue wildebeest have a sweet, pungent scent that tends to hang in the air even long after they have decamped. The blue wildebeest is the larger bush/savannah-dwelling cousin to the black wildebeest, also known as the white-tailed gnu (*Connochaetes gnou*), which inhabits grassy plains.

Richard, who has hunted with me several times previously, was once again hunting with one of his handguns. This time he used his .500 S&W built by Smith and Wesson Performer Centre with a 10-inch barrel and integrated sight rail. It is a marvellous piece of engineering and definitely not what one would normally deem to be a handgun, but rather a hand cannon! On a previous hunt I had watched Richard down a trophy common reedbuck at well over 200 metres (220 yards) and probably closer to 300 metres (330 yards) in poor light! That time Richard was using a .7-30 Waters-Thompson Contender with a 14-inch barrel. Make no mistake, Richard can get these hand cannons to talk!

The going was slow and a tad painful as we worked in and out of the head-high canopy of the sweet-thorn trees (*Acacia karroo*) all decked out in their summer tunics of full leaf. Every time that one's knees or hands touched the ground underneath the outstretched and interlaced canopy of branches from a mini forest of these typically

African trees, one ran the risk of picking up a needle-sharp thorn of 5 centimetres (2 inches) long or more. Twist and turn, slowly does it was the order of the stalk.

We came to the edge of a small grassy plain or clearing and slowly stood up with our eyes scanning to and fro for signs of the blue wildebeest. On the other side of the plain we saw the back end of a single blue-black rump disappearing into the long, waving grass topped by the canopy of yet another myriad of sweet-thorn trees. I suggested that we should wait a few minutes and then skirt the lower left-hand edge of the plain, thus keeping the wind in our favour. By waiting a bit, it would hopefully allow the wildebeest time to move deeper into the trees so that we would not bump into him as we continued the stalk.

After about five to ten minutes we slowly moved around the edge of the plain, with all of our senses in tune for signs of our quarry. We continued like this for about 200 metres (219 yards) until we reached a tall bottlebrush aloe (*Aloe rupestris*) which I had guessed to be about 50 metres (54 yards) to the right of where we had seen the disappearing butt end of the animal. I did not want to go in right up close, just in case he was standing in the shadows on the fringe of the trees.

As we entered the shadows, we crouched down and let our eyes become accustomed to the gloom and shade. After a minute or so we began our stalk once more. It never ceases to amaze me as to how quietly a herd of wild animals can move and then at other times how vocal they

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Karen and Mark Hampton with Mark's black springbuck hunted with the author.



Mark Hampton and his common reedbuck hunted with a TC in .300" JDJ.



Richard Eales and his prize zebra stallion.

are. These wildebeest were deeper into the thorn thicket and still making a reasonable bit of noise, the grating nasal sound so often made by the bulls.

Several years ago when hunting with a client, Jose Vieira, we stalked and followed a herd of about one hundred and some change blue wildebeest on sound alone for a good two hours before we were in a position to see any of them, let alone a good bull. We were on the opposite side of a small river to the grazing herd and followed their progress by the continuous plaintive bleating of calves and the gentle, soft lowing of the cows. These sounds were punctuated from time to time by the more nasal grunt of the bulls.

Eventually we crossed the small river and worked our way around the side of the herd, positioning ourselves slightly ahead of the now spread out and slowly grazing herd. Here Jose and I waited for what we hoped would be a chance at a shot at a bull. It was not long and a good bull of 30 inches stepped clear of two cows and a red-coloured calf. It was his last mistake on this earth as Jose shot him with his .300 Win Mag.

Now back to our cat-and-mouse stalk on the wildebeest that Richard and I were dogging. The sun was getting higher and hotter with a good bit of humidity thrown in for good measure. Anyone that has had the opportunity to hunt KwaZulu-Natal's bush-clad river valleys, namely those of the mighty Umkomaas River, Bushman's River, Mooi River or Thukela River, especially in summer, will tell you of the heat, humidity and thick vegetation and the prolific birdlife and accompanying insects. This hunt was no different!

After what seemed to be and in actual fact was most of the morning, we finally closed the gap on the blue wildebeest bull. We came up on him fairly suddenly. I flicked out the long shooting sticks and Richard slipped his hand cannon from the shoulder holster that held it snug under his left arm. He rested the butt of the revolver and his cupped hands in the V of the sticks, cocked, aimed and let go with a shot all in one fluid movement.

On the shot, the bull that had been standing facing to our left at about 80 metres (87½ yards) from us, reared up and flinched away from us as its shoulders shuddered under the impact of the 400-grain Claw soft nose. The bull pirouetted a full 180 degrees before tearing off into the bush on a mad headlong rush. I looked at Richard and nodded, telling him I was sure that the bull was in the bag.

I asked Shibas my tracker to bring Toffee, my Jack Russell, up to where the wildebeest had been standing on taking the shot. Toffee has been an absolute boon to both me and many clients in recovering wounded game. Some of these animals were found already dead while others he had to track and bring to bay for us so that the client could finish them off.

With a quick shake of his body from nose to tail Toffee was off. Here and there we found tracks of the departed wildebeest as we followed Toffee's waving, stumpy tail. In two ticks Toffee was gone; then off to our left we heard one short sharp bark, followed by silence. Shibas said that the bull was dead and off to our left, judging by Toffee's behaviour. The next instant Toffee jumped up in the long grass to our left running towards us. He was coming to

fetch us and show us "his" quarry!

The bull was lying on his chest facing away from us in a heap of brush and amongst sweet-thorn trees. There was a tremendous amount of blood at his final resting place, yet along the route of his death rush there was very little blood. Richard had harvested a good old mature bull with a well-placed shot. This I was very glad about as a blue wildebeest can soak up lead and seem to get healthier with each shot.

As we still had the afternoon, Richard and I decided to have lunch whilst the guys caped the wildebeest and then head out and see if we could add a Burchell's zebra to the bag. Now Richard has hunted a lot and has shot almost everything that there is to hunt in Southern Africa several times over, with the exception of some of the mini antelope species, which we will be working on later this year. This means that it is fun hunting with him as we always find something to hunt, be it with rifle, handgun or bow!

I feel it fitting to mention at this point that the vast majority of the handgun hunters that I have had the privilege of hunting with over the last couple of decades and then some, have all been very good shots as well as hunters that have really been prepared to work hard for their trophies. I would even go so far as to stick my neck out and say that percentage-wise the average handgun hunter is a better shot than the average rifle hunter. I think that the reason for this is that handgun hunters on the whole tend to practise with their weapons far more than the average rifle hunters do.

One hunter that stands head and shoulders above many good hunters who were also excellent shots is a Missourian by the name of Mark Hampton. Mark and his wife Karen hunted with me in the early 1990s. Mark used a Thompson Contender in .300" JDJ and boy, could he shoot! Mark's favourite position was to shoot over his knees, when sitting flat on his rear end.

We hunted the Eastern Free State as well as the KZN Midlands for those lovely critters that inhabit the rolling, open grasslands of the high country. The species that we targeted were black springbuck, grey rhebuck, common reedbuck and oribi. All of these animals Mark hunted and took with single well-placed shots. The common reedbuck and grey rhebuck were both shot at a distance of over 300 metres (327 yards)!

It was around 1.30 pm when we were all back in the hunting truck and rolling away from the skinning shed in search of a zebra stallion for Richard. The sun was at the top of its daily arc through the African sky and we could feel it! We had seen a herd of zebra up in the hills off to the north-west of us where we had left the Toyota hunting truck earlier that morning when starting our stalk on the blue wildebeest. That is where we were headed.

On glassing the hills we saw that the zebra were not where we had last seen them. My bet was they were headed for water or that they had already had their midday drink. We once again left the hunting truck and headed off on foot. The terrain between the hills and the river was

cut at right angles by a lot of small gullies. It was up one of these gullies that we headed in search of the missing herd of zebra.

It was not long before Shibas and I cut the tracks of a herd of about nine zebra heading towards the distant waterhole. We were sure that this was the same herd we had seen in the distance earlier that day. We slowly started to follow the tracks. However, the wind was all wrong and touching the backs of our necks with its long cool fingers.

I said to both Richard and Shibas that we should rather make a wide sweep and approach the waterhole from the leeward side. This way we could intercept the herd on their way in or hopefully follow their tracks away from the waterhole but with the wind working for us. That is what we decided to do and so followed a long walk at a reasonable pace that left our shirts stuck to our sweating backs.

Upon reaching the waterhole we found that the zebra herd was already there along with a fairly large herd of impala. I would say that the herd was in the region of 80 to 100 strong. By the way, the zebra were behaving, just standing under the trees in the shade and only occasionally swishing their tails or stamping a hoof in a sharp and irritable manner at the tormenting flies. I surmised that the herd had already slaked their thirst.

Richard and I left Shibas and Toffee hunkered down in the shade of a guarri bush (*Euclea natalensis*) whilst Richard and I wormed our way closer using a gully and the tall grass as cover. Our objective was to reach the deep shade provided by a couple of large paperbark trees (*Acacia sieberiana*) near the edge of the waterhole. There was also a small mound of earth with grass growing out of the top that would give us extra cover.

We eventually reached the mound of earth and lay behind it side by side with just our foreheads and eyes peeping over. I could see the stallion off to the left of the mare that was the "central" animal in the resting group.

However, we did not have a clear shot. This meant we were to wait. Now I have nothing against waiting but when a bundle of tiny little black ants are crawling up your trouser leg and doing a teeth-tongue-tip test as they proceed, it takes all of one's concentration to not wriggle about!

After what seemed like at least three ant lifetimes there was a shifting in the herd and the stallion with his thick and chunky neck and legs moved to present Richard with a good, clear shot into the front of the chest. The S&W boomed, shattering the heat-induced silence as the 400-grain Claw shattered the zebra's bulging chest muscles and brisket and then proceeded to punish both the heart and left lung. Richard was thrilled to have his prize stallion at last.



Toffee, the author's fearless Jack Russell.

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