



Daniel with his magnificent grey rhebuck trophy.

It's simply **BLACK AND GREY!**

Hilton Gary Sanders

I awoke to the sound of the wind as it howled and moaned its way past the lodge for the second consecutive morning. This was definitely not the weather that I was hoping for on this safari in the mountains of the central Karoo. Daniel Mulholland of the UK was on his third safari with me and we were after five species to add to his trophy collection.

Before I carry on with the species that we were to hunt, I must tell you a bit about the ever-necessary species to the professional hunting industry and that is the client of course! The 33-year-old Daniel the hunter is a good mix of English ethics and American collector mania. You see, Daniel is the secretary of the London Chapter of SCI and therefore is in the process of building a rather impressive collection of

trophies comprising species from all five continents.

However, Daniel's quest for record-book quality trophies is tempered by his unbending ethics and beliefs in fair-chase hunting at all times. He also doesn't allow the tape measure to determine the quality of a particular hunt or stalk. Daniel is a gentleman and sportsman of the first order and a great client to hunt with!

As I was getting ready for the day's hunting I heard

Gerrit, a young PH who hunts for us, bringing in the coffee. Gerrit Craffert had accompanied me on this safari as we were hunting a new area for the first time and he needed to see the place. Despite the wind I was looking forward to the day that lay ahead!

The previous day Daniel had secured a very impressive Cape eland (*Tragelaphus oryx* or *Taurotragus oryx*) and a good blesbuck for his trophy room. We had also seen a couple of good klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*) as well as grey rhebuck rams (*Pelea capreolus*), both of which were on Daniel's wish list along with a black wildebeest (*Connochaetes gnou*). Needless to say we were both excited in anticipation of a fruitful day ahead.

As the hunting truck rumbled out of camp, just a wee bit ahead of sunrise, we were in high spirits with lots of chatting taking place while we scanned the open yet convoluted terrain for signs of any of the three species we were still after. In a case like this where my client has a list of species I definitely like to hunt opportunistically!

We had decided on heading for a couple of areas where our game scout, Ivan, had seen good-sized herds of grey rhebuck on numerous occasions. The first two areas proved to be fruitless due to being in deep and cold shade as the sun had not reached into the valleys. Nor would we expect to find the herds on top of the now windswept summits!

The grey rhebuck or "vaalribbok", as it is known in Afrikaans, is a very unique animal in several ways. Firstly they are the only species in their genus and secondly they are only found in South Africa. This makes them a sought-after species by collectors. However, many hunters never get to hunt these wonderful and unique creatures as they inhabit high altitudes and often rocky areas that makes the going hard for the not so fit or mobile.

The grey rhebuck inhabits pretty much the same terrain as the southern mountain reedbuck (*Redunca fulvorufula fulvorufula*). However, they are not found at altitudes as low as the southern mountain reedbuck, preferring an altitude band of 1 400 m (4 600 ft) to 3 000 m (9 850 ft) above sea level. Out of interest, the English sportswear manufacturer Reebok derived their name from these awesome little antelope, which are very fleet of foot and athletic in running across the mountains.

They have outsized ears and eyes. Their eyesight is phenomenal and often all a hunter sees of his quarry is the raised fluffy white tails as the herd bounds away in alarm, only to stop and look back on the next mountain! They have an average weight of 20 kg (44 lbs) and stand 75 cm (29") at the shoulder. Many people thus class them as mini antelope. I think that this is a borderline classification.

These little fellows are rather woolly with a grey-coloured coat. Their coats have a distinct "musty" scent to them as well as a slightly oily undercoat; this helps with the extremely cold temperatures that they need to contend with in their mountainous home. Grey rhebuck are grass-eaters, favouring the short grasses prevalent under Afro-montane conditions.

As Ivan inched the Toyota hunting truck up yet another steep road, a female grey rhebuck was spotted on the opposite slope catching a spot of sun. We stopped and glassed the slope. A second doe was spotted and then the air was rent by a sharp nasal whistle as the ram broke cover from the rocky, bush-clad stream bed below us and between us and his two does. They headed up the slope and away from us.

As we climbed off the truck we spotted another seven does coming out of the stream bed where they had been drinking at a small pool under a rock ledge. There are

numerous sources stating that the grey rhebuck is totally independent of water. I have, however, noticed that these animals will walk long distances up and down very steep mountain slopes in order to drink. They seem to prefer to drink between 8 am and 10 am and it appears that they are fairly regular as far as timing goes.

These observations have not only been made at one or two locations but over at least fifteen different locations in the Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Northern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal as well as in Mpumalanga. Shibas, my head tracker, has his home in Lesotho in the Black Mountain area and he too states that the grey rhebuck that live there also drink very regularly.

Daniel and I headed down the slope to a slight shelf for want of a better term, where we could use a termite mound as a dead rest; Daniel did not want to make a long shot on a small animal off the sticks.

When hunting grey rhebuck there are a few prerequisites that will make one's hunt more enjoyable. Firstly, a flat-shooting rifle firing a reasonable bullet weight (shots are often made under windy conditions and over longish distances), topped off with a good scope is important! Secondly, a bit of work in the gym beforehand with lots of stairway exercises plus a good worn-in pair of hunting boots will definitely help with hunter comfort!

Daniel snuggled in behind the ant heap with his custom-built 7x64, topped off with a variable Swarovski scope. The angle was very sharp so Daniel had to slide the butt under his arm pit and nestle his cheek up on the comb; not good, definitely not good!

The rangefinder told us that the distance was a cool 451 m (493 yards) – one very long shot on a half-pint animal in anyone's books. Taking his time, Daniel steadied his breathing and placed the crosshairs two inches over the

top of the ram's shoulder and two inches forward towards the head to account for both the long distance and wind factor. "Baaaahm!" Then, as if in slow motion, we watched the ram slowly and gracefully wheel to the right on its back legs as if in a slow pirouette before an audience at the St Petersburg Ballet Company.

Daniel had made a really good shot on the ram. He went slowly up the slope for about another 20 m (22 yards) and lay down behind a small bush. While Daniel and I watched the spot where the ram had gone down, Gerrit headed up the ridge to our right to retrieve the ram. His ascent was accompanied by the alarm calls of the ram's now masterless harem of nine does.

After about 20 minutes Gerrit called me on the radio to ask how Daniel was to mount his ram. I answered that he was going to do a shoulder mount. Gerrit then asked if he could rucksack the ram out. "Yes!" came the joyous answer from Daniel. It was not even 9 am on the second day of the safari!

Daniel was now three fifths of his way through his wish list, with the grey rhebuck being one of his priority species. After a relaxing lunch we once again headed out into the hunting veld. We were after a black wildebeest and a klipspringer. We had seen several good rams of both species but none of them were quite what we were looking for.

Daniel had hunted a black wildebeest in Namibia on a previous safari. The black wildebeest population found in Namibia has its origins in animals that were translocated there from South Africa by game ranchers. Daniel was now keen to hunt a bull in the area where the black wildebeest historically occurred.

The black wildebeest is a conservation miracle. By the turn of the 20th century, they had been hunted to almost



Daniel and his black wildebeest mentioned in the article.

total extinction by the white settlers in South Africa. The main reason for their slaughter had been to remove competition for grazing with domestic stock. Vast numbers had been shot to feed diamond diggers as well as the British army during the Anglo-Boer War.

A few far-sighted farmers in the Free State began to conserve the last few remaining remnants of this species that occurred on their properties. These few remaining animals are the forefathers of our current national population, which now has a conservation status of "Least Threatened".

However, more recently our national black wildebeest herd has faced several other threats. Firstly, crossbreeding the black wildebeest with its close cousin, the blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), has resulted in many hybrids exhibiting features of both species. There are documented cases of this occurring in several provinces and crossbreeding has been attributed to keeping both populations on small game farms.

The next threat took place when the species was placed on the "Threatened or Protected Species" (ToPS) list by the former Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, and his crew. Once the farming community at large became aware of the proposed legislation to "clamp down" on the perceived rights of farmers to hunt and deal in their herds of black wildebeest, the following occurred: Instead of wanting to comply with the proposed legislation, many owners of black wildebeest herds took the view that they were the custodians of these animals and therefore could see no need for interference from Government! So a bunch of black wildebeest owners lost perspective of the bigger picture. Culling teams were called in to wipe out entire herds or good portions of the black wildebeest herds before the new legislation was promulgated. This is what happens when there are short-sighted people involved on both sides!

But back to our hunt . . . The property that we were hunting has a population in excess of 200 black wildebeest. This population is scattered fairly widely over the plains and flat plateaus of the 15 000 ha (37 000 acres) of the total property. Black wildebeest are found in open grassland as well the Karoo whereas blue wildebeest prefer the lower lying savannah regions. We saw many small herds consisting of a herd bull, a bunch of cows and last year's calves; the current calving season had not begun as of yet. Herd bulls as well as solitary territorial bulls fight fiercely to protect what they deem to be their space. I know of a farmer in the Noupoot area who keeps solitary bulls in the camps where he runs his sheep. I hear that they are hell on hooves for would-be stock thieves!

When disturbed, these herds will bolt off on a game of follow-my-leader across the veld; white tails swishing from side to side and heads held low (the black wildebeest is

also known as white-tailed gnu). They will canter in large circles, then cut sharply to the left or right, and then run back in the general direction of the original circle. From time to time a bull will feign an attack on the herd member closest to the leader. This type of behaviour has earned black wildebeest the title of "clowns of the veld".

After about an hour of slow driving in a northerly direction from camp we sighted a lone bull standing at the base of a steep, rock-strewn mountain. Ivan eased the truck to a stop and we glassed the bull, which was about 350 m (383 yards) from us. Before I could make a comment Gerrit gave a low whistle and said that this was the type of bull we were looking for. He had hard bosses, a good drop to his horns and the tips came well up on the return sweep. He also had a good spread to his horns; a definite shooter! Black wildebeest have horns that sweep out towards the front of the head and not sideways as in blue wildebeest, whose horns rather resemble those of a Cape buffalo.

Black wildebeest also have an erect mane that runs from the shoulder to the back of the head; there is also an erect "mane" of hair down the centre of the face. A "beard" extends from the base of the throat to just in front of the belly. All this additional hair makes this animal look much bigger than it actually is. The average height of the adult is about 1,2 m (40") at the shoulder and the weight about 170 kg (375 lbs).

The bull watched us as we watched him for about three minutes and then headed straight up the mountain to disappear off the lip of a small ledge. Checking the wind, I decided we should stalk this bull. We headed straight up towards where he had disappeared. I whispered to Daniel that by the looks of the lay of the land, if the bull were to decide to depart from the ledge we would get a shot at him from no more than 100 m to 150 m (110 yards to 165 yards).

As we crested out the bull was directly in front of us at about 80 m (88 yards). I popped the shooting sticks up and Daniel was in them in a fluid flash. The bull shook his head at us and started to move off to the left. Gerrit whistled and the bull stopped to look at us. The 7x64 barked once; the bull reared and took off up the slope.

We watched as the bull stopped halfway up the mountain at the top of a sand spit. He tottered around, fell, and then rolled down and over back onto his wobbly feet. Then he was gone, over the ridge of the sand spit. We followed. On topping the spit some five minutes later we spotted the stricken bull lying down in the upper reaches of a gully or water course on the opposite side of the sand spit. We got Daniel around the bull from above so that he could deliver the coup de grâce.

Daniel had himself a very good bull after a successful stalk and follow-up. All that remained was to take photos and do a cut-and-carry recovery! By the way, Daniel shot a magnificent klipspringer the following morning. 🐾