

A Gem of a  
*Zululand Cat*  
*Panthera pardus*

## Hilton Gary Sanders

**As I sit and write this article thinking back on a warm Zululand, it is busy snowing. No, I am not in Europe or North America. My clients and I have taken a break from hunting grey rhebuck as it is now snowing, with the icy wind pushing the falling flakes parallel to the ground!**

The doors to the arrivals in the Richards Bay airport opened to reveal the jovial form of returning client Dick Rosenberg of Minnesota, USA, and his trolley laden with baggage and rifle case. The air was soon filled with laughter and friendly greetings as Dick's joviality is very infectious!

Dick had flown nearly halfway around the world at very short notice to take up a spare leopard tag that had become available due to a cancellation. This would be Dick's third safari with Madubula Safaris. My friend, fellow outfitter and owner of Madubula Safaris, John Abraham, had asked me to conduct the hunt as I had a gap in my own bookings.

Hunting leopards, be it over my hounds or over bait as is the

case when hunting for trophy leopards in South Africa, has always been a passion of mine. It is a hunt that needs to be conducted with a combination of one's brains, a good bit of hard work and a dollop of instinct.

The leopard (*Panthera pardus*), and that includes both the African and Asiatic members of the family, is classed as one sub-species. This makes this large cat the most widely distributed member of all the big cats. Found from the tip of the Southern Cape in South Africa all the way into South-East Asia, there are a few gaps here and there but that is still some distribution!

These cats are not only super predators, they are also super survivors and highly adaptable in this changing world of ours. It is not uncommon to hear of sightings of leopards in and amongst or very close to human habitation. Several years ago there were sightings reported of a leopard in the Pretoria suburb of Waterkloof. A few people even took photos of this leopard or leopards.

My home is situated 35 kilometres (22 miles) east of Pietermaritzburg, the capital city of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, and about 95 kilometres (59 miles) north-east of the metropolitan area of greater Durban. For the last six years my family and I have monitored a female leopard that has raised a total of eight cubs over this period. The remarkable thing is that these cubs have all been raised in a home range that is slap bang in the middle >>



Bongani prepares the bait tree.

>>> of a well-populated rural area with herd boys, wood gatherers and packs of mongrels. There is a high incidence of traditional (illegal) hunting with dogs and yet these cats are still around and seem to be thriving.

The first day saw us heading out to check Dick's rifle, followed by a tour of the baits that the farm manager had set up prior to our arrival. One of these baits had been hit by a good tom about seven days before we arrived but he had not returned for some reason. None of the other baits had been touched before or since. However, it was only day one of this safari and I was very positive that we would have a good cat on bait soon.

As we headed for the second last bait I eased the Toyota Land Cruiser through a dry, stony stream crossing. I was half hanging out of the driver's window and Bongani was sitting on the bullbar; both of us were scanning the ground for tracks just as we had been doing for most of the morning. We both saw the pug marks at the same time. I brought the Cruiser to a standstill and climbed out checking the tracks on my side whilst Bongani checked them on his side of the rig. I told Dick that they were the tracks of a good tom and his face beamed with a huge smile.

It is at crossings like these, or where two streams meet, or where two dusty roads join up that one often finds leopard tracks left behind from nightly hunting excursions. If one follows the tracks left by the prowling predator, one will see where the cat has left the road or climbed up and out of the dry stream or river bed to inspect the surrounding bush for prey.

My trackers Bongani, Vincent, Freedom and I very slowly, carefully and methodically spread out and proceeded up the dirt tracks which formed the road we had been travelling along in the

Cruiser. We kept our eyes peeled, searching to see where the tom had left or returned to the road. The cat had done a fair bit of meandering. His tracks returned from the left-hand side of the road and continued down the road for another 50 metres (52 yards) before heading off into the bush once again. This time they were more purposeful and cut away from the road at a 45-degree angle to the west.

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The tracks headed in a fairly straight line, detouring only to avoid a guarri bush (*Euclea natalensis*) or acacia tree. He was hungry and on the prowl. Leopards are opportunistic feeders and will

Dick also took this giraffe on the same safari as his leopard.





The blind.

eat almost anything they can catch, including fish or what they can scavenge.

It is interesting to note that the occurrence of man-eating leopards in Africa is not all that common. A few years ago, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife requested that I take my hounds up to the Hluhluwe area and investigate a case of a young woman that had been killed by a leopard. This turned out to be a single, fairly young male that had been cornered at a waterhole which had been fenced very securely with thorn bushes. The only exit was past the young woman who had come to collect water. This was not a case of man-eating but rather a "flight versus fight" issue.

I have found that leopards tend to favour the buffalo thorn (*Ziziphus mucronata*) as well as the tamboti tree (*Spirostachys africana*) as scratching trees. Of course they do use other trees but here in Zululand they do seem to prefer the buffalo thorn.

In Asia and more specifically India, however, there is a much higher prevalence of man-eating. I feel a lot of the blame for this type of behaviour by the leopards there can be laid at the feet of the burial/cremation practices of the Hindus. This is especially so in

times of drought or famine when more people are dying than normal and the burial rites are not fully completed. This then forms a free source of meat for the opportunistic cats. If one reads Jim Corbett's books one will see some rather impressive tallies of human life racked up by the man-eating leopards and tigers of India.

Back to our safari: The big tom then walked across a dry stock dam and sat on his haunches at the foot of a scented thorn tree (*Acacia nilotica*). The imprint of his hocks and where his tail had "swished" to and fro could easily be seen in the dust. Here the tom had reached up and dug his claws deep into the bark and scratched downwards. There was both fresh and old scratching on the trunk. Some of the scratches were level with my head; this was a good tom and we had found one of his favourite trees.

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Bongani and I then decided that this tree would make a good bait tree. We agreed that due to the wind we would set the blind up under a scruffy, hanging guarri tree. The cat would sit or crouch on one branch and would have to reach out for the bait with both front paws as it hung in front of him. This would then give Dick a good shot into the cat's back between the shoulder blades.

Bongani and Freedom took off up the tree effortlessly and started to prepare the branches so that there would be no obstructions to hinder Dick's view of the cat or to cause any deflections of his bullet. Bongani also piled and stuffed cut thorn bushes into the fork of the tree above the "sitting" branch. This would stop the cat from gaining access to the bait from above or from behind the trunk of the tree. If this occurred we would be snookered! >>

>>> Once we were sure that everything was 100% with the bait tree we carefully hoisted up a leg of giraffe and wired it securely to the overhanging branch. The last thing you want is for the cat to abscond with the bait. We then turned our attention to where we were going to site the blind. We cleaned out the underneath of the guarri tree, so that we could set up my pop-up blind "inside" the tree. The pop-up would help to keep our scent in and conceal us as it is black on the inside, thus creating a black "hole". Just a bit of judicious use of our bait bucket's vile smelling concoction was all that was left to do as we departed for camp.

All was now set for our return to camp for a brunch and a spot of giraffe hunting. If the bait was hit that night we would start to sit the following afternoon.

The next morning we headed for the bait line with great anticipation; we were to start with the "new bait". Yes! There were once again tracks on the dusty road just where we had found them the day before. The pug marks were on top of our vehicle tracks from the day before. The proof of the pudding, so to speak, would be to see if the bait had been taken.

All of a sudden there were two stubby, spotted front legs in my binos as I scanned under the bait tree. He was here! I reached over and tapped Dick on the knee. As we looked back at the base of the tree, he was gone just as silently as he had appeared.

We stopped on the edge of the dry dam opposite the bait tree. We did not need binos to see that the cat had eaten about 5 kg (11 lbs) of meat from the giraffe leg. We were in business! The rest of the morning was spent cutting the other baits; we did not need the tom to feed on one of the other baits by chance whilst we sat waiting for him at the "new bait".

After a good brunch we headed back for the blind. We placed three blankets on the floor as well as covered both the plastic chairs with blankets. I wanted to be sure that no foreign sound would alert the tom to our presence. Dick's rifle was secure in the rest and set up on the spot where we expected the tom to sit and feed.

With a bottle of water to drink and two empty 2ℓ soft drink bottles we were ready for the wait. We said goodbye to the trackers and to Fix-it, our driver, then listened as the sounds of the disappearing Cruiser dwindled. I quietly called them on the hand-held radio to make sure that our communications were in order.

Slowly our ears tuned in to the bush sounds coming to life after the Cruiser had gone. Birds and insects alike sang out, a veritable orchestra! When sitting in a blind I do not look at my watch as this seems to make the time pass very slowly indeed. I like to scan the area surrounding the bait and to get to know each and

every "nook and cranny" in all the different light and shadow phases of the passing sun.

The practice of scanning the area around the bait with my binos has over the years helped me to learn a lot about the creatures that one does not normally spend too much time studying, like insects, birds and even plants. I watched as an African hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) hopped from branch to branch and then back to the ground, flexing his headgear periodically.

At about 16:30 we heard a huge commotion coming from the direction where the dry stream bed and road intersected. This is where we had first seen the tom's tracks. The big male baboons were barking their defiant warning cries, telling all and sundry that danger was on the move. Yes, our tom was on the move! I looked across at Dick and nodded my head at his unspoken question.

It was not long before the baboons quieted down. About 20 minutes later a nyala started to give vent to a series of hoarse barks. Then a second nyala started to bark even closer to the blind. The nyala were no more than 100 metres (104 yards) from our blind. Then all went quiet, as it often does in the bush. Not even so much as a cricket made a sound. This I hoped was the quiet before the storm. I carefully scanned the perimeter of the dry dam from left to right and then back again. Nothing!


Then, as I rescanned the area, I noticed a pair of fork-tailed drongos (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) dipping up and down behind several clumps of knee-high grass. Their flight pattern was both determined and highly animated as they dive-bombed the area behind the grass.

My senses were now on high alert! I knew from this behaviour of the drongos that the tom was the target of their attentions. I had seen this scenario played out on my own front lawn when our house cat was the target of the dive bombers.

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No, he was still there; only now he stood on the branch below the bait. He stood with his mouth slightly open, panting and head held a tad lower than his shoulders. I nodded to Dick and saw him snuggle into the stock of his rifle. Boom! As the shot went off the tom disappeared from the lenses of my binos. I heard the thud as he hit the ground. I scanned the area underneath the bait tree. It was empty.

Dick gave me the thumbs up to indicate he felt it was a good shot and tapped the centre of his right shoulder. Quietly and carefully we exited the blind and circled wide to our left, all the time looking for the tom. Then we spotted his stretched out form under the low sweet thorns on the edge of the dam, behind the bait tree. There was a growing crimson pool slowly seeping into the dry earth. This tom was a goner.

Dick had made a good shot on a gem of a Zululand cat, and all before the sun set on the third day of his third African safari. 

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