



CAMEROON RAIN FOREST HUNTING - NOT FOR THE FAINT HEARTED	2006
---	-------------

Story by Peter Flack



Looking back over the month I have just spent in the rain forests of south eastern Cameroon, I can honestly say, without at all wishing to sound sensational or melodramatic, that I have never hunted in a more inhospitable and dangerous place in Africa. The inhospitality is caused mainly by the micro-predators - the ants, ticks, fleas, centipedes, millipedes, caterpillars, flies, bees, mosquitoes, insects and snakes - as well as the climate. Rain here is measured in metres - three and a half metres, on average, per annum - to be precise. And when it is not wet, it is so hot and humid that, within an hour of picking up tracks and walking on them, you have perspired right through your clothes and are sodden from head to toe.

Everything is wet. When you go to bed, your sheets are damp. When you wake the next morning, the clothes you put on are clammy. Within days, your camera gear has fogged up, the stock of your spare rifle is covered with green mould as is any unused leather gear. Any cut or scratch usually festers and eye, ear and lung infections are rife.

And yet it is important to hunt during the wettest part of the hunting season (June/July), as it is usually the most successful time. Rain washes away confusing tracks and makes it easier to walk quietly through the sodden forest. The drip drop of water filtering down through the overhead canopy after the rains helps to camouflage what noise you do make. Most importantly, rain makes the forest animals cold and uncomfortable. They move and search out open areas where they can dry out and warm up. It is this movement that provides the hunter with the chance he needs.

What makes it so dangerous is primarily two things - the claustrophobic confines of the 250 foot high, full canopy rain forest itself and the unrelenting pressure of the commercial bush meat market. The heavy undergrowth in the forest limits visibility to a maximum of 30 paces. Where the forest has been illegally over logged (as is usually the case) and sunlight has been allowed to penetrate the forest floor (this encourages a lush growth of thorn encrusted vines, creepers, lianas, shrubs and aspirant forest giants), visibility can be reduced to as little as five paces. In other words, when an animal first becomes aware of you, you are often slap bang in the middle of its flight or fight circle and which way it runs - at or away from you - is like betting on red at roulette. Poaching pressure exacerbates the issue - both the elephant and buffalo I shot carried shotgun slugs - two in the face for the elephant and one in the neck for the buffalo. A lot of these animals have worked out that offence is the best form of defense and unprovoked charges are a regular occurrence in the rain forests.

For example, in the week before I arrived, the head tracker, a Baka pygmy called Jean Quatre, of my highly experienced professional hunter, Geoffroy de Gentile, was attacked and killed by an elephant within 40 paces of him. Geoffroy heard the elephant trumpet and instinctively ran towards the sound but, by the time he arrived on the scene, his tracker of seven years was dead and the elephant was gone. As he explained, an elephant, buffalo or gorilla runs through the rain forest undergrowth as if it were a spider's web. For us feeble humans it takes roughly an hour to cover a kilometer through the intertwined morass. The 40 or so paces probably took Geoffroy half a minute. It was too long.

Jean Quatre was dead. There was not a drop of blood to be seen on his body but his chest and stomach were badly bruised. It looked as if he had been squashed. My first encounter with one of the huge, lowland, silver backs, one of whom had recently bitten off the arm of a villager from nearby Kalluma, nearly embarrassed me. From nowhere, a cacophony of screaming, shrieking, drumming and roaring erupted from the dense, dark, dampness to my left. The awful noise rose to a crescendo as branches broke like gun shots and vines snapped like fire crackers on the 5th of November. The torrent of sound approached at the break neck speed of a tornado.

Before I could help myself, I came as close to running away as I ever have. Even so, I levitated three paces backwards. My rifle automatically glued itself to my shoulder and, if someone had so much as breathed on my trigger finger, 400 grains of Federal's best would have blasted from the barrel of my .416 Rigby into the all enveloping, large, waxy green leaves which bulged toward me no more than six paces away. Even so, they still obscured whatever was making the truly horrendous noise. And then, total silence. Not an insect stirred. Not a millipede moved. Not a turaco kock-kock-kocked from the canopy above. Behind me, one of the pygmy trackers whispered, "Bobo" and I knew I had just experienced my first mock charge (as 99% of these charges are), from a lowland gorilla male unless, of course, you are a very unlucky Kalluma poacher who has, in all likelihood, shot a number of the gorilla's offspring.

So why hunt in this inhospitable and dangerous place? For the adventure, of course. For the novelty. For the unique, difficult to hunt, mysterious, rain forest inhabitants - forest elephant and sitatunga, bongo, dwarf forest buffalo, giant forest hog, red river hog and a slew of duikers like yellow-backed, bay, Peter's, gaboon and blue. For the chance to test skills and "intestinal fortitude" in a hunt which must lie at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum to canned and put-and-take killing.

I believe that you hunt the rain forest denizens in their dark, dank, dangerous habitat with your head. There is nothing to take your mind off the fact that your body is taking punishment. You see no brilliant birds, beautiful vistas or bright blossoms. It reminds me of scuba diving all day in storm tossed, silt filled waters except the predominant colour is green. Green on green on green.

De Gentile says that, in order to be successful on a rain forest hunt, you need to do three things well - walk far, walk quietly, and shoot fast. The latter two both require concentration and mental alertness at all times. Chances are few and far between and, when they happen, you have only a few seconds to make the decision - shoot or no shoot. I would hazard a guess that more opportunities are lost in the rain forests because

the hunter could not get a shot off in time than for any other reason. Of course, the thing that makes this even more difficult, is the lack of visibility. Even at ten paces it can be impossible to make out what part of the animal you are looking at.

On day 15 of my hunt for one of those nasty, aggressive, red dwarf forest buffalo, I am ashamed to admit that I shot at what I was convinced was the shoulder of the animal standing broadside on, facing to my right and some 20 paces away. In reality, the bull was lying down, facing to the left and the soft nosed bullet sliced harmlessly through a bunch of broad, innocent leaves.

And you can never relax and lower your guard. On two occasions it nearly cost me dearly. We heard the small herd of buffalo thunder off. It was just too thick and we were too close. They probably heard us as there is hardly ever even a trickle of wind in the cloistered confines of the forest. I relaxed as we entered a small, rugby ball shaped opening, about 30 paces at its widest. I say opening and not clearing because the undergrowth was merely less dense while there was still a full canopy overhead. In the middle of the opening, a dome of dense shrubs cluttered what would otherwise have been a pleasant, Robin Hood/Sherwood Forest type of a glade. I wandered wearily towards the dome as I heard the thundering of hooves suddenly grow louder again. I was confused. As the words, "Could it be?" entered my tired brain, the buffalo burst into the opening to my right, passed behind the dome of shrubs, made a tight turn to their left and came straight at me, two abreast, from a distance of about 12 paces. My by now adrenalin filled reflexes were fighting a losing battle to catch up with the program and mount my rifle, flick off the safety catch, aim and fire. I was not going to make it! I could see the beady, dark brown eyes of the left hand buffalo fix on me.

From my left, two, dull brown, turbo charged projectiles hurtled across the leaf littered forest floor, barking hysterically as they came. Up until now, our four pygmy "hunting" dogs had proved absolutely useless. In three nano seconds they went from zero to hero in my book. Glock, a Jock-of-the-Bushveld look alike, fearlessly jumped at the face of the buffalo on the left which had already lowered its head as she came at me. As the buffalo flinched left, she bumped her companion out of her stride (I think it was also a cow) and Suffrance snapped up at her left flank. The buffalos turned sharp left again and battered out of the opening by the same route that they had entered.

As I looked around with my heart hammering a heavy metal beat in my chest, I could see no-one other than Geoffroy. Then, as our six man pygmy hunting team gradually climbed down out of the surrounding trees chattering excitedly at ten to the dozen, I became aware of a tiny hand in the small of my back holding tightly to a bunch of my olive coloured, thick, cotton shirt. It was my faithful gunbearer, Mombato, all four feet and some change of him.

Geoffroy did not mince his words. He explained in single syllables that I was not to become separated from him again. Ever. And that when I heard drumming - I was to find a tree. Immediately!

I did not have long to wait to put both lessons into practice. The very next afternoon, after tracking and wading for nearly three hours through a thorn infested swamp, full of boot sucking, grey, glutinous mud and smelly, rusty brown water, we hit solid ground and discovered a large patty of olive coloured buffalo dung on the tracks. It was covered

by a thin skin which indicated to me that it was about two hours old. I was more than weary (we had been hunting since dawn) and fed up at the thought that we had been misled as to the freshness of the tracks by the wetness of the ground in the swamp. I suggested to Geoffroy that we call off the hunt as it was getting late and the one thing you do not want to do is be caught in the rain forests at night. Do it once and you will never, ever do it again.

We moved off the tracks and on to a "bimo", an elephant highway or path through the forest which made for much easier walking. We had not traveled far when Mombato whispered urgently to Geoffroy that he could hear the buffalo. "Release the dogs! Release the dogs!" he added in French. Talking into his shoulder mounted radio, Geoffroy repeated Mombato's instructions to the four man, dog pack leader trailing behind us by some 200 paces. I was not hopeful. We had done the same thing on 11 previous occasions with nothing to show for it. The dogs would return after a brief and silent run (they are trained not to bark unless they see something), wagging their tails jauntily as if to say, "See, we showed them who is boss around here".

For only the second time in 16 days, hysterical barking broke out and I needed no second invitation to find a tree. Then the barking stopped so suddenly it seemed as if the power had tripped. We waited anxiously. Mombato looked like a bird dog on point. Then someone turned the power back on.

As the barking started to fade into the distance, Geoffroy shouted "Come" over his shoulder as he plunged back into the forest. We ran towards the sound. A snake thin, thorny tendril slashed across my face. A branch stretched out a hand to snatch at my rifle. Eventually, the hallooing of the dogs, which had in any event been fading rapidly, stopped. So did we. Then we walked forward a few paces until we came to a small opening. We later discovered it was about 12 metres in diameter.

At this stage, I was in front, a solid, dark brown tree trunk to my right. Behind me and to my left stood the ever present Mombato with Geoffroy in a similar position behind him. We formed a diagonal line like half a sergeant's stripes. I slowed to a halt and was at a loss what to do next. My indecision did not last long.

Without any warning, the leaves to my front burst open and a reddish tan body hurtled into the opening, saw me, turned hard left and disappeared into the all-embracing greenery. Behind me I heard Geoffroy shout, "Don't shoot. Don't shoot". No sooner were the words out of his mouth than there was an action replay. Except the second reddish tan body was twice the size of the first one. And it didn't turn left. Its big, brown, bulging, white rimmed eyes focused and it came straight for us.

I would like to say that I calmly shouldered my rifle. That everything happened in slow motion. That I stapled the crosshairs between the eyes of the buffalo, waited for it to come closer and drop its head to hook me and smoothly squeezed the trigger. I can't. I have absolutely no recollection of anything other than seeing the head of the buffalo filling my Zeiss Diavari scope turned down to its minimum setting of 1 ½ power. Then it was too close. The .416 fired itself and the buffalo dropped to the shot. From the buffalo to me measured precisely four of Geoffroy's paces. Worse still, from where I stood, I could see that I had missed the whole head of the buffalo. The bullet had grazed the cheek, passed through the ear and penetrated the neck, breaking it, about 12 inches

back. Later, we found the badly deformed, 400 grain, Bear Claw soft nose under the skin behind the right shoulder. There is no doubt in my mind, that if this had been a bus bodied Cape buffalo and not this half pint, red , 250 kilogram, smaller version, things would have turned out very differently.

Earlier in my month long hunt, I shot an excellent forest elephant at 15 paces (the biggest Geoffroy has taken in nine years of rain forest hunting), a good representative giant forest hog (only the third ever taken in the concession) and good quality Peter's, bay and blue duikers - a good haul I have been assured for a 28 day rain forest hunt. Although I have previously hunted the pristine rain forests of the Central African Republic on two occasions, neither these experiences nor my reading and research prepared me for the rain forests of Cameroon. For this bald, 57 year old, roll-on-deodorant of a man, it was nearly, but not quite, a bridge too far. Although I became stronger, both mentally and physically as the hunt went on, I still lost six kilograms in weight and I could readily understand why each of my three hunting companions decided, for one reason or another, to curtail his trip. Clearly, this is not a hunt for everyone.

But, if you are weary of conventional buffalo and elephant hunting. Have been there, done that and sold the T-shirt. Are looking for some new, interesting and exciting challenges, then Cameroon rain forest hunting may be just the thing for you. I will remember Cameroon for an unbeatable and unforgettable, five day elephant hunt and, although the buffalo cow chose me and not the other way around, I will also remember it for two days of the most exciting and exhilarating buffalo hunting of my life. The memories of these hunts will remain crisp and clear in my mind for many years to come and, after all, isn't that what a lot of hunting is all about?