



COMMONLY UNCOMMON BONGO	Safari Times, September 2006
Story by Craig Boddington	



It was early the morning of the fifth day. Just a few minutes out of camp, we picked up the tracks of a single bull, maybe not smoking fresh, but definitely made the night before. We followed through dense green thickets into more open gallery forest, across another forest road and into more forest. We had followed for little more than an hour when a heavy animal crashed away just in front of us. Our lead tracker released his terrier-like dog, and the trackers behind us released three more.

In seconds, the barking grew more shrill and stabilized, and we fought our way toward the din. There was movement ahead through the leafy screen. We fought more vines and creepers, and then there were patches of mahogany hide and hints of white stripes. Professional hunter Guav Johnson and I saw the horns at about the same time, good horns well shaped. I got the rifle on the bull just as he turned to go, and we had a beautiful bongo bull.

I was in one of Mayo Oldiri's concessions in the forests of southern Cameroon, and this was an entirely different experience from my first encounters with bongo – two 21 – day hunts in adjoining Central African Republic. Five days into the hunt, a good bongo bull was in the salt.

Technically, at this point three bongo bulls were in the salt. Hunting with the same outfitter in nearby camps, Iowan Howard McCutcheon took his bongo on the first day. My hunting partner, Cameron Hopkins, took his on the third day. All three were good, mature bongo bulls.

In 1996, my first forest safari, I didn't get a bongo, but my partner, Sherwin Scott, did. In 1997 I took a great bongo, but my partner, Joe Bishop, did not. In fairness, Joe, who had previously taken a good bongo, turned down two or three bulls looking for a big one. This is unusual. Almost nobody turns down a mature bongo! But results are results. In 1996 and 1997, we totalled three bongos in 42 hunting days. In 2006, three bongo in five days.

In my opinion, these disparate results do not suggest a difference in outfitter or professional hunter competence, or even a significant difference in bongo density. After all, in order to take a bongo you only need one large, round-toed, fresh bull track to be successful. There are differences in hunting methodology –and there are differences in the forest itself.

In 1996, hunting with Rudy Lubin and Jacques Lemaux, we hunted extreme southeastern C.A.R., with Sudan to the east and former Zaire to the south. Bongos are supposed to be somewhat less common here, but as you move from west to east, bongos definitely get larger in the body and, at least potentially, commensurately larger in the horn. Perhaps more important, this area was technically “finger forest”, a transitional region where fingers of true forest intertwined with fingers of savanna woodland – as was the country where bongos were hunted in southern Sudan. Foolishly, I insisted on “pure tracking” without dogs. In this finger forest, it was possible. Sherwin got a bongo, and quite easily. Jacques and I tracked bongos every day. We heard them move in front of us, and once I even saw a flash of red. The tracks led us through many open areas, so with a wee bit of luck I might have gotten a shot – but I never did. And then it raining, and the last 10 days we had no tracks at all.

In June 1997, I hunted with Alain Lefol in southwestern C.A.R., on the Cameroon border. This was my first look at the true forest zone of Central Africa, from the air an almost unbroken blanket of green. On the ground, average visibility might be 10 yards – often less, only occasionally more.

Here it is my view that pure tracking, without dogs, is almost an exercise in futility, and certainly an exercise in blind luck. This year in Cameroon, our pygmy trackers used several dogs, leashed until the bongo is seen or, more likely, heard. Either way, one dog or several, the intent is to distract the bongo long enough not only to close for a shot, but also to see the horns. It doesn't always work. There are no wild canines in the forest, and indeed no predators at all that are dangerous to a mature bongo. Some bongos stop to stare at this strange yapping creature. Others instinctively try to kill the dogs. Still others simply walk away, never stopping at all.

Despite his legendary rarity, I believe that the bongo is the most common game animal in much of the vast forest zone. The bongo isn't rare, but he is difficult. Rain is essential. Rain quiets the forest and makes tracks more visible, which is important. But the real kicker is that when the forest is dry and noisy the forest animals move very little, thus leaving few tracks to follow.