



black band down its nose. It has long, droopy, baset-like ears, and a pendulous dewlap hangs from its neck.

Down the full length of the massive neck runs a short, thick, reddish mane, as stout and stiff as a cropped thoroughbred's. Its feet are topped with chocolate stockings and - unusual for an antelope- its sports a stylish tail. And of course its horns are magnificent, twin towers of spiralling ebony with deep ridges and massive bases. The world record is 56 inches. Think about that for a second: 56 would be a darn good kudu, and that's across two full turns of horn. A Derby can make 56 inches in a single twist.

For comparison's sake, the SCI world records for the three common eland subspecies are 46, 44, and 43 inches for the Livingstone, East African, and Cape varieties, respectively. Tip your hat to the good Earl's namesake- this antelope can grow horn. But the size is net everything with a Lord Derby bull; shape is equally important for aesthetic beauty. Horn configuration comes in three versions: wide, normal, and narrow. I had my heart set on a eland with length. Anything over 45 inches is good, anything over 50 inches is exceptional. I would be happy with anything in the 43- to 45- inch class.

An eland uses its horns -both sexes carry them, although those of the bull are significantly more massive- to snap branches with a quick twist. Derby eland love the tender upper leaves on the Isoberlinis doka tree.

At one time the range of the giant eland stretched like a belt across the breadth of Africa, from Senegal to the west bank of the Nile, a band just north of the equatorial rain forest. There were two subspecies, the Western giant eland and the Central African, or Lord Derby, eland. Today the Western giant eland is either extinct or virtually extinct- either way, it cannot be hunted.

That leaves only the Lord Derby eland for a hunter seeking the undisputed king of the spiral-horned antelopes. Today, the Derby's range covers the savanna zone of eastern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, southern Chad, northern and eastern Central African Republic, and southwestern Sudan. Quite possibly there are pockets of Derby in the northeastern Congo; however, hunting is only just now reopening in the Democratic Republic of Congo, so we don't know if there are huntable population there.

Today, the vast majority of Derby eland hunters go to the Central African Republic. I was hunting in northern Cameroon with Mayo Oldiri Safaris because my friend and hunting partner, Craig Boddington, suspected that this unheralded former French protectorate might just be the new hot spot for Derby eland. Craig had already shot a nice Derby, so he was hunting Western roan and buffalo on this safari.

### ***THE***

### ***TRACK***

Our senior tracker, Celestine, whistled. The PH and the other three trackers quickly trotted to his side, and they all pondered the track Celestine had found. I hurried to see what the fuss was all about.

It was a sharp, clear track, the large, cloven print of a big Lord Derby bull. Nearby was a cow track, and the difference was patently obvious- the bull's track was half again as

big, and the toes were noticeably more rounded. A big bull tips the scales at two thousand pounds, outweighing most Cape buffalo.

And there it was, etched in the freshly burned, charred ground- the perfect track. A track must meet four criteria before you can follow it after the shy and wary Derby eland: first, the track must be fresh; second, it must be from a big bull; third, you must find it no later than 9 o'clock in the morning or else you'll never catch the herd by dark; and fourth- and most important- the wind must be right to follow the track.

Lord Derby eland are notoriously skittish, and they're fast walkers. Typically, you pick up a suitable track early in the morning, and then follow the herd throughout the day, pausing only to drink and gobble down a piece of bilrong. It's not unusual to walk twenty miles in a day.

One reason for the long march is that eland browse on Isoberlinia as they saunter. Another is that if anything spooks them, off they go at tireless trot, and they don't stop. To paraphrase what's oftensaid about elephant, you kill a Derby eland with your feet, not your rifle.

Stephane Ndondue rubbed his chin soberly. "I'm very worried," he admitted. "You see, in an Armaton like this, the game is very spooky. If we follow this herd, we have no margin for error. No mistakes. If the herd is startled, they will be gone and they won't stop for two days."

"My big fear," he confided later, "was that in the Armaten, the eland would see us before we saw them." With only four hunting days left on our safari, the chances of finding a second herd if this one spooked was slim.

The four trackers took to the spoor like terriers after a rabbit. The lead tracker, Celestine, was a Gambai tribesman. He was always quick to smile and his laugh was deep and happy. Andre, also a Gambai, was the respected gray-beard. Perhaps one day he had been a lead tracker, before his rheumy eyes began to lose their sharpness. He nonetheless drew quiet respect from the other trackers.

Martin, from the Dourou tribe, often accompanied me on solo walks along the river looking for harnessed bushbuck. The fourth tracker was a reformed poacher named Faustin of the Bagando, a forest tribe, whom Ndondue had brought from Mayo Oldiri's forest concessions to try his skill on the savanna.

The trackers, Ndondue, and I set off into the mist. As we ventured into the sparse hardwoods, the setting became more and more surreal. You could see clearly for fifty yards, then the next fifty faded to white.

Watching the quartet of trackers work was fascinating. If one lost the bull's track, another found it. Celestine spotted fresh dung. He pointed to the pile of acorn-size droppings with a long stem of dried grass, an implement he favored for indicating things like this. The turds glistened- still moist.

My senses tingled. We had only been walking for an hour, and already we were close. Apparently the herd was holding fast in the Armaton, and we were gaining on it.

We continued on the spoor for another fifteen minutes when, suddenly, Ndongue dropped to a knee and whistled softly. The well schooled trackers froze in place. Ndongue slowly gestured for me to get down and to move toward him.

Whatever he saw not ahead of us, but directly to our right, 90 degrees from our direction of travel. I duck-walked to his side and Celestine did the same. The two peered into the white nothingness. I inched my binocular around.

As I was fussing with the binocular, I thought I heard Ndongue say to Celestine, "Roan". My heart sank. Here was the only mistake we couldn't afford- spooking another animal that in turn would frighten the eland. I felt my shoulders sag with disappointment.

But the Celestine slowly began to raise the shooting sticks. I was puzzled. Ndongue whispered in my ear, "Eland". "But I thought you said roan, " I whispered back. Ndongue looked at me quizzically. "Didn't you just tell Celestine it was a roan?" I persisted.

"No, I said eland", Ndongue replied softly. This is a real problem for me. I have a noise-introduced hearing loss, to use the audiologist's term, from a lifetime of exposure to gunfire, including ten years as a competitive pistol shooter. "The herd is over there," he pointed.

As I peered into the mist, something magical happened that I will never forget. A Lord Derby eland materialized out of the whiteness. One second there was nothing, and the next and eland took form. It was a cow, ribbling on a Isoberlinia tree. I felt my breath quicken as I watched with wonder, and then there was a firm squeeze on my arm. "There's the bull," Ndongue hissed.

Out of the right side of the field of view, an animal half again as big as the cow emerged from the mist.

"He's not wide, he's normal, " Ndongue cautioned. I had told him I wanted a wide one. But in that magical moment, this surreal setting, I no longer cared if my Lord Derby eland was wide or narrow. I sank into sitting position and began to sling up my Sauer. 37s H&H Magnum when again Ndongue squeezed my arm. "No, stand up. Use the sticks," he whispered.

Rising gingerly, I carefully nestled the Sauer into shooting sticks and looked through the scope. The cross hairs rocked and wobbled as I watched the big bull feed, reaching up to nibble a succulent leaf. The eland was on the far side of a slim tree, but I wasn't about to rush the shot. The wind was right, and there was no hurry.

Was about a hundred and fifty yards away -the wangefinder would later say 161- and the Armaton hid us just as it had hidden the eland. I waited through at least three presidencies for the eland to give me a shot. Lazily, the eland fed around. Now it was facing us directly, still feeding. Give your shoulder, I thought as I watched through the scope. Give your shoulder!

The bull slowly pirouetted around the tree, now facing to my right a perfect broadside

shot. The reticle hopped like a flea in a hot skillet. I heard my heart throb. As a serious runner, I've worked out with a heart monitor and know exactly when aerobic exercise takes my heart over 145 beats per minute. Conservatively, my heart rate was at 165. The Lord Derby bull continued to feed, and I switched in a competition mode from my pistol days. Shooting, whether in the field or at march, is 90 percent mental. Breathe. Relax. Concentrate. No one, not even an Olympic Marksman, can hold a dead-still sight picture. There is always movement; in competition, it's called the wobble zone. The idea is to shrink the zone until it wobbles only in the X-ring or, in this case, on the shoulder.

First, keep the cross hairs on the eland's body. Good. Narrow the none some more. Keep the wobble on the shoulder. Good. Now the cross hairs were only vacillating only on an invisible pie plate, a six-inch circle on the great bulls' shoulder.

Trigger squeeze. Constant, slow, even pressure. Don't rush the shot, don't hurry, don't... Orange flame lanced from the muzzle and the crash of the shot was followed by the wet, meary thump of a 270-grain Winchester Fail Safe hitting home. But then one of the strangest sights I've ever seen while hunting occurred: Nothing.

The Lord Derby had taken the bullet in the shoulder -we recovered it in the off side later, a classic lung shot. But the animal was totally unimpressed.

I watched in the scope and the herd milled about, unsure. Not a single eland ran. They couldn't locate the sudden sound, couldn't smell us, and couldn't see us.

I reflexively worked the bolt, ejecting the spent case, and closed the bolt over a fresh round. Once an animal is wounded, there is no more nicety of finding a perfect broadside. It was time to anchor it.

The bull was facing almost dead-away- a spine-tail shot. A pelvis shot, if it misses the root of the spine, will quickly cripple, allowing a fast finisher. My second shot missed the spine by two inches but it sent the bull lunging in a death run.

The bull went fifteen yards, staggered, and fell dead. The first shot had been fatal, but the massive old bull didn't bolt like most lung-shot game. It hadn't seemed to notice at all.

Now it lay before me, magnificent even in death. Frothy, crimson lung blood dribbled from its nostrils, and I wiped the muzzle clean as a gesture of respect.

As the trackers pranced joyously and burst into the "eland song", Ndongue clapped me on the back. I was still in a daze of wonder. I stared into the mist and marvelled at the surreal setting. The otherworldly form had materialized suddenly, a Central African giant eland had appeared out of this Saharah ether, the Armaton.

And suddenly my peculiar sense of foreboding crystallized. Indeed, today was destined to be vividly etched in my memory forever- the day of the eland in the mist.