



JUMBO IN THE JUNGLE

January 2006

Story by Peter Flack (Sports Afield)



At first I thought it was the fault of GT's bongo. My friend of 25 years and regular hunting companion for 20 of those, had shot a good, representative bull on the fourth day of our hunt with Antonio Reguera's Mayo Oldiri safari company, out of Lognia camp, in the 275 000 acre rain forest concession, in the South Eastern corner of Cameroon, bordered by the Sanga River and the Republic of Congo to the East and the Ngoko River and the same country to the South.

We had celebrated that night with smoked salmon complemented by the first chardonnay of GT's new winery and, although we did not overindulge and were in bed by 9:30, when I awoke to the first ominous signs at midnight, my first thought was that perhaps I could have eaten less of the rare bongo fillet and drunk less of his superb wine.

For the next five hours my intermittent sleep was interspersed with sprints to the toilet - some of which I won - as I employed the full range of my bodily orifices. By 7:00 a.m. the next morning, all I had managed to keep down without mishap was two mashed bananas and a glass of coke. I felt decidedly fragile when, somewhat belatedly, I joined my PH, the highly experienced Geoffroy de Gentile and his six pygmy trackers, Van Damme, Denis, Mombato, Mongokelli, Josef and Remi - all Baka tribesmen - on the back of his venerable, metallic gold Land Cruiser. We were off to continue our search for a good Kamba - a true forest elephant bull.

Loxodonta Cyclotis has a number of obvious physical differences to the savannah elephant, *Loxodonta Africanus*. The most incontrovertible, apart from size - 2½ to 3 tonnes, as opposed to 4 to 6 ½ tonnes - revolves around nails. The forest elephant has five toenails on its fore feet and four on its hind feet as opposed to the more usual four and three, respectively, of its larger cousin.

Other obvious differences include the shape and girth of the tusks which look as if gravity has pulled them directly earthwards (instead of curving forward), making them progressively longer and thinner, almost like macaroni. When a forest elephant stands erect, it looks as if it is trying to drink water at its feet through a straw, except the straws are tusks. The shape of the ears is more rounded, circular if you like, and different to the "Continent of Africa" shape of the bigger bruisers from the savannah. Of course, to complicate matters, there are also savannah elephants which invade the rain forests on a temporary basis and I really did not want to make a mistake. If possible, I wanted to

take back a full skin for mounting purposes because, as far as I could find out, no full mount of a forest elephant existed in South Africa or Africa for that matter.

En route to the northern borders of our concession, we found our path blocked by a fallen Pemba tree, host to a vicious ant, called Sassa by the Baka, which lives in the hollow twigs and branches of the tree. Try and pluck the pale yellow, apricot sized fruit and see what happens. The ants rush out of the hole you have just created in the twig or branch by picking the fruit and swarm to the defence of their host and bite and sting simultaneously, vigorously and often. As Geoffroy said in his inimitable French accent, "Zay are ze only one who fight ze elefaan and gorille wiz out gun an win!"

The big elephant tracks we found next to the tree as we gingerly moved it out of the way changed our initial plans but, after 2½ hours on the tracks in the stifling, near 100%, June humidity, bending, kneeling, standing and walking as we snipped and hacked our way through the secondary growth created by the undisciplined and unscrupulous tree felling of the lumber company, was too much for my weakened constitution. I called a halt and, dizzy and shaking, sought relief in Land Cruiser power. Lumber companies still operated in the concession and we were often bullied off the main, red, dirt road, which bisected the concession from north to south, by their heavily laden vehicles boiling along at breakneck speed. This led to frequent accidents, three of which we witnessed, as the trucks skidded off the slick clay (sometimes overturning) and into the jungle.

The grotesque evidence of the companies' recent handiwork was also readily apparent. Unnecessarily wide tracks wound every which way through the forest. Discarded tyres, lengths of rusting wire cable (eagerly used by the poachers to make snares for bigger game like elephant and buffalo), plastic and metal drums lay where they were dropped. Worse still, one cut and rejected tree trunk after another was left to rot on the forest floor in a tangled mess. I gave up trying to estimate the cost of the pillage, destruction and waste.

Of course their uncontrolled logging not only allowed the sunlight onto the forest floor which, in turn, resulted in thick, almost impenetrable undergrowth, but this vegetation also soaked up the water in the salines or salt licks. Their roads provided access to commercial bush meat poachers, two of whom Geoffroy's anti-poaching team caught during our stay (to complement the five others caught earlier in the year), along with over 400 snares, one half dead Peter's duiker, a Bates pygmy antelope and 15 smoked blue duiker, all destined for the bush meat market at Kika.

The next morning I felt much stronger and we went back to the same area as the day before. Sitting in a wooden seat fastened to the front bumper of the Land Cruiser, Joseph, a specialist elephant poacher-turned-tracker, picked up the tracks of a big Kamba as it gouged a muddy, reddish tan path up an incline to the left of the overgrown logging track we were following. The tracks looked very similar to the ones we were forced to abandon the day before.

The heavy thunderstorm the previous evening had been a real stroke of luck but was also the reason we were hunting in June/July, the wettest part of the hunting season. The rain made the forest animals wet, cold and uncomfortable and they moved out of the continually dripping forest into the more open areas to warm up and dry out. Another

by-product of the rain was that it washed away the old tracks and allowed us to move much more quietly through the thick undergrowth. The steady drip drop, tip tap of water filtering down through the layered leaves of the 200 foot high, full canopy above, also camouflaged what little noise we made when moving through the rain softened, sodden undergrowth.

The bull followed a "bimo", an elephant highway, through the forest from one choice feeding spot to another, appearing to concentrate on the bamboo trees which produced a yellowy red fruit roughly the shape and size of a small mango. Quite palatable, the Baka say it is "lokoloko" or sweet but the strawberry coloured fruit exudes a whitish paste which acts as a kind of glue and makes it very chewy and sticky to eat.

We were hunting efficiently and quietly. So quietly, in fact, that we approached to within 15 paces of a tail twitching, minute blue duiker who, oblivious to our presence, bustled and scuttled its foraging way across the forest floor and out of sight.

Van Damme and Denis alternated in the lead, followed by Geoffroy, me, my gun bearer, Mombato, Theo Pretorius, one of South Africa's leading cameramen amongst his many other talents, who was filming the hunt, and our remaining three trackers. Whenever the tracks became confused, which was not infrequent as there were many other elephants afoot, the team would spread out to unravel the problem and communicate quietly via radio with Geoffrey who listened on an earpiece to reduce noise.

Geoffroy de Gentile's name reminded me of a French version of one of the Knights of the Round Table. You know Rodney the Brave, Geoffroy the Gentle, that kind of thing. He resigned as a lieutenant from a crack French Commando unit to follow a dream initially kindled by the overblown, some may even say "mythical" adventures of Alexander Lake, to become a professional hunter at the age of 24. At 43 he is now in his prime and has hunted out of Lognia Camp for the past nine years. During this time, his clients have shot 43 bongos (only one has not been successful and that was during the 1998 drought brought on by El Nino), seven forest elephant, eight dwarf forest buffalo and two each of the giant forest hog and forest sitatunga. I was hoping to add to the score of the latter four species.

Hunting in the rain forests is like no other hunting habitat in Africa. In my opinion, it is the most inhospitable and dangerous environment on the continent. A fact borne out by the death of Geoffroy's head tracker of the last five years, Jean Quatre, in the week before I arrived. The dogs had bayed a bongo and the hunting team was running to close in. Jean, being small, fit, fast and keen, was some 40 paces in front of the rest when they heard the elephant scream. Denis said he heard Jean Quatre cry, "The elephant has killed me" and, when they arrived on the scene, they found his body, lying on its back, bruised around the chest and abdomen, but without a drop of blood or visibly broken bone. As Geoffroy explained to me, "The elephant runs through the vines, plants and trees as if it is a spider's web but a person can't".

Admittedly, there are no big predators like lions or hyenas in the rain forests and the leopards are small and few and far between. However, they are not the ones to worry about. It is the micro predators that are the real concern - the fleas, ticks, ants, mosquitoes, flies, bees, millipedes, caterpillars, worms and a myriad of other different insect types, all in their thousands. Each, like Shylock, wants a piece of you and, when

they are done, it is the turn of the razor sharp grass, the thorn encrusted vines and spike filled branches. I can go on and on.

Then the big game, like elephant, buffalo and gorilla, are constantly pressured by the commercial, bush meat poachers. Both the elephant and buffalo I shot bore fresh bullet wounds from shot gun slugs, one of which we recovered - an imported Prevost from France, not available on the local market. These animals have learnt through bitter past experience that attack is often the best form of defence. When you consider that you and your prey often only become aware of one another at very close range - say a maximum of 30 paces - usually within on another's fight or flight circle, then it is a toss up as to which way the animal will run - at you or away from you.

Rain forest hunting requires special clothing, footwear, equipment and skills, which needs an article all on its own. The most important piece of equipment, however, is a mere six inches long and is found between your ears. Although three rain forest hunts do not make me an expert, it seems to me that you hunt the animals in the rain forests with your head. There is not much to see in the claustrophobic confines of the forest. There is nothing to take your mind off the fact that your body is suffering. The micro-predators grind you down and the presence of snakes like the formidable gaboon viper can also prey on your mind. I believe that you need to be mentally strong and concentrated to withstand the tensions, pressures and discomforts of the hunt and yet remain alert.

According to Geoffroy, you need to be able to do three things well if you want to be successful in the rain forests - walk quietly, walk far and shoot fast. In my book, all three require a certain degree of mental toughness and alertness.

We picked up the big Kamba's tracks at exactly at 6:43 a.m Don't ask me why I remember but I do. Originally the pygmies said the tracks were "makala", their word for "right here, right now". Initially we found fresh dung and urine and advanced in a state of heightened alertness, every sense primed and questing. I was tense. Nervous. Worried how I would react. Whether I would be able to see enough of the bull to place an accurate shot. Concerned that a poor shot might endanger our team. Intervening vines were carefully and silently snipped or sliced. Denis and Van Damme cupped their ears with their hands and pointed urgently into the forest to our immediate front. Mombato gathered his fingers together in a cone and held them to his nose to show he could smell the Kamba. So could I. The strong, musky odour of elephant was unmistakable.

2½ hours later the machettes had been out for some time and Denis had stopped shaking his forefinger at anyone who took an incautious step. My pulse had slowed to the speed of light. I had returned my .416 Rigby to my gun bearer and was feeling much more calm and confident. Suddenly, Van Damme did an abrupt about turn and came back down the track passed Geoffroy and I in a rush, the whites of his eyes showing and fear written in capital letters across his face. The "Dicky bird" effect took immediate hold of the pygmies and I just managed to retrieve my .416 before Mombato disappeared in a blur of green and black camouflage.

The Kamba bull, some 15 paces in front and slightly below us, was small and had even smaller tusks. He was inadvertently heading down the same "bimo" we were on, only in the opposite direction. Still, I suppose if I was unarmed and had lost a close friend and

colleague to one of these battleships of the bush less than two weeks previously, well, let's just say that in any confrontation between valour and discretion, the latter would have won hands down.

The second bull we crossed swords with was a much more orderly affair. We were moving through a section of Limbali trees. They have a very dense, hard wood not favoured by furniture makers and are used mainly for railway sleepers. The distance from a suitable market makes it uneconomical to cut them in South Eastern Cameroon and so these parts of the rain forest remain as pristine, with relatively light undergrowth, as they were hundreds of years ago.

We spotted the bull at almost double the distance of our first encounter. "I can't see the tusks!" Geoffrey whispered in my ear as I tried for a clear shot through the 1.5 x 6 Zeiss Diavari Scope attached to my custom made .416 Rigby (Walther barrel married to a Brno ZKK action) loaded with 400 grain Federal solids. "He is not bad" Geoffrey breathed as, for an instant, the cross hairs locked onto the creases below the ear and behind the elbow of the bull. My forefinger tightened and then, like a lighthouse, the bull was gone. Now you see it, now you don't.

I became aware of Van Damme standing to one side beckoning at us. In French he explained to Geoffrey that this was not the right bull. The track we followed belonged to a much bigger animal. Encouraging, I thought. It was now after 10:00 a.m. Our bull was clearly a traveling man. Turning to Theo I said, "I guess our best bet will be to try and catch up to him while he has his midday snooze". After an hour or so, as if to bear me out, the tracks started to meander to and fro and it looked for all the world as if the bull was looking for a place to rest.

We crossed a further two, gravel bottomed, crystal clear rivulets and plashed through the grey mud and ooze of four salines before we hit a second section of Limbali trees. One moment Van Damme was walking confidently on the tracks, the next he disappeared. The five foot tall pygmy crouched low on the forest floor and pointed. Geoffrey bent over his point and beckoned urgently behind his back. As I turned from retrieving my rifle from a by now thoroughly composed Mombato, I caught a glimpse of long, straight, creamy white ivory and knew, without a word being exchanged, that it was time for me to step up to the plate.

The bull, burnished a tanny brown by the mud with which he was newly caked, was approaching from the left at a brisk walk on the diagonal towards us at a distance of about 30 paces. In the dim darkness of the full canopy some 200 feet above, it was difficult to make out the elephant clearly as his skin colour blended perfectly with the browns and beiges of the ground leaf litter and dark brown, dappled, lichen splashed tree trunks. Only the flashes of bright tusk through the green on green of shrubs and leaves guided me and enabled me to calculate both the movement and positioning of the animal. The big bull was closing fast.

Then there was no more time. As the bull started to draw level with me about 15 paces away, I saw his right tusk through a miniscule two foot gap. As his front leg entered the gap, I found my aiming point behind the right shoulder and made the shot I had practiced repeatedly on the range and in my imagination. Re-chambering quickly, I moved around an intervening tree trunk and fired a quick second shot as the elephant

bulldozed its way off at a tangent before, as arranged, Geoffrey's double bellowed and the bull slumped to the shot. Encouraged by him and from where I stood, I placed two shots in the spine region and then, reloading and moving briskly to my right, at an angle of about 30 degrees, I placed a bullet which bisected the brain and came to rest behind the left eye socket. And it was probably just as well that I did so.

While my first shot bisected both lungs, Geoffrey's had missed the brain and merely concussed the beast. While the spinal shots may or may not have been effective, the final and fatal last brain shot most definitely was and, by the way the elephant flung his head back at the shot, he may have been in the throes of recovering consciousness. With that the pygmies went crazy and so did we. They danced, shouted, clasped hands, hugged one another and me. Mombato jumped into my arms to his amazement and mine. Although there was no way of knowing whether this was the selfsame bull that had killed their friend, at the very least, it was like getting back on the horse that had just thrown you to find out, with great relief, that you had lost none of your hard won riding skills.

A big forest elephant weighs between 2 ½ and 3 tonnes, slightly less than half that of an equivalent savannah elephant. So, a forest elephant with tusks weighing 25 pounds a side is probably acceptable. 30 pounds is good; 35 pounds, very good; and 40 pounds and above, exceptional. The bull I shot was left handed and the left tusk was broken off at the tip but, due to the extra work load, was also a bit thicker than its neighbour. They measured four feet eight inches and four feet six inches, respectively and, according to our Heath Robinson scale, we estimated the tusks to weigh about 40 pounds each. It was the best elephant that a client of Geoffrey's had shot in nine years in the rain forests.

Although the position of the fallen forest giant made for some good photographs, the entire camp staff could not push it over and, instead of being skinned out from the stomach, it had to be skinned from the backbone down. It was a mammoth undertaking which took a day and a half in very trying conditions of heat, humidity, flies, bees and rotting meat and gave me renewed respect and admiration for the work of Carl Akeley and what went into the elephant exhibits in New York's American Natural History Museum, not to mention that of my own long time friend and taxidermist, Rodney Kretzschmar, who volunteered for our month long expedition.

Hunting the dim, dark, recesses of Africa's rain forests for its special treasures - forest elephant, sitatunga, buffalo, giant forest hog, red river hog and the variety of duikers - may not be everyone's cup of tea, but if canned lion shooting ranks at zero in the African hunting scale of 0 to 10, then forest elephant hunting must be right up there at 10. It can only take place on foot and without dogs and, without wishing to gild the lily or sound melodramatic, it is an exciting, dramatic, dangerous adventure of note.

Before the hunt, two professional hunters with more West African, rain forest hunting experience behind them than any other current hunter, Alain Lefol and Rudy Lubin, both told me on separate occasions but in virtually the same words, that they thought elephant hunting in the rain forests was the last great hunting adventure left in Africa. With great respect to these two, outstanding professional hunters, I must agree with them