



PYGMEIS AND PRESIDENTS	January/February
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"A Cameroon Success Story" Safary SCI Magazine	



The two most difficult animals to take on a jungle hunt in Africa are the dwarf buffalo and the forest sitatunga.

While hunting bongo with Alan Lafoe in the Central African Republic, I got lucky and took a good sitatunga, but the dwarf buffalo still eluded me. Over the years, I had talked to several outfitters about their ability to produce a dwarf buffalo. Most offered only about a 25 percent chance.

During the 2003 SCI Convention, I talked to Antonio Reguera, owner of the Cameroon safari company Mayo Oldiri, about my chances in one of its areas, three of which are in the forest and four in the savanna. He assured me that I would have a 95 percent chance to take a good specimen of the dwarf buffalo and that my hunting partner, Al Cheramie, would have close to a 100 percent chance to take a sitatunga.

In the course of discussions about our trip with Doug Yajko and Wayne Pocius, they decided they would hunt with us for sitatunga, and we would use all three of the company's forest areas -the Boumba, Lognia and Dja.

Thus, four past presidents of SCI - all good friends - would be hunting together. All four have been inducted into SCI's Hunting Hall of Fame, and three of us have received the World Hunting Award ring. In 2003 I received the SCI International Hunting Award, the highest honor the organization presents to a hunter. If Al took his forest sitatungas on this trip, he would receive his ring at the 2005 SCI Convention.

Wayne would be hunting with a bow and would be accompanied by Kevin Downer as a non-hunter (Kevin is a famous outfitter from England). They would hunt the Lognia concession. Al would hunt in the new areas of Dja. Doug and I would hunt in Boumba.

Our plans were to leave the United States on June 15 and return on July 3, 2004. About three weeks before departure, however, we received an email that rain - a vital factor in hunting these two most difficult animals - was quite scarce in Cameroon and that our hosts were going to watch the weather. If it did not improve, they would advise us to cancel the hunt. We received almost daily email on the reports, and finally, just a few days before we were to leave, it started to rain. So off we went to Cameroon - with some apprehension to say the least.

The five of us (including Kevin) all met in Paris to catch the final leg of our trip to Douala, the main city of Cameroon. We were met at the airport there by Mayo Oldiri guide Tomas Garcia. He ran us through customs and then took us to a very nice restaurant that had entertainment and great seafood.

The next morning we caught a charter flight to Dja, dropped off Al and Tomas, and the rest of us flew on to Kika on the Congo-Cameroon border. Wayne and Kevin's camp in Lognia was about a one-hour drive away.

Wayne's guide, Geoffroy De Gentile, ran all the hunting in the area, and his girlfriend was the camp manager.

Doug and I were picked up by our guides and staff in two new Land Cruisers. Doug's guide would be Stephane Ndongue, who ran the Boumba camp, and my guide was Joaquin Morales (Akeem), who ran a camp in the savanna but came to the forest to guide after the hunting there was finished.

Boumba camp was about three hours' drive from the airfield at Kika. On the way we passed through the town of Moloundou on the Cameroon-Congo border, a typical African rainforest community with dirt streets. Then we crossed the Boumba River on a small ferry. As we drove, stopping occasionally to pick up fresh fruit and vegetables at roadside stands, people were always waving to us and smiling.

The camp sat in the middle of a remote area of jungle along the Boumba River, which was wide, very swift with some rapids, and overhung with trees and vines like a photo from National Geographic. The main structure, built primarily of thach with a wooden floor, was elevated on stilts about 2-1/2 feet above the ground to minimize flood-stage problems. Each room had its own bath with a shower and good beds - in all, quite comfortable and roomy.

An open-air lounge area with a roof overlooked the river. In the mornings we were entertained by all manner of enchanting jungle sounds and sights, including the antics of gorillas and chimpanzees.

An excellent chef prepared great food and a lot of it. Whenever we came in to camp from a hard day of hunting, a man handed each of us a cold drink. As soon as we took off our boots, they were whisked away to be cleaned and dried and then returned to us before we got the next morning.

The first, Doug took off in a 20-foot canoe with his guide and seven Pygmies, headed north to stomp out the swamp areas, looking for sitatunga tracks. My guide and our team of about seven took one of the Land Cruisers and drove on the area's only road, which ran about 12 miles and dead-ended. About six miles from camp, we found a single bull buffalo track that was about eight hours old.

Off we went on foot, our tracker in the lead. We weaved our way through the jungle, with three machete-wielding Pygmies in front cutting a path through the dense vegetation. Fresh bongo tracks were everywhere. If I'd wanted a bongo, I could have taken a 30-inch-plus specimen with no problem. We kept running into them and

spooking them, which created something of a problem - once, they spooked aour buffalo.

Finally, after about 10 miles of winding and cutting, we got close, but the wind switched and the buffalo caught our scent and spooked. We never saw him. It took us 2-1/2 more hours of walking and cutting in a more or less straight line to get back to the truck, and then we headed to camp for R&R. Each day went about the same - always on a track, looking around the next bush.

Doug's trackers, with the help of some dogs, had run a sitatunga but never saw it. Apparently it entered the river to lose the dogs, swam back to the bank, and disappeared.

Doug's guide, Stephane, started to show signs of malaria but kept on going each day until one morning he just could not get aout of bed any longer. Luis Mesia, my assistant PH, agreed to guide Doug. This worked well until Luis, too, came down with malaria. This left Doug without a PH.

By then, Al had called via satellite phone to tell us he had taken a sitatunga, a Peters duiker, a blue cuiker and an African golden cat. Given waht had happened to Doug's guides, we decided that Al would leave his camp at Dja, and Doug would make the two days drive there and hunt with Tomas. Tomas thought he could probably get Doug a sitatunga within two or three days, which would fit well with our time frame. Wayne, in the meantime, had bowkilled a 30-inch-plus bongo (which aould be the new world record), a sitatunga and a number of duikers.

The wheater had dried out, making it impossible to track buffalo, so a decision was made to set up a fly camp a day's drive to the west in the hope that this area would have more rain. We left the truck at the end of the road, packed in some distance and set up a tent. We hunted there for two days, shooting some duikers, but it was still too dry to track buffalo. Although we found plenty of tracks around salt licks, we simply could not follow them.

Still no rain, so we drove back to our main camp. That night, as we sat around the Boumba camp trying to come up with Plan D, the sky suddenly opened up and heavy rain continued thtough most of the night quitting just before daylight. A beautiful sunrise with blue sky and bird song was the kind of treat that only Africa can give. this was Day 10, and within an hour of leaving camp we hit the track of a huge lone buffalo. Everyone was excited and ready for this hunt. Even the Pygmies actedas if they were sure this would be the day of the buffalo, and with the size of the track, this was some buffalo.

Once again, we spooked bongos. this area must contain Africa's lasrgest concentration of this furtive game animal. Tracks were everywhere and we saw bongos as we walked. After about seven hours, one of our trackers pointed suddenly out to one side. About 30 yards to the right, through trees and underbrush, I could barely make out the dark form of a large bull. Without hesitation I fired offhand. the bull began to tun and I with it.

The Pygmies released the dogs at the same time I fired. There was a lot of blood where the buffalo had stood - obviously a lung shot - and the race was on. I could a dog

barking and the buffalo bellowing as if he were standing his ground and fighting. I outran everyone to the scene in the thickest patch of jungle. At ten feet, I could not see him, but the barking and bellowing were deafening.

I dived under the brush and crawled until I could make out the bull's torso, not just the legs. I fired my .375. Improved, using 300-grain Swift bullets, and it was over. The long-sought dwarf forest buffalo was mine. The natives and my guide could not believe the bull's body size, which was about 25 percent larger than that of a typical dwarf buffalo.

Whoppsand hollers from our trackers kick-started the celebration. With their machetes they hacked out a clearing so we could take photos and begin the process of caping the animal and cutting him up so we could pack him back to the truck. They figured that even if we followed a straight line, it would take two hours to reach the truck. Each man took an enormous load of meat, and off we went on our long walk, singing most of the way. The Pygmies are among the happiest and kindest people I know, always there wanting to help.

As we drove back to Boumba camp, totally exhausted, the Pygmies began to sing of the successful hunt. As we arrived, the whole village was there to meet us, waving palm leaves and singing of our success.

The Cameroon jungle is beautiful, with flowers in vibrant colors, different shades of green, and a parade of birds and apes and other jungle animals. Hardly a day went by without our seeing gorillas or chimpanzees. Once, we walked within ten feet of a gorilla without knowing it. All of a sudden, he pounded his chest. Needless to say, we locked and loaded, but he ran off. In all, I took that huge dwarf buffalo, a blue duiker and a bay duiker. My buffalo hunt was hard work. We covered seven to 20 miles a day, either following a track or looking for one around salt licks. We easily could have shot bongos almost every day. Elephants also were common.

Doug had a major success as well, taking his forest sitatungas. All four past SCI presidents managed to take an animal that had eluded them for many years. All of our guides were excellent. All together, that Mayo Oldiri-outfitted hunt was one of the most professionally orchestrated safaris I have ever been on.