



SEEING RED IN CAMEROON	November 2004
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The first day was what you might call a reconnaissance mission. We were beat from a long journey and didn't exactly get up at the crack of dawn, nor did we head for the hills right away. First came the ritual of checking the rifles, during I accomplished my own ritual of acquiescence, my first scope cut of the trip. It was already morning and growing warm when we left our camp on the Oldiri River and headed into the savanna woodland of northern Cameroon.

I didn't expect much and not just because of the late time. My previous experiences in the terminalia forest in Central Africa -four safaris in C.A.R. and one in Southern Chad -Had convinced me that the region held relatively little game. Mind you, most of these hunts were eventually more or less successful, but we worked hard for everything we saw and harder still for what we bagged.

So I expected this recon to be boring, the real hunt beginning over the next few days as we took up tracks. I couldn't have been more wrong .Right away we saw a few western kob, a midsize golden antelope with thick, lyre-shape horns then we saw a herd of waterbuck females. Then, the tawny, big-bodied western hartebeest. In between we spotted flashes of ochre-colored, red-flanked duiker and the little west African bush duiker.

Along the way we caught a quick glimpse of a big, russet. Colored antelope with blunk and spite fair mask the huge western roam, one of the great prizes we sought. Our professional hunter, Stefen N'Douga, took us on the roan's tracks without hesitation, but the big male gave us only a couple of distant glimpses before we gave up, he knew we were after him. A good roan antelope of the largest western race was at the top of my trophy list, and I had heard Cameroon was the place for big roan. Now I had seen one on the first morning, so there was really no hurry.

As high, hot noon, resting in the shadows of a big tree, we saw northern Cameroon's other great prizes Lord Derby eland. There were three bulls. One of them was huge, but we were at an impasse. One does not shoot such a regal creature from the vehicule. In a few seconds they bolted, and that was the fine because the sighting confirmed we were in an exceptional area.

As African countries go, Cameroon's game laws seem weird at first blush, although they make sense from a management standpoint. Game is divided into classes: Class A for

the major species; Class B for the medium size antelope; and Class C for the small antelope and other animals, such a baboon and small predators.

On a big game license one may take only two Class A animals, plus the hunters choice of four from classes B and C. My hunting partner, Cameron Hopkins had never hunted central Africa before, so all his choices were difficult.

My choices from the B and C schedules were simple: of these animals, the only one I had never taken was a western hardest, largest and heaviest-horned of the several races of these odd-looking, fleet-footed antelope. I wanted one, and the rest didn't matter. After that first morning, faced with an unexpected and marvellous plentitude of game, I realized that the animals on the B and C lists would come along in the time and we just needed to be picky.

Cameron especially wanted a barnessed bushbuck, the small bushbuck of central and West Africa with the most dramatic markings of all the extensive bushbuck tribe. The rest -kob, waterbuck and the hartebeest- would come along the way.

Choosing from the A list was far more difficult. In the savanna region of northern Cameroon (different from forest zone to the south), the schelude of Class A animals includes elephant, lion, buffalo, Lord Derby or giant eland, roan and korrigium.

Cameron and I both wanted roan. The roan is cousin to the sable, genuinely strawberry roan in color, with a sable-like face mask of black and white, and with horns that are similarly curved but sometimes thicker and definitely shorter. Roan have not adapted well to the intrusion of man and today are common in few areas and hutable in fewer. Cameron also wanted a giant eland, and well he should; longer in horn than common eland, with a dramatic balck throat ruff, they get my vote as Africa's most dramatic trophy and one of her toughest prizes.

I wanted one too but was intrigued by the buffalo. Classified as West African savanna buffalo, they are much larger in the body than the true dwarf buffalo found in the forest zone farther south, and their horns rise abruptly without the boss and curve of the Cape buffalo. In terms of coloration, the farther west you go, the more brown and red the buffalo become. In northern Cameroon there are still some black buffalo, often the older bulls, but mature bulls can also be brown or shockingly bright red.

I had never taken a red buffalo, and I wanted one, but I couldn't have a roan, a red buffalo and a giant eland. My choise was not to decide it yet.

We were hunting with Antonio Leguera's Mayo Oldiri Camp Safaris. Mayo means "river", and the Oldiri is the watercourse in one of the concessions we could hunt. We also hunted Mayo N'Duel to the north, trading back and forth between the two blocks. Initially we hunted with Stefen N'Douga, a bright, studious young man with 10 years' experience as professional hunter in both the forest and savanna regions of Cameroon. A few days into the safari, young Guav Johnson -an exceptionally capable PH- returned from his native Zimbabwe and took me off Stefen's probably grateful hands.

We were all hunting together late in the evening of our third day when Stefen spotted two roan bulls a couple yards off the hunting trazk. We made a quick stalk through tall

grass, and as we were approaching I saw, dimly, two bulls sparring. They broke apart, and I watched a young bull cut to the left. I knew we didn't want him.

Then, a few blades of grass farther on, I could see the remaining bull standing, facing us. Oh Lord, he was huge! His horns were as thick as baseball bats, curving back almost like a sble. Cameron shot him frontally with his Steyr. The bull went into high grass, and things got interesting.

Roan are perhaps the fastest of all the antelope -even lions don't mess with mess. But he was well hit, and he went down for good when hit again. He was a marvellous specimen, the front ridges on his horns were worn slick, and they were heavy, well-curved and nearly 29 inches long.

Over the next couple days, we shot most of the animals in the B and C classes, and then it was time to get really serious.

Guav and I went up to Mayo N'Duel. One evening before dark, while heading back to camp after an unsuccessful search for buffalo, we ran into a half-dozen roan antelope in a clearing. Both bulls and cows have horns, and their color is the same, so you have to look hard. One seemed to be a young bull, and the rest were cows. We glassed to the left, into the gloom, and there were more. One trotted out was not only clearly a bull but easily the biggest one I'd ever seen. Guav was calm and noncommittal. "Yes, Craig, I think you can take that one".

I already had a round chambered with the safety off, and as soon as the crosshairs senled on his shoulder I squeezed the trigger on the 375 Wby, Mag, thereby getting my third scope cut of the trip. He ran a bit, went down, then- miraculously with a 300 grain. Swift through his hungs- got up and moved off into the gathering shadows. We followed up quickly, and I shot him again. He was one of my finest African trophies long and heavy of horn.

The next day hunting with Stefen once again we saw a vast herd of eland down the road. We followed and almost got a shot at the huge hard bull. Hunting with Guav several days later, we tracked the same herd and glimpsed the bull several times but got no shot.

The eland won that round, and several more, but In the midst of a shamal or, locally, armeten- a hot wind that brings dust and sand off the desert and reduces visibility considerably- Cameron finally caught up to the herd and killed the bull at 150 yards. I was in the other camp when Cameron got his eland, and I heard about it that night. I was delighted but still uncertain as to what I really wanted. Guav was playing it as I'd asked him to: If we found buffalo, we followed them; if we found eland, we followed them.

There are a lot more buffalo than eland, and we followed several herds- sometimes for a short distance and sometimes for hours. On several occasions we simply bumped into herds then approached on foot to son them out.

The cover is fairly thick, so it was exciting hunting. We got very close to a lot of buffalo, but finding the right combination of color and horn eluded us. I passed up a

couple of big but black bulls, and I passed up some younger bulls that were wonderfully red.

Early one morning, probably about the 10th day, we found fresh buffalo tracks along a marshy watercourse. It took our trackers- old Binda, Taiwee, tall as a basketball player, and young Zachario- quite a while to figure it out, but when we left the river the spoor was still very fresh.

We didn't follow very long before we saw a single red buffalo moving ahead of us, trailing the herd. He was a good bull, red with black accents, so it should have been the shortest buffalo hunt of my career- except that I blew the shot. I was tired of bleeding from scope cuts, and I had also noted that every time we came up on buffalo it was close-in work, so I had removed the scope and was now hunting with open sights. It wasn't the shot, I had anticipated. We were in a burned area, and the bull was on the far side of a korongo or deep gulch, quartering away at probably 80 or 90 yards. The shot was simply enough, and it felt fine, but I hit him a little far forward on the first shot and just creased him with the second. He disappeared over the ridge.

Taiwee found blood right away, but this was not good. The burned area wouldn't go on forever, and these buffalo have a reputation for being extremely aggressive.

I'm not convinced they are more truculent than other African buffalo, but the country is usually much thicker, so encounters tend to be closer. Earlier in the year Guav had stopped a charge, point blank in tall grass, from an unwounded buffalo killed a professional hunter. So our cheerful trackers were suddenly serious and I felt like a dog for putting them through this. The track, highlighted by good blood spoor, ran straight for several hundred yards, deep-cut running tracks that a child could follow through the black ash. Then the burn stopped, the buffalo slowed to a walk, and the tracks began to meander.

We crossed a fat and the ground dropped abruptly into a tale korongo of tall, yellow grass. The tracks led straight in, and we were sure the buffalo was waiting for us. He was not. We followed the sign through the grass, palms sweating, one step at a time, and then we walked out, still on the tracks.

We took a few steps forward and then Taiwee pointed up the ridge. At first I couldn't see anything, then I saw a tail swish. The buffalo was up there, still moving away. He took a step, I saw the outline, and I got the rifle up and fired where I thought his shoulder must be. He vanished behind a screen of leaves, but a second later Taiwee, off to my right, said, "He is down."

Guav and I ran up the hill, and I shot the bull again as he tried to rise one more time. He was a terrific buffalo- a wonderful red buffalo and a unique prize. After that, Guav and I dug around for a really good kob and eventually found one. Cameron still needed a harnessed bushbuck and he took it right down to the wire- killing a fine ram just before dark on the last evening, a fine capper to a wonderful safari.