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CONTENTS

REGULAR

6 From the editor
98 Subscriptions
98 Our advertisers

ARTICLES

8 Around the campfire
Barrie Duckworth
16 A double and a buffalo
Ed Ostrosky
20 The elephant that hated motorbikes
John Coleman
24 On safari: close encounters with lions
Chris Meyer
28 Dagga boys by the dozen
Geoff Wainwright
32 Soup plates in the sand
Arnuld Engelbrecht
36 Double the trouble
Jason van Aarde
42 A tear for Somalia
Ivan de Klasz
48 Just another day in Africa: Pafuri short stories
Cleve Cheney
52 The use of statistics to evaluate the dispersion of shots: Part 2
Chris Bekker
66 Campfire chronicles: Abjater
Colyn Schutte
68 The proposed age-related trophy measurement system: Part 2
Erongo Verzeichnis
72 Mountain nyala: third time lucky
Peter Flack
80 True friendship, and a giant kudu
Danie Geel
87 The solo traveller
Brittany Boddington
90 Summer in France: Roe deer galore
Christophe Beau

Cover design: Nadia du Plessis

MOUNTAIN Nyala

Third time lucky

PETER FLACK

When you're in it. Up to your neck. Far from home, turning back is not an option. Nothing is happening and the days start to tick by ever faster. You can feel the first, faint hints of desperation creeping in. What do you do?

So, you rise earlier. Walk further. Stay out longer. Try harder. Investigate any suggestion. Return later each night. And the silence grows on the way back and around the evening meal. Everything that needs to be said has been said before - many times.

And when you are alone, you have to fight off the black mood that threatens to envelop you. You are useless, not prepared enough, not deserving enough. I mean, what the hell do you think you are doing here? Miles away from anywhere. Miles out of your comfort zone.

The unavoidable question surfaces again and again. Is this going to be another of those times? Because this is not the first time. It's not even the fourth or fifth time you have returned home defeated, empty-handed, telling yourself that that is the way it goes sometimes. What if success were guaranteed, if you could dial or rent success, you wouldn't do it. But it is cold, cold comfort pretends as you might.

After all the planning and preparation! After trying all your know-how. After sparing no effort. There is a part of you, however small, that thinks that you almost deserve success. In the past you have believed that, if you wanted something badly enough, worked at it hard enough, you would win. Well, welcome to the real World! You were wrong, plain and simple!

Looking back with the perfect vision of hindsight, you wonder as time dims the past emotions what all the fuss was about back then. But when you are in the situation, in the there-and-then situation on day 32, you can see now how it seemed perfectly reasonable to question your sanity. We all know that repeating the same thing again and again while expecting a different outcome, is a sign of madness. So, you asked yourself how much longer were you going to keep on keeping on. You simply did not know if and when you were going to achieve anything. Logically, if you spent 32 days hunting Mountain nyala without seeing a mature male, then there was no reason why you should spend another 32 days with the same outcome.

I spent the first 21 of the 32-day hunt with the late Colonel Negussie's safari company and, to say I was underwhelmed by him, would be an understatement. He got lost three times trying to find the way to his own hunting camp at 13,400 feet in the Kaka Mountains, south-east of Addis Ababa, where it was freezing cold. My accommodation was a small tent, two thin blankets, a fold-up camp stretcher, no ablution facilities and a cook who burnt boiled eggs for supper two nights in a row.

My PH had no rifle nor knife. The organisation was in shambles and there were endless delays each morning while the large crew of spotters and hangers-on argued about who was going to do what, even though it had all been sorted out the night before.

On day 18, I was offered the opportunity to shoot a very young, male Mountain nyala with about 20-inch horns. I say "offered" but, in reality, the hunting crew were screaming at me in barely subdued, hysterical, high pitched whispers, "Shoot, shoot, shoot" in a rising crescendo. In the end, I unloaded my mean-looking Winchester 300 Win. Mag., custom-made for me by Bill Ritchie of Krugersdorp (its black, synthetic stock hosting a Brno action and a Walther barrel with four black, silver-tipped, 180 grain Winchester Fail Safe cartridges in the magazine), closed the bolt, lay down behind the extended Harris bipod, acquired the young bull in my 3-9x42 Zeiss scope, fixed the crosshairs to the animal's right shoulder some 200 plus metres away, and gently squeezed the trigger. Even at that distance, the bull seemed to hear the click and picked up his grazing head to gaze in my direction, but it was probably the harum-scarum hunting team bobbing up and down behind me, trying to see what I was doing, that attracted his attention.

Previously, I had even taken a four-day hike to the distant Kubsa mountain and back where, unbeknownst to me, I was trespassing on the hunting concession of another outfitter who I subsequently discovered knew nothing about my presence. A scouting team had returned from the mountain with glowing reports of several Mountain nyala bulls, one of them sporting horns in the magical 30-inch plus realm, according to the measuring

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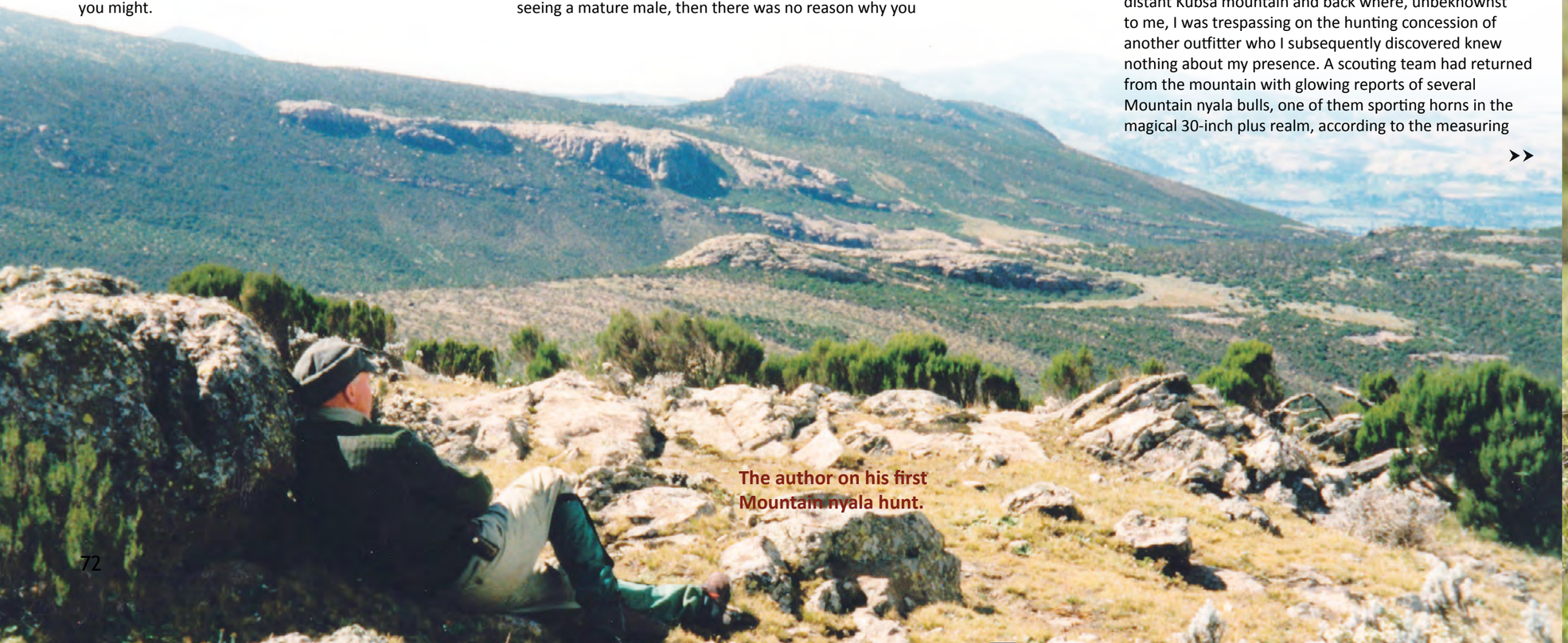

The author on his first Mountain nyala hunt.

Photo: courtesy of Hakan Pohlstrand.

stick they brought back.

It was a myth. If there were Mountain nyala bulls in the region, they had perfected the art of walking without leaving tracks.

There is nothing worse than realising you have been sold a pup and that there were no animals to hunt of the species you were looking for. Worse still, I had been told by the outfitter to buy hunting licences for several animals that had not been seen in many years in the areas I was hunting. In Ethiopia, the problem with this is that you have to pay for these expensive licences in advance – a Mountain nyala licence now costs $15,000, and there is no refund if you do not fill it.

I would not have returned to Ethiopia again had it not been for a fortuitous meeting at an SCI annual convention. I met a young, successful, Mountain nyala huntress who spoke in glowing terms about a certain Nassos Roussos and his success rate on Mountain nyala. Over breakfast with him the next morning, I booked a hunt for two years' hence as he was fully booked until then. A good sign!

In the interim, I got stuck into research on these

The author's second Mountain nyala bull hunted beneath the crest of Otmenna Mountain in Ethiopia.

The author with his first Mountain nyala bull hunted in the Munessa Forest, south east of Addis Ababa.

tough-to-hunt members of the exclusive, nine-member, spiral horn clan. There was substantial controversy over the naming of this solid, gunmetal, high country, big buck indigenous to Ethiopia. Initially called a kudu by a scientist at the Natural History Museum in London, the name was later changed to nyala. Well, as Rottweiler is to a Doberman pincher, so a Mountain nyala *(Tragelaphus buxtoni*) is to our thinner, smaller, more dainty and prettier KwaZulu-Natal beast. And, in fact, the Ethiopians themselves call it a Highland kudu and distinguish it from *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*, or the more common kudu, which they call a Lowland kudu.

I was also concerned to read scientific research that indicated, year on year, the numbers of Mountain nyala were dwindling. Habitat destruction and poaching – which the researcher conflated with hunting as so many animal extremists do – were given as the main reasons and numbers as low as 1,500 of these animals - with their supposed highly selective eating habits confining them to ever smaller areas - were being bandied about, as well as a move to place Mountain nyala on the IUCN red list.

And yet, when I spoke to Nassos and his son, Jason, a degreed conservationist from Colorado State University, they had another tale to tell. Most of the Mountain nyala were to be found in hunting concessions because the poaching was controlled in these areas and that there were far more than 1,500, of which the government at that stage allocated less than 20 licences a year. With the help of scientists like Paul Evangelista, the views of the Roussos family were proved to be correct. Mountain nyala was found in previously unsuspected areas and the total was in the region of 8,000 animals. The hunting concessions did indeed hold the best and growing populations and, after analysing the stomach contents of many Mountain nyalas, it could confidently be said that they ate a wide variety of plants - nearly 80 different types – available across many areas!

Let me nail my colours to the mast. I am a huge admirer of Nassos and Jason. My second Mountain nyala hunt with them in their Munessa Forest concession, at the more comfortable elevation of some 9,000 feet, was a far more organised and calmer affair. Yes, certainly there was a lot of hard work. Mountain nyala hunting is never

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Nasson Roussos and the author with a Menelik's bush-buck taken in the Munessa forest.

The neat tented camp on the author's second Mountain nyala hunt.

Nassos Roussos and Peter Flack enjoying a cold beer after a successful hunt.

The area below Otmenna Mountain where the second Mountain nyala was shot.

a gimme. The terrain, a series of razor-sharp mountains - where you were either heading steeply up or steeply down - meant that this was not a hunt for the unfit.

On day 11, I saw my first two mature bulls but only fleetingly through my fogged, distance measuring Leica Geovids. As on my previous hunt, scouts were sent out to various vantage points, the difference being that now most of the scouts were equipped with radios to call in any sighting. When the call came, we were still a mountain range and over half an hour away at warp speed. When we arrived, I was sweating bullets and breathing so hard I could barely make out the bulls. They seemed gigantic to me but Nassos barely gave them a second glance and merely muttered that the big one had already left. I was beyond excited and disappointed at the same time. How could Nassos be so matter-of-fact? Why were we not following them and trying for a shot? "We can do better than that," was all Nassos muttered to my hyperventilating questions.

And we could. Two days later, after hunting Mountain nyala for 32 days in total, we moved into position on the side of a steep, narrow, vegetation choked gorge where a bull had been spotted climbing. I was able to move into position behind a moss-covered, fallen, forest giant and rest behind the comfortable, soft, wide, brown, flaking bark. By the time the bull emerged on the opposite side of the valley my breathing had calmed, my pulse had slowed, I had been able to range various reference spots and knew that, if he appeared, I would have a shot between 175 and 225 metres. Not far by Mountain nyala norms. When he appeared, he was at the bottom of the gorge, almost fully covered by the dense vegetation but he obligingly moved up the opposite slope and, as he stopped to rest just past a slender, grey tree trunk, the shot flowed from my old Brno .375 and rolled the bull back down the slope to where he had been previously. He was stone dead on arrival and, just like that, I broke my Mountain nyala hoodoo.

No-one who has not endured this kind of torment can understand that there is no sense of triumph, no self-congratulations, no "thrill at the kill" as animal extremists parrot on about, only a deep sense of relief and quiet satisfaction at a job, if not well done, then at least properly done and ticking all the fair chase boxes.

My first Mountain nyala bull was mature and big in body but his horns were shy of the 30-inch mark which I had set for myself. I was a happy camper, make no mistake, but I found, as the months rolled by, that Ethiopia had worked itself into my psyche. It was a unique country. They spoke a language, Amharic, with some 284 letters in its alphabet, that no-one spoke elsewhere. They lived according to a Julian calendar, which was years behind ours. They were the first country to beat a major European power in pitched battle when led by Emperor Menelik, they slaughtered over 4,000 Italians under the command of Count Baratieri, in one day. I can go on and on. Suffice it to say it is a fascinating country which believes firmly that the Ark of the Covenant is housed in the northern town of Lalibela in a church, carved out of solid stone.

My second Mountain nyala hunt was up in the high mountains and I have to agree with Nassos that there appear to be differences in the Mountain nyala found in the two areas. Those in the high mountains are smaller and their horns thinner, primarily I suppose because of the cold and difference in food, which is more plentiful and with a higher nutritional value in the lower forests.

The stomach contents of a Mountain nyala, showing the variety of vegetation on which it fed.

Having said that, for me, the high mountains is what this kind of hunting is all about. After about five or six days of scouting, horse riding and walking up-hill and down dale in and around our base camp in the Bale mountains, we set off for a fly camp beneath the crest of Otmenna, a reasonably new concession acquired by Ethiopian Rift Valley Safaris, the Roussos' outfitting company.

En route we passed many of the beautiful, black Menelik's bushbuck – I think I counted over 16 rams – and found the fresh spoor of hyena and leopard as well as giant forest hog. Towards lunchtime, we picked up the track of a big Mountain nyala bull and followed it through an abandoned farm, down towards the foot of the mountain where it was probably going to drink. Halfway down, we came unexpectedly upon an open, rugby ball-shaped glade about 160 x 70 metres and Nassos decided to call a halt, thinking the bull might return the same way later that afternoon en route to his sleeping place higher up.

It was a long wait but patience, never my strong suit, paid off. I was nodding off, my head resting on my bent knees, my bipod's feet stuck in the laces of my boots with my rifle butt resting on my thigh when I was nudged awake by Nassos. I was gobsmacked. There, some 165 metres in front of me, was the Mountain nyala of my dreams, giving an enthusiastic exhibition of mud horning to an appreciative, onlooking, minky, brownish grey female and another young bull. As I mounted my rifle, I heard Nassos hiss, "Wait! I need to see his horns from the front." As impatient as I was to take the shot, I knew he was right, having previously made this mistake on my first common nyala where the tips of the horns touched.

It took forever. So long in fact that my feet became tired of propping the rifle up against the steep, downward slope of the mountainside and started to tremble. Of course, just as the feet of the bipod slipped off my feet, the bull turned his magnificent head and Nassos quickly gave me the go-ahead.

What followed next is, to this day, still engraved on my hard drive. I remounted the rifle and, not quite as steady as I might have liked, held the crosshairs on my 1,5-6x42 Zeiss Diavari Z in and about the bull's left shoulder as it stood almost side-on and allowed the shot to flow from my customized, Brno .375, loaded with 270 grain Winchester Power Points. At the shot, the bull nonchalantly turned on its heels and elegantly cantered up the steep slope into the forest, its bunched haunches displaying all the power of these heavily muscled antelopes.

Menelik's bushbuck - courtesy of Francois Guillet.

Nassos looked up to the Heavens and, with the palms of both hands facing and parallel to his grizzled head said, "Oh Lord, why this one? Why he miss this one?" He turned to me, his fierce brown eyes boring a hole in my head and added unnecessarily. "You miss, you miss!" Looking at the two game scouts and our tracker, Syfou (an ex poacher), for confirmation, he asked them,

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Common nyala and Mountain nyala mounts in the author's old trophy room on Bankfontein Game Ranch.

"He miss, no?" Their downcast eyes were answer enough.

Without further ado he stood and walked rapidly away downhill to where the bull had been standing, with me stumbling behind in his wake, apologising over and over again, saying, "So sorry, Nassos. I thought I hit him. I could have sworn I hit him."

He totally ignored me as he examined the muddy ground beneath the bull's feet and followed the deeply gouged, clear tracks into the treeline. After some 70 metres he stopped, bent over and minutely examined the deep green grass cover at his feet. He pointed to a small, roundish splodge of red. Blood!

With that, Syfou grabbed my shoulders from behind, turned me sharply to the left and shouted, "Shoot! Good shoot!" I thought he had spotted the wounded animal. I quickly mounted my rifle, flicked off the safety and, with eyes darting everywhere, tried to spot the bull. As my eyes found no target, I could feel the incipient panic rising. I knew I had only seconds.

Syfou dragged me forward and pointed, not up but down. There, behind a fallen forest giant, lay the bull stretched out on his side as if fast asleep, a small circle of blood on his left shoulder marking the spot where the bullet had entered before penetrating his heart.

I had no time to admire the magnificent animal. With a whoop, Nassos picked me off my feet and, although I was twice his size, started to dance me around the bull with the others soon joining in. I was overwhelmed by a flood of different emotions that threatened to get the better of me – overwhelming joy, a deep and enduring sadness, massive admiration for the wonderful beast, shoulder dropping relief, a sense of accomplishment. It was the Mountain nyala of my dreams and would be the last one I would hunt.

Nassos Roussos.