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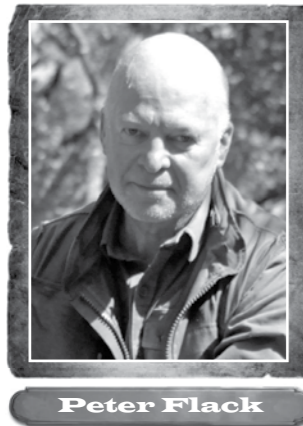
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- Cover: Rigby .416 "London Best" model. See article by Johan van Wyk on p.32.
- Cover photograph: Japie van Reenen
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HUNTING LORD DERBY'S ELAND *in Cameroon*

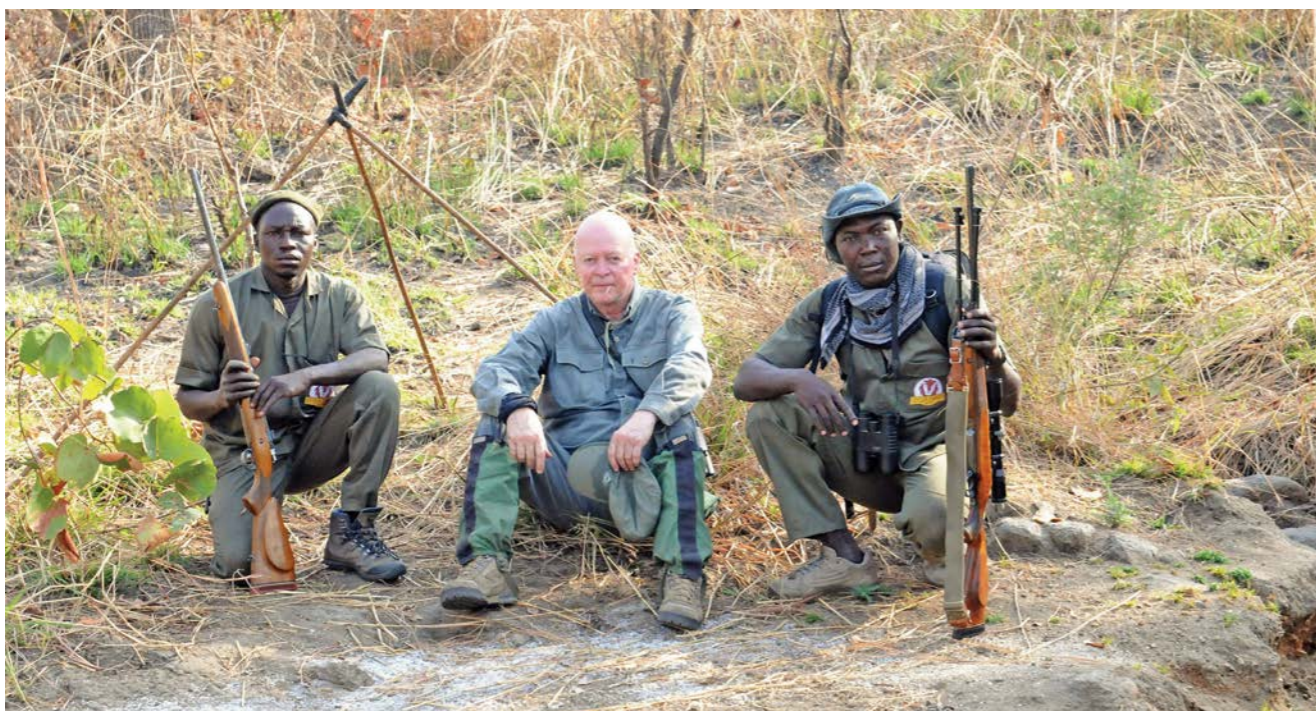
We all have our favourite things – an ice cream flavour, a particular restaurant, an old Harris tweed jacket. When it comes to hunting, my favourite is a giant eland hunt in one of the vast, unfenced wilderness areas of West Africa. And, if this hunt is the cream of plains-game hunting, then hunting an old, lone, super-wise, giant eland bull (or Banditas as they are called in Central African Republic), who has long since passed on his exemplary genes and has been expelled from the herd by the reigning bull, is the cherry on top.

There are two kinds of giant eland. The first is the Western giant eland, which is only found in three small areas in Senegal, numbers less than 1 000 and is not available on licence. The second is the Central or Lord Derby's giant eland previously found in Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Cameroon, although the latter country is currently the only viable hunting destination for most people, despite the fact that there is still one brave and very experienced safari outfitter, Alain Lefol Safaris, left in CAR.

One part of me feels a deep empathy with and sympathy for these old warriors who, after giving their herds their protection and counsel for many years – most of them are over 12 years old and in the last year or two of

their eventful lives – are summarily discarded. It is pitiful to see how they still try and sneak back into a herd only to be pushed out forcibly by the resident herd bull yet again. They remind me a bit of myself, if the truth be told! I mean, what is it that makes young people assume a man in his sixties is suddenly an idiot incapable of rational, logical thought? That anything he might have to say is irrelevant and not worth listening to?

Well, expelled these bandit bulls may be but stupid they certainly are not. They know they no longer have the protection of the guardian cows and the eyes, ears and noses of the herd and are hyper-alert. Like the big roan bulls whose habitats they share, they also never stop walking and feed on the move. Of course, being on their own,



The author flanked by his lead tracker, Sabou Celestine (left) and the assistant tracker, Papy Pano Abou (right), taking a water break at a salt lick. (Photo courtesy of Peter Flack)



The *Bandit* fell where he stood. (Photo courtesy of Peter Flack)

finding their tracks is difficult in the first place but following them through head-high elephant grass, screening the ground from view, is even harder and a skill few are blessed to possess. No wonder then that, in my humble opinion, giant eland trackers are the very best in the business.

For some reason – some may say masochism has played a role – I have been fascinated by the challenge of hunting these loners and have tried to hunt them time and again. It may help explain why, over five giant eland hunts, covering a total of 52 hunting days, I have managed to shoot a grand total of three bulls. But, if I say so myself, what three bulls! The Rowland Ward minimum entry level is 45", and the three huge bulls I shot measured a ½" under and a ½" over the magical 50" mark, with the last one measuring 48" on the dot.

Allow me to change the subject for a moment. When I was in my forties, I thought that if I could hunt the way I always have – on foot, carrying my own rifle and kit over a full day – into my mid-fifties, I would be happy to call it quits. Of course, when this day duly of arrived, I did not want to stop. So, I tried to box clever, train harder, use a gun bearer and a baggageman to carry my *katunda* (Swahili word word "stuff"), rest every seventh day, and so on.

In my sixties, after a horrible hunt in which I battled to see camouflaged game, was slow to acquire them in my scope and clean missed a huge kudu bull three times in a row, I decided it was time to stop hunting before I started wounding the wonderful wild animals I was so passionate about. Over an excellent steak, accompanied by an even better red wine, my friend, Eben Espach, persuaded me to carry on just a little longer. "Just hunt the animals you really enjoy hunting in the places you love, Pete," was his compelling advice.

A difficult but ultimately hugely enjoyable and successful hunt for a Livingstone's eland followed in northern Mozambique, succeeded by the complete opposite for nyala in the same country the following year and an outright disaster in the Republic of Congo the year after.



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Franz Coupé, the author's PH, with the local anti-poaching team that caught an eland poacher while we were there. Note the home-made firearm in the front row. (Photo courtesy of Peter Flack)

Were these clear signs telling me to stop? That I had reached and surpassed my sell-by date? At 68, I decided there was time for one last hunt and the 80-year-old, professional hunting icon, Franz Coupé, found a ready listener when he described his successes over the last three years in hunting giant eland along the eastern border of Bènouè National Park in north-central Cameroon. I immediately booked to hunt with him over the dark moon in January 2017, when giant eland are at their most attractive, wearing their full, thick, chocolate-brown winter neck ruff. The fact that the hunt was a good E13 000 cheaper than similar hunts helped, although I was a little wary because, when it comes to hunting, you invariably get what you pay for. However, Franz's sincerity and reputation was undeniable and I looked forward to hunting with this legend who, in his youth, had been one of the paratroopers air-dropped to secure the release of 2 000 men, women and children held hostage by Katangan rebels in Stanleyville. Next year Franz will have been a PH for 50 consecutive years!

I have a friend who says that those countries that most need tourists make it the most difficult to visit and Cameroon is a prime example. Apart from requiring additional information not mentioned in their own visa application form, issuing a visa for incorrect dates, refusing to grant a firearms permit for more than one rifle and then charging R2 000 to do so, the procedure took a very professional, very patient personal assistant over 50 calls and emails and the better part of two months to arrange. When you include the costs of the absolutely essential meet-and-greet service at Douala, the commercial capital and point of entry, as well as at the domestic airport of Garoua, the closest one to the hunting concession, the cost of these formalities exceeded R6 000, without costing the time of the personal assistant.

Garoua is reached via a twice weekly, 2¾-hour commercial flight, which usually manages to leave on the date

indicated but the timing is debatable as are the destinations between Garoua and Douala at which it might stop. En route to camp from Garoua, a four-hour drive over what once used to be a tarred road, marred by the inevitable roadblock-cum-extortion point, followed by two hours on dirt, there were many times when I asked myself whether any two-week hunt could possibly warrant this kind of bureaucratic bull-dust and uncomfortable inconveniences. To give you some idea, my firearms permit bears 16 stamps, the number of times I was obliged to surrender my firearms and ammunition for inspection while I was in Cameroon. Travelling to and especially in Cameroon certainly gave the lie to those misguided souls who repeat ad nauseam that hunters kill for thrills or pleasure. If this were the case, it would have been much, much quicker and cheaper to book a springbok hunt in the Karoo.

But the Ndilla Safaris permanent camp, owned by Pascal Gerard, on the banks of the Bènouè River was an absolute delight. There were five scrupulously clean and insect-free, whitewashed chalets with en suite bathrooms and a large central building containing a spacious, open-air lounge and dining room, including an internal lounge and kitchen where the chef, Gaston, turned out the most remarkable meals it has ever been my privilege to eat on safari. The most memorable comprised a fresh, cold, mixed salad from the camp garden, followed by fresh prawns flown in by Franz from Douala via Garoua, and then brought to camp, firstly by bus and then by motorcycle. Next on the menu was eland tail and banana ice cream – the first time I have eaten ice cream on safari. We certainly did not go hungry in camp although the same could not be said initially for the packed lunches.

The safari did not start well. We found no fresh eland tracks for the first three days. What little game we saw comprised mainly of very skittish Western kob and the odd red-flanked duiker. The Harmattan, a hot wind off the Sahara Desert, blew and blanketed the area in suffocating



My hunting partner, Eben Espach, entering one of the many stands of tall elephant grass through which the giant eland tracks often led. The ability of the trackers to follow spoor through these thick, matted areas where the ground was not visible, was extraordinary. (Photo courtesy of James Lawson-Smith)



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dust and humid heat, which neither man nor beast enjoyed. Although the long concession covered over 120 000 ha, more than half seemed devoid of game, while the bottom half included Mbaou Village, home to cotton growers, fishermen, grass cutters and honey gatherers, all descriptions being euphemisms for poachers. In fact, towards the end of the safari, a villager was caught with a freshly killed giant eland bull by a bunch of half a dozen desperados who formed the local anti-poaching squad, armed with a terrifying collection of handmade and poorly maintained firearms. To make matters worse, in one day my hunting partner, Eben Espach, and his team saw seven lions and we found the carcasses of two freshly killed, mature giant eland bulls as well as two Western hartebeest.

Day Four was the charm. At 09:45 Sabou Celestine, Papye Pano Abou and Laurent Mirabelle, our outstanding tracking team, picked up the fresh spoor of three eland bulls, one of which was a monster. By 12:50 I was resting my 39-year-old Brno .375 H&H on the shooting sticks with the crosshairs fixed on where I calculated the left shoulder of one of the bulls to be. I estimated the distance at about 160 m. Unfortunately, the front half of the animal was covered by a blackened, freshly burnt, woody shrub and the bull's head was lost in the enveloping shell burst of pinkish-beige, brown and off-white leaves still clinging valiantly to a burnt tree to the left of the shrub.

We could not move. We had come on the bull suddenly and unexpectedly. There was nothing between us and the bull other than a newly burnt, empty expanse of concave, blackened ground. We were caught in the open with only two small trees as cover. We stood motionless, waiting for the bull to move.

The bull stood like a statue. Immobile. We waited. And waited. Three questions rattled around in my head



The author's 300 gr Swift A-Frame and Norma solid recovered from the Lord Derby's eland shot by him. (Photo courtesy of PHF)



From left to right: Richard Flack, the author, Eben Espach (holding the bottle of Veuve Clicquot French champagne provided by my PH), the man next to him, the legendary Franz Coupé, and Jacques Guhel, a French medical doctor turned PH. On the table are the prawns Franz flew in from Douala for our special dinner that night. (Photo courtesy of James Lawson-Smith)



A typical giant eland hunting team – the lead and assistant trackers-cum-gun bearers in front, followed by the PH, client and baggageman with water. (Photo courtesy of James Lawson-Smith)

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A good-quality Western kob. (Photo courtesy of Christophe Morio)

as a *piapiac* (a big, black, crow-like bird) cawed raucously overhead. Which of the three bulls was it? How big were the horns – I did not want to shoot a small, young, immature bull? And lastly, could I risk a shot through the blackened bush? When in doubt, do nothing, Chiang Kai-shek, ex-Taiwanese president, was quoted as saying. Not being able to answer any of my questions, I waited some more until the hot, fickle, midday breeze suddenly changed and, in less time than it takes to write this, the bull pivoted on his heels, spun through 180 degrees and left. He was, of course, the big one. Big and old and a pale yellowy-grey with horns, although thick at the base, well below the magical 50" mark, which is the holy grail for all Lord Derby's eland hunters.

It did not matter. I had seen enough to know that this was THE bull. I was going to devote the rest of the hunt to finding him and, if I did not, too bad – I would go home empty-handed, and not for the first time.

And of course we followed. The bull neither stopped nor deviated from his due westerly course. We followed until 15:30 when we ran out of water. For reasons known only to himself, the baggageman had left the third water bottle behind. In the 40° heat, covering the kinds of distances we needed to on foot, no water meant no hunt



Our comfortable chalets with en suite bathrooms at the Ndilla Safaris camp on the banks of the Bènouè River in north-central Cameroon, which formed the border with the national park of the same name. (Photo courtesy of Peter Flack)



Franz Coupé, the author's 80-year-old, iconic and legendary Belgian PH

and certainly not for a diabetic like me. Worse was to follow. Arriving back at the truck to refuel – we were in radio contact and I had not eaten for 10 hours – the only food was two small sardine tins and a tiny loaf of dry bread for six men. I was taught in the army that the men ate first and officers last and so it was a very hungry man who, on arrival back in camp, ate all the peanuts before supper.

The next morning started very promisingly. We dropped off two trackers where we had abandoned the spoor the afternoon before. Taking the truck, we drove in a westerly direction to try and leapfrog the *Bandit* and, believe it or not, cut the tracks of the lone bull in the fine grey dust of a two-tyre bush track. Then the filthy forefinger of fate intervened ... The tracks led us past the carcass of a freshly killed, mature Western hartebeest bull. Undeterred, we went on and found where he had joined a small herd of cows and calves. This was good news because, if the bull stayed with them, the calves would slow him down and give us a better chance of catching up the hour or so we were behind, especially when they would be forced by the calves to stop and rest at midday.

Then we found the tracks of four lions – a large male, a female and two younger ones – on top of those of the eland. They led straight into a seemingly endless stretch of suffocatingly thick, 10 ft high elephant grass. What to do? To save the eland, we set fire to the grass and then had to run for it as the wind changed and drove the fire towards us. What a disaster!

Sunday, 29 January 2017 – the seventh day of my hunt and my day off. I slept in until 06:30, had a leisurely break-

fast, cleaned my rifle, cameras and binoculars and was photographing the camp when our driver, Moosa Ali Baba, a Muslim Fulfulde from Tchollerie to the north, arrived to fetch me. The trackers had found the smoking hot spoor of the *Bandit* crossing a dirt track. The dung was still green and wet and warm. We started on the tracks at 08:44, about an hour behind the bull.

He did not stop once and continued heading in a south-westerly direction into the Makat Hills on the southern border of the concession. The territory was all rolling tree savannah hills and green valley bottoms and we followed him up the hills and down the dales. We regularly lost his tracks in head-high, unburnt, long blonde grass and, when we stopped for a quick 15-minute break to eat a cheese-and-tomato sandwich and drink a Coke, I felt we had not made any inroads into the hour.

Sabou Celestine, our Dourou head tracker, was convinced, however, that we would catch him before dark. He was right and at about 16:15 I saw him stop suddenly and throw up the sticks while Papye immediately turned and handed me my rifle. I was on the sticks in nanoseconds and, through the 1,5-6x42 Zeiss Diavari Z scope, saw the noble head and muscular neck of the *Bandit* heading towards us at a 45° angle about 180 m away. We saw one another almost simultaneously and he reacted faster. The bull went from a walk into a flat-out left to right to run, as my finger tightened on the trigger and the shot battered through the spot he had just vacated – a tad too high and behind him, I suspected.

We followed the *Bandit* for three quarters of an hour. He was completely unharmed and resumed his normal, stately, steady, ground-eating walk within half a kilometre. When we crossed a heavily utilised game trail at 17:15, we had been on his spoor for nine and a half hours in total and soon found where a large herd of about 40 eland had obliterated the heavily indented, well-worn hoofprints of the animal I was increasingly thinking of as "Our Boy".

The next morning started off well once again. We found Our Boy's lone track at 07:30. Sabou and Papye followed while we leapfrogged in the truck. We had not gone far before we found them, covered by those of the huge herd in which I counted at least seven other mature bull tracks. Although we felt confident that our boy would be booted out of the herd in no time, to find where and when he exited such a large herd, whose tracks meandered all over the place, was a well-nigh impossible task. The decision, however, was taken from us by the arrival of my hunting partner on the scene. They had been following the big herd all morning and so we left them to it.

The mood was sombre as we drove back to camp, each with his own thoughts. We had been more than lucky so far but where could we possibly look for the *Bandit* now or the next day? We did not seem to have any answers. The only thing that kept me going was the realisation that I had been on this hunting roller coaster many times before – from joy to sorrow, from happiness to despair, plus a whole variety of other intense emotions all crammed into a few hours.

I went to bed early that night but the extra sleep did not bring any enlightenment. When we drove out of camp at the normal time of 06:00, none of us had come up with any clever ideas and, as dark gave way to early dawn and



The Bènouè River at the height of the dry season in February when the Harmattan was blowing, carrying dust from the Sahara Desert. The river forms the border between the hunting concession and Bènouè National Park, which, according to the author's PH, was a shadow of its former self. (Photo courtesy of Peter Flack)

heralded the chortling calls of the stone partridges scurrying about under the matted grass next to the dirt track, we dawdled in the direction of the Makat Hills. An hour and a half later, we stopped to examine fresh eland tracks. Sabou seemed certain they were from the same herd of cows and calves that Our Boy had temporarily joined



The back of the author's Cameroon firearms permit with 16 stamps, one for each time his rifle was inspected during his two-week hunt.

before. For want of anything better to do and without any discussion or clear decision, we somehow started following the tracks.

By 11:00, we had pushed the small herd three times without scaring them too badly or being able to winkle out a decent, mature bull. Still we persisted and, an hour later, lo and behold, found the *Bandit's* tracks crossing those of the small herd at right angles to it. We were back in business! From lolling behind the trackers with my thoughts anywhere but on the matter at hand, to all senses in high alert, took exactly five nanoseconds.

Of course, the question on your mind may be, how did we manage to identify the *Bandit's* spoor? Well, quite simply, apart from the fact that his were very large and worn, the cleft of the left back track had a small but unmistakable kink in it.

Our buzz was back. Everyone was suddenly taking special care to minimise the noise made although, given the break-dry, burnt grass and crunching golf balls of soil formed by earthworms underfoot, we sounded like a company of jackbooted infantry to me! Midday found us heading up a steep, narrow, rocky, tree-clad ravine. I saw Papye tap Sabou on the shoulder and point ahead with his chin. They called Franz over and a long, rapid conversation took place in French, which was too fast for me to follow. All three were looking through their binoculars, as was I but I could see nothing, nor could Franz. The conversation became louder as Franz has lost over 70 per cent of his hearing and I began to fear that, if there was an eland up ahead, he could not but fail to hear us.

Worse was to follow as Franz tried to translate Sabou's instructions for me. I just could not see a thing. It must have taken all of three minutes before I eventually saw the dim, grey shadow silhouetted in deep shade near the

top of the ravine over 200 m away, much further than the directions I had received. I was nervous that, with all the loud whispers and jockeying to see the bull, we had mere seconds to make the shot.

Fortunately, Sabou and I had practised him throwing out the sticks, kneeling and holding them steady while Papye moved in to give my chicken wing a steady place to rest on his shoulder. Within moments the 300 gr Swift A-Frame flowed from the barrel almost without conscious thought and, as I recovered from the recoil, the first thing I saw gazing up at me was Sabou's beaming face. The bullet hit precisely where I had aimed – a high shoulder shot through the spine. The bull never woke from his siesta. He collapsed where he stood and never moved although I fired an insurance solid between his front legs as he lay with his stomach towards me. I always remember the rhyme – if the animal falls and runs, the fun has just begun. If the animal runs and falls, that animal is all yours!

What an end to a hunt! Day Nine and the sixth consecutive day of tracking the same lone Lord Derby's eland bull! I had realised the dream of a lifetime. So, the important question is: Would I go back to hunt the same concession with Franz again? Let me think about that. OK, I have. The answer is no. While the staff were exemplary – well trained and well motivated – and the camp facilities and food very good, the concession was too small to host two hunters and there were too many people wandering in and about the concession, which, I suspect, was the main reason the game was sparse, although I will concede that a number of hungry lions may also have had something to do with it.

For more about Peter Flack, his books, DVDs, articles, blog, SHAC and the Fair Chase Guild, visit the website: www.peterflack.co.za



Stone partridges (Photo courtesy of Richard Flack)



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