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HUNTING IN THE RAINFOREST WITH THE *Baka pygmies*

Pedro Ampuero

Ten years had passed since our last visit to the African rainforest. At that time, my father and I hunted the eastern part of the Shanga River in the Central African Republic. It was time to go back and experience one of the most amazing hunts Africa has to offer – hunting with the Baka pygmies in the rainforests of Cameroon.

Our hunting destination in Cameroon was close to the Ngoko River that borders the Congo. We had planned a 13-day hunt with Jose Chelet of Chelet Hunting Safaris, a good friend from Spain. I am very privileged to be able to share these hunts with my father, who has taught me everything I know about hunting. He is, without a doubt, the best hunting partner I could wish for.

Our targets on this hunt were the elusive dwarf forest buffalo for my father, and the beautiful bongo for me. Also on our list were other species such as the forest sitatunga, duiker, bushpig and giant forest hog.

Despite your hunting list, you never know what the rainforest may offer you, so it is better to go there open-minded. Apart from the many huntable creatures roaming this dense forest, you may also be fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of the elusive forest elephants and gorillas.

The adventure begins

If there is something that you have plenty of in Africa, it is time. The real Africa welcomed us, forcing us to spend two days while waiting for some “paperwork” to be done in order to get the charter plane to fly to our final destination. Finally, we arrived in the hunting area, where Pepe (Jose Chelet) was waiting for us on a little timber landing strip.



My father and I, ready for the great adventure!

Hunting method

The rainforest is overwhelming; everything is so immense, so dense and so wild that just having the opportunity to spend time there makes the long trip worthwhile. Unfortunately, timber production has hit this forest hard in the last few years. Tons and tons of millenarian trees have been removed from the area, breaking the forest into a maze of timber trails.

The felling of these big trees allows the light to penetrate the thick forest. The result of the sunrays on such fertile land is impenetrable forest that can only be explored by the slash of the machete.

Luckily for us, we were hunting with probably the best hunters in the world – the Baka pygmies. One cannot help but be in awe of these people who are small in stature but possess great hunting skills. Using primitive hunting equipment, they will put many of today’s hunters with special-



Tons of trees have been felled in the forest.



The Baka pygmies in their village in the rainforest

ised, modern equipment in the shade. It is just unbelievable how they can read the forest. You think that you have seen it all until you watch them tracking a sitatunga through the water – simply mind-boggling!

The main hunting method used in the rainforest is tracking. You spend the morning slowly looking for fresh tracks along the timber trails. If you find something worthwhile, you follow it. As the forest is so dense, it is simply impossible to get to the game without the help of a few little dogs.

While tracking, the dogs stay close to the hunters as they know that they can get lost very easily. When flush-



Small dogs are helpful to flush animals in the dense forest.



Tracking a sitatunga through the water



Baka pygmies tracking bongo

ing an animal while tracking, the dogs will go after it and, with a bit of luck, will hold it back for a few moments. This often happens in the thickest parts of the forest. Here the animals will make a stand and face the dogs, ready to fight. Both the bongo and the buffalo often end up kicking the dogs.

On the spoor of bongo

One day we found a very fresh bongo track. We did not have to wait long before the antelope with its striking reddish-brown coat and white-yellow stripes jumped out in front of us. After a few tense seconds, the dogs started barking. We started running like crazy, with the adrenalin coursing through your veins, you manage to go through places you never thought possible! In the last few metres

of the chase, we slowed down to a stalk. We could hear the bongo running from the dogs, but we could not see more than 10 m ahead!

We were all standing behind a big tree with the bongo just 5 m away, but still we could not see it. After catching a glimpse of the bongo through the dense foliage, we decided to pass it up as it would be impossible to get an arrow through there.

During the afternoons there was not enough time for tracking game, as night falls very quickly inside the forest. For that reason, every afternoon my father and I would go to the viewpoints in small openings in the forest, where we would call for duiker with two pygmies.

Glorious day

Hunting in the forest is tough, both physically and psychologically, with many hours of walking through the jungle while bending down or even crawling on your knees. The heat and high humidity make hunting very tiring. You may not see any game at all, which may cause you to think you are looking for ghosts. And that is half true, because the denizens of the rainforest can appear out of nowhere, just to vanish again a few seconds later.

But that particular day was different. The mysterious morning fog was hiding something that we were about to discover ...

It was early in the morning when we cut the fresh track of a solitary buffalo bull. My father decided to give it a try. With him was his South African PH, Hancke Hudson. Pepe and I went by ourselves to look for a bongo track.

While searching for tracks, we came across something very unexpected. Just 30 m from the road there was a



The secretive bongo



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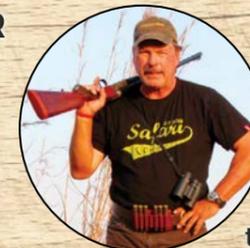
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bongo taking a bath! We watched it for more than five minutes and then left it to bath in peace. Although we knew we might regret it later, it was definitely not the right way to take such a majestic animal. This was probably one of the most beautiful encounters with an animal I had ever experienced. What are the chances of seeing a wild bongo bathing for a full five minutes a mere 30 m away? As the pygmies said, it was Mother Forest's way of saying good morning. And she was generous indeed as we had a second magical encounter soon afterwards when we encountered a gorilla.

It was already one o'clock in the afternoon when we came across a bongo track. Although it was late, we decided to give it a try. If we had no luck within the next 90 minutes, we would call it a day as it would take us that long to return to the car, by which time it would be dark.

The tracking team consisted of Endeke, Rigoberte, Kema and Martin – all exceptional trackers. Each step was followed as though they were inside the animal's head, all working together as a team. Each step took us a bit closer to our prey, a bit closer to a moment I had dreamed of many times before.

After a little more than an hour, we heard the bongo jump, followed by the dogs. A few moments later we heard them barking. The bongo had stopped to face them. It was time to run! Flying through the liana thicket, we were suddenly stopped by the pygmies. We were very close and now it was our turn to go into action – Pepe with the rifle, and I with my bow. We were ahead of the line, getting closer to the barking dogs and charging bongo.

Suddenly we saw it – an orange shadow only 12 m away! Looking for an area with better visibility, we advanced a few metres when the bongo charged at the dogs. He was coming in our direction, forcing us to back off. Pepe, being a very good PH, luckily did not shoot, even though the situation gave us the creeps. It was really close!

The bongo returned to its initial position and started fighting the dogs again. It was difficult to get a clear view – besides the dogs running around the animal, the bongo also kept on moving to try and reach them. I needed to find a way to get to it!

Pepe knelt down, ready to back me up, so I decided to gain a few more yards to try and find an opening among



My beautiful bongo



My father and PH Hancke Hudson with the dwarf forest buffalo

all those moving limbs. Suddenly the bongo ran at a dog, and for a few seconds I managed to find an opening the size of a foot. Without hesitation, I drew my bow and released the arrow as quickly as I could. The bongo was just 8 m away!

The arrow found its mark and I could clearly see the white blazers right on the shoulder. I moved away from my position and told Pepe to back up. I knew it was a perfect shot and did not want to force the situation. Within 10 seconds, the bongo collapsed, much to the astonishment of us all!

The restrained adrenaline exploded and we all started shouting, hugging, and all those things that you do in that kind of moment. It was a dream come true and one of the most exciting hunting experiences I had ever had. I cannot explain the emotions that washed over me – it was in one word, unique.

And so, as to close the perfect day, my father was waiting for us in the camp with a magnificent buffalo! After following that morning's track for over three hours, they found the lone buffalo. As it was about to charge, my father put a bullet from his .375 into its chest to stop it, only 12 yards away! After that initial shot, my father and Hancke both fired a few more back-up shots before the buffalo expired. It truly was a day we would never forget.



Here I am with Pepe, the pygmies and their dogs after a successful bongo hunt.



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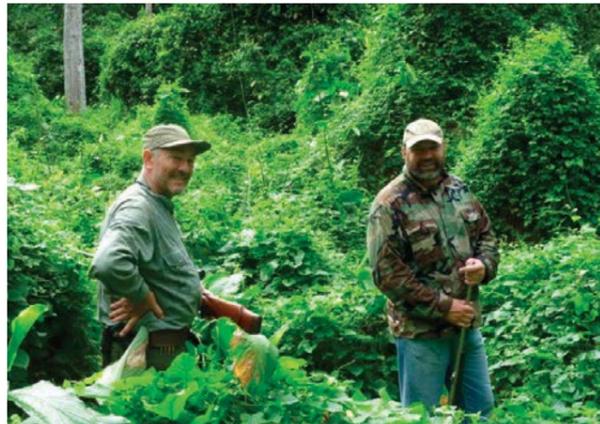
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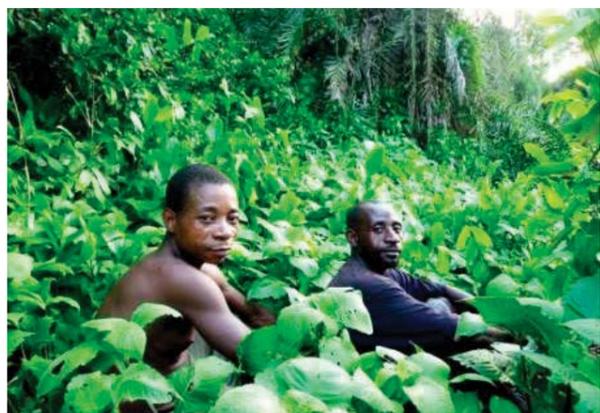


My father and PH Hancke Hudson

Ups and downs

With the main objectives fulfilled, we would target sitatunga next. But as with every adventure, there were ups and downs. I came down with a fever and was forced to rest in camp for a day. Luckily it was not malaria and I could quickly rejoin the team with renewed strength.

As usual, my father went to a viewpoint that afternoon, while I decided to explore the forest with Endeke and Mustik. Poaching in these areas has been intense;



Exploring the rainforest with the pygmies



My Peter's duiker

there were snares everywhere, with all the duiker species being the most affected. Years ago, you could easily call in a few duiker simultaneously, but now we struggled to bring any in. However, the opportunity to learn from the pygmies was amazing. I spent all afternoon asking them questions. They taught me how to put out snares, find good water, read forest signals and track game.

The pygmies would make the distress noise, and the duiker would come in to help its partner (I will never understand why, since there is not much a little duiker can do). That afternoon nothing came in for the first five calls. We were just about to throw in the towel when a Peter's duiker appeared a mere 6 m away from us. It was looking in our direction to see what was going on. I drew the bow as slowly as possible, releasing the arrow the moment I reached full draw. The arrow took flight but I had no idea where it had gone. Everything happened so fast.

Endeke said that I had missed it. I was a bit disappointed, as we had been working hard all afternoon. However, when we started looking for it, there was blood all over the place. A perfect miss turned to be a perfect heart shot! We found the Peter's a few metres away from the site of the shot. It was an old warrior with only three legs, and one of them had a snare attached to it. I do not know if there is a solution to the poaching, but if it keeps going like this, the forest hunting will soon disappear.

We crossed sitatunga tracks almost every day, but getting to them was nearly impossible. We only saw one in the time we chased them. We were going through some really dry days, and game movement slowed right down. It was becoming really hard to cross fresh tracks. But finally it rained, and when it rains in the rainforest, you had better be prepared!

It rained nonstop for a whole day, resulting in all the bridges collapsing. We had to spend a whole day rebuilding them. But the important thing is that everyone was happy! All the local people came to help us reconstruct the roads. Soon after the rain stopped, the animals started moving again, and that was exactly what we needed. Tons of small critters showed up. As Hancke used to say, "They are either going to bite you, sting you or lay eggs on you. Or maybe all three things at the same time!"

Almost every day we cut sitatunga tracks. We tried to find one until the last moment of the hunt, but all we



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All the local people came to help us reconstruct the roads.

managed was to hear them running. It was the fourth time my father had tried to get one of these antelope. It is definitely not an easy quarry. However, that gave us the perfect excuse to come back soon!

Getting back home was not easy. Again, a paperwork problem made us lose two days waiting for a charter plane that never came to pick us up. We had no other solution but to drive 24 hours straight through those crazy timber roads, with trucks driving at full speed with tons of timber loaded behind.

Despite these problems and inconveniences, nothing could change the flavour of an incredible trip. The main reason why my father and I go on one of these hunts almost every year, is the adventure – you know how things start, but you never how they are going to end. We had managed to spend a wonderful time in one of the wildest places on earth, hunting with outstanding trackers for amazing animals.

Thanks

I would like to thank Jose Chelet for his professionalism; Hancke Hudson for his help and support throughout the entire hunt; Endeke, Mustik, Benoir, Rigobertte and all the other trackers, without whom the hunt would have been impossible; Francis for bringing some order to the chaos; and of course, my father, for letting me experience this adventure. I feel really privileged and could never be grateful enough.



The old way ... and the new. Left: A pygmy with his traditional bow. Right: A pygmy tries his hand at my modern bow.



This small pangolin appeared after the rain.

Equipment used on the hunt

- ▶ Elite GT500 70# , Trophy Ridge V5, Limbdriver rest, Winner's Choice Strings, Doinker
- ▶ Carbon Express PileDriver, Muzzy MX-3 and Bohning Blazer Vanes
- ▶ Sitka Gear, Hecks
- ▶ Bohning Blazer Vanes
- ▶ Winner's Choice Strings



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