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Botswana: 2006

“Cat and Mouse”

By Dr. James Turner

Safari planned by John Barth of Adventure Unlimited, Inc.



Few experiences in life stop time in slow-motion movie fashion. Mine was when a large, ginger-maned beast had me wondering what I was doing in Africa staring down a lion.

I felt it first – the perceptible vibration that became an audible rumble that escalated into a heart-stopping roar. An involuntary spasm brought the .416 to my shoulder. He was close and about to get closer.

A whole chain of events had landed my wife, Michelle, and me in the Chobe with a lion at 20 paces taking loud exception to our presence. Sage advice about not seeking lion on a first – or even a second – safari had fallen on the deaf ears of the obsessed. As I poured over the available opportunities, it was clear that lion hunting was pricey and success was relatively uncertain. But that didn't change my mind when a cancellation for lion in Botswana (which reopened in 2005 for the first time since 2001) appeared. But I would have to hunt in August, and it was now May, and we'd been home less than two weeks.

Ten weeks later we were getting our first look at Victoria Falls, 'the Smoke that Thunders,' from 2000 feet on the charter. At Kasane we met PH Calvin Nobrega, a quiet, unassuming man of Portuguese and English descent, who began hunting at age 13, becoming fully qualified in Zimbabwe in 2001. Only later, after much probing, did we learn he'd won the award for taking the best elephant in Zimbabwe in the last two years. His quiet intensity was evident early in the hunt.

Calvin and his partners, Doug Hidden and Thys de Vries, acquired hunting rights to Botswana's CH8 concession in 2005; Trophy Quest Botswana is an extension of their successful Zimbabwe operation, Lion's Den. CH8 is a roughly 30- by 40-km area on the Zambezi River between Botswana's Chobe Park and Hwange Park in Zimbabwe. The terrain is relatively flat with heavy bush in Kalahari sand, which makes tracking possible. Large populations of eland, sable and elephant add to its overall appeal.

After 38 hours of travel we were exhausted, and stumbled to our tent, complete with double bed and a hot shower under the stars.

Our first task was a quick check of the rifles. Our Winchester Model 70 .416 Remington Magnum with 400-grain Barnes Triple X-Bullets hit the makeshift target dead-center; the Ruger .300 Winchester Magnum with 200-grain Barnes was the expected two inches high at about 80 yards. I had worked up the loads and, considering the short turn around, I was glad.

Botswana doesn't allow baiting, so this would be track and stalk – not for the faint of heart. Tracking in midday may allow you to approach a sleeping lion, but the bush can be very thick, and you are often only a few feet away before you can see him. We learned quickly how this works. We would crisscross the concession watching for tracks in the sand with the lead tracker, Texan (Don't ask, no one seemed to know) ahead. Tall for a bushman, he had a huge smile and wore a knit stocking hat and overalls, regardless of the temperature. He stood on the back of the Land Cruiser with a four-foot-long stick and waved it in front of the windscreen to direct progress through the bush as he watched for tracks in the sand. If they were recent and large, we began tracking.

Botswana takes game regulation seriously, so our merry band included Calvin; Toffey, our Botswana PH; Texan and Alex, our trackers; Pibs, the Botswana government game scout; a community representative; and Michelle and me. I was sceptical about our ability to stalk lion with eight people.

The first two days of tracking were frustrated by swirling winds that always were at our back no matter which way we turned. We spooked a pride several times but were unable to get them in sight. Repeated encounters with elephant herds and buffalo bulls kept us entertained. One large herd of buffalo created a cloud of dust that could be seen for half a mile, and though we were hopeful the lions would stay close to this moving buffet, there were no sightings.

Our nights were frustrating, too. Something in our bags had aroused the interest of a mouse with a zipper fetish. I can sleep in an elevator standing up, but Michelle stalked it night after night armed with flashlight and shoe, as if our greatest risk was to be stranded with unusable luggage.

Early on Day Three we crossed fresh tracks by the pan. Initially the sandy soil made tracking easy, but as the ground became harder so did the trackers' job. At times we would stand silently for 15-20 minutes as Alex and Texan spiralled in ever-bigger circles to reacquire the track. A curious African pantomime would take place. One would raise his arm to near shoulder level, bent at the elbow and with hand flapping to and fro would describe an arc that indicated 'this way,' although 'this way' seemed to be almost any way to me. A palm-up shaking motion that looked like an attempt at rolling the dice meant 'I've lost the track.' A bowling motion with thumb up would signify a new find. And we were off again.

Three hours into the track we heard a sound that initially we thought was an elephant. As we stood motionless, we heard it again and realized it was lions growling, and not far off... As we closed in on the low growls, Toffy ran forward to where he thought we would see them to set up shooting sticks. Too soon. We moved again and circled left to clear a small thicket. Too late I realized we were circling upwind. As we passed the thicket, Texan began to gesture wildly to my right, and we froze as a large ginger-maned lion stood, growled, and disappeared into the grass. Two seconds behind him was a lioness that stood and ran. We all just stood there.

I could have attempted a crossing shot as he slinked off, but I'd promised myself I would not take questionable shots at unwounded dangerous game running AWAY. I have made that shot on whitetail deer at 175 yards, but this was different.

A heated discussion in Setswana ensued, with gesturing, finger pointing, and gradually escalating volume. I was sick. I knew I could have successfully taken that shot. They were disgusted. I should have done it. From the grass but no more than five metres away, a growl interrupted the discussion, and we wheeled to see the second large male slip off equally disgusted.

I sat down, and for the first time asked myself what I was doing here. I was convinced I had missed my one chance and would go home empty-handed. I had just seen three lions within 10 metres. Stunned, I realized how dangerous this was. Could I have stopped a charge? I would replay that moment and the decision not to shoot over and over for the next week. I was convinced I would not see another lion this trip. Boy, was I wrong.

That afternoon we set up at a waterhole to watch for lions, but a large male came in early, walking right at us in the middle of the Cruiser tracks. He saw us just as we saw him and he ducked back into the bush. We grabbed our rifles and tried to cut him off. Twice we had a glimpse of him running to avoid us. As we followed his tracks for the third time, he showed serious indignation at our interference. That's when time stopped.

The trackers, community rep, and game scout were equally focused in their own responses – retreating and climbing trees, leaving Calvin, Toffy, Michelle and me to deal with the current concern. As I looked through my scope I thought their reaction most reasonable. He looked huge. He was standing maybe 35 metres away with his front paws up on a fallen log doing his best MGM lion impersonation, head rolling side to side as he bellowed his loudest. His tail was up over his back flicking side to side, and to add emphasis, he bolted 10 metres closer and stopped to roar again. My finger was tightening on the trigger as the crosshairs settled on his shoulder.

Calvin's hand appeared in front of me and I heard him say over the roar:

“Don’t shoot! He’s the wrong one.”

“Are there wrong ones?” I remember thinking.

“He’s young. Get behind me and start backing away.”

The big four-year-old took two more runs at us, the last stopping at no more than 20 metres, roaring, pawing the earth, and showing off his dental work. Calvin yelled something at him and began to back away, his .375 ready. We stumbled backward over a log as the 400-lb youngster growled approval and sulked off.

When we hit the clearing we began to talk and realized Alex had lost his radio. Calvin suggested he go back for it, and Alex suggested in Setswana that Calvin do something that I suspect I understood. Laughter was a good release as we all re-lived the too-close encounter. Calvin said he wasn’t full mane and had pink on his nose. In Botswana they are serious about only taking old adult males. At any rate, I had faced a charge and not lost my nerve. I felt a bit reassured and a little giddy.

The next few days were filled with close encounters in heavy cover, sometimes spooking lions off their kills at five metres, but no chance to shoot one. The hours of walking were easier than bouncing through ruts in the sand looking for fresh tracks. Being mock-charged by a young bull elephant was entertaining, but, by Day 10, I was beginning to lose hope.

Then, again, we found fresh tracks early. We lost the trail several times, as the cats seemed to double back repeatedly. Judging from the spoor, Texan thought the large male and female were probably breeding. By then, I had decided that the many sightings and close calls were enough. After all, lion hunting is a long shot at best.

Another 10 minutes passed when Texan’s eyes widened and he sank down. “LI-ON,” he whispered. We studied the bush on the anthill he was pointing to. Sure enough, a sub-adult was looking in our direction. We couldn’t see others, but the tracks told us otherwise. Calvin and I circled downwind to try for a better look, and as we crawled 30 yards a few inches at a time, we found a break in the grass, and there he was.

All I could make out was a mane, then an ear and a nose, so I imagined the rest. Calvin offered to move closer, but we were only 40 metres away. I didn’t want to risk spooking him since the young one was still watching. Sticks up, .416 steady, deep breaths out slowly, jaw slack, and I touched off a round. I racked in a second and looked. Nothing. No movement. Great. I had just killed a tuft of grass.

Then I saw the lion’s rear foot quiver, and for the first time I was sure he was down. We moved up 15 metres and I put the second round in his chest at Calvin’s urging. The closer we got the bigger he looked. The first shot had hit the neck at the shoulder and severed his spine. The Triple X-Bullet had left no unnecessary drama.

As promised, Toffy taught Michelle the lion dance to a four-count as they all chanted ‘Tau e sule’ - The lion is dead. As we approached camp my rifle was handed to me to fire a shot into the air to alert the camp that a lion has been taken. Men, women, and children that we hadn’t realized were in camp came out to celebrate. The dance and chant were repeated as the staff congratulated us.

Calvin's speculation that the cat would make the SCI trophy record book proved true: #44. The leopard quota remained unfilled but, for now, the joy of success was more than enough to occupy us as we sat by the campfire.

James Turner is a physician and father of three who practises medicine in Washington, Missouri. He has been hunting since age eight. Hunting Africa was a lifelong dream for him. This was Michelle's first big-game experience. They are sure to be back. Soon.