



Hunt the Sun

Mike Birch Safaris

Newsletter

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Featured Animal

Eland

Taurotragus oryx

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BIG BLUE

The dying suns rays illuminated the bull, magnifying him in a brilliant splendour of light known only to those who have experienced an African sunset. Quickly Lance rested his Rifle on the sticks, perfectly positioned to send a 250gr Barnes TSX from his .338 Kimber screaming over the 140 yards separating us, his finger mere ounces away from the moment, the big Eland bull, massive with his dewlap hanging like a flag in the breeze, his "kuif" (fringe hair growing on his forehead, a sign of a really big old bull) a dark tuft of sticky hair mud encrusted, horns thick and twisted with muscles bunching ,the big bull looks around and saunters after a cow, again more interested in the alluring smells that govern all animals. The awaited crack of the rifle is deafeningly absent as my mind urges for the shot only with slightly tinged with relief for the big bull as Lance straightens, "I cant do it" Lance retorts standing up, "Mitch would kill me" and suddenly the suns falls below the horizon plunging the veld into twilight gloom as only Africa can

do. Its as if someone switched off the theatre lights, the stage was set but the show was over. Mixed emotions flood through me, the afternoon splendour with soft light washing over the African veld unspoilt, yet the hunters instinct strong and disappointed.

Big Blue is a legend, an Eland of monstrous proportions, weighing in at nearly a ton, truly a sight to behold. African animals don't do suicide and he didn't get so big by being stupid are often used phrases for consoling a disappointed hunter, who has unsuccessfully tried to hunt Big Blue. For the last two years I have tried hard to hunt him, wanting to shoot him before the natural forces of time summon him elsewhere. He is a majestic animal, often I get good sightings as he calmly walks by, seemingly knowing that today he is safe. Hunters have tried on a regular basis to hunt him, each single minded in their approach, starting out as a fun idea, mostly ending as a fanatical obsession with only one goal, that of con-

quering the ultimate, hunting Big Blue, yet always ending in failure, sometimes only having seen a few glimpses of him through the thick bush, yet even such glimpses enough to fuel the hunt.

Big Blue is a huge animal, his heavy neck with massive dewlap dwarfing the other eland bulls who in turn are huge animals. His horns are thick and twisted, the points worn well down. The horns are not very long, long ago past his prime they are now well broomed, victims of time. But yet he is a trophy, unlike any other, massive in his beauty. He towers over any of his competitors for herd dominance, choosing however to live alone yet often joining the herd for brief periods, his dominance remaining unchallenged.

We saw him on the game count this year, majestic as ever as the chopper flew over him.

Must end of now, Kevins plane lands in an hour, maybe he will be the one to hunt Big Blue.....

NEW BROOMS

Anton and Grant have successfully attended a PH school, both passing the prescribed exams with ease, especially excelling in the caping test where they both

achieved 100%. No real surprise with their hands on caping experience. Their months of training definitely paid dividends.

Anton is one of very few his-

torically disadvantaged persons to have completed the PH school and exam and what makes this more significant is that he is competing on equal terms, no quarter asked and

none given. He will continue to be a massive asset to our business.

Grant has also joined the business as an apprentice hunter. He will only be legible to obtain his license in October when he turns 21 but hopefully all the formalities will be completed by then.

I look forward to these two youngsters being licensed Professional Hunters as both have been groomed in our system. Anton through being a tracker with us and Grant

having spent time during his vacations working for me as well as the experience he has gleaned this season. They know our areas and the way we hunt, our ethics are the same so this could only be a positive contribution to Hunt the Sun. It also cuts out the need to hire in contract hunters when we cater for large groups.



Grant and Anton with client Kevin.

The Big Kudu



I always pride myself in knowing what is happening in my hunting areas, the time I spend traversing it either hunting with clients, culling or just spending the time doing recces before a hunt always pays off. Local knowledge has proven time and again that it pays dividends and the time is well spent. Even so one always gets a few surprises. Two weeks ago while driving in one of the

far flung corners of the open area (40 000 acres of low fences allowing free movement of game) I bumped into a brute of a kudu, a real monster equal in size to anything I have seen anywhere in my travels across Southern Africa. He's old, already carrying the scars of a hundred conflicts, escaped to a quiet corner to live out his last days, no longer interested in competing for the right to mate, a bull in ten thousand,

probably not even going to see the end of winter. Watch this space.

THE ELAND

I remember the day I shot my first Eland, the clear air sparkling bright in the high mountain air. The Eland has mystical qualities in Africa. In the area I frequented as a young hunter, they were never in abundance and it was many years before the opportunity to hunt or shoot an eland fell or jumped in my way. As a young conservator working for our conservation department I was stationed deep in the remote mountain areas, looking after a wild piece of Africa. I had a break out of Eland bulls high in the mountainous areas of the Ciskei tribal homelands, the animals doomed to be chased down by marauding dog packs. Gathering all staff and surplus hands we dropped the fence for a distance of almost 200m and using motorbikes, horses and any other transport able to negotiate the mountainous terrain we rounded them up and drove them to the gap, the area where they first escaped. All went well until right at the fence a young bull turned and broke through the beaters trying to herd it towards the safety of the reserve, in despair I watched as it cleared the line of weary men having run the mountains chasing the Eland, quickly lifting my CZ .375 H&H, sending a 300gr PMP soft through the engine room. He went down within a few yards, physically exhausted I stumbled closer, elated yet sad for the conservation effort that had failed, elated for the opportunity, the excited chatter of the men left no doubt

about their loyalty, Africa would have meat tonight, not just any meat, Eland.

The Eland has always had the respect of the early tribal hunters, the reason probably twofold, the absolute mass of meat that could be obtained from a single animal probably kept everybody fed and the mother in law happy for many days and likely the most important factor was that a big bull in prime condition would carry huge chunks of fat, a rare delicacy in a harsh African environment. Cave walls throughout Southern Africa are adorned with the delicate rock paintings of early Artists. In the hills around the lodge we find etchings, Eland always prominent, chipped out by ancient artists using little more than a sharpened stone.

The Eland is tough, a big heavy boned animal with massive shoulders that can easily absorb the impact of a misguided shot as many a hunter has found to his detriment. When asked about which calibre to bring to Africa, my standard reply falls short. Yes accuracy and shot placement are vital but with such a large heavy boned animal a really well designed bullet coming out of a minimum of at least a .300 calibre is recommended. As a young PH I was horrendously mistaken in my belief that any plains game not able to be cleanly hunted with my .270 shouldn't be hunted at all. Youthful bliss and an extreme belief in my abilities one day left me stranded, a big wounded bull,

pre alerted on the radio, our positioning was excellent my client and I briefly pausing our hunt to follow the bushlaw of first finishing off any wounded animals. At 80 yards all 4 shots were spot on, the last briefly dropping him before an upper neck shot finally ended the show. My self confidence took a dent, shaken, the shots all well placed, the autopsy showed that the penetration simply wasn't there, the big shouldered blockers blocking the bullets out like a good defensive linebacker.

Hunting Eland is always challenging, they are alert, mostly move in groups, multiplying the excellent eyesight. They are seldom still. Stalking after them you never seem to catch up, hours later exhausted you throw in the towel before starting the long walk back usually over rough ground. They always travel into the wind, moving deceptively fast their good sense of smell providing protection from the front. I have hunted Eland many different ways, following their tracks with the superb Kalahari trackers, descendants of the San, walking after them in the thick bushveld until the branches and twigs are moist with undried saliva, even crawling for hours so close to the ground everything is magnified with your head so close to the ground, or my favourite, getting onto high ground and spotting them, usually a group of mature bulls or even a lone bull and planning your stalk, cutting in from the side, quietly, quickly and sometimes successfully! It always amazes me, their massive size yet incredibly agility, once seeing a big heavy mature eland bull clear a high wire, muscles bunching and rippling as the massive bull easily cleared the fence.

Eland *Taurotragus oryx* – fact file

Eland are grouped with the spiral horns and 3 subspecies existing, the Cape Eland, Livingstone Eland and the Giant or Lord Derby Eland. Eland can reach a mass of over 700kg (over 1500 pounds). Cases have been recorded of Eland bulls reaching the 1 ton mark. Both sexes carry horns with the cows having slender horns while the bulls carry thick heavily spiralled horns. They are gregarious

(live in groups), big bulls often forming bachelor herds or even living solitary existence. They are predominantly browsers (leaf eaters) but are highly adaptable and will eat grass as well as many other forbs and other herbaceous plants. They were historically found over most of Southern Africa, from the high mountain grasslands to the thick coastal forests. They are known to have migrated over large distances in order to keep foraging in prime

feeding areas. Those found in mountainous regions will move up or down the mountain depending on the food reserves and where they are able to find the best feeding areas. They breed throughout the year with the main calving occurring in the early summer. Calves grow fast and can be weaned at 3 months. Eland tame easily. Old animals can be recognised easily as they tend to become a dark grey colour as they age.

Eland *Taurotragus oryx* – fact file

Social habits

Calves are born at night and the cow will hide it until it is strong enough to join the herd where it will form part of a nursery group. The calf can get weaned from 3 months and will start foraging from its first few weeks. Eland have a dominant cow who leads the herd. Bulls will join and leave the herd often in bachelor groups. A dominant bull will usually be found in the herd. Other bulls are tolerated but will be chased out when females are in oestrus. The bulls can fight with fatal consequences although usually a test of strength by locking horns will determine dominance. The strength displays are done from a young age and this usually determines the natural pecking order. Males will generally stay in association with a group until they are about 18 months before forming a bachelor group. This group will often be in contact with the main herd. Herds will often exceed 100 animals in size.

Distribution and habits

Historically throughout the Southern African sub region. They are found in almost every habitat type from the coastal forests to the high mountain grasslands. They can move

over vast distances in search of food. Eland do not need to drink daily but will if water is available. They can obtain all their water requirements from their food and have been known to go without water for lengthy periods. They are browsers but will eat grass when available especially new shoots. Eland will forage widely especially in winter to obtain green leaf material. They twist and break branches with their horns in order to get at green leaves and can wreak havoc on the trees in an area.

For the Hunter

Eland make a challenging trophy to hunt. The sheer size and toughness alone means a well placed shot from a suitable calibre. Recommendations are for at least .30 calibre with a minimum of a 180gr bullet. As with all animals hunted, bullet placement is crucial. They have massive lungs and are relatively easy to kill, a poorly placed shot however will have dire consequences as they have an ability to absorb poorly placed shots. My preferred method is to use the advantage of high ground to find the Eland and plan a stalk using wind direction and the direction they are travelling to cut them off.

	Bull	Cow
Mass	700kg	450kg
Height	1.7m	1.5m
Gestation	-	271
Weaning	From 3 months	

SCI min	77
Rowland Ward min	35"
SCI record	115 7/8"
Rowland ward record	44 1/4"



Clothe-a- Kid

Winter is upon us, the frosty air can be felt in the mornings. Many think of Africa as a hot dry and barren land but are surprised to feel that our winters although short can be surprisingly brutal. On a recent visit to our local school it was evident that the schools kids were completely inadequately dressed for the

weather conditions. This community is extremely poor living. Our idea is to assist where possible, last year we gave every child a warm blanket, this year we want to give them some, warm clothes. The classrooms are none insulated prefabricated buildings, icy fridge-like environs for teaching. We have priced a set of clothes consisting of a pair of shoes, two trousers,

two shirts, socks, jersey and underwear to be just over R700 per child which equates to just under \$100. There are 50 kids in the school who need to be clothed. Anybody who would like to assist this worthy project by clothing a kid, please do not hesitate to contact me so that I can give you the particulars of the payment process.

Bird Shooting Africa

Most visiting hunters don't know that South Africa is a first rate bird shooting destination. I have always put it down to the fact that we are spoilt with our large diversity of animals to hunt and that we have always done bird shooting as an after-thought. We hunted quail each summer as my mom traditionally made a quail pie on Christmas Eve, so it was our duty to provide the necessary. We also hunted a few guinea fowl or the odd duck hunt as a social gathering. Bird shooting was always tacked on as an activity to fill a day after obtaining all your trophies. Times

have changed however and bird shooting has now become a sought after activity in South Africa. We have expanded our hunting activities and now offer a range of wing shooting activities, the prime being our pigeon shoots. Rock Pigeons numbers have exploded and they now do significant damage to the sunflower farmers with crop losses up to 30%. The shooting is fast, rockies fly at over 90km/hr, coming in low and fast. The opportunities start at about 8am and can continue all day. Clients have shot up to 1000 rounds per day. The fun doesn't stop with

"rockies" however, we also offer driven guinea fowl, ducks, geese, sand grouse as well as various partridge hunts including greywing partridge over English pointers. Pack in your shotgun or select one of our many camp guns, it will be worth the effort. We supply most ammunition types.



Up to 30% of the sun flower crop can be lost





Hunt the Sun

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A word from Mike...

Well we are almost at the end of the soccer, yes we are thankful for the exposure that the country has received, but I fear the cost was very high. The hunting industry took a beating with the higher price of flights scaring away many clients.

This year has been technologically challenging, a laptop crash and a hacker deleted all the executable files on our website server which has created pandemonium from which we are slowly recovering.

After our magnificent summer rains the veld is still in excellent condition. The game are in especially good condition and we can expect a bumper calving season this summer, so we will need to do some serious animal regulation this next season. Winter has been reasonably mild but that usually means it will linger and inhibit our initial spring growth with late frosts.

We have been doing numerous expansions and have increased our hunting areas. The trade off that I offer land owners with the assistance in managing their properties is definitely paying dividends.

With a few exciting projects looming things are looking up! My family is well with the girls growing fast, it is amazing how the year flies. I continue to make as much time available to spend with them as possible.

God Bless

Your African PH for Life

Watch this space

The new developments to our East Cape concessions are fantastic.

The Steytlerville ground is in the throws of expansion and the lodge, a beautiful old farm homestead is being changed to be more functional as a lodge.

The camp at Brentwood as well as our Graaf Reinett (Kudu heaven area) are also Seeing some major changes.

Unfortunately the Graaff Reinett area is experiencing the worst drought in 130 years! It is not pretty.

We have completed an awesome blind in the middle of the sanddam at cel 2 to supplement the ground blinds at cel 1 and cel 2, pics will follow soon. At Imbasa we now have 2 ground blinds at solar panel and three dams as well as two elevated blinds, viz superbowl and Imbasa dam