



Hunt the Sun

Mike Birch Safaris

Featured Animal

Gemsbuck

Oryx gazella



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Newsletter

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Sometimes hard hunting isn't enough.....

My heart pounded loudly, my breathing already fast with sweat pouring down my back as we lay punctured by thorns, dirty and deadstill in the hot dry African sun. Gemsbuck, two of them, 40 yards away and still oblivious of our presence. The gemsbuck moved closer, alternatively feeding heads down with their horns sticking out above their shoulders (a good indication of a superior trophy) before walking towards the next edible grazing area, always alert. Long black horns, easily 40 inches in length, sweeping like twin rapiers through the air as they ever alert surveyed the territory ahead with huge dark eyes that compete well with Leica Geovid binoculars (with built in range finders keeping you just out of range). They wondered closer, 25 yards, then 20, 15...., my grip tightened on my trusty .375 H&H, we were well within their "fight zone", the space which any animal of-

ten chooses to fight and not flee when threatened and those horns were long and sharp, glistening in the late afternoon sun.

Diane lay motionless slightly behind me, clutching her .30-06 ready to spring into action.

Aristocrats, Knights of the Desert, Prince of the plains are a few of the more common descriptions which try to depict this noble animal, this time however we were looking at "princesses", their horns lacking the bulk of mature bulls. The wind swirled and with a snort and a cloud of dust they were gone.



We unfolded our stiff limbs and continued with our search with renewed vigour from the rush such special encounters bring.

We were on Day 2 of the hunt, my clients Ron and Dianne Raydon from Houston, Texas. They were on their second hunting trip to South Africa, Dianne was looking to hunt a few good trophies with Kudu and Gemsbuck on the top of her wish list.

Three days of walking, crawling & stalking

Hunting is however not shopping and so far we had failed to fill or even contribute to the basket. The third day yielded no results and supper on day 3 was quiet, we were tired yet satisfied that we were hunting hard. Three days of walking, crawling, stalking and still the gemsbuck had the upper hand

that trophy still eluding us. Dianne never complaining, climbed trees crawled through bush, walked kilometers in search of her prize, however after 3 days of no results despair was setting in.

Day 4 began as a freezing August morning. Herd after herd we glassed, were mostly cows

and calves this day was beginning to follow the very depressing trend of the previous days. Ron hunting with Warren had shot a beautiful Eland bull and Duiker to add to his impressive Black Wildebees. The call on the radio to view the bull was received with bittersweet emotions.



It was a race against time.....

Early afternoon we finally saw a group with good bulls. We stalked and crawled closer trying to head them off, only to have them change direction and head up a shallow valley, probably heading for water over the rise. Quietly backtracking until we were a safe distance away I smiled at Dianne "ready to run?" I asked. To get ahead we had to backtrack over a hill and then try to get in front of them before they reached the head of the valley, a distance for them of 800 yards and probably 2 kilometers for us.

We literally ran over the hill keeping well within cover and around behind the crest of the hill, spooking some zebra which thankfully moved away without undue fuss. It was a race against time as the sun began to sink fast on the horizon. As we crested the skyline and crawled towards a lone *Acacia tortillis* tree, I could see the Gemsbuck feeding diagonally towards us. The wind was almost perfect and we were looking almost directly into the setting sun. We hid behind the tree which had low branches allowing for a

perfect rest. About 250 yards out the Gemsbuck turned and slowly headed away from us feeding as they went.

Disappointment had yet again settled over us heavier than a lead blanket, we had hunted hard. Then inexplicably one bull turned and started feeding directly towards us. The glare made it impossible to see him properly. Would he be a good trophy? The setting sun showered the African savannah with a golden glow. The gemsbuck was still 200 yards out when he

Knights of the Desert.

He was a good bull with thick heavy bases

stepped out the glare and showed himself. He was a good bull, an old mature male with thick heavy bases and long symmetrical horns, a bull that was past his breeding prime. Slowly he came, Dianne battling the glare of the setting sun on the horizon directly behind the gemsbuck. On he came until he was directly behind a tree 160 yards away, it was now or never. Then incredulously he saw us, head up staring trying

to make out what we were half hidden in the *Acacia* tree, but it was too late, on the signal Dianne made good with a frontal shot that entered his chest and obliterated the plumbing on top of the heart. A quick insurance shot and he was down. It was difficult to contain our excitement as we admired Dianne's trophy, a beautiful bull, his teeth already worn down level to his gums, a worthy trophy hunted hard.



Gemsbuck – swordsmen of the desert



Gemsbuck for me have always held a certain mystique. As a child growing up in the wetter coastal areas which abounded

with Kudu, Bushbuck and other game, we knew little about this fine desert animal which we only encountered on family trips to Namibia, game reserves or saw in certain areas of the karoo. They were fairly scarce.

Guiding my first client on a gemsbuck hunt almost 15 years ago was a treat. Bulls and cows both carry horns with the cows mostly having longer thinner horns often sweeping back and with the bulls horns being

thicker, shorter and often "bell" shaped. The thick ridges at the bases often are a distinguishing trait between bulls and cows but the only real way to tell them apart is to see a penis sheath. This is impossible to do after a season of good rain with high grass or if the gemsbuck is lying down. Woe betide the hunter who however takes a chance on judging sex by only the horns. Mistakes are however fairly forgiven as the females also make fine trophies.

That first hunt was a milestone, we crept within range and unable to see any penis sheath waited patiently for hours until an opportunity arose and a good bull cleared himself.

During this hunt I was afforded with hours of opportunity to study these animals from a relatively close distance. We were however grilled "medium rare" that day as the sun beat down on us mercilessly on that open plain.

Subsequently working for the department of Nature Conservation I gained plenty of experience both in capturing as well as hunting and culling these noble animals. They are often referred to as the "knights of the desert" with their tawny grey armour, a visor-like mask and twin rapier horns. They are nomadic wanderers with bulls protecting a territory. Probably one of the most challenging animals to hunt, they are notoriously tough and unless the shot is accurate made with a quality bullet the result could be a long hot day tracking.

They have strong well developed shoulders and heavy necks. The skin is incredibly thick at the neck area as it must offer protection from fighting with other Gemsbuck. This is often witnessed as being well over 2 inches thick. The spine in the neck dips low. Shots by people other than those who are well versed in the anatomy of the Gemsbuck in the neck region are mostly placed above the spinal column resulting in a brief concussion after which the animal recovers and is last viewed exiting the scene hastily.

The Gemsbuck is uniquely adapted for desert life. The most significant of these adaptations is the ability to increase its body temperature instead of sweating. This can be increased to over 45°C, well past the point when other mammals have already expired and proteins denature. It then radiates heat at night

dropping its temperature. The body is also covered by a hair which is quilt like and almost hollow. This forms a thick insulation against the desert heat as well as protection against the freezing winter conditions. The carotid artery which supplies most of the blood to the brain divides into small retia. These are surrounded by a sinus of cool venous blood from the nasal area which has been cooled by airflow which can be increased by panting and thereby cooling the venous blood which in turn cools the blood to the brains. Gemsbuck can also moderate its breathing and moisture content in their respiratory tract. Moisture content of the stomach is high, often exceeding 80%. This is reabsorbed and the faecal pellets are very dry. Their urine is also highly concentrated. They can obtain all their water requirements from the food they eat but will drink readily when available. They also have the ability to drink water from saline sources. Feeding in the early morning allows them to use water in the form of dew which has settled on the grass.

Gemsbuck occupy the drier regions of Southern Africa but are able to utilize a vast array of vegetation types. Essentially grazers, they are however able to eat shrubs and leaves and have a great capacity to break down fibre. They eat forbs and succulents and can obtain all their dietary requirements from Tsamma melons (*Citrullus lanatus*). They dig for bulbs and tubers as well as the roots of certain grasses such as *Stipagrostis amabilis*. As with most desert animals they mature quickly with females calving for the first time scarcely over two years of age. Calving usually coincides with the rainy season. Territorial bulls crouch when defecating in order to leave a compact pile of dung which acts as a sign post to other males. These dung piles concentrate the scent of the territorial bull often leaving a longer lasting scent. They also have interdigital glands which mark the area that they have walked over. Territorial males will also paw the ground before defecating thereby leaving additional scent. Bulls especially will thrash bushes

and shrubs with their horns often completely destroying these bushes.

The perceptual awareness that a Gemsbuck has with respect to his horns and horn tips is astounding. While having them in Bomas during capture as well as with a wounded Gemsbuck I have seen it demonstrated by throwing a small stone at its horn and the animal then spars the stone with its horn – truly amazing. Bulls are extremely aggressive although fights are seldom to the death; it is almost as if they know that they are dangerous. They fight with a sweeping sideways lunge which the other combatant spars. Wrestling takes place to test the opponent's strength and at the slightest sign of weakness the loser will back down. In situations such as game capture where these animals are in close proximity to one another they will horn each other with dramatic results. On opening a game truck a few years ago we were astounded to find that the protective piping placed over a bulls horns had come loose and that the animal had fatally horned the remaining animals in the compartment. Carnage that told a story.

I thoroughly enjoy hunting Gemsbuck. We usually use a vehicle to spot the animals and then proceed on foot. It can be a long walk as they are notorious wanderers and it is guaranteed that there will be a lot of crawling and a few thorns to boot. I do not often back up a client with non dangerous game, however the Gemsbuck is a noted exception, if I am not convinced of a fatal shot I will not hesitate to back up as a long 2-4 day follow up after a wounded animal wandering over a few thousand hectares quickly puts a dampener on a hunt.



Gemsbuck *Oryx gazella* – Hunting Fact File



Hunting the Gemsbuck in my opinion ranks as one of the most challenging hunts available. Unfortunately this majestic animal has been disgraced by poor hunting ethic, probably stemming from hunting them in the Kalahari Desert where it is not feasible to hunt solely on foot and vehicles have be-

come the norm as a hunting method. A farmer needing to remove large numbers of gemsbuck does not have the staff to accompany a lot of hunters or opportunities of hunters to remove these animals with purely ethical means and what is then actually culling is labeled as hunting. In my opinion culling is by no means incorrect, but then call it culling. If you wish to experience the hunt then the gemsbuck is the real deal, he is tough, aggressive and super sharp – a worthy opponent. Don't ever be tempted to shoot from the pick-up, not

only is it illegal but also highly unethical and you will also rob yourself of a special experience. I encourage all my clients to hunt Gemsbuck a truly value for money hunt which in my opinion outweighs Kudu hunting (of which I am exceptionally fond). As they are usually found in a group it means that there are more eyes on guard. I have experienced their hearing as the weakest sense while their sense of smell is good and their eyesight is superb. Even when you are hiding well camouflaged they seem to spot something amiss. Never shoot solitary animals without carefully checking out their age (horn growth, aging rings and soft tissue at the base of the horn). The animals grow proportionally so a younger animal has a smaller skull as well as horns. If you are unsure, it is easier to hunt animals in a big group if you are looking to shoot an exceptional trophy as you will have other animals for a comparison. The down side is that you have a lot of eyes to beat. I had an interesting hunt this year with a Czech client who spoke no English at all. Try explaining quietly to a CZ client to shoot the 34th animal from the left, the one next to the cow with a slightly crooked horn!

	Bull	Cow	
Adult mass (kg)	210-240	180-215	
Adult Shoulder height (cm)	124cm	120cm	
Sexual maturity	18-24mnths	20-24mnths	
Gestation period		261-275 days	
calf wean age			3.5mnths
Life expec (yrs)	20	18	
Territory size	490-980ha		

Distribution and Habitat

Five subspecies are recognized of O.g. gazelle is the subspecies found in South Africa. They are found throughout Namibia, most of Botswana as well as marginally in Zimbabwe and South Western Angola. In South Africa they are found in most of the Northern Cape Province, parts of the Eastern Cape as well as North West province. They have been extensively introduced in the Free State, Limpopo Province, Eastern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal. They prefer the drier regions and are very susceptible to both internal and external parasites and therefore struggle to adapt in the higher rainfall areas.

Primarily a species which inhabits an arid area, they are able to utilize a wide variety of habitat. They are found in the dry rocky deserts such as the Namib, sandy Kalahari, thick Shrubland Savannah and wide open karoo. They are highly adaptable in the drier areas.

Social Behaviour

Herds consist of small family groups comprising of cows with offspring. Bulls usually either protect a territory or form Bachelor groups. When the grazing is good they can form huge herds with recorded herd sizes in excess of 400 animals being recorded. They will split up in the dry seasons and are usually in good condition all year round.

Hunting the Gemsbuck

The gemsbuck is wary and great care needs to be taken to get within range. Vehicles should not be used as a hunting tool but only if an animal is wounded and is likely to escape and then only if no other option is available. They have highly developed eyesight. Calibres should be chosen with care, preferably 7mm Rem Mag and higher with the .300's and .338 Win Mag being ideal. .375H&H is capable. Shot placement is crucial with aiming point on the shoulder one third up from the belly line. Good strong caliber bullets are advised. Bullets are cheaper than lost Gemsbuck

Trophy Listing

Both male and female carry horns with the female usually having longer but thinner horns.

Rowland Ward record	49.25' Kalahari, cow
Rowland Ward Qualification	40'
SCI Min	88 points
SCI record	105 points

Wondrous Waterbuck

Kevin Young of Claquato Farms, Chehalis Washington State hunted this monster Waterbuck in June this year. The bull was shot with a Remington Sendero .300 Win Mag using a 180gr Grom. It green scored just over 31' and is the largest taken on the concession. Kevin also successfully hunted Nyala, Springbuck, Sable, Kudu and a Blesbuck.



Concession Update

With yesterdays rain we trust that the long awaited rain season has finally arrived. It has been exceptionally dry with the temperatures soaring each day leaving the veld parched and bone dry. We have exciting plans for 2009 and will shortly be bringing you an updated article about the concessions and an in depth guide as to the concessions' whereabouts in South Africa as well as the animals that can be hunted in each area.





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Hunt The Sun – continued excellence

Editorial

As 2008 comes to an end and 2009 starts we reflect upon our personal milestones - whatever they may be- whatever we have either achieved or failed to do, for whatever reason in the past year. It becomes increasingly obvious how the pace of life has increased. Thirteen or so years ago when I started as a younger (I still consider myself young although the mileage is definitely creeping up) PH, mobiles were very new and excessively brick like in size, computers has less gadgets attached (we are always a bit behind here in Africa) and most things were still manual and probably far less complicated. Today the pace of life is absolutely frenetic, with all the time saving gadgets making us more productive and always available. What has happened to the quality of our life? The most valuable lesson that I learnt this year is that we need to all learn the ability to switch off. My hunting season has got longer and longer, now starting in March and only ending in October. This past season was fantastic, but definitely exhausting. Since the season ended it seems to have got even busier, fixing vehicles, doing maintenance on the concessions, visiting new areas and still fulfilling my obligations as an ecologist. I however managed to spent quality time with my family, fulfilling one of the most important roles we can, that of a parent and role model to our children and husband to my wife who is also my best friend. I look back on the year with satisfaction, even though there were many challenges and no doubt 2009 will bring its fair share. On all our minds at present is the collapse of the world economy and the negative effects that it may have on all of us. However I choose to be positive, the year ahead has potential and we will strive hard to unleash it to its fullest. We have worked hard to develop even more hunting areas, adding new areas of more than 100 000 acres of hunting area mostly in one block. We are striving to continuously improve our facilities and services to provide you with the ultimate hunting experience. Focusing always on a quality hunt. We are busy launching our new website, which we trust you will enjoy. The aim is to develop the site into an interactive experience which will provide all necessary information.

The rain seems to have finally fallen with good falls over most of the hunting areas on January 1st – good start to the year.

We would just like to take this opportunity to thank you for your support over the years and trust that 2009 will be a year of breakthroughs and exciting opportunities. Hunt often and spend quality time with your loved ones,

Mike Birch

Your PH for life

