

by Derek Carstens

Keeping It Real With Lion In Niassa



Let's start with the first requirement of a successful lion hunt. You quickly need to master the art of both the "tsetse roll" and the "tsetse swot". These are the only ways of permanently annihilating those unpleasant creatures that will drive you mad, whilst meandering in the October heat of Mozambique's bush country. The "roll" being characterized by connecting with the tsetse as it alights on your wrist, neck, arm or any other exposed flesh, and rolling it with the palm of your hand, till you hear the distinctive "crack" of its armor plating succumbing. Then and only then can you be confident that it has been permanently dispatched. The "swot" occurs when sitting with a steel sprung swotter in the Cruiser cabin and hitting them with force, effectively turning the cabin into a tsetse cemetery.

Then and only then should you venture out to take on the lions. Having got that all-important piece of advice out the way, let's now talk a little about the hunt itself and how it came to be.

Firstly, it was never on the agenda. Our trip to Kamboko camp, in Northern Mozambique's magnificent 4 million-hectare Niassa Reserve, was planned around Livingstone's eland and hard boss dagga boys. For this we had allowed 10 hunting days.

As things turned out, the hunting Gods smiled on me. By the end of day 4 two great dagga boys were in the salt, as well an exceptional eland bull. So, what to do? Not long before the mind starts wondering

by Derek Carstens

about “what if?” As in, “what if we phone the Outfitter” and see what he may be prepared to add to the list of late season possibilities.

Well, as if to prove that your thoughts do in fact become your actions, it was not long before we were on the blower and suffice it says that an attractive proposition to do with a lion and another buffalo materialized. While I was still mulling it over Pete, in his refreshingly candid style, reminded me that after turning 65 there weren't that many marbles left in the jar.

So best I accept and get on with it. It seemed like a good opportunity to bring the fair chase, on-foot, in-the-wild-experience to life. Whether successful or not, ultimately it is about the hunt.

Since the dye was cast, we spent the afternoon on a great photographic drive all the way down the Lugenda river border. We toasted the sunset with a proper G&T, had a memorable meal of eland tail stew (cooked by our camp chef who could teach Jamie Oliver a thing or two), washed down by the elegant sufficiency of the fruit of the vine. Conversation largely revolved around Pete's success with his eland earlier in the day, and plans about my lion hunt due to commence the following morning.

Day one found us traveling to Coutada camp on the far Eastern border of the concession, about an hour's drive from Kamboko camp. We checked with the camp staff as to whether they had heard any lions calling in the night. Indeed, they confirmed that roars had been heard in a north easterly direction. Excellent!

Before long we were at the river. On seeing some old spoor of two male lions in the road, we alighted. With a .300H&H and .416 for comfort we walked for 5kms upriver in search of fresher tracks.

Paul (my PH) confirmed that two males did operate in the area and in fact last year they had encountered them whilst feeding on a young elephant that the lions had killed.

Get the picture: two large males, one blonde and the other black maned, specialized in hunting buff and young elephants. Clearly not juveniles; both well over the minimum shooting age of 6 years.

Whilst the river revealed little in the way of fresh tracks, it was alive with other signs of life. There were basking spots where a croc had lain, the calcified remains of some poor victim, drag marks of a leopard kill, a kaleidoscope of butterflies, iridescent blue and red dragon flies, and fishing snares placed in the throat of the stream to trap barbell and anything else aquatic.

There were distinctive sole treads of poachers together with evidence that they had been poisoning the water in their quest for elephant; elephant diggings in the sand (doubtless to avoid the contaminated water), beautiful little orange-throated bee eaters, yellow baboons peering from behind the foliage, and massive red mahogany trees that would keep a carpenter in business for years. Always impressive too was the sign of the floodwater high mark, littered with massive tree trunks, carelessly cast aside by the raging power of the Nicage in flood.

Beautiful wild country, and somewhere two elephant-slaying lion. Sadly, more evidence too, that everywhere, but everywhere, elephant are under extreme threat. In fact, in my humble view, they are

by Derek Carstens

far more endangered than rhino. They cannot be ferried away to safe havens, ivory does not regrow and the demand for it seems to be insatiable. The poachers further exacerbated the problem, as by slaying the adults, they orphaned countless young who in turn became easy prey for the lions.

Mid-morning, we emerged from the river and after some diesel stalking for tracks, decided our best bet was to relocate to Coutada camp. It was, let's say a little more rustic than Kamboko, but clearly habitable and imbued with its own bush magic. It would place us in close proximity to the lions, assuming of course that they were still in the area.

And this of course is the first big challenge of hunting lion in this manner. It has to do with assessing the whereabouts of sound. Given that their roars carry for kilometers, the challenge is to both correctly place the general direction and then to basically guess at the how far away the roars are.

The second challenge is the lions' mobility and the size of area that they patrol. A lion will think nothing of a 10 to 15 km overnight journey. Given that the area they patrol is vast, the problem is self-evident.

Both challenges dictate that your first priority is to get yourself into the general area dictated by available evidence. We hustled back to Kamboko to brief the camp manager to get Coutada camp stocked and rigged for two or three nights. He saw to it that we would want for nothing, especially a plentiful supply of the proven tsetse repelling combo of Gordon's Gin (since 1764), Schweppes Tonic (the quinine, you know), lemon and plenty of ice.

That evening Pete and I had cocktails under a massive baobab on the banks of the Lugenda, framed by a classic African sunset, reminiscing about past hunts and resolving to do "more of this in the future". The magic of the African bush coursed afresh through our aging veins.

By 4.30 the next morning Paul and the rest of the AAA team (so nick-named after the successes we had enjoyed earlier in the hunt) comprising of Jethro, Dulla and Patricio and yours truly were back in the area. The good news from the camp staff was that the lions had again been heard, twice, in the same general area as the night before - once at around 7pm and again at about 3am. Worth noting, however, is that this type of information, obtained from locals, is more often than not incorrect, given their naive predilection to tell you what they think you want to hear, as opposed to what actually is the case. Occasionally fact will match fiction, and ever the optimists we opted for the latter on hearing the news.

The arduous process recommenced. Roads, rivers, gullies we scoured looking for sign. We were rewarded with the tracks of large single male, as well our two-some from the day before. Alas, they too were at least two days old. After sending at least 35 tsetse to an early grave we returned to our new camp at around 11am to have some lunch and a rest till early afternoon, when battle would recommence.

Of course, during all this time, one is thinking about the hunt itself. Gradually you realize that what you are experiencing is the unique, peaceful state of being almost at one with Nature itself. Absorbing every little detail, you are focused, fully involved and integrated into the environment. Notable is the complete absence of stress, as you quietly and methodically go about your task. The process of the hunt fully

by Derek Carstens

involves you and rewards you with a close-up of life in the wild that I never before had imagined. Every sense is alert. Whilst in no way stressed, one does feel exposed, which is why the eye becomes sharper, the hearing more acute and even the sense of smell heightened. You definitely feel very much alive.

Without getting too heavy about it, one is reminded of the elusive challenge of “living life in the moment” instead of chasing moments. It is the acceptance that “what will be will be” without always “wishing it to be”. The whole hunt in fact is one long moment. Anything may or may not happen and by not forcing anything one happily accepts that “what will be will be”, as you immerse yourself in the pedestrian pace of the day.

Doubtless if and when action comes it will be fast and furious, until then your surroundings dictate the pace of things. And animals in nature only really speed up when predating or seeking to avoid predation, or breeding or vying for the right to breed. For the rest it is a pretty languid affair.

And this is also true for hunting on foot. You go at Nature’s pace. That includes feet up in the midday heat. There is the irony that the super predator Man could have a similarly paced way of life. But no—we choose instead to predate on one another in either a material or physical way—weird.

Afternoon action commenced at 3:30pm after a jolt of coffee to raise one from an afternoon slumber. By 4pm we were back on the far side of the Nicage coming against the wind, in the opposite direction of our hike the day before.

by Derek Carstens



Before long the river sand revealed to us the pug marks of a large single male lion, which had passed through in the night. Not long thereafter the smaller tracks of a lioness. So big tick—lion were definitely around and operating in our immediate vicinity. Seemed we were correct in affording the camp staff the benefit of the doubt.

The presence of the female however brought the third challenge of hunting on foot to the fore. Namely that of being able to identify a shootable male in the narrow window of time that would inevitably be the case, should the opportunity arise. Problem being the earlier mentioned fact that males had to over 6 years old to be eligible. Should an animal be shot that is below this threshold, the PH is subjected to a healthy fine and the Outfitter forfeits a quota lion the following season. Definitely something to be avoided at all costs.

Here are some of the pointers your PH will use in trying to gauge the animal correctly within a very narrow window of time: General body condition showing sign of gradual deterioration (e.g. backbone and hip protrusion); a big muscular body which is usually that of a lion in his prime; if he has the look of a Mohican from the front i.e. has two bald patches above the ears, then typically he is underage; when

by Derek Carstens

the bald patches are filled out, it is an older animal; scarring on the face from territorial battles (the more, the older); very yellow teeth (need to be close enough to see!) are a further indication of aging; the nose must be at least 50% black (the less pink the better); in areas where there has been veld burning this pointer is flawed, as the lions inevitably walk head down and the whole nose becomes blackened by the ash; younger males from behind reveal a single black scent-line down either leg from territory markings.

Add to this the lion's weakness for porcupine flesh, resulting in regular quill poisoning (i.e. with a face looking like a pin cushion) which affects body condition. You will see that a correct assessment is no walk in the park. So, if in doubt, don't shoot.

What you may ask is the reason for this? Well the explanation has to do with the health of the pride and the fact that typically your lions between 4-6 years old hold the pride together. Should one be shot and another male come in, the newcomer will immediately kill the cubs of his predecessor to procreate his genes.

As we trudged through the sand more secrets were revealed, like a paralyzed guinea fowl (was it poison?), a decomposing civet, remnants of poachers' fires, leopard tracks, muddy warthog wallows, and fresh ant bear burrows. Majestic trees stood astride the river, challenging the next flood to dare uproot them.

All the while the sweat laden "saddle bags" grew under the armpits and salty rivulets started running down one's back, disproving forever the fallacy that hunting on foot is merely an acronym for stalking by diesel. 6 kilometers and two hours later we rendezvoused with our ever-reliant local version of Uber—Jethro and the Cruiser.

I awoke the next morning after a fitful slumber and heady dreams of lion fantasia in a bed drenched with sweat. The ever so gentle sound of soft rain on the tent canvas. Was this a good or not good thing? Well good in the sense that any tracks would be fresh. Good that lions tend to use the roads more in an effort to stay a little drier. Bad in the event of becoming too heavy and turning the roads into a muddy mush pit.

The rain eventually abated. By 8 am the Cruiser was slip sliding on roads that overnight had turned into slick, sticky mud trails, effectively eliminating all traction. This made driving quite challenging. We had to negotiate numerous dongas and river crossings with steep approaches and exits. The winch combined with some good old human horsepower proved its worth. The Cruiser did what Cruisers do best.

This morning turned out to be a long, diesel-powered search for tracks in the knowledge that fresh tracks would indeed be very fresh. Alas, despite dagga boys, sable, bushbuck, kudu, zebra, grysbuck, duiker and hartebeest providing evidence of their presence, nothing from the lions. Seems they must have heard the AAA team were in town and had decided to clear out! The afternoon passed relatively uneventfully as we searched in vain for fresh tracks.

by Derek Carstens

7:30 the next morning we connected with the real thing. Here's how the saga unfolded.

We had started out on foot patrol down a new section of the river. Immediately we noticed unusual leopard activity. Pugmarks of a male and female were clearly in evidence. Before long we observed some lofty vulture activity.

That definitely got our attention, as we had long since come to the conclusion that one of the best ways of succeeding on foot, is to locate a natural kill. Our theory was about to be put to the test. Keeping an eye on the vultures we continued down river. Paul and Patricio scouted the right bank, Dulla and I the left.

Suddenly there it was—a game trail on the left revealed the drag marks of a crocodile. It had clearly ascended up the trail, out of the water, in search of something. Thirty paces later the veld revealed lion tracks, blood, bush pig hair and signs of a very recent struggle. You could literally still smell the dust and gore. Quite what had happened was anyone's guess, the only thing that was certain was that the bush pig had come off second best!

We immediately picked up the tracks of the lions dragging their kill and set out to follow them into the grassy veld. Before long, Paul and I branched off to check why a bunch of vultures were congregating on an old stump.

Shortly thereafter Dulla whistled us back to the drag marks. He had just seen the rear end of a lion walking away in the long grass. Hectic! "Easy now" I thought "just take it easy". Picking up the tracks in the still moist ground, we set off and after fifty paces got a visual on a young male and a full-grown female. A very quick visual, but enough to know that they were not eligible, but not a lot more. With the wind on our backs it was doubtful we would see them again. We went back to examine the kill.

When I tell you that that the bush pig had been consumed, I mean it had quite literally been hoovered. All that remained were small pieces of the jawbone, some guts and hair. Hooves, head bones, skin—the whole lot had been devoured. All this must have happened but twenty minutes prior, at the same time as we found the original signs of the croc vs. lion struggle. The twosome had literally moved off from the kill as we came along their trail.

"So, it can be done" were my first words to Paul. I mean think about it. Here we were on day three of an unplanned lion hunt, working off flimsy local knowledge and we had made contact.

The contact however brought focus to bear on the fourth challenge of hunting this way. This relates directly to the speed with which things happen.

Clearly no time to fully adhere to my normal principles when taking a shot: be close; be comfortable; be confident. Time and circumstance would probably compromise the first two, but I quietly committed to myself only to shoot if I felt confident.

The fifth challenge also became apparent during the relatively short stalk. This has to do with the terrain. The moist ground had undoubtedly helped us, whereas it would have been a different story in

by Derek Carstens

dry, gravelly conditions interspersed with thick patches of grass.

With these thoughts in my mind it was back to camp with a spring in the step and a hunger in the tummy. With time running out on our impromptu hunt, and no fresh sign of a shootable male, we decided to move to an area on the Lugenda where a pride was known to operate.

Although we could not shoot a pride lion, we thought it would be worth seeing if a lone male was by any chance in the area.

Early afternoon, after heroically climbing an “inselberg ” (like an island mountain hewn from granite) for the view a spectacular view of the concession, we found ourselves in dagga boy heaven. Thick riverine bush ran parallel to the river. Lion tracks and signs of waterbuck recently departed to the happy hunting grounds, courtesy of the lions, were aplenty. Alas, the cats were nowhere to be found either that afternoon or the following morning.

Walking that riverine bush was one of the more pulse quickening experiences of my life. With every darting bush buck, or chattering monkey, or grunting bush pig, or flushing francolin sounding like a nightmare about to unfold, I was happy to emerge from the claustrophobic foliage on to the wide river bank.

Before us unfolded a fitting end to the quest - a veritable vulture conference was taking place on a sand bank in the middle of the mighty Lugenda. There were already about fifty delegates on the ground - I then watched another 50, as they emerged out of the blue like stacked planes at JFK. It seemed they would never stop coming. If what they say is true, that when all is well with the vultures then all I well with Nature, then all is indeed well in the Niassa.

After living life in the moment for four and a half memorable days, we took leave from our fair chase lion hunt. As we did so the question quite naturally arose—would I do it again? The answer in a nanosecond was YES. Just maybe a little more planning next time.

However, during the hunt and in the days since then, a deeper question has been prodding its way to the surface of my conscious. In the event my ever successfully tracking a shootable, wild lion to the point of having it in my scope—would I be able to pull the trigger? Or would I find myself in the same position as I did many years ago, when I had an Alaskan Brown in the cross hairs and found myself unable to do the deed. The animal, within his harsh and hostile environment evoked too much respect.

Having immersed a short time into the world of the lion, I suspect I may find myself in the same position, as I willingly put the rifle aside in acknowledgement of a predator far worthier than myself.