

by Peter Flack

## When Is It Time To Stop?



I know no-one likes to think about it but, inevitably, we will all stop hunting sometime, either voluntarily or involuntarily. There are so many involuntary reasons I don't want to even try and write about them but what about the voluntary reasons, the ones within your control?

When I was in my forties, I thought that, if I could hunt the way I've always have, on foot, carrying my own rifle and kit, over a full day, into my mid-fifties, I would be happy to call it quits. Of course, when this day arrived, I didn't want to stop. So, I tried to box clever, train harder, use a gun bearer and a baggageman to carry my *katunda*, rest every seventh day, and so on. I started thinking about this more seriously about five years ago and wrote an article, *How to Hunt Hard When It's Hard to Hunt*.

In my 60s, I went on a difficult hunt in terrain I did not like, during which I lost the nails on both my big toes, where I battled to see camouflaged game in the thick cover which blanketed the region, was slow to acquire those I could see in my scope and succumbed to pressure to shoot at and clean missed a huge kudu bull three times in a row at a distance I should never have attempted. It was the first time I had not enjoyed a hunt. I was disappointed with myself and decided it was time to stop hunting before I

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started wounding the wonderful wild animals, I was so passionate about.

That was not the only reason I decided to stop and, in retrospect, I suspect that each hunter who voluntarily decides to do so will have his own reasons, even if some of them are similar. Maybe some of my reasons may resonate with some of those that are on your mind.

Some of my reasons related to why I hunted in the first place. I loved being in nature. I loved the companionship around the campfire with like-minded men and women. I enjoyed the planning and preparation for my annual pilgrimages. I enjoyed practicing on the shooting ranges to help ensure I could kill my prey quickly and cleanly; the training to be fit enough to walk the five to eight hours a day - with the occasional route march thrown in - over the week, two, three and even four-week safaris I went on. But I found I could still do all those things without actually hunting.

Some things I couldn't replace however. The comfort, confidence even, that I felt in pulling my weight and fulfilling my role in a safari hunting team. The satisfaction I felt deep within me in overcoming all the difficulties in finding, outwitting and cleanly killing an old, lone male of a long sought-after game species. Something I believe has been genetically programmed into my DNA due to the fact that, for 95% of the 200 000 years we humans have been on earth in more or less our current form, we have been obliged to hunt to provide for and protect our families.

At the end of a successful hunt - and I must admit there were any number when I came home empty handed - I felt proud of my achievements and happy that, although they were not the only reasons I hunted - I had made a significant contribution to conservation and provided wholesome and healthy protein for my family.

Then there were other reasons. I know some hunters who thoroughly enjoy hunting the same areas for the same game year in and year out and I envy the expertise they develop as a result. But I am not one of those. I enjoy the adventure and challenge of hunting new areas, meeting new people and hunting new game in Africa. No, more than enjoy, these new adventures enthused me, made me come alive!

Now, I found the excitement I felt in seeking out a new challenge and in the planning and preparation that went into it, diminished as I grew older and the places I wanted to visit and game I still wanted to hunt grew fewer. I did not want to hunt purely for the sake of hunting and even repeating previous hunts began to pall. And, as we all know, trying to repeat a past happy experience is notoriously difficult and these expectations, when they meet reality, seldom win.

Apart from this, just getting to those wild, unfenced parts of Africa I had come to love so much became more and more difficult due to incompetence, bureaucracy and corruption. Just the time, expense, irritation and frustration involved in obtaining visas and firearms permits started to become prohibitive. Then, once in the countries, the road blocks or extortion points and the ever-increasing aggressive nature of some of them, knocked most of the gilt that was left off the gingerbread. I had rifle barrels pushed into my chest, I had to unpack the contents of my suitcase in the road, I was accused of importing armor piercing ammunition - 300 grain Norma solids for my .375. I can go on and on, and this is not to mention the time I was shot at by three AK47 wielding thugs.

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Then there were the undeniable effects of the passing years on things like eyesight, strength, stamina, skill, fitness and flexibility levels. So, at one and the same time, while my physical attributes necessary for hunting were reducing, so was my motivation. From being a single-minded hunter, always planning two to three years in advance, I was battling to find something to look forward to.

Over an excellent steak, accompanied by an even better red wine, my friend and hunting companion, Eben Espach, persuaded me to carry on just a little longer. "Just hunt the animals you really enjoy hunting in the places you love, Pete," was his compelling advice. I listened to him and found that, although they were ever more difficult to find, there were still places and game I still wanted to hunt.

A difficult but ultimately hugely enjoyable and successful hunt for two massive, old Livingston's eland blue bulls followed in Northern Mozambique, succeeded by the complete opposite for nyala in the same country the following year and an outright disaster in the Republic of Congo the year after.

And then, at the Dallas Safari Club Convention in 2016, I met Franz Coupé; the 80-year-old professional hunting icon found a ready listener, when he described his successes over the last three years in hunting giant eland along the eastern border of Benoue National Park in North Central Cameroon. I booked to hunt with him over the dark moon period in January/February, 2017. The exact time, when giant eland are at their most attractive, wearing their full, thick, chocolate brown, winter neck ruff.

Now, when it comes to plains game, my all-time favorite is a giant eland hunt in one of the vast, unfenced, wilderness areas of West Africa. And, if this hunt is the cream of plains game hunting, then hunting an old, lone, super-wise giant eland bull, which has long since passed on its exemplary genes and been expelled from the herd by the reigning bull, is the cherry on top of the cream.

One part of me feels a deep empathy with and sympathy for these old warriors who, after giving their herds their protection and counsel for many years - most of them are over 12 years old and many in the last year or two of their eventful lives - are summarily discarded. It is pitiful to see how they still try and sneak back into a herd, only to be pushed out forcibly by the resident herd bull yet again.

They remind me a bit of myself, truth be told. I mean what is it that makes young people assume a man in his sixties is suddenly an idiot incapable of rational, logical thought? That anything he might have to say is irrelevant and not worth listening to?

Well, expelled these bandit bulls may be, but stupid they certainly are not. They know they no longer have the protection of the guardian cows and the eyes, ears, noses of the herd. Therefore, they are hyper alert. Like the big roan bulls whose habitats they share, they also never stopped walking. They feed on the move.

Of course, being on their own, finding their tracks is difficult in the first place, but following them through head-high elephant grass screening the ground from view is even harder and a skill few are blessed to the possess. No wonder then that, in my humble opinion, giant eland trackers are the very best in the business.

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For some reason - some may say masochism has played a role - I've been fascinated by the challenge of hunting these loners and have tried to hunt them time and again. It may help explaining why, over five giant eland hunts, covering a total of 52 hunting days, I have managed to kill only three bulls. But, if I say so myself, what three bulls! The Rowland Ward minimum entry level is 45 inches and the three huge bulls I shot measured a half inch under and a half inch over the magical 50-inch mark, with the last one measuring 48 inches on the dot.

Sunday, 29 January, 2017 - the seventh day of my hunt and my day off. I slept in until 06h30, had a leisurely breakfast, cleaned my rifle, cameras and binoculars and was photographing the camp when our driver, Moosa Ali Baba, a Muslim Fulfulde from Tchollerie to the north, arrived to fetch me.



Unbeknownst to me, the trackers had gone out on their own and found the smoking hot spoor of the lone eland bull - the Bandit as such a bull is known in West Africa - we had been tracking for the last five consecutive days, crossing a dirt track. The dung was still green and wet and warm. We started on the tracks at 08h44, about an hour behind the bull.

He did not stop once! He headed in a south westerly direction into the Makat Hills on the southern border of the concession.

The territory was all tree savannah, rolling hills and green valley bottoms and we followed him up hill

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and down dale. We regularly lost his tracks in the unburnt, long, blonde grass and, when we stopped for a quick, 15-minute break to eat a cheese and tomato sandwich and drink a coke, I felt we had not made any inroads into the hour.

Sabou, our Dourou head tracker, was convinced, however, that we would catch him before dark. He was right and, at about 16h15, I saw him stop suddenly and throw up the shooting sticks. Papye, my gunbearer, immediately turned and handed me my rifle. I was on the sticks in seconds and saw the noble head and muscular neck of the Bandit through the scope, heading towards us at a 45° angle about 180 meters away.

We saw one another almost simultaneously. He reacted faster. The bull went from a walk into a flat-out, left to right run as my finger tightened on the trigger and the shot battered through the spot he had just vacated. A tad too high and, I suspect, behind him.

We followed the Bandit for three quarters of an hour. He was completely unharmed and resumed his normal, stately, steady, ground-eating walk within half a kilometer. When we crossed a heavily utilized game trail at about 17h15, we had been on his spoor for nine and a half hours. Soon after, we found that a large herd of about 40 eland had obliterated the heavily indented, well-worn hoof-prints of an animal I was increasingly thinking of as Our Boy.

The next morning started off well once again. We found Our Boy's lone track at 07h30. Sabou and Papye followed them while we leapfrogged in the truck. We had not gone far before we found his spoor covered by a huge herd in which counted at least seven other mature bull tracks. Although we felt confident Our Boy would be booted out of the herd in no time, to find where and when he exited such a large herd, whose tracks meandered all over the place, was a well-nigh impossible task. The decision, however, was taken from us by the arrival of my hunting partner on the scene. They had been following the big herd all morning and so we left them to it.

The mood was somber as we drove back to camp, each with his own thoughts. We had been more than lucky so far but where could we possibly look for the Bandit now or the next day? We did not seem to have any answers. The only thing that kept me going was the realization that I had been on this hunting roller coaster many times before - from joy to sorrow, from happiness to despair plus a whole variety of other intense emotions all crammed into a few hours.

I went to bed early that night but the extra sleep did not bring any enlightenment. When we drove out of camp at the normal time of 06h00, none of us had come up with any clever ideas and, as darkness gave way to early dawn heralded by the chortling calls of the Stone partridges scurrying about under the matted grass next to the dirt track, we dawdled in the direction of the Makat Hills.

An hour and a half later, we stopped to examine fresh eland tracks. Sabou seemed certain they were from the same herd of cows and calves that Our Boy had temporarily joined before. For want of anything better to do and without any discussion or clear decision, we somehow started following the tracks in a desultory fashion.

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By 1100, we had pushed the small herd three times without scaring them too badly, nor being able to winkle out a decent, mature bull. Still we persisted and, an hour later, lo and behold, found the Bandit's tracks crossing those of the small herd at right angles to it. How lucky could you be? We were back in business!

Of course, the question on your mind may be, how did we manage to identify the Bandit's spoor? Well, quite simply, apart from the fact that his were very large, worn and deeply indented, the cleft of the left back track had a small but unmistakable kink in it.

Our buzz was back. Everyone was suddenly taking special care to minimize the noise made although, given the break dry, burnt grass and crunching, earthworm golf balls underfoot, we sounded like a company of jackbooted infantry. Midday found us heading up a steep, narrow, rocky, tree clad ravine.

I saw Papye tap Sabou on the shoulder and point ahead with his chin. They called Franz over and a long, rapid conversation took place in French, too fast for me to follow. All three were looking through their binoculars, as was I, but I could see nothing, nor could Franz.

Worse was to follow as Franz tried to translate Sabou's instructions for me. I just could not see a thing. It must have taken all of three minutes before I eventually saw the dim, grey shadow silhouetted in deep shade near the top of the ravine over 200 meters away. Much further than the directions I had received. I was nervous that, with all the loud whispers and jockeying to see the bull, we had mere seconds to make the shot.

Fortunately, Sabou and I had practiced him throwing out the shooting sticks, kneeling and holding them steady, while Papye moved in to give my chicken wing a steady place to rest on his shoulder.

Within moments the 300 grain Swift A-frame flowed from the barrel almost without conscious thought and, as I recovered from the recoil, the first thing I saw gazing up at me was Sabou's beaming face. The bullet hit precisely where I aimed - a high shoulder shot through the spine and the bull never woke from his siesta.

What an end to a hunt! What a hunt! Day Nine and the sixth consecutive day of tracking the same bandit! I had realized the dream of a lifetime.

The current hunt had been wonderful. I had hunted with exceptional companions. My son had accompanied me and shared my joy. I had hunted in one of the truly wild, unfenced areas of Africa, on foot, in the fairest of fair chase hunts, for an animal I had tried for without success on five previous occasions. I had killed the old, lone bull cleanly with one shot. What more could I ask for? What could be better than this?

Rather stop now I thought and go out on a high note that I will remember fondly forever, rather than carry on and risk being forced to stop on an ignominious one.

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Two years has passed. I have not hunted again. I have sold all my rifles. Do I regret my decision? Not yet. I am at peace. I remember my hunting days with great satisfaction and pleasure.

In retrospect, I believe now, just as much as I did then, that hunting is the cornerstone of conservation on the African continent and, if I have played a microscopic role in the continuum of this praiseworthy effort, I am happy and content that I have done so and will continue to do so albeit in other ways. And even happier that I have not sullied this memory by hunting too long.

*For more about Peter Flack, his books, articles and blog, please go to [www.peterflack.co.za](http://www.peterflack.co.za)*