Dr. Kevin Robertson also known as Doctari, was appointed to head up the Southern African Wildlife College’s Sustainable Use and Field Guiding department on 1 March 2014. And what an amazing four years it’s been!

Sadly as they say all good things must come to an end. On 13 July 2018, Kevin travelled to the United States, where he will in future be located to be closer to his daughters and to get involved in some exciting wildlife work and breeding projects taking place in Texas. We wish him all the very best in this new venture.

“Thank you for all you have given to the College. Although you are nearing ‘retirement’ as you tell me, your dedication, energy and enthusiasm is unmatched by most people. We will miss you! We wish you all the luck and happiness in the world with your new adventure. I know you will still be affiliated with us, and for that I am extremely grateful,” Theresa Sowry, SAWC CEO.

Kevin’s energy and eagerness to impart knowledge is what stuck with me throughout the four years I worked with him. Students and lecturers alike learned from him. His humbleness is remarkable. I think of him as a mentor, and inspiration. No doubt he will be a massive asset wherever he works,” Pieter Nel, Senior Trainer – Sustainable Use and Field Guiding Department.

Kevin’s willingness and ready smile will sorely be missed. He was always ready to step in to assist employees (me) with the necessary rabies vaccine injections when needed. He was willing to sign off inoculations annually, and assist with emergencies, not only for the K9 unit in which he took a keen interest but also for the residents with dogs on site. He arranged camp-outs for donors, got involved in rhino captures to ensure notching, chipping and DNA sampling was done and at the same time managed and ran the Sustainable Use and Field Guiding unit, which he transformed during the almost five years he has been with the College – a powerhouse indeed,” Lesley Greyling Manager - HR Manager.

“Oh how we are going to miss two very special people. Both Kevin and Catherine Robertson have for the most part become part and parcel of the College. There is so much to say that it’s actually difficult to know where to begin. Kevin’s presence, his experience, skills and gregarious nature and his willingness to always go the extra mile for anyone, often at a moment’s notice and Cath with her photographic and creative skills as well as her no nonsense approach to anything that came her way, will certainly leave a void.

Kevin’s sense of humour plus his naughty smile have always been enough cause for engagement, never mind his innate ability and knowledge to draw one in to his subject. He certainly managed to charm all who met him but just before he had any chance of strutting his stuff, Cath would bring him straight back to planet earth. Go well Doctari and 5H...we will certainly miss you both.” Jeanné Poultney – Executive Manager, Marketing, Fundraising and Media Relations.
Dr. Kevin Robertson is a recognized expert in African wildlife management, bringing four decades of experience in multiple disciplines of wildlife conservation. A qualified veterinarian from the University of Pretoria’s prestigious Onderstepoort Veterinary faculty, Kevin “Doctari” Robertson is the author of multiple books that provide in depth insight into all aspects of ethical wildlife utilization.

Kevin’s early career focused on establishing a rural veterinary practice in the northwestern Mashonaland region of Zimbabwe, while also managing a large Beefmaster cattle herd. This experience provided insights on both wildlife and livestock management.

In the mid 80’s, Kevin purchased a commercial farm in the Karoi farming area of Zimbabwe, successfully growing tobacco, maize and legume re-enforced pastures. Being close to the well-known Zambezi Valley and the wonderful array of wildlife that inhabits this pristine and remote part of Africa, a small resident herd of only six naturally occurring sable antelope were discovered on Kevin’s new farm. Over the subsequent 15 years, thanks to careful management and protection their number multiplied to 120. This was the start of Kevin’s passion for all aspects of habitat and wildlife conservation, which lead to the creation of a ‘wildlife area’ on his farm in turn attracting other naturally occurring species like waterbuck, impala, bushbuck and warthogs. Wildlife and the environment in which they roam requires careful management, resulting in Kevin taking his Zimbabwean Dangerous Drugs / Game Capture license.

As a qualified veterinarian, Kevin was thrown into the deep end with controlling Hoof & Mouth Disease, as part of the Zimbabwean government’s interest in protecting the country’s beef exports to the European Union. This required an in depth engagement with the Hoof & Mouth Disease host, the Southern Buffalo (Syncerus Cafer Cafer) that frequently entered the local commercial farming and ranching areas. All aspects of the African buffalo were to become Kevin’s fascination – resulting in two books being authored on the subject, Nyati and Africa’s Most Dangerous. Kevin is considered to be one of the world’s foremost authorities on these formidable black bovines. Kevin’s buffalo fascination ultimately lead him to taking his Zimbabwe Professional Hunters license, and together with his wife Catherine starting a successful safari outfitting company specializing in high-end dangerous game hunting safaris in Zimbabwe’s Zambezi Valley.

As the only Zimbabwean veterinarian who was also a licensed Professional Hunter, Kevin has been uniquely qualified to provide precise guidance on effective hunting procedures. This position lead Kevin to author The Perfect Shot, a best seller, which has since been expanded to The Perfect Shot II and various mini, pocket versions. These books provided Kevin with an opportunity to share insight on his extensive firearm and ballistics knowledge. The well-known Swedish ammunition maker, Norma, launched their successful African PH line of high quality big bore rifle ammunition, with Kevin “Doctari” Robertson as its brand ambassador.

Under the banner of “Ask Doctari” Kevin also penned for a good few years a popular ‘Question & Answer’ column for the outdoor magazine Sports Afield. This eventually lead to a “Doctari On Africa” column in this magazine which kept readers abreast with current hunting and conservation matters in Africa.

The Robertson family and their Zimbabwe farm were eventually to become victims of that country’s land reform policy – and after being displaced they relocated to South Africa where Kevin remained involved with wildlife management, developing game ranches in South Africa, Botswana and as a wildlife consultant in Namibia. For the past four years Kevin has headed up the Sustainable Use & Field Guiding department of the Southern African Wildlife College where together with his lecturing duties he is the college’s veterinarian. He also manages a rhino-monitoring program where the rhinos which occur naturally in this area are darted, ear notched, micro-chipped and subsequently monitored.

Safe travels to the “Lone Star State” Kev and Cath. We wish you both the very best in your new venture.
A KINDRED BUFFALO BESOTTED SPIRIT!

BY: SUSTAINABLE USE & FIELD GUIDING BUSINESS UNIT MANAGER, DR. KEVIN ROBERTSON

What is it about buffalo that the ‘beefy’ and ‘brawny’ find so attractive. A kindred spirit may be. I make no excuses for the fact that I am such a person – one who is absolutely besotted about buffalo but I’m pleased to say that I have recently met my match – in the form of Danie Rossouw. Danie too wears with honour the title of being buffel bef….ked! – and this statement was easy to determine. When we recently sneaked him up to a wonderful old buffalo bull his excitement was palpable, almost electric in fact, and wonderful to see!

With 63 Springbok rugby caps under his belt and many, many more for the Blue Bulls, Danie is something of a South African rugby legend. He is also a giant of a man. Shaking his hand is like shaking a normal person’s foot! It is not often that I am intimidated by size but it was very soon obvious to me why Danie was such a success and daunting presence on rugby fields the world over.

Around a campfire however Danie comes across as a completely different character – a doting father, one who is calm and gentle and absolutely passionate about the bush and the role hunting plays in the grand scheme of things.

Danie recently joined this department for one of our elephant and buffalo dangerous game courses.

Camping on the shooting range and spending a couple of days with Danie out in the veld allowed Piet, Gawie and myself time to get to know him and see the other side of this giant of a man. There was game a plenty on our training area and our target species co-operated well and we were able to conduct some exciting approaches on an elephant bull and two groups of buffalo. A couple of elephant cow herds were also co-operative allowing us to discuss in details these large pachyderms and the influence their numbers are having on the environment.

Danie admitted to having no elephant experience whatsoever and as if he was aware of this fact, a late 20’s elephant bull’s antics sure tested Danie’s intestinal fortitude! The calm and experience of the SUFG department’s trainers, under the expert guidance of Pieter Nel makes such experiences unique. Danie now understands elephants and their behaviour a lot better than he did before – and for this, he mentioned a number of times, he was extremely grateful.

What a pleasure it is to train someone who knows how to shoot a big bore rifle really well and here Danie excelled. He shot both our elephant and buffalo courses with life size targets like an experienced pro. When compared to his massive frame his large calibre rifles looked like .22’s, and it was amazing to watch him carry and handle his .470 double as if it was a conductor’s baton.

The SUFG department wishes Danie every success with his professional hunting career and outfitting operation.

In the dry Timbavati riverbed we found some nice buffalo bulls. One was a wonderful 12 year old Dugga Boy which soon got Danie’s heart racing. That he too is buffalo besotted was wonderful to realize and experience.
What makes the SUFG departments dangerous game courses unique is that they provide opportunities to put what is learned in the classroom and on the life-size and realistic shooting range into practice. Here senior departmental trainers Pieter Nel and Gawie Lindeque accompany Danie Rossouw on a buffalo approach. The bull on the left is a particularly fine ‘still-of-breeding-age’ specimen.

Danie absolutely waxed our life size and realistic buffalo course. What a pleasure it is to train someone who really loves buffalo, knows his way around big bore rifles and can shoot really well.
As if he knew Danie had no previous elephant experience, this youngish bull proceeded to put on a fine display of elephant behaviour, so much so that the ground actually shook! Danie was later to admit it was a real test of his intestinal fortitude!

As it was with the buffalo course, Danie also shot the elephant course like a pro! It is not often I am intimidated by a person’s size – but on this occasion I was!

To even the odds I got Danie to stand below me while in front of out ‘elephant head down’ target! As can be seen, Danie’s frontal brain shot was perfectly placed.
The recent hunting of an old, (8.5 to 9 years) lone, past-his-prime, broken toothed male lion in the Umbabat Private Nature Reserve has resulted in another outcry, and a sensational, far from the truth social media article. This all demonstrates yet again how detached this section of the general public have become to the realities of practical conservation in wild, free ranging parts of Africa.

Personally I blame movies like 'The Lion King' – as sweet as it was - for this sorry state of affairs. Often have I wondered as to what percentage of those who so enjoyed this Disneyland movie were left with the misguided perception that it is perfectly natural for lions and warthogs to sit around a cheerful campfire while singing happy little songs together! The reality of wild African life is that lions kill and eat each other – and if you kill and eat warthogs, and many other antelope species as well. They also get killed and consumed by hyenas when too old and feeble to defend themselves. These are the facts the reality of it all is that no lion has an easy life or a pleasant death. If not killed (and eaten) by their own kind beforehand, all lions either starve to death before being eaten by scavengers or they get killed and consumed by hyenas or by the book, all hell breaks lose when human emotions take over, logical, common sense seems to me to be lost in such situations – and what a shame this is.

This all demonstrates yet again how far from the truth social media article. We all know only too well what a financial drain the protection of the region's rhino population has become, the only solution for which is for wildlife to 'pay its own way'.

All of those who love African wildlife respect lions for being strong and noble creatures but the reality of it is that no lion has an easy life or a pleasant death. If not killed (and eaten) by their own kind beforehand, all lions either starve to death before being eaten by scavengers or they get killed and consumed by hyenas or by the book, all hell breaks lose when human emotions take over, logical, common sense seems to me to be lost in such situations – and what a shame this is.

The APNR (Association of Private Nature Reserves) is a wonderful conservation success story – built solidly upon the back of a carefully monitored, scientifically determined, sustainable wildlife off-take so that the major portion of the respective reserves annual operational costs can be covered. We all know only too well what a financial drain the protection of the region's rhino population has become, the only solution for which is for wildlife to 'pay its own way'.

Many areas of wildest Africa are dead boring from a photographic/eco-tourist’s perspective, (and this applies to parts of the APNR as well) and yet these same areas are often prime hunting destinations. The revenue derived from the APNR’s sustainable off take programme contributes in the region of 60 % to their annual operational expenditure, of which as much as 80 % now goes towards counter-poaching operations. Put simply into perspective – the APNR would not be in a financial position to protect its rhinos without the income derived from its hunting operations, to which a single, old, past his prime and near the end of his natural life lion contributed R 1 000 000!

Recently some statistics have emerged in an article on the africaSustainableConservation.com website where a comparison is given regarding the income generated by eco-tourism compared to that generated by hunting within the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve. The article states that the income brought into the reserve by 24 000 photographic tourists was less than one third of that brought into the reserve in the same year, by only 46 hunters! Lions worth millions are dying of old age within the APNR and when a single old lion is legally hunted and by the book, all hell breaks lose all over social media! When human emotions take over, logical, common sense seems to me to be lost in such situations – and what a shame this is.

In the greater Kruger National Park most of the old lions are now TB infected, so much so that very few live to become older than 10.

An old, TB infected lioness. Such a lioness is close to the end of her natural life.

This old lion is of similar age to the one recently hunted in the Umbabat. He is also TB infected – but at this stage he is still worth R 1 000 000. In about six months’ time his lion will look like the one below – and be worthless.

This once magnificent lion starved to death in the APNR. An autopsy revealed that his stomach contained nothing but porcupine quills! What a pitiful ending to a once noble and fearsome creature. These are the realities of a lion’s life which are very conveniently ignored by those opposed to hunting.
The ability to age lions with a fair degree of accuracy is an important aspect of being a field guide or conservationist. This is what we teach here at the Sustainable Use and Field Guiding department and I’m proud to say we get quite good at it. Here are some lion facts. Depending on their level of nutrition while growing up, lions are fully grown by late in their second or early in their third year. Upon reaching sexual maturity, male lions born within a pride are forced out of it, to become nomads. For the next three or so years they live on the fringes of other prides territories, while avoiding dominant pride males. They must endure this harsh and dangerous lifestyle until strong and experienced enough to challenge an existent, dominant pride male or coalition for a pride take-over. This will usually take place sometime in their fifth or early in their sixth year. This age group of lions are in their absolute prime.

The lionesses in a pride will all be related – either full or half-sisters of each other. Nomadic male lions, when sufficiently old, strong and experienced, fight with and eventually displace dominant pride males. This is how lion genes are spread around and how inbreeding is prevented. The phenomenon of infanticide within lion prides is well documented. This is when a newly dominant pride male or coalition will kill all the suckling cubs within their newly taken over pride. The reason for such drastic actions is so that the lactating lioness’s milk will dry up, and when it does, they will then come back into estrus. This allows the new pride male to mate and pass his genes on – enabling him to protect and nurture his own offspring and not those of other lions.

Lionesses have relatively short, 110-day gestation periods. Depending upon their level of nutrition, (because sexual maturity is a function of body weight rather than age) female cubs born as a result of such mating’s will themselves become sexually mature late in their second or early in their third year. Nature generally sees to it that a dominant pride male will not mate with his own daughters and this is accomplished by the father of such lionesses himself being displaced before his own daughters are ready for mating. So, by sometime in their eighth or early in their ninth year, most dominant pride males lose this most privileged position. The fights that displace such lions are usually violent affairs, which often result in the vanquished being injured. Such lions are by this stage of their lives becoming old and slow, and without lionesses to feed them with kills, they have to resort to killing for themselves – usually small game, ground birds or by scavenging. In reality they are now on the slippery slope to starvation. When combined with the debilitating effects of tuberculosis such lions do not survive for much longer. It makes absolute sense therefore from a sustainability perspective to utilize these old lions before they deteriorate further and become worthless, but to do so in this day and age causes a major outcry by people who are misguided or uninformed.
8-year-old lions start to look ‘old’

The Phelwan males were known to be 9 years old when this photo was taken. Note the facial scarring on these lions. They were a displace coalition and aged to be in their 9th year.

Note the facial scarring on these lions. They were a displace coalition and aged to be in their 9th year.

Old lions just look ‘old’.

Notice the characteristic circular scar on this lion's upper lip. This is a good example of how lions age. This lion was estimated to be 6, 8 and 9 years old respectively when these photos were taken.
The Sustainable Use and Field Guiding department’s elephant and buffalo have so far proved themselves to be extremely popular – so much so that participants wanted ‘more’. The logical solution was to expand the species being offered and so course material was developed for lion, leopard, hyena, crocodile and hippo. Much of the previous course’s success can be attributed to the life-size and realistic targets we created, with unique ‘shoot ‘n see’ areas over the correct shot placement sites. In short, we needed a new set of targets for each of these species – and this is where Catherine Robertson kindly came to the party. She was convinced to exercise her considerable artistic talents and in the end her efforts were fantastic. They say a picture paints a thousand words so here are the fruits of her efforts – the targets are already set up in their ‘field’ positions in our shooting lane area. Many thanks to Catherine for a job well done.

When one’s wife comes to the party

By: Sustainable Use & Field Guiding business unit manager, Dr. Kevin Robertson

The end result of Catherine’s efforts.

The walking leopard target after receiving its target area, undercoat and outline features.

Senior departmental trainer Pieter Nel stands next to our new lion target. So legalistic is it, it looks like he is about to get bitten!

Wooden cut outs for each species were given to Catherine, onto which the ‘shoot & see’ target area was attached.

The end result in its natural habitat in last light.

The end result in its natural habitat in last light.
Likewise, senior trainer Gawie Lindeque also looks like he is about to become a hyena meal!

Our new ‘dog sitting position’ leopard target also looks surprisingly realistic when positioned in its natural habitat.

Thanks to Catherine’s artistic efforts, our crocodile target looks absolutely realistic.

And our ‘in water’ hippo looks pretty good as well.

Our first ‘dangerous cats’ course was a tremendous success. At last light the sitting leopard was amazing realistic.

So much so that an elephant bull attacked the ‘sitting leopard’ target one night and ripped its head off!
There is absolutely no doubt of the importance of hunting within the Association of Private Nature Reserves (APNR) which border and are open to the Kruger National Park. Hunting contributes in excess of 70% of the management costs of these reserves, with comparatively little environmental impact (when measured against photographic tourism for instance) making it the most sustainable land use option available.

Regardless of the mentioned positives, hunting has been under pressure from all corners. At the writing of this article, social media, printed media and just about every other platform is alight over a legal lion hunt concluded earlier this month within the APNR, despite it being conducted in the most professional and considerate fashion. The Greater Kruger Park Hunting Protocol (previously the APNR Hunting Protocol) is a document born out of the need to ensure best practice and sustainability in hunting within the areas surrounding the Kruger National Park, in an effort to address public concern (it is worth mentioning photographic tourism does not have such protocols in place at all). The Southern African Wildlife College’s Sustainable Use & Field Guiding (SUFG) Department actively participates in keeping the protocol current, and in the training of all Reserve Representatives whose responsibility it is to ensure the protocol is adhered to. The skill level of these Reserve Representatives is extraordinary. It is a privilege for the SUFG Department to be involved with them.

In an effort to further empower good decision making for the Reserve Representatives, the SUFG Department has been working on ways (tools) to help (training) with the ability to better age elephant bulls accurately more accurately. Various scientific papers exist on ageing elephant, but the accurate ageing of bulls over 30 years of age seems to be a major challenge (scientifically anyway). Not a single scientific paper includes data on elephant males older than 35 years. To this end Mr. Julian Wengenmayr, the International Sales Manager of Swarovski Optik, and Andrew Whysall, of Whylo Distributors, the Swarovski agent in South Africa, showed interest in our efforts to improve sustainability within land use and considerate fashion. This particular model has a range finder and calibrations (in Mils). Within the first day of using the binoculars, it was clear the Swarovski technology was vastly superior to our own locally developed device.

Working from a scientific paper (Figure 2), where ages were determined by examining the lower jaws according to Laws (1966) and correlated to the shoulder heights of elephants culled (from 1974 until 1996) in the Kruger National Park (Data I.J Whyte), the simple prototype device we built was used, in conjunction with a range finder to calculate the shoulder height of live bull elephants. (Figure 1) This simple device 0 a Vernier and a piece of cord can be carried around in the bush. The idea was to build a training tool, to show what specific characteristics certain age groups of male elephants have and to reduce the chances of a reserve representative not complying with the KNP protocol.

In order to do so effectively, the data deficiency of shoulder heights of bull elephants older than 30 years needs to be addressed. This is where our new Swarvoski toy becomes handy. The range finder and Mili calibration within it now make it easy to calculate the shoulder height of an elephant. Once enough data has been collected to accurately estimate bull elephant age based on shoulder height, this data can be compared to foot measurements. According to Moss (1996), bull elephants with track lengths over 50 cm are older than 30 years. (We are aware elephants have the same physical quirks as humans in so far that there will be individuals taller or shorter than others, and ones with bigger or smaller feet than others. Who knows, the SUFG department, with the help of the reserve representatives, could add value to existing science, and have knowledge actually applied in conservation practices. Without the input from Swarvoski and Whylo Distribution this would not be possible and for this, the SUFG department is extremely grateful.

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SO WHAT IS THE IDEAL PH OR FIELD GUIDE’S RIFLE?

BY SENIOR DEPARTMENTAL TRAINER - GAWIE LINDEQUE

A lot has been written on the subject of the best rifle/calibre combination to hunt Africa’s dangerous game. On the other hand there is not a lot of reliable information as to what constitutes the ideal PH/Guide rifle for those professionals that exclusively operate on foot in remote areas of Africa. Unfortunately for most young upcoming PH’s and guides, the ideal rifle is the one that you have in your hands. A young PH simply doesn’t have the funds in the beginning of his or her career to be too picky. You simply buy what your pocket can afford in a suitable calibre and try and make it work for you. Guides on the other hand usually start working for a lodge and simply have to use the rifles that are there and to be honest most safari guides seem to be rather happy with this sorry state of affairs. Luckily as a young PH, the opportunity to hunt dangerous game is few and far between. You cut your teeth on plains game and gradually move on to the bigger more dangerous stuff. This affords you time to save up a bit and gain experience with different rifles, which helps you to make a decision when the time comes to acquire a proper charge stopper. A young safari guide starts off his career spending most of his time behind the wheel of a game drive vehicle and so consequently very little time is spent on foot in dangerous game country. As time goes by and their experience grows a few guides climb the ladder to become full blown trail guides where most of their guiding is conducted on foot in dangerous game country. When this point in a guides career is reached, it is time to start thinking seriously about getting their own rifle.

A good rifle for hunting dangerous game is a completely different tool to the rifle in the hands of a PH or guide whose job it is to ensure no wounded animal escapes or tramples a client or guest. It’s like comparing a bog standard Hilux pickup truck to the one Giniel de Villiers uses so successfully in the DAKAR rally. What calibre to get is a popular question? Simply put, experience has proven that to be effective the minimum ballistic formula to reliably stop a determined charge by an elephant or buffalo is a 500gr .458 calibre bullet at an honest 2150fps. How you get there is up to you. In factory form and depending on barrel length, the ever popular .458 Win Mag falls short of this by about 100-150 fps but has still proven itself to be highly effective, thanks primarily to the exceptional sectional density of the bullet calibre and weight recommended. A lot has been said and written about the .375 and various .400’s all of them are very effective hunting rifles and a good number of PH’s and guides have over the years used them with great success, but if the truth be told, they lack the punch of larger calibres in close contact situations where perfect shot placement is not always possible. The rifle in your hands is far more important than the bullet it launches and this is what this article will focus on.

A PH or guides rifle is a functional tool that has to operate in any condition at any given moment. The most important attribute the rifle must have is reliability. It must go bang every time the trigger is pressed. In case of a bolt action rifle it must extract and eject a spent cartridge and feed a fresh round into the chamber reliably, every time the bolt is worked. The Brno ZKK 602 and its modern counterpart, the CZ 550 Safari Magnum has been the workhorse rifle of the safari industry for many years. The reason for this is that they have always been available even through the firearm embargo days, they are affordable, immensely strong, rugged, accurate and come standard in the two most popular calibres in use today, the .375 H&H Magnum and the .458 Winchester Magnum. That they are true magnum Mauser type actions definitely works in their favour. They are all that one can ask for in a dangerous game rifle and are therefore used by a multitude of PH’s and by far the most popular rifles of all photographic lodges I have ever worked for or seen used.

As popular as they are, they are seldom 100% functional and reliable straight out the factory. The actions are as rough as a warthogs backside and one of its biggest attributes is also one of its biggest disadvantages. As mentioned, the actions are true magnum Mauser actions, traditionally used for the really large and long cartridges like the .416 Rigby and right up to the .505 Gibbs. Just why CZ decided to build these actions so big has always been a question for which I have never found a satisfactory answer, because through their entire production period, the ZKK 602 was only ever offered in .375 H&H and .458 Win Mag. It was only when CZ started producing their new 550 Magnum, (which is almost identical to the old ZKK 602) that they started to offer it in .416 Rigby and more recently in 458 Lott. Trying to get “small” (i.e. short) cartridges like the 2.5 inch long .458 Win Mag to feed properly in these big actions has forever been a headache. Most will function fine with round nose monolithic solids but problems start to be encountered when you want to use the modern, more effective flat nose solids or even in some cases traditional soft nose bullets. Only a handful of South African gunsmiths can fix these problems and it normally involves rather a lot of work. A spacer in the magazine box has to be fitted, and a new magazine follower installed in the case of the .458 Win Mag, combined with very fine work done on the guide rails. Not fitting the spacer can cause other problems as well. The rounds in the magazine tend to jump forward during recoil and slam against the magazine box, in time causing them to deform and this exacerbates the feeding problems. More serious, especially in a tight spot, is when bullets are forced backwards into the cases and if the bullet is properly crimped, the cases become riveted at the mouth and thus cannot be chambered. This has personally happened to me, and I have seen it happen a number of other times. Luckily all these incidents happened on the shooting range and all it cost the shooter was some lost time or worse, not passing an assessment.

**ZKK 602 Magnum action with standard 458 Win Mag cartridge**

**Same rifle with a .458 Lott cartridge**

**There is even a bit of space left with a .416 Rigby cartridge**
Of all the rifles available in the world only these are deemed suitable for dangerous game P&f'ing or Guiding. Left to Right and true Mauser '98 actioned rifle; the CZ 550 Safari magnum when reworked, the Ruger M 77 Mk II; the Winchester pre '64 or the new Safari Express; the CZ ZKK602 also when reworked.

A ZKK 602 on the left and a CZ 550 on the right. Untouched and straight out the box, the ZKK 602 is not ready to take to the bush, while the CZ 550 is. It has been glass-bedded, cross-pinned and the barrel shortened.

Both of these rifles have been reworked. Stocks double cross pinned, reshaped and glass bedded and the barrels shortened. All that is outstanding is to remove the sling swivel stud from the stock and replace it with a barrel band type swivel.

The other weakness of these rifles is stocks that crack under recoil. My personal issue rifle as a day walk guide in the Kruger National Park was a brand spanking new CZ 550 .458 Win Mag. That particular rifle's stock cracked in fewer than 30 shots. While waiting for the stock to be repaired I received an old ZKK 602 that was issued to a trails ranger in a time when the Park's resident gunsmith still had the time to sort out all these problems. What a pleasure it was carry and shoot that rifle. It was everything a guide could ask for in a rifle. The action was polished smooth; it had a properly fitted magazine spacer and follower, the barrel had been shortened to 22 inches, the stock was fitted with cross bolts and glass bedded into a beautifully profiled stock that fitted me like a glove. I have ever since longed for a rifle like that. These are the basic modifications that need to done to these rifles to make them truly reliable rifles that any PH or guide in big game country can trust his life on. Let's look into these modifications in a bit more detail.

1. Polishing the action. This does not mean to slap on some grinding paste and working the bolt until smooth. Although this does the trick. It can easily be overdone and take away too much metal. Rather have it done by a competent gunsmith. This goes for any of the modifications suggested here. Please take your rifle to a reputable gunsmith with proven experience working on big bore, dangerous game rifles. There are very good gunsmiths that I will gladly take my ultra-accurate long range bench rifle to but that same gunsmith will never touch my dangerous game rifle and vice versa. While the gunsmith is busy polishing the bolt ask him to weld up the hole in the bolt handle and bend it up at a slight angle. This makes the bolt easier to get hold of in a hurry.

2. Feeding. This almost goes hand in hand with polishing. Polishing the bolt, guide rails and feed ramp already goes a long way to help sort out any feeding issues. When you take your rifle to your chosen gunsmith take along a handful of your intended brass beads but they are a pleasure to work the bolt until they feed smoothly every time no matter how fast the bolt is worked, even upside down. This is finicky, time consuming work so make sure your gunsmith has the patience to do it properly.

3. Stock. The first thing here is to have the stock properly double cross pinned and fully glass bedded. The cross pins should be placed through the wood directly behind the recoil shoulder and between the magazine box and trigger. A third pin can be put through just behind the tang of the action. A better option to strengthen the stock in the tang area is to drill a hole from the just behind the rear stock screw angling it down towards the rear of the pistol grip but not completely through. A threaded brass rod is then epoxied into this hole. This does an amazing job of to strengthen the tang and grip area of the stock. Please make sure when glass bedding the rifle, that there is a small amount of space between the stock and the rear tang of the rifle. Too close contact in this area will eventually lead to a split in the stock.

4. These rifles exit the factory with 25.5 inch barrels. This is too long for the standard factory stock. The rifles feel unwieldy and unbalanced. If you are going to replace the stock entirely, the barrel can left alone and the new stock profiled in order to balance the rifle. If a new custom stock is a bit above your paygrade your options are limited to shortening the barrel length. For me personally I like the barrels to be cut off at 22 inches. This makes the rifle a pleasure to carry, handle and shoot in a hurry. You might want to experiment a bit and cut off an inch at a time until you are happy.

5. Sights. These rifles come standard with a barrel band type front sight. This means that because of the taper in the barrels, the band won’t fit over the barrel. If you insist on having a factory sight can be replaced by simply cutting it open at the bottom and soldering it in place. A number of gunsmiths out there will tell you that it is not possible because of this and that and will have any number of excuses. The bottom line is they just don’t want to go through all the trouble or do not have the skill to solder the sight back on. It is easier to simply drill and tap two holes in the barrel and then screw on a new sight ramp. If your gunsmith insists or you prefer a more traditional front sight ramp insist that the new ramp is soldered and screwed in place. Too many times I have seen sights that were simply screwed on, come loose and fly off the rifle when a shot is fired, often never to be found again. Whatever sight ramp is fitted, the factory bead needs to be replaced with something bigger. I do like the modern big bright fibre optic beads, they are less rugged than traditional brass beads but they are a pleasure to pick up in a hurry.

These are a few of the absolute essential modifications that need to be done before you take your rifle to the shooting range for the first time. As time goes by and with regular use you will inevitably pick up small niggles here and there. Take your rifle back to your gunsmith as soon as possible and have it sorted. Remember for the rifle to be 100% effective in a close quarter encounter with a big, hairy and frightening beast, you have to have confidence in your rifle. You cannot have confidence in your rifle if there is a mechanical flaw in the back of mind.
THE TIME HAS COME TO BOW OUT

It seems like only yesterday and not almost five years ago that I first arrived at the Southern African Wildlife College (SAWC). That was in March 2014 and my position at that time was senior lecturer to the Professional Hunting students. A “lot” of water has flowed under the bridge since that time and the SAWC has grown and expanded tremendously. What a challenge it was to become the head of the Sustainable Use & Field Guiding (SUFG) department where our PH students were first trained as field guides before entering the longer PH training programme.

Some of the highlights have been to observe the growing confidence and competency of the field guides and professional hunters we trained and later hearing how well some are doing in their respective professions has given me a tremendous sense of satisfaction. With funding donated by the SCI Hunter Legacy 100 Foundation the department secured a specially modified Landcruiser, which has subsequently proved to be ideal for training purposes. Together with the training of field guides and professional hunting students, the SUFG department conducted an ambitious buffalo ageing and trophy size demographics research programme. The success of this programme made for an interesting and rewarding time spent here at the SAWC. Our department also purchased a full selection of camping equipment, which eventually allowed us to offer dangerous game training courses to members of the South African Hunters and Game Conservation Association. These courses took place during the cool winter months over many consecutive weekends. The enthusiasm shown for these surprisingly realistic courses was most rewarding. As a NGO that does not receive any subsidies, the constant struggle to source funding to keep the department ticking on was stressful and a part of the job I did not relish.

I sincerely hope the department not only survives in the future, but with the necessary support, continues to develop and thrive.

Being involved in the SAWC’s rhino monitoring program has been very special and quite emotional for me since it is something I felt privileged to be included in. But nothing lasts forever and as retirement age fast approaches, the desire to be closer to our two daughters and our four grand-kids resident in the USA has grown ever stronger. This, together with the wonderful opportunity to consult on African wildlife matters in Texas made the decision to retire from the SAWC a no-brainer. There are currently 6000 exotic wildlife ranches in Texas and some 1.6 million head of a wide variety of African wildlife species.

And so, Catherine and I will shortly be swapping the African ‘bush’ for a very similar environment in south Texas. Initially not permanently while we work on visa and work permit issues, which means that for the next year or so we’ll flip flop between Texas and our home in Nelspruit. But Texas already feels like ‘home’ because the game animal species on the ranch where we will be based are similar – Cape buffalo, sable, roan, wildebeest, impala, nyala and many more - all there in surprisingly numerous numbers.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my time here at the SAWC, but it is now time to hand over the reins to Pieter Nel and Gawie Lindeque who are more than capable of continuing the training in this department.

New and exciting challenges now await Catherine and I and we look forward to them with enthusiasm. And so it’s now for Catherine and I to bid you farewell and best wishes for the future.

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