

Cape Buffalo

Bob Coker

The air was cool with a slight breeze out of the North, which was unusual for this time of year; we were following what appeared to be at least fifteen huge sets of tracks. We had been tracking this herd for over five hours when all of the sudden the wind shifted and started coming slightly out of the East. Then the wind began to swirl. Out of no where here they came...big, black, two thousand pound Cape Buffalo!

I knew there was always a possibility of a charge, but not the tune of five at a time! I drew my bow and found my anchor point. Steady now! I found my twenty yard point and burned it on his juggler. I had picked out the one headed directly at me, the others would have to fin for themselves. After all, they had guns and were supposed to be protecting me! Steady now... Burn, burn,

burn that pin in! Don't jerk [squeeze] the trigger slowly. Okay, a little more pressure. Burn!

Baked chicken or pasta sir? Huh? Baked chicken or pasta sir? Do what? Would you like baked chicken or pasta this evening sir? I was awakened by my flight attendant asking what I wanted for supper. With drool on my chin, mouth wide open, probably snoring, I was embarrassed to find myself slumped as far down as you can slump in a plane seat with my feet way under the seat in front of me. There is no telling how many times I kicked or tried to lift the seat in front of me with my legs. And, did I forget to mention that I talk in my sleep! No wonder everybody sitting around me was grinning and staring at me. No matter, I was on my 7th trip to Africa and I was going after Cape Buffalo.

Life is great and I am blessed. I met Isan at several hunting EXPOs about five years ago and had been talking to him about filming some TV episodes at his place. Isan owns Eulalie Safaris and after a couple of discussions about the arrangements, we had a

plan! There was a large group of us making the trip. The others were hunting plains game of which we were filming to produce episodes. Once all their hunts were over, Dayna Masters, Josh English and I were going after Cape Buffalo. Dayna and Josh were going to run the camera. Isan and Sculk were backing me up and acting as my P. H. All the other hunters in camp were successful at shooting all the specific animals they had come to hunt. When it was time to leave those leaving left extremely happy. Everyone agreeing that we had made memories for a lifetime. It was a bittersweet goodbye. I was sad to see the others leave, especially my wife and kids, but them leaving meant the stage was set for an exciting and dangerous hunt to start!

The night before our first day to hunt the bluff, we had a thunderstorm. There was about two inches of rain. Normally this is not good for bow hunters in Africa because you usually hunt the waterholes. After a good rain, the water holes are not as effective due to the puddles of water that are left everywhere. Since we

where going to spot and stalk my Cape; the rain was a blessing. It cleared all the old tracks away and made the ground much softer. The thunderstorm had tripped a breaker to the electricity to the lodge. When we awoke the next morning, before daylight, the power was back on. Isan had to drive to the main well and turn the breaker to the pump back on. When he came back to pick us up, he had great news! He had spotted some fresh Cape buffalo tracks. He said there were two of them. We checked the wind and found it to be blowing out of the east, which was normally the case. When we got to the tracks, I saw what was told to me the first three rules to hunting buffalo. Stay on the tracks, **stay on the tracks** and **stay on the tracks**. So, we got on the tracks and stayed on them.

The tracks were running from North to South and the wind had died a little but was still blowing from our left, which was out of the East. The tracks were fresher than what we had anticipated. We had only stalked the tracks less than one fourth a mile when Isan spotted nine huge trophy bulls. We slowed our pace down

considerable as Isan planned in his mind our approach. As we closed the distance from one hundred and fifty yards to about forty yards, the wind totally died. We had plenty of cover as there were several sickle and acasea bushes between us and them. As we inched our way through the thorns ever so carefully not to make even the slightest noise, the wind began to swirl. Not so much that you would even notice if you were not stalking a dangerous animal. **But we were!** And we did! Notice it, that is! So did the second bull that we hadn't even seen up til now. That bull bolted from our left to even farther to our left and out of sight. The bull we had been trying to get close to, also bolted without even knowing why, just because it was the right thing to do. The ground was shaking like thunder as they bolted off and out of site. Isan continued to concentrate on their hoof noise long after I couldn't hear them anymore. After a couple of minutes of silent disappointment, Isan turned to me and said they had run for over a mile before they slowed down. Then he smiled at me as though he

knew a secret and said “now rule number two...stay on the tracks!”

The ground was moist and soft, under these conditions a blind man could follow the tracks of a running Cape Buffalo. After an hour and a half of steady tracking, Isan slowed down the pace. He told me the buffalos had stopped running at that spot.

The tracks weren't quite as deep but with the moist ground they were still easy to follow; especially since the two bulls stuck together like brothers. Based on the sizes, they were probably more like father and son. After the initial sighting of the buffalos, we didn't see them again even though we had steadily tracked them from early morning until nightfall, under what is considered ideal tracking conditions. Isan took note of where we were and back to the lodge we went. That night, we had Kudu steaks from the Kudu that Jimmy Sammia had shot just three days earlier. They were delicious! After supper, I showered and hit the sack.

Even though the adrenaline was pumping, I had no trouble falling asleep as we had followed those tracks for several miles.

The next morning, Isan woke us all well before daylight. After our coffee and toast, we all piled into the Jeep. The land we were hunting had cross section dirt roads that cut the bush into blocks. Knowing where we had seen the tracks the night before, Isan had a hunch where the bulls were headed. There was a natural rain catch, a waterhole, that they call a pan, that was three blocks from where we had left the tracks. Isan figured they were headed there to water. Isan drove the Jeep to the pan, and true to form, both bulls had watered there. Isan had a couple of motion detection cameras set out there and I got my first real good look at the bull I was after. Rule number two was implemented and we got on the tracks. After about three hours of slow moving tracking, Isan had figured out where they were headed. We checked the wind and the pace picked up. We circled to our right which was west and then headed south. We hit a different dirt road. One I had never been on before. Isan checked the wind and

off we went, almost at a trot. When Isan got to the ambush spot he stopped and stepped to his left, just off the road and into the bush.

By the time the rest of us caught up to him, he had already heard the crunching of the feeding bulls as they grazed our way. I eased off the road to my left but not as far in the bush as Isan had gone. Dayna was right behind me. We saw the first bull as he loped across the road to the other side. I shot the bush where he crossed with my range finder. It was forty five yards. I got ready. We had a bull to our far left, about to cross the road and over the creek. We had no clue what he was about to do. Fortunately for us, the wind was in our face. The crunching of the grass chewing got louder until we realized that the noise was coming from our right. The bull that had crossed the road first was feeding just inside the brush and was grazing right to us. He couldn't have been more than fifteen yards away but in the brush too thick to even get a glimpse. About the time I was sure he was close enough to smell us, the other bigger bull stepped out into the road.

He was about five to ten yards further away than was the first bull that had crossed. I quickly drew my bow and centered my green fifty yard pin in my peep sight. The bull must have caught my movement because he went from broadside walking to standing still facing me in 0.2257 seconds. I gapped my fifty and sixty yard pins and held them on the center of his chest waiting for him to turn and give me a broadside or slightly quartering shot. I held at full draw for what seemed like three minutes, but was probably no more like thirty seconds. He swung his head up and down from left to right and stomped his left front hoof showing a posture and gesture simulating aggression. It sure worked on me. I just knew he was about to charge at any moment. I held at full draw and burned the pins waiting for his next move.

I did not like his next move. Instead of slowly turning and walking off, giving a broadside shot; he whirled and bolted from left to right like he was shot out of a cannon. The other bull heard the commotion and followed left.

We implemented rule number three and stayed on the tracks. We didn't see them again the rest of the day. It's one thing to think about or even visualize killing a Cape with a bow; but it's another thing to be in Africa standing on the side of a dirt road; squaring off with a two thousand pound Cape with nothing but a stick and string in your hand. I don't want to say that I was having second thoughts, but I must admit, when I went to bed that night, reality set in and it set in hard!

By the next day, things were really drying out and tracking became more difficult. At least it was for me. Isan's ability as a tracker really shined this day. He was able to distinguish the buffalo's tracks over Élan tracks in some of the rockier and dried up dirt you have ever walked. Folks, if you don't know the difference, then there isn't any. It was amazing to see him at work. He could identify all the thousands of tracks we encountered this day. I was awe struck! We stayed on the tracks but due to the difficult conditions, our pace was much slower. Somewhere about

mid morning, the buffalos must have bedded down because around 11:00 p.m. their tracks led to fresh scuff marks in the dirt with deep indentions. Isan whispered, "This is where they were bedded, we have gained a lot of ground. They must be grazing now." From following the tracks, we could tell that they were indeed grazing. The tracks would lead perpendicular to an acacias bush and stop. Then they would back up and go to the next one. The bulls were not eating the bush but rather the broad bladed grass that grew under the bush. Within an hour, Isan spotted the bulls. The one we were after was on the other side of a bush, just thirty yards away. Ever so slowly, we tip toed around bushes and thorns trying to get into a position for a shot. Always cognizant of the wind, we maneuvered 10 yards closer and to our right. From this position, I could see the bull through the bushes but not clear enough for a shot. The bull had no clue we where there. As Isan was contemplating our next move, the bull left the bush he was feeding under and came perpendicular to the bush that was 7 yards

right in from of us. There was nothing but a bush and seven yards between me and Black Death. Of course, there was no shot through the bush. The bull stuck his head in the middle of the bush and dropped it to the ground to get a mouth full of grass. The crushing of his teeth at that distance sounded like someone stomping a coke can. While his head was down and pulling up grass, I drew my bow. When he lifted his head to chew and swallow, he spotted us. He was not sure what we were, but he knew we were there. He swallowed his mouth full of grass and stared frozen at us for about five seconds. Then he ducked his head under and through the bush. I burned my top green pin just under his chin. Since his head was down, that put the pin right in the middle of his chest. Picture this in your mind; a two thousand pound Cape buffalo standing under and in the middle of an acacias bush, head down at five to seven yards. I am at full draw, with my top pin burned into the middle of his chest between his massive broad shoulders. I am 257 microseconds from squeezing my

release when I remembered what Isan had told me just five days earlier. Isan said, “When you stick a Cape, his first reaction will be to charge forward in the direction that his head is facing.” Well folks his head was about seven yards away and facing directly at ME! I knew if I hit where I was aiming, it would be a fatal shot but so would be the injuries to my body from the trampling and “butt whooping” I would have received. I froze at full drawing, praying he would turn left or right and give me a broadside shot. It was as though the buffalo knew what I was thinking and what the consequences would be. He backed up to his original side of the bush and darted to my right, leaving me at full draw with no shot at his vitals.

Now rule number four...Isan hadn't told me about rule number four but I was fixin to learn it! We briskly walked back several miles to the Jeep. When we got there, Isan said he thought he knew where the bulls were going to go. He said in that area, there was only one place to water and there was a blind already built there. Isan said the bulls would water just before dark.

We drove the Jeep to within two hundred yards of the pan. A pan is a natural low spot that holds rain water and looks like a very small shallow pond. We all climbed into the blind and waited for dusk. About one hour before dark we heard thunder. Three minutes later we saw lightening and seven seconds after that heard thunder again. Isan said “it’s coming”. I didn’t have to ask what! Sure enough, lots more thunder and lightening and sheets of rain foiled rule number four. Skulk got soaked running to the Jeep while we stayed in the blind. Fortunately, it had a tin roof. Skulk drove the Jeep back to the lodge and got the Suburban truck. He drove right up to the blind. We did get wet, as sheets were falling, but I can’t imagine riding all the way back to camp in an open aired Jeep.

We were up two hours before the sun the next morning having toast and coffee. The rain had stopped and the ground was moist and soft. These were ideal tracking conditions. Over coffee, I found out what rule number five was. “When rule number four

fails, see number one”! That’s right; we were starting over and no clue where to begin. The rain had washed all the bulls’ tracks away and we hadn’t a clue where to start. We went to all the obvious places we thought the buffalos would be with no luck. I won’t bore you with the details, but we spend two days looking for trails. We even split up with radios. There were four of us looking and for two days no tracks. The morning of the second day, Skulk ask if I was feeling confident, I wasn’t. I told him that I was concerned that we could not find them. On the evening of the second day of looking for buffalo tracks, I saw a thirty inch water buck. This was a monster and we decided to spend the last thirty minutes of daylight trying to stalk the water buck. Fifteen minutes into the stalk we got busted. Knowing the daylight was our enemy, we had rush it and blew it. We got busted and walked back to the Jeep and headed to the lodge. Isan cranked the Land Rover and we were off. Two hundred yards from where we had parked the Jeep, the buffalos had crossed the road. There they stood thirty yards on the left side of the road. There was only one problem; it was too

late to put on a stalk. If we had only not decided to pursue the water buck! Rule number 99 of hunting Cape Buffalos, stay on the tracks and don't go after anything else! Stay on the buffalo tracks only!

The good thing was, in the morning, we knew right where to start. I had trouble falling asleep that night. I am not sure what the problem was. It could have been that I only had two days left to my hunt and the morning was going to be my best opportunity yet. That morning, I was the first one up, one hour earlier than normal. I ate some toast and drank two cups of coffee. I got my bow and decided to practice using the lights. After shooting several practice arrows, I knew I was ready. Isan gave me some last minute pointers. He explained how the ribs of a Cape overlap. He said the ideal shot is a slightly quartering away shot, right in the armpit. That shot could be difficult to get. He said a perpendicular broadside shot must be taken in the armpit to avoid the overlapping ribs. If an armpit shot is not available, you must shoot him four to five ribs back from the shoulder with the buff quartering

away. This will allow the arrow to slip between the overlapping ribs to reach the vitals.

After the instructions, we loaded into the Jeep. I asked Skulk to ask me again. He knew exactly what I was talking about. He asked me, “Are you feeling confident today?”...I said “Today [is] the day”! It is my birthday! Yes, the day was April the 9th and I was on top of the world...a new sighting the night before with fresh tracks. I looked at Isan and said, “GETERDONE”! Isan, Skulk and Dayna all laughed as we left camp in pursuit of Black Death. We parked the Jeep just off the dirt road not far from where we had spotted the buffalos the evening before. By daylight, Isan was hot on their tracks in pursuit like a seasoned hound dog. They had crossed several dirt roads and when we spotted one of them he was about to step into another one. We had no clue where the other buffalo was? The night before there were two. From the tracks we could tell they had stayed together. But, where was the other one? With a visual of the one, we knew how we needed to go to keep the wind in our favor to get a shot. With

no clue where the other buffalo was, we had to be careful for two reasons. We didn't want to get busted and run them off again; nor did we want to startle the other buffalo and get trampled to death. My adrenaline kicked in. My senses were keener than they have ever been. I don't know how to explain it. It's like cleaning your pallet with a tart bite of ice cream before tasting a sweet desert. I was sharp and ready for anything! The one buffalo we could see had stepped back into the brush. I guess for another morsel of grass. We eased to the edge of the road down wind, just beside the brush and waited! It seemed like forever but it really was not that long. The buffalo stepped out into the middle of the road. He was about forty four yards and a half according to my range finder. I drew my bow and gapped my forty and fifty yard pins in the center of my peep.

The bull caught the movement of the bow and turned to face us. I burned the gapped pins in the center of his chest waiting for him to turn left or right to give me a broadside shot. He stood and faced me for over 2 minutes. He ducked his head and swayed it as

though he were about to charge. My heart was up in my throat and pounding so loud my ears were hurting. Finally, he whirled to my right as I held the gapped pins in the armpit. I squeezed my release and saw my arrow sink up to the fletching just before he stepped into the bush. He was forty four yards away and moving and I forgot to lead him. He was slightly quartering away and the arrow slid between the sixth and seventh rib. The ideal shot would have been between the fourth and fifth rib but the sixth and seventh would have to do. Fortunately for me, the ABC Sonic Broad Head cut through the edge of the seventh rib and kicked the arrow at a steeper than normal angle, driving the Broad Head to the right such that it slightly punctured both lungs on the other side. We waited five minutes and decided to go get the dogs. We had no idea that the arrow had kicked and thought that I had made a questionable shot. We figured we would need the dogs to bay him up so I could get another shot.

Before we left for the dogs, Isan wanted to see how much blood was on the ground. We got on the tracks and followed them

about fifty yards before we found any blood. We followed the blood ten more yards and found ourselves looking at the bull. It had only been twenty minutes, at the most, and there he stood, one hundred and twenty yards from the road. There was lots of brush between us and him. He was starring right at us through the brush about sixty yards away. Isan and I dropped to our knees still not knowing how good the shot really was. We were puzzled why the bull hadn't run any further. Furthermore, we had not seen hide nor hair of the other bull. We knew this bull was hurt and we figured he was about to charge at any second. He took two steps toward us and Isan shouldered his gun. The bull turned and stepped out of our sight. We were wondering what our next move should be.

Should we go get the dogs or pursue the bull now? Then we heard a loud thud. Then we heard it again. Then we heard something that sounded like a cow bellowing. Isan whispered to me that this was good. I guess this was like hearing a bear death cry after you have fatally wounded him. Isan then told me, "This was his death cry," but it lasted a lot longer than a bear death cry.

Finally, the bush was quiet. Too quiet! In the back of my mind I knew there was still another buffalo somewhere even if this one **was dead** and we couldn't be certain that was even the case. As we walked to the brush where we had last seen the bull, the hair on the back of my neck was standing attention! I was positive that he was dead, heck, I heard the death cry loud and clear. But you still can't help but have that uneasy feeling in the back of your mind as you walk toward the brush where you know a cape buffalo was once standing just 2 seconds ago and you are holding nothing but a bow in your hand. The closer we got, the more unnerved I was. Then finally I saw the bull. He was all piled up on the ground. Now don't get me wrong, he was still over 5 feet tall, but he was all piled up. A big pile at that. It goes without saying that this is a 50 year old birthday that I will never forget. Live is good and God has blessed.

Bob Coker