

African Lion Hunt

Close your eyes and image that you are face to face with a full black mane 500 lb. Lion, after having stalked him for several hours, with nothing in your hand but a bow. That is exactly what I was doing most of the 23 hour flight to Johannesburg, South Africa. Similar dreams occurred almost every night for months prior to the trip. My dreams were about to come true after having met Buddy Norman at a hunting show. In the area I was going to hunt, it was difficult to get the proper permits to hunt lion with a bow, due to the danger involved. Buddy Norman was able to get me a special permit from the local government. There were inches of paperwork and many phone interviews to be made. After all the paperwork was complete and all the stipulations were met, a permit was granted. The dreams were becoming a reality.

The safari was a 30-day hunt and was being filmed by a crew of 2 cameramen and a soundman; there was of course a rifle armed backup Professional Hunter (PH). Although, we filmed and took several different species of animals, my main purpose for the trip was to take a lion with my bow, and that was my number one priority. During the course of our 30-day safari, we saw a lion on a couple of occasions, but the situations were never right for a shot. Some of the incidents were prides of lions, which included large full mane males.

With only 5 days left to my safari, it became apparent to me that my guide, Alec was avoiding lion and was hunting other game instead. He had gotten cold feet about me killing a lion with my bow. Having realized this, I hired a second guide, Otto, who was noted for his lion hunting abilities. Coming to the realization that the clock was ticking away on the safari, I was forced to compromise my dream of stalking the lion, and accepted the reality of taking one in whatever legal means available. We stalked and hunted by day and began hunting over bait at night to double our chances.

In order to night hunt, we mounted spot lights on two tripods hooked to a truck battery and built a blind out of bushes, South Africans call these blinds, bomas. The boma was large enough to accommodate two guides, a tracker, two cameramen, a soundman, my wife Tami and of course me. It was cramped, and we were back to back but, we all fit. On the next to last night of my safari, we were using the carcass of a water buck I had taken two days earlier as bait. We had been eating the game I took, but the water buck has a very foul taste.

The tracker took the stomach of the water buck and put it on a stick. Then he dragged it in a circle around the boma, with a radius of about 1/10 of a mile. He then drug the stomach back to the carcass, which laid 15 yards from the boma. Otto explained how the lion would roar as he approached and how he would smell the human scent inside the boma. He said he would probably circle the boma to determine our perimeter, and then he would go to the bait. Otto also claimed there probably would not be just one lion but and entire pride. There could be as many as 15 to 20 lions at one time approaching. I told Otto I did not think I could knock 15 arrows fast enough but I would do my best. He laughed and said he and Alec would help me out.

At about dark, all eight of us settled in the boma for the night. Back to back we sat for hours and waited. The night was pitch black with no moon or stars. You literally could not see your hand in front of your face. During the early hours of the night, we heard all kinds of strange noises; at least they were strange to Tami and me. At about midnight, a dominant male baboon of the territory decided to wake the entire bush. I must tell you, he did a good job of it too. I almost jumped out of my skin. I did not know what it was, but I did know that I did not want to wrestle with it. Alec told me it was a baboon. I knew right away I was not going to challenge him over any of his girlfriends.

At about two o'clock a.m., every one was asleep propped up back to back by each other. Alec was in the back and Otto was on the far left against the bushes on the opposite side. I was on the front right side of the boma against the bushes. All of a sudden, all eight of us were awake from the percussion of a lion roar. The vibration was so intense; it was like standing in front of a large speaker at a heavy metal rock concert. The difference being that this speaker had large teeth, was carnivorous and very hungry. Tami's back was against mine as she tapped me on the shoulder and asked, "Did you hear that?" I replied with a nervous chuckle, "Are you kidding me, it blew my hair back off my face, and the goose bumps on my neck are still honking."

Five minutes passed without a sound. I could hardly breathe; the only noise I could hear was the sound of a bass drum my heart was making in my throat. My ears have never been so keen and in tune. The rustle of the cameramen inside the boma seemed to echo into eternity. I do not know how to describe the sensation as the tension mounted.

My heart was pounding so hard I could hardly hear the lion panting just yards away. The lion moved closer and closer, as he was circling the boma. Tami says I was hallucinating but, I promise at one point the lion came so close, he stuck his head into the bush where I was sitting and began sniffing violently in my face. I not only could smell his foul breath, but could feel the heat from it.

At this point, the goose bumps on the back of my neck turned to chicken bumps and flew off. I started to jump out of my skin and go with them. Just before I did, the lion roared again and ran back from where he had come. You never heard so much commotion and thrashing about. The silence afterwards was deafening. I strained to see what I could hear next. There was nothing.

About an hour later, some hyenas came in on the bait. The noise they made reminded me of witches dancing and stirring around their black boiling pot of brew. Alec turned on the lights; the hyenas ran off. Otto said we should call it a night. He claimed the lions were not coming back because the human scent was too strong. Then when Otto shined his flashlight on the ground around the boma, I saw what he meant when he said lions; plural; there were at least three different sets of tracks.

We called it a night and went back to our huts. I lay awake for hours due to all the adrenaline flowing through my body. The thought of having three or four lions so close in such darkness with nothing but a bush between me and them frightens me still today.

The next morning we were all up at daylight ready to start the hunt. It was my last chance to stalk and bow hunt a lion in the daylight hours. I was to leave the next day for the Johannesburg airport.

We went to the area where we had hunted the previous night. We knew there were at least three lions in that area. We drove around in the jeep about one hour looking for signs and tracks, when the tracker spotted a vulture flying in a circle and then it made a sudden nose dive.

As we got closer, we saw approximately 50-60 vultures on the ground and quite a few flying above. They were eating a 3 day old lion kill. We figured it was an old kill from the same pride we had the close encounter with the night before.

It was obvious we were in their territory. Knowing that we were in active feeding grounds, I became more excited as we continued to search for fresh signs. It was not long before we hit the jackpot. Our tracker, Martae, found fresh blood and lion tracks in a shady area. With closer observation, Otto determined it to be where a lion had killed its pray the previous night.

We could clearly see the lion tracks and marks left where the lions drug the kill.

After about 100 yards the drag marks disappeared. Otto said the animal finally died and the lion was now carrying the animal completely off the ground. There were occasional drops of blood, as well as small puddles of blood every few yards. From the tracks, Otto and Alec agreed there were at least 3 lions, one large male, one large female, and one average size lion that they could not determine the sex. The sun was in our face, and worst of all, the wind was at our backs. The area was covered with a grass like broom straw ranging from knee to waist high. The grass was the exact color of a lion. On several occasions, as I peered out over the swaying brush, I could have sworn, for a moment, a lion was charging at us. As soon as my heart was in my throat, I realized it was just the brush swaying in the wind.

After about an hour and a half of keen tracking by Martae, we came to a big puddle of blood and a lot of bleached out bones. It looked like a graveyard scattered with the remains of animals. Otto said this was where the lions would drag their kills to feed. From the amount of bleached bones, it was obvious this pride was well fed.

By this time, my heart was pumping adrenaline instead of blood. Otto said the lions must have winded us, and picked up their kill and left. As strong as the wind was blowing, it was inevitable the lions were going to winded us. The tracking became tedious, since the lions knew we were following them. Martae was worth his weight in gold, you must know what you are doing in the bush when tracking a lion.

We finally spotted the male and one female lion in the brush ahead of us about 80-100 yards. Tami took a photo using a telephoto lens, but due to all the excitement and her view through the brush, the picture is blurred at best.

We continued stalking and pushing the lions for at least another hour. The lion finally dropped its kill in an effort to escape our pressure. As we cautiously approached the kill, we could tell it was the remains of an impala.

Otto studied the impala and determined from the teeth marks, that two of the lions would make the Safari Club Record Book. I do not know where all my blood went, but now my heart was pumping 100% adrenaline.

We studied the tracks, what little there were, and determined the direction the lions had gone. We slowly and cautiously filtered through the broom straw for another 40 yards. There came such a ferocious roar from a bush that was only 40 yards in front of us that I almost leaped out of my shoes.

The lion continued to roar and thrash about with its claws. Otto yelled, "It's the female!" She had decided **not** to give up her kill after all. The male and the smaller lion had left, but she was the most aggressive of the three and was not about to leave her meal behind.

Otto no sooner got those words out of his mouth, when the lion crashed through the bush and began to charge right at me from 40 yards. You can not believe what all can go through a person's mind in such a short period of time.

I could actually see the expression of anger in the lion's eyes, and there was no doubt her eyes were focused on me. It was as though she knew who it was that was hunting her. I drew my bow to full draw and waited, as she continued to charge. I must have told myself at least a dozen times to release the arrow, but I never did. I was waiting for the lion to get closer and closer and even closer.

Alec screamed at me to shoot, but I did not. I was afraid the bush in front of her would deflect my arrow. I knew the lion would have to leap over the bush or charge through it. No matter which of the two occurred, I decided to let the arrow fly just as soon as the bush was no longer in my shooting lane.

When the lion reached the bush, she pulled up and stopped. There she stood eight steps away growling ferociously, but still standing behind the bush. Alec screamed at me repeatedly, "For God's sake **SHOOT!!!!!!**" The bush was thin and the lion's head towered over it. Never the less, it was still an obstruction between the lion and me. Shooting an 85 lb bow and 165 grain broad heads, the arrow probably would have made it through the bush and killed the lion. Or I could probably have taken a clean head shot and killed the lion. But, when it comes to my life, I do not like probabilities. I was waiting for the sure thing. I was waiting for the lion to step to the side of the bush, and give me a broadside shot. Finally it happened, but before I could release my arrow she whirled around and ran off. She had gone into a thick area and disappeared. We cautiously approached the thicket until we were within 40 yards. We stopped and decided to discuss the situation. No more than 15 seconds elapsed when she roared twice and then burst through the bushes directly towards us. Once again, her eyes were fixed on me as she charged.

To my amazement, I was at full draw within one second with my 20 yard pin fixed on her chest. Once again, she pulled up at about 10 yards and

whirled from my right to my left. For a split second, as she was turning, she gave me a broadside shot. This time there was no bush to save her.

I released my arrow, and it found its mark. I did not lead her quite as much as I should have but it was still a deadly shot. It struck her in the rib cage, as she was quartering away. The arrow past clean through and was embedded in a nearby tree.

The lion ran about 30 yards then doubled up into a ball of fur and did about three head over tail rolls. By this time I had knocked another arrow, and was at full draw running towards the lion to get another clear shot.

When the lion quit rolling, she sprang to her feet and realized she was badly hurt; she turned and decided to avenge her pain, but this time it was not a mock charge. I released a second arrow; it hit within one inch of the first. Again, it passed straight through and seemed to take all of her wind with it.

She leaped off into the nearby broom straw and disappeared. We cautiously started after her. The blood trail was easy to follow, but it was the most nerve racking blood trail I ever followed. Fortunately, it did not take long. We could hear her softly moaning at about 25 yards. Occasionally she would lift her head above the tall grass to see where we were.

Otto told me to shoot her again the next time she raised her head. I already had my third arrow knocked, and when she lifted her head again she was facing directly away from us. I shot her the third time with a sharp angling away shot. The arrow past between the second and third rib, through her chest cavity and lodged into the base of her skull.

The Hunt Was Over !

The lion weighed almost 400 lbs. And took five men to put her into the jeep. We delivered the lion to the skinning hut, and began to pack our belongings and memories for our trip back home.

As I sat on the plane headed to Atlanta, Georgia, an unprecedented smile grew across my face as I recalled the countless joys Tami and I had while in Africa. When my eyelids became too heavy to keep open, Tami knew I was dreaming of the day when we would return to Africa for another safari.