

Wounded Leopard – DON'T DO THIS!

The pursuit of Africa's great cats is exhilarating, it is humbling, it is emotional and it can be extremely dangerous. Lions possess the power to snap your neck or any other part of your body with a simple bite, they pull down belligerent buffalo bulls and have the nerve to start eating them while they are still alive and fighting for survival. They are the most powerful of cats, the most arrogant and in their eyes they remain the jungle's king.

The Leopard however is a totally different feline, cunning and invisible, they possess great strength - proportionately more than the lion - and they have keen senses, not only their sight, smell and hearing, but also an innate ability to perceive or feel danger. They possess human traits - cunning, sly, curious, plotting, vindictive - these are all the things you will realize from merely spending 2 weeks in pursuit of this magnificent creature.

In my mind Lions are the men of the cat world - they are big and strong, they smell terrible, they're always loud and self-important, they bully the females, steal the meat, kill all around them and when wounded they come at you in loud aggressive bursts which you have to deal with affirmatively.

Leopards however are the women; they are always calm and quiet - almost introvert - they spend more time grooming than hunting and rather avoid confrontation than take it head on - BUT do something to piss them off, and you're dealing with a totally different kitty. They'll plan their means of attack, they'll even let you get away with it a few times before they bring hell down on you and you will know it when it arrives, usually only a split second to realize this is it. They also don't aim to destroy you, rather their plan is prolonged suffering and while they will leave painful surface wounds, their real intent is to drive the knife in deeper and twist it slowly down where the ego presides - that place that is the make or break of any self-respecting professional hunter.

I was sitting at a popular road side pit stop, the Forest Inn, at the western end of Zambia's great north road taking in a few cold Mosi's after a nerve-racking and tense lion hunt. This was the regular overnight spot for those PH's who live on beans - the ones that make their living the old way and still drive their vehicles between concessions - and I was not breaking this camp until the Mosi's were finished and the sun was up? The great north road had taken its share of lives since it was first built back in the 60's and I had no intention of being one of them, even if I was only 4 hours from Lusaka and home. However it was Eddie, my driver who shattered the ideal post-safari moment with his cellphone, someone was asking for me and if they were calling him it was urgent I guessed, so I took the call staring at my half-empty glass longingly.

These days I tend to work only for myself, I sell hunts, I do them, I drink beer afterwards and if anyone objects I tell them where to put it. It works out OK for a PH bum like me, I tend to stick to the old ways and haven't cared much for the new fangled methods and manners I see today's PH's exhibit and aspire to. That is not to say I'm past my prime, far from it and I guess a reason why I have never been in the diamond class of PH's - those hard men of steel you regularly see on the top US hunting network shows taking down charging elephants, cigar in mouth while narrating to the camera as the elephant bears down on them. They are the Goldenball Brigade (GB's) of this industry, all with those mandatory cut-off vests, the heavy double guns slung over their shoulders and fancy awards to their names that bear testament to their superb ability in the field.

Now how could I miss out on a chance like this, the caller was telling me, to walk amongst the elite and fraternize with the stars of your industry, it can only go one way from here you see and to top it all, you

Zambian PH's could learn a thing or two from these guys!

NO I thought to myself, I could not let this one go, and said OK I'll do it, I had to join the GB ranks and see for myself if I compared, if I even came close to the tremendous prowess of these real life African PH's and their golden assets and magnificent manes of manicured hair. Thankfully Eddie was there and after a quick negotiation with the bar lady, we drove off into a setting sun, me with a cooler of Mosi to make sure Eddie kept between the white lines.

In Zambia, there's a shortage of PH's and so it seems no matter what your experience or modus operandi, you'll always get enough work to see you through so why worry about the small stuff like your hair, or your clothes, or your hunting rig, or your rifle. With this in mind, it is then understandable to see why the GB brigade flock to our game rich country with their high rolling clients and look at us with disgust and veiled horror. You see, all the Zambian PH's I know are rather casual about their attire - 2 sets of shorts, 3 shirts and boots - what more do you need for a hunting season? Does it matter if your cut off vest does not match your Armani shorts?

The hunt I was about to embark upon turned out to be the most talked about safari of the season in Zambia and it did make waves in the great hunting halls across the seas. It certainly was one of the highlights of my season, it had a number of firsts for me and it also put my mind at rest, finally, about me and my fellow barflies and our simple yet continued ability to carry out successful safaris.

The first thing I realized when I pulled into camp was that my trusty land cruiser - the one which had carried hundreds of clients with many lions and leopards and buffalo's and other assorted parts of game - was not really good enough to fit in with the GB breed. You see mine was not last years model, it didn't have air conditioning, nor did I keep the cab and doors on - but I think what really did it was that I didn't have a driver who I gave directions to with a little pointed stick from the high seat up top. Thankfully I was not alone in this, there was another common garden variety Zambian PH on the hunt too, one who I'd known since a kid and we called ourselves the 'replacements' on this hunt. We were relegated to a small canvas tent about 50 yards off into the bush away from the 5 star luxurious camp, like two step brothers who didn't belong. The GB's needed their sleep and comfort, you guys are used to sleeping on the ground without a shower or toilet and we have to look our best for the clients you see!

Now this was the second eye opener - a 5 star camp needs ultra luxurious fancy imported wooden cabins - no not as you would find in the Zambian bush, not something made out of local indigenous timber, but rather something which resembled a resort style cabin in the Rockies and was fully imported from the US of A. Then if this wasn't furnished with the finest 'African chic' decor straight out of Orvis, Cabelas and LL Bean it wasn't really a 5 star African hunting camp now was it? The two hippo sized generators chugged into life at 5 am each morning, drowning out any sound of the flowing river, any possible last leopard or lion calls near camp and definitely any of the bird calls I usually wake up to. You see, outlet power was a must, there was hair to dry and clothes to match which could simply not be done in a half light of a fluorescent, and don't forget GB's had to be clean shaven and smell good for the client! Image was everything, it meant the difference between success and failure out here in this harsh continent!

OK so I don't make any excuses for the rifle I carry, it is old and looks like I've dragged it behind my cruiser in the dust for 5 miles and to everyone's horror, it is a single barrel bolt action - both the replacements had the same rifle and caliber and we received the kind of look you see at charity events when some or other endangered species is on show in a cage - a look of sorrowful concern with a hint

of horror - do these guys have to be along with us 'thankfully the camera crew are private, not from some big network where everyone will see them with us!'

So each vehicle had a cameraman, not unusual these days, and fortunately I knew ours from years before, the kind of guy who took everything in his stride and could have passed for one of us - the replacements. Yet each move and action, every step or flicker had to be recorded and he was kept rather busy by 'our' client and her bodyguard. You see, it was not enough to have a run of the mill Zambian PH (that's me), a fully fledged paparazzi GB PH, 3 trackers (with axes) and a cameraman who could shoot (a rifle that is) - a bodyguard was needed at all times. Thus it was that each step the client took was neatly followed by the bodyguard, a massively muscled bull of a man dressed in combat fatigues carrying a semi-auto shotgun with one of those combat flashlights stuck on the end of the barrel. Despite his size and work, he was probably the funniest and most amiable of the whole group especially his antics at trying to avoid being bitten by tsetse flies and other crawling things - for a man his size he had a phobia for insects - tiny insects.

Thus we would set out each morning in GB's cruiser, because he knew about Toyota reliability and had gone one further, this one had satellite tracking in case we got lost! Eager to help, I would drive, with the bodyguard up front enclosed in the cab (much to his delight) while the other three sat on the rear elevated seat talking about important hunting stuff like the color of their camo outfits and which worked better in the miombo woodland. Regardless, we were hunting in one of Zambia's best concessions - naturally - and we took some great trophies doing better than GB master-in-chief who forged his own way through Hemingways Africa, leaving before sunrise and returning well into the night sunburned and deflated - if you put in the hard yards then you were bound to stumble onto something!

Our client was more relaxed, she liked to return to camp for lunch, have a leisurely nap and then strike out again in the cool of the afternoon - much to my delight - it meant time to fish and perhaps fix that nagging noise on my cruiser. My GB however would retire to his room, pull out a portable dvd player and watch movies the whole afternoon, totally disinterested in his surrounds. However when one of the clients revealed they had an airgun the urge to show his marksmanship could not be contained. Here started a long and arduous journey of tolerance on my part and my respect for this well known and highly regarded PH faded with each shot he took. It was not as you'd think - we PH's do have faults and often we miss - his shooting ability was excellent, it was his choice of targets that bothered me and eventually made me look at him as little more than a cold hearted killer.

Respect was what was lacking in this man, respect not for me or his client or the staff, but rather for wildlife and nature itself, for the very source he relied upon to live and glow in the limelight. You see, he'd shoot at every living thing around the camp - except humans that is - but I must confess, I was rather worried when out alone with him one day looking for a suitable hippo bull to shoot as he carried his 9mm pistol along (I'm serious)! All the colorful birds would get it, those that were of no use to anyone were shot and left to float down the river in a bundle of feathers, monitor lizards, baby crocs, basking fish, in fact anything that moved and each hit was followed with a sinister laugh of pleasure. The same day we rode the river looking for hippos, he frightened the hell out of me with a wild shot at a young warthog speeding across the road in front of us - what the hell are you doing I asked, we don't have a permit for that, to which he replied, it's OK we'll just throw it in the river, no one will know.

Numerous times I would question his actions - why kill it, we can't eat it, it's of no use to anyone to which there was the same reply - because I like it! He then went on to tell me that he had been doing this for a long time, it gave him a close up look of animals and birds that no one would ever get close

to, his best was a wild dog he said with pride and then he hesitated - guilt I thought - but no he said it must have been the Shoe Bill stork with my best mate the other great GB of the hunting world.

That night I sat sickened to my very core at what I was witnessing and after some thought spoke to our game scout, the one who was seconded to us as an observer and policing authority. You see, no matter how much I tried to stop this buffoon, he would simply do it while I was not around even after the game scout spoke to him he still continued although only when his master in chief was around with the full group of clients. His behavior didn't seem out of place to the other GB's either and the clients loved it, joining in as if it were a competition. The replacements watched this unfold, here we sat in our country while a group of foreign GB's behaved in this way. At night as we sat around the fire, the exploits of the real men came out, showing off scars and relating stories of Lions and Leopards and Buffalo - and then when the women had gone to bed, the real conquests flowed freely off their tongues - wives, daughters, girlfriends! The master in chief however was reserved and more respectful, glued to the screen of a laptop most of the time answering emails and making calls.

And so the hunt continued until we had a great strike, a massive black maned beast hit one of our baits and it was determined this would be the one. I plucked an eight inch long hair off the rotting hippo leg and my heart jumped, this was our Lion, goldenballs was still in the cruiser barking commands to his personal assistant who was untying a stealth camera from a pole near the bait. This was another first for me, the use of still cameras to capture pictures of whatever came to the bait. OK I know I'm a stickler for all things ethical and tend to pull my hunting values from a day that has long gone so it was with amusement that I watched the glamor boy work. In hunting there is always an element of surprise, this is what makes it so enjoyable, it is like fishing, you don't know how big a fish will strike next or what it looks like until you pull it from the water - this is what often makes it a hunt. However there are signs an experienced PH can feel when you look at a big lion's tracks which makes your blood flow faster - like when you can see that between his toes there is hair pushing through and if you look carefully at the edges of his pads, it is smooth and not rough. Follow this up with an 8 inch pitch black hair and you know that this is a cat worth putting in the extra miles for. I guess that GB's are just so busy that they can't take the chance of actually hunting for a cat, they must know that it is a monster and for this they need the stealth cam!

The Lion walked in right on time, just at dark, almost impossible to see with the naked eye, his mane making him look half black and half transparent - a dark mass drifting into the clearing. The female he was with lay at the foot of the bait having been there for some time - a group of curious elephant had made an earlier visit to the bait and stood reaching out with their trunks at the rotted hippo. Goldenballs was busy with his i pod movie, complete with earphones on and I tugged at his foot to alert him. The Lion took the bullet a little far back, but standing at an angle it passed through his liver which was a fatal shot but not immediate. We waited the usual 30 minutes for the vehicle to fetch us and on their approach they had seen the male lying in a clearing with blood on his side about 100 meters away - we rushed there and 2 more shots, one from goldenballs' double and one from the clients 7mm, saw him down.

In truth, this was one of the biggest lion I had ever seen in Zambia, he was old and scarred and his mane was starting to recede from poor condition. We found later that he had a wound, possibly a bite or a shot and thus his reluctance to come to bait early. Despite my distaste for my newfound PH associate, we congratulated each other and for an instant I thought he and I shared the same feeling about this cat. I always look at these magnificent creatures, sadly once we have killed them, and marvel at their sheer presence, their perfect lines and muscular prowess, the smell of their coats and the raw power that is evident within. Yet this was short lived, goldenballs was off in his chalet watching dvd's again!

This was the turning point of the hunt, my job was done and although I felt a huge weight off my shoulders it was not to last as the master in chief came in about an hour later with a long sour face, jumping off the vehicle ushering us away from the crowd around the lion, motioning his GB clan inwards. The client had duffed his shot at the leopard, a great big beast, it was his fault, I told him to keep still and wait, the cameraman had it on film, but we had a wounded cat on our hands - the replacements simply looked at each other, we both knew what this meant and headed to bed early that night with solemn dispositions, it was our duty to help with this mess!

Wounded leopard are no fun, they don't provoke the same fear and sleeplessness that a wounded lion does but you always know that something interesting is going to happen. In my time as a PH I have had more bad luck with leopard than any other of the big 5 and I guess because I am so perplexed with leopard, it always ends up happening to me, a full on charge. So here I was in a situation I didn't create but would follow protocol and head in after the devil as a hired hand, hoping there would be no repeats from my past. When I was young, the first leopard I ever shot was with iron sights right at dusk, it was one of those guessing shots and I ended up wounding the cat. However with my step dad and uncle in tow the next morning we approached the bait and scene with great trepidation, we stopped the vehicle a kilometer away, snuck up on the bait and very slowly and gently followed the blood trail - the charge was instant, the leopard lay not 20 yards away and came at us with snarls and growls that remain with me to this day. It frightened the hell out of me but we all got a shot off and all ended well.

What transpired the next morning was one of the more comical things I have ever seen and I would have loved the cameras trained on us, the replacements that is, to capture the look on our faces as we arrived at the bait - because what followed can only be described as total chaos. The trackers pointed to the direction the leopard had fled and then without even trying to look for blood or follow a trail, master in chief with clients and GB's in tow marched into the bush, guns at the ready, trackers following close behind carrying spare loaded rifles. Off they went with their benellis in hand churning up the bush ahead of them in a line which resembled a driven European wing shoot! Seriously, for a moment we - the replacements - stood with our mouths agape at this, it was something I had never witnessed. So this is how the big boys follow up a leopard I thought, what nerves of steel and absolute trust in their own innate ability they must have, surely this is what sets them apart from us, the meeker subordinates who will never in their lives see the GB glory they receive.

As we located a spot of blood in the dry bush and took up our usual tracking position - it seemed uncanny at how our thinking fell into place - the replacements slowly headed after the leopard with a cacophony of sticks breaking and brush rustling all around us as the GB's and clients tried to 'kick-up' the cat. Our two trackers simply looked at us in bewildered silence and I had to grab mine by the shoulder and shake him out of his trance, we had to focus on the blood. After about an hour of tracking we heard a great wailing and whistling sound ahead of us - it seemed they had found the leopard - dead I hoped! Yet they were milling around a tree as we approached with none of the usual back clapping and 'your sure nailed him' kind of comments you usually hear when the cat is dead. He had spent the night in a Shepard's tree, with his blood, a very pale and insignificant color having dripped down the bark and onto the ground - they had heard a thud, a slight grunt and then nothing - this leopard was far from dead!

Again the line was formed and off they went again, this time through much thicker stuff, pushing through brush and ripping over grass in their haste as if this was a very troublesome and annoying situation, almost embarrassing and now their patience had worn thin with this leopard and they were not to be toyed with. The cat had totally done an about turn, faking in one direction then angling back

towards the bait almost parallel to his original trail - this was his safe haven, this thick section of kasaka was his territory and he didn't want to leave the area, he would simply keep out of sight. Another hour followed, slow painstaking work, our forearms tense and knotted from holding our shotguns at the ready, our backs aching from walking at half mast most of the time, our legs ripped by the thorn brush we had to tear through - (we wore shorts, typical bloody Zambian PH's I heard one of the GB's saying!) By this time it seemed the clients were either tired of marching off through the bush in every direction or they had cottoned on to our method which I must admit did look a whole lot more sensible and constructive - we were on the blood trail although it was almost invisible. Here our trackers saved the day and as a muzungu (white man) I can only marvel at how these guys pick up sign in such a tense situation - a hair stuck to a thorn branch, grass laying at a different direction to the wind, a pinhead speck of blood and all this armed with a rudimentary Axe!

The client saw the leopard first, sneaking off half crouched and pushed through us to get a shot, snapping our heads and guns up, he fired twice from his double shotgun - we were too slow and the leopard grunted a few times as the shots went off. I realized that we were in for a long day as the leopard had shown no sign of a crippling injury, bounding off easily and with visible strength. There was no blood from the two shots, he had missed, yet one thing stuck out in my mind during those split seconds I had glimpsed the cat - it was massive, a tawny beast with his back so dark it was almost black and a head and neck resembling some of those Springbok rugby players you see battling it out with the All Blacks or the Wallaby's! Leopard this large are seldom the highly fractious cats we often deal with in a fury filled all out charge, the younger ones who want quick revenge and come at you at first sight. This leopard would be more calculated and reserved, he'd try and get away from us (he'd done it twice which was warning enough) and then failing that he would choose the terms of confrontation, he would wait, even if it meant all day until the conditions were perfect to defend himself. I guess with all the commotion that was going on in his territory there was some confusion on his part, the enemy were numerous and they were everywhere, noisy pestilent humans which always meant danger.

Master in chief was still charging off into the bush with his entourage although I could see a nervous glint in their eyes, a realization that this was not really their ideal way to glory, hell it could mean getting bitten. We had bumped the leopard twice in 2 hours so it meant we were likely to engage again soon; the sun was hot on our backs, the sweat dripped down our faces as we clung seriously to our shotguns with aching hands - we walked ahead of the trackers about 10 feet apart, they were crouched following the sign and the client stood behind them looking over their backs and behind him was the cameraman. This was our formation and before long it had expanded with the other GB's flanking us on both sides walking in unison to our step by step progress. It was a great formation, there were more guns than the usual solitary one I was used to, but just adding a little more nervousness to my mind as I had a loaded gun behind me in a situation where common sense is easily lost. We inched forward like this for another half an hour or so and in all this time master in chief kept forging his way ahead of us and around us, always within earshot yet once more than 15 yards off, he was lost in the thickets and the crashing and fumbling was all we heard until he appeared again with a clearly agitated look on his face.

Ahead of us there was an anthill, a term used to describe a very large termite mound upon which trees and grass have grown and I remember thinking to myself mark that spot it was a great hiding place - until I looked closer and saw master in chief sitting on top of it scanning the area with his binelli resting on his knees. We were progressing towards the anthill and it seemed that if he was there already then the leopard would have either jumped him or fled so I took no further notice except periodically glancing up and seeing him still sitting there red faced. Good I thought, stay there, you'll stop scaring the leopard into moving and hopefully we'd have a confrontation - something I didn't relish but found

myself hoping for, we were all hot and tired and the hours of heightened alertness under a baking sun was getting a bit much - we also had enough firepower to see him dispatched. I looked up one final time and chief GB was gone and I thought to myself we'll never find this cat, he's one step ahead of us with all this commotion going on.

Two shots fired suddenly, about a second apart, then a familiar sound, that of a leopard growling in a series of spitting coughs and snarls as if rebuking someone, telling them off, and then the inevitable - help me, help me, help me - and shouting from the trackers. It took us all about 5 seconds to react, we stood in the silent heat with new levels of adrenalin pumping through us simply listening and eventually it was the cameraman who took the lead hoping to catch this on film. Upon our approach we saw his trackers standing around him holding him in a sitting position, they had seen it happen being behind him and had managed to chase the leopard off. Master in chief sat clutching his neck tightly with both hands as if trying to strangle himself, concerned his jugular had been severed and gurgled something to us - his shirt was ripped open, his gun lay off to one side and his neck, shoulders and throat glistened with blood. In his eyes there was a seething anger not driven by shock but rather embarrassment and as we helped him release his grip on his neck and take stock of the mostly superficial wounds, this became more evident. He cursed at the leopard, his trackers and himself shaking his head in disbelief, mumbling things like, he ambushed me, didn't see him coming, I got two shots into him and wrestled him on the ground, he's got to be dead!

In truth, none of this really happened - he didn't get two shots into him, they hit the ground ahead as the leopard crashed into him from behind. He had seen master in chief sitting on the anthill and lay motionless, he held his ground sensing a chance as the noisy human started towards him alone. What was most remarkable is that master in chief walked past this leopard crouched less than 10 yards off on bare ground, using the shade of a tree as cover, he held his ground as I had predicted and once past him, waited a few seconds more before launching his silent attack landing full onto his back knocking him down and biting the neck and shoulders repeatedly with a series of scolding grunts and growls. The first bite was perfect and how it didn't do more damage is only a mystery, it should have snapped his neck considering the size and power of this cat. Then with the approaching screams of the trackers the leopard must have cut short his warning and bolted off, all this within the 5 seconds it took us to get moving.

In my mind this leopard had no intention of doing harm, he was an old cat and not wounded that badly, we were merely a nuisance to him and we kept at it which aggravated his temperament, like a swarm of mopani flies constantly in his eyes that he wanted to swat. He waited and when he saw one of us alone he knew the chance to give a final warning was here. I liken the incident to one of those cartoon scenes where you see the protective bulldog grab Sylvester by the neck and pound away at his face until the message has come across! It was merely a warning, a reminder to us all, and thankfully no one walked away with serious physical injuries. Rather the injuries suffered were very deep and shameful wounds in that part of a man where his hunting supremacy resides, that most prized aspect of the goldenballs fraternity - their egos!

There are various versions of this story, some from those who were not there, who were never part of the hunt itself, who never set foot in the country - this is my version, as close to true to what I can remember - BUT then again you have to remember that I am just a common garden variety PH, one with a beat up old cruiser and single bolt action as a back up gun, one who is a little outdated in methods and ethics and one who is definitely not part of that which all modern day PH's yearn towards - the realm of the goldenballs - Africa's real men of steel!

You may wonder what happened to the leopard - the replacements followed him for the the rest of the day - the GB's had to look after master in chief, much to their delight. We never found him but a week later his unmistakable tracks crossed the road near the bait - he had survived, he was back in his territory and had also learned a valuable lesson. One which would probably see him dying of old age rather than from a bullet - he was never likely to feed off a bait again!