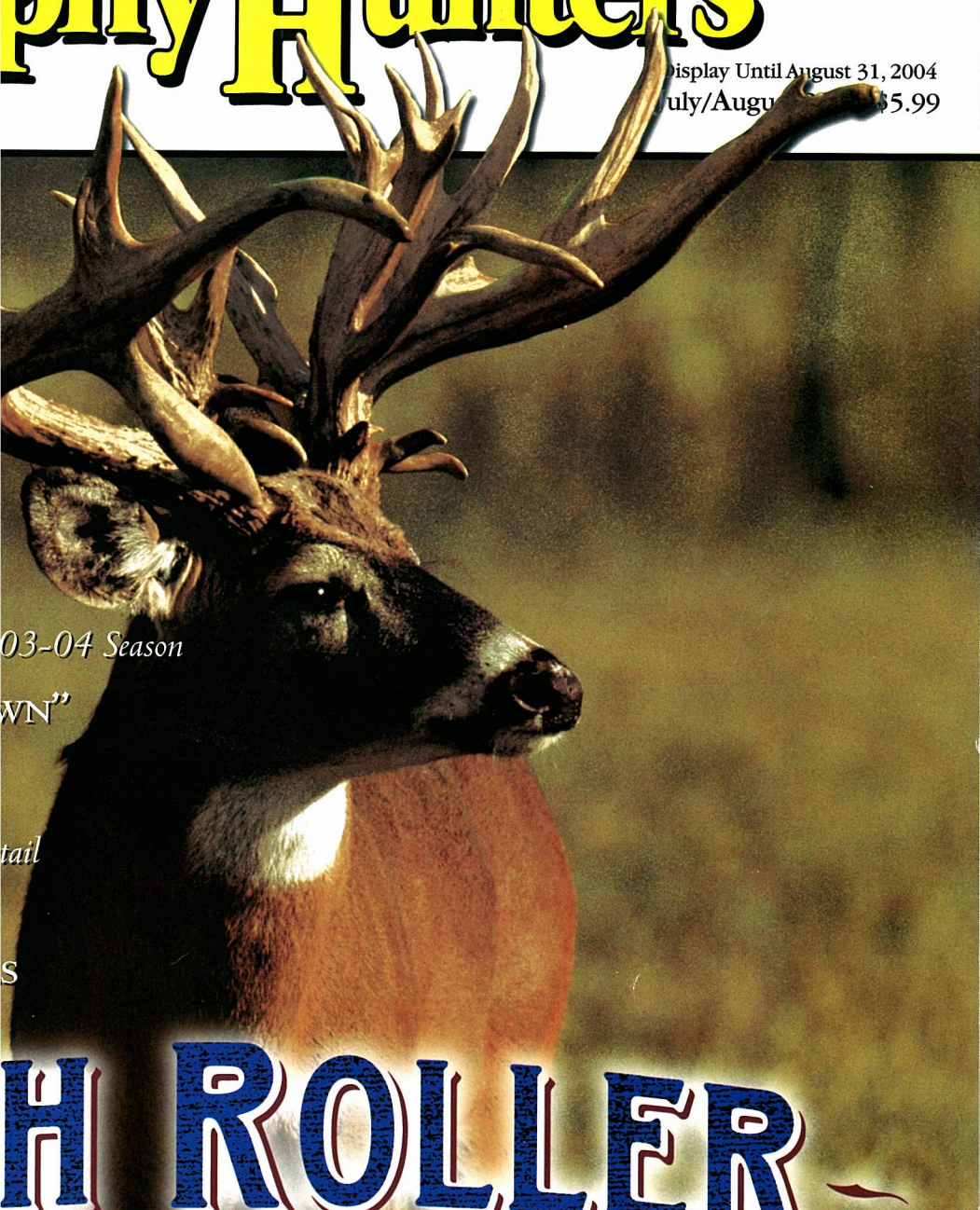




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SPIRALS OF SMOKE

A KUDU HUNT NORTH OF THE TROPIC OF CAPRICORN
BY STEVE RAMIREZ

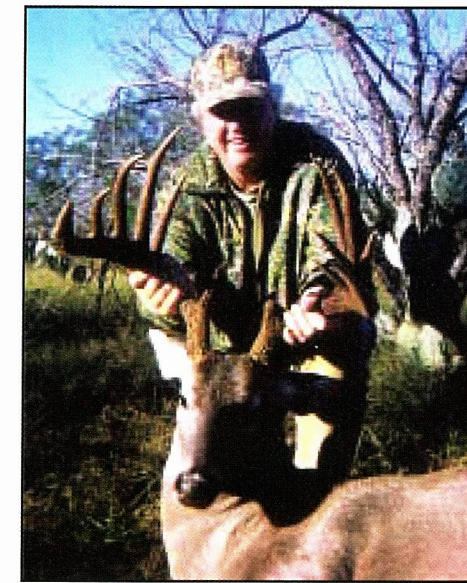
It was not yet first light. The thick black walls of the old German house shielded me from the biting cold of the Namibian morning, but the silence and the darkness were still my companions. I lit a candle and followed its halo of dim, golden light to the small, white sink to enjoy a cold water shave.

The candlelight flickered reflections of a middle-aged man who was for the first time in a long time following his heart instead of his obligations. I had seen his face before; at times he seemed a stranger, his tired and worried eyes looking back at me and asking

the most difficult questions. Now, in the warm glow of the corner near the sink, he looked new. Now, he looked back at me with eyes of peace and purpose.

I heard Zumele moving about in the darkness of the garage and then the rattle of the generator began to rise. The single yellow light bulb that was suspended from the center of our ceiling began to glow a little at first, then more and more until the room filled with light and the spell of the morning was broken. Today we would hunt kudu.

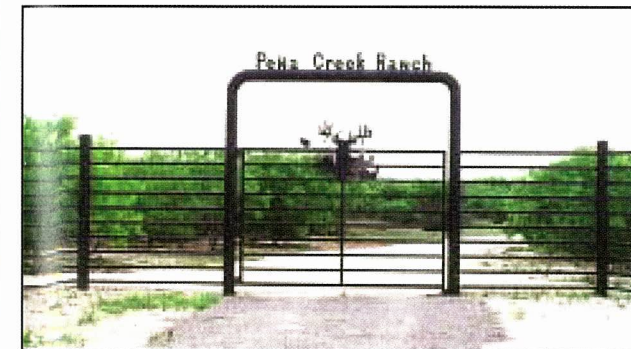
[CONTINUED ON PAGE 82]



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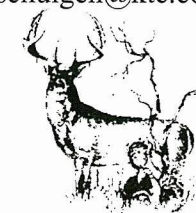


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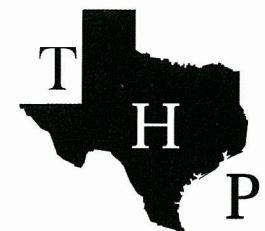
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SPIRALS OF SMOKE

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 80]

I was hunting with "Sir Frederick the Great" Burchell of Burchell Safaris. Fred is a man of good humor and kind heart. A true South African, he is a man who has lived through hard times and at times has had to be a hard man. He is a man of faith and family, and now he is also my friend.

Earlier in the week we had hunted on his 90,000-acre ranch in southern Namibia between Keetsmanshoop and the Kalahari Desert. We had it all to ourselves if you didn't count the Nama trackers and skinners or the 2,000 springbok, or the kudu, gemsbok, zebra, hartebeest and steenbok.

The landscape was wide open and dramatic. The few quiver trees were golden as they grew amongst the rock kopjes that were made up of perfectly squared stones, stacked one upon the other, naturally in an unnatural manner. This was the semi-desert veldt where game was taken at a fast run or at long distances, but now we were north of the Tropic of Capricorn where the hills were steep and the kudu bulls disappear like spirals of smoke from the evening fire.

The north ranch consisted of 35,000 acres of steep kloofs and hills covered in mopane and thorn bush. Beyond the hills was a vast mopane flat that extended north toward Etosha Park some 30 miles away. Although there are fences on the ranch, it is not fully fenced. Elephants and the occasional lion pride wander onto the ranch, and leopards are plentiful among the kloofs.

The dry, golden grass outlined the red, dirt track. The sun was beginning to edge the hills with light, but the stars and the cold and the darkness were clinging to the western horizon. Tears streamed down my face as the hunting vehicle moved steadily forward and the frigid wind numbed my hands. Piet the Bushman and Franz the Herero trackers were both wearing gloves and woolen caps. They knew better, but made no comment as they watched me shiver.

In short order we stopped at a water hole, dismounted and began to walk along the edge of a deep ravine known locally as Leopard Kloof. As we moved slowly and silently between the mopane trees, I could see the tracks and traces of

kudu, gemsbok and mountain zebra in the fine, red dust between the sharp, grey stones.

Soon, we came upon two kudu cows that were feeding on dried mopane leaves that had fallen among the stones. We watched them in silence until the snort of a hidden duiker sent the kudu plunging into the wind through the thorny bush and away from us.

This was one of many days that we spent walking through thorn-covered mopane, up and down the rocky hillsides in the morning cold and midday heat, past the discarded skins of cobras and the padded prints of leopards. With each new day there was hope. Kudu slipped in and out of the shadows and, in the end, I'm sure we saw more than 100 of them, some 30 of which were bulls.

The bulls always seemed to be at least a quarter-mile away and running over the far hilltop. Each time they would materialize it would only be a brief and distant glimpse of grey hide and spiral horns, and then they would vanish, leaving me wondering if I had really seen them at all.

I wanted this to be a challenge. The value of a kudu comes at least in part from the difficulty in obtaining it. Now with only three days left of a two-week safari, I was beginning to doubt if I would ever be able to get close enough, for long enough, to get the shot off.

As we moved further along the canyon's edge, Franz heard the sound of rocks falling and hooves tapping on the cliff face below. "Kudu," he whispered. Fred set up the bipod and I readied myself for the shot. The sound of hooves on rock grew steadily from the other side of the kloof until the sound transformed itself into the vision of four beautiful mountain zebra.

Very near the top, a big stallion stopped, turned and looked directly at me, presenting a broadside shot. I really wanted a mountain zebra, but Franz felt that there were kudu nearby, so I took a pass on the shot. I watched as he

followed the others over the ridgetop.

Just as I began to regret my decision to pass on the zebra, we heard more movement from below. This time the sound came from farther across the chasm. Four kudu bulls appeared in the distance, one of which was big and slate blue with horns that swept back some 55 or more inches.

Fred's instructions sounded urgent, even as a whisper. I lined up for the shot. It was a very long way across the canyon to the old blue bull. It was too far. Fred measured it at over 500 yards. My heart sank as I watched them top the cliff face and vanish into the mopane.

Franz spoke in excited Afrikaans and Fred pointed and nodded his head saying, "Ja, ja, goot!"

"What's the verdict?" I asked in English.

Franz said that he thought they might hold up in the mopane thicket along the hilltop. "I think we might have a good chance at the old bull if we cross down the kloof and over the next ridge," Fred said.

"Sounds good to me. He looked like a big one."

"Ja, he'll go 55 or better and the other three were all over 50."

We started down the cliff trying hard not to make noise or fall to our death. Crossing the valley, we began the climb up the hillside toward the ridgeline where we hoped to catch up with the massive old bull.

Moving almost as if a military formation, we inched our way across the ridgeline through the mopane and around the termite mounds, straining our eyes for a glimpse of kudu. A fork-tailed drongo began flitting from branch to branch, moving every few seconds to keep up with our pace. To all of our amazement, he followed our every movement for hundreds of yards. I tried to focus on the bush in front of me and not on the nosy little bird.

A flash of movement caught my eye; I raised my rifle and called out, "kudu," just as a darkened, dreamlike image with spiraling black horns sweeping over its back became a part of the shadows beneath the mopane. I would see many

more bulls that morning, always either too young or too far away, but I would never see that old blue bull again.


After our lunch break at camp, we drove out to a new area that Fred felt might have promise for us. I was tired and sore and a bit perplexed as to how we always seemed to be going uphill. Once again we began our climb over rocks that were so sharp that the mere act of touching them would leave you cut and bleeding.

A Damara Dik Dik scampered behind


some thorn bush. It was a ram and Fred said that it was a very nice one. Standing broadside at a mere 30 yards away, it was a very easy shot, but just as in the case of the mountain zebra, I had to remind myself that I was hunting kudu, not Dik Dik.

At the top of the very first hill we stopped for a moment to look back. A black eagle sat perched on a dead tree on the edge of a gray, rocky ridge. Turning

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 86]



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The author, left, watches as his guide listens to advice from one of the trackers.

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SPIRALS OF SMOKE

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 83]

away from our back path, we crested the hill and stepped out onto another expanse of razor rock. From the rocky ledge we could see for miles down into the next valley. A large mopane flat stretched out before us. We stopped and glassed the valley below.

Fred and Franz began conferring once again in Afrikaans while Piet stood quietly smiling. I looked over toward my wife and our eyes met. I think we were both beginning to doubt that our kudu would ever appear. Fred turned to me.

"This valley is often full of gemsbok and sometimes we see kudu along the kloof," he whispered. "We'll just have a look across the kloof and then work our way around the ridge to the valley below."

I looked out over the expansive mopane plains that drifted off to the north from the hills where we stood. I found myself trying desperately to burn

it all into my memory. I began to relive the feel of the red Kalahari dust in my hair, the hartebeests running at top speed with their heads up and their tails streaming in the wind, the taste of springbok liver and deep red wine that we enjoyed together near the fire and under the stars, the thorns that streaked my arms red, but made me feel good to be truly alive and even the pain in my legs from miles of walking, always up the steep hillsides.

Africa has been a part of me for so very long. Some 18 years ago, Alice and I where married amongst the rain forest of the Ivory Coast. We have climbed its sandy desert dunes and sipped coffee as the early morning sun reflected off Kilimanjaro. The problem with this deep love affair with the mother continent is each time I'm with her, I wonder if this will be the last time.

We began to move across the rock face toward the deep kloof at the head of the

valley. Fred and the trackers were just ahead of me, and Alice followed a short way behind. As if in a dream, I looked up from the rock to see four kudu bulls stand up from the thorn brush not 40 yards away. I raised my rifle and called out the word "kudu" toward Fred. As fast as they appeared, they had vanished into the brush and down the steep kloof face. "Come on," Fred hollered.

We began to run up the razor rock that we were navigating with great care only moments before. In that moment in time there was no pain from the cuts of the rocks and thorns. The trackers, Alice and even Fred ceased to exist. Only the kudu I could no longer see, my rifle and the stark, brushy, far away side of the kloof remained, and it was then that I saw them again. The four bulls ran in a single column up the far side of the kloof and into the setting sun.

"Take the second one from the top," Fred commanded.

With the squeeze of the trigger, my .300 WSM slammed back into me and I lost them in my view. The sun was shining directly into the scope from the top of the ridge that they were quickly reaching.

"You missed!"

"I couldn't have. I was on him!"

And then they were gone.

We stood there on the rock in silence as I struggled with the difference between what I thought I had done and what seemed at that moment to have happened. Piet began to speak excitedly in Xhosa and Afrikaans and started slapping me on the back.

"Piet says that you hit him well. He says we'll find him just inside the treeline."

"I felt sure that I was on him when the shot went off," I said, not truly sure if I believed what I was saying.

"Well, you may have him," Fred replied. The sun was right in our eyes and I didn't see the hit, but these Bushmen have astonishing eyes. "Let's go have a look."

We moved carefully now over the

rocky ledge toward the opposite side of the kloof. As we started up through the trees near the place where we last saw the kudu, I strained my eyes and said a silent prayer. Fred climbed a large rock some 20 yards up from me, stopped and turned, raising his arms he shouted, "Thank you Lord! You've got him!"

He pointed uphill toward a patch of dry grass beneath the mopane. A spiral horn rose from the grass as if it were a spirit rising up to drift among the treetops. My kudu was lying in the rocks and grass. I sat beside him and stroked his mane, touched his horns and just tried to take it all in.

"Look," Fred said while pointing toward the old bull's eyes. "The Bushmen say that a kudu will always cry when he dies."

I looked over to see tears running from his large black eyes. I felt that mixture of joy and sadness that only a true hunter knows. I thanked him for his life, and promised to honor him throughout mine.

As Franz and Piet began the caping process, we began the long walk down into the valley, through the mopane flats toward the dirt track where Fred's wife and best friend Laura would be waiting for us with the hunting vehicle.

While we sat in the dark under the stars sipping Cokes and waiting for the trackers to bring the cape and horns through the blackness, we began to sing. We celebrated our hard work and good fortune. We counted our blessings as we each made up a new verse to our kudu hunting song. We soaked up the moment in time and the friendship that comes between people of like spirit. And I knew then, as I know now, that I'm the luckiest man on earth. ♪

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