

Hunting on a SA Game Ranch: A View from Central Europe

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A view from the Rooiberge on Bankfontein of Hartebeeskop (on the left) and Spitskop (on the right).



Freek, Hendrik and Alfie, the Bankfontein hunting team, with the author next to his Rowland Ward-class black wildebeest (photographed on the Bankfontein shooting range, as the author forgot to take his camera to the veldt)



A typical, black-faced Eastern Cape kudu next to a RW-class southern mountain reed buck, hunted on the same morning by the author

We travelled some 800 kilometres from the Cape of Good Hope, through winelands, small romantic villages and a semi-desert, called the Karoo. As we travelled, cattle and sheep were replaced by springbok and ostrich. Finally, we came to a gate made of woven wire. My host, Peter Flack said, "Welcome to Bankfontein! We have arrived."

I had met him in 2007 at the annual World Hunting Convention of the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) in Belgrade. Peter is a reserved and pleasant gentleman and, after we had shortly, but quite controversially, debated the South African policy of 'fenced hunting' I gladly accepted his invitation to hunt on his property in the Karoo. To me as a typical central European hunter, fair chase means that the hunted game is not behind a fence but free-ranging.

I had postponed the undertaking twice to some time during 'the following year' and when I proposed doing so again in October 2009, Peter laconically replied, "Well, it's either now or never – because on the 1st of December the farm will be sold." I immediately booked a flight for the following month.

Nature restored

The game ranch consists of 3 500 hectares. Peter bought the farm 20 years ago when it was an overgrazed and run-down wilderness. Up to then, an Afrikaans family had tried to farm with merino sheep and angora goats. They were unsuccessful and went bankrupt. For over a year Peter used the entire workforce just to clear the land of refuse and agricultural scrap. Step by step, he stopped erosion, prepared bush tracks, and erected game fencing.

At that point, the farm was as good as devoid of any game. A couple of duiker or reed buck might possibly have survived in the mountains. No longer threatened by poison, bat-eared fox, jackal and caracal had returned on their own. Peter had bought and released some big game on the farm. Today, the optimal carrying capacity has been reached and about 1 200 animals roam the ranch. The most important of these are the rare Cape mountain zebras, of which only some 1 100 exist in South Africa. Of these, Peter can call 51 his own.

The spoor of the once nearly-extinct white-tailed gnu, as well as kudu, eland, hartebeest, brindled gnu, impala, blesbok, springbok and waterbuck can all be seen. In addition Peter has gemsbok although, biologically, these are a somewhat doubtful case. If they were ever found in this region of the Eastern Cape, then this must have been the southern extremity of their territory.

The Kafue lechwe, by comparison, pose an awkward case. They obviously live quite happily in the thick vegetation along the small river, quite oblivious to Nature Conservation's disapproval of their existence. "I know," Peter admitted, "that for the restoration of the original fauna, I should remove them, but I'm not a purist." The lechwe arrived in the Karoo, courtesy of the National Zoological Gardens in Pretoria, nearly 50 years ago.

It is obvious that the vegetation has recovered. There are 16 reference points on the farm where scientists annually examine the development of the flora. Game counts are conducted every year by helicopter or on foot. This then indicates the number of animals and which species should be shot or caught and removed. The best way to use such a farm economically is hunting tourism. After all, each year about 16 000 tourists visit this country in order to hunt and they leave about US\$215 million behind. The local hunters, who mostly hunt for meat, annually generate a robust turnover of some US\$600 million.

On the morning after my arrival, I sighted in the borrowed rifle at the shooting range behind the farmhouse. There were targets catering for ranges up to 300 yards. When I observed the flat grasslands at the foot of the range of hills on the ranch, I understood that long shots were going to be the order of the day.

By 16:00 the gleaming November sun had still not lost any of its strength but it was time for the first tracking drive. A farm worker with extensive experience in hunting accompanied me. Freek is fluent in Xhosa and Afrikaans but only speak broken English. He knows the farm like the back of his hand. At first, I let him set the pace with me following. I soon realised that he was not a bad hunter at all, if a little careless. It was also soon apparent that the game, except for a herd of impala, which always grazed near the farm buildings, were not 'on familiar terms' with

humans. Despite the low hunting pressure in this open terrain, flight distances were long and the game obviously had no suicidal inclinations.

White-tailed gnu – a typical South African, and ...

A black gnu and a kudu were my main hunting goals. On the farm there were brindled as well as white-tailed wildebeest. According to the latest research, the brindled gnu is strictly a grazer of the tree savannahs. It was originally most probably found only in the northern regions of South Africa. However, the white-tailed gnu with its thick coat is better equipped to withstand extreme temperatures of heat and cold. As a grass and leaf browser, it is better adapted to a typical Karoo habitat. Both types of wildebeest inhabit open terrain, each in their own small herds.

The mature bulls, however, are range bound and are either solitary or found with other bulls. I quickly saw that there were some strong and old trophy black wildebeest bulls among them. Freek had an excellent eye for trophy quality and I knew that the animals could not vanish over the mountains on a hunting ranch but needed to remain there. Why then should I shoot the first bull? "I would rather wait for a 'big one'," I tried explaining to Freek, and in my best Afrikaans, "*Groot, groot!*" My first stalks proved to be unsuccessful. We observed from afar many a herd for right-sized bulls. Finally, I spotted two bulls, which were grazing near an elevation. We took a closer look.

Time and time again, I am amused by the awkwardly comical figure of the *Connochaetes* gnu, with its well-built front end and twisted horns. It would be impossible for me to describe off-hand this amazing product of evolution or to even draw the animal.

After moving in a very wide arc, we used the ground elevation as cover. We still had to

crawl, however. I was more than delighted, therefore, that, apart from all the other hunting accoutrements Peter had lent me, he had included a couple of knee protectors. For the first time in my life I made use of such things, but with all the stones they came as a relief.

"Actually, we do not produce anything here but stones," my host jokingly had said. When I looked around me, I understood what he meant.

I fear that the government is dreaming when it plans to expropriate game ranches and give this type of land to 'formerly disadvantaged citizens' for agriculture. It would be grossly unfair to expect new settlers to be productive on such unsuitable land and at the same time not destroy their environment. The game industry is the only way in which one could possibly use this barren landscape without damaging it.

At some point, I raised myself carefully over the elevation, found a rock to serve as a rest, padded it somewhat with my cap and gauged the distance. The bull was slowly moving away from me, in a diagonal direction, at 250 to 260 metres. I could waste no more time shilly-shallying. The wind might not be too strong but the chance of a still sure shot would soon be gone. And this bull was a fine representative of its kind. I realised this myself, even without Freek at my side. He could hardly suppress his enthusiasm in urging me to shoot. Then it was a matter of no rash movements but to slowly squeeze the trigger, which had so carefully been set by the rifle-maker. The gnu briefly lifted its head once, but remained standing side on. The bullet was on its way. And then I



The author at last light with his two Kafue lechwe

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heard the impact! The bull took ten paces and, in a cloud of dust, spun about on its legs, its head and white tail tuft a blur of movement until, suddenly, it collapsed.

... Kafue lechwe – an exotic

The following morning, we went out looking for kudu. Instead, we came upon two Kafue lechwe. I might have stated that I did not want to hunt these animals because they were foreign to that region, but now that the temptation was there I gave in too quickly. I would surely not have the opportunity in future to hunt this swamp antelope again. One of the bucks was mature and we started the stalk.

They soon became aware of our presence, however, consequently joining and mingling with a small herd. At times I had the buck in my sights but either a twig obscured my vision or other animals in the herd would be endangered by my shot. We followed the herd in this way for about two kilometres until a deeply eroded, dried-out, small riverbed offered us cover and made it possible for us to approach the herd quickly without being detected by any of the grazing animals. This was no easy task. It was impossible to take aim and shoot while lying prone. Everywhere there was too much vegetation in the way.

“The 7mm is not fond of grass,” Peter had emphasised to me. But then, all of a sudden, the two buck began moving towards me at a distance of 50, then 40 metres. Now, everything needed to happen quickly. I knelt down and, within moments, the shot at the bigger of the bucks was on its way. The buck leapt into the air and headed for a narrow but dense strip of bush where it vanished. I saw the head, estimated the contour and simply aimed and shot at the centre. The buck went down. The rest of the herd was in full flight up the mountain. From the corner of my eye, I saw that a weaker buck was limping and moving awkwardly. Something had gone wrong. At 130 meters, the buck raised its head and I shot it offhand, killing it quickly in the distance.

I was not happy about this. Peter

proved to be a charming host and had been very generous regarding the hunt, but he also came across as being very precise, I would almost like to say ‘finicky’, regarding the manner in which game was approached and shot. He expected me to shoot only mature, huntable game and preferably animals that were already losing condition. This was not the case here and no provision had been made for two buck. A bullet fragment had hit the rear right leg above the hoof. The animal might have recovered from this. I had no idea whether this was a direct hit or even a stray fragment, or a ricochet off one of the many stones. Regarding the bigger picture, this did not matter then.

“Peter was not amused,” one would say in English. On the other hand, he was practical enough and, after sufficient explanation about the mishap by my Xhosa guide, he closed the subject with, “These things happen during a hunt. The important thing is that a wounded animal has been killed quickly and cleanly.”

Game ranching – a success story ...

That evening, we had more than enough time over a bottle of Western Cape pinotage to continue our argument, begun in Belgrade, about fenced hunting. There is no doubt that game ranchers in South Africa, through private initiative and by making use of their own funding, have achieved what neither nature conservation departments, nor foreign aid with its umpteen millions, coupled with public assistance and donations could manage to achieve north of the Limpopo River. Instead of almost extinct game populations, here there is game in abundance. Land and flora have recovered because game animals – contrary to domesticated cattle – can survive on marginal land and do not destroy nature. Furthermore, the ranchers have shown that with the game industry one can earn money and generate jobs.

In South Africa, a once unimaginable abundance of game with massive migrations was brought to the edge of extinction. The early settlers shot in inordinate fashion entire herds for meat and

skins, for fun or to clear space for their cattle. The Anglo Boer War, two world wars and economic depressions did the rest. Game was seen as a financial liability. When a farm was sold during the sixties, it was positive if one could state that there was *geen wild* – no game – on the property, which could be handed over as game-free. The last quagga in the wild was shot around 1830 and other species were on the same path to extinction. In 1960, there were three game farms in South Africa and hunting tourism was unknown. This changed in the seventies, when hunting was prohibited in Kenya and, temporarily, also in Tanzania. Professional hunters and hunting guests started looking towards the south. To date, about 9 600 game farms have been established encompassing 21 million hectares, nearly three times the size of all the national parks and state-protected areas of the country, taken as a whole.

In the past hundred years, there has never been as much game as there is today. The white rhino increased from about 30 to over 18 000 animals, the Cape Mountain zebra from 11 to 1 200, the bontebok from 19 to over 5 000 and the white-tailed gnu from 34 to about 26 000. The mountain zebra is still on Appendix 1 of the Cites list and is especially well protected. If this were not the case, by now there might be a much larger number of these zebras. Presently, the authorities are tightening the regulations, resulting in some farmers losing their desire to breed game animals. If one compares the development in Kenya, where hunting has been prohibited for over thirty years and where, during the same period, the game population has decreased by three quarters, one does not need to be a mathematician to reach a conclusion ...

... small mistakes apart

Of course, there are a couple of things one can criticise. Many of today's game farmers are farmers and not hunters, their aim being returns and not fair-chase sport. Biodiversity is of no importance to them. When they were farming agriculturally, the ecologists left them alone. So, why change now? They buy and sell game and find nothing wrong with the fact that they might buy a splendid kudu at an auction two weeks before the animal is shot. ‘Put and take’, in other words to put in and take out again, is what this is called.

A herd of blesbok towards the white beacon on Bankfontein. These animals do particularly well in this part of the Karoo and it is more difficult to shoot one that does not make The Book than one that does.



And the breeding process is pursued, as is being done by farmers all over the world. The result is animal species that are not found in the wild: black impala, crossbreeds of kudu and eland, which carry the beautiful name Kulan, wildebeest hybrids and 'yellow' hartebeest. One will always find somebody who is willing to pay a substantial amount of money to hunt such outlandish creatures.

The smaller the fenced area, the easier it is to shoot the expensively acquired or bred game. 'Canned shooting' or killing animals in the smallest of enclosures has become synonymous with the dark side of the South African hunting industry and the story has spread around the world. Whichever way the fight between some lion breeders and the authorities may end, it is not about hunting. Neither is it about conservation of the natural. The issue is rather a purely ethical one regarding the protection of animal rights. It lies within the same ambit as criticism of bull-fighting or dancing bears. Canned shooting does not harm biodiversity but has much to do with cruelty to animals. It is good that the government wants to establish legal clarity on this matter. But it would be even better if Wildlife Ranching SA were to take on and solve these problems themselves. On the scale of importance, all these problems may be sidelined in the face of the great



A classic Cape mountain zebra herd consisting of a stallion in front, two female sisters and their offspring. As the female always chooses her mate it is a fatal mistake to shoot the stallion, as she may never take another one. Old barren females should be the trophy of choice for discerning hunters.



A good RW-class southern mountain reedbuck ram amongst his harem on Bankfontein. Note how the horn tips rise above the ears before curving forward – always the sign of a good trophy.

success of the South African game and hunting industry. Generally speaking, we from central Europe do not have the right to judge. Should all the deer horns from the hunting brothels in Austria or Bulgaria light up, many a German living-room would be exceedingly well lit at night.

It all depends

When Peter said goodbye to me at the door of his farmhouse the following morning, he asked whether, after my impressions, I then saw hunting on a fenced game ranch as 'fair chase' or not. "It all depends," I answered. "Not necessarily, but it could be genuine hunting, as the last days have proven." At Bankfontein the game have a fair chance and

my hunting was definitely 'good fair-chase sport'.

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