

GRAY GHOSTS OF THE UMKOMAAS

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HUNTING FREE-RANGE KUDU HAS A FAMILIAR FEEL.

AS THE SUN was setting on our fifth day of hunting with zero sightings of a mature bull, I began to come to grips with the looming truth that most likely I would be going home empty-handed. But I was OK with that. We had grinded from sunup to sundown, glassed until ocular migraines set in, and wore out our boot leather for five solid days. Despite the valiant effort put forth, sometimes it's just not meant to be.

Then, a lone cow fed into the clearing over 1,000 yards below us, followed by another, and then another. We intently watched the harem for several minutes when, out of nowhere, the massive coal black horns of an

ancient old bull materialized from the shoulder-high grass. One look through the spotting scope was all it took. There was no doubt he was a shooter and the first and only mature bull we had seen in five days.

Game on!

This scenario is all too familiar when hunting big game across the West. However, I was a long way from home, halfway across the world to be exact, pursuing the elusive gray ghost of South Africa's Umkomaas Valley: the southern greater kudu. Despite being removed from my hunting roots, attempting to outsmart these cagey, free-ranging kudu bulls shared many parallels with hunting elk back home.

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When many people envision Africa, they see vast open plains teeming with various varieties of wildlife. My mind will always see the steep, densely vegetated, mountain-type terrain of the Umkomaas Valley, nestled in the heart of South Africa's Kwa-Zulu-Natal province. This region is renowned for producing spectacular free-ranging, spiral-horned antelope, including Cape bushbuck, nyala, and southern greater kudu.

On previous safaris I had taken a solid 15-inch bushbuck and a stunning 30-inch nyala, but a wise African Professional Hunter (PH) once told me, "Take what the bush offers you." I was ready for whatever opportunity were to arise, but my heart was set on a mature kudu bull. With that goal in mind, Dave Aardnesgard, my PH and owner of Nkonka Safaris, and I began our search.

TIME BEHIND THE GLASS

The agonizing hours spent behind our binoculars, dissecting every little nook and cranny for some form of life, were enough to test anyone's mental fortitude. Similar to glassing for mule deer, we were looking for the flick of a tail, a twitch of an ear, or a piece of horn gleaming in the sun. In the few brief instances we did catch animals in the open it was as if they knew they were seen and quickly vanished into the dense thickets.

The constant searching for these elusive ungulates reminded me of expert levels of "Where's Waldo?" except that here Waldo could see, smell, and blend into his surroundings like a ghost. Every now and again we would catch a glimpse of kudu cows and, on one occasion, a yearling bull. Other than that, our first two days of hunting were rather uneventful.

Over the course of the next four days, we took a break from hunting spiral horns and drove several hours east to a different part of the country to hunt Cape buffalo. An incredible adventure, but a story for another time.

Anxious to continue our search for a mature kudu bull, we made our way back to the Umkomaas Valley. Days seven and eight followed the same pattern as the first two days of kudu hunting—with the exception that we saw a three- or four-year-old bull that I elected to pass on. The evening of day seven brought some excitement when we made a play on a whopper of a bushbuck ram only to have him give us the slip as darkness set in.

TILL THE BITTER END

I have never understood why, but you often hear about hunters filling their tags in the last hour of the last day of their hunts. It's easy to fall into self-pity during a tough hunt



The kudu moved easily through the thick cover and disappeared as if they were ghosts.



The landscape was thick with brush and stretched for miles. A good pair of binoculars was a necessity.



When game is taken, the meat is given to local authorities and distributed among the locals of the area.



and talk yourself out of hunting hard or seeing what's over the next ridge. No matter where you are hunting or what you find yourself hunting, force yourself to push through to the bitter end. The reward is always worth the sacrifice.

Day nine began like the others: a small breakfast, a steaming cup of milo, and a growing sense of urgency. The forecast was calling for a downpour the following day, likely making this our final day of hunting.

Early that morning, Ruan Pretorius—my PH and a good friend—and I hiked to a vantage point that overlooked a steep river gorge. It was an exquisite morning in the African bush, and we saw plenty of impala, nyala, warthog, kudu cows, and a scurrying troop of baboons. But there was no sign of the gray ghosts we were pursuing.

As the day progressed, I could sense the pressure Ruan was putting on himself, knowing we were coming down to the wire. As a guide myself, I respected the fact that he wanted to see me have success as much as, if not more than, I did. I assured Ruan all was well and that if it was meant to be then it would be. If we were unsuccessful, we would sleep well knowing we had given it our all.

With an hour of light left, we reached a high glassing knob that overlooked the Umkomaas River. The valley floor was peppered with ancient acacia trees mixed throughout the shoulder-high thatch grass. Herds of impala and sounders of warthogs paraded around the barren pan in the middle of the valley while several immature nyala rams cautiously slipped out of the heavy cover for an evening snack.

"Kudu," whispered Ruan. Two cows and a calf fed out of the tall grass below us. With the rut primarily over, we watched the cows with hopeless optimism that a bull might be nearby. Several minutes passed uneventfully. Then, out of nowhere, the massive, deep curled kudu bull I had long dreamed of appeared.

With the sun setting we knew we had a half-hour or less to make it back to the truck, drive around to the other side of the valley, and make a mad dash to get within shooting range. It would be a long shot, but we had nothing to lose. It was all or nothing this late in the game.

TAKE WHAT IS GIVEN

Whether you're hunting screaming bull elk in the Idaho backcountry or free-ranging kudu in Africa, opportunities at big mature animals do not come along very often. When they do, we must make the most of them and capitalize on the opportunity. This skill is tough to teach, and it's typically learned through years of trial and error. We must prepare ourselves physically and mentally to push when needed as well as to be proficient with our weapon of choice. Many hunters have let the buck or bull of their dreams slip



T TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Strasser's straight-pull, switch-barrel RS14 Evolution rifle chambered in .270 Win. Mag. and topped with a Zeiss Conquest V6 3-18X50 scope performed flawlessly on my kudu as well as on a zebra and black wildebeest. Nosler's 130-grain E-Tip solid monolithic bullet took down each of these animals quickly and cleanly, with the bullet being recovered under the skin on the offside shoulder on both the kudu and the zebra.

My binocular of choice was Zeiss's Victory 8X42. The glass was pristine, but I felt a little under-equipped with the 8X binocular in big country like the Umkomaas Valley. Next time, I'll have Zeiss's Victory 10X42 strapped to my chest.

Strasser RS14 Evolution Rifle
strasser-usa.com

Nosler E-Tip
nosler.com

Zeiss Victory Binocular
zeiss.com

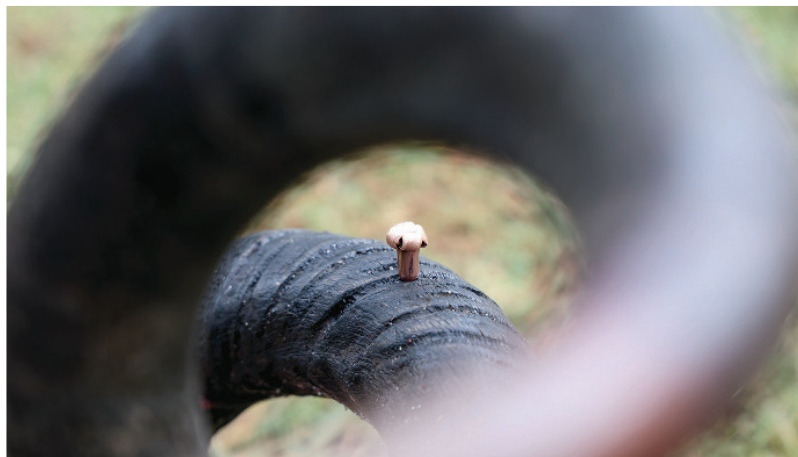
Kudu bulls are wily and smart. Pursuing them can be a challenge very similar to that of chasing elk in the West.



through their fingertips due to their inability to execute a shot in the moment of truth.

The wind was not ideal, but we had no choice but to push our luck. As we moved closer, we realized we wouldn't be able to see them until we were inside 100 yards. Knowing they could blow out at any moment, I chambered a round and held my Strasser RS14 Evolution at the ready. A cow and the calf were first to make their presence known, no more than 50 yards in front of us. We froze. The bull had to be close, but we couldn't see him. After several intense minutes, the cow's head snapped up, her ears pinned our direction. That's when I caught a quick glimpse of the bull's horns through the thick grass and the bull looking intently in our direction.

A sinking feeling from the gentle breeze tickling the back of my neck told me the jig was up. As the kudu erupted out of the thatch grass, I instinctively shouldered my rifle, swung my crosshairs through the front chest of the fleeing bull, and squeezed through the trigger. As I came back into the scope after the recoil, the bull was nowhere to be seen. Judging by the enthusiastic expletives coming from Ruan, the bull was down. At



Nosler's 130-grain E-tip bullet mushroomed perfectly and was recovered in the bull's offside shoulder.

a mere 35 yards, the Nosler 130-grain E-tip had centered the bull's shoulders sending him end over end to his final resting place.

I felt humbled and elated as we walked up on this magnificent bull. Five days of grueling hunting resulted in one fleeting opportunity at the only mature bull we had seen. To have it all come together made for a hunt I will never forget. 🍀