



JUNE 12th – JULY 1st 2007

ZIMBABWE DANGEROUS GAME SAFARI

HUNT #59

HUNTERS: Paul and Jane Plante, Steve and Katy Merlin and Larry Merlin

A huge amount of preparation went into planning this trip. It was booked a full two years in advance to ensure we had the best area and PH's. Since I had taken numerous buffalo with a rifle in the past, I decided to try to take a Cape buffalo with a bow plus any other dangerous game I could get a tag for.

The first thing to get in order was to obtain a bow that was capable of flinging a very heavy arrow at high speeds and do so accurately. As usual, the folks at **BowTech** out did themselves by building me a custom 90 pound plus **Tribute**. I have to say it is the best bow I have ever shot. Right out of the box with minimum sighting in, it shot perfectly with the heaviest arrows I could build and literally almost no vibration. I started with **Carbon Express Terminator Hunters** arrows then added a two grain per inch weight tube into them which are no longer manufactured by anyone I am told. Then a trip to Lowe's yielded me a wooden dowel that fit perfectly inside. Finally, tipped with 150 grain **NAP Razorcap Broadheads**, the arrows weighed in at 690 grains and were chronographed at 257 feet per second. The penetration into the targets was unbelievable. The sighting in as I mentioned was simple, especially with the fabulous new **APEX ATOMIC** 4 pin site. If you haven't tried any of the above products, do yourself a favor and go try them. You will certainly be impressed.

Just as I finally had the perfect set up dialed in and ready to go, I began to hear rumblings of new laws being passed in many of the African countries regarding hunting dangerous game with archery equipment regardless of poundage. Before, it was required that the bow and arrow be capable of producing 90 pounds of kinetic energy to be legal. Now, South Africa made it illegal to hunt any dangerous game (i.e. large cats and any thick skinned game which includes Elephants, Cape buffalo's, Hippos, Rhinos and Crocs) illegal with bow and arrow unless a special permit was issued a reliable source told me from SA. I was then told that Zimbabwe was thought to have made it illegal also on government concessions but nobody knew for sure. After all the preparations and work to

say I was disappointed was an understatement. Numerous calls to everyone I could contact, yielded me no new or better information. I was simply told to bring the archery equipment and everything should work out so I continued to practice. You should have seen the looks of other vacationers on the beach in Florida when I was there with my family for our yearly week long beach stint, a couple of weeks before the trip. I pulled out my target against the dunes of sand at 40 yards and punched two dozen holes into it each day. I honestly had people ask me what that “contraption” was. They had never seen a modern compound bow before, what a sheltered life some folks live.

The day finally came when we left on our long highly anticipated flight to Africa. We were fully packed with my superb and finely tuned **BowTech** as well as my seasoned, tried and true, trustworthy .416 Weatherby Magnum which has bailed me out of serious situations in the past. After a short flight from Columbia to D.C. and then waiting out a thunder storm for 2 hours in the plane, we actually left for the 15 hours in the air to Jo’Burg, South Africa. As usual that sounds too easy because the problem was that I almost wasn’t allowed onto the plane to Africa since my passport didn’t have two empty consecutive visa pages. That caused a great deal of anxiety till I was told that if they let me go I would have to stay in the airport and not go into Jo’burg as planned. So while everyone else went to a nice hotel and dinner, I meandered in the airport till our expected next am 9 o’clock flight that was delayed till 11:45. That short two hour flight to Bulawayo, Zimbabwe was followed by three hours of driving north to the buffalo area after all the appropriate documents for the firearms were filled out in customs. The next issue was that the original plan the whole time was to hunt leopard first since it was the priority species and now it had been changed without anyone telling us. Also, Steve did not get one of his bags so he and Katy stayed behind to hopefully retrieve it the next day and then follow us up to the camp which was below Hwange National Park. The bag didn’t arrive so they came up anyway with the promise that it would be sent up here within two days.

After arriving into camp, Larry with his PH Graham, Jane and I with our PH Terry unpacked and had a nice dinner around 9 PM and then went to bed for the early rise at 6 AM on Friday June 15th. The night was cool around the high 40’s but after breakfast and quickly sighting in the rifles, the temperature was rapidly rising into the mid 70’s by mid day. The plan was for Larry and his PH to go off into one direction and for us to go in another looking to cut a set of fresh buffalo tracks that we could follow. Next problem was that Larry had planned to use Steve’s gun to hunt buffalo with but all the shells were in the lost bag so Larry borrowed a rifle from my PH.

After all that was settled, we took off in high hopes. Unfortunately, the area had very little game in it. With minimum amounts of water, the amount of game was extremely sparse and made for some very long stretches of driving without seeing a thing. We did, over the length of the day, see around two dozen animals with ¼ of them being Steenboks and Duikers. We did find one herd of buffalo tracks that were over a day old. But we couldn’t find the whereabouts of the herd so after dark we headed home and I was a bit dejected because this is certainly different than the last four times I had hunted buffalo. There was never a shortage of them to be found.

Steve did arrive with his PH Dion but without his bag and began to inform me that the leopard camp plans had also been changed to some extent and that my camp was some 80 miles from his which is certainly not what we had discussed with John when we booked the hunt. This also caused yet another problem, which was our flights because we would be eight or more hours away from Victoria Falls and that was where we were told to make our departures from. After dinner and a short time around the fire, we all went to bed and I did so with some apprehension that things were not going as planned although it could all work out but that was to be seen.

Saturday, June 16th, we awoke at 6 AM to a fifty degree morning. After a nice breakfast we took off for the distant water hole and the trackers quickly found the spoor of the small band of buffalo that drank that very night. We parked the Land Rover and set out on foot for almost five solid hours tracking and sneaking in on the wary herd. The wind was terrible by swirling constantly but we still managed to get in on them a few times even at 40 yards but couldn't find a mature bull before they caught our scent and spooked off. So we pulled out at 1 PM and went back to the Rover for lunch and a needed break under a large Mopany tree. The afternoon found us trying to track down the herd that had split off from the original animals but they had gone to far and by 5:15 PM we were no where near finding them so we took off for the camp. We walked a solid 8 hours today but Jane was able to experience first hand the uncanny and unexplainable ability of the native trackers to follow these buffalo where ever they went. Larry had a similar day to ours but Steve and Katy saw literally 600 buffalo in seven different herds just coming to a water hole. They never tracked anything and too think we were worried about Katy and how much she had to have walked that day since they didn't make it back to camp till two hours past dark. Steve did shoot a big bossed bull twice in a large herd on an open plains area but didn't recover it since it joined back with the herd and seemingly walked off without notice. The plan is for all of us to go back there in the AM and recover the bull and then hunt the other herds. Hopefully, we can fill our tags and go for the Hippo's which are awaiting us.

Sunday, June 17th Father's Day, we awoke at the same time and headed out early to the place where Steve had shot the buffalo. We quickly found a female that had been errantly shot on Steve's second shot and the Hyena's had found it during the night and ravenously fed. We formed a grid pattern and went into the thick brush looking for the now obviously wounded buffalo but found nothing at all so we gave up. We took off and started tracking a herd and went all the way to the boundary and didn't find them so we returned to the vehicle. We decided to build a blind at the water hole after having some lunch and sitting there till dark to see if any of the herds of buffalo's returned. During lunch we had giraffe, warthogs, sable, kudu and bush pigs come in much to everyone's delight. At 4 PM, Larry, Graham and I settled into the blind and watched the Sable play till a huge Hyena came in again and I dusted him at 150 yards. I had been looking for a large hyena for years to no avail but had a fine specimen now. No buffalo came in so on the way to look at the hyena right before dark another one started in and Larry shot at him 4 times at 300 yards but missed dejectedly. After a few pictures and loading the rather odoriferous animal into the truck we made our way back to camp over the next hour. A

nice dinner, drinks and a phone call to Dad ended the evening but not before we found out that Steve had whacked a huge baboon and was very happy. Bed and a plan to hunt buffalo again tomorrow on day four of the hunt was the agenda in the AM.

Monday, June 18th, we awoke again at 6 AM and headed out after quick breakfast. Rapidly driving the perimeter roads surrounding the first two water holes didn't gain us a lot of buffalo sign we were desperately wanting so we headed for the last water hole which was a long way away. Before reaching it on one of the boundary roads we came across three lion tracks, one of which was a large male. They seemed to be walking down the road so we paid little attention to them unknowing what was to happen soon enough. A few miles later, we found a very large fresh crossing where a herd had recently moved through. After parking the Land Cruiser, all of us including the two game scouts set out on their tracks. It wasn't long till we found the same lion tracks right behind the herd. They were now stalking the same herd as us. On three different occasions the lions charged the herd and ran them deeper and further into the thick bush. It made the tracking easy but the distance became long. I guess the lions finally gave up and decided to rest a while under a large shade producing canopy tree. We literally walked up to within 15 yards of the lions before they knew we were there. They surprised us to as we quickly backtracked to give them escape room. After they departed, we pursued onwards on the buffalo tracks and immediately ran into two bull elephants that were in our way. Now we had to wait for them to leave so we wouldn't draw their attention and either get charged or spook them towards the buffalo herd. As the elephants meandered away, the tracking resumed and we literally walked unknowingly right into the middle of the sleeping buffalo herd within a half of a mile. The tracks they had left right till the very end had been at a fast pace so we were in hot pursuit and the herd must have just decided all of a sudden to stop right there and laid down for a rest.

Right there in front of Terry and I was a mature bull sleeping 15 yards away facing the opposite direction. A laying down shot on any animal is risky and I almost took it knowing that the .416 was well capable of getting that degree of penetration but the bull had no idea we were present. We estimated him at 36 inches wide with a heavy sealed boss and I certainly would be happy with him. I told Terry that I would prefer that he be on his feet but Terry was correct when he told me that any noise that the bull would hear, he would interpret as the lions returning and would immediately charge out of there so I would have to be ready. He threw a stick some distance to his right and he was up and bolting in that same direction in a split second. I fired instantly behind his right shoulder and he spun away in full stride which allowed me to break his hip and then spine him as he charged threw the brush away. I quickly reloaded and circled him at put two more through his shoulder and he was done. This was all done in well less then one minute. We were all elated. What a hunt with lions, elephants and a great buffalo after walking 6 or 7 miles pursuing a herd of buffalo that was being pursued by a pride of lions. Jane enjoyed the whole thing and was amazed at what goes into getting a trophy like this. After all, it is the adventure of the hunt not really the taking of the trophy that makes the experience. So after the high fives and the picture taking, it was 4 miles by GPS back to get the cruiser. After arriving, we drove to the other end of the block where it was a mile through the

brush to get to where we left him. Jane then witnessed how you load a nearly one ton animal into the back of a Land Cruiser which is a spectacle in and of itself.

A long and happy ride home ended up with us finding out that Larry had taken a very nice buffalo also and had a tremendous hunt as well. A well deserved shower, dinner and drinks was next to follow then a needed rest. It was off to Hippo camp in the AM to hopefully join Steve and Katy while Larry went to the plains game area which is also the leopard area.

Tuesday, June 19th, we arrived into the Hippo camp on the end of Lake Kariba by 2 PM. I was finally in the famed Zambezi valley. What a change in terrain from where we had just come from. So after a quick lunch and relaxing a bit, we went to a close by pool that contained a pod of hippos. We watched them to dark to see if they were going to come out but a local villager said they had already been out a few hours earlier and wouldn't come out again till well after dark. Nether the less, it was the first time Jane or I had ever seen hippos in the water in such quantity. The amazing thing is that despite the heat and lack of fresh water nobody and I mean nobody will even consider going into the water because of the crocs and hippos. As they said, you might as well put a gun to your head and play Russian roulette. Steve and Katy returned that evening from their hunt but did not get a hippo so we are all going in the AM and we hoped we would be successful.

Wednesday, June 20th, the sixth day of the hunt found us up at 6 AM with a one hour drive to the hunting grounds. The two trucks split up with Steve and Katy going one direction and us in the other after picking up the two required tribal scouts. Steve quickly anchored a very nice bull by mid morning while we spent the whole day going back and forth to three still areas off of the Zambezi river trying unsuccessfully to get close enough to a pod for a shot. The highlight of the day was seeing the mass of villagers that showed up after Steve took his hippo to get a scrap of meat. There was nearly 200 of them and the mayhem that resulted was unbelievable. There were axes and knives flying in all directions while others scampered off with whatever they could grab. All that was left was literally a blood spot and that was all. I am glad we got it on video so everyone back home can see for themselves what the meat we provide means to these natives. Anyway, we went back to camp and had a nice dinner with the plan made for us to go back out in the morning while Steve and Katy were to leave to join Larry.

Thursday, June 21st, day number seven, we left for the hippo hunting areas on the tribal land by 7 AM and arrived at the site Steve shot his hippo by 8 AM. We quickly determined that they were not in the same spot and were just making their way to the patch of tall grass and weeds to rest. So we left Brian behind with a radio to watch the area for us while we went to first area we visited the day before. After a short 15 minute drive, we arrived and proceeded on foot across the grasslands surrounding the shorelines to a hill which overlooked the lagoon the hippos were in the day before. Jane found them first and Terry immediately said that one that was staying up was a big bull so we circled backwards around the hill top and stalked in along a fence line which kept us out of site.

After closing the distance to a little more than 100 yards, I found an opening in the wooden staked fence which allowed me to lay prone and obtain a secure rest for my .416. The bull never moved as I drew a bead on his brain tight in front of the ear. I looked for Terry to give me the final go ahead and when he softly nudged me, I fired and the shot felt perfect. It was 9 AM. The water erupted into a huge boil but neither his head nor his vitals ever surfaced for another shot. I had immediately gotten up and found a good rest on one of the stakes and kept vigilance through the scope but he never surfaced again. All we saw for the next few minutes was a small wandering trail of bubbles which gradually got smaller and finally dissipated.

Now the wait began and the time crept by slowly. After the first 20 minutes, all the other hippos left. Then by 30 minutes, I put the gun down as he was not coming up again. Everyone was relatively confident that he had died and was down below. The opinions averaged that it would take an hour or so for him to float to the surface. Also by this time the bush telegraph had gone out and villagers from distant areas began to arrive in small groups to await the meat distribution. How they knew there was a dead hippo is beyond me as there was no one to be seen when we arrived. By the time 60 minutes had gone by a little worry set in and we rehearsed what had happened and the same conclusion that he was dead was reiterated. At 90 minutes, Terry sent one of the villagers out in a small dingy to look around and probe the bottom but it was quickly evident that it was deeper than everyone realized since they couldn't hit the bottom with the oars so they returned. It was then that I started praying for help because now there was 150 plus villagers waiting for their first piece of meat in long time and the last thing they needed was a very angry wounded hippo in their midst especially since the village was a isolated fishing camp. A sense of security came over me and I knew then that it would all turn out OK. But by the time two hours had gone by I was beginning to worry just a little as was Terry. He decided to go get a cup of tea and the hippo popped up. The tracker found it first and pointed it out. I was elated, jumping up and down on the top of the land cruiser and the whole crowd began to cheer as if they had just won the lottery.

Terry and I got into the dingy with some villagers and went out, tied a rope around it and paddled it back to shore where the vehicle took over the job of dragging it out with a mass of villagers helping to move the 6000 pound animal. It turned out to be a huge male with fantastic teeth. The chief came in and brought in the skinners while keeping the whole crowd in a nice orderly fashion unlike what occurred when Steve took his hippo. After the picture taking session, the 12 skinners made short work of the hippo and loaded the feet, four huge panels of skin and the head into the back of the cruiser. They then processed the meat and placed onto a bed of branches and leaves and then into an equal ration for everyone there. I have never seen such gratitude in the face of people as was on theirs. We waived good bye while they all thanked us and we left for home with a truck full of hippo. We were back home by 3 PM, cleaned up, packed up and organized the skinners here to start the processing and salting of this trophy. A nice dinner and bed as the plan was to leave by 6 AM for the leopard camp 7 hours away. What a fantastic day, excitement followed by uncertainty followed by doubt and despair then a by a renewed faith with a final fulfillment of jubilation and celebration and all of this in less than 2 ½ hours.

Friday, June 22nd, day eight of the hunt, found us driving the 8 hours to the new camp in Marula which is two hours south of Bulawayo. We met up with Larry, Steve and Katy and heard of Larry's success so far and was then informed that in the AM we were traveling yet another 3 ½ hours further south to another area where the leopard were hopefully active. They had been baited for the last two weeks but the staff had no way of communicating it to George my new PH for this leg of the safari. Terry and Maxwell, the tracker, said good bye and headed home not long after we arrived to the Hill Top camp which is appropriately named. The view is excellent but the game we saw was sparse that evening. Dinner, drinks by the fire and bed were in order for the change again in the morning.

Saturday, June 23rd, day nine, we left by 7 AM for the leopard camp on the Shashi river that is the border between southern Zimbabwe and Botswana. George had a team there that had been baiting it for us for the last two weeks so hopes were high. It took us three hours along a dirt road to reach it. Unfortunately, other than cattle and donkey there is very little other living mammals there. Very little wildlife exists there with the exception of large leopards. The area though is the quintessential leopard environment with many river beds surrounded by many kopies. The whole area is a huge communal land parcel of which George has the hunting rights too. It is probably 50 miles wide and 30 miles deep and has not been hunted before for cats except for the one George took last year.

After arriving, we found out that one of the baits near camp had been hit twice in the last four days by a big tom so we rested till 4 PM and headed for the blind after a nice dinner. Jane elected to stay behind and wished me luck. We sat the whole night in the little hidden tent as the temperatures plummeted as George said they would. From 4 PM till 6 AM, we laid in the tent awaiting our guest. He did arrive but never showed up at the bait. He circled the area throughout the night roaring intermittently and ended up near us at first light somewhere up in the nearby kopie. Although it was cold, we were comfortable in our blankets and mattresses and it was fun being able to hear all the activity at the bait via the microphone that George had rigged to the nearby tree. One of our visitors was surely a bushpig, which is a trophy I certainly wanted but had to pass because of the nearby leopard.

Sunday, June 24th, the tenth day, we made it back to camp by 7 AM, had a bite and headed out to check all the other baits but nothing else had been hit. It didn't matter anyway, the plan was to go back to the same blind since the cat was close and hadn't fed for two nights and three days so he had to be hungry or at least we hoped. We were back into the blind by four and stayed till 6 AM without any sign of the tom. We heard him once at 4 AM a good piece off. It was clear to us he was obviously chasing a female in heat. The night was as cold and went by quickly but it was also very quiet as nothing came in at all. We tore down the blind, went back for breakfast and headed out to check the other baits. Only one other had been hit and it was by a female leopard. Another area held a big track from tom so we hung a bait there in hopes he would come in. Washington and Farty, the trackers, found the tracks of the male we had been hunting and he was headed back to our area with a female companion so George sent them back to

re-bait and drag that spot as well as put the blind back up while we had lunch and showered. Jane also got to briefly experience the pleasant odor of rotting meat in the back of the cruiser as we traveled the roads. The decision was made to stick it out to the end and get the leopard. We had the opportunity to go after an elephant that had wandered in but proceeded on with the leopard activities.

4 PM, June 25th, the eleventh day, we headed back out to the same blind with a small but positive expectation. To no avail though as not a single creature came in except a hyena. We did hear the tom three times throughout the night in the area as the previous nights. So after yet another 14 hours in the blind, we came home on the morning of June 26th, Jane's birthday and the twelfth day of the hunt. With only three nights left to hunt, we had breakfast and headed out to check the rest of the baits but none were hit. I missed a rushed shot off the truck at a zebra which George wanted for additional bait but I didn't miss a huge male baboon though on the way back when Farty and I went after him. A 220 plus yard shot and a very close finishing shot put him in the salt and gave us yet another bait which we quickly hung. Back to camp, a nice lunch and dinner and a relaxing evening ended the day and I finally got the much needed sleep in a cot and stayed warm in the process.

June 27th Wednesday, the thirteenth day of the hunt was a repeat of the previous with the exception that we didn't hunt baboon. No baits were hit by male leopards but we had three hit by females so we spent another day hanging out and relaxing.

June 28th, Thursday the final day of the hunt revealed no male sign at the six baits just the same females with kittens. So we packed up and drove the three hours back to the Hill Top camp below Bulawayo. We stayed the night there before leaving in the AM on June 29th which was supposed to be our last day of hunting but was lost due to poor planning by the outfitter and consultant. We did find out Steve had taken a Leopard and all was well with Larry also. The plan was to be driven by mini-van back to Vic Falls and stay overnight there before catching our flights out on June 30th to Jo'Burg and back home. All in all it was a good trip, I collected three new species and had great experiences with each of those hunts, new friends were made and two new hunts have been arranged for 2009. Luckily, my trip back for leopard will be free since it was agreed upon in the original contract.

