

Pieter Engelbrecht (left) with Gerard Kirkham and his nyala trophy.



woodland and is home to world-class nyala and red duiker. Other species present are impala, kudu, bushbuck, grey duiker, warthog, baboons, reedbuck, blue wildebeest, giraffe and more. The place also teems with numerous bird and small game species such as mon-goose, vervet monkeys, genets and bushbabies. What really excited me though is the presence of wild leopard on the property. Just a month or two before our arrival a leopard entering the bush camp was caught on a trail camera which Mark had set up.

I joined my friend and PH Pieter Engelbrecht who brought an Australian couple, Gerard Kirkham and his partner Abby-Gail. Gerard would be hunting nyala and perhaps one or two other animals while I was after impala and warthog. The hunting/bush camp consists of a thatched open-air lapa (cooking/dining area) with a small wooden deck and a fire pit, three tents, a flush toilet and a shower. There is no electricity, you either cook over an open fire or with gas. Hot water for the shower comes from a donkey (a big drum filled with water and heated by fire). Mark supplies a gas stove, gas fridge and freezer, cutlery, crockery, pots and pans and bedding. Built on the banks of a seasonal river, the camp not only overlooks lush bushveld but also a small watering hole which is regularly frequented by game. It is so close to the lapa that you can take beautiful close-ups of animals from the comfort of your deck-chair with nothing more than say, a 300mm zoom lens.

Due to the dense vegetation basically all shooting is done at ranges under 100m, so you can leave the fast magnums at home. In the more open areas distances might stretch a little but even then you won't have to shoot beyond 150m. Mark's shooting range is in the same river that runs past the camp but at least two kilometres, as the crow flies, from the lapa. The maximum shooting distance available is approximately 75m. I sighted my rifle to hit dead on at 100m before leaving for the farm, then fired a couple of shots at 50m and noted where the bullets printed at that distance. At Mark's range I fired two shots at 60m off my shooting sticks to verify my 7x57's zero and then was ready to go.

Pieter, the Australians and Mark's Zulu farm manager, Johan Gumbi, who acted as guide, hunted the south-eastern side of the farm while I started at the shooting range and hunted along the river back towards camp. The river makes a big loop so I would cover a distance of about 3.5km. Soon after setting off, I once again realised just how different bushveld hunting is from hunting in more open terrain. Locating animals in open veld is much easier, especially where there are hills from which you can sit and glass

hundreds of hectares in comfort. Once game has been spotted, the hunter then checks the wind direction and plans his stalk. Of course it's not always that simple...

When hunting dense bushveld, the first thing a hunter needs to do is check the wind direction. Because visibility is limited you have no idea where the game is and therefore have to hunt against the wind right from the start. In open terrain animals rely heavily on their eyes to spot danger but in bushveld their senses of smell and hearing become more important.

About 15 minutes into my hunt a red duiker startled me when it suddenly emerged from deep shadow and darted away. Because I was still fairly close to the shooting range and did not expect to encounter game, I had fallen into the trap of moving too fast and subsequently making more noise than I should. Hunting against the wind is not enough. When the animals can't smell or see the hunter, they rely on their ears. Hunters often forget just how well game can hear. They easily distinguish between human and animal footfalls, and clothes brushing against branches and leaves that crackle under foot will instantly alert them.

I slowed right down to a start-and-stop mode – I'd take a few cautious steps, then stop to scan the bush for anything between say, 15 seconds and two minutes or so – and was soon rewarded. First a waterbuck crossed in front of me at about 30 paces, totally unaware of my presence, then I managed to sneak up on a trio of warthog and watch them for some minutes from about 15m until they moved off. About an hour later movement ahead and to my right caught my eye, a nyala bull. Moving slower than an arthritic snail I managed to close the distance between us to under 20 paces before taking out my pocket camera. As the bull fed past me at about 12 paces I clicked my tongue to stop him, then took his picture. If I was hunting nyala, I could have shot that bull several times. I'm sure there was an expression of surprise, maybe even indignation on his face (for getting caught out by a human) as he dashed off, and it brought a smile to my face.

I have often heard bushveld hunters complaining about having walked 20 to 30km on a particular day without getting a single shot at an animal. Well, that doesn't surprise me. Trying to cover even 20km per day on foot, means you have to walk quite fast, way too fast to move silently and stealthily enough to get within range of even the dumbest of animals. Moving very slowly through the bush can be tiring and some hunters find it boring. The secret is not to give up when there is no action within the first hour or so and if you do get tired, sit down and take a break.

At times I entered the riverbed and the deep shadows on the banks revealed more secrets as I wound my way towards camp – two red duiker, a kudu bull and a reedbuck ewe. In some places the riverbed was narrow enough to allow the branches of the trees on the banks to almost close over it like a canopy. As I walked I could not help but look up and notice several overhanging branches that would be perfect for a leopard to use as ambush spots. Was a leopard perhaps lurking somewhere in the shade where his coat, dappled with sunlight, blended in so perfectly with the Zululand bush that I'd walk right past him without noticing? Mark told me how, just a few weeks earlier, Johan and a hunting client almost rubbed noses with a big tom in this very same river. Sharing the hunting area with leopard and being warned that you might encounter one added flavour to my hunt.

Upon reaching the camp, I swung away from the river and about 30 minutes later heard an impala ram grunt somewhere