

The Leopards of Mlanje

by Christopher Bean.

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I lived in Africa for forty eight years and spent a large part of my leisure time in Nyasaland, Bechuanaland and Rhodesia as they were then, hunting and fishing. My stories and experiences were written mainly for my own benefit and that of my children - and any friends who can enjoy reading about hunting in those unenlightened and non-pc correct times. The stories are contained in my book, 'So Shoot Me'!, and the following is in the early part of the book.

It should be borne in mind that at the time of which I speak, in many areas of Africa there were still vast quantities of game and licences were very cheap by modern standards. The fact that the game has been decimated now is not as a result of depredations by legitimate hunters. It has been proved countless times that legitimate controlled hunting actually conserves game. The decimation of game in most parts of Africa is due without doubt to conflict between ever increasing numbers of black Africans and their consequent need for land, thus reducing the amount of natural bush available for game to live in, and their never ending need for meat. Not unnaturally, they have always seen game as a natural resource available to anyone to exploit for food to live.

I have seen many instances in which areas of originally thick with game, and now desolate, poorly cultivated 'farmed' lands, ruined by the Africans who need more and more land because they cannot make the land they do have properly productive.

I had a marvellous time, only ever once shot something which couldn't be eaten, caught many thousands of fish, most which were eaten and don't regret a minute of it. So shoot me!



My first posting was to an area called Mlanje (now Mulanje) and the administrative buildings and housing was at the foot of the mountain. Mlanje is actually a massive mountain range some thirty miles long and something like ten thousand feet high at its peak. The area was very heavily populated by Africans, mainly

from the Alomwe tribe and was an intensive tea growing area, thus providing plenty of work for the Africans.

There was little game, other than small buck, on the plains around the foot of the mountain as a result there being so many Africans who years before had trapped and poached most of the naturally occurring game out of existence for food.

The mountain itself however was a prolific storehouse of many kinds of game, buck, mainly bushbuck, duiker, steenbuck and klipspringer, baboons, green monkeys, leopard, hyena and wild pig to name the main ones. There was also an abundance of snakes of many kinds.

My first experience of hunting of any kind was uninformed, hair-raising and dangerous to say the very least.

The monkeys, mainly vervet, were pretty little animals to watch, they were always in our gardens stealing fruit but they created no other problems. The baboon stayed more on the mountain but were a great pest in that they constantly raided the villagers' maize fields and in one night could wreck a field and destroy a family's entire stable diet for the next year. The wild pig, which lived mainly in deep river gorges, very inaccessible, also a deadly for maize fields. They were very dangerous animals to hunt being capable of killing a dog



being used to hunt them with ease. Baboon and pig were the main diet of the leopard and were also classified as vermin. Any villager killing either had to take the ears into the District Commissioner's office where they would be paid two shillings and sixpence and given an LG shot gun cartridge, shotguns being the means by which they killed the animals. Eventually the villagers would gain the upper hand and the pig and baboon numbers would decrease markedly. This then deprived the leopard of their main diet and they would start marauding in the villages looking for the occasional dog, to which they were very partial and loose goats and sheep. In fact, leopard will eat almost any other animal so nothing was safe.

The villagers would complain to the government about the number of leopard around and the damage they were doing and the government would declare leopard to be vermin and pay a bounty of two pounds ten shillings for any leopard skin brought into the boma. After a year or two of this, leopard numbers would be diminished and the baboon and pig would increase and become a nuisance again! So the whole cycle would be repeated every few years.

Most of the Europeans living in the Mlanje area had plenty of experiences with leopard, which of course are very beautiful animals. I think most people living in Mlanje saw a leopard every few weeks and it was not at all uncommon to come home from the club late at night and find one skulking around the garden in search of pickings, or on occasion even stretched out on the khonde admiring the view. The kitchen of most houses, having a wood burning stove, was a rondavel situated just outside the back door and this was the domain of the cook-boy. Again, not infrequently a cook-boy would be scared half out of his life by a leopard entering the kitchen whilst a meal was being prepared, looking for something to eat.

A leopard incidentally is not really a very big cat compared to a lion or tiger and will normally run about six feet six to seven feet in length from nose to the tip of its tail. A seven foot six leopard is a big animal. They will go to about one hundred and forty pounds for a big one. I mention this because it was not that unusual for an African, somewhere in Nyasaland each year, to kill a leopard with his bare hands in self defence. The technique, which is instinctive, was to turn sideways to a leopard when attacked, thus presenting the

thigh and hip to leopard which would usually grip the upper body with his front paws and teeth and rake the lower body of its victim with the rear legs in an attempt to disembowel it. The victim would try and get his hand down leopard's throat and choke it from the inside. Of course, if the victim had a spear or a knife in his hand at the time of the attack, his task was made somewhat easier. I may have made this sound a simple procedure but believe me, I have seen a leopard attack twice and the noise and activity is tremendous and ear splitting. A hundred and thirty or forty pounds of snarling spitting fury is terrifying and the reaction is purely instinctive as I have said.

During one of the periods when leopard were on the ascendance, the villagers from one village came into the police station to complain that during the night a leopard had entered a hut and taken a dog out from under a blanket also sheltering a child. Had the child been sleeping near the door instead of the dog, the leopard would have taken the child. They wanted action.

What followed was a virtual pantomime. A number of Europeans stationed in the boma armed themselves with variety of totally unsuitable weapons and set out to hunt leopard down. The villagers had tracked it to a small stand of trees not far from the village. I remember, this being my first hunt, I was very excited and not a little frightened and I carried a huge hunting knife on my belt, my police .38 Smith and Wesson and an issue .303 rifle. All utterly useless for leopard. A shotgun is the ideal weapon as one only gets a brief sighting usually, in thick bush and at close quarters. Sam Scott, the telephone engineer had a .22 pistol!! The Assistant District Commissioner had a shotgun and the agricultural officer had a .303 we loaned to him.

A tea-assistant named Peter de la Pasture, ex-Kenya and reputed to be also an ex-big game hunter had a double-barrelled shotgun. Off we went to the thicket in which the leopard was holed up and we lined up on one side, spread out about fifty yards apart. The villagers went in from the other side, beating drums and saucepans, to drive the leopard out. This they did but when it went between them and we never got a chance. This went on all day with the leopard evading us and about mid afternoon we had what we thought was an ideal situation with the leopard in bush alongside an unplanted maize field. The

villagers again went in from the far side and this time the leopard came out towards us. The noise it made was ear shattering and it ran down between furrows on the field so that all we could see was his big fluffed out tail sticking straight up in the air. I was on top of a huge rock on the edge of the field and could not get a shot. Just off the field in an open area stood Peter de la Pasture, accompanied by the African head clerk from his tea estate. The



leopard went straight for him and as it approached he let it have both barrels. Afterwards he swore he saw puffs of dust off the leopard's head where he had hit it but had he done so at that range he would have dropped it. We are convinced that in his haste, and fear, he missed at point blank range. On reaching him the leopard stopped, reared up and sank its teeth into his shoulder, gripping him front and rear chest with its front paws. It did not try to rake him but it did savage him ferociously for a few seconds and it was suggested after that this was because it was probably an old animal. Anyway, he was at its mercy having fired both barrels. The head clerk besides him was armed with a bow and sheaf of arrows held in his hand, again very unsuitable for hunting leopard. However with great bravery and quick thinking he beat the leopard about the head with the bunch of arrows causing it to abandon de la Pasture and make off into the nearest bush. De la Pasture appeared

severely wounded, bleeding profusely and we are all very shaken by the suddenness of the event, so we called off the hunt for the day and took de la Pasture to the local hospital. Amazingly, from such a brief encounter, albeit a very ferocious one, he had one hundred and forty-four puncture wounds in his shoulder, chest and back, either from bites or claws. A leopard's teeth are full of bacteria as are its claws and he had to have a drain fitted in every hole and they had to be kept open for about a week. He was of course now subject of fame and I remember, he wore the green shirt he had on at the time of the attack for about two weeks in the club without washing it. The holes and the blood were the cause of great excitement and he was very proud of them... The Head Clerk I am pleased to say received a B.E.M. for his bravery.

At this stage we realised we were ill equipped both with our armoury and our knowledge, to tackle this leopard so a phone call to the Dept. of Game in Blantyre to obtain the services of an experienced hunter the following day.

He was a tall lanky ranger named Ollie Carey and he arrived the following morning. The villagers had still tracked the leopard and knew where it was holed up again and out we went. I was amazed when we got out of our car to see that Ollie Carey had brought with him an Alsatian and a dachshund. He explained that leopard could always kill a dog, no matter how big, but two dogs together, of whatever size, would put a leopard to flight. The reason being that a leopard cannot stand being harried from two directions and will take to the nearest tree. The day followed much the pattern of the previous day. We would keep finding the leopard, chase it out but never managed to get a shot at it. An interesting point was that Ollie, being a tracker of some skill, showed us time and time again how when we had stopped to have a conference as to what to do, the leopard had circled round, back on its own tracks and had lain some twenty yards or so away from us whilst we have been gathered. About three in the afternoon, the leopard again broke cover went straight for one of the villagers in its path. As it passed him, it half reared up and swiped the left side of his face with one paw and carried on. The one blow, took off half the villager's face. Ear, eye and cheek. It carried on up the mountain and was never seen again. the villager was taken to the hospital where his wounds were treated, but he didn't recover and died.

And thus ended my first hunting foray in Africa .