

HUNTING AFRICA'S STRIPED HORSES

By Willem P Frost

It seems that DNA technology is now enabling taxonomists to get a better grip on the proper classification of all species and sub-species. Same is also true of zebras. The taxonomic classification has now been reviewed and it is generally accepted that what we always knew as "Burchell's zebra" is in fact Chapman's zebra – "*Equus quagga antiquorum*". Burchell's zebra is apparently extinct for almost 100 years now. Zebras are grouped into "*Mountain zebras*" and "*Plains zebras*". And then there is Grevy's zebra which is a highly endangered separate species found only in dry north-eastern parts of East Africa.

To summarize: zebras are now classified as follows:

MOUNTAIN ZEBRAS

Equus zebra zebra – Cape Mountain Zebra

Equus zebra hartmannae – Hartmann's Mountain Zebra

PLAINS ZEBRAS

Equus quagga antiquorum – Chapman's zebra

Equus quagga boehmi – Grant's zebra

Equus quagga crawshayi – Crawshay's zebra

Equus quagga selousi – Selous's zebra

Equus grevyi – Grevy's zebra

Equus quagga burchelli – Burchell's zebra extinct circa 1910

Equus quagga quagga – Cape quagga, extinct in the 19th century.

Most African outfitters still list "*Burchell's zebra*" on their pricelists. Readers can now tell them on good authority that Burchell's zebra became extinct in 1910. What the outfitter is probably referring to is the Plains zebra sub-specie known as Chapman's zebra - *Equus quagga antiquorum*. There are no mountain zebras in the Bushveld regions of South Africa, only Plains zebras. Some game ranches have however introduced mountain zebras in areas that are not regarded as within their historical natural distribution range.

The Cape Mountain Zebra is found only in the mountainous terrain in the Eastern and Western Cape, whilst the Hartmann Mountain Zebra's natural range is in the Northwestern Cape and Namibia.

Mountain zebras and Plains zebras can be distinguished as follows:

- ❖ Mountain zebras frequent mountainous terrain whilst plains zebras roam the open savannahs
- ❖ The ears of the Mountain zebra are larger
- ❖ Plains zebras usually have brown shadow stripes in between the usual black stripes
- ❖ The belly of the Mountain zebra has no stripes and is white whilst the stripes of the Plains zebra extend around the belly
- ❖ Only mountain zebras have a dewlap
- ❖ The insides of Plains zebra's legs are white; the Mountain zebra's legs have stripes right around
- ❖ Mountain zebras' stripes are closer together than is the case with Plains zebras
- ❖ Only Mountain zebras have a splash of orange just above the snout.

The rest of this discussion will focus on the Plains zebra.

Zebras do not carry horns and are thus not regarded as antelopes, nor are they measured for trophy purposes. They have only one toe (hence the classification in the order *Perrisodactyla*) and the track is thus similar to that of a horse.

Zebras are grazers with a preference for open bushveldt with a variety of short and medium high grasses. They are *bulk grazers* rather than *selective grazers*. Plains zebras are not found in deserts, mountains, forests or *sour-veldt*. They may occasionally take young leaves and in times of drought they will dig with the front hooves for roots and bulbs. They are water dependant and need to drink regularly. As a rule they will drink during the day, but once they have been disturbed by bowhunters in a blind at a waterhole they will come in at night.

It is not uncommon to find zebras with other species such as blue wildebeest, giraffe, eland, impala and even waterbuck. The purpose is self-defense: there is safety in more eyes, ears and noses to detect danger. When threatened they flee in single file, the stallion usually in the rear. The primary defense when chased by a predator is a most vicious kick with both hind legs. This can result in serious injury to the predator – even death. Mares can be extremely aggressive and they are known to bite viciously. Game capturers thus have to take care when capturing zebras – there are stories of game capturers and their staff running like Olympic athletes through the African bush with a zebra hot on their heels. I am however not aware of a zebra ever attacking a hunter.

Natural enemies are the larger predators, especially lion.

Zebras migrate in search of food, but this is no longer possible in South Africa. In Botswana there is an impressive annual migration between the Linyanti swamps and the Mababe Depression. The story of this migration is told in Derek and Beverly Joubert's spectacular film "*Patterns in the Grass*".

Zebras, otherwise known as "*Africa's striped horses*", can be extremely difficult to bow hunt, as many a hunter has found out. Their senses are superbly developed and they do not come in to a waterhole without checking out the environment very carefully. At the slightest suspicion of something being wrong they will immediately take off. If disturbed at a waterhole they will come in at night when it might be deemed to be safer. They are very difficult to sex as females and males look very similar. The bow hunter should however know that the stallion usually follows the herd and the neck is usually slightly larger. It may thus pay to be patient and to wait for the last animal to enter the shooting zone. Since zebras are not measured for record book purposes, one can take females as well as males. The risk is however that the female may be pregnant and we are therefore not keen on harvesting females.

Dennis Kamstra, an experienced and accomplished traditional bow hunter, published an article in the *African Sporting Gazette* (see Volume 13, Issue 3, Jan-March 2008) with title "*Zebra with a bow is tough!*". In this article he describes some of the difficulties he experienced in hunting Africa's striped horses. It is very good reading.

To illustrate how difficult zebras are to bowhunt: we have so far had only one bow hunter who was successful in taking a zebra on a "walk-and-stalk" hunt. Zebras are usually taken from blinds at waterholes.

A herd of zebras can kick up a lot of dust and this often betrays their position. They sometimes also neigh loudly and

this may give them away. We often hear them at sunrise and the neighing of zebras in the serene stillness of the early morning remains one of Africa's evocative sounds.

The horse lovers usually object to hunting the zebra, and one cannot argue with this. But the zebra also offers a great challenge to the bow hunter. The skin makes a beautiful rug, whilst a pedestal shoulder mount can be spectacular. Zebra skins are also used on furniture, particularly chairs and ottomans. Although zebra skins are available in South African retail trade, they are highly sought after and quite expensive.

Plains zebras are not regarded as threatened or endangered species and are quite common within their range. There are currently probably more plains zebras in South Africa than at any time during the last century.

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