

BOW HUNTING THE GREY GHOST OF THE AFRICAN BUSH

By Willem P Frost

The Southern Greater Kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros strepsiceros*) is a member of a group of antelope referred to as “the spiral-horned antelopes”. The other members of this genus are the bushbuck, the nyala, the eland, the lesser kudu, the sitatunga, the bongo and the mountain nyala.

Three additional sub-species of the greater kudu are recognised:

- The East African Greater Kudu, *T. s. bea*, of Kenya, Tanzania, north eastern Uganda and south eastern Sudan.
- The Western Greater Kudu, *T. s. cottoni*, of south-eastern Chad, north-eastern Central African Republic and far western Sudan.
- The Abyssinian Greater Kudu, *T. s. chora*, of Ethiopia and Sudan.

The Lesser Kudu of East Africa, *Tragelaphus imberbis*, is a separate specie altogether.

Roland Ward and SCI record the Cape kudu separately but this is misleading as the latter is NOT a separate specie or even a sub-specie. The Cape kudu is slightly smaller than the kudu found elsewhere in Southern Africa, but is in taxonomic terms no different at all from *T. s. strepsiceros*. But the Eastern Cape offers some of the best kudu habitat in Southern Africa. The kudu density in the *spekboom* veldt, for instance, is higher than is the case in other veldt types. Yet the animals and the trophies are slightly smaller.

Southern Greater Kudu occur widespread over much of Southern Africa: Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa. It is believed that the kudu is one of the few animals that benefited from human settlement and overgrazing by domestic stock in that additional habitat was created for them as a consequence. It is likely that kudu has expanded their range over the last 150 years, especially in South Africa.

They are found in savannah woodland, usually not too far from water. Expect to find them in thickets or bush large and dense enough to provide cover. In the arid areas of Southern Africa they keep to woodland on the fringes of watercourses. They normally avoid open grassland.

Kudu are predominantly browsers and utilise an extremely wide range of plant species. Their distribution range is quite wide and they therefore have to utilise a wide range of plant species. Also, within a given habitat they utilise almost all plant species; the main diet consisting of leaves from trees and shrubs.

Browsing by kudu led to a fascinating discovery by researchers in the late 20th century. It was found on game ranches in the then Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo) that many kudu are dying even though it would appear that they clearly had enough food. Many of them died with full stomachs. A research team under Professor Wouter van der Hoven from the University of Pretoria then found that when a tree or shrub is being browsed upon, it increases the tannin levels in its leaves significantly, to such an extent that the animal is unable to digest the “food”. This was clearly a case of too many kudu having to live of the available browsing. The research team also found that when a tree is beaten with a stick, or browsed upon, the tannin levels in the surrounding trees also increases. The trees have thus not only developed a remarkable defence mechanism, but they

also seem to be able to communicate “danger” to their neighbours.

It is not surprising that the greater kudu is usually right at the top of the wish list of visiting bowhunters. It is truly a magnificent and handsome animal and words such as impressive, regal, elegant, graceful, imposing and dignified spring to mind when one attempts to describe a mature bull.

A bull’s horns grow throughout his life and he is generally regarded as a good trophy when the third turn in the horns has developed. He is then about eight years old and past his breeding prime. Kudu horns can vary markedly from one animal to another. Some have a deep curl, others have a swallow curl. Sometimes the horns are quite wide spread; others have narrow horns. A deep curl usually results in a greater overall length.

Kudu are gregarious and occur in small herds of up to fifteen animals (although I have seen thirty kudu together), but the herd size can vary with the seasons. Mature bulls stay with the females for much of the year, but in summer they leave the herd to form “bull herds” of ten or more animals.

Bow hunting the kudu can be extremely challenging. They are shy, cautious and extremely alert with very well developed senses of sight, hearing and smelling. Those big ears are like radar dishes constantly scanning the environment for the slightest suspicious sound whilst the quivering nostrils test the air for the faintest suspicious smell. Once alarmed they take off for the nearest cover with the tail raised in characteristic fashion.

They often “freeze” in dense bush and have a remarkable ability to melt away into the shadows and foliage. They have not developed the reputation as the “grey ghosts of the African bush” for nothing – it is a reputation well earned.

In South Africa they are mostly bow hunted from blinds at waterholes, although some purists would not approve of this methodology. But they can also be hunted from an ambush along a well used game trail. Once a suitable spot has been identified, a mobile blind can be erected, or a tree stand can be put up. Alternatively, wear a ghillie suit and wait patiently in suitable cover. It is extremely important to remain downwind, immobile and dead quiet. Should the wind be swirling or changing direction, as it sometimes does, the hunter can forget about kudu hunting.

Walk-and-stalk hunting represents probably the ultimate challenge in bow hunting the kudu. The hunter should move very, very slowly and very, very quietly through the bush. He should spend more time standing still, looking and listening for any sign of kudu, than walking. Even when you are fortunate enough to find some kudu, a clean shot may not be possible due to brush and dense bush.

If the terrain offers some vantage point from where it is possible to glass the area for kudu, spot-and-stalk hunting is another possibility. Once kudu have been spotted, a stalk can be attempted. This is usually very difficult and again the hunter should be patient, well camouflaged and move very slowly. If you feel confident about the direction the kudu are moving, you may also attempt to wait in ambush for them.

It is usually easier to hunt single bulls as the hunter has to compete with the senses of only one animal. Not to be detected by the eyes, ears or nostrils of a herd of kudu, and to then get within bow range, is certainly no mean feat. But

it is more difficult for the hunter to spot a single kudu than a herd.

Do not expect a high success rate on walk-and-stalk or spot-and-stalk hunting. The most successful method remains shooting from blinds. Because the kudu's senses are so well developed, it is simply much easier to let him come to you rather than go after him in his own backyard.

Kudu are not particularly tough animals and will down with a well-placed shot into the vitals. But do take the time to study the kudu's anatomy before setting out to hunt. As with most other African antelope, the vitals are slightly lower and more forward than is the case with North American deer.

The kudu is a most worthwhile trophy to possess. Happy hunting for the "*grey ghost of the African bush*".

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