

THE APPEAL OF BOWHUNTING SOUTH AFRICA

By Willem P Frost

Hunting Africa is the dream of many an international sport hunter. Most of those who have hunted on the *Dark Continent* keep coming back for more. South Africa, in particular, seems to be the most popular hunting destination. It is believed that more than 7000 international sport hunters visit the country annually. And there is good reason for this.

The biodiversity in terms of habitat, and fauna and flora species, is simply incredible. The Bushveldt of Limpopo province offers the widest variety of game species which includes the “big five” and great trophy animals such as sable, kudu, roan, waterbuck and tsessebe. The mountains of the Eastern Free State and the Eastern Cape are home to grey rhebok, mountain reedbuck, Cape mountain zebra, bontebok and Cape grysbok. The Kalahari Thirstland provides ideal habitat for gemsbok, eland, red hartebeest, blue wildebeest and Kalahari springbok. The Highveld of the central South African plateau is excellent for blesbok, black wildebeest and springbok. Zululand’s specialty is the nyala but most of the typical Bushveldt species are also found here.

It is important that the hunter realizes that different species are found in different habitats, which may be many, many miles apart. Although some game ranchers have introduced species on their land that did not historically occur there naturally (such as red lechwe in the Free State or blesbok in the Bushveldt), many regard authentic African hunting to be restricted to the hunting of a species only in its natural, historical habitat. Hunting lechwe in the Free State or Lichtenstein’s hartebeest in the Eastern Cape would thus be frowned upon.

Point is that prospective hunters should determine beforehand, with the help of the outfitter, which species are best hunted in which part of the country.

Game ranching has become a major industry in South Africa. The total privately owned land under game management is about three times that of the National Parks. Wildlife ranchers control about 21,1million hectares while the State controls just over 7million hectares. The approximately 9500 registered game ranches have about 3-4 times the headcount of game. The game ranching industry is represented by *Wildlife Ranching South Africa*, is well organized and runs smoothly.

This means that game numbers of most species have increased significantly over recent decades and are currently at levels not seen in the last 100 or 150 years. Although some hunting takes place in some of the provincial reserves, no hunting is allowed in the National Parks, and most of the hunting, by far, is undertaken on private land.

This brings us to the issue of ‘high fences’. Whilst most North American hunters would find fences objectionable, it is simply reality in 21st century South Africa (and in Namibia and in parts of Botswana). Without fences the country would not have had the successful wildlife industry that it can currently boast about. It enables landowners to manage, protect and conserve the habitat and the free-roaming herds that occur on the property. One should also recognize that the game on these fenced-in properties is wild, free-roaming and self-sustaining. Most visitors only see the fence when they drive onto the property; thereafter they usually do not see any fences as the properties are often quite large.

For the international sport hunter it is important to know that he can hunt free roaming, wild game species in the spirit of “*fair chase*” on a fenced-in property. Ethical bowhunting has primarily to do with (i) ensuring a quick, clean kill, and (ii) hunting in the spirit of *fair chase* which means that the animal must have the inclination as well as the opportunity to get away.

One should however acknowledge that that it is no longer possible for the big herds to undertake the massive migrations in times of drought. It has thus become standard practice in the industry to provide supplemental feed in times of drought. In the good old days (say up to the nineteenth century) herds of eland, springbok, zebra, etc. were able to migrate over vast distances in order to find grazing. Many, many animals died from starvation during these migrations, but many more survived. Today the game animals have become a valuable commodity and landowners do not hesitate to provide supplemental feeds in times of severe drought in order to protect their assets. Relatively few animals thus succumb these days to drought.

There are many countries in Africa where one can have an exceptional rifle hunting experience – especially for the *Big Five*. Countries such as Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, etc. offer great opportunities to hunt buffalo, elephant and lion. But when it comes to bowhunting plains game, South Africa is most probably still the best destination – especially for first timers to Africa. The bowhunting skill and experience in South Africa is, generally speaking, just a notch above what is available elsewhere in Africa. South Africa boasts a few outfitters that specialize in bowhunting only. Finding *Bowhunting only* outfitters elsewhere in Africa is not so easy.

But as of February 2008 it is no longer be possible to hunt large predators, rhino, crocodile or elephant with a bow in South Africa. Bowhunters wishing to hunt these animals will have to hunt elsewhere in Africa.

South Africa also offers a number endemic species not found elsewhere in the world, e.g. Bontebok, Blesbok, Cape grysbok, Black wildebeest and Cape mountain zebra (although some of these species have been introduced to a few game ranches in Namibia). Not only is the South African hunting industry well organized and regulated, but the country is also relatively disease free compared to the rest of Africa (e.g. tsetse fly have been eradicated in South Africa and most of the country is malaria free). The infrastructure compares favorably with that of the first world, and transport, telecommunications and health care is quite good. South Africa is an excellent family destination and there is a lot to do and/or see before or after the hunting safari.

Accommodation at the typical South African hunting destination is usually excellent and may sometimes even be too luxurious for the average sport hunter.

International bowhunters will be well advised to first hunt their home territories to gain experience and then to explore South Africa. Once a good collection of South African trophies has been taken, and some experience have been gained in hunting on the *Dark Continent*, they can move on in search of species not typically found in South Africa such as puku, lechwe, dik-dik, kob, gazelles, sitatunga, the many species of forest duikers, etc.