

Bowhunting the Common Waterbuck

by Willem Frost

There are essentially two types of waterbuck in Africa, the common waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*), and the defassa waterbuck (*Kobus defassa*). Only the common waterbuck has the white ring around the backside. They occur south of the Muchinga Escarpment in Zambia while the defassa waterbuck is found further to the north.

As the name indicates, waterbuck can be found in areas with permanent open water seldom wandering more than two kilometres from water and drink at least twice per day. They prefer flood plains, riverine bush and marshes with some trees for shade and cover. They are also found in bushveldt thickets with plenty of shade. Waterbuck are big animals and they avoid thickets with too much shrub where it is difficult to move around freely and also avoid sour veldt. Shade and the availability of water and long grass is, however, a definite habitat requirement of the waterbuck.

When threatened they often flee into water and may submerge their entire body until the threat is gone. They are strong swimmers and will swim to islands within rivers and lakes to find good grazing.

Waterbuck are predominantly grazers requiring high quality grass such as *Digitaria*, *Panicum*, *Themeda* and *Heteropogon Contortis* with a length in excess of 12 centimetres. During the dry season they have to eat more dry material in which their condition can deteriorate rapidly. They may then move to other areas in an effort to find better quality food. Waterbuck do not migrate annually like the wildebeest on the Liuwa and Serengeti Plains.

The waterbuck's skin is covered in rather long hair for an African antelope. Glands in the skin produce an oily, musky secretion which forms an oily layer around the hair and old bulls in particular can be smelly. This has given the waterbuck a reputation for having meat that

“stinks”. Even if the animal is carefully skinned so the skin and glands do not come in contact with the meat, waterbuck meat is, in my opinion, excellent eating. Crocodiles are known to be reluctant to catch waterbuck as it is believed a result of the waterbuck's strong odor.

Waterbuck is known to be found in herds ranging from only four to more than thirty animals, but solitary old bulls are also common. Active in the late afternoon around sunset and during the early morning, during the heat of the day they tend to rest and locate in adequate shade.

When a bull reaches five to six years of age, he will leave the herd to challenge the territorial bull for territory. A bull may get killed in these fights. Old bulls driven out of the herd become solitary and will not join other waterbuck again. The territory is defended aggressively and intruders are not tolerated. Waterbuck may appear to be docile, calm and relaxed animals but they will become aggressive when under stress or wounded and may even attack humans, although attacks are not common.

Only bulls carry horns. The waterbuck horns curve forward and to the outside and is characterised by eighteen to thirty eight prominent ridges with the ends of the horns rather smooth. The hunter seeking a quality trophy animal should look for one of those old bulls that had been driven out of a herd. A bull with horns in excess of thirty inches can likely be aged around ten years old.

The waterbuck is a big animal and only a broadside shot or a slightly quartering-away shot should be attempted. Since they drink regularly, they are usually hunted from blinds at waterholes. They are not as wary or vigilant as some other African species and could be hunted successfully with walk-and-stalk or spot-and-stalk techniques. Since they always



stay relatively close to water, there is not much point looking for them far away from water.

Shot placement and penetration is vital when hunting waterbuck. The skin is loose and moves over the wound resulting in an extremely low amount of blood to trail, if any, to follow on a wounded animal. Even with a complete pass through, hunters shouldn't rely on following a trail of blood.

The animal should not be followed-up within thirty minutes if it is a heart shot. With a gut shot he should be given at least six hours before being followed-up.

As the waterbuck often does not provide the bowhunter with a good blood trail, it is essential to observe meticulously as he takes off after the shot. Try to memorise where he was standing, the direction the animal was running and try to listen to get an idea of what direction the waterbuck might be heading.

Examine the arrow carefully as it can provide some important clues as to what happened.

Waterbuck are not as quick as, say, the Bush Duiker, and a super fast arrow is not necessary. With the waterbuck being big strong animals, a minimum of a 65 pound draw weight is required. A 600 grain arrow with a two or three blade broad head is recommended and consider staying away from expendables.

Waterbuck is not endangered and are abundant throughout their range in Southern Africa and is an impressive trophy animal to pursue.

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