

A Hunter's Tales ...

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 10

A Hunter's Tales - A Hunter's Trails

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By Ron Thomson

**The best of fair-chase/free-range big game hunting stories from colonial
Africa**

(Southern Rhodesia)

(1955 - 1980)

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Leopard Hunting: The Spotlight Experience

I spent 24 years as a game ranger in the Rhodesian Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (1959 - 1983). During those years I gained vast big game hunting experience. Most of my leopard hunting, however, took place during my early period - when I was between 18 and 24 years old. I was 20 when the three hunts described in this story took place.

One thing I learnt from my many experiences is that a big game hunter's expertise does not come *only* from hunting and killing animals. It accumulates from every single contact that he has with Africa's dangerous big five animals - no matter how minor the event. Each and every new incident tempers yet more the hunter's spirit and his soul, and they mould and finely tune his every ultimate skill.

Furthermore, a hunter's most unforgettable memories emanate from his novice years - because, at that stage of his career, he has no idea how any these often very dangerous and frightening encounters will conclude. And the fears and trepidations that he endures during the process indelibly burns the memories into his brain.

Throughout the early months of 1960 I made a number of trips to Ngamo, Hwange National Park - which was two hundred kilometers northwest of the Matopos - to collect several lorry loads of young game animals to restock the park's extensive new game-fenced enclosure. I had had the privilege of helping the Hwange game rangers capture these animals from the back of racing Land Rovers, with cotton lassoes. These were the days before darts, dart guns, and immobilising drugs.

The first consignments that we released into what became known as the White Waters Game Park, comprised six to ten animals of the following species: giraffe; buffalo; sable; zebra; wildebeest and eland. During subsequent exercises more of these species were added - and so, too, were ostrich, waterbuck, kudu, reedbuck, tsessebe, impala and white rhino. All the

animals were three-quarters grown and in superb condition.

The Matopos is one of Rhodesia's (Zimbabwe's) most scenically beautiful national parks. It comprises vast granite hill ranges interspersed with grassed valleys, and there is rain forest vegetation surrounding the bases of all the high dwalas (giant granite domes). The hills abound with dassies (hyraxes), klipspringers and black eagles. Leopards are ubiquitous. It wasn't long, therefore, before the leopards discovered the newly introduced young animals and they began to regularly have them for breakfast.

As a consequence, it was decided that we should remove the leopards from the fenced game park area - and from the hills immediately surrounding it - to give the introduced animals time to mature and to acclimatise.

The task was allotted to 56 year old game ranger Jurie Grobler, and 20 years young me. Jurie had extensive leopard hunting experience and I had, at that stage (prior to joining national parks), successfully hunted seven leopards.

The last seven months of my service in the Matopos was taken up almost exclusively with leopard control work. This involved procuring and laying baboon baits almost on a daily basis, and setting gin traps to catch the big cats. It also found us hunting leopards in the beams of spotlights, in and around the fenced game park, nearly every night.

Initially Jurie and I hunted the game park together. Every night of the week we drove around the new grader-scraped tourist game viewing dirt tracks. Jurie always drove whilst I stood on the back of the Land Rover holding a powerful spotlight. We thus scoured the hillsides and the open vleis (grasslands) with the torch's powerful beam - searching for the glowing eyes of the leopards that were, at first, relatively plentiful.

When we found one we tried to hunt it down on foot with small battery powered torches strapped to our foreheads. Thus equipped we followed each leopard's flashing eyes, climbing the hills which the leopards climbed and slipping and sliding down the other side. Then we climbed the hill that lay beyond. All the time we relentlessly pursued those brilliant flashes of eyes. They were the only sign that betrayed the leopard's whereabouts. We went wherever those telltale eyes took us. Most hunts were

fruitless, the leopard eventually giving us the slip.

Sometimes we were lucky. We got our leopard. Then we had to carry its heavy body up and down yet more hills until we reached the nearest dirt road.

The job was exciting but it was a killer. We worked through every night and into the early hours of the morning. We drove round the game park enclosure for hours on end, staring into the bright beam of the probing spotlight, and we were forever climbing the hills in pursuit of those elusive bright eyes.

And during the intervening days we had to execute our normal daytime duties.

My regular diurnal work programme entailed shooting baboons and laying their carcasses out as bait. Every morning I religiously revisited all the baits to see if leopards had fed on them during the night. Occasionally I shot a feral donkey - or a vervet monkey - anything that would lure one of the big cats to a potential trap site.

Whenever a leopard visited one of the carcasses, Jurie and I spent the afternoon setting steel leg-hold (gin) traps around it. These were medium-sized Canadian bear traps! Sometimes we were successful with the traps. More often - not! But we did not give up. Nobody could have accused us of not trying!

This work regime was not sustainable. It was not sustainable by Jurie. It was not sustainable by me. It left both of us exhausted. Each day we walked about in a total daze - looking and feeling like zombies. We tried our best to do a good job but we were always dissatisfied with what we were able to achieve. Our faces were forever haggard. Our energy reserves were constantly tapping zero. So out of necessity we split the nocturnal hunts. One night Jurie went on duty and I slept the night through. The following night I did the hunting. *That* programme worked best for both of us.

In the beginning success was relatively frequent, but as we reduced the numbers of leopards in and around the game park, the more difficult did it become to kill those that remained. It was more challenging because there

were fewer leopards to find, and those we did find were infinitely more difficult to stalk. They became ever more elusive and cunning. There is no animal quite so tricky to bring to book as a leopard that has been persistently pursued.

During my last seven months in the Matopos National Park - before I was transferred to Main Camp, Hwange National Park - Jurie and I, between us, killed over 20 leopards. And by the end of that period the killing of the young game animals had stopped.

The following year more game animals were introduced from Ngamo. Over time the numbers grew and they adapted to the Matopos conditions; and when they were mature, the herds were able to absorb occasional losses from leopard predation. The Matopos staff then stopped the leopard control work in the game park altogether. The leopards rebuilt their numbers and a natural herbivore/predator regime was established.

In the beginning, however, the killing of the resident leopards in the game park was vital. If it had not taken place it is doubtful that the Matopos would ever have had the numbers and variety of animals that today roam those wild and beautiful hills.

I recall very little about most of those leopard hunts. That they happened I can only assure you because I recorded the numbers. Some of them, however, I will never forget.

* * *

One night at the very beginning of our leopard control programme, I picked up intermittent flashes of eyes on a small and isolated kopje (small hill) that was located in the middle of an open vlei (grassland). Jurie drove over the veld to the base of the hill to investigate. We were both sure that what we had seen was a leopard. We recognised the colour of the eyes and the way the animal moved. We confirmed it *was* a leopard, however, only when we saw its spotted body walking round the high top edge of the kopje.

There were boulders and small dongas (erosion gullies) surrounding the hill, all hidden by long grass. This made further driving impossible. If we wanted to get this leopard we concluded, we would have to leave the vehicle and walk. So we removed the Land Rover battery, attached the bright

spotlight to its terminals with metal crocodile clips, and set off after the leopard on foot - with a native game scout carrying the battery on his shoulder.

We had two scouts with us that night. One of them, Justice, was tasked with carrying the battery. The other one remained with the vehicle.

“Leave your rifle,” Jurie instructed me. *“You are going to have to carry the battery just now.”*

This remark puzzled me but I did not question it. I left my 9.3 mm Husqvarna in the Land Rover. Jurie carried a single shot Greener 12 gauge shotgun. It had a lever action under the pistol grip that opened a top slide to the cartridge chamber. Jurie had great faith in shotguns. I never took to them - maybe because of what we were about to experience!

Jurie was the man with the greater experience and he was my immediate superior. So I followed his orders. I trusted him implicitly.

To begin with I carried Jurie’s shotgun. He carried and used the spotlight. Justice carried the battery on one shoulder.

“I am going to ask you to carry the battery when we get close to the leopard,” Jurie explained to me quietly as we walked along. *“I don’t trust these native game scouts when push comes to shove.”*

“I was once hunting a leopard just like this,” he went on. *“I wounded it with my first shot and it charged at us out of the darkness. The guy I had carrying the battery dropped the damn thing and took off into the night, leaving me alone in the dark to face the leopard. I have never trusted any one of them ever since.”*

“What happened?” I prompted, *“...with the leopard?”*

“Oh,” replied Jurie matter of factly... *“The leopard! It was wounded. It fell over dead in its charge. It never reached me... but that damn game scout never hunted with me again.”*

Jurie was very clearly more concerned at having been let down by his native assistant than he was about the fact that he could have been killed.

I remained silent, thinking deeply about the kind of man Jurie Grobler was. That little story pushed him a notch higher up the ladder in my estimation.

“Anyway...” Jurie continued *“When we get closer I want you to take the battery off Justice. It’s damned heavy but you are young and strong. You can manage it. When we get up very close we’ll put the battery on the ground and I’ll give you the torch. You will then be responsible for holding the beam on target. You got that?”*

“Yes.”

“And if the leopard comes at us I want you to keep the spotlight on it no matter what. Just remember, it won’t be able to see behind the light. So we will be safe just as long you keep that damn beam focused on its eyes.”

What Jurie said made sense; and the story he had just told me started to take on a new three-dimensional shape. And it occupied a great deal of my thoughts as we continued with the hunt.

We walked round the hill. It was relatively small - 100 metres long by 50 wide and high. It was, in fact, just a jumble of large granite boulders. I continued to carry Jurie’s shotgun. Justice continued to carry the battery. Jurie held the back of the spotlight’s reflector case hard on his mouth and he looked directly over the top rim. We stopped regularly as we progressed through the rough bush, scanning the hillside above with the bright light. For a long time we saw nothing.

At first I believed the leopard was walking ahead of us, constantly positioning itself round the next edge of the hilltop. It never exposed itself. It never showed its eyes. After about half an hour I began to have doubts. I grew despondent.

“It’s gone,” I said disconsolately to Jurie. *“It must have come down off the hill and made off through the grass.”*

“No,” Jurie said confidently. *“It’s still up there. It is keeping ahead of us and out of sight. It’ll get tired of the game just now.”*

So Jurie had believed what I had believed before - and more. It

seemed he knew from experience what the leopard was doing *and* what it was going to do. That made me feel a whole lot better!

I wasn't as sure as he appeared to be, but I tagged along - anyway, faithfully carrying the shotgun for Jurie should he ever need it.

Suddenly everything happened just as Jurie had predicted. On the hillside up above, slightly to the front of us, we saw the leopard, sitting like a big dog on its haunches, at the base of a large boulder.

"Hah-haaaah," I heard Jurie say under his breath. *"Just keep going,"* he told me quietly. He kept the spot on the leopard whilst picking his way forward through the bushes and boulders in the lamp's penumbral light.

When we reached a point not quite below where the leopard was positioned, Jurie stopped. Keeping the spot focused on the leopard's face he quietly instructed the game guard to put the battery down on the ground.

"Now give me the shotgun," he said to me in a whisper. *"You take the torch, Ron. And remember, no matter what happens, keep the light on its face."*

The leopard was no more than fifty yards away and at a forty-five degree angle above us. It was having trouble looking down into the bright beam; and it half closed its eyes to ward off the heavy glare. As Jurie had said it would, it had become tired of the hide and seek game it had been playing.

Jurie had loaded the weapon with a triple-A cartridge. This was not as heavy a load as SSG buckshot but it was good enough. It carried 42 pellets against the SSG's much heavier 17 but, Jurie assured me, the smaller and more numerous lead pellets were far more effective on leopard.

Jurie stood back from the light, not letting any movement in its peripheral glow betray our presence. From behind the torch and over my head he discharged the weapon.

I flinched at the detonation but kept the beam on target. The shot ploughed into the leopard's head and chest. A pattern of irregular puffs splattered across the granite boulder behind it. These rock strikes were from those outer pattern pellets that had not hit the target.

All hell broke loose.

The leopard reared up and started fighting the rock behind it. It roared loudly, growled and hissed and thrashed around like something demented. Then it came tumbling down the hillside rolling head over heels, bouncing over the rocks. It made no attempt to stop its wild downhill plunge. And all the while the terrible roaring and the coarse growling continued.

“HOLD THE LIGHT ON IT” Jurie shouted. His command was urgent. *“Don’t take the light off it whatever you do!”*

As he spoke Jurie worked the lever on the shotgun. *Yunk... Yunk... Yunk....*

I heard the action going again and again as he repeatedly yanked on the lever beneath the pistol grip. The Greener was a single shot weapon. That meant Jurie had to physically eject the spent shell and replace it, by hand, with a fresh one.

“Damn...” he cursed. *“Damn it...”*

The leopard slithered off the bottom of the hill and came to a stop. There it lay writhing in pain and bewilderment. It looked up into the light and hissed in anger. It was no more than ten metres in front of me. There was nothing between us. Just a few blades of tall dry grass!

“Hold the light on it,” Jurie told me again. He spoke quietly almost into my ear. There was a vital cadence in his voice.

I heard the sound of metal scraping on metal. I flicked my eyes away from the leopard. I just *had* to see what Jurie was doing. In the glow of the light behind the beam I saw him fiddling with his penknife. He had inserted the blade into the chamber. I knew, then, that he was trying to get the sharp point under the rim of a jammed cartridge case.

‘Oooh... Hell....’ My mind ran riot! My rifle was back in the Land Rover - and the now wounded leopard was growling and hissing angrily at

me almost within touching distance!

At the exact moment that I returned my attention to the leopard it rushed at me, looking straight into the bright beam of the spotlight. The charge was silent, deadly, dripping with malice. My nerves, already on edge and stretched to breaking point, began to hum. My body quivered all over with fear. The desire to turn and run was overwhelming, but I stood my ground. I held the spot firmly on the face of the charging big cat.

The leopard ground to a surprising halt right under the hot reflector. It stood there cowering and hissing, not three feet from my outstretched hand on the handle of the torch. My body was quaking with an all-powerful fear and all-embracing tension. I held the beam, quivering now, in the leopard's face.

For what seemed an eternity the leopard moved about in front of the light, squinting up into the core of its beam. Hissing! Growling! Baring its teeth! In reality the episode lasted probably no more than a few seconds. Whatever! My wide eyes never left the animal's face. What was happening was unbelievable.

I watched the leopard's angry eyes. One was bloodshot - damaged by a shotgun pellet - the other bright yellow. They were malevolent eyes. They were eyes that reflected many things. Fear, confusion, bewilderment and pain! Deep down in my psyche I felt a twinge of conscience. Despite the dire circumstances of the moment I felt sorry for the leopard.

Blood was oozing out of several puncture wounds in the leopard's face and across its chest where the shotgun pellets had entered its body. Some of the holes were bleeding profusely.

Then suddenly - at last - Jurie had the weapon to his shoulder. He stepped forward to get a better shot at the target. The muzzle of the barrel stuck out into the beam. The leopard saw it and made ready to jump. It was too slow. There was another thunderous bang. The leopard's head disintegrated. This time, at point blank range, every pellet had entered its

head. They blew it apart.

My first conscious feeling was one of great relief. A suffocating pain hit my chest as a huge gush of air left my lungs. While time had been standing still I had been holding my breath!

Suddenly my whole body began to shake. It shook uncontrollably, the consequence of the enormous adrenaline rush that came with the release of tension. It had been a frightening but exhilarating few moments.

The hunt was over. I had survived my first *really perilous* hunting encounter with one of Africa's dangerous 'Big Five'.

A story of two leopards.

I responded one day to a leopard stock killing complaint that had occurred in the northern region of the national park. The countryside was dominated by jumbles of high granite hills but the complainant's village, an untidy conglomeration of badly thatched pole-and-dagga (pole and mud) huts, was set amongst towering mountain ridges in the middle of a wide and barren plain. The ground all around was bare. It had been grazed flat for many years by excessive numbers of domestic stock.

In those days I often wondered why the national park's office at Maleme responded to such reports. I believed the leopards were doing a fine job de-stocking the over-burdened land of grazing animals. In my mind the health of the veld was all-important. Coming from farming stock, I was forever concerned that the soils and grasses in the national park were being constantly degraded by too many cattle, sheep and goats. Every one of the village headmen owned infinitely more livestock than their residence permits allowed.

Much later in life I learnt that the issues at stake in this widespread and general African conundrum are much more complicated than meets the eye. Africa is a complex continent; and to resolve its ecological problems, such as overstocking with domestic animals and the commercial poaching of wildlife, needs the hand of a master craftsman. In those days I was far from being in that league. My youthful drive was, then, just to *do or die* and my volatile and impetuous nature caused me to think about and to react to these problems in a spontaneous and sometimes irresponsible manner that I now know was wrong.

There was a barren ploughed field alongside the village surrounded by a skimpy brush fence. The barrier was just heavy enough to keep cattle out of the land when crops were growing in it.

A roughly constructed bush pole cattle kraal stood next to the village huts. This was where cattle were housed at night. A smaller roofed enclosure was reserved for the family's sheep and goats. The whole village ménage was

set against a small hillock of piled up granite boulders. The kopje protruded out of the open plain like a disfiguring pimple on a teenager's smooth young face.

The leopard had come down to the kraal out of the kopje and it had taken a small calf just as the dawn was breaking. The calf had wriggled through a gap in the pole fence during the night and it had been wandering around outside, bleating for its mother. It had thus advertised its presence and its predicament. It was easy prey for the opportunistic stock killer.

The village headman had heard the big cat catch the calf. He had rushed out of his sleeping hut to defend the animal. With the help of the village dogs he chased the killer off. But he was too late. By the time he had rallied to the calf's assistance it was already dead. He found the leopard dragging its prey up the small hillock into the rocks behind his hut.

The carcass was intact and the old man left it where he had found it. This is what the national park game warden at Maleme Rest Camp had told the people to do if they wanted his assistance. Early the next morning the old headman had sent his eldest son on a bicycle to Maleme. There the young man had reported the killing to Senior Game Warden John Hatton.

Prior to my posting to the Matopos, Game Ranger Jurie Grobler attended to all such complaints. Now it had become my job!

I arrived at the village in the government Land Rover sometime around midday. I didn't know what to expect and hoped the people had not removed the carcass.

It often turned out that, after travelling many miles to get to a leopard kill early, I discovered that there was nothing left of it. The villagers, starved of red meat protein in their diet, as they normally were, often cut up the carcass whilst it was still fresh. They would prepare the meat, some for immediate consumption. Some of it they '*benghisa-ed*' - cut into biltong-sized strips which they dried out in the sun, on rough bush-pole racks, over a smoky fire. This treatment preserved the meat for future use. The leopard then had nothing to return to in the early hours of the following night.

Whenever I came across such a situation I normally aborted the hunt and immediately returned home. With nothing left to come back to, the

leopard would invariably move on. Sometimes it killed again at the same village or at one nearby, within a few days.

If there was no carcass, there was no point in me wasting my time. If the leopard was a veteran stock killer and it killed again, maybe next time the villagers would leave the carcass alone.

This time was different. This time the old man of the village told me upon my arrival that the carcass was still in one piece. He had left the dead calf where he had found it, halfway up the hill, and he had instructed his family members not to go near it. He wanted this leopard dead. He did not want to have it kill another of his animals the very next night.

I had come prepared to camp out for the night but I did not immediately set up my bivouac. I wanted to first see the kill in order to arrange in my mind's eye exactly how I was going to go about killing the leopard. I had brought gin traps (leg-hold traps) with me just in case these were a better option than hunting.

“Show me the dead calf, Mdala” I instructed the headman after he told me what had transpired.

Mdala, “old man”, is a respectful title in the Ndebele culture. It is a courtesy afforded to elderly men by younger people.

He led me behind his sleeping hut and together we laboured up the steep slope of the hill behind. We reached the first of the huge boulders that, higher up, were jumbled one on top of the other. I carried my Husqvarna 9.3 mm - which had a full Mauser action - loosely in my hands. The rifle was cocked, there was a bullet up the spout and I had the safety catch fully on.

NB: *The Mauser safety catch is a leaf at the back end of the rifle bolt. When the leaf is turned over to the right the safety mechanism is fully on. The rifle is ready to fire when the leaf is turned fully to the left. When the leaf is left standing erect the rifle is safe but it takes just a flick of the thumb to make it live. The half-safe position is used when a state of danger is imminent but not immediately vital. This is why I prefer the full Mauser action to any other.*

We followed the drag marks through the grass and leaves. The old

man pointed out all the signs to me as we progressed up the hill. When we reached the place where he had left the dead calf, it was gone. The leopard had returned in daylight to retrieve its kill and it had dragged the carcass into the rocks higher up.

I was pleased. *This* leopard was bold and full of temerity. *That* was a good omen. I felt sure, then, that I would soon have it in the bag.

“*Ggghaau*,” the old man gasped gutturally, his eyes wide in disbelief. There was nothing else he needed to say. What had transpired was obvious.

I looked up the hill following the new drag marks with my eyes, as best I could. The calf had been a small one so the leopard could have taken it anywhere inside that jigsaw puzzle of giant rocks piled, as they were, one on top of the other.

I gauged the size of the hillock. It was really very small compared to the giant mountains of similar structures that loomed on every side all around us. I examined our position. We were surrounded by a huge expanse of close-cropped open ground. Even a rash leopard, I surmised, would not voluntarily risk crossing such exposed ground during daylight. Subconsciously I knew the big cat was still inside the kopje. I also knew it was accessible to me, even in daylight.

“*How many dogs do you have, Mdala?*” I asked the headman quietly.

“*Four*,” he announced with brevity. He held one hand towards me displaying four erect fingers.

I considered my options. I could locate the leopard with his dogs, of that I was certain but, in doing so, would I also chase it away? *That* was the million dollar question! I again looked across the open expanse of bare flat ground beneath me. What I saw convinced me that the dogs would never flush our quarry from the kopje’s many boulder retreats in the middle of the day.

There was no kill around which to set my traps. So trapping the leopard was, for the time being at least, not an option. Having no kill on which to focus my attentions also eliminated the possibility that I could lie in wait for the leopard at dusk.

There was a good chance we could relocate the calf with or without the dogs. The drag marks were conspicuous. If we found the carcass, trapping might be again possible. There was an equally good chance we might *not* find the carcass. There may be nothing left of it. The leopard could have eaten it all.

If we could *not* relocate the carcass in daylight, my only option then would be to hunt the leopard after dark with a spotlight, in and around the conglomeration of rocks high on the summit. Higher up there was more granite than ground. So following the drag marks up there would be more difficult than was the case down where we were standing - in the lower elevations of the kopje. The more I thought about the problem the more I leant towards using the dogs.

I made up my mind. “*Go get your dogs,*” I instructed the old headman.

I had never before hunted a leopard with dogs but the procedure seemed pretty obvious. The dogs, I believed, would do all the work. They would follow the scent of the leopard wherever it went until they eventually treed it, or chased it up a high rock. Then, if I could keep up with the running dogs, all I would have to do was to shoot the leopard from a safe distance. Its attentions would then, I believed, be focused on the dogs and not on me.

It didn’t quite work out like that! Indeed, whenever and wherever I worked with dogs in later years the end result was never as I had hoped it would be. My early unsatisfactory experiences with dogs put me off using them for life. Nevertheless, many other people use tracker dogs with great success. But not me!

The dogs arrived and we set off in pursuit of the leopard, just the old headman and me.

At that stage in my hunting career I had not yet learnt the advantage of having good and loyal trackers. In retrospect, I now know that none of the native game scouts that I worked with in the Matopos had any worthwhile tracking or hunting capabilities. Neither would any of them have developed into reliable and trustworthy hunting companions. In those days my only true *hunting* companion was myself. The native game scouts I was forced to use

were mere '*tag-alongs*'.

On this occasion I had the fearless old headman at my side. I was beginning to like him more and more as each minute passed.

I was then and I am now, a loner. I was a hunter at heart. I relied totally upon myself. I was a young man with little fear but a great deal of well-tempered caution. Despite my tender years I had a surprising understanding of the natural world. I had a great deal of patience when hunting and I was developing a huge confidence in my hunting capabilities. My ability to handle leopards under any circumstances was growing by the day. At that stage of my career I had already shot more than ten. I also had an unwavering determination to succeed and I had already developed surprising instincts that did not allow me to take unnecessary risks.

Gone now was the trepidation I had experienced with my first leopard kill on the Angwa River two years previously. The terrible funk I had endured with my first elephant at Macaha in 1959 was also behind me. My performance that day still irked me but I had by then laid its memory to rest in the shadows of my past. My Matopos days saw me beginning to emerge from my chrysalis, but I still had no idea what kind of butterfly I was going to become. The transformation was not then yet complete. There was still some incubating to do! My leopard hunting experiences in the Matopos kneaded the dough of my now quickly developing hunting character.

So it was that the old black headman and I, with a rifle in my hands and a spear in his, set off after the stock killing leopard in the heat of the day. The old man's pack of four village curs initially ran about all around our heels but once they had picked up the scent they coursed ahead. Three of them showed great fear. One had more courage. The old man walked behind them urging them on with many and varied homely verbal communications with which the dogs were familiar.

Every dog's hackles were standing erect. As they progressed along the drag marks they growled continuously and softly to and at each other. They knew, all of them, the danger involved in what they were doing. The scent of the leopard was everywhere and, except for the one brave hound, they were clearly reluctant to engage the animal they were following.

I walked along next to the old man directly behind the dogs. I was starting to enjoy myself. I had a soft nosed cartridge in the rifle's chamber and I lifted the safety catch lever into the half-safe position.

We had not gone far when a commotion erupted ahead. The leopard had gone to ground in a rock shelter amidst the boulders. The lead dog had found it. The dog moved straight into the shelter and started barking and growling at the big cat.

I rushed to the rocky overhang, all prepared to shoot the leopard. The other three dogs were milling around my feet, barking and yowling hysterically. Not one of them, however, was prepared go into the cave. They were quite happy to leave their intrepid leader to deal with whatever mess he had got himself into.

The deep and resonant growls of the leopard, and its loud hissing threats, were easy to distinguish from the lesser barking and growling of the dog.

The hair on the back of my neck was standing erect. The hairs on my forearms were stiff like bristles. Adrenaline rushed through my veins. My whole body was quaking.

With great trepidation I looked into the cave. The dog was standing stiff legged. All its attentions were focused to its right hand side. It was barking furiously at the leopard which I could not see.

There was a loud and angry roar. In a flash of movement the leopard, right under my nose, rushed at the dog. There was a skirmish. The dog came flying through the air out of the cave. It landed at my feet.

After that one attacking movement the leopard turned, and in a blurring moment, it disappeared into the rocks behind. I hadn't had a chance to raise my rifle and aim, let alone to pull off even a snapshot. Everything happened in one fleeting split second of time.

The leopard was gone.

The brave little dog lay whimpering at my feet. Its entrails were writhing and squirming on the leaves next to its ripped open belly. It raised

its head and looked up at me with limpid pleading eyes. It was asking for help. I didn't know what to do.

The old headman knew what to do. He stepped forward and, muttering to himself angrily, he did the only sensible thing he could have done. He whacked the dog on the head with his knobkerrie, snuffing the dog's life out in one fell blow. The dog's body stretched in an almost leisurely manner. It quivered all over. Finally it lay still. It had paid the price for its bravery.

The remaining three dogs were reluctant to continue with the hunt.

The old man picked up his dead dog by the back legs and hurled its body into the cave. Its carcass was something else the leopard could feed upon come nightfall.

I went inside the cave and found what remained of the calf. It was lying on top of an open sheet of granite and was now more than half consumed. There was no place where I could set gin traps. There was no place where I could lie in wait for the leopard at dusk.

I lifted the dead dog by the scruff of its neck and laid it next to the calf on the rock. It may just keep the leopard occupied for a little while longer.

The old man came into the cave. He watched my every move, with his spear at the ready. When I left the cave he followed, and we retired back down the hill together.

I now had but one option. I would have to await the coming of the night. I would then have to seek out the leopard in the darkness with the bright beam of my big spotlight.

I set up camp on the far side of the valley under the canopies of the several large forest trees that ringed the base of a high rock dwala (solid round granite hill). There I lay down on my camp stretcher to wait out the rest of the day. I slept like a baby throughout what remained of the afternoon.

This is a common scenario when hunting stock killing predators. It is

often necessary to wait for many hours until the appropriate moment came to dispatch your quarry. You are, therefore, either waiting for night to fall or you are waiting for the leopard, or lion, or hyena, to trap itself in one of your gins. There is nothing you can do to hurry the process. These repeated experiences instilled in me a huge capacity for patience.

I had supper out of tins just before nightfall and prepared the tools of my trade for the night: my rifle; my headlamp with its elastic headband; and the big handheld spotlight – and I removed the vehicle battery from the government Land Rover. I had one uniformed native game scout with me that night whose job it would be to carry the battery on his shoulder. Everything set, we waited for total darkness. Happily, there was no moon.

It had been my intention to walk round the lower rim of the kopje and try to locate the leopard on the higher levels with the beam of the big spotlight. Once we had it pinpointed, I planned to walk up the hill alone with just the small spotlight on my forehead. It provided enough light for me to shoot. I had already determined that it would be physically impossible to have the game scout carry the heavy battery all over and through the jumble of rocks higher up.

Nevertheless, I had my game plan all worked out.

The scout and I walked across the bare open ground to the village in the bright starlight. The headman was waiting for us. His whole family was present. Some of them sat around flickering log fires in the compound. Others stood immobile, leaning against a tree trunk or a pole fence. They watched intently. Nobody spoke a word. Clearly the old man had told them all to keep very quiet.

“*Ready?*” I asked the old headman.

“*Yebo Nkosana,*” he replied. “*I am ready.*”

Calling a young white man *Nkosana* was a sign of respect. Translated *Nkosana* means *Little Chief*. That meant I had already scored several credits with him. Calling me *Nkosana* meant that he expected that one day I would

be a *Big Chief* - an *Nkosi*.

The old man held a spear in his left hand and a knobkerrie in his right. The latter was a primitive weapon that he had already demonstrated he knew how to use. He also hung a small knobkierrie axe, by the blade, over one shoulder.

Spears, knobkerries and knobkierrie-axes were the standard *battle* equipment of most native men in Rhodesia during the twentieth century. These were the poachers' tools of the trade, too, together with dogs and bundles of wire and steel-cable snares.

Another weapon the old man carried that night was a rough bladed knife with a wooden handle. It was sheathed in a wooden scabbard that was secured to his belt with raw goatskin leathers.

I looked the old man over and smiled. He was a typical rural Ndebele of his time, right down to the ragged old European clothes that he wore. The sandals on his feet - *maskatcholos* - were made from motorcar tyres. He must have spent many days cutting those tyres into strips, sewing the strips together and then sewing on the tyre soles.

Simply being in the company of this old man gave me a satisfying glow in my heart. I liked these old generation natives. I particularly liked the Ndebele. I liked them immensely.

"O.K." I said. "*Let's get on with it.*"

I attached the crocodile clips to the battery terminals and flicked on the spotlight's powerful beam. Its sharp light cut through the darkness like a knife. I swung the beam about the village picking out, one by one, the old man's stoic family members. When the bright spot hit them in the face they all, one by one, cast their eyes to the ground. The light was just too bright!

I cast the beam up the hillock, working it over the rocks and bushes, higher and higher, behind the headman's sleeping hut.

Towards the crest there was the flash of a leopard's eyes. The big cat,

clear as daylight, was standing completely relaxed on one of the summit rocks. It looked down on us, calmly, as we prepared for the night's hunt in the village below.

“NANSO!” exclaimed the old man immediately, excitedly. *There it is.* The bright white eyes winked out and the pale form of the big cat disappeared into the rocks.

I had the proof I needed of the leopard's whereabouts, so the big spotlight was already redundant. It was now up to me to get the job done with my head torch and my rifle.

“O.K...*You guys stay here. I am going up alone.*” I spoke haltingly in the vernacular. I was picking up the Sindebele language very quickly.

“Aaiee...” the old Ndebele exclaimed. “*I cannot let you go up there alone, Nkosana. I will come with you.*”

“No, Mdala. *I am going alone.*”

“Aaaieeee....” The old man remonstrated with me, shaking his head.

“*You all stay here,*” I said again. “*I cannot hunt with a whole herd of people all around me.*”

With that command firmly established, I left the protesting old headman and my game scout in the middle of the village. I switched on my headlamp, focused its beam directly to the fore and set off up the hill alone.

There was a lot of trash on the ground, mainly twigs and dead leaves from the tree canopies above my head. There was also discarded human detritus: tin cans and broken bottles; and old and badly rusted - discarded - farming tools. Beyond the last of the tall trees there were no more dead leaves - or human waste. I waded through some tall stiff thatching grass, then I was walking on the bare rough surfaces of solid granite boulders. My main concern was that I should not sprain my ankle in a rocky crack, or slip down an open crevasse.

Throughout my initial journey the beam of the torch was more often than not searching for a safe passage through and over the rocks than it was

looking ahead for signs of the leopard. The higher up I went the more dangerous my footing became.

The leopard was no doubt well aware of my progress. It *must* have seen the flashes of bright light that periodically illuminated its rocky fortress.

The dead calf and the dog's carcass were not where I had left them. The leopard had returned and carried them both off to some other place. I ventured further up the hill.

The closer I got to the summit the more excited I became. I moved ever more carefully. I moved ever more slowly. And I spent more time scanning the rocks in front of me with the torch beam. I probed every cave and every rock shelter that I passed. A vision of the gutted village cur was constantly in the forefront of my mind.

My breathing had become seriously laboured. This was inevitable. It had been a fast, hard and steep climb. But this was not good. If I was going to shoot straight I *had* to get my full composure back.

I started to rest more often, using the time to calm my senses, to allow my breathing to return to a more normal rhythm, and to more thoroughly scan the rocks ahead with the torch beam.

On one of these stops I smelt the stench. There was the familiar heady smell of blood and raw flesh. And the pungent odour of freshly exposed gut content was rich in my nostrils. The kill was nearby!

There was also the fetid pong of fresh leopard scat. *That* told me the leopard was probably very close!

I flashed the torch beam around searching for the leopard's kill. I found nothing. From the heavy smells I knew I *must* be standing right on top of it. How literal did that thought turn out to be! I looked down and saw that I was standing in a liquid puddle of black excrement. Big cat diarrhoea - resultant from a bellyful of fresh meat! I had found the leopard's fresh dropping!

I was absorbed with a sense of disgust at finding my one foot in the leopard's stinking dung, when a subtle sixth sense pervaded my being. Something had changed! I had seen nothing. There had been no sound. Not a

whisper! I simply became acutely conscious of the leopard's presence.

I never ignore such paranormal intelligence.

Standing still I slowly lifted my head. The beam of the head-torch seemed to know exactly where it was supposed to go. It sketched a pattern of light up the surface of the boulder directly in front of me. As it rose higher the leopard's form slowly took shape in the reflected light. Finally the bright core of the beam locked onto the leopard's face.

The big cat was standing broadside on, looking directly down at me. Its eyes squinted as the bright light burned into its pupils. It turned its head away but it kept looking back trying to probe the darkness behind the light. There was no menace in its stance, no malevolence in its stare, no fear, only curiosity and some bewilderment.

It was perilously close. No more than fifteen feet separated our staring eyes. I had to crick my neck to keep the beam pointing upwards into the leopard's face. I felt extremely vulnerable. I was vulnerable! Just one small leap and the big cat could have pounced onto my shoulders. *Then the mauling would begin...*

My hands were quivering as I gently turned the Mauser safety catch into the fully 'off' position. I was careful not to let the metal key *click*. The beam, all the while, remained locked on the leopard's face!

Slowly I raised my left hand to my forehead keeping all sign of it out of the bright light. I gripped the reflector case firmly behind the beam. Holding the beam on the leopard's face I moved my head to the right. The elastic band slipped around my head until the reflector was located over my left eyebrow.

It is impossible to shoot using a headlamp unless the beam is directed along the length of the rifle barrel. To make that happen the torch had to be located on my brow above my left eye. I had it right. I was ready to shoot.

The leopard never moved, except when it turned its head away once or twice to relieve the discomfort of the bright beam in its eyes. As the rifle

barrel moved up into the light, however, the leopard's body tensed. Its stare became less casual, more concerned. But it did not move away.

Slowly, methodically, I placed the bead of the foresight onto the leopard's face just below its right eye. Impacting at that point the bullet would traverse the skull upwards and pass through the brain. The 'vee' of the rear sight snuggled around the bead. I settled my cheek onto the rifle's wooden stock. I took a deep breath - holding my body still.

I was no longer conscious of my beating heart. My hands were now steady as a rock. My nerves were under complete control. Gently I squeezed the trigger.

The rifle's butt kicked sharply against my shoulder and up against my cheek. A red and white flash spewed out from the muzzle racing away towards the target. The bullet hit the leopard exactly where I had aimed. It punched the big cat's head away from the light. Its body fell down onto the sloping rock; and it slid down the intervening space between us, backwards, and tumbled onto the flat rock at my feet.

I stood my ground with a new round already up the spout. The leopard's magnificent golden body, covered in shining black rosettes, shimmered in nervous reaction as its spirit departed to a happier hunting ground.

All around, up and down the valley and through the countless caves and rock shelters in the high Matopos mountains that surrounded me, the reverberations of the rifle's echoing report rolled and rolled and rolled. The deep and resonant sounds went on and on in a seemingly endless cacophony until finally they exhausted their energies in the vastness of the night.

Only then did I lift my foot out of the stinking excrement.

As I moved my foot I became aware of another malevolent presence. The hackles on the back of my neck erected even though, once again, I had neither heard nor seen anything. Again I just *knew* something had changed.

I lifted the beam of the torch slowly, as before, to canvas the rock above me. Just a few feet behind where the first leopard had stood there now

stood another. This one was facing me with its head held high. It was casting its head around with palpable agitation. It looked to the left, then to the right and back again into the bright beam of the torch. The loud report of the shot that had killed its brother, and the heavy reverberations that followed, had clearly unnerved this fellow. It was searching for its companion.

Both these
leopards
were
males in
their prime.



The torch on my head was still in the correct position. There was already another cartridge in the chamber. It was a simple procedure for me to raise the rifle to my shoulder, repeat the aiming process, and to gently squeeze the trigger a second time.

The second leopard dropped dead where it had been standing. This one, too, slid down the sloping surface of the rock, head first, leaving a smear of blood on the granite face behind it. Its body tumbled directly on top of the first leopard. And there it too, writhed gently in its death throes.

Even as the echoes of the second shot rolled round and round the mountains I was casting my torch beam all over the high rocky summit, probing the rounded tops, searching all the gaps between the giant granite boulders. I was looking for a third leopard but that was just too much to expect. There had only been two.

Both of these leopards were males in their prime. There were no fighting scars on their faces. They were young nomadic adults - wandering males without a territory to defend. There was no sign of the long fluffy coats

that separate the juveniles from fully mature leopards. Their skins were flawless.

Relating *all* the stories of the leopards that Jurie Grobler and I hunted together, and those that I hunted on my own that year, would make repetitious and boring reading. Few had any hunting qualities that warrant reporting. One or two, however, stick indelibly in my mind.

There is one more Matopos leopard-hunting story that I would still like to tell.

Hunting my biggest ever leopard

The Senior Game Warden at Maleme - John Hatton - the recipient of all stock killing reports, had been badgered by an Ndebele headman who lived just outside the southeastern boundary of the park. The old man had asked for help with a leopard that had been killing his cattle on a regular basis. He had reported five cows lost in as many weeks. The fact that this headman lived outside the park boundary, however, gave him a lower priority rating than those who resided inside the park and who had similar complaints. As the weeks passed the man's pleas for help became strident.

Jurie and I were up to our eyebrows hunting leopards in the White Waters game park during this period, so John Hatton was reluctant to call on either of us to attend to this complaint. Finally, when the headman's pleas for help could no longer be ignored, I was dispatched to attend to the problem.

I arrived at the complainant's kraal late in the afternoon and was confronted by a mass of meat ropes drying and being smoked on bush pole racks in the middle of the headman's village. This, I was advised, was what remained of the leopard's last kill two days before.

The whole village had heard the leopard make its kill in the middle of the night. Aroused by the ruckus just outside the village palisade the old man, his two adult sons and his pack of scrawny dogs, had driven off the leopard before it had even settled down to feed.

"Hah!" I exclaimed angrily to the embarrassed and bumbling headman. *"Why did you call me to help you when you have already benghised the leopard's kill?"*

"Haaaaieeee...." The headman replied in remorse, shaking his head. *"I have asked for assistance so many times,"* the old man explained, *"and nobody came to help me. How did I know that you would be coming this time?"*

He had a point!

"I could not waste the meat, Baba... Nkosana," he continued. His pleading for me to understand was vibrant, almost obsequious. *"I could not*

waste the meat.”

“Where can I camp?” I asked him with unnecessary brevity.

“I can prepare a hut for you in the village,” the headman said graciously.

“No... No...” I said, relenting, smiling my thanks to the old man. *“All I need is a big shady tree.”*

“There is a big wild fig tree over there....” The headman said, pointing to a small kopje that lay further down the open vlei.

“And water?”

“I will get my wives to bring water to your camp. They will bring water whenever you need it. And my sons will bring you dry wood for your camp fire.”

The village was located up against a small granite hill that was clothed in trees and shrubs all round its base. In the close vicinity of the pole and mud walled huts all the trees had been removed. Just one remained - a big shady *mphafa* tree in the middle of the village. This was the family's indaba tree, the place where the headman conducted his tribal and family business.

Like most other villages in the Matopos, this one comprised a conglomeration of roughly constructed and loosely thatched huts surrounded by a six foot high rough-pole palisade. The ground inside the pole wall had been swept clean. It was as flat and uncluttered as the top of a billiard table.

There was a large cattle kraal on the outside of the village palisade. It, too, was made of rough tree trunks. The cattle kraal was empty when I arrived but there was a huge mound of cattle manure in it. This told me the headman's cattle slept inside the protective boma every night of their lives.

In the distance I could hear cattle lowing. The village piccannins had already gathered the scattered herd and were driving the animals slowly back

to the village - back to the cattle kraal where they would spend the night.

The village overlooked a broad once grassy vlei (plain) that meandered between a mass of low granite hills. The grass had been cropped short by too many cattle over far too many years. This had resulted in a huge donga (erosion gully) that snaked its way down through the middle of the plain. Along the bottom of the donga, ten feet below the surrounding flat ground, there was a narrow bed of golden sand over which a shallow stream of water flowed throughout the rainy season. It was dry at the time of my visit.

All around, to the horizon in every direction, was a magnificent vista of the granite hills of the Matopos range. The native peoples of the Matopos lived and worked in this beautiful environment every day of their lives, yet they never really noticed it. And neither, I realise now in retrospect, did I.

I set up my frugal camp before nightfall. My stretcher was laid out on top of a large canvas tarpaulin that was spread over the ground under the big wild fig. My game scout helper of the day, Solomon, prepared a log fire and got my paraffin Tilley lamp going. He then prepared my evening meal of boiled potatoes, bully beef and baked beans. The beef and the beans came out of tins.

I was exhausted. I was perpetually exhausted. It was a common physical state to which I was growing accustomed. The continuous nocturnal leopard hunting that I had been assigned to do in the White Waters game park, was keeping my vitality and energy levels constantly at a very low ebb. That state of affairs, more than anything else, was the factor that made me decide to spend that night camping out – rather than return to my base at White Waters.

I lay down on my camp stretcher and quietly looked up into the darkening tree canopy. There were birds flitting about in the treetop but I was too tired to bother identifying them. The change, having nothing to do for a while, was a relief. And with no leopard kill to attend it seemed that I was going to enjoy the luxury of a full night's sleep. I shut my eyes and dosed off.

Solomon woke me just after dusk. He carried a tin plate in his hands full of the steaming food that he had prepared.

“*Thanks Solomon,*” I said sleepily, reluctantly sitting up on the bed. “*Put it on the table.*”

I wearily lifted my body from the bed and sat down on my canvas camp chair at the table. Solomon collected the hissing Tilley lamp from near the campfire and placed it on the table directly across from my plate. I got stuck into the food. I was famished.

It was by then dark. There was no moon but there was plenty of light from the bright stars hanging in the sky high above. The Tilley lamp, however, masked all that reality with its own bright light.

No sooner had I started to eat than a commotion erupted in the village. There was the sound of cattle bellowing and of dry poles splintering. Cattle raced across the open veld, their many hooves beating the ground to a pulp. The noise of the stampede was thunderous. Slowly the sound of pounding hooves and moaning cattle disappeared into the faraway distance down the vleis.

I stopped eating. Listening! Hearing everything! A single beast began lowing softly in the darkness. I judged it to be three to four hundred yards away on the far side of the donga. Its moan was a mournful, melancholy sound that I had never heard before. It was the sound that a beast makes when it is being strangled to death by the jaws of a big cat.

When the furore died down I became conscious of Solomon standing at my side. I looked up at him. “*The leopard has killed again,*” he said succinctly. I nodded. I had worked that out for myself.

I resumed my interrupted meal. “*You can make me a cup of coffee, Solomon.*”

“*Yes Sir,*” Solomon replied. He left to carry out my instructions.

I pushed my empty plate to one side of the steel camp table and took up my mug of hot coffee. It was strong and good. It tasted much better mixed with the fresh milk from the village than it usually did. Coffee made with powdered Kilm milk, my normal camp fare, made the beverage taste artificial.

There came the sound of running feet. A young man, one of the headman's sons, presented himself at my table.

"Nkosana...." The young man said out of breath. *"The leopard has come. It has killed another cow?"*

"I heard it," I answered laconically. *"I heard it all"*

"Nkosana, my father wants you to go and kill it."

"All in good time," I replied with some nonchalance. *"I want to finish my coffee first."*

"But... Nkosi...?"

"Go tell your father that the leopard is not going to run away," I explained my lack of immediate action. *"It will be feeding off its kill for many hours. And the longer it feeds the less will it be likely to run away when I go to kill it. Tell your father to get everybody in the village to be quiet. Tell them to go to bed. And tell him that nobody must go near the leopard."* I swallowed the last dregs of the coffee.

"Now I am going to get myself ready to kill the leopard." I said rising from the table.

The young man turned and ran through the darkness back to the village.

In the light of the Tilley lamp I prepared my hunting headlamp and adjusted the elasticised fabric headband until it felt snug and comfortable around my head. I picked up my rifle and I snuggled my cheek into its polished wooden stock. I switched the lamp on and adjusted the reflector case over my left eye. I moved the head lamp until the beam ran straight down the barrel of the rifle. The sights came up naturally in front of my eyes. I turned the lamp off.

I fed the wires from the headlamp through the neck of my shirt, down my back inside my shirt, to the waistband of my short trousers. I secured the small battery case on its clip to the waistband. That left my body and arms

free. I strapped a small bag around my waist. It contained spare batteries and four extra brass cartridges - wrapped tightly in a handkerchief. The purpose of the handkerchief binding was to keep the cartridges from rattling together as I walked along.

All that remained was my rifle. I slipped four soft nosed cartridges into the magazine. Pressing a fifth round on top with my thumb, I pushed it into the breech with the bolt. I clicked the bolt shut and put the Mauser safety catch on full.

I was ready.

I doused the Tilley lamp, extinguishing its bright light altogether. I knew the leopard could see the light and I didn't want *anything* to confuse it.

"*Haaaauw...*" Solomon exclaimed disapprovingly.

"*Leave it off until I get back,*" I instructed him clearly.

"*You are going alone?*" he asked in surprise. This was the first time Solomon had been out hunting with me. He had only recently been appointed but he must have *known* that I preferred to hunt alone. Word gets around quickly about such things in African society. Nevertheless, the native staff all tested me. It was a ritual that was getting tedious

"*Yes. I am going alone,*" I said with emphasis. "*If you come along with me the leopard will think a herd of elephants is attacking it.*" I chortled softly to myself.

Solomon laughed.

I walked out from the camp directly onto the vlei. The ground was hard and flat. There was practically no grass and I heard my every footstep on the sun-baked earth. *That* was bad.

I was night blind! This was the result of eating in front of the bright incandescent mantle of the Tilley lamp for the last little while. Everything around me was black. My night vision was zero. I stopped and looked up at the stars. There was a carpet of bright sparkles scattered over the dark night

sky. There was no moon. *That* was good.

I stood alone in the darkness, quiet and quite still, absorbing all the sounds of the night as I waited for my vision to improve. I had hunted on such a night many times before and I knew the stars, on their own, would soon give me enough light in which to operate.

A barn owl swooped low over my head. It *screeeeched* like a demented banshee. The sound lifted the hackles at the back of my neck. I smiled. Why *that* should have happened I had no idea. I have raised many baby barn owls in my life and I am certainly not afraid of them. I am also far from superstitious.

A Mackinder's eagle owl began hooting from the hill directly across the vlei. It was no doubt hunting red rock hares on the granite slopes!

It was going to be another night for owls! I smiled to myself. I love Africa's nights. They are very special. That night was no different. Every living thing spoke to me out of the darkness.

A tiny scops owl began *burrrrping* in the trees behind me. I began counting. *Burrrip... one, two, three, four...Burrrip... one, two, three, four...Burrrip*. There was an exact five-second interval between each syllable.

I was in no hurry. It would take a little while for my night vision to return and I had all night long to wait. The leopard had probably not yet even broken through the cow's tough hide.

I tried to think what the leopard was doing. I had a vision of it ripping off small pieces of the soft under belly skin around the udder. *That* it would do quickly. Leopards love chewing those soft and tender titbits. And even if it *had* broken into the meat it had certainly not started to feed seriously. There would be a lot of tasty fluids oozing out of the warm hot flesh and the big cat would be licking them all up.

Whatever the leopard was doing I was certain of one thing. Once it had broken into the carcass and had begun to eat seriously, it would not be easily chased off. So there was *really* no need to hurry. In fact, I did not want to reach the site of this very fresh kill too early!

A black-backed jackal - having picked up the scent of fresh blood -

began wailing far away down the vlei. I visualised him sniffing the air to get direction - then trotting determinedly and importantly towards the leopard and its kill.

I looked up at the stars. They were brighter than they had been a little while before. My night vision was returning! Slowly the things around me began to take shape.

Out on the vlei ahead of me, I could make out the wide meander of the donga. It's sinuous, winding course looked black against the lighter grey soil of the flat, sparse grassland.

Ten minutes later I slipped over the edge of the donga and, on my bottom, I slid down its steep side to the sandy rivulet below. The thin ribbon of dry yellow sand was pewter-grey in the starlight. I began to walk slowly down the metallic road.

The sand had a crisp crust that crunched audibly under my every footstep. It reminded me of my childhood days in England during World War II. I remembered the squeaking noise old snow made when my little-boy feet broke through its thin, hard surface. The sound of the sand-crust breaking was loud - too loud - but there was not much I could do about it. I worried, however, that the leopard would hear my approach. They have extremely good hearing.

I had worked out roughly where the leopard had killed the cow. I judged the distance and began counting my steps, moving slowly to minimise the noise of my passage.

When I guessed that I was directly opposite the kill site, I quietly climbed the sloping donga wall, and slowly lifted my head above its rim. There, with my toes dug deeply into the steep bank, I listened for many long minutes for the telltale sounds of the leopard feeding.

The sounds I heard were faint but distinct. They were the sounds of the leopard feeding all right, but they came from some distance away downstream. My quarry was further away than I had thought.

I slipped back down to the silvery streambed and progressed for another hundred yards along the donga bottom. Again I climbed to the top of

the gully -slowly- quietly - carefully. I was conscious all the time that I must not make any kind of detectable noise. This time the sounds of feeding were much closer but they were *still* further down the vlei.

The next time I climbed the steep and sloping donga embankment, I judged the leopard to be directly opposite me. It was feeding on its kill right out in the open in the middle of the vlei.

I tested the wind by sticking a spittle-wet forefinger into the void above my head. It seemed to be still, very still. If there was any air movement at all it was slight. I sensed it was drifting down the length of the donga. That idea comforted me. My scent would be flowing, like water, down the gully drainage and not across the open veld. The wind - what there was of it - It would not betray my presence to the leopard.

Satisfied, I put the drift of the air out of my mind.

I listened for several minutes whilst peering into the darkness towards the feeding leopard. My eyes were at ground level. I was so close but just *how* close I really did not know. Sound travels far in the still cool air of the night. Was the leopard close enough for me to kill it cleanly?

That was the big question.

There was one way to find out.

I carefully laid my rifle on the ground just over the top edge of the donga, pointing it in the direction of the feeding leopard. Ever so carefully and quietly I kicked my toes deeper into the loose gravel of the steep embankment, lifting myself marginally higher than I had been before. Then, with my elbows firmly secure on the flat ground, I took up my rifle.

I shifted my position continuously, listening all the time to the sound of the leopard feeding, until I felt comfortable with the natural angle I had assumed. I snuggled into the rifle stock and imagined seeing the leopard in the sights. I was ready.

I lifted my left hand to my head and twisted the elastic band of the headlamp until the reflector was sitting over my left eye. I tried to remember

the feel of its exact position when I had tested the angle back in camp. Would it be correct when I turned on the light? *Another* big question!

My fingers found the switch. The bright beam blazoned itself across the open veld.

A flock of crowned plovers (lapwings) took to the air with raucous screams. They had been sitting on the ground between the leopard and me when the bright light had suddenly struck them. The birds had been startled - and they had startled me - but I quickly put their explosive interruption behind me. In the beam of my torch I saw my quarry clearly. It was only 100 yards away!

A light mist of dry brown dust - from the stampede - still lingered in the air. It told me - better than the spittle on my wet finger - that there was no breeze blowing whatsoever. The air was absolutely dead still. And the hazy cloud added a measure of surrealism to scene.

The leopard's senses had been jolted by both the stunning burst of bright light *and* by the simultaneous and explosive screaming of the birds. And as the bright light hit it, the leopard bounced sharply to his feet. It turned half away round and made ready to run. But it was strangely hesitant.

I focused the beam squarely on its face. It turned its head away. I kept the light on the back of its head. The leopard was standing over the carcass of the cow right out in the open. The nearest cover was another 100 metres away across the open ground.

For a moment, it looked through the gloom at the jumble of rocks and bushes that would have given the animal refuge. Then it looked back at me - directly into the bright glare of the spotlight.

My first impression was that it was a small leopard. This surprised me. It definitely seemed *very* small when I compared it to the size of the cow it was feeding on.

It looked away again and made a quick and sudden movement - brief and jerky. I got the impression it was about to run away. But then it stalled - again. And I suddenly understood why!

In the darkness beyond - cast by the torchlight - the leopard was unexpectedly confronted by the sight of its own exaggerated shadow. The image appeared like a phantom amidst the quiet and dust-laden night air. This strange and ghostlike effigy threw the animal completely.

It growled softly in anger and confusion.

I flicked my head from side to side. The light beam ran back and forth across the veld like a mini-searchlight. It had the effect of making the image of the leopard's shape fade and sharpen repeatedly; and it seemed to bounce from side to side. It was an old trick I had learned many years before - when hunting nocturnal springhares as a schoolboy.

The moving image confused the leopard even more.

I stopped moving the light. The leopard froze but it kept its face away from me.

One last time, briefly, I flicked the light from side to side. The leopard growled again in perplexed anger. Then, slowly, it turned its head back towards me and squinted directly into the bright light. That is what I wanted. That is what I needed.

The leopard was now alert but still undecided. It had clearly never been confronted by bright torchlight before.

I knew I would have to shoot it now - quickly - or it would disappear into the night. Once it was on the move it would be gone. So would my opportunity to kill it!

I was ready for it. As the leopard squinted into the bright beam I rested the foresight bead on the bridge of its nose. I quickly brought the vee of the back sights into line. On target! I squeezed the trigger.

The rifle kicked. The recoil threw me backward into the dark void of the donga behind me. I loosened my feet and tried to drop vertically. My feet hit the hidden slope beneath me and I tumbled head over heels backwards, rolling to the bottom. All the while I clutched my precious rifle close to me.

The still burning lamp on my head fell over my nose.

When I hit the bottom I found myself lying on my back in a cloud of fine grey dust. The light beam cut through the murky air in a solid column.

All around the hills the reverberation of the shot echoed and re-echoed into the night. The report rolled in and out of the kopjes, bouncing the sound back and forth for what seemed forever. It took several moments for the resonance to fade away.

What had happened to the leopard?

I scrambled to the rim of the donga, pushing another round into the chamber as I climbed. For a moment, during the instant I had pulled off the shot, I had seen the leopard's head punched backwards by the bullet. So I had hit it. That I knew.

Reaching the top edge of the donga again, I set the light squarely on the front of my forehead, pushing the beam towards the carcass of the cow. All around the flatland lay vacant. The leopard was nowhere to be seen.

For a moment I wondered: *Had I wounded it? Had it run away into the night?*

Then the white tip of the leopard's tail flicked up from behind the dead cow. I recognised the movement immediately. It was a death throe. The leopard was *not* wounded. Neither had it escaped into the night. It was lying dead just behind the carcass of its last kill.

I approached the big cat cautiously. It was dead all right. The bullet had hit it precisely where I had aimed, passing right through the leopard's head and through its brain.

The cow was not a cow at all. It was a giant ox nearly as big as a Brahman bull. It was the biggest animal I ever heard of a leopard killing. *That* was why the leopard had looked so puny when I first saw it in the beam of the torch. It was only small in comparison to the enormous size of the ox it had killed.

The following morning I went over the scene of the previous night.

Before the kill, the leopard had walked around the cattle kraal just outside the village palisade, giving the cattle a full view and a good smell. There was a wet patch on the ground where it had urinated on the edge of the kraal.

Seeing the leopard and smelling its urine caused the cattle to panic. They burst out of the kraal and stampeded down the vlei.

The leopard had followed, jumping onto the neck of its selected victim, getting a death grip with its teeth about its throat. It had hung on, the claws of all four feet digging into the skin and the flesh of its running victim's neck. Thus locked together, the bullock had carried its killer - under its neck - for one hundred and fifty yards before falling to the ground asphyxiated. *That* was when it had let out that long and mournful bellow that everybody had heard.

This was the biggest leopard I was ever to kill. It was a huge tom weighing 164 pounds (75 kgs).