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84 HUNTING IMAGES



We continue our interviews with well-known professional hunters and hunting outfitters. For the sake of fairness and consistency of responses, a standard questionnaire is used for this series.



This magnificent leopard with 17²/₁₆" skull was shot by Chris Hellinger.

When did you start your professional hunting career?

My father farmed in the Free State in South Africa and my mom home-schooled me until I was nine. At least she managed to do so until teatime. Then I was gone, into the bush, and the rest of my day was lost to her. I used to roam the veld with a .22, mostly barefoot or bareback on an old mare.

As a young man I devoured books by JA Hunter, Jim Corbett and Robert Ruark. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was one of my set-books at school and I would spend hours daydreaming about living a life in the bush as a professional hunter.

In 1976 some friends asked if I would like to accompany them on a month-long trip to Rhodesia and I jumped at the chance. The Bush War in Rhodesia was in full swing and this trip would change my life forever. Early on I bumped into an old friend, Frank McCourt. He had moved to Rhodesia a few years earlier, joined the army and was now running the Bar G ranch in his spare time, not far from the Lion and Elephant Motel in the south-eastern Lowveld. It was through Frank that I met Ray Torr who owned the motel. Ray assured me that before the war there had been a growing safari industry in the country and suggested that I come back and do my apprenticeship with him. Suddenly my life took on new meaning. Our holiday flew past in the blink of an eye, and when we returned to Cape Town, I knew that my stay there would be short-

lived. I had discovered a dream and it was perfectly within my grasp. I have never looked back.

I returned to Rhodesia in early 1977, enlisted in the army, and then spent as much time as I could working as a learner PH under Ray. This mostly consisted of going out with a tracker and culling his hunting quotas on Liebigs and Nuanetsi Ranches. I got my learner's licence in 1978 and qualified as a full professional hunter, without restrictions, in 1983.

What is your favourite game animal?

I have two favourites – buffalo and lion. Buffalo give all the appearances of being easily hunted animals, but this is an illusion. They are worthy adversaries that will not think twice about revenge, should that situation arise.

Tracking buff can involve hours and hours of walking, sometimes in intense heat, and finding them too late limits the options. Selecting the right animal, keeping it in view, and getting the client into the best position for a clean shot are all more difficult and time-consuming than they sound. The critical first shot, well placed, will see the selected bull down in less than 50 yards – mission accomplished. A bad shot will usher in a whole new ball game and an onslaught of dry mouth. They are huge, tough, powerful animals that become incredibly hard to put down if the first shot is off the mark. When they charge it is with deceptive speed and as far as I am concerned the only way to stop them is with a shot to the brain; body shots will not faze them at all. They can be clinically dead, but that massive bulk, once pumped full of adrenaline and rage, will remain fully functional and terrifyingly focused for enough time to cause serious body damage at best, or fatality.

I always tell my clients that shooting a buffalo is easy; it is convincing him that he is dead that is the hard part.

Fortunately, not every wounded buffalo will try to kill you, but you never know if the one you are following will be *the* one. In the event of a charge, standing one's ground requires holding fear under control and harnessing it. For a client, facing an oncoming buffalo must feel utterly terrifying!

Lion is my other favourite hunt, especially if it can be tracked. Hunting them on their own terms is infinitely more gratifying than taking one from a blind.

To accomplish this successfully, I must have a client with a sense of adventure. Baits must be set up and armed with trail cameras. It is imperative that the lion can be correctly aged from the camera pictures, ensuring that it is not a pride male but one that has been evicted from a pride. Once this has happened, a lion's days are numbered, unless he manages to form a successful



Bill Pritchard with a beautiful lion taken in the Bubye Valley Conservancy (BVC), Zimbabwe

coalition with some other males. Having grown accustomed to his females supplying his food, evicted lions often find it difficult to fend for themselves and generally become scavengers until they either starve to death or are killed by younger males. A hunter's bullet is a far better option for them and does nothing to affect the gene pool, so it is a win-win situation for all concerned.

Wild lions are extremely vigilant and almost impossible to stalk, especially if they happen to be facing in the direction of your approach. For experienced trackers, following them is not that difficult. After feeding, the cat will leave the bait and seek out a dense place to lie up for the day. Depending on the time of year, his choice of position might be way too thick, in which case he will see or hear us before we get to see him, and in this thick stuff he

may choose either to run or charge. Seeing him first is the object of the exercise and I must still get the client into a position for a clear shot without alerting the lion. By this time the cat is quite often within 40 yards, so a misplaced bullet can have 500 lbs of snarling fury in our faces in a heartbeat.

Tell us about your rifles

My first heavy rifle was a Winchester Model 70 in .458 Win Mag that I bought in Cape Town for ZAR500 (I'm guessing around \$166 at the time), together with 99 rounds of ammunition. I was told that the previous owner had bought the rifle with a hundred rounds, fired one shot and decided it was not for him. I had the rifle restocked



Early days. Here I am holding the skull of a 50¹/₂" buffalo from Lusulu.



John Sharp and Hogan MacCarty with her 15 ft crocodile in Mozambique

Around the Campfire with John Sharp



Black rhino in the Buby Valley Conservancy

to fit me, and a quarter rib fitted to replace the flip-down rear sight. It was such a good fit that I could almost shoot it with my eyes closed. This rifle served me very well for my first 15 years in the business with not a single malfunction, and I never experienced any penetration problems.

During my earlier years in the industry, I had a close call with a wounded buffalo. I fired too soon and only then realised that I did not have the time to reload. Knowing that I had to protect the client behind me, I remained rooted to the spot, hoping by some miracle that I would be able to close the bolt and fire as the enraged bull hit the end of the barrel. That miracle didn't happen but another one did – and that's why I'm here to tell the tale. After this incident I set my sights on owning a double.

After many years of discussion I managed to convince a wealthy German client of mine to trade his Austrian doubles for investment-quality English doubles. The weapons he acquired over the following years were from Holland & Holland and the amount that changed hands was considerable. Both parties were extremely happy and through their mutual agreement, I was given a .470 working double as a gift. This turned out to be a "Best Hammerless Ejector" by Rigby, built in 1928 and sold in 1929 to a Viscount Furness. This rifle had later been acquired by H&H who had rebarrelled it during the 60s, of course with more modern steel. Having thus lost its collector value, it became a working gun and found its way into my willing hands. It fits me like it was made for me and is without a doubt the finest weapon I have ever owned. It is my all-time favourite heavy rifle and has become an extension of me.

I have two Remington 700 loaner rifles in .375 H&H, both scoped for buffalo hunting. I also have two loaner rifles in .300 Win Mag – one Sako and one Ruger M77. The Ruger I have rigged up for leopard hunting with a Leupold

Vari-X III scope with illuminated reticule.

My leopard follow-up weapon is a Binelli 3½" 12-gauge Magnum, and I have a Freedom Arms .454 Casull mounted in the cab of my Cruiser for quick access to firepower when driving.

Any regrets regarding the choice of PH as a career?

Not a chance. Most people spend their lives trying to reach their dream and I have spent the better part of my life living my dream. It really can't get better than that.

As a single man I have been free to follow my heart, doing whatever I pleased, whenever the feeling took me. I have hunted all over Tanzania, except for the Selous. I have hunted in Mozambique and was involved in a crocodile culling exercise on Cahora Bassa – an incredible experience that will in all probability never be repeated. I've hunted South Africa and South West Africa (before it became Namibia), as well as Zambia and Botswana. And of course I've hunted pretty much all over Zimbabwe. The latter has always been my favourite, as the bush just lends itself to close-up and personal forays with dangerous game. An adventurous spirit could not have asked for more.

Do you have any specific career highlights?

My career as a professional hunter has been filled with highlights and it is because of this that I have written the book, *Facing Down Fear*. Herewith an excerpt from my book:

"In the Buby Valley Conservancy a normal lion / buffalo hunt is an eighteen-day affair. James had informed me that he would not be able to stay for the full period so we would only have thirteen days of hunting. The pressure

was on. He told me that he fully understood the risk of a shortened hunt and that he would totally understand if the hunt was unsuccessful. This was a very kind gesture on his part but it did nothing to relieve my stress. In addition, he had expressed the desire to do a follow-up or tracking hunt.

"During the first few days we shot two giraffe and a number of zebra for bait and placed these over a pretty vast area of the conservancy. Altogether about twelve bait sites. We attracted prides, females with cubs, pride males easily distinguishable by their stained back legs, immature males, leopards, everything but the mature, older male we were seeking. The days were drifting by and I was becoming more and more tense.

"On day nine we arrived at Mabule waterhole to find that a good, blond specimen had fed very briefly at around midnight, but only for a few minutes, and then left. Moving on to Mabulani waterhole, we found that bait hit as well. On going through the pictures I saw that a black-maned lion had arrived on the scene at 04:17 and left at 06:51 – he would not be far. I tried to convince James that this was the opportunity we had been waiting for and that we should immediately start tracking. It was then just after 08:00 and our chances were excellent. After much deliberation, he said that he would rather go after the male from the previous bait, as it appeared to have a longer bib. My trackers looked crestfallen; they knew this was our best chance. I tried to reason with James that the other lion's tracks had by now been totally obliterated by thousands of guinea fowl, so we had no chance of following it that day, and additionally we would be losing an opportunity to go after this black-maned lion that we all



Ola Dønnem with his 91 lb elephant bull

preferred. Besides, it was doubtful that James' lion would even return to that bait. He remained resolute though, so we drove away from almost certain success. The trackers and I were dejected but tried our best to hide our feelings. The remainder of the baits offered nothing exciting except for a collared pride male and his extended family.

"Day ten dawned and we went straight to Mabule to see if James' lion had returned, but it had not. More stress. At Mabulani the camera revealed that our black-maned male had fed pretty much the entire night from 18:18 the previous evening through to 04:14 this morning and had departed in a different direction from the morning before. His belly was undoubtedly full, but as this was now our only option we decided to follow. His tracks led southwest down a little used track. After about two kilometres, I knew this cat was on his way and would not



61" Kudu shot by Bob Jacobs



Matt Bell posing with his wide-bossed buffalo bull

Bob Jacobs with a 180 lb tom



be returning to the bait, but we continued on the tracks. We followed it a long way, past England waterhole, until I dejectedly threw in the towel. After calling in the vehicle we checked the remainder of the baits with the same results. Realising that we now had absolutely nothing suitable anywhere, we dropped two untouched baits and tried to re-hang them ahead of the black-maned male's track direction. We got back to camp well after dark, tired and miserable.

"Day eleven saw us checking the two baits we had re-hung the night before – nothing. At Mabule, while checking our bait there, the trackers found a good-sized male track near the waterhole. The tracks were still visible



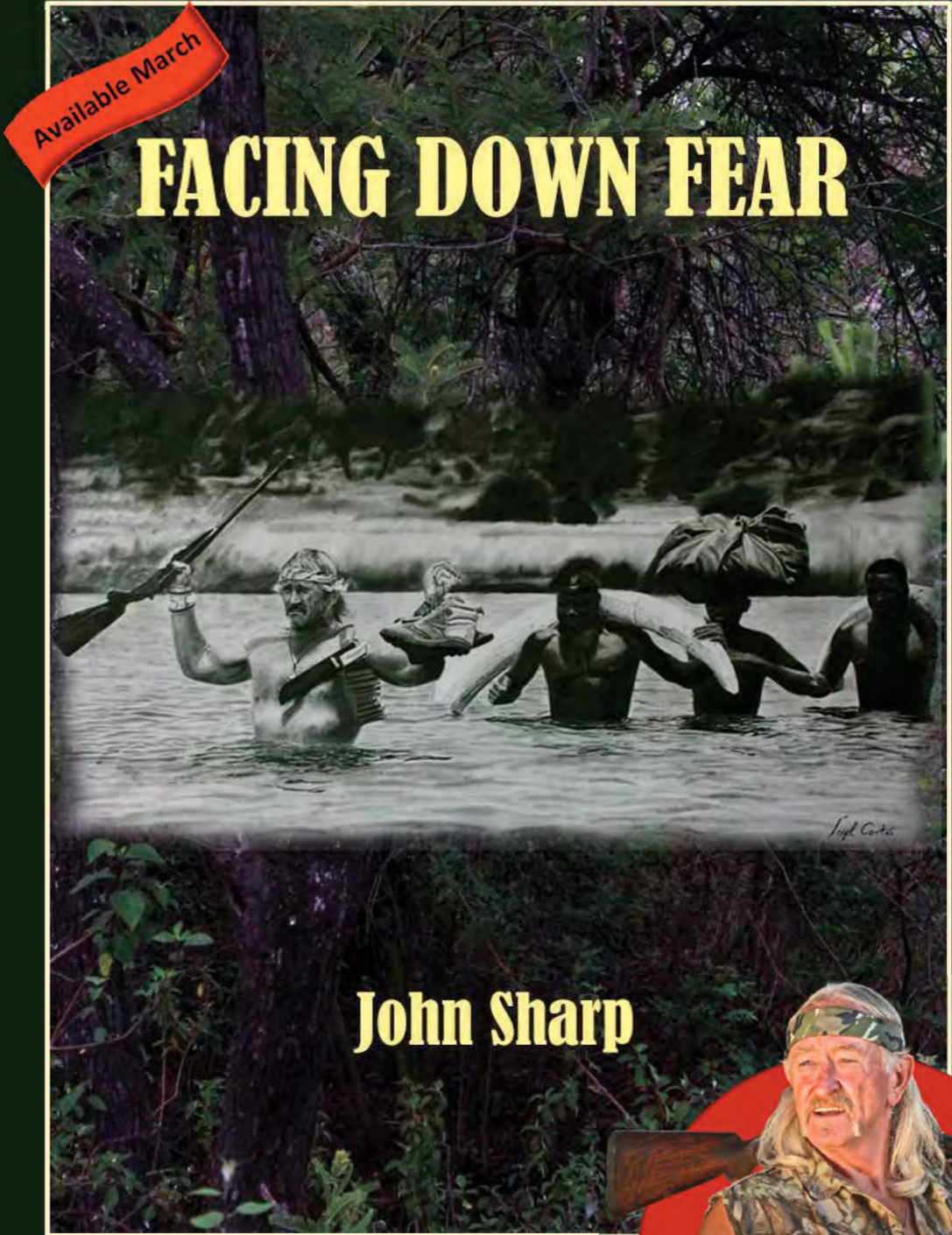
Jack Mayfield with a lovely old male lion

and not entirely obliterated by the guinea fowl, indicating that this lion had come to drink early in the morning. He could not be far away. I decided to race to Mabulani, just a few kilometres away, to see whether the black-maned lion had perchance returned. He had not, so we sped back to Mabule to track this male from the waterhole. We had no idea what we would find at the end of the tracks; we just hoped it would be the one James wanted with the longer bib.

"The weather looked a bit suspect, as if it might rain, and there was a strong wind blowing from the northeast. I could smell the moisture in the air. The tracks were headed directly into the wind. This was a huge factor in our favour, as it would mask the sound of our approach. I said a silent prayer that the cat would maintain its chosen direction. Isaac led the way with Lovemore, a new tracker, pulling abreast of him when the vegetation allowed. The pace was very slow. We simply had to spot this lion before it saw us – everything depended on this. The ground was very dry, like powder in places, and the wind lifted the dust from our footfalls into the faces of those behind. Isaac, Lovemore and I were tense; with only two days left we knew all too well what was at stake.

"We were in scrub mopane, still relatively flush with leaves after the late rains, but it was sparse, giving us a good field of view. We came to a spot in the open where the lion had lain down for a rest and then moved on again. There were few other animals about, far fewer than we

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Fishing with clients off the Mozambique coast

would normally have encountered. They had mostly retired into thicker surroundings because of the strong wind. We continued slowly forward, the dust irritating our eyes, scanning our surrounds with intense concentration. A second resting place heightened our tensions and our pace slowed yet again. Not a single bird was seen or heard.

"The scrub mopane began to thicken, indicating to me a possible lie-up venue. Suddenly Lovemore crouched, pointing ahead, and we all went to our knees in unison. There, barely visible in the thick scrub, was the lion, lying on his side and fortunately facing diagonally away from us. He was no more than thirty-five yards away. I quietly got James onto the sticks in a position where he could see




Don Anderson with a huge lion in the BVC

a vital part of the lion's chest and whispered for him to hold his fire until I gave the command. Our cameraman, Gareth Dimmick of Dark Continent Video Productions, sidled silently up behind him, ready to record whatever happened. We knew it was a lion but was it old enough to shoot? While the rest remained motionless, Isaac and I moved silently from side to side with our binoculars, trying to get a better look. The lion rolled onto its back, feet in the air, and then back onto his side again. I stopped breathing. How long before he saw us? Isaac and I finally agreed that he had a good mane, and for me the colour of his hide put him in the correct age bracket. I slithered silently back to James, moved him slightly to the right with






My .470 Rigby double on 17" bosses in the BVC




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Gareth in tow, explained where he should place his shot and told him to fire. With my Rigby at the ready I awaited a possible, close-quarter charge – the lion was unaware of our presence and might run straight at us in fright if the shot was not good. The report was deafening after the prolonged silence but the lion did not move. I called for a second shot, just for security, and again the cat remained motionless.

“My trackers erupted! They sprang high in the air, shouting at the top of their voices and then engulfed James, hugging him and dancing with and around him. I kept a vigil on the motionless lion, rifle at the ready just in case, until I too was swept almost off my feet by the elated trackers!

“We walked slowly towards the still form, alert for any movement, and then claimed a beautiful seven-year old, battle-scarred, solitary lion that was on the other side of a pride. It was not the one we had seen on camera – it was better! This one had certainly spread his seed when he was in his prime, but he was past that time now so we had not affected the gene pool in any way.

“I felt a sense of pride as I reflected momentarily on how this one sacrifice would go a long way to fund the BVC’s projects for the surrounding rural communities, the conservation of our other species and the protection of our valuable black rhino population. It does not get better than this.”



James and the fantastic old lion we tracked from a waterhole

What is your definition of a quality hunt?

Every hunt should be a quality hunt. I always try to treat each client as I myself would like to be treated. This can be easier said than done, but fortunately the vast majority of my clients have been great people.

I encourage prospective clients to ask lots of questions so that there are no grey areas. It is extremely important for them to know exactly what to expect. A quality hunting area is vital. It should go without saying, but it doesn’t, that a client should be confident that he is buying a hunt

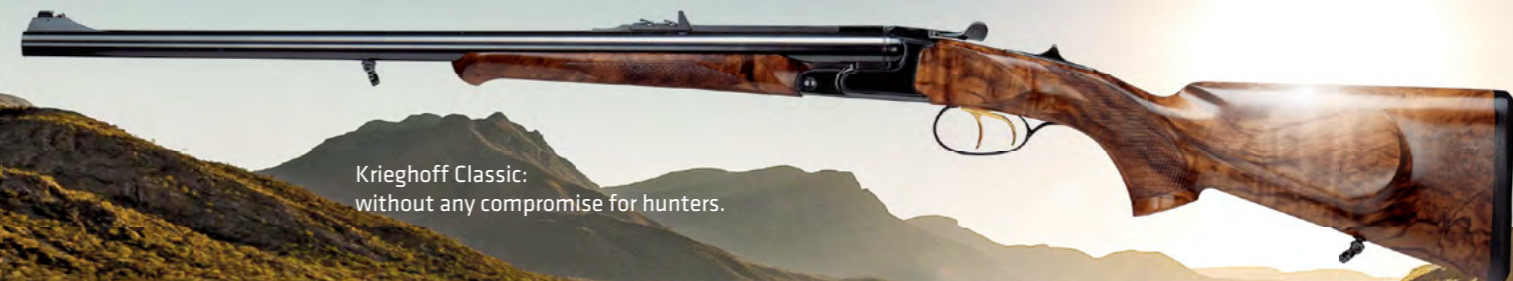


A stunning lion in the Buby Valley Conservancy



Henrik Lott, Erongo Mountains Namibia June 2016

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Elephant cows drinking
– photographed during
a recent safari



that actually exists. Paying for a lion in an area that has a quota of six for the year, and finding out halfway through the hunt that 12 have been sold, and the PH has been instructed not to allow the client to take a lion, is a disgraceful reality. I have never oversold my quota.

I also encourage my clients to practise shooting quickly over shooting sticks before they arrive. Hunting is a team effort and each person must do his/her part. I tell them all that, once on the sticks, only they can decide whether they can take the shot or not. No professional can decide this for them – it's entirely their call. In a few split seconds they have to make this vital decision and this is where their practise will pay off. If in doubt, rather decline the shot. It is far better to let it go than to risk a bad shot and possibly wound the animal. This policy of educate and communicate has worked well for me over the years. The people who listen to my suggestions and follow them will almost certainly have a quality hunt.

I especially enjoy the first-time hunters to Africa; eager to learn, they listen intently and try to follow instructions to a T. Coupled with the fact that their first-time experience is so way beyond their imagined expectations, they are guaranteed to have a quality hunt.

What is the difference between an agreeable and a difficult client?

I have been racking my brain and I can recall less than a handful of difficult clients – pretty good going after more than 35 years in the field. A good PH has spent many years in the bush, and if he's worth his salt, has never stopped learning. It makes perfect sense then that a relative newcomer to Africa would listen to what that PH has to offer. Wisdom gleaned from experience.

One item that can lead to complications on a hunt is the dreaded shot placement book. Kevin Robertson's books are excellent for what they offer but a thorough knowledge of anatomy is also required, and there's the rub. The majority of the drawings or pictures show the animals standing on bare ground, apparently on a level surface, dead square to the shooter's position – something that rarely occurs in the field but is important for


the book's explanation purposes. Some people simply cannot comprehend that should this position be different (either angled towards or away from the shooter), the bullet's point of impact and thus the aiming point will also be different. I use a book to indicate to clients where vital organs are situated but that's as far as it goes. Thereafter, I always call the shot placement to try to ensure a fatal strike. Sadly there are some that choose not to heed my advice and make their own decisions based on what they have interpreted from one of these books, and this can result in a wounded animal. My excellent trackers seldom fail but it can make for a long day.

I've always believed that from a PH's perspective, hunting is 75% PR and 25% hunting. A good PH should be able to conduct a totally unsuccessful hunt, but do it in such a way that the client would willingly book another hunt with him.

Can you single out a particular and favourite hunting area?

From 1984 to 1991, I was the king of an incredible area within the Binga Communal Lands in Zimbabwe. I hunted primarily an area called Manjolo, which had Chizarira National Park on its northern boundary and Chirisa Safari Area on the eastern side. It was more affectionately known as Lusulu, after the small village of Lusulu, a tiny settlement about one kilometre north of my camp.

I have wonderful memories of the hunts I had there with my clients, as well as with Johnnie Vivier, John Oosthuisen and Neil Wareing who brought some of their clients to hunt buffalo there. These formed the basis of lifelong friendships.

I have been incredibly blessed to have hunted in many African countries, in diverse areas ranging from deserts to swamps, but Lusulu will always hold a special place in my heart. 

For more information about John Sharp and his hunting experiences, please visit:
<http://www.john-sharp-safaris.com/>