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- Cover: A Friedrich Stendebach, Suhl 16 gauge shotgun, built circa 1910/1915 owned by Hendrik Frauehauf.
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JOHN COLEMAN

The good, bad and ugly of buffalo hunting

Buffalo are the most popular of the "Big Five" hunted on safari by overseas clients. Nowadays, particularly in South Africa, buffalo are a sought-after species and, with all the rules and regulations regarding the safari industry, in most cases the average amateur hunter will only be able to hunt buffalo with a professional hunter guiding him, but a hunter should know something about this type of hunting before going out. There are, however, some areas to the north of South Africa where some lucky amateur hunters can still hunt buffalo without a professional guide.

Buffalo is the most popular of the "Big Five" hunted by overseas clients. In South Africa, buffalo is a sought-after species. Given all the rules regulating the safari industry, the only dangerous game animal most amateur hunters will ever take is a buffalo. However, it is not a hunt you should ever take lightly. It is always advisable to engage the services of an experienced professional hunter. There are areas north of South Africa where you can legally hunt buffalo without a guide. That is not a good idea unless you are a seasoned

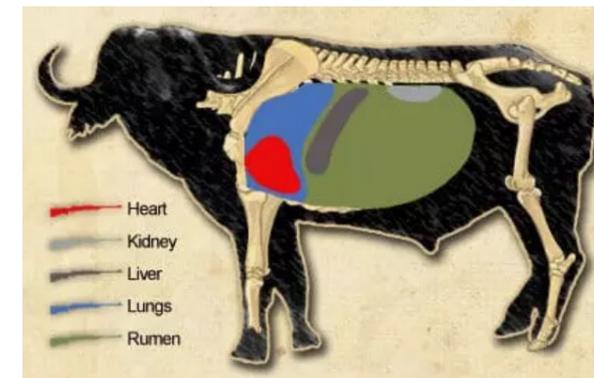
hunter with a backup plan or two up your sleeve. Over the past 60 years, as a professional, I have hunted many buffalo in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Zambia, the Caprivi and Botswana. I was a game ranger with the Department of National Parks. I was in charge of "control" work, cropping on my own in the Matetsi area, shooting for meat and conducting numerous hunting safaris. After big cats, buffalo hunting is one of my favourite big-game hunting occupations. Buffalo are big, tough animals and dangerous when persecuted. Like any of the

other "Big Five" members, care should be taken. A good rifle and reliable ammunition is a must. Legal calibres are from 9.3mm and .375 magnum up. I have found that round-nosed full metal jacket (solid) bullets in the heavier weights for the rifle of choice are best for all-round penetration and performance. Well-constructed expanding bullets such as Nosler Partition, Barnes X or other "Premium" types are excellent performers for broadside shots on buffalo.

A buffalo's heart is situated between the front legs, just under a third of the way up from the chest floor. The lungs are around, and slightly above, the heart, extending back into the chest cavity to just behind the shoulder. It usually is best to angle for the heart/lung area.

From the front, if very close and standing undisturbed, the hunter should aim in the centre of the forehead, midway between the eyes and the boss, to get the brain. When disturbed or charging, with its head up, you must aim much lower, between the nose and the eyes. It is not advisable to take a brain shot unless the animal is very close and about to attack or actually attack.

It is always better to prevent a charge by finishing the animal off before he can do so. I was genuinely charged only a few times and luckily, I managed to put those buffalo down before they got to me. The danger of buffalo hunting is genuine but often exaggerated. If you make the first shot count, a buffalo dies like any other animal. Most injuries or deaths are caused by panic and carelessness.



A buffalo's engine room.

Don't go barging in after a wounded buffalo and you should be okay. Buffalo normally run away when sensing you or when shot at, except if it is badly or mortally wounded. They will attack if you get too close. If it hasn't seen you and if you stood dead still, you would have time to give it a good shot. Remember: if there is no death below after a minute or two, wait a while before following up. A buffalo is a large and relatively slow animal. It can't hide as well as the big cats and you usually have enough time to get a shot or two in.

A wounded buffalo can be deadly dangerous in thick bush, a reed-bank, or high elephant grass, where visibility is poor. In this case, follow up slowly and cautiously



A buffalo shot by the author.

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and, if possible, use a dog to sniff it out. Get the tracker to throw sticks and stones ahead if there is no dog - this usually gets a reaction. A bad buffalo, however, is a previously wounded one that you come across unexpectedly and unarmed. This nasty character will nail you! The rule to follow in big-game country is "always carry an adequate rifle and stay alert".

Notwithstanding what I have said, buffalo and other dangerous game behave somewhat differently, depending on the area and local conditions. They are often heavily hunted by the local communities, resulting in non-fatal wounds. Others become cantankerous by constant harassment. Obviously, they will be more likely to charge unwary hunters. As long as you follow the "rule", you should be okay.

The popular belief that a wounded buffalo will deliberately circle back around you and then follow up on your tracks from behind is absolute rubbish. A buffalo is not capable of pre-meditated plans! What happens is that the wounded animal will run away and, after a while, will instinctively turn down-wind for a short distance to stand or lie down because of exhaustion and pain. When the pursuers pass, lose the spoor or stop, the wounded animal instinctively believes that it was spotted and will charge, quite often from behind, because you have passed it and are too close. When you find tracks turning off down-wind, watch out!

Buffalo seldom attacks humans without good reason. I have never known a whole herd to charge, as some people believe. If the herd runs towards you, they are either following the one that is actually charging or are just running in confusion. Buffalo naturally appear mean because of their looks. Having their mean-looking noses in the air means they are merely curious or suspicious. When they do charge, their noses will be up and they will only lower their heads once they are about to make contact. Occasionally they bounce up and down as they approach, and this could indicate a bluff. A well-placed shot from a heavy rifle should stop them or turns them away. A poorly placed shot definitely will not!

I must stress that the attitude of the hunter is critical. Animals can sense fear, aggression and tension and is more likely to attack if a person presents these symptoms. Calm yourself, breathe and make sure your first shot counts.

Always make sure the animal is dead before getting too close to it, particularly with dangerous game. I once made the stupid mistake of not poking a "dead" buffalo in the eye with the end of my rifle's barrel. One that is still alive, will blink. I was cropping and was really tired. I walked up to the seemingly dead buffalo cow and sat on it. Next, she leapt up, threw me in the air and, thank goodness, took off. I was forced



Buffalo taken by the author's clients in southern Rhodesia. >>

to follow up and finish her off, prolonging my day and increasing my risk. I could have been killed!

Experiences like this have taught me to treat all dangerous animals with proper caution and respect. If you are not a hundred percent sure the animal is dead, give it another shot. Bullets are cheaper than a human's life!

There is a belief that a Honeyguide bird will sometimes lead you to a buffalo or a snake instead of a beehive. I have actually had this happen to me twice. The first time, hearing the little bird chattering, coaxing me to follow, I obliged. I was a keen collector of wild honey. After some distance, the bird started making more urgent sounds and kept swooping down on a patch of thick bush. I entered the bush, looking for the beehive. Next, a loud snort and a huge dark, sinister shape rose up ahead of me. With my .458 ready, I watched, my heart in my mouth. The buffalo stood facing me with its nose up, then came at me. I shot it in the brain and jumped aside as it crashed to the ground right in front of me. That was close!

If I had not been alert, I would have walked into it. After I settled down, I examined it and found a massive abscess on the side of its belly. I opened it up and found a poacher's muzzle-loader slug in there from a skirmish a few weeks previously. I checked the bush; there was no beehive.

Another time, following a honeyguide, I was led to a big, bushy termite hill. I cautiously approached, thinking that there was, perhaps, a beehive in a hole. The bird

got excited and kept swooping down towards the ground. Suddenly, to my horror, a huge black mamba reared up, level with my head. I beat a hasty retreat and left the honey, if any, to the snake! It may have been a coincidence... but maybe not?

When I was game farming in the Matetsi area in the then Southern Rhodesia, I shot up to fifteen buffalo at a time, twice a week, to supply the miners at the Wankie Colliery. Large herds regularly moved through from the Robins Camp area in the Wankie Game Reserve nearby.

Upon receiving an order, I would approach the herd, shoot a couple of big-bodied bulls, then run alongside through the clouds of dust and shoot as many more as needed. I used a .458 with 510-grain soft-nosed bullets and, in more open country, a .30-06 with 200 grain Nosler partition bullets. I did not use solids because of the chance of the bullet penetrating and hitting other animals.

The 200 grain Nosler bullets were good for broadside shots, typically penetrating through and lodging under the skin on the other side. If an occasional animal was wounded, I followed up with the .458, loaded with 500grn "solids". I must say, I was never actually charged more than twice. I had a Muslim along to cut throats. Most miners were of the Islamic faith and their meat had to be Halaal. Needless to say, this official throat cutter made sure the animals were quite dead.

One such occasion where I was charged by buffalo, was on Nampini Ranch, north of Victoria Falls, near Kazungula.

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TANZANIA

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The bush along the Zambezi river is very thick and it is almost impossible to get open shots. My tracker Luka and I followed a herd of buffalo. Luka suddenly stopped and pointed at fresh afterbirth. I knew the cow and newborn calf must be very close, so I hurriedly snapped off the safety catch of my .458. As I did so, she came steamrolling out of the bush. She was only a few paces away and I had to shoot. The little calf was lying nearby, so we took it home and managed to raise the orphan. I sold it to a neighbour when it got too big to handle.

At another time, I was hunting buffalo for meat on the same ranch. My .458 was loaded with solids because of deflection problems in the bush. Luka and I were tracking when suddenly we heard oxpeckers' warning "chirr". I knew the herd was close. I saw the ample black backside of the bull almost immediately. I quietly moved in, aiming just forward of the hind leg towards the heart/lung area, and fired. The bull crashed off with the rest of the herd and we set off on the blood trail. After a while, the wounded animal broke away on its own and headed into the thicket. We realised that the bullet had not reached the vital organs. The blood was from a flesh wound and a bit of watery gut blood. Every time we came close, the animal crashed off. Eventually, I actually started hoping that it would charge so that I could finish it off, but it kept going.

After two to three hours of tracking through the thick Jesse bush, we finally came close to it. It was deadly quiet and I knew the beast was about to charge. Next, it came crashing towards us. I knelt down to see under the bush as its huge black form appeared. I shot it in the chest. It turned and ran past us towards the Zambezi River. I waited for its death bellow. Nothing. Maybe there had been a deflection from a branch?

We kept following the trail, expecting a charge any minute. Every time we approached, it ran off. Finally, I decided to fetch my fox terrier, Sam and some other dogs. Luka waited on the tracks for my return. As soon as we set the dogs on the trail, we heard barking and the infuriated grunts and bellows of the buffalo. It almost sounded like a lion!

Next, we heard the animal crashing off towards the river. I was concerned that it would swim across to an island, so I ran like hell to get to it. As I got to the riverbank, I saw the buffalo jump, followed by the dogs snapping at its tail. I shot it between the shoulders. Its front quarters sank, but its rear was out of the water.

The river was in flood and the water was up onto the firm, grassy bank. I reversed the truck into the water, up to the carcass. The loading was easy - we floated it onto the load-bed, closed the tailgate and drove out. When the head surfaced, I could not believe my eyes. The horns were enormous! The first shot entered just forward of the hind leg, went through the intestines and stopped in the stomach, filled with grass and leaves.



One of the many buffalo taken by the author.

The second deflected shot went between the right shoulder and the lung, exiting on the side of its abdomen.

Later on, back in the skinning shed, the horns were a Rowland Ward record.

Some of the most dangerous and exciting buffalo hunts are on the Zambezi river's reed-banks. The thick reeds are about four metres high, so visibility is only a couple of metres.

Some of the old bulls go in there to feed and hide in the shade. Following buffalo under these conditions is nerve-wracking and not recommended for inexperienced or nervous hunters. The only way in was crawling along the hippo paths. I crept along, listening for the crackling of reed and the sound of the animal's breathing.

Sometimes the buffalo would scent me and charge off, crashing all around me and I had to stand ready in case one ran into me. Often one was so close that I just pointed the rifle like a shotgun and fired into its chest or head. It certainly got the adrenaline moving and my heart rate fluttering. Thankfully, I was never gored or trampled!

One day I decided to burn the reed-bank because it became so rank and thick. I knew there were some old buffalo bulls in it. They had to come out when the fire got nearby. I took the boat and set the reeds alight at the bottom end so that the wind would carry the fire right into the area. I went to the top end and waited in a small clearing, my .458 ready. The fire caught well and was burning towards me. I heard the buffalo running. Four old bulls emerged on the other side of the clearing. When they saw me, they stopped. Not seeing any escape, they charged straight towards me. I shot the front bull, dropping it a few paces from me. I jumped behind it and the other three ran past me into the bush, much to my relief.

When hunting dangerous game, keep your head, take your time and make sure the first shot counts. Follow up with the utmost care! If it comes for you, don't panic. Panic is what gets hunters killed. One good, well-placed shot is better than half a dozen, fired in panic.



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