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- **Cover:** Rhino poaching is a very real problem in South Africa. Millions are spent on anti-poaching programs to protect this iconic animal. The day that this photo was taken, another traumatised rhino calf arrived at the rhino orphanage after its mother was poached.
- **Cover photograph:** Yolandé van der Merwe
- **Cover design:** Nadia du Plessis

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JACQUES STRAUSS

# Okavango River Chronicles: Hunting dinosaurs

*Crocodylus niloticus*, the Nile crocodile, is a master assassin, combining the ideal qualities of cunning with ruthlessness and cold voracity, matched with reptilian intelligence, far greater than his small brain would indicate. They are little more than teeth, jaws, and stomach, propelled by the most powerful tail in nature, demonstrating the value of simplicity in design with deadly efficiency.

For the last 160 million years, they have remained the dominant predator and scavenger of Africa's tropical and subtropical lakes and rivers. They have remained unchanged since the Mesozoic Era, making them the only true dinosaurs of today.

The Nile crocodile holds the unquestioned title as the most accomplished of Africa's man-eaters. Professional researchers suggest that crocodiles cause over a thousand deaths per year in Africa, and about a third of all attacks are deadly. In these days of moon landings, robots, and wireless internet, it can be difficult to fathom that crocodiles are still a substantial threat to human life in Africa.

In October 2020, in a fifty kilometre stretch of the Okavango River, between Shadikongoro and Kamutjonga in Namibia, five people lost their lives to crocodiles while doing their daily activities along the waterways in only two weeks.

Apart from the crocodiles' human-eating habits, they often prey on the villager's cattle, goats, and dogs, creating havoc amongst the subsistence farmers to make a living off the land. The theory is that because of the fish populations being depleted by illegal netting, the crocodiles that mainly prey on fish tend to start preying more

and more on humans since they are a soft target.

The Nile crocodile is one of Africa's unusual trophies for any hunter. Known locally in most places as "crocs" or simply "flatties". Trophy sized crocs are one of the most challenging species to hunt. Even the largest and most apparently lazy crocs are shy, wary, and cautious creatures.

Any trophy Nile crocodile worthy of hunting would be considerably older than the hunter capable of hunting it successfully, which is somewhat of a sobering thought, to begin with...

Across most of Africa, a handful of crocodiles are being hunted as trophies every year. It takes a few years for any professional hunter to gain enough experience to be really successful in hunting and judging them accurately. By no means would I call myself an expert in this field, but crocodiles are fascinating creatures, and the challenge of successfully hunting a trophy bull crocodile is something I enjoy immensely. Soaking up all the information I could find and making keen observations, I have learned a thing or two over the years.

There are usually two ways to go about hunting crocodiles; by baiting and by walk-and-stalk. By combining both on a safari will result in higher success rates. When



Typical Blind.

hunting along the Okavango River, I always keep an eye out for big crocs, either by sight or by tracks in the sand or mud. Crocodiles are cold-blooded or poikilothermic, which means that they do not maintain a constant body temperature. Their average body temperature is around 25°C, and they regulate it by basking in the sun or immersing themselves in the water. That creates a perfect gateway to search for them, and you will either see them sunning themselves or see their tracks on a sand- or mudbank. Generally, crocodile bulls are very territorial, and they will frequently stay in a specific area.

If I know of a trophy-sized crocodile in an area, I will slowly walk the bank of a river up-wind, since they have a very sharp sense of smell, watching for them on islands. The water between the mainland and the island muffles the vibrations on the ground when you walk, which they seem to pick up quickly. We try and avoid being silhouetted against the sky. This is most effective in the mornings and late afternoons. Crocodiles hunt mostly at night, and they need to absorb maximum heat before nightfall and likewise at sunrise after spending the night in the water.

The challenging aspect is that you really do not know at what distance the crocodile will present itself for a shot, making it difficult to zero the rifle at an exact distance for that pinpoint shot placement to secure your trophy.

The second method I like to use is baiting. I usually choose an area not far from where I frequently see signs



Croc Tracks.

of a big crocodile. I do not bait at its basking place, as it might disturb our walk-and-stalk. I tend to bait on an island and choose an area suitable to build a small blind, with a good approach and minimal environmental disturbance. Usually, I search for a tree log of around three meters in length, to which I will tie a long two-meter chain in the middle of the log and wrap both ends of the chain a few times around the log before digging it horizontally into the ground to about half a meter deep. I attempt to place the bait about one meter to two meters from the water's edge. I pick an area with shallow water around the island, just in case the shot is messed up so that there is an opportunity for a lucky back-up shot. I also make sure I cover the bait with some reeds, branches or grass to deter the vultures from depleting the bait before the crocs get to it. I am not eager to tie up a lot of meat at a baiting spot at once. The reason is that crocodiles do not eat often. They are opportunistic hunters and scavengers but seldom eat more than twice per week.

I make sure that I have enough guts and blood collected from previous hunts, which will be scattered over and around the bait to create a good aroma to lure the crocs closer. For humans however, the smell will make you lose your appetite for a week.

While preparing the bait site, I also build the blind, between eighty to hundred paces away on the mainland, sheltered between bushes or reeds. I like using a big



camouflage net in-between two bushes or reed clumps to form a roof and sides. If possible, I recommend my clients shoot, laying down, with a bipod on their rifles or from a sandbank to assure good steadiness. Alternatively, I have a very steady gun rest from which you can shoot from sitting in a chair. This works well on leopard hunts too.

Trophy sized crocodiles are hard to judge accurately. Most professional hunters do not hunt them often enough to gain enough experience.

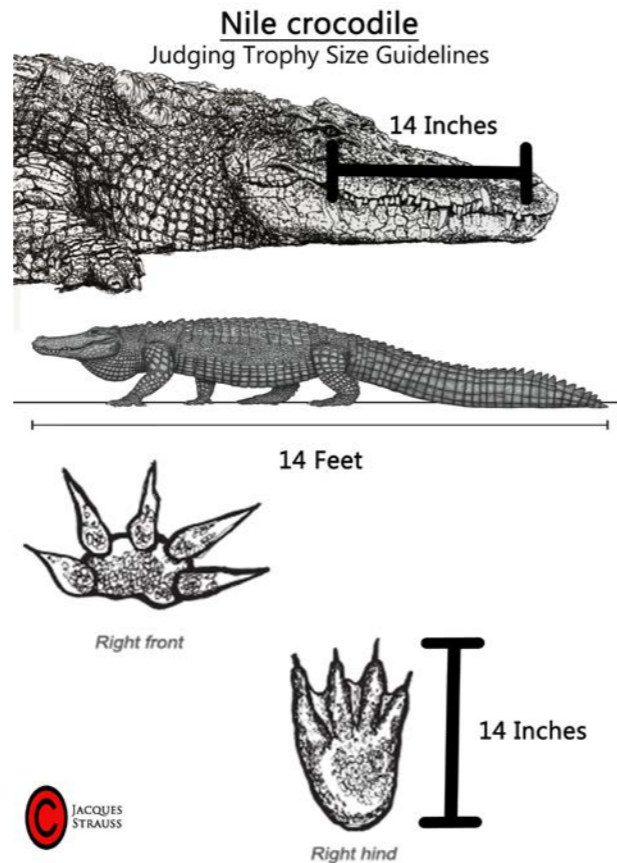
A big bull crocodile will have a large, broad head with a wide and well-rounded muzzle. Its neck will be thick, broad, and muscular, with well-developed fleshy jowls on the sides. Big crocs are dark, almost black. If you glass a crocodile from two to three hundred meters away and see teeth, he is a shooter. The best advice I have ever received was, "You will know if that croc is a shooter; trust me, you will know..."

There are two methods I use to judge the length of a crocodile. The first method is a visual or sight method; this is when the croc is laying side on to you. You estimate the straight-line length in inches, from nostrils to its eyes, and that measurement will be directly proportional to its body length in feet. The second method is the track or spoor method; you measure the back track of a crocodile, from heel to toe, in a straight line, in inches. That measurement is directly proportional to the crocodiles' body length in feet. I have tested both methods on small and large trophy-sized crocs, and both are accurate to about two inches.

Once the crocodiles figure out that the bait site is intriguing and had a little starter, I take a small roll of strong mesh wire and redo the bait with half a warthog, impala or red lechwe the next day. I roll the bait inside the strong mesh wire and tie it down well with wire and pliers. It just gives you that extra time you need while the crocodiles struggle to get to the meat. The smell and meat are so irresistible that they keep on trying.



Unlike mammals, a crocodile's teeth is replaced numerous times during its lifetime.



The author's guidelines as to how to judge a crocodile's size.

Crocodiles have about eighty teeth, and unlike mammals, they can be replaced. It is estimated that each tooth is replaced over fifty times! They are also the only reptiles to have tooth sockets in their jaws like mammals. In all truth, they do lose a few teeth on the mesh wire, but it does not ruin the trophy or affect their hunting abilities afterwards.

The rest is a waiting game, and patience is the name of the game. A big territorial crocodile will guard the baiting site and patrol the area, but they are seldom the first to feed on the bait. It takes an hour or two for the first crocodile to move closer to the bait, sometimes only moving an inch or two every ten minutes.

Once the first croc is on the bait eating his share, you will quickly hear jaws snapping as the rest swallow the spilt guts. It goes from no action to a fully fledged brawl in minutes. Eventually, the big boy will show up, just to stay put and enjoy the show.

As for shot placement, I suggest that most of my clients shoot "behind the smile" since it is a simple and straight-forward shot when the croc is lying broad-side. However, with the adrenalin and over-eager hunters' hearts at work, the shot can be messed up easily because the target area is so small.

The shot placement I recommend now is on the lower, big scab on the crocodile's neck. There is room for error on such a shot; a little left, right, up, or down will still do the job since you are targeting the area where the neck goes into the body, which is surrounded by the spine and shoulder bone, which will render the croc paralyzed and immobile.



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## The tale of two crocodiles

My last two crocodile hunts took place in the Bwabwata National Park, and both hunts were spectacular and very different.

The part of the Okavango River that runs through Namibia is approximately 480 km long. The last 53 km is located inside Bwabwata National Park before it runs into the Okavango Delta. There are only three crocodile licenses issued for hunting every year in that stretch of water; the rest of the Okavango River is left untouched by hunters. With the abundant wildlife populations in the area, it is a true haven for crocodiles, and they thrive in the park.

We hunted hard for five days on the first hunt without getting a decent opportunity on a bull crocodile. We saw shootable crocs daily, but we wanted something special, and we were prepared to wait for the right opportunity.

One afternoon, we found a shooter on an island, but we had no boat or canoe to cross the stream to get a little closer for a shot. There was also no way to walk across the deep water, knowing there is a large croc in the area. I may be brave, but I am not stupid.

The next day, we went back to the same area with a boat and soon enough, about an hour before sunset, we saw a trophy-sized croc basking in the last rays of the day. We slowly paddled the boat between reed islands, past some hippo lurking in the shallow water before reaching the small island in silence. After a careful stalk, my client made a perfect shot on the monster crocodile at seventy



A crocodile this size can easily be over a 100-years old.



The author and his tracker with the client's 15.1 foot crocodile.

paces from the shooting sticks. That particular crocodile took my breath away as we approached it. He measured a dashing 15,1 feet!

On the second hunt, we tried everything but could just not make the right calls. The crocodiles we targeted were out of range, and we could not get close enough for a shot. Nonetheless, we saw plenty of big crocs in the area. Patience finally paid off when several crocodiles went into a feeding frenzy on the bait, right in front of us, for two days in a row. On the second day, we were seconds away from losing our bait's tree log as it was pulled out of the sand by the crocodiles, all pulling at it from different directions.

At one stage, over thirty crocs were eating and tearing at the bait at once! The big bull crocodile did not like it and eventually showed up. We could see him patrolling the waters at the back of the island, but he was not comfortable getting out of the water and approaching the bait on the island.

Then finally, he had enough. Like a steam train, he busted out of the water heading straight to the bait! The rest of the crocs at the bait darted out of the big boy's way without hesitation. Some of the crocs that were feeding looked over 12 foot long, but when the big bull showed up, the rest of the crocs seemed really small. He presented a beautiful broadside shot, and with a perfectly placed shot at ninety yards, he was stone cold dead. It was a big, fat, memorable bull crocodile and measured 15 feet on the dot.



Note the size of this crocodile's back foot.

Crocodiles cannot be aged accurately, but most trophy-sized crocodiles over twelve-foot long are over eighty years old. My guess would be that these fifteen footers are close to or around a hundred and twenty years old.

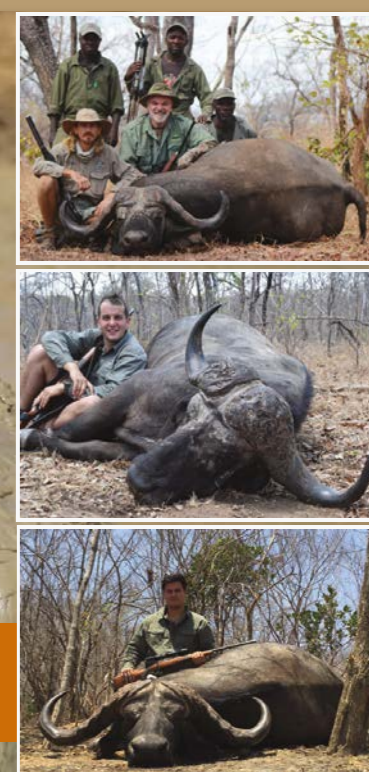
The inside of a crocodile's stomach is sort of an African junkyard. I have found everything from jewelry to whole Red Lechwe skulls, slippers, chains, metal hooks and large rocks inside of them.

It is quite intriguing to scavenge through the junkyard of a dinosaur. You never know what you could find. Hunting these pre-historic creatures take you back to a completely different era...



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