

# KILLER ROGUE ON THE CROCODILE RIVER

**I**n the summer of 2010, I took a month-long trip to Africa and spent two weeks on safari and two weeks exploring and visiting friends. I was the guest of renowned Professional Hunter Stef Swanepoel of Numzaan Safaris based out of Thabazimbi in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The Limpopo Province lies in northwestern South Africa, bordering Botswana, and is noted for the wide variety of plains game found there. I had been hunting Cape buffalo and plains game for several days and saw many trophy animals, but still had not fired a shot. I was determined not to shoot any game animals until I had looked over numerous contenders.

On the evening of the third day of hunting, I had just sat down to a wonderful dinner of gemsbok loin, native vegetables, mashed pumpkin, home-baked bread, and a bottle of red wine when I heard a vehicle driving up the bush road toward camp. It was Stef, and he had some interesting news: a large rogue hippopotamus was causing severe crop damage on a sugar cane plantation and had possibly killed two field workers. He had also chased other workers and killed livestock in his territory. The villagers who lived and worked on this plantation had a self-imposed curfew from sunset until after dawn because of the terrifying nocturnal danger posed by the hippo. Our only problem was that the hippo was on the other side of South Africa – near the Mozambique border in the Crocodile River Basin, which runs south out of

Kruger National Park and into the Mpumalanga Province – and it was a long, long drive from Thabazimbi. Stef asked me if I was interested in hunting the hippo, and I responded by asking when we were leaving. He told me he was afraid I was going to say that, and that he was already packed and we would leave as soon as I finished eating dinner and loaded my gear into his vehicle. Needless to say, I ate quickly.

We drove all night and all the next day into the evening before arriving at our destination. During the long hours of driving, Stef gave me a crash course on hippo hunting and hippo behavior. He said that in spite of their roly-poly cartoonish image, these animals were responsible for a staggering number of deaths in Africa each year. In fact, hippos kill more people than the rest of the “big six” – elephant, lion, leopard, Cape buffalo, rhinoceros, and Nile crocodile –

combined. He explained that hippos had excellent vision and hearing, a sense of smell like a bloodhound’s, and the ability to outrun a racehorse on land and outswim a crocodile in the water. To the native people of Africa, this animal is a living, waking nightmare.

Biologists still don’t completely understand hippo evolution: the most widely accepted theory posits that hippos are most closely related to whales. Recent studies have shown that hippos are very vocal underwater, communicating using clicking sounds as well as grunts, squeals, and barks. They stay submerged in cool waters during the day and only emerge from the rivers to feed at night. Aggressively territorial, hippos will attack any intruder regardless of whether it’s human, livestock, another wild animal, or another male hippo. The night before Stef and I arrived, two donkeys escaped their enclosure and ran into the sugar cane field, only to be claimed by our hippo. When it spotted them, the hippo chased them down one at a time and killed each with a powerful, crushing bite.

All hippos are equipped with large canine tusks, two on the top and two on the bottom. Much like those of a wild boar, hippo tusks self-sharpen constantly by rubbing together each time the jaws close: the bottom tusks are literally razor-sharp from this constant sharpening. The tusks are made of the strongest and most dense ivory on the planet, and professional hunters tell of

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high-powered bullets ricocheting in a flurry of sparks off the tusks of a charging hippo.

Lone, fully mature rogue bulls are the most dangerous hippos, and our target hippo fell into this category. Stef confided that this was the most dangerous hunt in Africa because we had to enter the bull's territory in the dark while he was out of the river grazing on succulent stalks of sugarcane. He said he'd rather bow-hunt for a wounded lion or Cape buffalo than stalk and hunt a rogue bull hippo at night. Leaving the pavement, we turned onto one of the jungle roads leading deep into the wilds of Africa and drove for another hour until we reached the sugar cane plantation, where we met the men of the Mpumalanga Ranger Team who would assist us during the hunt.

The ranger team leader, Jasper Aitchison, was an intent man with a serious disposition, and his men were more like military soldiers than conservation officers. They wore camouflage and carried an assortment of weapons ranging from fully automatic AK-47s, to high-powered rifles with night-vision scopes, to the automatic pistols in their holsters. I asked Jasper why we needed all of that firepower and he replied that it was for poachers, not the hippo.

"We don't catch and release like you do in America," he said. "If you poach in Africa and you run or resist, we will shoot you. If we take a poacher alive and he is convicted, it is an automatic prison sentence, so most poachers will run or resist. This is the crux of African wildlife conservation: wildlife is more important than you, and if you steal it we will hunt you."

Harsh, yes, but very effective, and a job description very much different from mine. Income derived from hunters does so much more for native populations than the sale of poached game. After introductions it was time for business, and in the glow of the Land Rover's headlights I signed and paid for my hippo permit.

Thousands of miles from Pennsylvania under an unfamiliar sky lit by the Southern Cross, I was about to hunt with the Mpumalanga Anti-Poaching Ranger Team in some of the darkest, thickest bush I had ever encountered, looking for a deadly adversary in an unforgiving, foreign environment. The trip was beginning to remind me more of work and less of a vacation. Jasper gave last-minute instructions to his team, which split up and headed to different areas to search for our target. My permit wasn't good for any hippo, only this one specific problem

bull, and the rangers were involved in this search precisely in order to identify him for me. They were equipped with top-of-the-line night-vision and infrared binoculars that would enable them to spot and identify the hippo before we even started the stalk.

**S**tef and Jasper explained that we would hike for about a mile toward the river and the sugar cane fields, then set up on a field where the hippo had been feeding recently. We hiked in silence until we arrived at a stake-out area located on a hill carpeted with heavily-laden banana trees, and sat in the dark watching the field as it got later and later. Eventually, night passed into dawn and as the sun fought its way into the sky, Jasper checked in with his men and told them to head in. He gave Stef and I the same order and we packed our gear and rifles, preparing to hike back to the village area and our vehicles.

We hiked out the same way we came in and I was in the lead going up a small road through the edge of the fields when I reached an opening where I could see very well. To my amazement, standing about 25 yards away was a large hippopotamus standing so still that I first thought it was some sort of trick Stef and Jasper were playing on me.

Something crashed through the brush right next to me, and a cute little baby hippo ran for the safety of its mother. Alarm bells went off in my head as I remembered Stef's words about mother hippos killing people to protect their young. The mother hippo moved with incredible speed toward me as I shouldered the rifle, took the safety off, and prepared for the worst. She and her baby passed close I could feel the vibration of her steps travel through the ground and into my feet and legs. Stef and Jasper, who didn't see her until I raised the rifle, both yelled at me not to shoot. When the hippos finally disappeared into a small irrigation pond to my left, I lowered the rifle, flipped the safety on, and took a deep breath. Later that morning, Stef told me both he and Jasper were very happy I reacted quickly, but held my ground and my fire. They were beginning to understand I wasn't the run-of-the-mill hunting tourist.

The next evening, Jasper asked if I would accompany him to put out two trail cameras at the spot where the hippo was leaving the river to enter the fields. We set up the first camera with no problem. These cameras used satellite technology to send a picture to Jasper's cell phone each time animal triggered the camera. As we were installing the second camera, the setting sun gave way to evening and Jasper said to keep a good eye out, as this area was thick with high papyrus reeds, growing along the sweet, musty-smelling Crocodile River. Having more trouble setting up the second camera, Jasper was hunched over it, intent on getting it right, when I heard a noise that sounded like someone slowly dragging a bag of rocks through the bush. I would think I heard it when it would stop, and then I would hear it again, getting closer and closer. I told Jasper something was coming through the reeds and to hurry up as visibility was definitely decreasing in a hurry. I saw reed tops moving about thirty yards away when Jasper told me he was finished.

We got the heck out of there and were hiking back to meet Stef when Jasper's cell phone rang. Jasper answered, checking out the first picture of the night from the camera we just left. An evil grin crossed his face as he showed me a large Nile crocodile. We now knew what had



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been stalking us in the reeds just moments before. I suggested we turn around, find that croc, and blast him with the .375 Holland & Holland I carried. I figured a 350-grain bullet would be the perfect medicine for that river devil.

Jasper smiled and said, "Chris, you don't get to shoot a crocodile until I see how you do shooting the hippo, and besides, I don't have any croc permits with me, O.K.?"

A few minutes later we reunited with Stef and prepared for the night's hunt. Unfortunately for us, we saw no hippos

that long night, although we did get some nice trail-cam pictures of several genet cats hunting along the brushy river banks.

Our third night of hippo hunting started out pretty much the same as the first two, with the ranger teams splitting up to keep watch over their areas while Jasper, Stef and I headed out to the banana tree hill. Jasper suggested he would sneak around to different locations to see what he could see, and would call us if he sighted the bull. We had been watching our field for about an hour when Jasper called and told Stef that his men were reporting hearing hippos in the river. Hippos out of water have a very distinctive call, a deep and raspy "MMMMHH-MMMMHH-MMMHH-MMHH-MMHH-MMHH-MMHH-MMAHHH" over and over. After another hour passed, I began to hear the hippos calling below me from the river. We listened as the calling continued for at least another hour, and as the clock approached midnight Jasper called again with instructions to head toward his closer to the river, and with news that the bull had entered the sugar cane field.

Stef and I hiked as quickly and as quietly as possible, arriving a short time later. Jasper explained that while we were hiking, a second bull hippo entered the field and challenged our bull. A violent fight erupted between the bulls as they clashed like Sumo wrestlers, first in the field and then down into the reeds of the riverbank. All was quiet now and no hippos were calling at all along the river. Jasper told me not to worry as all of that fighting would surely make the bull hungry. We sat again watching the empty sugar cane field with the night vision binoculars for another two hours before Jasper spotted our hippo returning to the field from his obvious victory over the other bull.

We watched in silent awe as the hippo crushed and crunched through stalk after stalk of the sweet cane. A hippo can eat well over a hundred pounds of vegetation each time it feeds, which is some very serious crop damage. The bull's field was missing more than thirty acres of sugar cane, and he had to travel more than 150 yards from the river to begin feeding. When Jasper believed the bull was distracted enough by constant feed-



ing, he told me to get ready to stalk the hippo.

The wind was coming from the top of the field down towards the river, so we would hike down to the river bank and stalk the bull from the river towards the sugar cane. This was the same route the hippo took and for good reason: a hippo will only feed on the side of the river with the downwind breeze. Jasper would lead the stalk, I was to be behind him with the .375, and Stef behind me with the .470 Nitro double rifle, just in case. We needed to get within thirty yards or less of the bull, moving quietly and staying downwind. When we were in position, a large hand light would be turned onto the bull, allowing me to identify him and place my shot accurately. Jasper said to shoot quickly as soon as the light was turned on, aim low on the bull's shoulder, and keep firing until the hippo fell. The goal was to break the hippo's shoulders so he couldn't charge us or escape to the river.

We followed a dirt trail until we reached the river, where we moved along its bank to the barren area of the field. We could smell the sweet, sticky-scented dung the bull had sprayed out earlier to mark his territory, and feel the warm humidity of the river as we quietly stalked along. The stalk became much more difficult as we entered the grazed sugar cane, and we moved slower to avoid detection by the bull. A primal buzz enveloped my body, increasing the closer we got to the hippo and the more intense and excited I became. Jasper stopped and squatted down, looking up and into the field. He whispered that the bull was about 50 meters away and this would be our final approach, stressing that we must be quiet and I must be ready at all times. When we were close enough he would stop, I would step up next to him, and when I was in position he would turn on the light.

I swear that was the longest 50 yards of my life: the primal buzz was singing through my body like an electrical current and after a few minutes of super-slow stalking, Jasper stopped and pulled me close. In the darkness just in front of me I heard the hippo feeding on the hard stalks of cane. Jasper, still looking at the hippo with the night vision, asked if I was ready. Stef was behind me and to the

left as backup with his double rifle. I shouldered my rifle, pointed it towards the crunching sounds in the pitch black, and clicked off the safety. At the sound of the safety clicking, Jasper turned on the spotlight and there, 20 yards directly in front of me, was the largest land animal I had ever seen.

**T**he bull started toward us as I concentrated on placing the cross hairs on his lower right shoulder. I squeezed the trigger and at the report of the rifle I watched the bullet like a tracer enter the bull's body exactly where I had aimed. I instantly worked the bolt, loading a new round, and as the bull turned to flee I shot again at the same location on his shoulder and was rewarded when he dropped on the spot for a clean kill. I was in absolute awe as I looked at my fallen adversary, and was thus unprepared as Stef shot the hippo again, just for insurance. The .375 is loud, but nothing could prepare me for the unexpected detonation of Stef's .470 from behind. I jumped a foot into the air when it went off, and the guys had a good laugh as we waited a few minutes, just to be safe, before approaching the fallen hippo.

Jasper and Stef both congratulated me, and upon inspecting the carcass we observed that both of my rounds had struck the hippo's lower right shoulder within an inch of one another, breaking the shoulders and piercing the heart and lungs. Upon observing the placement of my rounds, Jasper told Stef I could come back for some crocodile hunting and maybe we could look for dragons as well. Stef, who had watched me sight in the rifle, agreed. What better compliment could an American ask for from two of Africa's premier professional hunters? I flushed with pride as I looked over the hippo, impressed with his immensity. We measured him at a little over 16 feet long and estimated his weight at between 6,000 and 7,000 pounds. As the body cooled, reddish fluid seeped from all of the hair follicles onto the skin. Stef explained that natives called this fluid hippo blood, but that it was really a kind of sun screen the hippo secreted to protect its skin from harsh sunlight as it slept in the river during the day. Slimy to the touch, it evaporated in just a few

minutes. I ran my hands slowly over the skin of the hippo which was clean, cool, and smooth. Hippo skin is used in Africa to make wonderful leather products when tanned.

It was after three a.m. when we hiked back to the trucks for some sleep. We awakened after sunrise and drove the truck through the trails and across the field to the hippo. He was even more impressive in the daylight. A large number of villagers had arrived to see the hippo that had caused them so much grief and damage. We took a few photos and informed the village elder that I would donate the meat to the village. He thanked me and announced the news to the villagers, who literally jumped up and down for joy. They don't get much hippo meat, and to them it was the African gift of life – protein and fat. Jasper would recover the skull and tusks later, as I would keep them as a trophy.

With that, Stef and I thanked Jasper and all of the members of the Mpumalanga Anti-Poaching Ranger Team who had helped these past few nights. After our goodbyes, Stef and I loaded his truck and prepared for the long ride back to Thabazimbi. As we drove along the dusty jungle trails I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the African landscape which had been invisible by night while we were hunting. As we left the dirt roads behind and pulled out onto the pavement, Stef asked what I thought about hunting at night for problem hippo. I said I hoped we didn't have to do that when I returned to hunt problem crocodiles. Stef smiled, gave me a funny look, and shook his head. As I leaned back in the seat preparing to sleep, I heard him mumbling something about crazy American game wardens.<sup>1</sup>

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*Chris Heil is a Pennsylvania Conservation Officer.*