

BONGO



Sweat ran down my forehead, mixing with mosquito repellent before stinging my bloodshot eyes. The sweltering heat and humidity of late afternoon clung to us like a hot, wet woolen blanket. The biting flies had disappeared into the forest where they vanish to every evening, only to be replaced by the malaria-ridden swarms of mosquitoes that call the forests and jungles of the Central African Republic (C.A.R.) home.

I glanced to my right at my trustworthy professional hunter, Rudy Lubin, and saw that he was still alert, glassing the *saline* (saltlick) and surrounding riverine forest of the savannah where we were hunting the most elusive African antelope, the bongo! Nothing but this magnificent creature could ever have gotten me to sit day after day, in the most miserable conditions imaginable, in a shaky tree stand, waiting for a fine specimen of this striped, spiral-horned antelope to come and satiate his taste for salt. It's not just because of the heat and vermin that I abhor this method of hunting. I just hate sitting in a blind, tree stand, *machan*, hide, or whatever you want to call it – Period! I despise the restless boredom that goes with it, the sitting and waiting. I am by nature a tracker, climber and stalker. I like to be moving; I want to *go*. Sitting and waiting for an animal to appear God knows when drives me absolutely bonkers!

However, in some situations you have no choice, and if you want a fighting chance on bongo where there are no forestry roads or Pygmies with hunting dogs, this was one of them.

Rudy Lubin is an old-fashioned style of hunter – my kind of guy. He will only hunt “the right way.” He insists on no baiting or spotlights or blinds for lion, and on giving all the animals the hunter pursues a fair chance. His preferred method of hunting bongo is tracking them on foot in the dense jungle – using all your senses and skills while following fresh tracks, lead

by two talented local trackers. Some PHs use dogs on bongo. Rudy does not and will not.

The benefit of using the local cur hounds when hunting bongo is that they are let loose to pursue the bongo when you have closed in tight on them; the canines bring the bongo to bay, yapping and biting at its heels, allowing the hunter a chance to judge and then shoot the distracted bull at close range.

Rudy's technique is to find a track and silently follow it through the dense, green underbrush until you catch a glimpse of a good bull. Then you wait, with excruciating patience, until you can squeeze a shot through the thicket at 10 to 15 yards from your quarry.

Typically, the bull will hear you or sense that you are near and haul ass, crashing through the foliage and vaporizing into the green hell before you can get a shot off. Talk about an exciting and invigorating way to hunt! Aside from the difficulty and determination required to hunt in this style, you need rain – and a lot of it, to make the crunchy, leafy layer that covers the jungle floor go silent. In dry conditions, the dry leaves and forest litter would make it difficult to track a deaf Jersey cow without her knowing you were after her hide.

I had timed my hunt in May to coincide with the rainy season so that hunting conditions would be perfect. The first two days the clouds dumped their burden each afternoon, making for

excellent tracking conditions the next day. After a 4:15 a.m. wake-up call, Rudy, our two Banda trackers, Ibrahim and Mustafa, and I would check the trails and natural salt licks for fresh tracks. Finding a large bull bongo track, we would turn Ibrahim and Mustafa loose like a couple of coursing hounds, and off we would go. The two of them worked as an efficient team, silently signaling each other. One would find where the bongo track had been lost and the other would find it again by picking out the twigs the bongo had nibbled on here or there. Moving fairly quickly when we started out, they would set a vicious pace while the temperature was still a smidge below 100°F. As the day wore on and the temperature climbed as we closed in on the bongo, they would slow to a deliberate intense pace. At this point I would have the .375 H&H ready and all senses alert, knowing that my one nanosecond of opportunity to shoot could occur at any given moment.

The first two days produced zero bongo sightings. The tracks either cooled off, or the invisible bull crashed away some unseen distance in front of us. But our team was establishing the all-important rhythm and camaraderie required for any successful hunt. A look, a nod, a raised eyebrow, was all that was needed for silent jungle communication. Then the rains stopped...

When that happens, you are done tracking and following on the heels of a bongo bull. That's it. Trying to sneak around

the dry jungle, we sounded like Sherman's army burning our way through Georgia.



“Are we there yet?”

“We have several *machans* overlooking salines that have had bulls coming to them recently,” said Rudy in his lightly French-accented English after another exquisite lunch at the main camp.

“The best track we have seen in the last week is a couple hours from camp, so we will stay there overnight to avoid driving

back in the dark. Bring your backpack and rifle. We leave at 2:00 o'clock this afternoon.”

The two-hour-plus drive to our new hangout was absolutely miserable due to the swarms of tsetse and forest flies we encountered on the rough “road” to the blind. Wearing shorts and a short-sleeved shirt for this first trip, I provided a veritable *buffet du jour* to the flying, biting insects. During every trip back and forth on the road after this, we all crawled inside a mosquito net Rudy had liberated from one of the sleeping huts, giving us some protection in the back of the Toyota.



Watching the saline from the blind

Climbing up the 18-foot, wobbly, homemade ladder, we got nestled in and silently waited for the bongo to appear in the humid sweltering heat. Nothing came to the saline that afternoon except mosquitoes and the unbelievable sounds of the jungle at dusk. Monkeys calling to their families to join them in their selected bedroom tree for the night, baboons barking to each other, untold numbers of birds squeaking and squawking before roosting for the night. The chorus of frogs and toads that began at dark from the swampy river that flowed past our tree stand continued unabated all through the night.

We settled in for a restless night on the sleeping pads that covered the poles that were lashed together with reeds to form the floor of our elevated hiding place. I pulled the mosquito netting over me as a protective layer, which had the unintended effect of increasing the already staggering heat to sauna levels. Fireflies danced the night away.

Waking well before dawn, I was poised in a shooting position if anything showed at first light. The black-faced monkeys that had slept in the tree next to us woke as the sky turned a steely gray, and started chattering among themselves as they stretched and moved from branch to branch looking for breakfast in the top canopy of the ancient trees. A big male monkey announced his presence 50 feet from us with a deafening “Whooooo-Whoop-Whooooo!” I looked over at Ibrahim, who

glanced up at the noisy primate and made a trigger-pulling motion with his fingers, and then put his fingers to his mouth and pretended to chew, insinuating the monkey was good to eat. I smiled and made a mental note for the future.

No bongo appeared, and at 8:30 a.m. we decided to drive back to camp, getting bit another 100 times along the way. We stopped and checked a couple of other trails and salines on our way back, but no fresh sign was evident.



Emerging from the jungle into the staggering heat

The heat and humidity were claustrophobic by now. Even though it was only 11:00 in the morning when we arrived back at camp, I had a beer. An icy cold beer with sweat running down the

edges of the bottle. The best beer I have ever had in my whole life of drinking beer – that is, until the next one. No, it was not as good as the first one, but damn close! A cold shower, lunch, and a two-hour siesta, then back to the *machan* for another night. This became our routine everyday: head to the blind at 2:00 p.m.; return the next day at 11:00 a.m.; beer, shower, lunch, siesta; and then back at it all over again.

There was some relief from the constant boredom in the form of a herd of bongo cows and calves, and a young bull that appeared on the third evening. This gave us hope that the herd bull had to be somewhere around. On evening five, after the sun had set, and the day's hunt was over and the rifle put aside until dawn, Rudy began his nightly ritual of pulling our dinner of sandwiches, snacks and water out of his backpack and spreading the fare out on a towel. Tonight, though, was to be different. Magically, two cocktail glasses appeared from his bag of goodies. Wondering what my intrepid French friend had up his sleeve, I was beginning to drool as he clinked ice cubes into the glasses from an insulated bag. With a fiendish grin on his face he poured from a water bottle a brown liquid that turned out to be some of the 18-year old scotch I had picked up at the duty free in Paris. While the scotch cooled in the glasses, Rudy continued the show, producing a foil-wrapped package containing the fabulous French sausage called “saucisson sec,” and some thin-sliced,

dried *jambon* (ham). Layered on top of some fresh French bread, we ate and drank like Gaul kings.



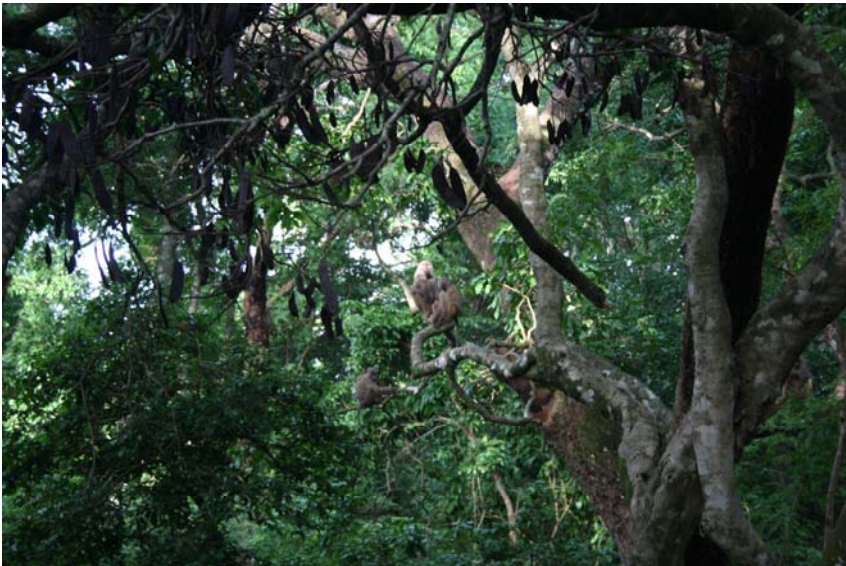
“Un repas francais dans le machan.”

“A class act, this Monsieur Lubin,” I thought to myself as I fell asleep with a whiskey-induced glow about me. The log bed didn’t seem quite so hard that evening.

As we arrived at the blind on afternoon eight, I was thinking, “We need to try something else.” The bull had come to the saline in the dark a couple of times, and we could see his tracks the next morning when we checked the saline. The wily

bull would skirt the open areas, not leaving the protection of the jungle, and vanish before the “shooting hour.”

The monkeys and birds had lost their appeal, and now when I watched them I wondered along with Ibrahim what they would taste like. Putting a bullet through the cocky male’s cranium had a devilish appeal. The frogs love song had become a racket now getting on my nerves... I didn’t like frogs anymore, not even sautéed in butter and garlic in a French bistro. Even the good scotch had lost its thrill.



Jungle canopy and lucky monkeys who don't know how close they are to being lunch!

Darkness enveloped the blind once again, and still no bongo. I wiped my face with a wet bandana for the umpteenth time and let out a heavy sigh. Yelling a swear word and having a childish temper tantrum began to sound like a great idea, I was in such a miserable state. I kept it to myself, however, as I fell into another fitful sleep.

The crashing of thunder close to our tree fort-like blind woke me at 2:00 o'clock in the morning, followed by the crack and flash of lightning that lit up the eerie forest. The two trackers and Rudy started to stir, and I saw that they were donning their rain ponchos.

“Oh, oh...” I thought and dug mine out as well.

The rains we had been praying for finally came – and then some! It rained as only it can rain in the tropics. A torrential downpour does not adequately describe the phenomenon. We had a tarp strung up over our blind that did a pretty good job of keeping us dry. Truth be told though, the rain felt good. The air cooled, and the drops hitting my arms re-freshened my attitude.

There was no hope of sleeping now. Huddled together under the tarp as the first rays of dawn's eerie light cast its spell on the darkness, the rain finally gave up and moved on. Everything was quiet. No birds, no monkeys, and no damn frogs. Suddenly Ibrahim tapped Rudy on the shoulder and pointed

excitedly at his ear indicating that he heard a bongo splashing in the creek as it approached the saline.

“Get ready,” Rudy hissed. I put my .375 on the log railing of the blind and peered over it. Rudy was looking through his binoculars and said, “He’s to the left if the big tree still in the forest, right on the edge. Can you see him?”

At 80 yards, the Zeiss scope turned up to nine power gave me a good look. The vegetation was so thick though, an elephant could have been standing there and you wouldn’t have seen him.

I slowly moved the scope, looking for any sign of the burnt orange-colored, striped antelope through the leafy thicket. But nothing. Then I saw a pair of ivory-tipped horns move, and I could see his nose.

“Is that his tail or his mane?” I quizzed myself.

“Rudy, is he facing away looking back at us?”

“*Oui*, I think so.”

“Well, I hope that’s his tail I see!” I said out loud.

“Maybe I should wait for him to clear the thicket,” I asked myself silently, questioning my confidence.

I put the crosshairs to the right of the root of his tail, guessing the angle he was standing at, and planning on the bullet going the full length of the bongo and ending or exiting out his left front shoulder. That is, if he was facing the way I figured he was. The crosshairs steadied, I squeezed, and at the boom of the

shot all hell broke loose. Monkeys, baboons and birds all started screeching at the same time. Complete pandemonium broke out in the jungle. The bongo vaporized. As the jungle rhythms and sounds settled back to normal we climbed out of the shaking tree stand.

“How was the shot? Did you see him well?” quizzed a nervous PH.

“If he was facing away and angling to his left, I think I got him.”

“You did the right thing by shooting. He wasn’t going to come out into the open. That’s a wise old bull,” whispered Rudy.

When we got to where the bull had been standing, no blood was visible, although I really wasn’t expecting any with that angle of the shot. If the bullet exited the shoulder, it would not bleed like a lung or heart-side shot.

The trackers got on the bull’s trail and suddenly froze after only 10 feet. Rudy put his hand to his ear, and a slight splashing sound came from the nearby jungle-edged creek. Ibrahim pointed and pantomimed an animal limping and struggling.

We waited another minute. There was the sound again, only louder. The trackers took off running with Rudy and me on their heels. As we cleared the clinging, cutting brush and emerged into the knee-deep creek, there was my bongo! The

trophy I had dreamed about for as long as I've been hunting was lying in the stream, thrashing about in his last throes of life. I put a finishing shot into the magnificent creature and we all just stood there. No one said a word, no one moved as we stared at



Africa's most elusive trophy

the twisting massive horns and the orange, white-striped coat of the ghost of equatorial forests.

“Good shot, *patron*,” Rudy said in hushed tones.

“A lucky shot perhaps,” I replied.

Rudy winked and smiled as he bent down to pull the bull's head out of the water and admire our trophy's fine horns.

I looked up into the tree canopy and so did Ibrahim, but the lucky monkey had disappeared.



Bongo!