

Would My Elephant Be PH Geoff Broom's Last?

By Alan Shaver

There I was in the Land Cruiser, along with several friends, PHs Geoff Broom and Tapera Mashunga and their trackers, watching for elephant spoor on the sandy narrow roads near Sengwa village in north-west Zimbabwe. I never intended to hunt elephant, but while hunting buffalo with Geoff the previous year, I'd been pushed around so often by them, it almost seemed personal.

Soon we stopped and walked up a large steep hill. In the slanting sunlight of early morning, we walked along a narrow ridge looking down on the sparkling Sengwa River meandering through its flood plains towards Lake Kariba. Distant drums sounded a rhythmic beat, which the trackers said was the call to a sorghum beer drinking party. It was the first morning of my first elephant hunt, and it doesn't get any better than this.

The elephants down on the plain were unimpressed with the drums and continued about their business of browsing. We glassed them, but they were all cows and calves. So we walked back down the hill and visited farmers to ask about elephants, which goes like this:

"Excuse me, Missus. Have you seen any bull elephants today?"

"Yes, they come over the river every night to graze our fields and generally make a nuisance of themselves. We can't leave our homes until they go back over the river at dawn."

I thought it was clever of the elephants to

come over at dusk and leave at dawn.

Late that afternoon we went to the river and waited for them. Sure enough, they began to arrive in ones, twos and threes, very casually, taking their time. Finally, after about 15 minutes, 21 bulls of various ages had assembled on the flat riverbank, spread over a distance of maybe 75 metres. Everyone was excited. Geoff said he had not seen anything like this number of bulls together in many years. There was a very big one that raised everyone's adrenalin levels.

We were in the bush on the opposite riverbank, the wind in our faces. I could smell their familiar barnyard odour as they joked around, pushing and tooting and splashing and spraying water. Every once and a while The Big One would sort out the rambunctious youngsters. They slowly settled down and started to drink. Then a leopard coughed several times further up the river, and our group exchanged questioning glances. The elephants did not seem to notice. When a bushbuck barked much closer, that did it. The elephants wheeled around 180 degrees

in unison and moved silently back into the bush where they stopped and stood perfectly still, listening. Gradually the tension eased, and they slowly dispersed into the bush. Clearly they were not going to cross the river. Our adrenalin levels receded, and it felt cold.

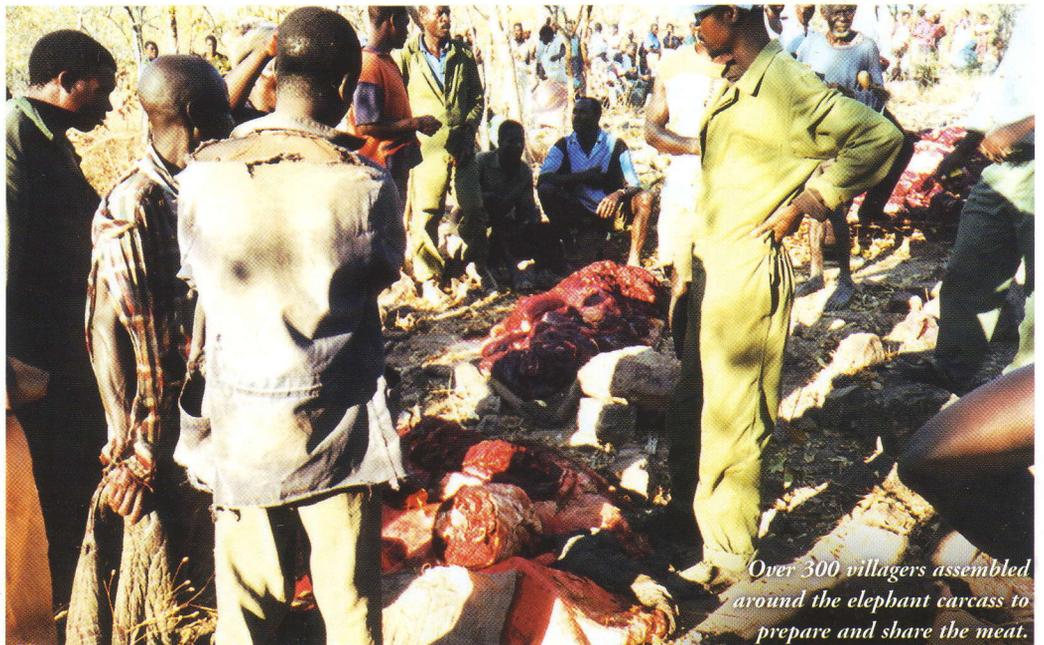
To me there appear to be three types of elephants in this world: The poor zoo elephants that have little real elephant personality left; the national park elephants that take little notice of humans; and 'free range' elephants that, living in the midst of human settlements, don't like people.

The Zambezi Valley seems to be full of the latter. The cows are especially aggressive and go absolutely crazy when calves are around, chasing the locals, trying to kill them. Books have been written about these 'Zambezi Ladies'.

The next morning we left before dawn to find out if the elephants had crossed the river in the night. But as we stepped out of the hunting vehicle we heard them trumpeting from the direction of the river. Although we rushed



PH Geoff Broom (r) and Alan Shaver with the bull elephant he shot only hours before Geoff broke his ankle.



Over 300 villagers assembled around the elephant carcass to prepare and share the meat.

there, they had crossed just before we arrived. Over the next few days a game of Hide 'n Seek became our routine: driving along the side roads looking for elephant sign or word of elephants from villagers.

One morning we learned of two bulls high up on a large, well-treed hill. The stalk began with a long, breathless hike. When we got up there, it was tricky finding them. But the trackers, Samuel, Truefoot and Dixon found one bull, and we worked our way in really close. He had long, slender tusks and Geoff and Tapera and Samuel started to disagree in whispers if he was shootable. We got even closer. Finally Geoff prevailed, and we backed away to search for the other bull. The trackers found him lying down, sleeping next to a small termite hill under a thick, bushy tree. Incredibly, I was seeing something that many experienced elephant hunters had never seen! This elephant clearly had small tusks so, again, we quietly backed away. But it must have caught our scent, because it suddenly rolled onto its feet and ran

off without a sound. Which taught me to never turn my back to a sleeping elephant!

The next day we intercepted the herd of 21 at the river, but missed them again. The farmers speculated that there might be elephants downriver at the site of a village, abandoned because the elephants had become so fond of crossing there to raid the villagers' crops. The people finally gave up and moved away.

We followed the dilapidated trail in from the main road. It was slow and rough going through the thick bush until the trail opened onto the floodplain of the river. As we drove beside the lagoon, we saw a young native couple approaching along the trail. When Geoff and Samuel asked if they'd seen elephants, they replied, yes, and pointed to a large hill in the distance. Geoff started joking in their language - his specialty - and tried to get the young man to come along and show us where the elephants were. The woman said he could go with us - if we brought him back to the store by sundown to carry her parcels back home! This brought

roars of laughter. Geoff suggested that, since she knew so much about these elephants, she should come with us and let her husband do the shopping. She doubled over, shrieking with laughter. Needless to say, her husband climbed up on the back of the hunting car and off we went.

We had to stop at a marsh and hike to the foot of the hill. The ascent was very steep, tricky and strenuous. It became very warm. When we reached the top, we took a break under some small trees that gave a little shade, while the trackers went to see if they could find the elephants. Twenty minutes later, we were on our way to them.

We found six elephants close together under some trees. Leaving the trackers and young husband behind, Geoff, Tapera, Samuel and I started the final stage of the stalk. It was difficult getting close enough to see their tusks. The sun was in our eyes and the wind was erratic. We kept moving in, then backing off and moving downwind, only to have the wind shift again.

Finally we got within about 30 metres of the group. They stood so close together that it was difficult to discern one from another. But Geoff determined that one was shootable.

Suddenly they became alert and moved about nervously, then started moving through the bush en masse towards us. I still retain a vivid picture in my mind of a large, black bull elephant heading directly at me, then suddenly stopping to stare at me with his ears out and flapping. Geoff jumped in front of me with his rifle up. There was no mistaking the seriousness of the situation. Geoff beckoned me forward beside him to face the bull looking at us. Two other bulls veered to our left, closing the distance between us in a classic flanking manoeuvre. Geoff whispered in my ear, "Take the second one as it seems clear."

So I did, and all heck broke loose. To my amazement, the elephant stumbled with the shot and fell on its face with a loud bang, breaking a tusk - only to get back up in an instant. Geoff screamed at the other elephants to drive them back. I fired again and the elephant wheeled to run, so I fired at its hip to immobilize it. It stumbled and fell and got up again! I reloaded, while Geoff wondered aloud why it wouldn't die. I ran forward to its side and fired. The elephant went down on its rear legs with its front legs straight, its head thrown back, trunk straight up in the air, shrieking a final, long, unnerving trumpeting as it rolled over on its side. Suddenly the elephant stretched out and died. It was over, and I will never forget it.

What a mess: dust, blood, rocks, parts of a tusk, the dirt torn up - with a huge, dead elephant in the middle of it all. I was shaking. The barrel of my .416 was burning my fingers as I unloaded and set it against a tree. Samuel whistled to the others. There was much mutual backslapping as

Geoff, Tapera and Samuel quietly congratulated each other. A sense of relief started to overtake me. I felt intimidated by the huge elephant and made myself touch it.

Soon we divided our forces, one group going to recruit villagers to cut up the elephant, while Geoff, with our group, returned to the vehicle. It was hot, the walking was tricky, and I was tired after all the excitement. I stumbled on a rock and almost pitched forward down the stony slope. Not a minute later, Geoff fell down with a yell. It was obvious that his ankle was completely - and painfully - broken. Now what? It was still a long descent to the lagoon, whose narrow beach did not extend to the car. Then Truefoot spotted a villager paddling a dugout canoe and called him over to the beach.

Geoff strapped his foot to his other knee with his belt, and we slowly carried him down the slope as he hopped along on his good foot. Geoff was loaded into the canoe and paddled around the lagoon to the car. We hiked back up the hill to collect the rifles, bags, and my elephant's tail for proof of ownership. It was all very strenuous. I was soaking wet when we got to the car and loaded Geoff. The rough road must have caused him agony.

Finally we got him back to camp where he started saying that it didn't hurt so much... that he felt badly for me, etc. I suspected he was starting to question the need to go to a hospital! We gave him Demerol and almost had to forcibly load him in the vehicle for the 15-hour-plus trip to Harare. Geoff leaned out of the window, took my hand, told me to hunt with Tapera, and wished me luck. As the dust settled and the silence returned, I stood there wondering: What next!

When we returned to the elephant carcass, over 300 people stood around it. Men with axes

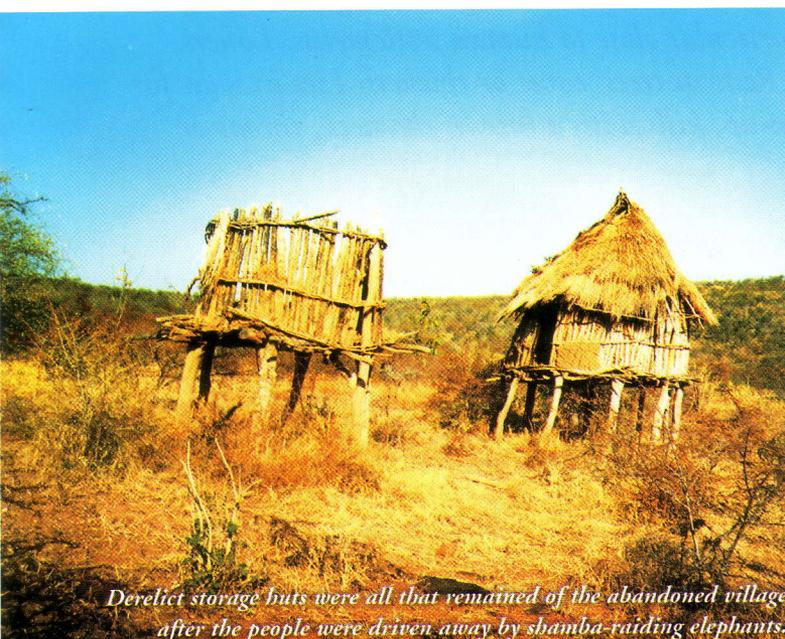
and knives cut, chopped and sliced. Covered in blood, meat and bone chips, as parts came free the men carried them over to the mats spread on the ground. Women were engaged in piling meat, cutting up the intestines and squeezing the contents out of them, and hanging the sections up in bushes. People sat quietly in circles away from the carcass, waiting patiently for a share. Hordes of kids darted in and out of the crowd. Occasionally Samuel would shout at them and drive them away with switches. Despite the chaotic appearance of things, they were somewhat under his control. Suddenly everyone stood back, and they breached the stomach. Gallons of reeking yellow fluid erupted and flowed down the hill. Having read about such scenes in old hunting books, now I was actually experiencing my own.

Our camp staff carried huge chunks of meat to the car, which was soon full. As night fell we drove through the darkening bush back to the village, then on to camp. It had been a big day for an Ottawa Valley deer hunter!

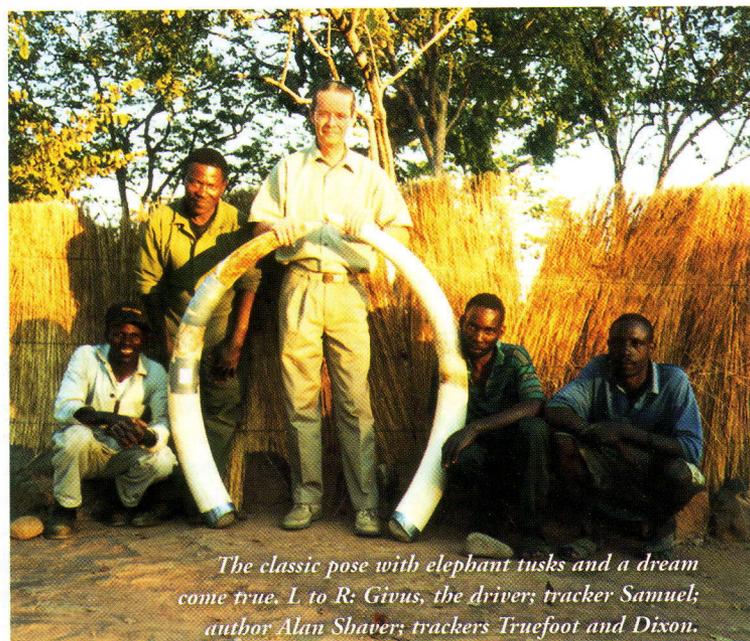
As for Geoff, three months later, he was up and hunting, saying the surgery had hurt more than the accident.

I still have not completely come to terms with my feelings about hunting elephant. My first buffalo hunt was so exciting that I soon hunted another. This hunt was so emotionally overwhelming that maybe the only way to sort out the experience will be, someday, to hunt another.

Alan Shaver is a professor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. His research in platinum chemistry took him to Pretoria, South Africa in 1982, where he fell under Africa's spell and hunted on and off over the next 16 years. Today, he hunts Canada's Ottawa Valley in autumn and Namibia and Zimbabwe in summer.



Derelict storage huts were all that remained of the abandoned village after the people were driven away by shamba-raiding elephants.



The classic pose with elephant tusks and a dream come true. L to R: Givus, the driver; tracker Samuel; author Alan Shaver; trackers Truefoot and Dixon.