



Dreaming of hunting's golden days

By Lisa Witseki

The hunting industry has changed considerably since 1982, when Mark Kyriacou established Botswana's Bird Safaris. Back then, hunting was an experience to be treasured rather than a goal-oriented activity. Kyriacou speaks with open nostalgia of the industry's early golden days.

Born and bred in Botswana, Kyriacou's love of the hunt was inspired by his father's enthusiasm for the wildlife experience.

Kyriacou held a rifle for the first time when he was just six years old, but it was only much later that he established his own professional hunting outfit.

Serving an apprenticeship under Wally Johnson, Tony Henry and Willy Engelbrecht, Kyriacou soon grasped the ideals shared by these great hunters, and together with the recently deceased Lionel Palmer, they swiftly became his mentors. "These men were firm disciples of the old school. They learnt hunting the hard way, without being taught by anyone." Because Kyriacou grew up hunting, he shared their mentality – in fact, he still maintains that the best way to learn the industry's intricacies is to serve an apprenticeship, getting up at 5am and going to bed only when the last detail has been taken care of.

Botswana's safari industry was still in its infancy when Kyriacou was ready to "graduate." Despite the growing interest, however, making a mark on the industry was far from easy. "At that time, many of the existing companies had exclusivity agreements with the Botswana government, so there was little room for a new outfit," he recalls. It was this, plus the realisation that a huge gap in the market existed for bird enthusiasts, that led Kyriacou to establish Bird Safaris.

"It took me a couple of years to get the company going," he admits. "Then, as now, our biggest challenge was marketing the company and achieving recognition." The best way of doing this was by exhibiting overseas and spreading the

message through word of mouth – and not much has changed.

However challenging the early struggles, they were definitely worth it, Kyriacou insists. "Every single hunt is rewarding," he states, "particularly those where I get to see a young person discover the magic of the bush." For Kyriacou, hunting is all about capturing this magic, and he derives great joy from seeing how people change after their first hunt. "At first, they view it as just another activity – but afterwards, they understand how truly special the bush is. Imagine the expression of a city dweller hearing a lion roar as he sits around a campfire, realising that there is very little between him and that hungry predator, or the reward in sharing their wonder that a piece of untouched paradise still exists as it did ten thousand years ago." Kyriacou cherishes these moments.

Of course, some times are somewhat less pleasurable. Although these have been few and far between, Kyriacou recalls an incident where he had to confront a hunter intent on setting a personal shooting record. "Back then, no quotas existed for shooting birds, although I imposed my own limits. My client was determined to exceed these limits, and the only way to deal with the issue was by refunding his money and asking him to leave."

Kyriacou doesn't restrict himself to hunting birds, though. His favourite plains game prey is the kudu, an animal he describes as, "so wily you can't see it, even if it's sitting in a ten by ten piece of bush." He's a little more indecisive when it comes to which animal is the most dangerous, as all Big Fivers can wreak destruction, given the correct

circumstances. And while some, like the leopard, score points because of the sheer number of wounds they have inflicted, others – buffalo, for example – get a vote because they aim to kill.

Kyriacou's most memorable hunt? That's easy – his first elephant hunt. "I was about 19 at the time, and had never hunted an elephant before," he remembers. "I enlisted the help of some of the village men, and we set off to track the elephant. When we found him, he was lying with his back to us, fast asleep."

With only an anthill separating him from his quarry, Kyriacou asked one of his trackers to whistle; he would seize his opportunity to shoot as soon as the elephant was roused by the disturbance. The tracker did as he was asked – but nothing happened. Next, he threw a stone at the elephant, but still nothing happened. Driven by adrenalin, Kyriacou climbed the anthill and shot the elephant through the back of its head, deciding that he would shoot again if the animal got up. Luckily, he was spared having to deal with the wrath of a wounded elephant – one bullet did the trick.

Was he scared? "Of course – I always get scared. When you're hunting a dangerous animal, it's stupid not to get frightened; if you don't, you die. Someone who tells you they're not scared is lying." But how to deal with that fear? "When you're in the moment, it's such a big adrenalin rush. All you're aware of is that you have to bring down this animal – so you do it."

Kyriacou's return from the elephant hunt was just as eventful as the hunt itself. Heading in the



ABOVE: Mark and Jorge del Rosal with a beautiful Cape buffalo.

direction of Namibia's deserts, the group got lost, and spent two days wandering through the bush. "Eventually, I realized we were tracing our old tracks, and decided to wait until the sun went down to get a direction. A rescue party finally found us on the road. After that, I took care never to get lost again. I was still a kid, and you're tough at that age, but I fast realised the need for an internal compass, especially in Botswana, where the country is flat and there are no landmarks."

Kyriacou's experiences have certainly left him wiser, but there's still a lot to learn. "I'm planning to carry on hunting for a long time!" he states. "It saddens me that nowadays people focus on the outcome of the hunt rather than the experience itself. Hunting used to give you a place to forget about your worries. Safaris used to take 30 days, now they take only five. The pressure is on professional hunters to come up with the goods, and I think that's a crime – it doesn't do the sport justice."

Another factor which worries him is the number of fly-by-nights entering the industry. "Although the industry has grown, the size of the area you can hunt has not kept pace. That contributes to the problem, which is unfortunate because it takes just one inferior PH to ruin the entire industry's reputation."

Kyriacou believes that the proliferation of "bush

academies" may compound the problem. "The schools may be doing a good job, but with it the industry's entry barriers have been lowered, which is regrettable," he opines. "That could become a major problem in the future."

The solution? Although clients bear a certain responsibility to verify their PH's credentials, Kyriacou feels that the onus is on hunting associations and organisations such as the Safari Club, to provide a list of licensed hunters. "The safari industry needs to police itself more strictly," he states.

On the bright side, he is confident that Botswana's hunting industry has "an incredible" future ahead, especially now that the government has introduced more conservative quotas. More positive news is that the government has now enacted laws regarding the ownership by game ranchers. "From now on, game will actually belong to the rancher. This is new to us, but this is the strategy responsible for South Africa's success."

"We're also lucky in that there is a lot of good interaction between the industry and the Department of Wildlife."

So the outlook is good – but what if something goes wrong? "The biggest threat to wildlife has always been population. Unfortunately, population

constantly grows and expands and if this trend continues, there will be no room left for animals in Africa."

The mushrooming game ranching industry has been a welcome lifeline in this regard. There is considerably more game in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana than there was 20 years ago, Kyriacou points out.

War is another menace which has decimated Africa's wildlife. "Civil war has destroyed countries like Zaire, Angola and Mozambique. It's impossible to compare their current resources with what they had in the past."

Countries that have banned hunting, like Kenya, are in no better position. "Kenya used to have wide open spaces, but now wildlife is restricted to game reserves. There used to be 200 000 rhino in the country; there are now no more than 50. The issue of poaching won't be resolved by banning hunting. In fact, the opposite is true, because when you have a concession, you become a free police force for the country, patrolling your land on a regular basis."

Kyriacou doesn't let these factors dampen his optimism, though. "If things remain as they are, we should be able to continue hunting for the next hundred thousand years!" he concludes.