



The Road Warrior

I named this leopard 'The Road Warrior,' and had followed his tracks for many years along the road, as far as 20 km at a stretch, before losing them as he turned off into the bush.

By PH John Sharp

I had been hunting this particular cat for four years now. I believe he was caught in a trap in the tribal area a while back - he had a penchant for goat meat - and this had made him skittish. His right front foot was bigger than the left one, probably due to damage from the trap, and he scuffed the earth when he walked, which made his tracks easy to recognize. Because he would hit a bait only once and then move on, I documented his movements so that I could anticipate his behaviour and, maybe sometime, outsmart him.

One day in June, he hit one of my baits and practically finished a kudu leg and shoulder, and then left. I knew where he would go next. Sure enough, we got another hit. Still, in the soft river sand at bait #2 it was difficult to say for sure whether it was him or not. The next day nothing fed, but we knew the cat had been close and watching. I decided that we would sit

on the bait the next afternoon.

Hearing badgers feeding is a common sound at Malangani, and this evening was no exception. At around 18.30 a badger entered the scene, but fed for only 10 minutes. Then all went quiet - most unusual for a 'Badger Banquet.' I suspected the leopard was near but had to live with both the silence and my over-active mind.

It was cold and the moon was almost full - conditions could not have been better. The time was heading for 21.00, and my listening device had been silent for a long time already - too long. I was starting to lose hope. Then I heard the cat approaching and leaned silently forwards into my binoculars. I could not believe my eyes as this enormous tom slid plainly into view, bathed in ghostly moonlight.

I warned my hunter, Angel Zamora Estrada of Mexico, to get ready, but the cat was nervous,

moving in and out of my sight picture. My heart was thumping hard; I thought he might not stay to feed. Finally, he started to eat, and was plainly visible to Angel through the scope on my leopard rifle, the reticule slightly illuminated.

The shot shattered the silence and the cat dropped, growling horribly, and then took off. We heard him growling once more about 50 metres to the left of the bait. Then silence.

Once the vehicle arrived, we started the follow-up. Quinn Kloppers, who had been filming, Isaac, Khevin and I took to the trail, pumped with that fearsome high that you only get from a continuous flow of adrenalin. The bush was getting progressively thicker as we slowly edged forward, but we found no sign of blood. I didn't like that at all. Something was not right, so I decided to pull the lads back. We returned to camp and spent a worried,



semi-sleepless night before returning early in the morning.

Once on the trail again we found small amounts of blood, but not the usual trail of a well-hit cat. We also found the place where he had lain in wait for us, and I knew that I'd made the right decision the previous evening - definitely somebody could have been mauled.

Rounding the side of a granite kopje we heard a growl from a cave above us – another surge of adrenalin. We climbed cautiously through the thick bush towards the mouth of the cave. As we reached it, Isaac shouted as he spotted the cat bounding out of the cave and up the boulders. Quinn had a clear view and loosed a shot from his 12-gauge shotgun, but the cat did not flinch. I jumped onto another boulder to get a clear shot. In the same instant that he stopped, turned, and looked straight down at me, we

Angel Zamora Estrada's leopard weighed 180 pounds for a skull measurement of 18 inches, winning PH John Sharp the Zimbabwe Professional Hunters & Guide Association (ZPHGA) 'Best Leopard' award for 2006.

both realized that the four-year hunt was finally over. He chose to die then and there, submissively, instead of charging into a hail of bullets, as these great warriors so often do. In that frozen moment of time before my killing shot, I could not help but feel a great sadness that will live with me always.

I am still amazed that he did not come for us. The .300 Win Mag had broken his right shoulder, gone through the meat of his chest and lodged in his left shoulder – no vital organs had been hit.

And so ended the reign of 'The Road Warrior' who, over the years had expanded his personal territory to well over 80,000 acres, ousting the other big competing toms.

PH John Sharp was born in South Africa and educated at Diocesan College. Appearances can be deceptive, for John's long hair and bandanna hide a soft-spoken gentleman with old-fashioned values and a passion for doing things the right way. His 25-year hunting career has taken him to East Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. John is a member of the African Professional Hunters Association (APHA). 🇿🇼