

SPOTS BEFORE



PHOTO BY JACQUES DE KROM

The leopard is often rated the most dangerous of all the big five African game animals. Because these cats are predominantly nocturnal and always unpredictable, the hunter must spend endless hours in his hide. Most good shots come at dusk.

The leopards, both as dark as midnight, strolled across the rutted single-track road as nonchalantly as though they were in the San Diego Zoo. I slammed on the brakes of the Land Rover and pawed in wildest and utter confusion for the cased rifle behind the seat, then swung the door open and fell into cover beside the single-track.

The cats had disappeared in the tall grass, so I plunged in after them.

There is no breed of black leopard. This coloration is a mutation, a sort of freak. If a fellow hunts leopard, jaguar, mountain lion, bobcat, lynx, and the score of other related felines all his life, he may with great good luck see a single black species. But to have two of these freakish cats walk across the rutted ox trail was just too much. As I combed my way through grass up to my chin, I hoped by some miracle to stumble on these leopards.

I never saw them again. And indeed 20 years later and after an infinite amount of hunting in all corners of this globe, I have

never seen another black cat. I scarcely expect to.

The country where this encounter occurred was that section of one-track road between Kontum and Pleiku, bare miles below the boundary which divided South and North Vietnam. As chief instructor of firearms for the South Vietnamese Army, I was enroute to Pleiku to put on a training course for the 5th VN Division. The single-track road was so abominably rough that it took eight hours to travel 100 miles. It gave plenty of time to watch for game.

Some months later and in the very middle of the monsoon, a light rainfall which lasts for five months and accounts for 300 inches of water, we were in camp at a spot called Dak Mot Lop. This hamlet, filled only with the Moi, that tribe of high-country Orientals who bear no resemblance to the Vietnamese, was almost directly on the boundary between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. It was 40 miles northwest of Kontum and was

Leopards Seem To Have A Knack For Showing Up In Places Where You Least Expect Them—Like Your Blind.

By
Col. Charles Askins

excellent cover for his royal nibs, the regal Bengal tiger.

Ngo Van Chi, probably the greatest shikari in all of Cochinchina, had organized this expedition. With 18 elephants and 27 Moi savages we were indeed quite a cavalcade. We marched for two and a half days with our pachyderm transport finally to fetch up against the Da Dung River. Here we made camp. We had shot three baits, staked these out very securely between saplings, and built a secure machan. Unlike India, where the platform is constructed a dozen feet off the ground, Ngo Van Chi built his blind on the ground and within 20 yards of the bait. I had not yet bagged a tiger and was keen about this particular trophy.

I'd gone into the blind an hour before dawn and had spent the whole day there. It was dull and boring, let me tell you. I sometimes dozed. As Chi explained it, if the tiger is not alarmed he is very apt to feed during daylight hours. "And when he feeds, he will awaken you from the soundest sleep," the old Tonkinese assured me very solemnly.

Sure enough, I was sound asleep when some sound awakened me. Certainly it was no great beast tearing off large mouthfuls of bait. It was a very slight twig-snapping. I raised my head and peeked out through the firing port. A properly built machan, let me explain, must be absolutely light-proof. There can be no stray and errant beams of light to intrude. If there is, the tiger will look right

YOUR EYES



Col. Askins witnessed a three-cat rendezvous at one of his baits while hunting in northern Uganda. He bagged the largest of the three with his .264 Winchester Magnum using a 140-grain, 6.5mm bullet.



The author ran a string of kongoni baits for 20 miles along the White Nile and, before building his blind, checked them each day to see which had been fed on.

through the cover and spot the hunter. My machan was a piece of masterful design. Only the four-inch firing port admitted light. I looked through it very carefully, being cautious to stand well back in the shadow.

There, amid the light and shadow of the jungle floor, walked a most handsome leopard. I had not really been expecting him at all. I was prepared for a tiger but hastily shifted gears, and as the beast neared the bait, I raised the .458 and took aim just behind its shoulder. The Model 70, one of the first to be chambered in .458, was equipped with iron sights. In Indo-China, game is shot at distances well under 50 yards. The ammunition was standard factory, and I had the 510-grain softnose under the hammer. On the shot the cat was gone in a flash.

I piled out of the machan and went to look for blood sign. It was in the deep dusk by this time, and although I found a few drops of blood, I was not tracker enough to take up the spoor. Reluctantly, I turned back toward camp as night set in. The next morning, at break of day, I was back at the machan and had two of our best trackers with me. Kim-Sa, the better of the two, took up the spoor, and we followed the leopard for a couple of hundred yards, then completely lost the track. I remained in Vietnam for 14 months and hunted constantly, but never again had the luck to find a leopard.

A year later I was in Kenya with Tony Dyer. This colonial is one of the oldest

and best known outfitters in Kenya. Only a youngster at the time, he had hunted with Bob Ruark before I arrived on the scene. Keen, energetic, and aggressive, he was later tossed by a buffalo and mauled by a lion but survived to earn the affection of countless sportsmen who hunted with him.

Dyer and I, together with Al Pope, were in the Masai Country near the Tanzania border. The Masai are all tall and carry spears quite as long as they are. These spears are imposing weapons with a blade that is half the length of the spear itself.

Before long, a Masai warrior came into camp. He perched on one foot beside the fire and waited for someone to speak to him. Tony sent his headman, M'bele, to talk to him, and there followed a long parley.

Old M'bele came back finally and told the white hunter what he had learned.

Tony said, "This fellow says there is a leopard coming into the manyatta almost nightly to take a dog. He is afraid he will take a child any night now."

We piled in the Land Rover and, with the Masai standing with his head poked through the roof, marched over to his collection of huts. The village covered 20 acres and was completely surrounded by a boma, or thorn fence, not less than 10 feet high and 20 feet thick. Some 600 head of Masai cattle and the mud and wattle huts of the tall Africans were within. The cattle are as docile as billy goats, and a staple of diet with the tall warriors is

blood taken from a vein in the cow's neck. Dogs handled the herd, and there were innumerable canines about the place. Small wonder the leopard was growing partial to a diet of dog flesh. I marveled that the Masai were sure a dog was missing.

Our guide took us to the far side of the manyatta, and here a dry wash came out of the surrounding bush and almost touched the boma at that point. The spoor of the leopard was quite plain. It had been into the boma only the night before. Apparently the thorn barrier was no problem at all.

Dyer and I looked about. "It is pretty evident you will want to sit somewhere near here so you can see Old Spots when he approaches," Tony commented. The upshot of the reconnaissance was that a hide was built at the forward lip of the wash, and here I tucked myself away an hour before dusk. I commanded a view of the wash, the boma, and the bush beyond. It looked like an ideal setup.

For the next 10 days I sat in frustrated impatience awaiting the arrival of my feline. He came to the manyatta almost nightly, prowled silently around the huts, seized an unwary canine, and scooted back through the thorn barrier to eat the hapless dog at his leisure.

My problem was I had to be fortunate enough to be in position when the leopard came early in the dusk. He did not do that. He waited, it appeared from his tracks,

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Spots Before Your Eyes

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until well after darkness had fallen. Despite the dreariness of the vigil, I persisted. I'd hunt from daybreak until about 3 in the afternoon, and then I'd have Tony drive by the blind. Without ever stopping the Land Rover I'd bail out, pop into the cover, and take up a comfortable position where I could command the nullah and its approaches.

The fourth evening, I saw the leopard approaching through the bush. I caught only two all-too-brief glimpses of it, and being certain it would drop into the nullah and there await darkness, I gathered up the Model 70 (it was a .338, in Africa for its baptism of fire) and glued my eyes to the far side of the dry wash.

About that time a big Masai warrior, his fighting spear over his shoulder, fell off in the wash and came striding up through the middle of the draw. The leopard faded into the thorn and did not enter the manyatta that night.

By this time I had taken to staying until two hours after dark. The night would be brightest moonlight, and in addition to the .338, I now fished with me a Dyer double-barrel Lewis 12-bore. It was loaded with blue whistlers, and I determined if I could not see the target through the Redfield scope, I'd just lay the rifle aside and give him a couple of rounds of buckshot. I was getting pretty desperate.

I had reached the manyatta and the hide late in the day. Dusk was transforming the bush to darkness and formless shadow as I leaped nimbly out of the Land Rover. The vehicle never stopped but accelerated and disappeared toward our camp some two miles distant.

As I stooped down to crawl into the blind there came a terrific roar, coupled with growling and a medley of snarls. The side of the hide away from me seemed suddenly to burst asunder, and out of it streaked the leopard.

The big cat struck the bottom of the nullah in what seemed like a single bound. In another leap it was streaking up the far side of the wash. I caught him squarely in the middle of his back with the 250-grain bullet. It cut his spine cleanly in two.

The leopard is often rated the most dangerous of all the big five African game animals. John Hunter, a famous guide and hunter, told me he had more respect for Mr. Spots than any of the others. Don Ker of the outfitters Ker & Downey used to spear leopards with a hound pack.

"When you finally brought the cat to bay he'd come right back through the pack to get at you. He knew full well who was at the base of his troubles," said Ker.

Mike Hissey, long-time white hunter, once had a client from California with him, "This bloke couldn't shoot," Mike told me. "When we finally got a leopard

coming to the bait, I held my breath for fear this client would only wound it. He did."

Hissey and his best tracker followed the blood spoor. The leopard climbed a tree and let Hissey and his boy walk under the limb. Then it fell out on Hissey's shoulders.

"I knew I was going to lose all of the little hair I had left when I felt him hit me," Hissey told me. The 150-pound cat drove the hunter to his knees. But instead of chewing him to doll rags, it suddenly loosened its hold and slunk off in the bush. "We never did get that leopard," Mike told me. "I don't think it was his very hard." I have a suspicion that my old amigo, Hissey, wasn't very keen about going after that leopard again.

On another safari, Hissey and I were camped just south of Numile, a town which sometimes is in Uganda and at other times is claimed by the Sudan. We had our camp on the shores of the great White Nile, and we'd been living it up. Game was in profusion and among other species in really good supply was the ubiquitous leopard.

We had a string of baits ranging for 20 miles up and down the east bank of the mighty stream, and each morn we'd check it. This is a somewhat touchy business, and you do not actually approach the bait, which typically is suspended from a thorn tree. You drive within a hundred yards and critically survey the quarter of putrifying bait. If it shows it has been fed upon, you are then in business. If it only indicates it has been molested by the birds, you drive away and come back the next day.

About the fifth morning we found a bait which showed it had been dined upon, and heartily. The trackers got out and in an hour had a most comfortable hide built for me. That afternoon, about an hour and a half before dusk, I stepped nimbly out of the Land Rover and slipped into the blind. The bait was 30 yards distant and was suspended from an overhanging limb of a thorn tree which inclined about 30 degrees from the perpendicular.

It was January and midsummer in northern Uganda, and the sun bore down unmercifully. I was partly shaded, but the flies and mosquitoes invaded my domain by the phalanx. I could not sleep because of the heat and the insects, or smoke, for that is verboten. And the doings about the bait and beneath were utterly nil. Until about 20 minutes after sundown.

I was peeping through the firing port, dozing despite the pests, when suddenly I spotted a leopard standing on the long slanting trunk of the bait tree. He was six feet above the surrounding terrain and quite as nonchalant as only a leopard can be when he is sure he is king of all he surveys. This was the granddaddy of them all.

I knew I should not shoot although I

was strongly tempted. The thing to do is to wait until the game reaches the bait and commences to feed on it. The quarter is always suspended from the limb so the cat must lie flat along the limb and attempt to reach the carcass with a foot. If it is made too easy, he will eat your entire bait at one sitting. You make it difficult for him so he will return.

I held my fire and this monster feline, after glancing directly toward my hide, climbed leisurely up the trunk. He did this in a series of bounds and settled just above the quarter of kongoni. Now was the time to give him the business, I concluded. I was shooting the brand new Winchester .264 Magnum with a Weaver scope and, of course, factory loads.

As I put the crosshairs on the lovely spots over that great shoulder, a movement out of the corner of my eye caused me to hesitate. There at the bottom of the tree and looking upward was a second leopard.

This intruder was not quite as big as the first, I instantly decided. But here was an unheard of situation. Two leopards on one bait. I concluded I'd just hold my fire and see, at least for the moment, what was going to happen.

The big cat on the bait raised his head, glared at the animal on the ground, and growled deep in his throat. The lower leopard seemed not in the least intimidated. He commenced to ascend the sloping tree trunk. "Am I going to see the fight of the century?" I wondered.

The first leopard lay flattened on the trunk with ears laid back and a fierce look in his eyes, and the second leopard continued to climb, step by step. About that time a third leopard walked out of the bush. He was truly a giant. He was taller, longer and heavier than either of the first two. He approached the bait tree with a determined step, snarled as he got to the base, and glanced upward as if to tell the other pair they had better clear out. This was plainly the situation of the century.

Now, it should be explained, I think, that leopards, unlike lions, do not travel in prides. The leopard is a lonely and solitary creature. He shuns his fellows except when a female is in heat. Why three leopards gathered at a single bait was the purest happenstance.

It was time, I could see, to make a decision. It took no more than a first glance to determine that the last of the great cats was the prize. I drove the 140-grain, 6.5mm bullet into his chest as he stood looking up in the bait tree. On the shot he fell stone dead. The first leopard leaped from the tree, although he was 15 feet off the ground, and the second leopard raced down the trunk and was swallowed up in the surrounding bush in the span of a couple of seconds. The trophy, between pegs, went 6 feet, 10 1/2 inches, which is Rowland Ward caliber. ■