

Season Of

The Heat Of The African Summer Sets The Mood But It's The Serpents That Make It Hell.

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

October in south-central Africa is like a coy woman, a tease full of empty promise. From the first week the heat builds up like a kiln, the smooth daytime breeze of August and September a memory but for the dust-devils, those rude, insulting fingers that probe obscenely at the parched earth in whirling columns of airborne filth and ashes. As the spring days pass, even the scant shade offers little respite from the swelter of midday, which turns bush jackets alternately into muddy maps of moisture and stiff, crackling salt patches. It is very different from the winter, when the sun is warm and the shadows actually cold in the arid air. Now, the humidity grows slowly from the tie-dyed dawn, building like a filling bowl until your brain feels squeezed by the hot band of your skull.

No longer do the dozens of daily cuts and thorn scratches of bush living and hunting heal in the dry air under clean scabs, but even the smallest nick festers and turns septic as the newly active bacteria in the barber-towel air feed upon your wounds. Truly, October is a flirt. Great, sterile thunderheads build like puffy, lumpy fortresses on the horizon only to evaporate into wispy mares' tails, disappearing into the flat incandescence of colorless sky. At night, sudden gasps of hot wind howl through the hunting camps, whipping canvas and straining tent ropes, but the promised slash of rain never seems to come.

October is the month of madness. The water in the pans is down, foul with alkali and muddy with the stirrings of thousands of hooves. Elephant are evil tempered, tortured by flies and heat even under their armor of caked slime, and the mutual admiration societies of bull buffalo are not seen even at dusk or dawn. Lions seem to call more, often complaining in the heat of day. In the villages, fights, murder and suicide are far more common than at any other time of year; spearings and head cleavings are practically nightly occurrences.



Some cobras can spit venom accurately seven or eight feet through hypodermic fangs. Most often, they aim for the victim's eyes.

But, October is notable for more than heat rash and rasped tempers. You see, October is the first month of snakes.

One of the most common questions of people who have not been on safari is, "But, what about all the snakes?" Well, that depends. In most areas of reasonable elevation, snakes are not too much of a problem during the usual safari period of the May through September dry season. The reason is that it's just too cold for

*This story is excerpted from Peter Hathaway Capstick's book *Death in the Long Grass* which may be ordered from the NRA Book Service, 1600 Rhode Island Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. Order number ASB11742, retail \$10.95, NRA member's price \$9.90*

most species to be active. Snakes are, of course, cold-blooded and take their body temperatures from their surroundings. In many parts of Botswana and (Zimbabwe) Rhodesia, a bucket of water left out over night will freeze solid by morning, although daylight hours in winter are a delight of low humidity and warm sun. Because of this low moisture content of the air, the variations of temperatures between places very close to each other can be astounding, dry air not holding heat the way moist air does.

A classic example was that difference between the *vlei* along the Mongu River in the Mateti District of northwestern Rhodesia I hunted and the hill on which headquarters was located, not 200 yards away and perhaps 250 feet higher. Returning from a day's hunting in the evening in an open Land Rover through this low spot was like being locked in a cryogenics chamber with a fan on you. By 6:00 p.m. the temperature was well below freezing, yet as you drove up the hill, it would magically warm to about 70 degrees Fahrenheit. As a consequence, one never saw a snake in the *vlei* during the dry season, but an eye had to be kept peeled around the headquarters building.

To tell you the truth, if anybody had any idea of how many dangerous snakes there really are in most parts of Africa, nobody would dream of going on safari, including Your Obedient Servant. If you want to look for them though, they are certainly there. One man who did a lot of looking in an area just a few miles square in Tanzania actually caught over 3,000 green mambas in a matter of a few years. From October through May most of my safari range is literally crawling with snakes, and it is a happy chance that they are not so much in evidence during winter. There are enough "requiem" snakes to give a herpetologist the creepy-crawlies, including black and green mambas, Boomslangs, regiments of adders and boxcar lots of cobras, not to mention a leg-long list of less poisonous types. To

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suggest that a visiting hunter doesn't take a risk of snakebite in the colder season would be irresponsible; yet to say that snakes are a full-blown menace blocking every path and festooned from every third branch would be an equal overstatement. Even though I have conducted many safaris where no snake was ever seen, one must also bear constantly in mind that just one bite from a black mamba or large cobra, let alone a small adder, can transform you into a neat, italicized statistic in one hell of a hurry. If you spend much time in Africa, sooner or later you

will bump into dangerous snakes. Such confrontations are not much fun.

The ringhals cobra, *Hemachatus hemachatus*, is one of the two cobras uniquely evolved with the ability to "spit" or spray its venom with surprising accuracy over a distance of seven or eight feet through the use of a modified pair of front fangs. These short teeth have an orifice in the front of each that acts much as the nozzle of a child's water pistol. Powerful muscles around the venom sacs contract at will, providing the propelling force to project the venom through the hypodermic teeth,

out the orifices in a spray toward the eyes. Contact with the eyes or broken skin can cause blindness in a few minutes and even death if untreated. It is my impression that the venom of ringhals (from an Afrikaans word that refers to the neck rings) is somewhat different from other cobra toxins in that it is very quickly absorbed through the white of the eye.

Although this snake is generally a pretty good shot, it aims for reflecting objects and may mistake a bright belt buckle or binocular lens for the eyes. The ringhals

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most likely uses this technique to blind and kill small animals out of reach, although it will bite like a proper son of a gun if cornered, striking like the other cobras, chewing its venom deep into the wound as it holds on like a snapping turtle.

In 1971, I was on a busman's holiday in the Ngamo-Sikumi Forest in west-central (Zimbabwe) Rhodesia hunting sable antelope. This is quite thick grass and bush country, sometimes punctuated with *kopjes* of giant boulders many stories high, which are handy as lookout posts for spotting game movement. I was hunting with just a gunbearer and a tracker, on the spoor of what promised to be a very fine lone bull sable, when we came up to one of these *kopjes*. The tracker, a MaKalanga whose name I don't remember, scrambled ahead of me and was looking across a scrubby plain for the bull from atop a six-foot rock at the base of the pile. I was just behind him, about to join him with my binoculars, when he gave a strangled shriek of pain and surprise and threw his hands over his face, his fingers digging at his eyes. Startled, I glanced around and saw just the last half of a heavily scaled snake disappear between two rocks in a jumble at about chest height, three-quarters in front of where the tracker was standing.

Chagga, the gunbearer, upon hearing me shout "Nyoka!" ("Snake"), grabbed the tracker's leg and pulled him off the rock. Despite the man's writhing and clutching at his eyes, Chagga pinned him down with a knee on his chest and pried his hands away. To my surprise, he then urinated in the man's eyes, yelling at me to grab his arms, holding the lids open with his fingers as best he could. When he ran dry, I dashed back for the water bag the tracker had been carrying, and together we irrigated the horribly bloodshot eyes with the whole jaw-sack. After 10 minutes, even though he was clearly in considerable pain, we were able to tie the man's shirt over his face and lead him the two miles back to the Land Rover where I had two kits of polyvalent antivenin.

I gave the MaKalanga the sensitivity test for horse serum, the basis of the antivenin, which can kill an allergic man quicker than the snake venom and, when there was no reaction, made a mixture of roughly five to one of sterile water and antivenin. Through the hypodermic syringe, I dripped this slowly into the eyes and after two hours, even though still horribly swollen and discolored, he had regained some sight and eventually recovered completely. Had the tracker been alone or had Chagga not applied such basic action, I doubt he would have ever

seen again. He certainly caught a full dose. (Incidentally, I once told this story to a doctor client who told me that urine, as it issues from an undiseased bladder is actually sterile! An interesting tidbit that might come in handy sometime.)

That the black mamba is a fascinating snake in sort of a queasy way is obvious when you consider that he has probably been the subject of more legend than any other African snake. The very sight of a black mamba, *Dendroaspis polyepis*, is enough to send a shiver through anybody but a congenital idiot, and if you haven't seen one before, you'll still probably recognize the species at a glance. Mambas really look deadly, probably because of the sharp canthus, or angle, between the flat plane of the head and the cheek. Set into this head are a pair of glimmering black eyes that look into your soul like a fluoroscope. One of the most dangerous aspects of mambas, especially black ones who are not so prone to living in trees as are their green cousins, is their extreme aggression. If disturbed even at a distance while mating, or just sunning for that matter, they are inclined to attack, approaching with scary swiftness and rearing to a very impressive height. A high proportion of mamba bites are high on the body, often the face. Inside the black mouth (which is really the basis for the name "black" mamba), normally held agape, is as much lethality as a hand grenade. Mambas swell their necks in threat display, although not as much as the cobras.

Peter Seymour-Smith, a pal of mine, has a very nice house, built from concrete reinforced with poachers' snares, on his Iwaba ranch in central Zimbabwe (Rhodesia). In the living room, behind the sofa at about neck level of a sitting person, there is a large gouge in the woodwork that looks like a point-blank shotgun blast. A closer look will confirm it to be just that. Peter was sitting in an armchair across the room when he noticed movement near his wife Jane's hair as she were having sun-downers one evening. A further glance showed it to be a dullish-colored snake lying along the top edge of the couch, a foot or so from Jane's neck. Used to the bush life, she did not ask questions when Peter told her to freeze as he edged across the room for his shotgun, propped in a corner. At his command, she hit the floor while he unstuffed the sofa, redecorated the wall and killed the snake, a black mamba about six feet long.

One of the most terrifying encounters I have ever had with a dangerous snake took place on an early October morning in Zambia, on the Munyamadzi River. It had been very hot the previous night, and I had slept under a mosquito net on a cot outside the hut with just a *kikoy* loincloth, lions or no lions. I awoke for the hundredth time at dawn, well basted in

sweat and padded bleary-eyed across the 30 yards to the *chimbuzi*, a wraparound, grass-walled latrine or "high-fall" on a bluff near the river bank. Still half-asleep, I started to enter and was chilled by a hiss like a ruptured air hose. Half across the open toilet seat, bolted to a cut off 55-gallon oil drum set into the top of the hole, reared an eight-foot black mamba. His head was as high as my throat, his tongue flickering from his partly open mouth.

That I woke up in a hurry is a masterpiece of understatement. Without thinking, I threw the towel I had in my hand at his head and, not waiting to determine the results, bolted out of the latrine and across the space to my hut in a flesh-colored blurr like a Road Runner cartoon. Shaking the big buckshot loads out of the shotgun, I reloaded with birdshot and carefully, very carefully, approached the *chimbuzi* again. As I inched up, I pecked around the grass baffle. Nothing, no sign of the snake, which bothered me one hell of a lot more than being able to see it would have. The only thing worse than seeing a mamba at close quarters is not seeing a mamba at close quarters. After checking the grass walls carefully, I went outside and looked over the bare dirt. I couldn't even find a crawl track on the hard earth. Where in blazes had he gone?

Aha! Obviously, he had gone down the open toilet and into the latrine hole, I reasoned. With the safety off, I edged back inside the roofless structure.

Sneaking up to the toilet seat, I pushed the muzzles of the double-barreled shotgun up to the edge and levered them downward. There was no movement. In a flash I leaned over the seat and pulled off both barrels, one after the other, straight down the drop-hole. The secondary results were not unlike dynamiting a septic tank while sitting on it, and I certainly got a solid dose of the basic contents of the hole. After, as the British say, purging myself, I managed a cold shower from last night's water, shouting to my understandably confused staff (who might have been wondering what the bwana was doing blowing up the toilet) to keep an eye out for the snake until I was no longer *hors de combat* from my sneak raid on the can.

Invisible brought over a flashlight and a couple of more shells for the gun, although if that mamba was in the hole, I strongly doubted that he would need any more persuasion. As Invisible held the torch, I held my nose and peered down into the black shambles of the shaft. Whatever else was in it, there was sure no mamba. Where he had gotten to in the less than a minute it took me to get the gun was beyond me, but I couldn't shake the idea that he might be in the walls or had even crossed over to my hut where he could be hiding right now.

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Not about to spend the rest of the season wondering if there was a mamba under the bed, I took the only alternative. I got a live brand from the campfire and lit the *chimbutzi* after removing the toilet seat, a possession rarer than ambergris in the middle of the bush, and watched it burn merrily to the ground without a glimpse of the snake. Since my hut was the only other cover in sight, I had my men drag out the bed and metal footlockers with sticks along with the rest of my *karundu* and fired the hut also. I felt a little stupid when it, too, had completely

burned without flushing out the snake.

Since I did not have a client at the time, the rest of the day was spent building a new hut on the other side of the camp and digging another john. The following day, as I was eating lunch, one of the men came running over to say that there was a big mamba sunning near where the old latrine had been, on the edge of the bluff. I grabbed the scattergun and killed him with one shot, his writhing carrying him over the edge and into the river. A few weeks later I was hunting across the river from the camp and suddenly realized where the snake had escaped to that day we met. Below the lip of the cliff were many deepish holes in the clay dug out by

nesting colonies of carmine bee-eaters, one of Africa's most spectacularly beautiful birds, which breed there each year. Almost certainly, the snake had disappeared straight over the edge and into a hole while I ran for my gun. From our side of the river, the holes were invisible and because of the possibility of the undercut banks collapsing, nobody would have thought of walking out to the edge, over the croc-filled water, to investigate.

I was mightily relieved that the snake was finally dead. I have often wondered what might have happened had it been darker in the latrine or if I had sat down on him. I probably would have had hell's own time with the tourniquet! ■