

The first American to achieve an oryx grand slam



*The following article written by **Elgin Gates** was published in 1963 in the Outdoor Life Magazine August 1960, when Namibia was still referred to as South West Africa and the hunting industry was yet to develop and become the major earner of foreign exchange it is today.*

I saw my first Giant Oryx or gemsbok in a habitat group in the Los Angeles Museum - and my eyes popped. Here was an African antelope as large as a cow elk with needle-sharp, straight horns nearly 4 feet long. With their long, tufted tails, large ears and burro-like colour, these animals looked much like donkeys with spears on their heads.

Subsequently I was to hunt the smaller cousins of the giant oryx - the fringe-eared oryx found in Tanganyika and in Kenya south of the Tana River, the Beisa oryx of the

northern frontiers of Kenya, and the beautiful and off-beat white or scimitar-horned oryx of the Sahara Desert, the only member of the oryx tribe that has curved horns. In addition, there is an Asiatic relative, the much smaller Arabian oryx, which at one time inhabited the Holy Land and which is mentioned in the Bible. In the Sahara I was lucky enough to take the No. 1 and No. 2 white oryx, magnificent creatures with almost unbelievable heads. Incidentally, like many African antelope, the cow oryx have horns, and generally they are longer, although less massive, than those of the bulls.

But I had never hunted the king of all the desert-dwelling oryx tribe, the gemsbok, and that was one trophy I'd always wanted. My resolve to take a gemsbok or break my neck trying, hardened one time when I was in London, where at W J Jeffrey & Co, the gun makers in Pall Mall, I saw horns of a bull oryx that looked as long and thick as baseball bats. For me that was it. Right then I knew I would have to take a gemsbok if I had to strangle it with my bare hands. By any standard, the giant oryx is one of the world's great trophies.

My opportunity came in 1959. I planned a trip primarily for the rare brush-dwelling nyala in Portuguese East Africa. In Portuguese East I'd be well below the equator, so it seemed feasible for me to fly across the narrow part of Africa and see if I couldn't collect a gemsbok.

But such a jaunt offered some difficulties. South West Africa, where gemsbok are found in and around the great Kalahari Desert, is not a safari country, and I knew of no regular outfitter there. However, by writing around I finally made arrangements to go out with a keen hunter, Basie Maartens, a South West African of Dutch Boer descent. He did some outfitting in connection with a gun business and told me that if I came he wouldn't have any difficulty in showing me plenty of gemsbok and also, if I was interested, some of the local race of the beautiful spiral-horned greater kudu and the little springboks. Because South West Africa is so far off the beaten track, only one American sportsman, as far as I know, had ever shot a gemsbok, and if I could get one I'd be the first American ever to complete a grand slam on the African oryx family - Beisa, fringe-eared, white and giant oryx.

En route to Windhoek, the capital of South West Africa, from Portuguese East Africa, we stopped off briefly at the glorious Victoria Falls, crossed Southern Rhodesia, and flew over part of the great and mysterious Kalahari Desert, home of the gemsbok. As the Delta Airlines DC-3 began its descent into Windhoek, we passed over some low rocky hills rising out of the desert. They looked just like the rocky sheep hills of the Sahara where I had found the bearded Barbary sheep and a few kudu, and not unlike the desert sheep that inhabit the mountains of Lower California and Sonora. I later found that all the hills and mountains of South West Africa were full of kudu.

Basie Maartens, who was outfitting Pop and me, was waiting for us at the airport along with Smitty, who was to be Basie's assistant white hunter. We spent the rest of the day clearing customs, securing the necessary papers and otherwise getting ourselves squared away. But the next morning we were off. Basie and I led in his American pickup, which was piled high with gear and which was topped off with his two Owambo assistants. One was the cook and the other - a man of many talents - second cook, Skinner, waiter, wash boy and personal butler. Pop rode with Smitty in a Land Rover, that tough little British job with four-wheel drive that is generally used as a hunting car all over Africa. Our destination was Gochas, a police outpost 200 miles south east of Windhoek on the edge of the great Kalahari Desert. A policeman friend of Basie's had reported seeing gemsbok regularly when out on patrol there.

It took us a long hot dusty day to arrive at Gochas, but when we did, the policeman offered to take us out to a salt pan where he had been seeing gemsbok and, since directions are hard to give in the desert and even harder to follow, we took him up on his offer. The Kalahari is a real desert and as we headed east we drove through great red sand dunes that lay in winding rows like giant frozen waves stretching from north to south. As we topped the great dunes and plunged into the valleys between them, it was like riding a giant roller coaster.

The Kalahari is one of the great deserts of the world - and one of the least known. It covers about 120 000 square miles and covers part of old Bechuanaland and the eastern regions of South West Africa. Mostly it is red sand, but there is thin dry grass and in some places considerable thorny brush. The gemsbok and other desert

game depend on melons and wild cucumbers for moisture, while the local inhabitants, the strange little mongoloid Bushmen, live by hunting, digging for water, gathering seeds and fruit, as they have lived for 100 000 years. It is a tough country, the Kalahari, lonely, beautiful and cruel. Thousands of people, white as well as native, have lost their lives there. Back in the last century a party of Boers with 300 wagons and thousands of cattle tried to cross it. Before the ordeal was over, more than 250 people and thousands of cattle had died of thirst.

Just before dark we turned off on a dim track into one of the valleys and headed south. A few miles further I saw our first Kalahari game, a herd of beautiful little springbok. The sand became softer and more difficult to drive through as we continued and finally, when we topped a dune overlooking the salt pan, I saw my first two gemsbok gallop away into the gathering darkness. I could tell that they were the largest oryx I had ever seen. I was thrilled with their long, straight horns.

We camped that first night under a big thorn tree about half a mile from the salt pan. It had been blazing hot driving down, but the night grew cold, and we soon huddled around the fire for warmth. I didn't sleep much that night as I was thinking about the game we had seen, wondering what luck we would have the next day. When it became light enough so to see, I discovered a thin skin of white frost on the red sand. After a hurried breakfast, we drove to the salt pan. Pop was inside with Smitty, and Basie and I were standing on the back of the Land Rover. I had my .300 Weatherby Magnum loaded and ready for action. There was no game at the pan, but we saw holes where the gemsbok had broken the crust of the earth with their hooves to get at the salt beneath. Much to our disappointment we spent all that day and the next driving over the endless red dunes seeing only an occasional springbok.

On the morning of the third day Pop and Smitty headed south in the pickup and Basie and I decided to take the four-wheel-drive Land Rover and look for another salt pan to the north east where the sand dunes were particularly difficult to cross. I stood up in the back with Komu, while Basie drove. About an hour from camp I thought I saw something resembling a gemsbok on a sand dune far ahead and tapped on the cab, the signal for Basie to stop. A quick look through the binoculars confirmed that it was indeed a gemsbok, a big solitary bull. The horns didn't look very big but this one fooled me. I have looked at a lot of Beisa, fringed-eared and white oryx and experience has made me a pretty good judge of their horns. Now I was mentally comparing the horns against the length of the face and the size of the body, forgetting for a moment that the gemsbok is bigger than any one of the other oryx and is on average at least 150 pounds heavier. Basie, however, had an experienced eye for gemsbok and when he got a good look at this one through his binoculars, he whispered, "That's a very good bull, let's get him."

So we began the stalk. For twenty minutes we struggled through the knee-deep red sand, keeping out of sight and sneaking up-wind. Finally we crawled the last few feet up to the crest of the dune, and there, about 200 yards away, the big bull gemsbok stood, a magnificent picture on that red dune against the clear, frosty blue of the early morning sky. I was out of breath and when I eased the .300 Weatherby to my shoulder the crosshair reticule was jumping all over the gemsbok and over part of the scenery. I didn't dare try a shot until my heart stopped pounding and I got my wind back. Fortunately the bull was accommodating. He stood there, still looking back toward the Land Rover. Finally the crosshairs settled down on his shoulder and I squeezed off the shot. He lunged over the dune and out of sight, but I was convinced I had hit him dead centre. An instant later the confirming whump of the striking bullet came back to us. When we crossed the dune and found him lying dead at the bottom, it was the end of another quest that had carried me halfway around the world.

While Basie went for the Land Rover, I measured the horns. They went 44 inches and the bases measured 8 inches in circumference. This was a whopping big bull! When Basie drove up in the Land Rover he said he had just seen another gemsbok disappearing over a dune and thought it carried horns longer than the bull I had shot. We quickly loaded the bull into the car and drove back to where Basie had spotted the second gemsbok. The tracks showed in the sand of the dunes and we followed them on foot. We eased to the top of each dune that the tracks crossed and looked carefully before exposing ourselves. As we peeked over the top of the fifth dune, Basie pointed. The gemsbok had seen us and was running up the side of the next dune about 75 yards away. I missed him with the first shot, broke him down with the second and finished him with the third. When we got there the "him" proved to be an exceptionally good cow with 46 3/4 inch horns that tied for third in the record book. In the oryx family, the cows usually carry longer but more slender horns. All the top places in the record book are occupied by cows. When we arrived in camp Pop and Smitty had a good springbok Pop had shot but nothing else to show except an ostrich egg he'd found, a trophy of which he was very proud.

We broke camp the next morning and drove back to Gochas. Our next destination was the Namib Desert to the west on the Atlantic coast. There I wanted to collect a specimen of the Namib gemsbok, a smaller animal with markings slightly different from those of the Kalahari animals. There also, in the rocky hills bordering the Namib, Basie told us we would find kudu and the rare Hartmann's mountain zebra. We stayed that night in Maltahöhe and continued the next day to the Namib.

If anything, the Namib Desert is even more desolate than the Kalahari. Basie told us that the highest sand dunes in the world were there, and we saw them. Also, the great untapped diamond fields of Africa are in the Namib. It is forbidden by law to venture into the interior.

We stopped to see a rancher friend of Basie's, who told us hundreds of gemsbok were coming out of the desert for the sparse dry grass at the base of the hills. He was right. On the way to a lonely thorn tree in the desert

where Basie had camped previously, we saw about 200 gemsbok. But we had no chance to hunt, as they took off like the wind into the big dunes where even a four-wheel drive vehicle could not go. We saw even more the next morning, but they were very wary and gave us no opportunity to stalk. I collected another springbok and late in the afternoon Pop and Smitty finally got behind some dunes without being seen, from where we stalked a herd of about 30. Pop picked out the best one and dropped him with his .300 Weatherby. It was a very good bull with horns 43 3/4 inches long.

We broke camp again and headed north with the intention of stopping off at Naukluft, a ranch in the hills, to hunt the mountain zebra. Because of a serious drought, the rancher said zebra had been migrating for miles around and were depleting his permanent waterholes. He was delighted to hear we wanted to shoot some of them. These Hartmann's mountain zebra are strange beasts. They are as large as small mules and about the size of the East African Grevy zebra. They have the same narrow stripes as the Grevy but instead of pure white between the black stripes, it is shaded with light brown. Also, there is a very peculiar pattern on their backsides which no other zebra has. Normally, zebra are thought of as plains game, but these animals were completely at home in rocky hills that reminded me of Arizona desert-sheep country. Pienaar, the rancher, knew exactly where to find them and he took us to the top of a rugged 5 000-foot-high plateau. These zebra are far more wary than the Burchell's zebra of the East African plains and it took Pop and me two hours of stalking before we got one each. Later that afternoon Pienaar took us down a rocky canyon off of the plateau and we picked two more off the steep sides of the canyon. We also saw two good kudu bulls, but our host asked us not to shoot them as the drought had just about wiped the kudu out in that part of the country.

No American sportsmen have ever hunted in South West Africa and with the exception of Basie Maartens, there are no organised outfitters in the country. Basie is a natural hunter and besides having good, new equipment, he has hunting friends all over South West Africa because he is in the gun business in Windhoek with his father and has sold guns and ammunition to just about every rancher in the country. Besides the desert game, like gemsbok and springbok, and mountain game like kudu and zebra, Cape eland, blue wildebeest, red hartebeest, cheetah and lion are also found in South West Africa. Basie told me that some of the finest black-maned lions in all of Africa came from certain parts of the Bechuanaland Kalahari. As confirmation we saw some tremendous skins at stores in the far north.

Actually, I wasn't interested in anything except the gemsbok, springbok and mountain zebra, since I'd collected the others elsewhere; but Pop was anxious to take a crack at one of the unusual mountain kudu. After stopping over in Windhoek for a day to replenish our supplies, Basie told us about some country in the far north near Angola (Portuguese West Africa), that was lousy with kudu and springbok. In addition there was another geographical race of gemsbok that were slightly different from those found in either the Kalahari or the Namib Desert. We drove north for two days, covering 400 miles, to a ranch called Rietfontein, owned by another of Basie's friends. We camped in a canyon near the rancher's house among some beautiful palm trees. The rancher told us that while there was normally running water in the canyon, the drought had been quite severe all over South West Africa that year and there were only a few pools left. He said the kudu had been dying off in great numbers, with the older bulls going first. We verified this during the time we hunted, as we found twenty-five or thirty sets of big kudu horns in the canyon, some of them tremendous in size. About 200 yards from camp down the canyon I picked up one pair that measured 59 1/2 inches around the curve! We piled them up into a great mound and when I looked at them I couldn't help thinking of all the sportsmen who had spent thousands of dollars, months of time and many weary hours walking all over east Africa where kudu are hard to come by, while in South West Africa they are practically considered vermin. This, I believe, is the world's greatest kudu country.

There were still plenty of live kudu around, for in two days of hunting, Pop and I collected four that went from 54 1/2 to 57 3/4 inches. These South West mountain kudu are indeed different looking animals. They have the typical white chevron on the nose but the face, instead of being light grey, is a dark charcoal grey and the body a beautiful rich brown instead of the regular kudu grey. In addition to the four kudu, we collected several fine springbok, including a 16 3/4 incher, which ties for second place in the record book. I also collected a 43 1/2 inch gemsbok while hunting kudu. On the way back to Windhoek, I took stock. Although there isn't the great variety of game here that can be found elsewhere in Africa, most of the species are unique. Anyone who has collected the big game of East Africa and is looking for new and unusual trophies will find South West Africa a most interesting country. We hadn't been on a plush safari comparable to those offered by some of the East African outfitters, but I enjoyed it more. We travelled light and fast, covering 2 500 miles in two weeks. There was never a dull moment. We had batted 1 000 per cent, collecting exceptionally good specimens of everything we had hunted and that, more than anything else, is what makes a safari successful.

It was the South West African winter when Pop and I were there and we found a tremendous variation in temperatures, a phenomenon common to all desert countries - from a high of 110 to a low of 25. In the Kalahari, a thin skin of ice would form on the water. But the nights were so clear and pleasant that we slept on cots under the stars instead of pitching tents. The licences we had to purchase were for kudu, giant oryx and springbok. The cost is 1 pound (\$2.80) for kudu and oryx and a half pound (\$1.40) for springbok. Actually gemsbok and mountain zebra are royal (protected) game, but the local ranchers obtain special permits to shoot a certain number of animals that graze on their land and use their water. The sportsmen can shoot on the rancher's permit and give him the meat. It is perfectly legal.

Our safari cost Pop and me \$50 a day apiece, about the cost of a hunt in the American Rocky Mountains. The country is much like the American West was 50 years ago and everyone speaks English as well as German and

Afrikaans. Just about anything anyone could possibly want in the way of film, ammunition and food can be purchased in Windhoek at prices similar to those in other African cities. In the future many more Americans are going to hunt there, as it is a unique hunting area.