

The



By Peter Hathaway Capstick

Carmines bee-eaters are flickering over the river in the early morning sunlight, their shameless red and short-circuit electric blue glistening with the purest color of tumbling, twisting gems as the young woman approaches the low bank of the Munyamadzi. The lifting lances of central African sun are starting to warm her bare, black shoulders as she walks gracefully to the shore, an empty calabash balanced lightly on her head, her mind full of her new husband. True, she is only a second or junior wife, but her superior is friendly and happy to have her share the long days of hard work in the fields, cutting steel-hard mopane firewood and carrying water. Already, the older woman's rebuke for permitting the water to get low at the *kote* is forgotten in the glory of morning coolness and the flight of the gleaming *ziriyoni*, swooping and chandelling, seeming to almost touch the water before sheering off with their insect prey. They are streamlined streaks of

darting feathered brightness against the sere, dead grass of the far bank.

Singing softly under her breath, the girl removes the dried gourd from atop her head and, feeling the crispness of night-cold sand between her toes, steps into the water at the edge of a bar. She slowly wades out a few yards toward deeper water where she may fill her container fully without drawing in bottom sediment. Dunking the worn, brown vessel, she watches the river slide smoothly into it, filling it almost to the brim. She grips it carefully with both hands, about to make the single, fluid motion to lift it back onto her head. But, it is too late. She has time to see the last ooze of stealthy movement and the burst of foaming speed before long, thick spikes of teeth slam together over her wrist and arm. She has time to look into the slit, flat, cat-like eyes of living death before the irresistible, numbing wrench pulls her flat, choking her with water. Terror courses through her 14-year-old body, but she is gagging too badly to scream as her arm is broken and dislocated at the shoulder. Her free, groping

hand feels the hard armor of the creature's back as the current of the Munyamadzi closes over her. She will live another 45 awful seconds, her brain still working in unspeakable horror as she fights the relentless grip. Then, with a sigh that releases a string of wobbling bubbles in a silver chain to the surface above, unconsciousness yields to death.

On the bottom, patiently holding his prey, *Ngwenya* simply waits until all resistance is over. Satisfied, he swims off easily with his kill to a deep, quiet eddy where he may feed at his pleasure, ever more easily as the corpse decomposes. Above, an inverted calabash bobs and floats down to the junction with the Luangwa. A swooping bee-eater flashes briefly over it and then flies back to his mud dwelling in the wall of a high bank up river. A family of drinking elephants spray themselves with water, and a rhino bumbles blindly back to a shady thicket. It is just another day.

Word reached me at my small game control camp nearby the day after the disappearance of the Headman's new wife.

Killing Machine

Crocodiles Are The Only Animal That Will Kill And Eat A Human Every Time It Gets The Chance.



From the description of the presumed events, the only evidence being the girl's tracks leading to the water and not returning, there was small doubt in anybody's mind that she had been taken by a croc. She had been, in fact, the third victim in a year from this same village. Despite the protests of the elders, this was one matter which left little for me to do. I couldn't very well just start shooting each of the thousands of crocs that swarmed in the Muniyamadzi in hope of getting the particular one that killed the girl, even if he was in actuality the same one that had eaten the other two women.

True, the past two attacks had been witnessed, but one croc looks much like another but for size, and this was just another 12-footer. I refused to even visit the place, knowing it would be a complete waste of time.

Often, I had suggested that a protective cage of stakes driven into the bank and bottom of the river would provide a safe place to draw water, but, as is so classically African, nobody ever went to the trouble. Time and again, a woman would be caught in the exact same spot by a croc as was a friend or relative a short time ago. They never learned and, despite what I have always felt was a good understanding of the native mind, this sense of fatalism continues to baffle me to this day.

The Headman would find a new second wife, maybe even younger and fatter. The men and women would continue to get motherless drunk on *tshwala* brew any time they could. Sooner or later somebody else would get eaten from the same stretch of river, just as they probably had been ever since these people had been chased up here by the AmaNdebele Zulu invasion a couple of hundred years ago. Also, the sun would very likely come up tomorrow. Cynical? Maybe. Certainly accurate. Crocs will always be crocs, and bush Africans will always be bush Africans. So

long as the two coexist, the first will always eat the second, and there is nothing you, I or anybody else can do about it.

Let me try to tell you the way of things in rural Africa. Eleven years ago, at the very moment the American Eagle was settling on the lunar surface, I was busy shooting 22 elephants as a cropping officer. It's hard to accept the incongruity of man's oldest profession (on the logic that the first Lady of the Evening was paid with meat killed by the first hunter) being conducted at the same instant his greatest dreams of space conquest became reality. It's an example of almost the total range of human activity and experience still existing side by side in time. So perhaps you can better grasp the fact that even now, in the 1980s, thousands of people are caught, killed and eaten each year by the African Nile crocodile. Crazy? An exaggeration? I only wish it was.

The crocodile and his extended family are available in a dazzling array of styles and body types. In southeast Asia and the nearby Pacific islands, the wonderfully efficient saltwater crocodile will eat you with unbounded enthusiasm. In parts of the Indian sub-continent, the "mugger" croc — cute name, what? — may pull you down to an astonishingly unpleasant end. Since the ban on killing Florida alligators, the death and attack rates have soared because the 'gator has lost much of his respect for his old enemies, these and me. Still, the real over-achiever in the people-purloining department is the African Nile crocodile (the same critter whether found in the Nile or your bathtub in South Africa) which may accurately be summed up as that land's only carnivore that will cheerfully kill and eat you every time he gets the chance.

Now, wait a minute. I know that's not what Lorne Greene told you last night on "Last of the Wild." Everybody knows the croc is endangered. So how could there be enough left to eat "thousands" of Africans

annually? That's what those wonderful folks who can't wait to bring you the Worldwide Anti-Hunting and Firearm Confiscation Act of 1981 have to say on the subject. You know them, the same armchair self-sacrificers of your rights who got the leopard on the endangered list despite the reports of their own field studies clearly showing the status of the leopard so well populated that their own research biologist recommended the possibility of commercial hunting of them. Well, choose for yourself. But, my money's going to be on the chaps with the big teeth the next time you try your backstroke up the Zambezi or most other semi-tropical African rivers crawling with "endangered" crocs.

It is the very nature of the crocodile that makes him such a successful life form which, in all practicality, has had as little need to change over the past millions of years as has the great white shark. Actually, the two do share the common characteristic of happily including man in their well-balanced diets whenever the chance is afforded. Yet, where both are really simply eating machines, the great white is a mindless processor of protein while the croc is a master hunter and stalker, patient as death, as cunning as a weasel. And, I mean any big croc on a general basis. Which creates the rub if you're a game control type like me.

An outbreak of man-eating among lions or leopards can always be traced to a particular individual or small group which can then be hunted down and destroyed. The same with a Cape buff or elephant gone anti-social. But, with the croc, it's almost impossible to hang the case on a particular animal where reasonable numbers of the species congregate. Of course, to every so-called rule, there's an exception. I have written previously of the tremendous croc killed by a safari client of mine, Paul Mason, after the 15-foot-plus

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lizard killed and ate a woman right below my safari camp on a lagoon along the Luangwa some years back. In this case, we both saw the croc as he dragged the woman off and his give-away was his unusual size. After days of hunting him, we finally caught him feeding on the carcass of a dead hippo we had shot for bait, and Paul atomized his skull with a .404 slug.

My old friend, Swiss-born professional Karl Luthy and his client, a Colonel Dow, were able to kill the croc that ate Peace Corps volunteer and Cornell graduate William Olson in Ethiopia's Baro River in 1966 mostly because he was the only large croc they saw in the area. It was taped at a shade over 13 feet.

In the tri-country central African areas of Zambia, Botswana and Rhodesia, crocs were, and to the best of my knowledge, still are on the general game license. Having operated as a professional hunter in all these places, it's fair to say I've been in on the Last Rites of quite a lot of crocs. Sport hunting crocs in daylight, as opposed to hide hunting with a night light from a boat with a gaffer, differs quite a bit from most Afro safari fare. It is not nearly so easy as those who have seen their ngwegwepus half-tame, loafing around the rivers of protected national parks would tell you. Crocs may be deadly when they are hunting, but are reversely shy when found in the only circumstances in which they know they are vulnerable — while regulating their body temperatures by sunning on banks and sandbars. Not only are they immensely wary, but the various ox-peckers, tick-birds and plovers that eat the vermin and leeches from their hides and even in their mouths are also very nervous, making the stalking of a big croc rather like trying to sneak up on a flock of hypertensive Canada geese. Sure, a decent shot can brain a swimming or floating croc in the water, but to what end? The carcass will sink like a pair of cement sneakers and either be eaten by the others or only rise when bloated and the skin spoiled. So croc shooting is much like American varmint hunting, a matter of

careful stalking and accurate, long range shooting with a well-tuned rifle.

Although I am not a fan of the ultra-velocity class of hunting calibers because of my continual experience of having their bullets break up or badly deflect in our heavy bush, they are perfect for hunting crocodiles. I used to keep a super-accurate little .243 Winchester with an 8X scope just for my clients' use on crocs. Of course, they had to zero it for themselves since no man can sight-in another's rifle for him. However, once on the money, it was dynamite croc medicine, especially in 100-grain doses.

The only practical shot for the crocodile is to the brain, and that from a rather flat side angle. With the advantage of height on a basking croc, either a front or rear angle is possible, but at the same level, from head or tail-on, the body protects the skull perfectly. In any case, the brain shot is the only one that will practically anchor him then and there, although this is not a rule. I have seen crocs do some amazing things with nothing left north of their eyebrows — were they to have eyebrows. Even with their brains scrambled like eggs at a brunch, they can continue vestigial, reflex action for a disconcertingly long time. With a perfect brain shot, the tail will invariably explode into a mad flurry of action. If facing the water, this may propel the croc into the current, and he'll be gone. Forget it. Any animal wounded and lost or, in this case, dead and lost, counts against your license. If you are lucky enough to nail him down, chances are most of your crew will have to sit on him to keep him still for skinning.

In any commentary so necessarily brief through lack of space as this one, there just isn't room to get over-involved with the many misconceptions generally associated with crocs. However, there are some aspects of the animal that are glaringly misunderstood. As in the case of the large constrictor snakes, croc sizes are often exaggerated. The largest ever reliably reported killed was recorded from Uganda/Kenya's Semliki River, shot by a member of the game department around the middle of this century. He pegged out at 19 feet, 9 inches. That is unbelievably huge, yet there are many "pulp" reports of crocs of over 25 and 35 feet! The biggest I ever saw was in the Luangwa one day, and I would guess him at an easy 15 feet without several feet of tail which had somehow been lost. As large crocs increase in weight tremendously for every inch they grow over 10 or so feet, that Ugandan dragon must have been pushing 3500 pounds!

Another common report is that crocs can literally snap off a leg or arm cleanly with a single bite. Not so, as a quick look at a croc's choppers will verify. The teeth are round and pointed, clearly designed for holding and not cutting. True, many

limbs have been lost to crocs, but almost without exception, this is when rescuers are holding one part of the man and the croc another. The croc will spin over and over, breaking the bone and twisting the flesh until the limb is torn free. Not a very pleasant sensation, I imagine, but I somehow doubt that those who have survived it would be quick to adopt "Take All of Me" as their theme song.

Crocodile attack methods are designed to put these teeth into action in the manner for which they were designed. I have seen quite a few animals and two people taken, usually when drinking or swimming. One was a full-grown lioness dragged down as she swam the Luangwa. There was plenty of commotion, but she never reached the surface again.

Despite the myth, crocs do not knock animals from the shore or river bank into their mouths with their tails. Just think it over and you'll see the structural impossibility of this old tale; no pun intended.

Although crocs do make most of their attacks actually in the water, they will sometimes take game and presumably man at fairly impressive distances inland from the shore. I have related elsewhere the experience of being in a leopard blind late one afternoon with a client, watching a troop of impala come down to drink. As we followed the dainty tableau, a big croc rocketed out of the water's edge and absolutely streaked across the ground, catching a ewe by a hind leg before she got over her astonishment. Seconds later, there was no sign of anything but ripples. We later paced off the distance from the shore to where she was grabbed and found it to be a bit over 10 yards. I have never seen an attack over such an extended distance from water since, but my tracker assured me at the time that it was not especially rare.

I have never been noted for being very smart, and you will find no legends lurking in any of the bars in Africa concerning my great enthusiasm for bravery. The more I got to know the bush as my career proceeded, the more careful and lucky I became, given that caution is the greater part of luck, anyway. So I relate the following episode as ranking approximately number two in my repertoire of recurring nightmares, a classic example of personal stupidity of the highest order rather than any attempt to impress anybody with the hairiness of my chest.

It was one of those mutually agreed-upon feast days, a Sunday, when safaris sharing adjoining hunting areas visit one another for a rest, a few hairs of the hyena and some yarn swapping. As usual, a shooting contest was part of the festivities. I was in Mwangwalala Camp on the Luangwa, doing a joint safari with Brian Smith, and we were hosts to Ken Wool-

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frey and his clients from upriver. This beautiful camp was situated on a high bank over the river. There was a sand bar about 100 yards away, near the far shore. A big, deep pool separated us from the game reserve on the other side, a pool we well knew to be literally crawling with large crocodiles.

When the question arose as to where we would place the tins we planned to use as targets, it was apparent that the thick surrounding bush did not afford enough room for a range. So somebody decided that the sand bar would be the ideal shooting gallery. Now, there was no way you were going to find anybody on our combined staffs dumb enough to swim over there and back if you had been offering gold sovereigns. Somehow, I got elected. I know I didn't volunteer, but all of a sudden, I found myself stripped down to my bush shorts. Carrying a plastic bag of vegetable tins, I stepped reluctantly into the water after Brian had fired four or five .458 rounds into the pool to shoo away any unwelcome residents.

I gripped the bag in my teeth and struck out for the bar, every second expecting something very toothy to grab me around the middle. Nothing happened. I waded up onto the bar, set up the tins and swam back with the empty bag tucked into my waistband. Drying off, I was advised that it would only be right if I took the first shot. I cranked up the old .375 H&H, locked in the ready-sling and looked over the sights. And practically fainted! Ten yards from where I had crawled out of the river below camp were a pair of 13-foot crocs, looking very hungry and frustrated. They had to have been there all the time! Why they hadn't nailed me, I have never been able to guess. I can promise you, though, that was my last swim in the Luangwa.

Personally, I hate crocs. The reason is that I fear them. There could be hardly an end more horrible than feeling that death-grip of terrible teeth, knowing that there was nothing you could do to save yourself. Still, crocs are as much a part of things as the mambas, puff adders and malaria. They're a part of Africa, and that's good enough for me. ■