

**For three days Gary McMillan padded the sands of the Limpopo as the sun deepened his ruddy complexion. For three days he carefully stepped in the footsteps of his PH, Deon, as they chased wisps of grey smoke through the thorns, and for three aching days my words trotted along behind them like jackals on a fresh scent.**

"Pussy hunters!"

"I thought PH stood for professional hunter?" one of my other safari clients chuckled back.

The crisp hiss of a cap being knocked off an ice-cold beer punctuated the moment and we chinked glass as the African sun bowed out beyond the horizon and Pride Rock was bathed in a golden afterglow. We were celebrating another great day hunting the bushveld - there are no bad days on safari - and I was quietly thankful my hosted safaris were operating smoothly and successfully. All hunters were revelling in the experience and a good number of quality animals were coming to the salt, but not without the required effort. Despite the abundance of game, the area hunted was huge, comprising 20,000 hectares, so it was no walk in the park, as Gary was ironically discovering.

Deon reacted to my barb like a fat lazy trout rising to a dry.

"Pussy Hunters — pah," he spat, "we stalked in on a number of kudu Gary could have shot but I'm here to do the best for my client and decided we could do better."

I lifted the rod tip and gently set the hook.

"So, you didn't see any as big as that monster you 'passed on' the first morning?" Deon opened his mouth to spit the fly but I struck firmly, "But wait, you couldn't

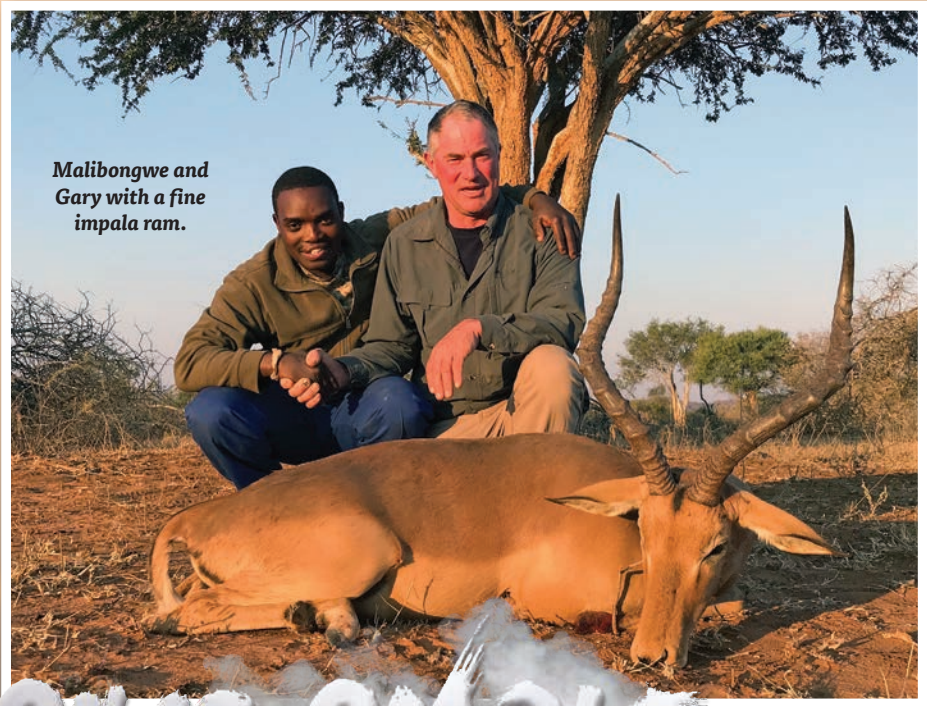
possibly have shot that kudu because you were both snuggled up in the cab of the bakkie playing footsie and trying to stay warm - pussies!"

"Why would we be on the back when we've got workers to do the job for us?" he countered lamely.

A full moon was also making the animals skittish; they feed longer into the night, drink earlier in the dawn, and bed down sooner. Predators also hunt hard over a full moon, so prey tend to be extra wary.

Plus, it was unseasonably cold so the animals were keeping to cover... just like Deon and Gary.

We'd just left camp and, despite the chill, I had taken up my usual position front-back righthand side; the conductor's position for the orchestra of spotters on the back. My personal PH and good friend, Hennie Van Wyk, was driving and had previously adjusted his wing mirror so that he could see me clearly at a glance. Sharing spotting duties with me as we drove to our hunting



**Malibongwe and Gary with a fine impala ram.**

# CHASING SMOKE IN THE LIMPOPO

By Daryl Crimp

destination were Kiwi hunter Bruce Grant and Malibongwe, my cheerful little Zulu eagle. The notion that all native Africans are uncanny trackers is a nonsense; tracking is a science and art form - not magic, so only those brought up away from urban rust and trained over time become exceptional trackers. And the art is not colour-blind either, because Hennie is one of the best trackers I have hunted with. Malibongwe, on the other hand, couldn't follow his own footprints in a circle but he has incredible eyesight, so good, in fact, that he can see things that aren't there.

One thing I have learned is that Africa doesn't play by the Queensbury rules, so you need to be constantly on your toes and watching for those ghostly jabs from left field.

The first came less than a thousand clicks from camp: two big kudu bulls, right on the edge of the rutted bush track. I checked the breeze and let the bakkie drive on 50m before clicking my fingers in the driver's side mirror to attract Hennie's attention. He glanced right and gave me that Jack Russell quivering stare while I spelt out the situation using sign: two fingers, a corkscrew motion with the index finger, and thumbing motion to the right - two kudu bulls off to the right. Palm up - stop.

Deon and Gary spilled from the vehicle, a little dopey from the fug of cabin warmth but quickly slapped into the moment by the drop in air temperature. Following my sign language they backtracked down the path, Gary raking a round into the breach of his

.375, and then melted into the thicket.

I can't overemphasize the need for absolute quiet when hunting the bushveld because the slightest foreign sound will alert those big old canny animals from kilometres away. The antelopes live with the threat of predation on a daily basis and have well-equipped senses and flight responses; you only have to look at a kudu's big satellite dish ears to have some understanding of what you are up against.

A quarter of an hour later the duo arrived back, having not fired a shot. The kudu had simply vanished but there was a bright side to it.

"At least you were one step ahead of Malibongwe," I grinned, "you managed to track your own footprints in a circle!"

**Gary finally had his bull.**



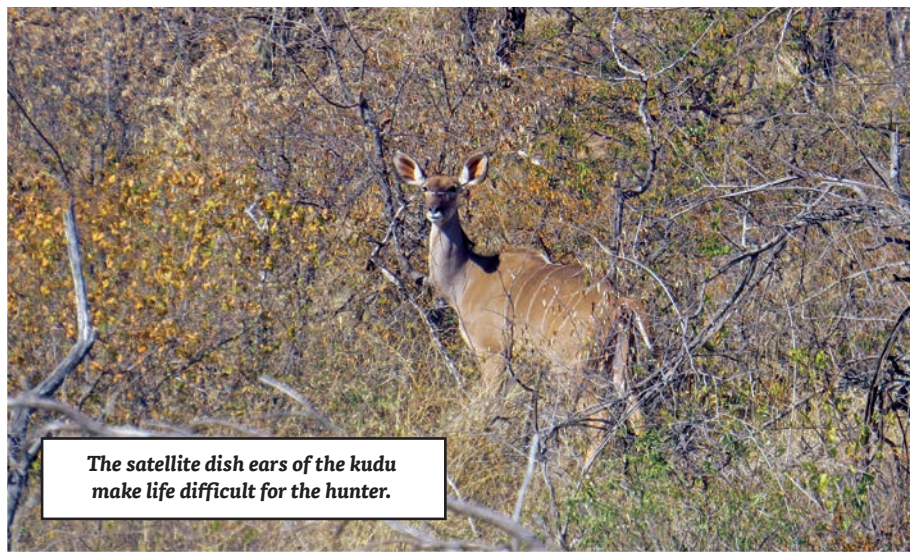
***As the sun bows out  
below the horizon.***

There were other opportunities - good bulls - but Gary became a victim of the three second window. That same afternoon Malibongwe spotted two nice bulls holding six cows high on a rocky koppie. They were so far away they were hidden to the rest of us by the curvature of the earth. Hennie, Bruce, and I decided to cut away across the open bushveld, keeping in sight of the kudu in the hope of distracting them while Deon and Gary stalked into a shooting position. Big kudu become big for a reason and the PHs will tell you that once they spot you, you have three seconds to get the shot off. In other words, shoot quick. Over three days, Gary had a number of windows shut in his face but he didn't give up.

I have also learned that Africa looks after those who respect her and, time and time again, I have seen hunters with the right attitude rewarded with exceptional trophies. Part of it is having the strength to turn down animals in the pursuit of a 'better' one, and part of it is having faith in your PH. Gary picked up on this quickly and never tried to second-guess Deon, and, as a result, collected some nice animals after some great stalks: buffalo, gemsbok, blesbok, and impala. But kudu were testing his mettle.

Often when the play is running against you, a change of tactics is required. Hennie suggested Gary and Deon stalk along the edge of a long koppie or small hill - the sparsely clad terrain a favourite of kudu - while we drove to Pride Rock for rendezvous later that morning.

As we pulled up, we were greeted by a very large nyala holding a harem of ewes, together with a herd of wildebeest, and several kudu cows... being lorded over by a very large bull. They were not more than 80m away. Unperturbed, the old kudu nibbled his flank



**The satellite dish ears of the kudu make life difficult for the hunter.**

and stared back at us, at ease with some insinuated sense of security. Later that morning, all the animals melted into the shadows and were gone.

Dejected and tired, Gary and Deon arrived shortly after, having seen nothing. The story I recounted of big kudu only deepened the brooding atmosphere.

"That's it... I've had enough, Gary mumbled. Let's head back to camp for brunch."

Hennie chipped in with a pearl of wisdom, "You just have to keep hunting, Gary, until one of them makes a mistake."

Gary dozed in the front of the bakkie as we trundled across the bushveld, Hennie drove in silence, and Deon was lost in thought on the back. Me, I had an orchestra to conduct. Suddenly, I clicked my fingers in the wing mirror and the Jack Russell quivered. One index finger up, then a spiral. Thumb to the right. Thumb and index finger spreading apart. One kudu and a big bastard.

Soundlessly, Gary alighted the vehicle as it rolled to a stop and took the .375 from me. Deon was already off the bakkie, following my hand signals, and backtracking.

Gary caught up and they ducked into the thicket. I signalled Hennie to keep the motor running to confuse the bull but a heavy set of spiral horns spun and sailed away on a sea of thorns.

Damn!

Then the kudu stopped, confused by the two disturbances, and looked back. At last a mistake.

The .375 fired, straight through an open window, and the kudu bolted. In the absence of blood, Hennie lit a cigarette and isolated the spoor. Gary relived the shot and was confident of a hit but it was that close none of us had heard the telltale thump of metal on leather. Malibongwe ran off to find a circle and Hennie did what Hennie does best - tracked the bull.

It had run 50m and fallen to a heart shot - the hunt had arrived at the perfect conclusion. The old kudu had mass and character and ticked all the boxes.

"It almost doesn't seem right getting it so close to the bakkie," Gary mused.

"I think Africa has just rewarded you for the effort put in over the past few days," Hennie said.

"And we could have just as easily driven past it," Deon added.

"Had it not been for the workers on the back," I chided.

"I was on the back this time," Deon said.

"You were asleep."

He was about to counter but I put a full stop on the hunt.

"Meeee-ooow!" <<<



**A nice gemsbok for Gary.**

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