



Hunting Leopard with Hounds

The Only Sporting Way to Hunt Leopard?

By Mark Butcher



THE QUESTION

The article by a well liked and respected colleague Charl Grobbelaar in the last *African Hunter*, was an interesting and balanced review of cat baiting as a method of hunting. However, he did comment that "... I cannot agree with the use of dogs to hunt leopard, unless, perhaps it is to hunt a wounded cat..." Which raised a debate that I have been wanting to initiate for some time in some forum other than one of the Sports Clubs.

Our safari company has conducted a number of successful and unsuccessful Leopard Hunts in Southern Africa with Hounds over the past couple of years, and our activities have been the subject of a number of lively discussions in the Sports Clubs. Basically it is a new thing in Southern Africa, that very few of our fraternity know anything about, and most know nothing about, and worse haven't bothered to find out about before passing judgement.

We are still on a learning curve on this one that is exponential, our success rate has not been 100%, but we're definitely getting better at it and aim for it. I can write only of our experiences with it. There are other packs of hounds used and others who have done it. They may have other experiences.

I am a Professional Hunter. I am not a person who hunts for sport. The only hunting I do is professionally. My clients are the sportsmen. However, I

am a very strong advocate of sport hunting, because I am deeply committed to conservation. I know unequivocally that the revenues from sport hunting are absolutely crucial for wildlife to survive in Africa, particularly in areas where wildlife densities are marginal outside Parks, i.e. the bulk of Africa.

Whenever faced with some issue to do with our Professional hunting which raises issues of "ethics", I have a few questions I ask myself, and if the answers are yes to all of them, I feel comfortable about it and proceed.

1. Is it legal?

This is straightforward. The law in most cases is clear. For example shooting a lion on the wrong side of a National Park boundary is illegal. Simple.

2. Is it good for the game?

Obviously hunting an animal is not good for that individual, but is for the greater wildlife population and in particular that population of the species being hunted affected negatively overall? Or does it in fact benefit positively? From the wildlife's point of view - does it serve the common good - "the good of the game"? For example, deliberately shooting young female leopard is probably not good for the game.

This one question I personally rank very high. It's the reason I can justify my profession to myself and it is the one that is most often forgotten in the current sport hunting ethics debates. As an example for viable safari hunting purposes, trophy quality leopard on most cattle ranches can only be shot at night with a spotlight off a bait (unethical!). Without the revenue from which many farmers in the bad old days poisoned and trapped hundreds indiscriminately. There are vast areas of prime leopard habitat in the lowveld, for example, that have now been consolidated with thriving leopard populations due to employment of this technique. This leopard population would be severely prejudiced if arrogance on the part of some Rupert in the Mathaiga Club stopped us from doing it, as wildlife conservationists we cannot allow this.

3. Is it Humane?

Sport hunting is not really a humane sport - full stop. We inflict pain on animals. However, once we have justified sport hunting *per se* from other

perspectives, we are obligated to be as humane as possible and get the killing done quickly and efficiently. To me this particularly applies to coaching your client's shooting (where necessary), setting up his shot so it falls within his ability and skill, making sure we're all using the right weapons and ammo for the task at hand and backing up where necessary. For example, telling a client with poor eyesight and marksmanship to shoot an elephant at 200 yards with his .375 while I'm standing there with my .458, though legal, is not humane.

4. Is it Sporting?

This is best answered by the sportsmen (in our case the clients), but it is such a challenge that it requires above average hunting skills, physical and mental fitness - I think so. If it is also dangerous, even more so. For instance, could a six year old with five minutes coaching do it? For me, potting blesbuck in a fenced off paddock from a truck is not sporting. Anybody could do it.

The hounds have to totally ignore other game, particularly antelope, or the farmers won't contract them in.

5. Can I sleep at night?

By this I mean, is this something that is going to eat at me later, or something that I would have a problem standing up in a roomful of my peers and defending? For example, shooting someone's tame lion in a cage and then accepting the Trophy for Biggest Lion at the awards Ball for it, would worry me.

BACKGROUND

So, is hunting Leopard with Hounds unsporting or unethical? To evaluate that question using the approach outlined above, we need some background about what it is and how it's done.

We started using the hounds for three different reasons:

* to be able to sustainably utilise, with some fair chance of success, big highly educated calf-killing leopard, for whom 'bait and blinds' hunting have a

success rate so low as to make it commercially unviable;

* to be able to utilise areas where cattle breeding is the predominant land use and hence the presence of leopard is financially detrimental to the landowner and hence the leopard are subject to unsustainable persecution;

* as an alternative to traditional 'baits and blinds' for safari clients who have taken leopard before and want another, but are not particularly enamoured with the prospect of spending another 100 hours or so, painfully cramped, watching pieces of meat rot.

The Hounds

It is extremely important to understand a little about the hounds that we use. Many of us have, when faced with a gut shot leopard in the ilala thickets, nipped down to the local village and picked up a truckload of *Tsholotsho Terriers* to help follow and act as early warning. We've watched them chase a kudu and hare, cover up difficult spoor, cock their legs on ours, and every now and then solicit a snarl that warns us about the direction of an impending charge.

The specialised pack of hounds we work with are a very different kettle of fish. They have been bred from stock originating in the U.S. and trained on a daily basis in Africa, for over 25 years. Their predecessors were Blue Ticks, Walkers and Treeing Hounds. They were developed originally for controlling Caracal and Jackal on goat and sheep farms in the Eastern Cape. Subsequently they were further developed to operate in areas where game farming has become very important. Our experience is that when we put the lead dogs on a fresh leopard track they stay with it, without exception, and the rest of the pack follows them. I have watched klipspringer, impala, kudu and warthog get out of their way without soliciting so much as a glance from any of the hounds.

However, I have seen a young dog on a couple of occasions get sidetracked by a hot honey badger or civet scent, but both times he quickly realised the error of his ways when he heard the lead dogs up ahead yodelling for backup, and no harm was done.

Hunting with the Hounds

These hounds can be worked in broad terms in two different ways:

a) Free ranging:

This is where the hounds are let loose in an area where the quarry is suspected to be, and they get out there and find it. This method works for the jackal in the Eastern Cape, but should in my opinion, under no circumstances whatsoever, be employed on leopard, because it is non-selective. Simply put, the hounds could pick up females this way. There is at least one instance I know of where a pack was brought into this country and used this way for 'vermin' control. To any wildlife conservationist this is a serious sin and this method should not be employed.

b) Selective tracking:

This then is the method to be employed when sport hunting leopard with hounds. A fresh track of the intended leopard is located and the lead dog called Red Wing, is started on it on a leash.

When we are comfortable she is following the right scent by visual verification of the spoor, she is then released and as she warms up the number two and three dogs (called Gold and Pine), who are on leashes, are untied to assist. Once the hounds flush up the leopard, which can be heard by the tone of their bugle, the rest of the pack (most of whom who are sons and daughters, not unlike a pack of wild dog or hyena) is released and the chase commences in earnest.

When used intelligently, hunting with these hounds is probably more selective than 'bait and blinds' at night. Who, honestly, can tell male from female correctly at night with a red light at 70 metres, ten times out of ten? With the hounds you have the advantage of visually confirming the cat by spoor size all the way in, and then actually eyeballing him in daylight. This is not to say the mistaken shooting of females is not going to happen. It hasn't happened with us yet, touch wood, but we reckon the number of mistakes will be less than with 'bait and blinds' at night on ranches.

We carefully avoid male leopards with a female in attendance, to avoid a SNAFU. But, interestingly, in at least two cases after the hunt was completed, we found there had been a female in attendance, but the hounds had stuck with the male. Probably because he smells more and is more inclined to stand and fight than to slip away like females and small males do.

There is a factor to this kind of hunt that I was previously unfamiliar with, which is hard to explain, but which anybody who has hunted with *good* dogs will understand well. This is the plain, simple joy of watching some well trained, highly skilled hunting dogs at work. People who have hunted birds with a pair of good Pointers will often tell you that it is as much fun just watching the dogs work and hunt, as actually shooting the birds. The same is definitely the case with these hounds. They are fantastic to watch and enhance the thrill of the sport.

I have had eyebrows raised by colleagues because of 'the poor bloody dogs'. In actual fact once you've seen these hounds hunt, it can be very easily construed that to *not* let them hunt is the more cruel option. They love to hunt. We've all seen our favourite Lab's reaction when we pick

SAVANNA
SAFARI CLUB
1/2 P
F/C
REPEAT 5 - 3

up the shotgun and whistle for him to get in the truck. These hounds make that Lab look miserable. They are exceptionally fit, strong and quick, at close quarters they know intimately a leopard's "reach".

After a typical hunt the hounds usually only have a couple of scratches between them. Indeed none have ever needed veterinary attention, certainly while I've been there. The pack we hunt with has had only one fatality and no cases requiring veterinary attention. Indeed the houndsmen, many of us have seen Buck Rogers' video, have received a more serious mauling than any of the dogs.

The one fatality was where a dog was killed on one of our hunts. The hounds have a couple of Jack Russells that run with them in South Africa, trained to get in the holes to flush out the jackal that go down them. Last year, working with the problem of leopard holing up in caves, we tried out a couple of the Jack Russells. The one was a young, over enthusiastic male called Fly, sadly he was killed on his very first encounter with a leopard. The houndsmen, were quite clearly extremely distressed, actually one of them nearly got mauled trying to rescue Fly. To me, as a dog owner whose dogs sleep on our bed, they quite clearly love their dogs and they are not cruel to them in any way.

Interestingly, the other Jack Russell, a bitch called Holy, is now an experienced ace. She has perfected the technique of going into the caves over the top of Leopard and then working them from behind. She drives a cat 20 times her size out of the cave like a champagne cork. When you hear Holy yapping in the cave, take your safety catch off.

The Areas

In my mind the areas best suited to using these hounds for Leopard are commercial farming areas where leopard occur, but traditional Leopard/Plains game safari packages are marginal or don't work. Usually because the leopard are too educated to make 'bait and blind' hunting successful enough to be commercially viable, and also plains game is too

scarce because of intensive cattle ranching and poor wildlife management.

By using the hound hunts in these areas, we are adding a new revenue stream for the landowners to improve their viability and promote wildlife (particularly Leopard) conservation - CAMPFIRE for commercial farmers. Usually these areas are managed predominantly for cattle ranching, where breeding and hence calves and calf killing are a significant factor.

The successful hunting of a big male leopard with hounds hinges on finding his very fresh track very early in the morning.

The Leopard

The competition between cats and dogs is as old as hunting. We know that leopard and lion (cats) have co-evolved in fierce and often deadly competition with hyena (dogs) since the Pleistocene. Anybody who has spent time watching the hassling that leopard receive from hyena, often very aggressive and even deadly for young cats, knows that this is just part of what a leopard learns to handle.

In the farms where we operate most of the herdsmen are actually allowed dogs by the landowner specifically to do just this, hassle the leopard whenever he kills a calf. While I'm sure this is distressing, it is a very routine annoyance to a leopard who has been around for a few years. I get the impression on a hunt that a big male leopard realises the hounds can't kill him, he merely has to cover his tail and keep them at arms length, until he can figure out how to escape.

The big male leopard in these sort of areas are usually habitual calf-killers and hence promote a very strong

case, from the cattle farmers' perspective, for persecution of the species as a whole. The big plus is that these calf-killers are usually big and hence are in demand by our safari hunting clientele as excellent trophies.

The Hunt

The successful hunting of a big male leopard with hounds hinges on finding his very fresh track very early in the morning. This is often easier said than done, as you have only about two/three hours. Bear in mind, this is usually also in areas where leopard densities are low, even though the population overall may be large. To make this happen involves a huge amount of plain old hard work in scouting the area and learning the leopard territories.

Part of the preparation also involves ensuring, to the best of our abilities, a 'clean kill'. The killing at the end has to be done efficiently and humanely. The clients we book for these hunts are not first timers and they practise quick, short range free hand shooting.

The question of the right tool for the job is also addressed. A scoped high velocity rifle is not ideal because of reduced visibility from the scope and over-penetration by the bullet, so endangering dogs and us from a ricochet off the rocks. A shotgun is not really ideal either because we don't want to also hit Red Wing with a pellet or two. On the odd occasion too a shot presents itself at 30-40 yards or so, which is stretching a shotgun for a leopard.

So we arm them with a quick pointing, fast reloading, low velocity, heavy calibre rifle. My preference is a Marlin lever action .45-70, loaded with thin jacketed 400 grain softs doing about 1700 fps, customised with an extended magazine tube, fibreglass stock, peep rear sight and a foresight only slightly smaller than a golf ball. Leopard hit with a couple of shots from this mother are dead very quickly.

This hunt is more exciting than the 'bait and blind hunting' by a factor of about ten times. Closing in for a shot with a very angry, about to charge, 80kg leopard in thick stuff when compared to sniping an unsuspecting cat off a tree limb is like goldfish and

tigerfish. It has been billed by one American booking agent, Bruce Grant, who has done it, as "...the most exciting hunt on earth today..." I don't think he's exaggerating too much either.

When it comes to the actual hunt, we try to get a cat from a fresh track off a bait, a natural kill (usually a calf) or a road down which he has walked in the pre-dawn.

Remember, in the areas in which we operate these hunts, getting a big male on bait and keeping him 'on' until the client and hounds arrive is not an option. So to get him off a bait, we have to visit the bait that he 'hits and runs', early on the morning he does it.

Typically, before we do our Leopard with Hounds hunt, we spend a week or two intensively scouting the area, figuring out the big males patterns (if there is such a thing). Then we set up a driveable circuit through what we figure to be the most productive areas. Along this route, we will swing up to 30 baits, usually cattle fetuses from one of the local abattoirs, and link them with drags.

Once the safari commences, the daily M.O. then is that just before dawn the P.H., sport hunter, houndsmen and mutts hit the road. They try to visit as many of the baits as possible before the sun heats up, slowly enough to watch the roads for the track of a big cat just out patrolling. If nothing is found, the rest of the day is spent scouting, baiting and dragging, in the old fashioned way.

Once a track is found, preferably off a bait, but often off the road, it is carefully measured to make sure it is a big male (a Madison and half a filter plus), scouted to ensure there are no females with him, then aged - early hours of the morning versus previous evening.

At this point, out comes Red Wing on a leash, if she can smell what we can see, she starts quivering, everybody loads up and we're off.

Picture a scene just after dawn on a crisp July morning as the kopjes are turning yellow, running along behind these hounds. Watching the lead dogs struggle with a difficult scent from a tricky leopard, who is experienced in eluding hyaena and jackal and is using the rocks to his maximum benefit, while the sun is slowly climbing and conditions are warming unfavourably. Watching the hounds cast

in circles for a lost spoor, yodel to their buddies when they relocate and then work in pairs and teams to effect maximum ground coverage. Then add to this scene suddenly, a background of roaring and snarling as the leopard comes to bay in thick bush, on a steep sided kopje dotted with cave entrances, and you run in for a shot.

You'd have to be a cold character indeed not to get a pretty significant adrenaline rush from this experience.

Conclusion

So, with this background, now we can evaluate Hunting Leopard with Hounds as an 'ethical' and 'sporting' method to hunt by answering the questions posed at the beginning.

The hounds really seem to love it, their injuries are negligible and fatalities rare.

1. Is hunting Leopard with hounds legal?

The answer to this is simple. In South Africa, the Act is very clear. It is only illegal (outside of the Parks Estate) if you do not have the landowner's permission. In the same way as taking your Pointers onto somebody's farm to shoot some guinea.

Answer - yes.

2. Is hunting Leopard with hounds 'good for the game'?

Again simple. We are promoting leopard conservation in areas where they are otherwise heavily persecuted. We are not disturbing the other game and it is probably more selective than 'bait and blind' hunting.

Answer - yes.

3. Is hunting Leopard with hounds 'humane'?

The answer to this question is a little more complicated: The hounds really seem to love it, their injuries are negligible and fatalities rare.

The leopard definitely doesn't like it, but is probably also pretty used to the kind of trauma involved, a clean kill is more assured and a wounded and lost

result is definitely going to be very rare with this hunt.

The houndsmen too have learnt how not to put their heads into caves already occupied by 'spotty'.

So, is it humane? If sportsmen can justify bird hunting or catching a fish, this too can definitely be justified. Who amongst us can know the terror of a covey of one-pound francolin when a 70 lb German Shorthair sticks his muzzle in your face while you are trying to hide in a grass tuft. Or the pain a bass feels when you strike a pair of 2/0 steel treble hooks through his palate and jaw as hard as you can and then drag him into your boat.

Are leopard receiving worse treatment? No.

So the answer to this question - yes.

4. Is it Sporting to hunt Leopard with hounds?

It tests to the maximum our tracking and shooting skills; it requires skill in baiting and knowledge of our quarry. It is physically demanding, requires mental determination (guts?) to go in close for the shot and it's dangerous (see video).

Answer - yes.

5. Can I sleep at night?

We are sustainably utilising leopard populations that were previously very threatened in areas that used to be unproductive for wildlife in a legal, humane and sporting manner.

Not only can I sleep, but I sleep well.

Answer - yes.

The bottom line, for the unbelievers:-

Sporthunting leopard, particularly in areas where they are heavily persecuted, using well trained hounds, is the ONLY way to hunt them. 🐾

About The Author

Mark Butcher is a well known Zimbabwean professional hunter and director of Matapula Hunters, one of the bigger Zimbabwean safari outfitters. Mark operates principally in Zimbabwe but also in neighbouring countries. He is an ex-Zimbabwean National Parks officer with a wide knowledge of hunting and considerable practical experience.