

Across Africa in Quest of Sitatunga

By Chris Kinsey

When I took my Zambezi sitatunga in Botswana, I remember thinking that sitatunga hunting wasn't so difficult after all. Ah, the innocence and naïveté of the novice! It took me seven safaris over the next 20 years to collect a forest sitatunga.

The afternoon sun was a hazy fireball floating in the African sky. Its oppressive heat, combined with stifling humidity, created a steam bath that addled my brain and drained my energy. I was doggedly following my PH, Rudy Lubin, and his two trackers, as we slogged our way through a marshy clearing in the forests of the Central African Republic to continue my quest for one of Africa's most elusive antelopes – the forest sitatunga.

Almost every hunter has a quest that holds

his fascination by day and haunts his dreams by night. When I gaze into the glowing embers of a safari campfire, it's always a spiral-horned antelope. Their pursuit has taken me the length and breadth of the Africa, hunting with some truly wonderful people in spectacular locations. I've enjoyed it all.

Sitatunga (*Tragelaphus spekii*) is a medium-sized (150 to 250 lb), semi-aquatic antelope with long, slender legs, a shaggy coat, and highly adapted hooves that splay out to support

its weight when walking across the top of the spongy marsh grass so prevalent in their swampy environment.

Botswana

I started my quest with the Zambezi sitatunga (*T.s. selousi*) in Botswana's Okavango Delta. The hunt went so smoothly that I failed to fully appreciate my good fortune at the time. There, one hunts out of a small craft called a *mokoro*, which is little more than a hollowed out log,



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eased through the labyrinth of hippo trails by local natives at both ends with push-poles. I sat in the middle and occupied my time with a small tin can, bailing out the water that trickled in from the numerous seeps in our wooden hull.

We had shoved off before dawn, and around midday the fellow in the bow suddenly crouched and looked at me with bulging eyes. Although a sportsman may not speak the language, he always knows 'The Look' when he sees it.

We were very close to something of great importance: sitatunga? hippo? As the only one in our flimsy craft with a loaded firearm, I knew he wanted me to get busy. After bracing myself on the gunnels, I eased to my feet where I could peer over the tops of the reeds. For miles, all I could see were the feathery white tufts of papyrus swaying gently in the morning breeze. Just as I reached for my binoculars, a gust lay down the reeds directly off our bow. There it was! A large sitatunga bull was crouching in the water and staring intently at us from only 50 feet away. Although most of his body was screened by vegetation, I could still make out the shaggy neck and curve of his hunched back. While struggling to maintain my balance in the wobbly mokoro, I slowly raised the rifle to my shoulder. When the next gust revealed the sitatunga once more, I placed the crosshairs of my .375 H&H Mag on his shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

At the boom of the rifle, I was thrown off balance by the recoil, the craft lunged forward, and the bull took off, churning up mud and debris as he literally galloped across the top of the water. In hot pursuit, the mokoro surged through the water with every heave of the poles, while I managed to regain my composure and cycle the bolt for a follow up shot.

With no blood trail or tracks, we were reduced to following a thin line of bubbles across the surface of the water, or mud-splattered papyrus stalks, or shredded lily pads. Glancing nervously at the grassy island where the watery trail was headed, there was a sudden, clearly discernable 'blurp' as a large air bubble broke the surface only 10 yards out. The Bowman gently probed the muck beneath us, then flashed a beaming smile. After a bit of fancy stick work that would have made any hockey player proud, he reached into the dark waters and pulled up the sitatunga by the horns.

Although it was cool that day, having a sopping wet carcass lying across my lap felt great. The matted brown hair was covered in bits of aquatic vegetation and a dark organic ooze, but for me, it was a handsome and well-earned prize.

Little did I know it would take me seven safaris over 20 years to collect the smaller bodied, smaller horned forest sitatunga (*T.s. gratus*) that live in equatorial jungles and patches of thick vegetation found adjacent to rivers and streams of gallery forests.

Liberia, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, etc.

I've probably hunted forest sitatunga every legal way possible. I followed tracks through flooded forests in Liberia and Cameroon, floated down rivers and streams in The People's Republic

of Congo, and spent enough days sitting on perches overlooking swamps in the Central African Republic to receive a Ph.D. in the study of marsh grass.

Following the spoor through dense forest was the most physically demanding. The sitatunga's long, pointed hooves create a distinctive 'V' in the soft mud that can be easily identified in the shadowy gloom of the forest floor. If you pick up the tracks leading from a feeding area early enough in the morning, there's a slim chance of catching the sitatunga bedded down by midday. I say 'slim' because the spoor inevitably lead into yet another swamp where it was frequently lost in the brackish water; or you make so much noise struggling through the muck and thick underbrush that you spook him before ever catching a glimpse of him. I've actually seen trackers peer into knee-deep water to follow hoof prints on the bottom. If the water remains calm, the oil in the sitatunga's coat leaves enough of a sheen on the surface to continue pursuit.

In Cameroon, I tried hunting sitatunga with dogs, but quickly gave up as, when alarmed, the sitatunga headed into the safety of the swamps. Still, if you encounter fresh tracks in a closed canopy rain forest where the under storey is thin, your odds of catching up with dogs might improve from 'impossible' to 'very difficult.'

In West Africa, floating along with the current in a small pirogue craft was my favourite way to hunt.

It was stealthy and relaxing, and we encountered other forest creatures as we floated by. In Congo/Brazzaville, we frequently saw lowland gorillas and forest elephants, as well as a wide assortment of turtles and snakes sitting on logs or draped over low-hanging limbs.

I actually had a shooting opportunity in Congo, but the awkward seating arrangements in our cramped pirogue conspired against me. The streams we hunted were very narrow and frequently blocked by liana vines strung overhead, trees, and other debris pushed in by elephants. The paddling Bomgombé Pygmies wanted me in the middle and out of the path of their machetes flailing away at obstructions.

The sitatunga was quietly feeding in the shallows of the Djaka River as we eased around a bend. Aware of our presence, he made a dash for the deeper water in the centre of the channel. Sitatunga can completely submerge and swim with little more than their nostrils above the surface. Although its body was completely below the water line, there was still a shot at the head and neck. As I attempted to stand in the pirogue and shoot, the Bowman leapt to his feet to get a better view and blocked my shot. He quickly realized what he had done, but the sitatunga had already disappeared.

C.A.R.

In 2006, I returned to the C.A.R. with PH Rudy Lubin, with whom I'd become great friends during three prior safaris for Derby eland, bongo, etc. He had lots of ideas about hunting sitatunga!

We decided the best time would be from late April to mid-May when the short rains were expected to begin. These frequent rains stimulate the movement of game and facilitate tracking sitatunga in the fresh mud as they emerge from the dripping forests to dry their shaggy coats in the tropical sunshine. When undisturbed, they will also establish feeding areas in a small clearing where they can be hunted from a machan (platform) built high enough in a tree to peer down into the reeds and spot the sitatunga when they emerge.

Our daily routine was simple: Up at 3.30 a.m., a quick bite, a drive to where we could walk in to our machan during the pre-dawn darkness in time for the 5.30 a.m. shooting light.

It was always entertaining to watch the forest creatures stir at the start of their day – tropical birds squawking and chirping about us, or the occasional monkey scampering around in the treetops. These could be a real problem; they were always on the alert and would sound a raucous alarm if anyone shifted weight or reached for binoculars. On several occasions we spotted Central African savannah buffalo or herds of western kob grazing in distant meadows. It was a beautiful and relaxing way to enjoy the rainforest.

Sitatunga hunting requires patience. Although a bull could emerge at almost any time of the day, they were most active at dawn or dusk. If nothing happened at sunrise, by 9.00 a.m. we would climb down from the machan to walk slowly along the marsh perimeter. No matter where one locates a machan, there are always secluded pockets hidden from view, and we were determined to not let those opportunities go untried.

By noon, the heat and humidity were unbearable, so we would return to camp for a light lunch and a siesta if at all possible. Our afternoon strategy varied according to the rain. Usually, we hunted for other species in the area, like kob, forest duikers, or buffalo.

Although we anticipated that the morning hunt would be the most productive, as we approached the safari's halfway point, Rudy felt we needed to change our strategy. We passed on hunting other species and spent both mornings and afternoons waiting for a sitatunga.

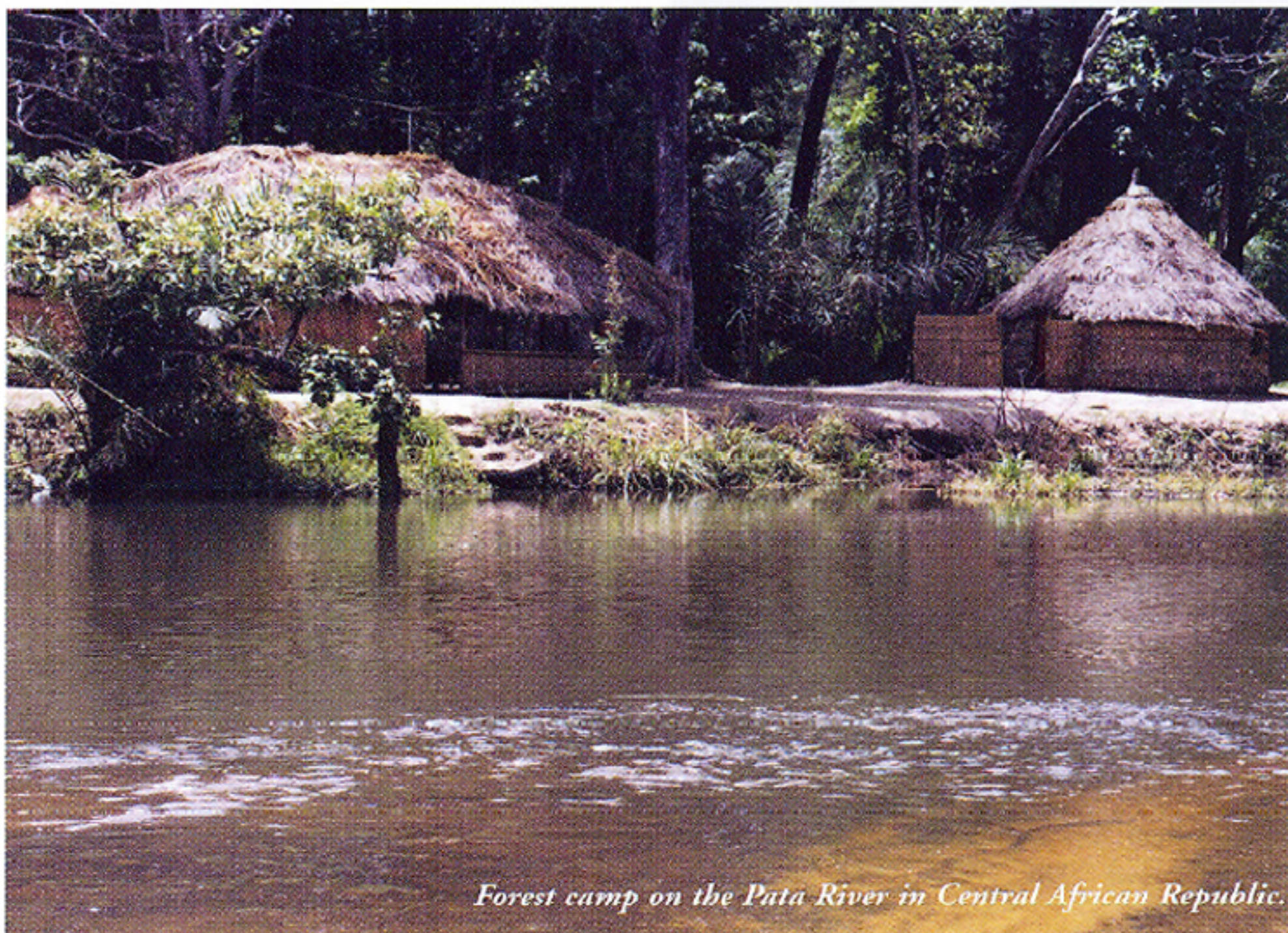
It was still oppressingly hot and muggy as we emerged from the darkness of the forest into the bright sunshine of a grassy clearing on that first afternoon hunt. We proceeded in silence, each man focused on reaching the tree where our



A female sitatunga swims past us at M'beli bai People's Republic of Congo.



After a bit of fancy stick work with his pushpole, the tracker reached into the dark waters and pulled the sitatunga to the surface by his horns.



Forest camp on the Pata River in Central African Republic.



A beautiful waterfall along the rivers of south-east Cameroon.

platform was located. I was drenched in sweat and needed to adjust my soggy clothes to be comfortable before sitting absolutely motionless in the machan.

As we were getting settled, our tracker, Michel, ventured out into the marsh to check for fresh signs of feeding, while his assistant, Gabriel climbed up into the machan with us.

Gabriel suddenly hissed at Rudy and pointed to the distance. After a quick look with his binoculars, Rudy whispered for me to get ready. A sitatunga bull, 150 yards out, was looking straight at us. Despite my best efforts, I just couldn't see him, so we went back and forth in hushed tones describing every blade of grass and

tree limb in the marsh until I finally spotted what they were looking at. The only parts that were even remotely recognizable to me were the white chevron across the bridge of its nose and the ivory tips of its horns protruding above the grass. I'd just acquired it in my riflescope when it dawned upon us that Michel was still wandering around the marsh searching for tracks. Gabriel clucked and waved his arms in a desperate attempt to attract his attention. Michel and the sitatunga were now less than 100 yards apart. If it sensed his presence, the bull would be gone in a flash. Finally, Michel got the message and dropped out of sight.

When Rudy cleared me to shoot, there was

precious little to aim for other than the bridge of the sitatunga's nose. After studying the situation once more through binoculars, Rudy whispered, "I think the body is on the left." And that's where I fired my shot.

I immediately lost the animal in my scope during recoil, but then Gabriel gave me a huge grin and made a downward motion with the palm of his hand. We sat in stunned silence, except for the incessant whine of the swarming black flies, then scanned the grass for any sign of movement. Unable to stand the suspense any longer, Rudy and I scrambled down the ladder and waded out into the marsh. Gabriel remained in the machan to give us directions,

but each time I looked back for guidance he was making so many wild gestures, it just added to the confusion.

At first there was no sign whatsoever of the animal. But when I crawled up a small termite mound to get my bearings, I made a correction and re-entered the grass. Ten more yards and there he was – dropped in his tracks with a .375 bullet hole spot on the shoulder.

Rudy was beside me in a flash. He knew what this moment meant for me, and the years of effort behind it. Never one for wild outbursts, he simply gave me a hug and a hearty congratulations.

Michel fought his way through the grass, celebrating my achievement in a mixture of French and his native Sango while furiously pumping my hand.

Finally we lashed the sitatunga to a sturdy pole for transport, and Rudy led the way in triumph as our little procession struggled out of the marsh. I dropped back to the rear to reflect upon what we had just accomplished and to savour the moment. A smile slowly spread across my face as I realized that, after all these years, it was time for a new quest.

A native of Shreveport, Louisiana, Chris Kinsey has hunted for over 20 years in Botswana, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, the



PH Rudy Lubin (L) with Chris Kinsey (R) and the forest sitatunga that it took Chris seven safaris over 20 years in C.A.R., Liberia, Cameroon, The Republic of Congo, and back to C.A.R. to collect.

People's Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Zambia, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. He is active in numerous conservation organizations, and is a member of

The Explorer's Club of New York, A Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society of London, and an Honorary Member of the African Professional Hunters Association (A.P.H.A.). 🇳🇮