

AFRICA'S *Grandest* GAME

The tracks were fresh in the faint cool of early morning. They stayed fresh all day, sometimes as white ash crushed against the black of burned grass and sometimes just as faint scratches on hard-baked red clay. The great beasts kept moving through the day, and it had not been cool for many hours. Equatorial sun beat down through the oppressive humidity. Sweat ran in small rivers, but it was so hot my shirt remained dry.

The eland herd was big: 50 animals or more. They were just ahead of us, somewhere in that impenetrable screen of new spring growth. The tracks wandered now, and discarded leaves from careless brows-

*Lord Derby's
giant eland
is one of
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elusive prizes.*

By Craig Boddington

ing were bright green. The fickle wind that had plagued us for days was, for a change, steady and very slight. If it held for just a little longer we had a chance.

One of the trackers saw them first, and then professional hunter Rudy Lubin spotted them. Finally I saw the movement and the color—caramel against gray branches and green leaves. We moved closer and still the wind held. Despite the great height and vast bulk of these giants, at 50 yards I could see only glimmers of movement. We closed in, and at less than 40 yards, in patches of clear between the thick trees, I could at long last see Africa's grandest antelope.



who has maintained his camp on the Upper Chinko River, fewer than 100 miles from Sudan, for 23 seasons now. Rudy is French, as are most professional hunters in the C.A.R., but his wife—outdoor writer Brooke Chilvers—is American, and Rudy's English is perfect. He was first posted to Africa in the French Army. He liked it and decided to stay, hunting first in Chad, then in northern C.A.R., and finally settling in with Daniel Henriot's Les Safaris du Haut Chinko (The Safaris of Upper Chinko), a Paris-based outfit. Henriot's concession is several million acres of northeastern C.A.R.—a vast, roadless, uninhabited country. The base camp, Trois Rivières (Three Rivers), is on the map. It is the last outpost in the region.

Reaching Rudy's camp from the capital (and only major) city of Bangui, nestled along the broad Oubangui River, is an arduous journey of seven to 10 days, depending on whether one has to wait for the rivers to drop before fording.

Rudy's clients have it a bit easier. They can, as I did, take an overnight flight from Paris, arriving at Bangui early in the morning. After a few moments of customs formalities and a welcome cup of coffee, I loaded up in a light plane for the two-hour flight to Three Rivers. It's a slow-going, four-hour drive from Three Rivers to Upper Chinko, but it's hunting country all the way, and eventually you reach Rudy's comfortable cluster of thatched *rondavels* along the Chinko River.

With me this time was Joe Bishop, a favorite hunting partner and one of the luckier sportsmen I know. I was hoping some of it would rub off. And Joe also hoped for luck.

Our focus was Derby eland. To that end we would depart camp long before day-

light, heading in separate directions to distant areas where eland might have been moving. Although we would take a gift if it were presented, we weren't really looking for the animals—only for fresh tracks we could follow.

The Upper Chinko country is beautiful in its rugged way. Dramatic rocky hills and broad, flat-topped plateaus look over valleys covered by dense hardwood forest of terminalia and acacia—not dissimilar to oak forest. Eland cover vast distances while feeding, and aren't shy about walking miles to water. In the early morning we might find tracks headed away from the river, but we would find the animals themselves miles out in the dry woodlands.

One of Rudy's favorite places for eland and roan was a long, flat plateau that rose a few hundred feet above dense woodlands. We had tracked eland there two years before, and we had tried it on our first hunting day. We had seen roan there, but the eland tracks had been a couple of days old. Under clear skies that promised another scorcher of a day, we headed there about midway through the safari. We didn't get there. Right on the main road were the fresh, clear tracks of two eland bulls.

It was 6:15 in the morning when we took the tracks. They wandered back and forth across the road two more times, then took a line to the northeast. In as fine a display



The western kob is usually one of the more common species found along rivers throughout the region the author hunted. Along with a handful of other available game, they lend variety to a safari in the Central African Republic.

of woodcraft as I've ever seen, trackers Gabriel and Jean-Marie took the track and held it all through a long morning. One bull split off, but we kept the biggest track. For a long time we knew the bull was far ahead. But for a much longer time we knew he was very close. Isober Linia leaves—favored by the eland—were clean and bright, and the dung was fresh. He crossed and recrossed a dry stream bed, perhaps looking for pools of water. Then he meandered into some very thick growth, and I knew we must see him.

We did, but not well—just a beige form angling through the thick trees. The shot felt good; cross hairs were steady, and where they needed to be—well behind the shoulder. He bucked like a Brahma bull, then ran to the left. Trees ate the second shot, and then he was gone. And then the longest day of my hunting career *really* started.

The blood was good, and the hit was not bad. But it wasn't good enough. Nor was the country open enough to offer a good chance. We jumped the bull five times with no shots fired. Each time we waited before continuing, beside ourselves with anguish. And suddenly it was very late in the day and we were very far from the only road.

The tracks that had wandered aimlessly now led to a saddle through the area's most prominent hills. I knew the prognosis: If he made the saddle we were done for the day and must continue in the morning.

Below the saddle there was a narrow valley of long, yellow, unburned grass. The tracks led across the valley and into its fringe of brush. And then, 200 yards up the valley, we all together saw movement as our bull stepped from the brush and into the grass—and toward the saddle far above. I shot, Rudy shot, and then the faint outline

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The Sing Sing waterbuck is a subspecies unique to central and western Africa. Reddish in color, it is a long-horned variety of common waterbuck.

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In the shaded trees they were dark, almost milk-chocolate in color, and the white side stripes showed clearly. So did the black of their massive, twisted horns. They were the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen.

The spoor our trackers had chosen to follow led us to the outside center of the herd as the eland fed past from left to right. After days and hours of tracking through

circumstances and tracked many bulls that I never saw.

The Lord Derby's eland, the largest of Africa's 100-plus varieties of antelope, is named for the English Lord Derby, who brought the first specimens to Europe in the middle years of the last century. In profile the giant eland differs little from the common eland—long legs, massive shoulders, slab-sided hips, and on males a heavy dewlap like Brahma cattle. In body size I suspect they are only slightly larger than the bigger subspecies of common eland, which can also reach a ton in weight. But the horns are exaggerated, much longer, and on the

ly doubt that Derby eland are warier than the Cape eland of southern Africa; the Livingstone's eland of Zambia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe; or the Paterson's eland of East Africa. But the Derby eland ranks near the top of any expert's list of Africa's greatest game because of his innate elusiveness, his physical beauty, his awesome horns, and the fact that he is found only in some of Africa's most remote and inaccessible country.

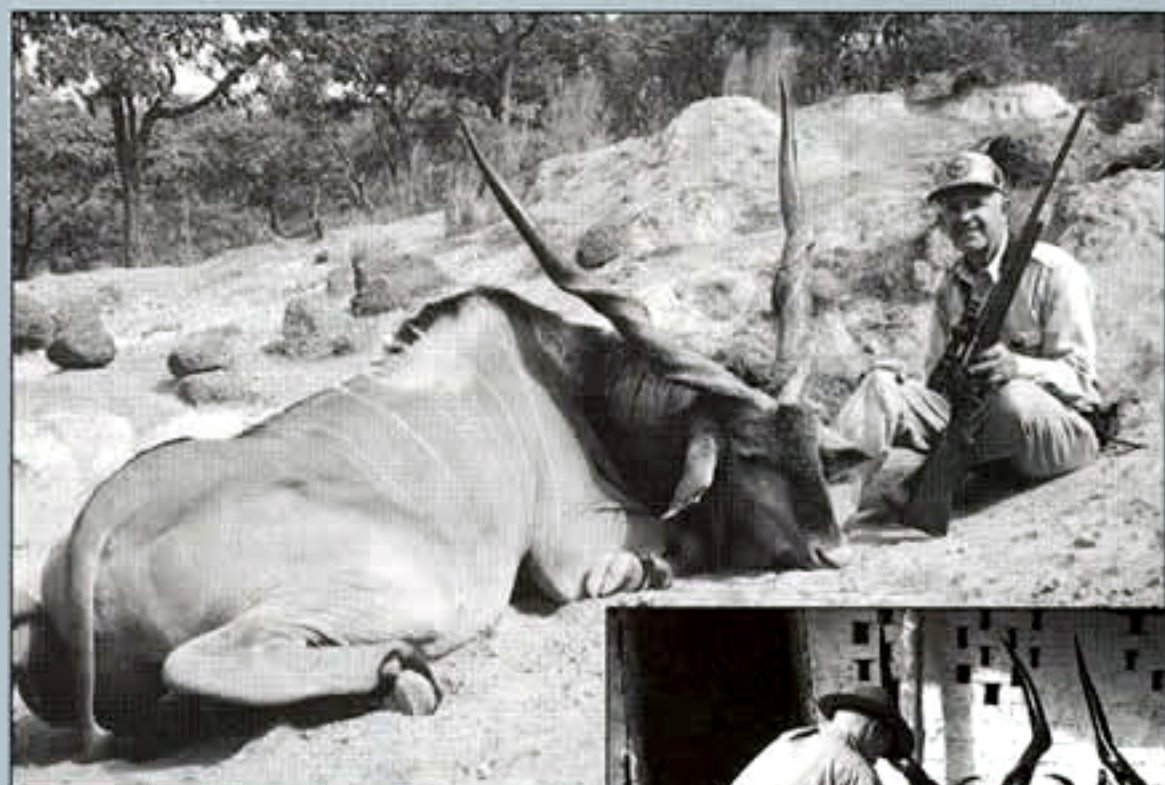
While the three varieties of common eland are extremely widespread, the Derby eland is found only in a narrow belt of savanna, savanna woodland, and transition forest extending from southwestern Sudan through the Central African Republic, northern Cameroon, and into Nigeria.

This habitat occupies some of Africa's last unspoiled wilderness. It is remote, hard-to-reach country, expensive to outfit safaris in and expensive to hunt.

The eland country of northern Cameroon narrows to a small strip of land below Lake Chad. The bulk of the population is found in the northern and northeastern Central African Republic, a vast country of few roads and fewer people. Almost as large as Texas, the C.A.R. has just three million human inhabitants—most of whom live along the Oubangui River.

Hunting Lord Derby's eland generally involves tracking jobs completed in the heat of the day. Although they are extremely wary, prone to cover many miles in a day, and thinly dispersed over a huge, roadless country, Derby eland are actually relatively common in the heart of their range. My bad luck on the first trip notwithstanding, Derby eland hunting is generally successful. And it's done in very pretty, very wild country that also holds a tremendous variety of other game.

On both trips I hunted with Rudy Lubin.



Firing a 300-grain Nosler Partition bullet through his Sako .375, Joe Bishop took a tremendous Lord Derby's eland (above) that placed well into the all-time Top 10 for the species. The author was on hand (right) to measure the new world record taken by French hunter Marc Blusztajn.



the central African heat I was speechless. Rudy was not. "Females," he whispered in disgust.

We moved with them, losing ground quickly but ticking them off as they passed. One seemed huge and much darker than the rest. I pointed. This one, too, was a female. Somewhere behind these outriders, in the movement dimly seen through the leafy screen, was the bull whose tracks we had followed. But he might as well have been on the moon. Precious seconds passed, and then the herd was past as well.

Running, the heat forgotten, we swung away from the herd and back to it. More females and young eland. Many more. And then a light breeze kissed the back of my neck as the wind shifted once more. Branches cracked and dust drifted back as 50 tons of muscle driven by 200 hooves crashed through the grove. And then all was silent again.

I never saw a giant eland bull on that trip, although I saw many cows under similar

oldest bulls, much thicker as well. As with all eland, both males and females grow horns, and the females can grow very long horns indeed. Males have thicker horns and a much more pronounced dewlap, but—as with any variety of eland—picking the bull out of a big herd moving in shadowed forest is no job for a beginner.

Aside from the horns, coloration is where the Derby eland differ most markedly from the other varieties. The coat, especially in winter, is much darker, and the vertical stripes much more pronounced. Winter capes are thick and luxurious, with a coal black collar altogether absent from other subspecies. All eland are especially alert and elusive among African antelope. If alarmed, they will cover many miles in a ground-eating trot before stopping. And they are easily alarmed: they possess superb eyesight, good hearing, and an exceptionally keen nose—all of which they use to good advantage. I have hunted all but one variety of Africa's eland, and I serious-



Elusive as giant eland are, their tracks are often all that hunters see. Once on the track of a big bull, hunters might follow it for miles in the heat of midday.

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was swallowed by the grass. We ran forward, looking at the place we had last seen him. He wasn't there. He was almost into the saddle, 150 yards above us. He stopped behind a tree, then ran for the saddle. I shot. Rudy shot. We both shot again, and our bull dropped into the grass.

Only days later, on the way out, did I see

a clear image of a live eland. But *my* eland was the most gorgeous creature I have ever seen, and by far the most impressive. His horns were average in length by Derby eland standards, but he was an old bull with immense bases, a huge body, and a thick, luxurious, absolutely prime winter coat. He went down at four p.m., 10 hours after we'd taken his track, and many more hours passed before we made it back to camp.

Joe got his chance the next day and took a fabulous bull with long, straight horns—

more than 51 inches, and making a perfect "V." For Joe, the eland was the ninth and last of Africa's principal spiral-horned antelopes, and by his own estimation, the greatest animal he'd ever taken. Joe's was one of the best eland of all time, but two days later, from the Three Rivers Camp, French hunter Marc Blusztajn took a bull with five inches more horn! In spite of the Sudanese poachers, the monsters still roam. But I was not, and am not, disappointed in my own Lord Derby's eland—he's a fine old bull, and one of the most prized trophies of my life. ■



The eland country of eastern C.A.R. is one of the truly remote hunting areas remaining in Africa, and the scarcity of roads means game must be physically carried out, sometimes over long distances.