



hunting with a



CHEETAH!

Here's a weapon that does what no rifle, sling or arrow can do. Once

"launched," it homes in on elusive game like a lethal guided missile

BY Arthur Whitman; PHOTOS BY Curt Gunther

A RABBIT BREAKS COVER. Fat and saucy, it skitters a hundred yards over short grass, then stops. It advances cautiously, then stops dead still, its head darting from side to side. Sensing danger, it advances hesitantly. Suddenly, it leaps like a dervish and runs in full panic. After it streaks the predator—a 110-pound male African cheetah.

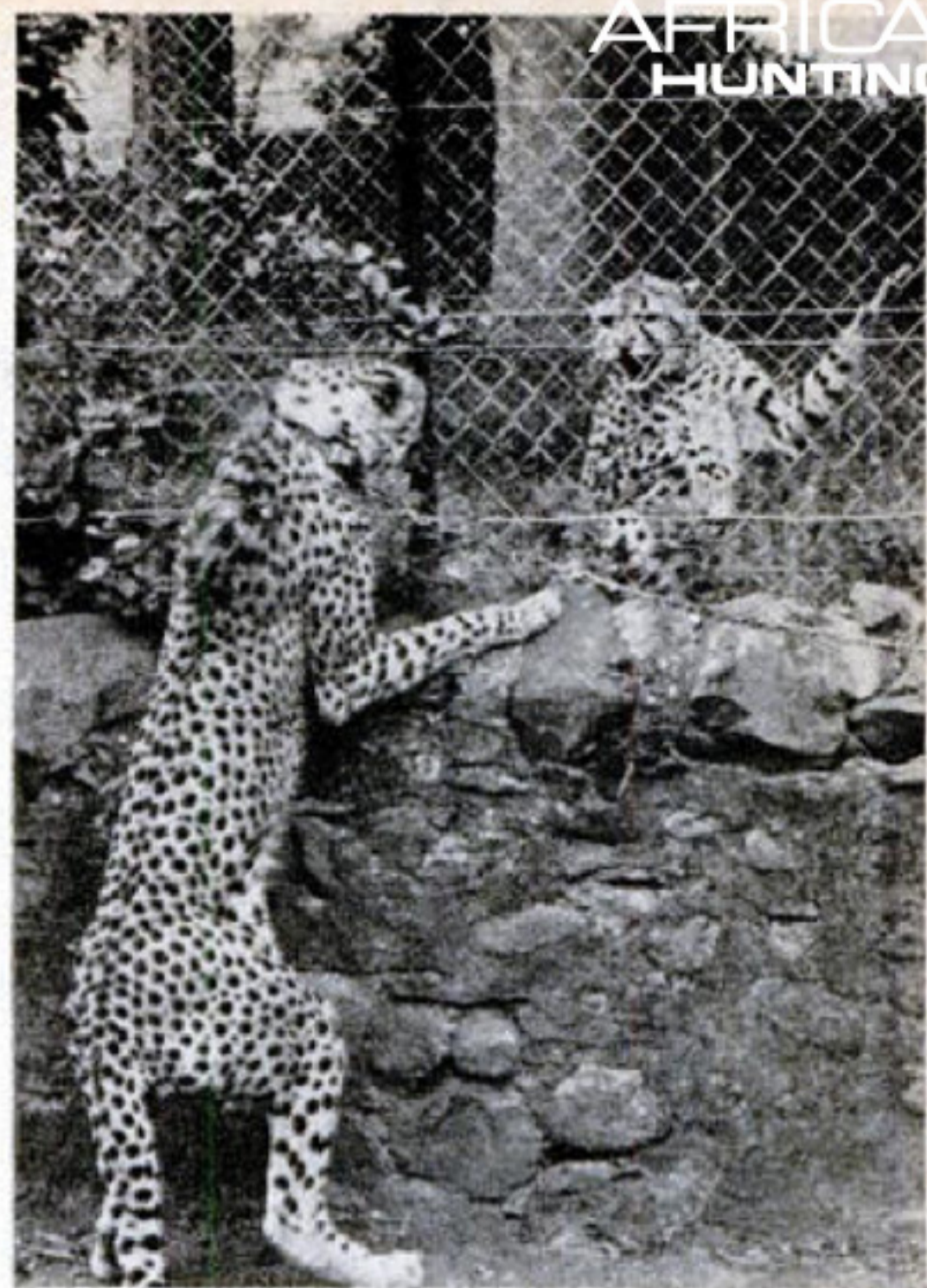
The cheetah, who had spotted the rabbit from 300 yards, closes the distance in seconds. To the eye, his legs are a blur, his body an elongated, strangely spotted meteor. As the enemy closes in, the rabbit dodges, skids, tears back toward cover, zigzagging wildly. But the run is over. With the barest movement of a paw, the cheetah knocks the rabbit sprawling. A quick movement of his head and it's finished. The rabbit is killed, its head severed cleanly in one bite.

The cheetah, named Pusspuss, is one of two that live outside public zoos in Scotland. Both are the prized property of Tom Spence, a farmer *cum* zoologist-veterinarian, who lives and works on his 800-acre sheep-and-grain farm near Cupar Fife, about two hours from Edinburgh, and keeps a collection of rare animals as a hobby.

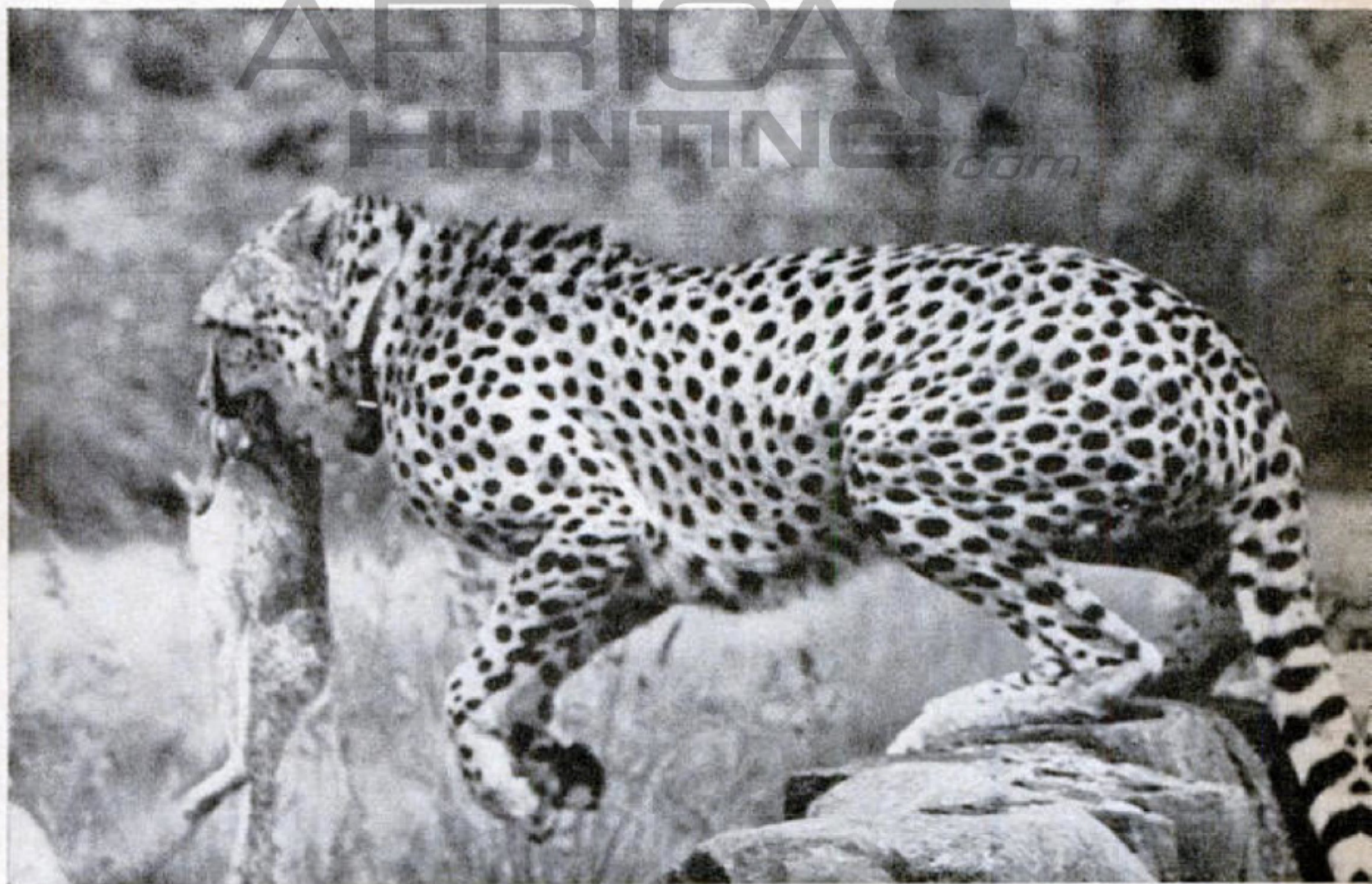
"I had a friend bring Pusspuss back from South Africa about two-and-a-half years ago," explains Spence. "Domesticated cheetahs go back to Babylonian times, but with the spread of civilization, they've grown understandably less popular. Today, they're the rarest pets, the ultimate ones. I guess



PUSSPUSS TAKES A RIDE in the family Jaguar, a favorite pastime. Although rare in these days, the taming of cheetahs goes back to Babylonian times



CAN CHEETAH CHANGE SPOTS? Pusspuss flew into a rage when confronted with a female named Duma, regarding the newcomer as a strange, hostile animal



BACK TO NATURE, the usually gentle cheetah brings home his kill. To make the animal hunt, Spence has to starve him for several days, but once hungry, he quickly reverts to jungle instincts



FELINE FORM OF RUSSIAN ROULETTE, zoologist Tom Spence gives his pet cheetah a buss on the whiskers. He claims that the big cat can be handled and trained like a dog, and is equally docile

I'm a bit of an exhibitionist, and the thought of keeping one rather appealed to me. They're dumb as Adam, you know, but they can be tamed down to be quite good friends."

The taming process amounts to little more than keeping them in a strong kennel and feeding them regularly until they associate food with human friendship. This is, of course, very much like training a dog, and Spence treats Pusspuss as he would a dog, walking him on a leash, curling up with him for an occasional nap before the fire, clouting him in a friendly way when he disobeys, and taking him for rides in a cat of another sort—his four-year-old Jaguar car. He lets him hunt occasionally just for the exercise, usually starving him for a few days beforehand since, like all wild animals, Pusspuss will hunt and kill only when he is hungry.

Animal handlers generally agree that a cat—no matter how long it has been tamed—cannot be fully trusted. Spence agrees with this to a degree, but he also feels

that he takes this into consideration whenever he handles Pusspuss.

After 30 months in captivity, Pusspuss is confused about his identity. Though he's never said it in so many words, he seems to think he's human. He snarls at his own image in mirrors, and has begun rubbing up against some of the farm help as well as Spence. Far worse, he attacks Duma, a lady cheetah that Spence bought a few months ago hoping to see him wed down happily. Closed into a large pen with her he attacked at once. The two nearly killed each other before half a dozen men managed to pry them apart.

As a predator, though, he is all cheetah. He can see small game from hundreds of yards and stalk it so skillfully he can't be seen even in low grass and weed shrubs. When attacking, he goes from a frozen crouch to 50 mph in seconds. Dramatic as this is, it's bad time for cheetahs, indicating that Pusspuss is somewhat out of practice. Back home in Africa, other cheetahs have been clocked for short stretches at 75 miles an hour. ★ ★ ★