



# 'Mba' Is Banda for Buffalo

By J. Alain Smith

*The cool morning air was refreshing, and I was cherishing every moment of it. It wouldn't be long before the staggering heat and humidity would turn the C.A.R. hinterlands into the hellhole they are.*

Glancing at the rest of my compadres in the back of the Land Cruiser at dawn's first light, I chuckled to myself at the way they were bundled up. You'd think it was freezing by the looks of their get-ups, even though it was already 75°F. But considering that within the next hour temperatures would once again be over 100°F, the heavy trench coats, stocking hats, scarves, and an occasional pair of gloves made sense to them. Our PH, Rudy Lubin, wore a medium-weight down jacket and shorts, along with his ever-present fedora, while Mack, my hunting buddy, and I wore the same gear, *sans chapeau*.

As the vehicle came to a lurching halt not an hour from camp, suddenly a mix of hushed French and Banda voices filled the air while the trackers pointed out the spoor where a solitary male Central African savannah buffalo had just crossed the hunting trail. In a flash, coats and caps started flying off the trackers as everyone quickly prepared for another, possibly very long, hike into the thickets of the surrounding woodland savannah.

This was a 'hot' track, the kind you long

for after days of fruitless searching for something worthwhile to follow, and we needed to get on it *right now*. No time for lollygagging around. After you've played this hunting game long enough, you learn to be *always ready to go*. You don't have to say anything; you don't ask any stupid questions; you don't have to be told what to do. You just go about your business, and get your business done – quickly and quietly. Your ammo pouch on your belt is full (you remembered to restock it the night before, after you burned up ammo on the Lelwel hartebeest that wouldn't die); your backpack has your camera, TP, extra bandana, hard candies, a few medical supplies, and sanitary wipes. You shake off the haze from last night's cocktails, and you're ready.

The PH has an air of confidence as he sticks a cigar-sized round up the snout of his well-worn .500 Jeffery, knowing that, for once, he has hunters who may actually be capable of staying with him and these devils of the riverine jungle.

I climbed down from the truck with my pack, and Mack handed me the rifles as he slipped over the roll-bar frame onto

the rust-coloured dirt. I gave him his rifle back, and we both slid one of the long brass .375 H&H cartridges into the chambers of our Winchesters, flicking the safety on and feeling more macho than Hulk Hogan at a gay pride parade. Rudy looked over his shoulder, saw we were ready to go, then turned the trackers loose on their appointed duty. *Show time!*

The original plan for the day had been to hunt plains game and duikers, but all of a sudden we had been blessed with an opportunity to get our adrenalin fix for the week and chase one of the most dangerous animals on earth.

The C.A.R. is home to a great many unique species, including bongo and the giant, or Lord Derby eland. The buffalo that the SCI Trophy Record Book today classifies as the Central African savannah buffalo, *Syncerus caffer brachyceros*, which hunters used to call the north-western buffalo, is also present. And while smaller in body size than the Cape buffalo, he is considered by most experienced hunters to be among the most ornery and aggressive of all the continent's species.

Now don't get me wrong: *All African*



*buffalo are dangerous!* The Central African ones have just taken the 'pucker factor' a notch higher than their cousins to the south and the east. Maybe it's the habitat they thrive in. The thick riverine forests of the woodland savannah, or the dense jungles of the... well, jungle... remind you of scenes out of a Tarzan movie. Buffalo habitat here makes it a sadistic requirement to stalk within spitting distance in order to get a good glimpse of the headgear your quarry is packing, especially when buffalo lounge away the scorching afternoons in thick vegetation after feeding at daylight in the open plains they call *landau*.

No animal likes it when you get within his comfort zone, and buff tend to have a definite boundary that you will *have* to cross to hunt him in the C.A.R. Getting close to anything this size that fears no other creature on its home turf, and would just as soon charge you and ram his hooked horns into your lily-livered guts (sending what's left of your carcass home in a small wooden crate) than turn tail and run, gives these buff a much deserved reputation for nastiness. And they certainly have no fear or respect for 'Great White Hunters.' Add a dash of the occasional poacher's bullet or snare-infected wound, and you have a cocktail whose potency has no equal in the bar room of African fear.

Neither lightning nor man had yet torched the long grass we slipped through, and the dry sharp edges stung our exposed flesh as we waded into it. It's strange how after 10 minutes of being scratched and torn, you get used to it and bull your way through without a second thought for the rest of the day. The trackers set a careful pace, even though you could tell by the dung piles that the buffalo had passed a half-hour or so before us. Visibility was zilch, and another solitary bull or some other beast could easily be around the next corner snoozing or lazily feeding in the morning freshness, and wouldn't take kindly to being disturbed by collectors of bovine headgear. The good news was that the track was clear and the bull was moving at a steady, direct pace, perhaps heading for a riverine retreat to rest within during the midday heat. So we followed him...

An hour later Rudy called a halt to the march and we drank from our water bottles while he and the trackers discussed the situation in hushed tones. "The bull is starting to wander around and feed here and there. We will start to gain on him shortly. Are you ready?" asked Rudy. We nodded "yes." The heat was getting real now. My back was soaked with sweat, and each time we came to an opening in the forest canopy you could feel the staggering weight of the sun punishing your already sunburned skin. The shade of the forest provided little relief as the temperature had risen to triple digits.

The steady, but stealthy, pace continued until the bull began to get into the really thick stuff. We picked our way step by step through thorny, clinging, vine-filled *bakos* (riverine forests), concentrating our senses on the smothering vegetation, looking for any sign of the reddish-brown hide. We'd lose the track, circle back, find it again, cast in front of the last seen track looking for where he had changed his route, and pick our way through downed trees and stickers while keeping out a trained eye for a waiting bull, our Winchesters at the ready position.

Zumbala, our tracker, whistled to us softly and we all edged over to where he stood pointing at a hot pile of pasture patty. He didn't need to stick a finger in it to test how fresh it was – the

*After hearing his favourite word ("Shoot!") from PH Rudy Lubin, Alain Smith (R) let fly a 270-grain Barnes X-bullet, followed up by a shot from the rifle of his hunting buddy, Mack Padgett (L). Two more shots finally brought the buffalo down for good.*



rising steam gave us all renewed incentive to pay attention to the task at hand.

We climbed up out of the tangled river bottom into a small grassy opening, and suddenly all hell broke loose 25 yards in front of us. I just about crapped myself as I looked straight into the eyes of the rust-hued bull that, after running 20 yards, spun around to see who had disturbed his leisurely breakfast. He was not a happy camper. Letting out a loud snort and a *hurrrmff* while



trying to get our scent, the great beast took five quick menacing steps towards us as Rudy hissed, "Shooooot!"

Since that is my favourite word in the English language, I was more than happy to oblige the PH's demand and let fly with a 270-grain Barnes X-Bullet into the centre of his chest. When buff are this close, Mack's and my policy has always been to shoot first and sort out Who did What later; so Mack followed a millisecond later with another well-placed bullet, which I followed with a random shot of unknown consequences as the bull was spinning away.

Running after the fleeing buff and reloading on the fly, Mack gave him a nice going away present that made the bull kick his back legs in the air, followed by a couple of hops that relayed, "Damn, that hurts!" About this time, the old boy had had enough of the 'Al and Mack Show' and, swinging around, decided to meet us head on and sort it out once and for all, *mano a mano* so to speak...or *mano a buffalo*, in this case.

The first couple of killing shots started to take their deadly toll as he staggered forward and swung his massive headgear from side to side in a threatening show of dominance. It certainly worked on me, I can tell you! Even after all the buff we've killed over the years of safari hunting, the capacity of African buffalo to absorb lead never ceases to amaze me.

He was partially hidden by some small trees, so we approached him head on, rifles at our shoulders and sweat stinging my eyes. We veered to our left to get a better angle to put an end to the beast's suffering. My guts churned, remembering in a flash those ugly videos of charging buff, and bulls dropping at the hunter's feet. The bull took two steps forward in a weak attempt at a charge and absorbed two more .375 shots for his efforts. The effect of the almost simultaneous shots was devastating, and shudders ran down the length of the buff's body as he took three more tentative steps forward before crashing to the ground in a bovine heap of red dust.

Stuffing my magazine full of fresh bullets, we paused, took a deep breath, and admired the fallen giant from 15 yards. My mouth was suddenly very dry. No one said a word. I doubt I could have said anything, anyhow. A wink and a well-earned nod from my PH filled my emotional centre with a satisfied glow of success that only those who tempt fate in the African bush can understand.

*Alain Smith's stories on his Lord Derby eland and bongo hunts in C.A.R. are included in his new book, Hunting New Horizons, available in a limited (signed and numbered) or trade edition. To order, go to [www.jalainsmith.com](http://www.jalainsmith.com).*



*The 'Tools of the Trade' for hunting buffalo.*



*Tracking buffalo involves many a discussion of dung. "Is this fresh enough?" Smith asks the tracker, Zumbala. "It looks to me by the steam coming off this pile that the bull is damn close?"*