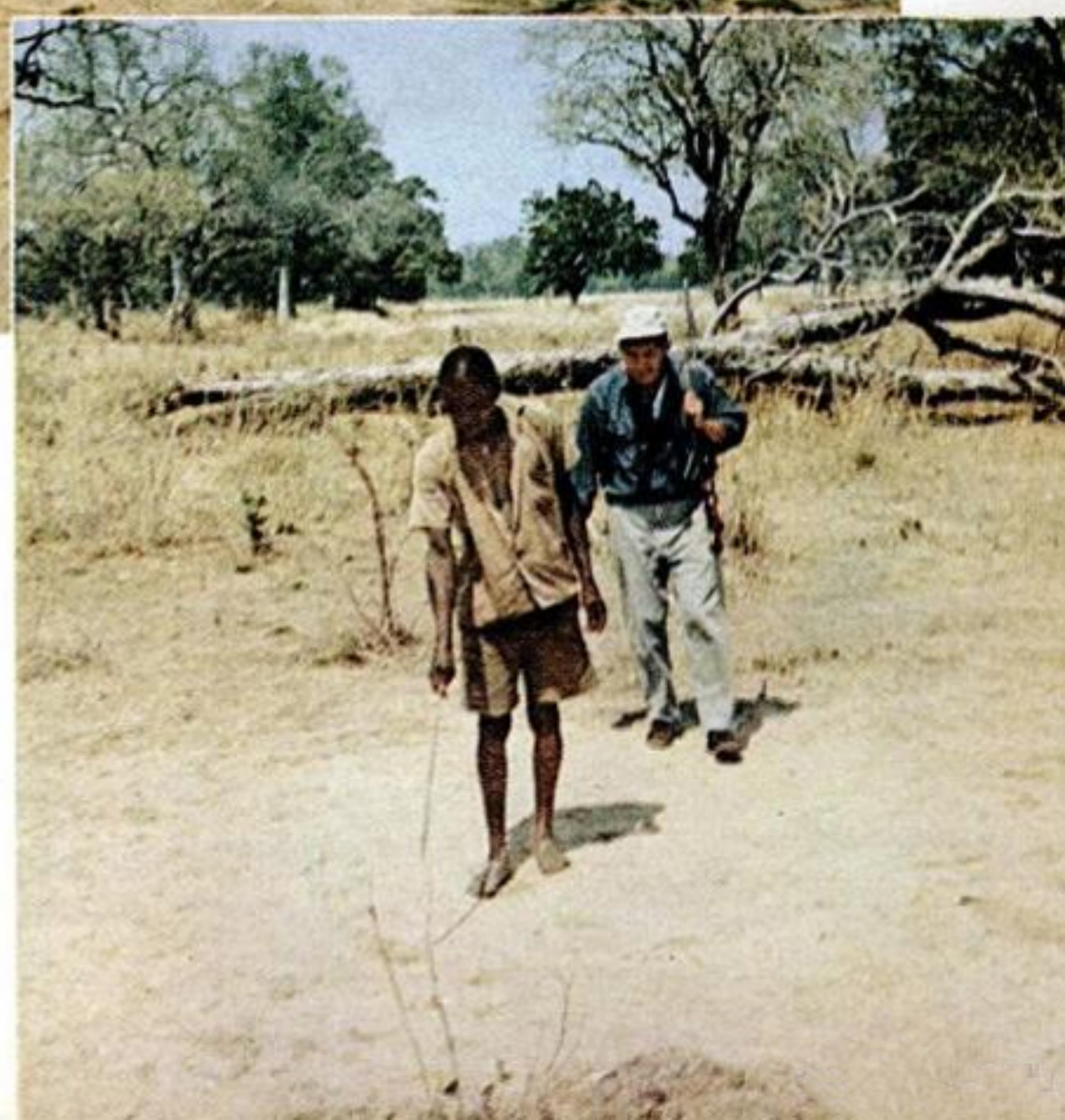
Two Tickets for Two Lions

By WARREN PAGE / Shooting Editor

Though sandy-maned, Page's Luangwa lion was out-sized, taping at 9 feet 6 between pegs. The .375 Weatherby dropped him



In today's safari areas the nation of Zambia is stacking up as the best source of trophy lions, chiefly in the well-controlled Luangwa Valley

"YOU can't kid me, Peter Hankin," I announced at breakfast the first morning in safari camp. "You've got a bunch of tape recorders planted out in the bush playing lion noises all night to keep the customers awake! Which brand works best, Sony or RCA?"

Zambian professional hunter Hankin, like most of the British born who live and work in Africa, delights in sly or light wit but has no feel for our lead-footed American brand of kidding. He took me seriously. "Oh, but of course not. Those were real lions. Plenty of them about, especially in the reserve across the Luangwa."

I knew that already. I had heard lions before, from Mozambique to Oubangui and back. But never so much nocturnal roaring or from so many directions. It was fine music. My chief interest in Zambian game lay in a maned lion, preferably one hairier than the Metro-Goldywn-Mayer symbol, something on the order of the handsomely coiffured cat that advertises the Dreyfus Fund on TV. The rumpus made by deep-coughing males not only that first night but almost every other night during our time at Peter's base camp on the Luangwa supported his claim that no customer in recent years has gone home without a proper lion if he really wanted one. That's a batting average not possible anywhere else in Africa I know of, not in this day and age. The prospects looked good. Perhaps both my friend Art McGreevy, New Jersey restaurateur who'd flown out with me on Alitalia for his first safari, and I would be able to fill our tickets.

The lion, or the King of Beasts as some romantics persist in calling the big sandy cat, can be hunted in a variety of ways. Classically, until outright baiting was tabooed in some countries formerly British, the most effective scheme was, after locating the operational area of a pride or family of lions, to kill a zebra or similar-size plains animal, drag the carcass for a scent trail, and then hang it in a tree rather high, where the hyenas couldn't reach it, the lions only just. The technique then calls for watching that bait from a blind at dawn and dark until the cats come in to feed. This is a fairly reliable scheme. My first male lion had been taken that way, a dozen years before up in the NFD, a cat skimpy in the mane as desert lions usually are. But I've also seen baiting fail dismally on hunter-educated lions, in Uganda and in the Mara country of Kenya, for example. They fed all right, but only between 10 P.M. and 2:00 A.M. and sneered at our efforts the rest of the time. The system is now permitted in some areas, taboo in a few. It has one great virtue, that of permitting careful trophy selection, since on a bait there's time to look over the cats, decide yea or nay, where other schemes usually demand snap judgment.

Some lucky types have happened onto lion when hunting other game, and Peter assured me that as I poked about with his son I'd find the Luangwa cat population dense enough for such a chance encounter to be likely. More often the cats are spoored up, tracked into a midday snoozing place from the remains of either their own natural kill or the residue of an animal shot by hunters. This can be difficult, ending in a very sporting stalk. It had worked for me in Uganda in most exciting fashion.

Calling in daylight by using a varmint call, as Murry Burnham and his brother did successfully last season, appears to be a new system. Calling at night by roaring into a five gallon kerosene can to challenge a local male and so to pull him in for jacklighting is an old scheme in Mozambique, has been used elsewhere. It is most effective but hardly kosher under either the law or hunting ethics. Hounds were once used to chase the big cats, but this was a sport for only the most brash of 19th century British and Dutch colonials, since pounding after Leo on horseback with either lance or gun must have been about as healthy as driving a race car down Chicago's Michigan Avenue. The basic requisite in any method, of course, is to locate the lions.

Philip Hankin and I thought we had that all wrapped in a bag one morning. While the dawn was still pink we were wading the crocodile-infested Munyamadsi River to poke into buffalo possibilities beyond the stream-bank village. While still in midriver we heard male lions roaring. From the sound, there were two, due west and not far away, perhaps a mile, one of the difficulties of locating a lion by his voice being that the roar and grunts have a deceptive ventriloquial quality, come from everywhere and nowhere at once. But Amoni, who was toting my .375 Weatherby as the heavy rifle, came from this village, and swore he knew precisely where the lions were. In the local Chunyanga tongue he explained things to Philip.

"This part of the river is a new channel," he said, his finger making a rude map in the sand. "Over there is the old channel, with small pools of water. On the plain by it will be the lions. The *nkalamo* should be by last night's kill."

But with the rising sun the lions quit roaring. Probably they'd already abandoned the kill, moved back into the bush to snooze out the daylight hours.

"One chance, though," offered Philip. "Sometimes, especially if the night was a bit cool, they'll lie out for a half hour on the river sand, warming in the sun."

That sounded encouraging but I didn't place much faith in it. In an area dotted by clumps of bush varying from room to house size, with 200- and 300-yard spaces of clear grass in between, chances were the lions would see us long before we found them. But they didn't. That is, some didn't.

We had eased around one lush clump, certain that we were close to the source of the dawn roaring, when ahead a lioness stood up, stretched, moved slowly under cover. Then another moved. No sign that either had seen us. We froze. But it was too late. A male lion materialized from a shady spot. He stared fixedly at us for a moment, then decisively trotted off. Obviously he had watched us all the way. Too bad.

From the tracks it was evident that the pride of several cats had moved into what looked like a solid wall of bush. Not a good place to disturb lions if you value your health. But the wall wasn't quite solid and we poked carefully around the edges, not so much worried about the male, since he would likely only demonstrate, but concerned lest we inadvertently stir up some lioness protective of her cubs. All at once we were surrounded by running lions. They had not gone fully in, had moved only into the shady edges, and we had unintentionally flushed them like a covey of quail. The hairy old tom showed not at all, however; neither did any cubs, as they ran into impenetrable bush. We (*Continued on page 72*)

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were perhaps lucky, because annoying lionesses is a good way to enjoy a short, if eventful, life.

"Females of any sort are trouble," said Ron Backus, McGreevy's professional hunter, that night. "Art and I got a bit close to a bunch of cow elephant this afternoon and one old girl made a swipe at us. She'd have turned off, probably, save for two of our boys. They buggered off and when they ran she kept on coming. Had to shoot her at about 15 yards."

"More like 15 feet to me!" chimed in the restaurant keeper. On his first safari, he was certainly getting all the trimmings.

"Well, anyway," continued Bob with typical British understatement, "if the locals don't find the carcass until midmorning, we might get a lion off it. Fresh spoor in the area. It's up early for you, Mr. McGreevy."

People don't shoot elephants for lion bait, needless to say. But now and again a tusker is brought down in an area where eating elephant meat is taboo among the local tribes, or perhaps there is no village at all in that region. In these situations, although normally several tons of elephant would be reduced to a grease spot in an hour by protein-hungry natives, there exists a super-colossal lion bait, a store of meat rather difficult for anything but a lion to open. In 1958 my 123-pounder, shot where there existed no local humans to chop it into coarse-grained steaks, had drawn not one but two prides of lions, neither with a really dominant old male, to quarrel over the remains. When they went out to remove the tusks from a Botswana bull, my friend Brandy Macomber and Ian Henderson, his professional hunter, had met two fine males feeding on it. They had pursued one, were eventually bloodily beaten up, half killed in fact, by a cat that strongly resented being chased out of his favorite restaurant. Full-grown elephants are attacked by no beast save man, but lions seem to have a sweet tooth for the youngsters, and any elephant carcass has stronger powers of attraction than any perfume Chanel ever brewed.

"And the lions are here," whispered Rob as he led Art McGreevy closer to the dead cow next dawn. Three lionesses were visible. Off to the right, where he had been napping with a bellyful of meat, reared the maned head and shoulders of a good male. "Can you hit him?"

Art told me afterward that it never occurred to him that he might muck up the 80-yard offhand shot. The lion was there, it was clearly a fine one, and he should shoot it. So he shot it. Dead.

I suspect that a man of greater hunting experience, one who had already learned the facts of what can happen after a bad hit on dangerous game, would have had the Jericho jitters. Sometimes it's wise not to know too much. Through the combination of a hot-headed cow elephant, two scared bearers, and a couple of clean shots over as many days, Art had him a very handsome gingery-maned lion.

This didn't help my plans much. Philip and I moved in on two other batches of cats we heard roaring in the early dawn, missed one, found where the other after eating up a whole zebra had squirmed away through a bulldozer-dense strip of gallery jungle and then marched off across a grassy plain. We had spoored up one big-footed male with a couple of females for a full mile, but lost that track when a herd of a thousand buffalo rocked and thundered across the trail. Philip's dad was still optimistic that we'd hit onto a respectable lion while hunting more common game, but that comment had begun to sound like the Luangwa Chamber of Commerce. Time was awasting. Meanwhile, every night we were serenaded by at least three lions holding territories close to the river, two of them on the far side.

The 300-mile valley of the Luangwa is checkerboarded with controlled hunting and no-hunting sections, so that most efficient control is possible by opening and closing easily marked-out areas. Most of that opposite riverside area was reserve. But a section perhaps a couple of miles long and a mile or so deep belonged to our controlled hunting area. Art had already found his roan antelope on the east or far side of the river, and by deliberately listening to listen to lion music one night I had become firmly convinced that one big male and his harem lived in that same region. Tracks bore that out. But three or four square miles is a big enough hunk of African real estate for a small army of cats to move around in without being seen.

"Bait it is, then," said Peter. Bait it would be.

Philip and I waded across the Luangwa, shallowing daily as the weather warmed towards the rains of November, and found a fat waterbuck, the second permitted on my license. A zebra might have been better, would last longer, but our hunch was this would be a one-night try. The waterbuck we chained up between trees high enough so that only the most acrobatic hyena might get a mouthful, but lions could reach enough meat to hold the pride's interest. Then we cleared a sneak-in approach from the riverbank to a termite hill surrounding a sizable tree 50 or 60 yards from the bait, so we could ease in quietly next dawn.

It has been my experience that very often lions do not locate, or perhaps they remain leery of, bait for the first night or three. In Uganda one small group of cats living in hard-hunted territory had merely circled the bait for two nights before deciding it was safe to feed. But not so Luangwa lions.

They hesitated not at all. We were late crossing the river, Philip's Landrover being hesitant about starting for the short drive upstream to our wading place, and arrived perhaps five minutes too far into the brightening morning. Only halfway to the tree-topped termite pile we spotted one tawny shape easing off into the bush back from the riverbank. And when I topped the dirt hill I saw, very briefly, a maned male moving out well upriver. The bait, all of it that was reachable, had been eaten and the pride had left it, apparently splitting up in the process.

Since there were big prints heading inland, and it seemed reasonable that the lone male would eventually rejoin the group, we followed the spoor away from the Luangwa. The actions of the small herds of impalla, found by thousands in this area on or close to the open riverine terraces, gave us as much clue to the lion's movement as did traces on the hard ground. We worked in the direction of those antelope that seemed most nervous or alert, toward the bucks that statuelike stared at some movement in the grass ahead. But eventually all the impalla began to act alike, with only their normal skittishness, and then another herd of buffalo—there are more in this section of Zambia than in any other part of Africa I know—fed and staged mock fights and propagated and fed again to move slowly be-

tween us and where we thought the lions might be. Spook them and we spooked the lions.

"But perhaps that male I saw didn't come this way. Maybe his girl friend led him off upriver," I suggested to Philip, and he agreed.

It was too late to expect much success in tracking, since the river-edge game might already have cut up any pug marks on soft ground, so we cut diagonally back toward the Luangwa, expecting to break out of the light *mopane* forest a half mile or so above the bait tree. While we were still a hundred yards back from the wooded edge, it was Amoni who first saw the cat.

"Lioness!" hissed Philip, as he too caught the movement. "Moving out."

She was well beyond 200 yards out on the grassy river plain, but with the alertness that seems to characterize the females, she had spotted us almost that far back into the mopane. And as we pressed on, she broke into a crook-tailed bounding run.

Not until then did we spot the male. He had been sunning a few yards further downstream, his tawny body invisible against a stand of 3-foot river grasses, seasonably burned to a pale tan. The lioness' movement had awakened him, and he stretched, turned to watch her for a moment. If we could get to the forest edge, there was a crooked tree from which I could shoot surely. But he had already started after the female. First at a walk, then at a slow lolloping trot. There wouldn't be time.

But unless he spotted us dashing toward that crooked tree there was a chance. From within the forest a shot would be absolute folly. It would be over 300 yards and behind the lion grew dense grass, acres of it a yard high. Wounded, a lion in that cover would be fanged desperation.

The big cat seemed puzzled by the actions of his mate. He paused for a second or two. I made the crooked tree, had wormed into a steady shooting position just as he lifted again into the clumsy cat trot. The shot was still dangerously long, but I had a helpful rest and implicit faith in the rifle, veteran of a dozen safaris. Now, just about that much lead, and hold it! And sque-e-e-eze off the shot.

As we had moved up toward the crooked tree I remember subconsciously noticing that this lion had a good mane. Not the longest in the world but the best I had seen. Perhaps wanting the cat so much helped direct my bullet, and there was no question of the battering whonk of the 300-grain Silvertip as it knocked him whirling. Down he went, and the boys behind me squealed in their form of a cheer. The ticket was filled.

Philip and I were sure enough of a clean kill that we paced the distance from my tree to the sprawled lion. He got 273 paces, I stepped off, because my legs are shorter, 278. Something well over 250 yards, anyway.

"Far enough," offered the young Englishman. "Perhaps a bit too far. But he's a bloody big one, what?"

We rolled the lion over onto his side, straightened neck and tail, drove a knife into the sand at either end so the measurement was, in effect, between pegs and not over the body curves. The tape then said 9 feet 6 inches. About as big as they ever come, with honest measurements.

"Not as hairy as the Dreyfus Fund television lion," I said happily, "but almost like the MGM animal—and both of those came from a zoo. No curlers or shampoo ever used on this fellow, anyway!" I gloated. And there was full truth in that statement.