



The Battle of the Gwayi

A story of Hunters and Leopards

By Kevin Thomas

Zimbabwe's Matabeleland in mid-winter can be subject to extreme cold, particularly so in the Gwayi Valley, a vast landmass lying to the north west of Bulawayo, the provincial capital. On the western side of the main Bulawayo - Victoria Falls road are huge state-owned forestry estates and further west of them but separated by the north bound railroad, is internationally renowned Hwange National Park. Much of the topography is gently undulating sand veld, more commonly referred to by the Ndebele people as *gusu*. It is deep Kalahari sand and has an average depth of three hundred feet. Water pumped from underground and having filtered through the sand is cool, clear and invigorating to drink. This sandy environment is not sterile and supports well wooded teak and mukwa forests; important hardwoods for Zimbabwe's export market of the time. It also supports wild life, a lot of wild life, both big and small.

Late June 1992 in the Gwayi Valley was much like any previous June month, warm during the day but bitterly cold at night. On this particular day, Professional Hunter Mike Bunce and his American client had crept quietly into a leopard blind in the dense and tangled riverine growth that borders the dry sandy-bedded Gwayi River. PH Bunce was no neophyte and had many years of hunting experience behind him from his days in the pre-Zimbabwean, Rhodesian Department of National Parks. After Zimbabwe's independence, Mike, like many ex Game Rangers, had gravitated into professional hunting. PH Bunce ensured that he and his client were settled in the blind by 3.30 p.m.

Further north of the Gwayi Valley, another ex National Parks' warden-turned PH and his client were checking leopard baits. Mike Fynn, one of Zimbabwe's most experienced professional hunters and a Zimbabwean professional hunter examiner, was guiding a safari in the Matetsi area west of Victoria Falls.

Sitting in a leopard blind can be boring, exceedingly boring. It can also be interesting, if those inside the blind are observant and appreciative of nature. Any experienced PH worth his salt will ensure that his leopard bait is adequately camouflaged from the sharp eyes of vultures and other airborne scavengers such as yellow-billed kites. This is effectively done by arranging a 'skirt' of leaved branches around the bait, or if branches are not available, suitable grass. The camouflage is pushed up between the wire holding the bait and the bait itself and left to hang down covering the bait. Once a leopard is feeding, this camouflage has to be carefully replaced without causing any disturbance. Looking with binoculars from some distance away is the normal way of checking the bait. If a pile of 'greenery' is observed on the ground under the bait, one can be sure that something has fed, or inadvertently disturbed the bait.

The 'feeder', however, may not be a leopard, it could be a ratel (African honey badger) or a lion, although lion will normally finish off a leopard



A view of a utilized bait from the blind. The bait had yet to have the camouflage replaced.

bait in one sitting, in which case the PH and his hunting crew have to start all over again. If a pile of camouflage branches are observed on the ground beneath the bait, it calls for a closer look and the PH and his top tracker, or either one of them, will move quietly up to the bait. They have to check carefully for tracks, how the visitor has fed, chest hairs adhering to branches, or to the bait and anything else that may be of interest. Whilst in the vicinity of the bait, no smoking, urinating and spitting of saliva and phlegm, an African trait that a good PH will guard against, are allowed. Leopard, unlike lion, are very leery. When the bait is first hung and after camouflaging but before 'splattering' with trail mix (a mixture of gut content, blood and other foul smelling decomposing matter kept in a drum on the hunting rig), the ground directly

underneath the bait is swept clean with a leafy branch. If the ground is rock hard, it is wise to spread sand beneath the bait, even if you have to bring it in especially if the bait is hanging about five feet above the ground or slightly lower (normal practice in hyena free areas). The PH needs to see a good size leopard 'pug' mark to determine whether or not the bait is worth building a blind over, although the amount eaten can also be used as a rough indicator.

Whilst there is no stigma attached to shooting a female leopard, one should always strive to shoot a mature trophy male. Immature males and females are not trophies, there are those professional hunters who will contest this with me using the weak adage; 'A leopard is a leopard'. Not really the most ethical way of looking at it, but mistakes do occur, for that is hunting, and it is not an exact science.

Leopard baits are normally impala or warthog, although a zebra haunch with good oily yellow fat is to a leopard what a good 'Scotch' is, to a discerning Scotsman. Then, after careful hanging and camouflaging, the trackers move in with a bucket of stinking fly blown trail-mix and, using their bare hands, throw it all over the bait, the hanging wire, the tree trunk and anything else that was touched by human hands. They are the last to clear the bait area and move off splattering trail mix over all and sundry. One of them would have also hung, or heaved, a stinking piece of maggot-infested intestine, or gut-pile, over a branch above the bait. The drag using the bait animal's intestine and even the bait animal with its gut cut open, would have taken place when the PH first determined his bait tree. The drag would not have been for more than a 100 meters and for good reason. Cats are not hyenas or jackals. Their olfactory senses are not that highly developed. Baits should also ideally be situated fairly close to water.

On board the hunting rig there would be a 10 litre container of water for the trackers and PH to wash their hands thoroughly after the baiting exercise. Swarms of lazy flies constantly drone around the hunting rig and the trail-mix's odiferous smell gags everyone. Welcome to the world of leopard hunting.

Professional hunters, Mike Bunce and Mike Fynn, had already carried



Leopard habitat can be quite varied as seen above. The picture on the left is typical of the granite kopjes found in Zimbabwe's Southern Matabeleland, the middle picture is Mjingwe in Zimbabwe, whilst the picture on the right of Matabeleland's Teak forests.

out the preliminary baiting procedures described above, albeit in different areas of western and northwestern Matabeleland and possibly in a slightly different way to the generalized description given above, for each PH has his own little tricks. In accordance with accepted baiting procedures, they had both placed a number of baits out, spread over a wide area but inside their respective hunting concessions. A good hit had occurred on one of PH Bunce's baits and he had already taken the next step in hunting leopards over baits from blinds. That is, the siting and construction of the blind. When the initial choosing of the bait tree takes place, be assured, the site of the blind would have been a major contributing factor. Baits are never sited haphazardly, it takes careful research. PHs Bunce and Fynn had both done thorough jobs. A hit had occurred early in Bunce's safari and he was now seated inside his blind with a fired-up client.

The leopard blind is a carefully built structure and is seldom closer than thirty-five paces from the bait. Before siting the blind, the leopard's direction of approach has to be determined. In some wilderness areas in countries like Mozambique and Zambia blinds need not be as carefully built as on game ranches and thirty-five to forty paces would be considered adequate distance from the bait. On the other hand, game ranch leopard are exceedingly wary and this is understandable if one considers that most game ranches were once livestock ranches. Some are still a combination of both. During the early 80's the hunting safari industry placed a value on ranch leopard by way of trophy fees. Prior to that, ranchers considered them to be 'problem animals'. For this reason they had been heavily persecuted, in some areas almost to the point of extinction. From 1980 onwards and after the bush war had terminated, with the new country Zimbabwe coming into being, leopard started making a healthy comeback, in tandem with the burgeoning safari industry.

Whilst dependent on the type of topography and cover in the vicinity of the bait, it has proven unwise in the long run to site a blind closer than about fifty paces if hunting ranch leopard. They are just too wily and the closer the blind the greater the chances are of compromise. Blind building material by way of supports, camouflage, grass etc is all brought in from some distance away from the blind site, in order to avoid disturbance and noise in the vicinity of the bait. I line the inside walls of my own blinds with lightweight wool blankets, to deaden the slightest noise even further. The outer walls are bunched, vertical bundles of thatching grass, tied against a framework made out of mopane saplings. This is then further camouflaged by laying leafy branches against the outside walls. A very small shooting port is cut into the front wall, through grass and blanket at the level that the client will be sitting when his rifle is fast into his shoulder. A small viewing hole is also made in front where the PH will be sitting.

When hunting in kopje country, with those huge hills of granitic boulders that make up much of Zimbabwe's landscape, it is important to roof the blind. This is because leopard inhabit kopjes and, if a roofless blind is situated at the base of a kopje and a leopard comes out to sun itself on a boulder during the late afternoon, chances are that it will

see into the blind. If that happens your leopard hunt may be over, before it has even started. For that reason roofing the blind is the best policy. The fore end of the client's rifle will rest on a securely tied, horizontal sapling that has been cut to fit across the front inside wall of the blind. Where the rifle rests on this sapling, with the barrel protruding slightly through the shooting port, the PH would have bound some form of padding. Suspended from a sapling placed from left to right across the blind roof, just forward of the seated client and PH, will be a bungee cord that hangs down in front of the client in a deep V. His rifle will be suspended in the 'V' under and just behind the trigger guard. Thus, all that the client need do once he receives the quiet hand signal from the PH is to lean slightly forward in his chair and pull his rifle into his shoulder. If done correctly, his sight picture should be one of a leopard on the bait. Voila!

PH Bunce and his client settled down to wait, further north, Mike Fynn continued to hunt other trophy species as none of his baits had been hit. He would check baits again early on the following morning.

Even during a Zimbabwe mid-winter, baits tend to decompose fairly rapidly and are soon festooned with maggots. Decomposition does not worry a hungry leopard. If the bait is hanging close to the ground, maggots are constantly dropping off and they in turn attract a wide variety of birds and other small mammals. This passing parade takes the edge off the boredom when sitting in a blind. Glossy Starlings in particular come and go constantly. An inquisitive jackal might slink out of the brush and circle the bait warily, continually glancing up at the bait with hungry eyes, but also keeping a wary eye open for the arrival of Spots. A bad-tempered badger or two, may arrive at the bait and clamber all over and into it in a feeding frenzy made all the more interesting by their argumentative growling, snarling and hissing. When a leopard arrives, even these normally fearless animals will lumber off on bandy muscle-bound legs.

Whilst the leopard is approaching the bait it may be observed by alert vervet monkeys, baboons, rock rabbits, bushbuck and Egyptian geese that will in turn vocalize, thus alerting the hunter to a possible leopard presence. In my own experience, whenever I have baited near a waterhole, the leopard has gone directly to water before moving to the bait. This I guess stands to reason, as the cat has spent an entire day holed up, often in extreme heat and humidity. With its thirst slaked, it then goes to feed.

One wag once stated that hunting leopards from blinds comprises three hours of extreme boredom followed by ten seconds of adrenalin charged excitement. That statement is a truism. Mike Bunce became ultra alert just as the sun began to bid the day goodnight, the bird life around the bait had stilled and all around the silence hung heavy. It was probably gloomy beneath the tree canopy but the bait was easily discernable beyond the blind that looked not unlike a thicket of brush. Suddenly and totally unannounced, a huge male leopard sprung up onto the branch beneath which hung the bait. Leopard have a habit of arriving like that, unannounced.





Dry season water holes are a good starting point when looking for leopard spoor.

Bunce tensed, and seated next to the client, quietly placed his hand on the dozing client's knee and squeezed. The client would have looked up and out of the small shooting port before slowly turning his head to look at PH Bunce, who gave him a clenched fist 'thumbs up'. It was the only communication needed in the close confines of the blind.

The scenario that probably followed was that of the client leaning forward to pull the suspended rifle into his shoulder, adjusting his head slightly to get a better sight picture through the scope. On x 4 power, the leopard would have stood out clearly and, standing broadside on, was well presented for a heart shot. The client would then have gently taken up the trigger slack, as the PH sat with bated breath, watching the leopard. The sound of the shot would have been deafening in the confines of the cramped blind. Grass dust shaking free of the walls and roof whilst the 30-06 soft point bullet drove into the leopard, which, with a loud roar of anger and shock, tumbled from the branch. That doyen of leopard hunting professional hunters, Lou Hallimore, once wrote that the sound of a dead leopard hitting the ground was not unlike the sound of a bag of wet sand hitting the ground after being dropped from a height. To PH Bunce's utmost chagrin, there was no sound like a bag of wet sand hitting the ground. Instead, the leopard still roaring in pain and anger, spun around in the air with normal cat like agility, before bounding off into the dark brush, just as soon as its nimble paws touched mother earth. That kind of behaviour by a leopard causes PHs to become alarmed, despondent and then silently annoyed with the client. It also brings on a serious case of 'sphincter pucker' to all of those involved in the exercise.

Normally I like to ask a client how he feels about his shot and, if he feels good about it, it tends to indicate that the shot was good. Mike Bunce had with him in the blind his Winchester .458. Pushing the flimsy rear door open he stepped out of the blind, just as his trackers arrived with his hunting rig. Once the shot had been fired, they had, like all good hunting crews, started driving back towards the blind. By which time it was dark with the hunting rig's lights already turned on. Given the density of the brush, PH Bunce could not drive through it with his rig, so instructing the client to vacate the blind he informed him that they would come back in the morning. Returning to camp they probably encouraged each other with a fair amount of comments like, 'I'm sure that we will find it dead tomorrow morning' this between morale boosting fireside cocktails that were probably not really being enjoyed. We all say that when an animal is wounded and lost, 'I'm sure that we will find it dead tomorrow morning, hell it looked a good solid shot.' Once back in camp it is the standard operating procedure for PHs when trying to placate a worried client after a badly placed shot.

Further north in the Matetsi, veteran PH Mike Fynn and his client were enjoying their fireside cocktails. They were relaxed and their conversation would have been more along the lines; 'I am almost sure that a leopard will hit one of the baits tonight'. Fynn and his client then had dinner and went to bed relaxed. Mike Bunce and his client also had dinner but probably did not really enjoy it because the overriding thought was one of a possible joust on the 'morrow with a very pissed off leopard. A leopard that they were sure '... would be dead by then anyway!' They too then went to bed and, whilst both tried to be relaxed about it, there was no doubt an abnormal amount of tossing and turning in the camp throughout the night with dreams of pissed off

leopards popping up with annoying regularity. Hunting a wounded leopard can be a nightmare come true.

On the 'morrow as it were, I came into the picture, albeit briefly and unintentionally. It just so happened that at the time I was both managing the company and hunting for Sotani Safaris in the Gwayi Valley. We had returned to Zimbabwe from South Africa the previous year. Dave Chatham owned the neighbouring ranch, all 50,000 plus acres of it, it too, bordering the Ngamo Forest and Hwange National Park. My parents, also ex- Zimbabwean, were living in Tarkastad, Eastern Cape, South Africa at the time. My Dad, working for Roy Hayes Taxidermy in his retirement, had come up to Zimbabwe with my mother to visit with us. Brenda, my wife, stayed in camp and I, with my parents, was en route the Gwayi Hotel to collect diesel, kerosene and other supplies. To get there we had to pass through Dave Chatham's ranch. I wanted to see Dave, so I drove up to his yard gate, which had remained unchanged since the cessation of hostilities in the bush war back in 1980. His gardener opened the gate in the security fence and we drove through and into the Chatham yard.

Their home was still surrounded by the RPG rocket deflection walls built during the war and, if you were on their verandah, you had to stand on tiptoe to look out into the yard. The Chatham family are hardy people, salt of the earth old Rhodesian pioneer stock. Their family I heard had been in the Gwayi Valley since the late 1800s. Between Dave and his cattle rancher brother Jim, who ranched the next-door property, they had over the years, shot numerous stock killing lion.

Dave's wife, Yvonne, met us and after introducing her to my parents she led us onto the cool verandah. Having seen us comfortably seated, she then went through to the kitchen to make tea. When I had asked after Dave's whereabouts, she had replied that he was busy farming. She did not inform us that his 'farming' meant that he was looking for a wounded leopard, for it was on this ranch that Mike Bunce's client had wounded his leopard the previous evening. Mike Bunce, Dave Chatham and his brother Bill who was visiting, plus their trackers, were looking for the leopard whilst we were driving towards the ranch from Sotani. They had left the client in camp to catch up on some lost sleep. Yvonne duly reappeared with the tea and stated that she was sure that Dave would be home soon. Their daughter too, who doted on her father was also there, having come home for the weekend from her job in Bulawayo.

Whilst sitting drinking tea and making polite conversation, we heard the labouring sounds of a diesel engine approaching the homestead. It was an old Land Rover in low gear grinding its way through the heavy gusu sand. We had not realized that, as we were arriving at Dave Chatham's home, a close quarter battle between a group of men and a very angry leopard was taking place in the tangled bush adjacent to the Gwayi River. The leopard won, hands down! As the old Series II Land Rover, spewing black diesel smoke, crawled up the driveway from the gate I stood up and looked over the RPG rocket deflection wall. The sight that met my eyes was one to behold. Some sad and depressed looking men were arriving back at the homestead. Dave Chatham was in his underpants, the angry leopard having undressed him before decamping.

Yvonne Chatham was still unaware of what state the Land Rover



Baiting near water holes can produce good results. The bait tree here is in the top left hand corner of the picture. Two leopards were taken from this bait tree on two different safaris.

passengers were in. I refrained from comment, but it looked to me like they were landmine victims. If local rumour was anything to go by there were still meant to be some of those, albeit unaccounted for lying around the area. When the vehicle pulled up outside the deflection wall covering the open verandah entrance, Dave Chatham's daughter rushed outside to meet her father. She returned within seconds completely hysterical. Yvonne Chatham is also a hardy Zimbabwean woman. She shut her daughter's hysteria down by grabbing hold of her and shaking her vigorously. It worked.

The leopard hunters then came onto the verandah from behind the rocket wall, and their physical condition showed us that the cat had given an excellent account of itself. Its want to survive in the face of superior technology and brainpower had to be commended. Dave Chatham, as mentioned previously, was in a state of undress and extreme shock. He looked as if he had been dancing a slow midnight shuffle cheek to cheek with an out of control chain saw. He was more red than white from blood. His brother, Bill, a lot shorter than Dave, was also shirtless and in his shorts, with a bunched T-shirt held tightly against the top of his head to stem the bleeding. The leopard had opted to use Bill's head as a 'stepping stone' in its quest to wreak swift havoc amongst all of its persecutors, a typical leopard trait. A shirtless black tracker slumped to the verandah floor, his left upper arm oozing white muscle from a deep open wound, his upper back a series of horizontal lacerations, bleeding profusely. He sat quietly staring at the wall, smoking a hand rolled shag tobacco cigarette. Mike Bunce was shirtless but unscathed. He was herding the wounded and maimed into the house, having used his own T-shirt for bandages.

My late mother was a fully qualified nursing sister and hospital matron, long retired but with decades of exposure and experience in trauma treatment on the turbulent African continent. My own special-forces military background had ensured adequate medic training qualifications and to be a licensed PH in Zimbabwe, one of the pre-requisites was a valid paramedic certificate, not just an arbitrary First Aid certificate, which had to be renewed annually. PH Bunce had the same. With Yvonne aiding, we got the still confused and shocked Dave Chatham onto his bed. He was in bad shape and that worrying factor 'shock' was becoming apparent. We also discovered that one of his fingers had been amputated in a clean bite with surgical precision by the leopard, right up to the first joint. Dave was mumbling and groaning and trying to speak comprehensibly but he was not really succeeding. His bleeding was a combination of capillary and venous, but most were already clotting. Where necessary we applied pressure dressings and attempted to clean up the other lacerations and wounds with disinfectant.

Few people understand the severity of shock in trauma victims. It alone, is often



Ideally blinds should be constructed from material brought in from elsewhere. Reed mats can be used to enclose the blind and bushes used to camouflage the outside while the inside can be lined with blankets to deaden any noise.

the cause of death and this is a statistically proven fact. I lost a close colleague of mine years before - an accomplished artist, writer and competent combat tracker. A game ranger, he was wounded in the upper arm during a contact inside Hwange National Park. It was a deep and serious wound but blood loss alone did not kill him. He was a sensitive individual and fairly highly strung, doubtless, severe shock caused his quick death, as well as the fact that there was no trained medic present.

Dave Chatham's pulse was racing, as was his breathing rate, and he was pale, cold, sweating and restless. He was also apprehensive and showing anxiety. He complained of nausea and felt a little weak and thirsty. He was still bleeding and was obviously undergoing hypovolaemic shock. Stabilizing him, prior to evacuation was our main priority. We got his legs elevated and dampened his lips but did not let him drink anything. We also gave him a lot of verbal re-assurance and threw in a bit of humour. One is meant to loosen the clothing of shock victims, but the leopard had already done a good job of that! Most professional hunters have a relatively warped sense of humour - it helps in our profession. Leaving Mike Bunce and the womenfolk to look after Dave and the other two casualties, I used the Agric-Alert radio system to call up Dave's brother Jim, requesting that he bring his Peugeot 404 station wagon over for a short distance casualty evacuation. I then radioed St. Luke's Mission just across the Gwayi River and requested that they place their ambulance on stand-by to transfer the casualties to Bulawayo.

With all of the recipients of the leopard's wrath having been taken care of, and Bill Chatham's bandaged head making him look a bit like a pale Arab in shock, Mike Bunce briefly described what had happened.

They had returned to the bait site early in the morning, but had left the elderly client in camp. The Chatham brothers were armed with their trusty old 'twin-pipe' 12ga shotguns but contrary to what many people think, it has been proven by mauling statistics, that 12ga shotguns are not always the answer on wounded leopard and lion. A 3" or 3 1/2" Magnum perhaps on leopard, as I have found out with mine on numerous occasions, but certainly not on lion. Well respected East African PH Robin Hurt is on record after his mauling by a leopard, saying that had he stayed with his .375 H&H instead of exchanging it for a 12ga shotgun for the follow up, the mauling may not have occurred. Mike Bunce possibly believed in this theory and was carrying his .458 Winchester. Seemingly he was leading the hunters into the bait area whilst they were walking in single file through the dense bush. Behind Mike was his tracker followed by Bill Chatham, who in turn was followed by Dave and then another tracker.

A number of professional hunters, including myself, are firm in our belief that a badly wounded leopard will seldom venture much further than about eighty-five meters from the bait. They lie in wait, simmering with rage, bent on vengeance.



Preparing a 'drag' in the field. The carcass is cut open and dragged to intercept likely leopard paths, eventually ending at the selected bait tree.

PH Bunce walked right past the leopard but his tracker, following, looked down to his right and locked eyes with it. That is all that it takes. In a blur of snarling rage, the leopard launched itself at the tracker, and, downing him, bit deeply into his left upper bicep. It then raked its claws across his back before discarding him and springing up with lightning speed onto Bill Chatham's bare head, where it did a 'number' on him with exposed hook-like talons. It then launched itself from Bill's bald and bleeding dome onto the luckless Dave Chatham. By this time in a frenzied rage accompanied by loud growling and snarling it really worked Dave Chatham over, as they rolled around in the dust and leaves locked in deadly combat. Dave's clothes were soon in tatters and torn bits and pieces festooned the battleground. Under these circumstances there is little that one can do, short of cleaving the leopard's head with a panga, or trying to stick it with a spear or bash its head in with a *knob-kirrie*. You most certainly cannot shoot it for the incredible speed of the encounter may well see the person getting mauled, being shot in error, or a bullet driving through the animal and killing the person.

Under the above-described circumstances, wounded leopard normally try and account for as many people in the group as they can, before streaking away and going to ground once more in thick cover. It will not go far and is merely taking a breather. As it bounded away from the bloodied and prostrate Dave Chatham, Mike Bunce tried to get in a raking shot with his .458 but was not sure if he had connected. The subdued group of leopard hunters patched themselves up as best they could and headed for home. It had been a bad morning at the office.

Amongst Professional Hunters, especially if hunting out of the same camp, there is an unwritten code whereby we will help each other to shut down wounded dangerous game. It is not a mark of cowardice, or a lack of macho, to request another PH's help and particularly so with leopard and lion. We do not normally bother with wounded elephant and buffalo, because the circumstances are very different due to the time of day that you normally close with these species, and the long distances from camp, so between your client and yourself you get on with the task in hand. Many are the times that I have helped fellow PHs account for wounded leopard, at their request, and many are the times that they have helped me, at my request. Normally, however, you have no one to help you, apart from your own trackers and again you get on with the job in hand. Many professional hunters too, particularly the middle-aged, are maybe too proud to ask for help.

Mike Bunce was understandably agitated and upset at how things had turned out, but he had no reason to feel bad, as the situation on the ground, when hunting dangerous game, can change in mere seconds. Despite my offers to assist him, he felt that he could handle the situation on his own and also felt that his .458 bullet may have connected as the leopard streaked away. I fully respected his feelings and decided to move on, as there was little else that we could do. Mike asked me if I would drop by the safari camp and convey the news to his client, and tell him that he would get back as soon as possible.

As we departed I suggested to Mike that perhaps he should cross the Gwayi River and visit a few tribal villages, where he could round up a bunch of dogs. It was about a twenty-minute drive from the Chathams' home. My reasoning was simple. A pack of tribal dogs would have quickly indicated the leopard, in that thick bush. Knowing exactly where that very angry cat was may have leveled the playing field. Many tribal dogs are cowardly 'curs' but they feel security in numbers, and some show a marked want to harry the prey. Once they find the wounded leopard, they will give tongue and worry it, thus allowing an approach whilst it is relatively distracted and confused. When the leopard sees the hunter, it may well try and charge through the dogs.

This is preferable because if a dog or two gets shot in the confusion, the owners will willingly accept compensation. At the time about which I write, ZW\$25.00, per dog would have sufficed.

Bidding Mike Bunce good luck, we drove on to the Gwayi Hotel and en route I stopped by the safari camp and asked where the client was. The chef indicated which chalet and I knocked on the door. An elderly gentleman opened the door. It was about middle morning and he was holding a cowboy boot in one hand. His one foot already had a boot on. I asked him; 'Are you the gentleman who shot the leopard?' He replied; 'Yeah, have they got it?' I answered 'No it got them!' He then stepped backwards and sat down heavily on the bed exclaiming loudly; 'Holy sh*t. . . how bad are they?' I gave him a quick briefing and suggested that it might turn into a fairly long day and that he best just relax, we then departed.

Further north in the Matetsi Mike Fynn was already building a leopard blind, as one of his baits had been hit the previous evening and he planned to sit that afternoon.

We finished what we had to do at the Gwayi Hotel and returned to Sotani Safari Camp without stopping in at the Chathams'. Our evening was pleasantly spent around the campfire recounting the morning's events. Little did we know that some time after our departure from the



A partially eaten bait on the edge of a dry stream-bed with the camouflage ripped off.



A bait having camouflage placed around it before being pulled up and secured just below the limb that the tracker is on, placing the bait well out of reach of hyena.



Sometimes a ladder by way of a forked log will assist the leopard to reach the bait.

Chatham homestead, a second reinforced wave of hunters had gone in to do battle with the wounded leopard which was predictably waiting for them mere meters away from the morning's combat zone. Later unconfirmed reports suggested that the cat had been gut shot and was by now, some twenty hours on, an extremely annoyed leopard. Apparently Mike Bunce's raking shot had also not connected.

Once more, PH Bunce led the way in. This time his intrepid band of hunters was made up of Thys de Vries, the PH son of well known safari operator 'Buck' de Vries, plus two Forestry Commission game scouts armed with 12ga shotguns loaded with No.4 shot shell. Young de Vries was carrying a NATO 7,62mm FN military rifle. It has a magazine capacity of 20 rounds and has both fully automatic and semi-automatic modes. I have never been able to ascertain if he was using .308 soft-nose sporting ammunition, or military 144grn, solid ball ammunition, however, with him being an experienced PH I somehow doubt that he was using military ball. Solid bullets are totally unsuited for both leopard and lion hunting and are a recipe for disaster. Both of these cat species have extremely highly developed nervous systems and with a correctly placed and well-constructed soft nose bullet take less killing than some of our more hardy species of plains game. The bullet, however, has to 'set up' or mushroom quickly in order to create massive hemorrhage.

No sooner had the group of hunters arrived at the scene of the morning's joust, than the leopard decided to carry the battle to them. It did so suddenly, without warning, attacking Mike Bunce with extreme aggression, before dislodging itself from his lacerated form and rushing Thys de Vries, who tried to bring his NATO 7,62mm FN into play. He got off one shot that was later reportedly found to have creased the leopard's belly. Thys' nightmare then became reality. His FN had a stoppage, possibly because of an incorrect gas regulator setting or dirt. An empty case was jammed in the breech. This was all go for the leopard and it took but a fraction of a second to land on top of Thys bringing him to the ground. Thys then began to receive similar treatment from the leopard that the hospitalised Dave Chatham had been subjected to earlier in the day.

This time round however, there were two extremely nervous game scouts who had witnessed both PHs bite the dust within seconds of each other. It was just too much for one of them, because he knew that standing closest to Thys de Vries, who was by this time involved in a serious and very noisy joust on the ground with the leopard, he would be next on the leopard's 'Want List'. By his way of thinking, and as a true survivalist, it was time to do something so he did just that. He let rip with his 12ga shotgun loaded with No 4 shot-shell, at the rolling man and leopard, locked in close combat at his feet. His timing was, however, slightly out and he jerked the trigger (there was just too much excitement to squeeze it) as Thys de Vries was on an upward roll and on top of the leopard. Thys absorbed the fully choked No.4 shot into his one buttock cheek. It brought tears to his eyes and cancelled out any pain that the leopard was meting out! Thys no doubt then began to holler in his home language, (Afrikaans); 'Skiet die fok**n luiperd, nie my nie!' ('Shoot the f***ing leopard, not me!'). This had the desired effect and both game scouts brought their 12ga shotguns into play. It was all that Thys de Vries could do trying to keep a pissed off and dying leopard between him and two game scouts gone berserk. Eventually, the leopard gave up, due to the weight of lead that it had absorbed, (both 12ga and .458 Winchester). By then too the leopard-lacerated PH Mike Bunce had come back into play and was able to put in a *coup de grace*.

All of the players in this last scenario made it back to the Chatham ranch homestead with the dead leopard. I guess the client was pretty damn relieved, because the human body count had been mounting throughout the day. They too, were casualty evacuated and joined their colleagues in Bulawayo's Mater Dae Hospital. The hospital ward now held five lacerated casualties to one enraged leopard, not good odds. Mike Fynn and his tracker were about to join them!

Whilst the second phase of 'The Battle of the Gwayi' was taking place, Mike Fynn, was sitting in a leopard blind with his client focused on the little happenings taking place around his bait. At last light and with



A wounded leopard is a dangerous adversary as illustrated by this story, and will often fight to the death when cornered. This makes correct shot placement imperative. The heart and lungs are located much further back than on an ungulate so due consideration must be given especially as leopard are often shot in the classic broad side position. Over tree-hung baits, the animal will often be shot whilst in a typical sitting position, or sitting but reaching for the bait. Avoid shooting if the cat is laying down. It is often easy to become confused by the patterned coat and some professional hunters advise isolating a particular "rosette" over the "vitals" when placing a shot. In some parts of Africa, leopard are also hunted with hounds, providing as varied a shot placement opportunity as any other species. A highly developed and sensitive nervous system make the leopard very susceptible to hydrostatic shock caused by high velocity bullets. While a 7x57 Mauser is considered a minimum, any of the .300 Magnums are recommended. Mature males (with an average mass of 60kg) have a noticeably thicker neck, heavier-set shoulders and thicker tail root.

clockwork timing, a leopard hopped up onto the branch in front of Mike Fynn's blind. Fynn got his client to do the deed, and at his shot the leopard tumbled to the ground. It looked good and felt good to the client, so Fynn kicked the blind door open and awaited the arrival of his hunting rig and long serving tracker Jivas Moyo. Mike Fynn has been around the safari-hunting block for a long time as a PH. With the light fading rapidly, he put on his heavy First World War German army trench coat. They offer excellent protection against a rampant leopard's claws. Jivas Moyo duly arrived in Mike's rig and leaving the client in the blind the two of them dressed forward to the bait. It was by now fairly dark.

As they arrived at the bait, a leopard torpedoed out of the dark shadow in the grass and swarmed up the front of Fynn's trench coat biting him in the mouth. Its bottom teeth penetrated his lower jaw from the underneath and its upper canines penetrated the inside bottom jaw of his mouth. It was not a nice situation to be in, and its hind claws were scrabbling at his solar plexus with downward sweeps. The heavy trench coat prevented disembowelment. Mike Fynn is a big man. He forcefully tore the leopard from his face and away from his front and threw it over his head. Much to tracker Jivas Moyo's utmost dismay, the discarded leopard landed on top of him, still very much alive and angered. It began lacerating him with relish before Fynn managed to kill it. To this day Jivas has not forgiven Mike Fynn for throwing a leopard on top of him back in 1992, but he still tracks for Fynn.

PH Fynn and tracker were bleeding badly and their panicked city dwelling client was totally out of his depth. Fynn stemmed his bleeding with a bandanna and they patched Jivas up with torn shirts. Fynn drove the hunting rig whilst holding the bandanna to his bloodied mouth and jaw and they eventually arrived back at the Forestry department safari camp where they requested the camp manager to drive them to Victoria Falls' Hospital. The manager refused because it was after hours and he was no longer on duty! Black and white culture and perceptions are still separated by a huge divide on this continent. Mike Fynn then drove to Victoria Falls Hospital, a lengthy uncomfortable journey, much of it along heavy Kalahari sand tracks. Once at the Outpatients Department they had to stand in a long line as it slowly shuffled forward to reach the Duty Sister. When they got to her she told Mike that he first had to fill in a pile of forms and by the time that he had done that, they ended up at the back of the line again!

Eventually, Mike and his tracker made it back

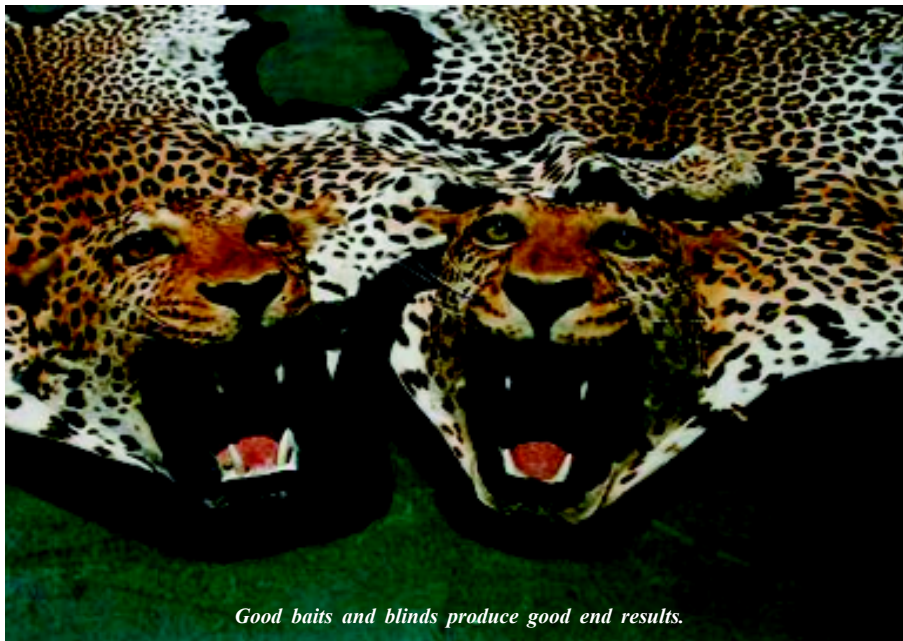
to Bulawayo. When he got to his family Doctor, and informed him of the leopard mauling, the Doctor burst into laughter. Fynn was not impressed, because getting mauled is a serious business. At that point in time Mike knew nothing about the 'Battle of the Gwayi'. His Doctor then told him that he had another five leopard casualties in a ward at the Mater Dae. Mike and Jivas were also admitted for overnight observation. Thus it was that two leopard had ensured that seven hunters were *hors de combat* in the space of twelve hours. At Old Miltonian's Club, a popular Bulawayo watering hole for professional hunters between safaris, some 'wit' suggested that they hang a score board on the hospital ward door reading; Leopard seven, Professional Hunters two!

Thys de Vries was rumoured to have spent some embarrassing time on his knees, with his bare buttocks elevated and exposed, as a nursing Sister removed the shot with tweezers. He was adamant that the beating the leopard had given him was nothing compared with the pain he felt when the excited game scouts opened up from close range with their 12ga shotguns and shot him in the butt cheek!

Shortly after the incident I was passing through Dave Chatham's ranch and bumped into his brother Jim on the deep sandy access road well inside Dave's ranch. Jim was leaning against the back of his trusty old 404 station wagon. Pulling up alongside of him I asked if all was well. Jim continued to stare down the road before looking at me and with a horizontal sweep of his hand said; 'Kevin I visited the scene and there is just a carpet of empty shotgun shells and brass covering the ground'. He was of the opinion that some day a movie about the incident might be in the offing. I left Jim to his thoughts and drove on.

This story had an interesting sequel, as during the year 2000, some eight years after the incident, I stopped by at a Bulawayo auto-electrical business. After having conducted a number of safaris' in both Zambia and Zimbabwe, my rig had developed wiring problems that needed sorting out. Once the job was done, I went to reception to pay. There

was an elderly bald man sitting at a desk writing out the invoice. Standing directly in front of him, and looking down at his shiny pate, I noticed a number of distinctive parallel lines made up of scar tissue running from back to front across his head. They could in fact have been made with a miniature sharp pointed four-pronged rake. When he looked up, it was Bill Chatham, whose cranium on that fateful day, became the angry leopard's 'stepping stone'. He vaguely remembered me but we did not discuss the 'Battle of the Gwayi', and having paid, I went on my way. 🐾



Good baits and blinds produce good end results.



About the Author

Kevin Thomas, pictured right with his Norwegian client (left) is part of that unique breed of African whose life and exploits, experience and input has formed the backbone of African conservation and hunting as we know it. Kevin, a born and bred Zimbabwean spent his boyhood years in Chipinge and the Save Valley. After completing his schooling in Umtali, Kevin joined the Department of National Parks & Wild Life Management seeing service in the Gona re Zhou and in the Zambezi Valley, after seven years service he resigned and joined the regular army. In 1978 he left the military and after working for Triangle Ltd as Estate Ranger & resident PH turned to full time professional hunting, a career that has taken him over most of southern Africa. He and his wife Brenda currently reside in South Africa's Eastern Cape. His life and encounters with Africa and her flora and fauna are the subject of a book to be published in the near future.