

# ON THE LION'S TRAIL

IN THE CENTRAL  
AFRICAN REPUBLIC

by Rudy Lubin





Rudy Lubin is a 45-year English-speaking French professional hunter who has collaborated with Les Safaris du Haut Chinko in the Central African Republic for 23 years, guiding over 200 safaris there. In addition to specializing in lion and leopard, Lord Derby eland and bongo huntin, his experience includes guiding in Cameroon, Gabon, Sudan, and Tanzania. He is married to American freelance writer, Brooke Chilvers.

Possibly the earliest recorded lion safari took place around 1400 B.C. in Nubia. The client? The Egyptian Pharaoh Amentoteph III. Since then, countless generations of hunters have tested their spirit and skill by facing the animal that epitomizes all that is wild and invincible and sacred on the endless African continent.

With stones, lances, spears, with every imaginable caliber of rifle, trapped, poisoned and baited, pursued on horseback, with camels, elephants, dogs and now – too often – by vehicle, the eternal quest for *Panthera leo* compels hunters to leave behind family and comfort, village and fields for the hard work of the hunt.

Despite the aura of adventure attached to names like Selous, Cummings, Oswell, nowadays too many hunters settle for “easy” lions. They miss out on the breath-stopping authenticity of tracking lions – really tracking them **on foot**, of walking behind them hours at a time one day... three days... eight days – a safari that culminates in the hunter earning his trophy with the sweat and nerve this noble creature deserves.

Here in the vast uninhabited northeastern reaches of the Central African Republic, for more than twenty years now, hunters have experienced the kind of safari where art is married to instinct; where primitive gifts and urges re-surface; where the hunter forgets his other life and emerges re-baptized by the African bush. There are no guarantees: the hunter must perform with the same effort as the PH and his hunting team. But an honest success rate shows that four out of five hunters go home with a worthy trophy.

Of course, by the time most American hunters have worked up to a CAR safari, their lion is already long-mounted, and it's Lord Derby eland, western roan antelope and northwestern buffalo they seek in the woodland savanna, and the bongo, yellow-backed duiker and giant forest hog that hide in the dense and fragrant forests. But every year, (mostly European) hunters come to seek the big-bodied cats of the CAR.

Body length measurements aren't counted anymore, and there's no record book category for great manes. But a good average skull measurement over my last 25 lions would be 24.5 SCI points for length plus width – no sweat even for entry into Rowland Ward. Yes, our CAR lion are big!

What is fascinating about lions is their simultaneous nonchalance and power, tran-

quility and strength, their physical relaxation that is suddenly transformed into the brutal force of a fearsome killer. Contrary to East Africa where prides of mixed age and sex of up to 30 cats are sometimes observed, in CAR, lions are most often encountered in pairs or small groups: an old male with a young adult, two or three full-adult males together, a male with a female, a solitary male. Lions, especially hungry hunting lions, can move up to 20 miles in a night.

And the night belongs to them: The lion's roar is the most fabulous sound in the animal kingdom. It holds all the mystery and secrets of the savanna, the ferocious never-ending struggle of each animal for survival. His very breathing is a roar – a perfect expression of his power. It incites me to go after him, find him, get him, and possess that heart of Africa he represents. Nearly 2,000 years ago, Pliny called the lion the ‘King of Animals’, and he was right.

Lion hunting begins in the cool, black night accompanied by the warning barks of baboons and ghostly calls of colobus. Some

nights, a veritable confusion of lions and lionesses means the PH and trackers must deduce the “best” lion to go after from the chesty depth and resonance of his voice that cascades then terminates in a series of growls that sounds almost like thunder receding in the distance.

If clients are allowed the luxury of sleep, the PH and hunting team remain on its edge, waiting to be roused by a call that can be heard up to nine kilometers away when amplified by the night and echoed in a river valley. Despite my own animal instinct to stay asleep, if lions are roaring, still in bed, I try to localise their general direction using a map and compass. After so many seasons covering this familiar territory, I can practically visualize where he is – near a favorite river crossing, or on the edge of the small plain where the lions successfully down waterbuck every year. If the roar is moving, the lion may be hunting his way across our territory, staying forever out of reach. If it is steady and from the same direction, he may be sitting tight on a kill, giving us a chance



*“I can practically visualize where he is – near a favourite river crossing...”*



to catch up with him.

When he's roaring regularly, it's everybody up and after him – NOT to shoot at night – but to pinpoint his position and pick up his fresh tracks at dawn. Letting the lion's voice lead us to him, we first shorten the distance by vehicle, stopping, listening, approaching to about three kilometers to avoid alerting these nocturnal predators or the baboons and colobus that stir up the night time silence with their warning calls.

The fever rises when we leave the vehicle. A last drop of coffee, a quick verification of material. Then our six-man line carefully laces through the bush, a lonesome string of dancing lights. It's hard to walk silently over the dry leaves and rocky animal paths. Outside the tiny puddle of light, a sudden shadow startles and scattering hoofs make the ground vibrate. A feeling of dread, the vulnerability of prey, sweeps over you. With each roar, we stop and reorient and refine the direction, zeroing-in to less than a kilometer, enough to avoid detection especially as the wind is difficult to check at night and visibility is almost nil on a moonless night.

It's absolutely thrilling when an unexpected chest-bursting roar shatters the silence only several hundred yards away. We can hardly wait for dawn to keep going, to find and follow his track, to hunt the hunter, knowing in our hearts we will confront him on foot at 20 to 40 yards!

Sitting with long drinks on a bluff overlooking an African river, a favorite hunting story comes to mind: One night we had almost too many lions to choose from before deciding upon what sounded like the biggest male. Driving... walking... at one



*"It incites me to go after him, find him and possess that heart of Africa he represents".*

point, I felt either **he** or **we** were too close so we soon hunkered to wait for the first inkling of light. The teamwork in finding lion spoor on the hard dry laterite soil is part of the real magic of this hunt, and mud, sand, and ashes from the seasonal burning are all blessings. Emitting a sixth sense like bloodhounds, one cannot help but be awed by the hunting team as they radiate over the suspect ground, alert to that broken stalk of straw, the crushed or turned leaf, even a hair caught on a branch.

In Central Africa, a 3.5-inch-plus pad usually indicates a mature male. If a lion is not hunting, he usually stops walking by 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. and spends the day resting. If we don't find the track by 10:00, we generally give up because the wind disturbs the dust and leaves, other animals mix up the

tracks, and they become very difficult to follow once the sun is vertical and the tracks are dry. We go too slowly then and lose too much time.

While tracking, sometimes the client gets impatient and edgy as the slow and careful closing the distance between hunter and hunted drags into hours; he's perspiring and bothered by sweat flies; if the track is temporarily lost, he loses faith and becomes disheartened; he is shut-off from the wonder or beauty of the bush; his attention lapses and his walking gets sloppy. Then an urgent snap of the fingers indicating a fresh sign re-electrifies him.

I don't expect the hunter to be able to immediately pick out a practically immobile, sphinx-like lion through thick foliage with the dappled light breaking up his sil-



PHOTO: JOHN DARLING.

*"lions are mostly encountered in small groups".*





*"The lion lay there: both magnificent and pitiful".*

houette. But it's my job to make him see – and to control his frustration. He's waited a lifetime for this moment. He wants this lion so badly. There's tremendous pressure on him to perform because the success of the safari now depends on him. We wait, suspended, and there's almost ecstatic relief when he says, 'Okay, I see him'.

That day, this lion was still 'outside' in the savanna before the day's heat would push him into the cool shadows of the riverine forest. Catching up to within 60 yards took only half-an-hour. Oblivious, the big male was preoccupied by his female companion in heat, and when I saw his huge body and undulating mane, I secretly hoped that that royal specimen had already transmitted his genes to his vigorous mate!

The 225-pound hunter, "Big Louis," made a single off-hand shot with a 9,3 x 64 Brenneke that reverberated off the hills almost as far as Sudan. A single growl and the lion headed into the overgrown riverine forest – casually – as if only momentarily disturbed. Thick vegetation prevented the hunter from shooting again, and I absolutely do **not** double my hunter even on dangerous game except in a genuine emergency. We were both convinced that he was hit, although he took off without leaving a smidgen of blood, flesh or bone. But Good God: Louis felt confident and I felt sure! Following him we heard a growl that was more like a sigh from deep inside the lion's body, and a few minutes later, heard it again. If he hadn't been touched, the two lions would have kept going to meet up again several hours later. But they were both still there.

Because the wounded lion would look

behind him to monitor anyone on his tail, we decided to approach him from another direction, careful of the wind, and trying to locate the pair by sound. Then there was a terrible growl. We braced for the shock of a double charge. Nothing happened. Instead the pair moved deeper into the forest. Cautiously, we advanced 50 yards to where the male had laid down. There was blood and stomach juices. He was badly hit, but too far behind.

The most delicate of all tracking began. Leaving the gunbearers behind, we moved ahead in line. I can still see the head tracker, Gabriel, a grimly calm Banda; a deadly serious me; Louis, ready to bag his third lion in three safaris in the CAR; and Jean-Marie, the second tracker. Our plan was that if a charge came, Gabriel would throw himself down on the ground to open my field of vision to get off the fastest shot possible – just like in our old elephant hunting days together before elephant closed definitely in 1985.

For one very long hour – all senses alive – we moved towards our prey. Then the huge growl came. Gabriel went down. Silence. Just the sound of the lions fleeing.

Four times the scenario repeated itself. There was real blood now. But the female stayed with her mate, leading him away from us, staying in the thickest part of the forest. If he had been alone, I am convinced he would have charged.

Minute by minute the drama unfolded. Four hours. We still couldn't see him, and he wouldn't leave the forest. I almost started to pray he would charge so we could put an end to this dangerous game. The heat was crushing, we were sweated through and

covered in black flies, dripping perspiration burning our eyes. A nightmare!

Again a roar. The incertitude of whether they would flee or charge. This time, the exhausted beast halted, uncertain what he should do – torn between his instinct to survive and the rage of pain. His hesitation was fatal. "Shoot!" Louis' reaction was fast, mechanical and rapid. Afterwards, he said he wasn't even conscious of aiming.

Louis hit what he saw – the head. The shot excited the skulking lioness to charge, and both our rifles went up, ready to stop her. But she turned and vanished... to our great relief.

The lion lay there: both magnificent and pitiful. We had seen him at his flamboyant height, his mane full of wind. Now he was a fallen Seigneur who had led us on a nerve-racking, dangerous, but amazing safari. In the sudden silence and mishmash of complex human emotions, there's the moment when the hunter discovers that you can never really possess anything – except the lion's skin.

Luckily, the team's reaction is more straight-forward. Jean-Marie made a lion's leap through the air shouting, "Safari gagne! Bamara akuyawe!" The safari is won! The lion is dead! The singing and dancing around the campfire that night was for real.

Looking back over the many lions we've honored with a worthy hunt, I raise my glass to them. Those memories make French champagne taste its very, very best! *Lion hunting in the CAR is in the dry season from January 1 through April, and can be combined with Derby eland plus all other savanna game.* □