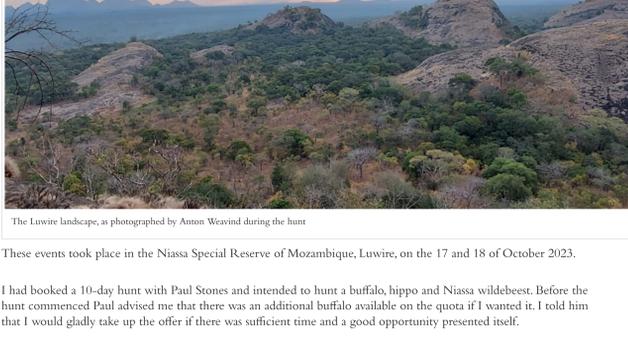


A sad story about an old buffalo by Anton Weavind



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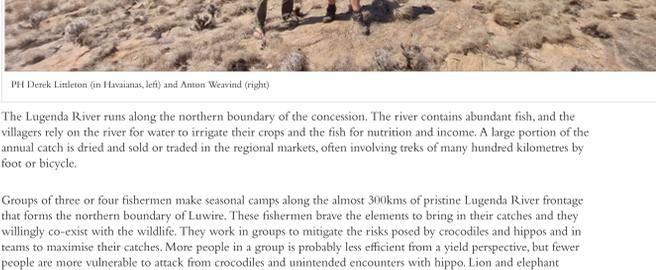


The Luwire landscape, as photographed by Anton Weavind during the hunt

These events took place in the Niassa Special Reserve of Mozambique, Luwire, on the 17 and 18 of October 2023.

I had booked a 10-day hunt with Paul Stones and intended to hunt a buffalo, hippo and Niassa wildebeest. Before the hunt commenced Paul advised me that there was an additional buffalo available on the quota if I wanted it. I told him that I would gladly take up the offer if there was sufficient time and a good opportunity presented itself.

PH Derek Littleton was guiding me on the hunt. I have hunted with him before, and it was good to be back. Derek is the concessionaire and is totally committed to the wellbeing of the abundant wildlife and 5,000-odd people who make the more than million acres of wild Africa their home. As usual, our trackers were Buanar and Sabite. They are a competent team and make a significant contribution to the hunt, acting as trackers, driver, assistants and cooks. They are always ready to share in a good joke or, in Buanar's case, to make one. Derek is the only person in the known world who hunts in Havaianas (flip flops!).



PH Derek Littleton (in Havaianas, left) and Anton Weavind (right)

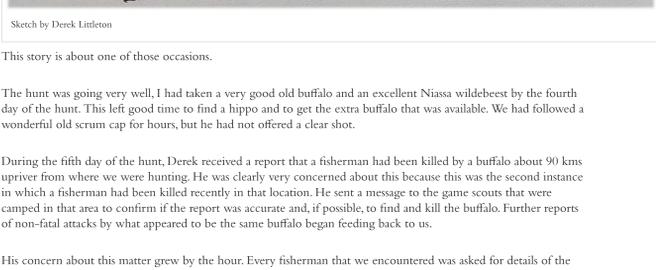
The Lugenda River runs along the northern boundary of the concession. The river contains abundant fish, and the villagers rely on the river for water to irrigate their crops and the fish for nutrition and income. A large portion of the annual catch is dried and sold or traded in the regional markets, often involving treks of many hundred kilometres by foot or bicycle.

Groups of three or four fishermen make seasonal camps along the almost 300kms of pristine Lugenda River frontage that forms the northern boundary of Luwire. These fishermen brave the elements to bring in their catches and they willingly co-exist with the wildlife. They work in groups to mitigate the risks posed by crocodiles and hippos and in teams to maximise their catches. More people in a group is probably less efficient from a yield perspective, but fewer people are more vulnerable to attack from crocodiles and unintended encounters with hippo. Lion and elephant increase that risk.

This is not a perfect science because multiple hippo and crocodile attacks are recorded every year along this section of river, but it is better than working alone. The risks that the fishermen face on the river are a part of their everyday lives, and they recognise that these are part of the reason they are allowed to benefit from the river system have learnt to live with it.

There are occasions when there is unprovoked conflict between the fishermen and an animal that is old or injured. In these instances, the fishermen are unprepared for the encounter and are unable to mitigate the risks which ensue. The results of these encounters are often deadly.

In these situations, the concessionaire must take action by removing that animal to ensure the safety of the fisherman and those working in the reserve and consequently maintain the tolerance between people and wildlife in general.



Sketch by Derek Littleton

This story is about one of those occasions.

The hunt was going very well. I had taken a very good old buffalo and an excellent Niassa wildebeest by the fourth day of the hunt. This left good time to find a hippo and to get the extra buffalo that was available. We had followed a wonderful old scrum cap for hours, but he had not offered a clear shot.

During the fifth day of the hunt, Derek received a report that a fisherman had been killed by a buffalo about 90 kms upriver from where we were hunting. He was clearly very concerned about this because this was the second instance in which a fisherman had been killed recently in that location. He sent a message to the game scouts that were camped in that area to confirm if the report was accurate and, if possible, to find and kill the buffalo. Further reports of non-fatal attacks by what appeared to be the same buffalo began feeding back to us.

His concern about this matter grew by the hour. Every fisherman that we encountered was asked for details of the attack. The majority confirmed by bush telegraph that the second attack had taken place.

We got an excellent hippo on the afternoon of the sixth day. One of the fishermen who helped us with the recovery had been attacked by a hippo about six months previously. The scars across his body were still healing. He had sunk to the bottom of the river, and after the hippo moved off his friends had rushed in with a fishing net and retrieved him. Despite being unconscious and under water for several minutes, they had managed to revive him. He was still enthusiastically fishing and recounted the story as an event of great mirth.

Derek advised me in the evening that the scouts had not located the buffalo, and we had to find and kill him before he killed someone else. He was extremely concerned and there was no other way that this could be done as he was the only Professional Hunter on the concession at the time. This would involve traveling to a remote area of the concession where we would fly camp.

Derek gave me the choice of hunting the buffalo on quota, or he would hunt it as a problem animal. I readily agreed to accompany him and his team on the hunt and to hunt the buffalo as a trophy. All signs were that he was an old animal, which was our prime objective.

We left at first light the following day and arrived in the area at about 3pm. We found a group of fishermen who were soon joined by other groups who confirmed the attack and told us the harrowing story.

An elderly fisherman was walking with a young family member near the river when they encountered the bull. The buffalo first chased the younger man who managed to climb a tree. The old man ran but was caught and was severely injured, dying from his wounds before help could be rendered.

We were taken to the site of the attack; the bloodied clothes and broken fishing paraphernalia were a grim testament to what had happened. I was not mentally prepared for what was shown to me, and all present were visibly distressed.

I will never forget that scene of devastation and my own realisation of what horrible events can transpire when humans and wildlife come into conflict with one another.

The fishermen recounted an event of a few days previously when the buffalo had actually charged far into the river in an attempt to attack a fisherman in a dug-out canoe. A deep channel had saved him. Further recent stories indicated the aggression was now triggered any time the bull encountered people. They were unable to tell if he had any injuries but reiterated that he was extremely old.



Sabite (far left against tree) and Buanar (middle, closest to camera in foreground) talking with local fisherman along the river

Derek, Buanar and Sabite were very concerned, the easy-going camaraderie that I had witnessed for the past week was replaced by a grim seriousness that conveyed the severity of the situation.

In the remaining two hours of light that were available, we examined tracks. The bull had been returning regularly to bloodied jacket. He was the only buffalo in the area. After drinking at the river earlier in the afternoon he had then gone off into the bush. After following a short way before dark, we resolved to set up camp in the riverbed that evening and to find fresh tracks that we could follow in the morning.

The fly camp that Derek's team established was very comfortable and we enjoyed an excellent dinner of fresh fish from the river. The cloudless sky with no light pollution made it possible to see stars and far-away galaxies that are hidden from view in the cities. We took turns to bathe in the river. Derek told me to scan the water with my torch for crocodile eyes and, if I did not see any, to have a quick dip in the river. The fastest bath in history was taken in the Lugenda river that night.

I climbed into my bedroll which had been prepared on the sand of the riverbed and thought about the coming day. This was not an ordinary hunt; it was clear that Derek was worried about what could happen with this buffalo and I was concerned that I would be a liability if things went wrong.

I agreed with Derek that he would also shoot if he felt that my shot was not fatal.

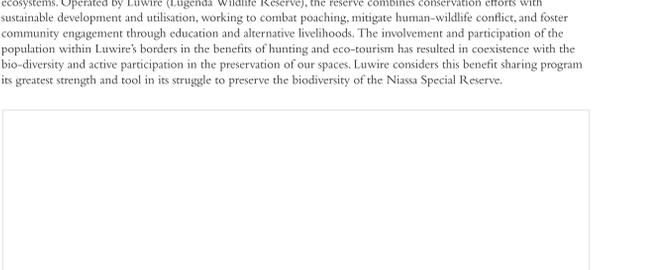
The next morning the camp started stirring at about 4am, and by 5am we were in the area of the incident. We found fresh tracks within an hour and immediately began tracking the buffalo.

We followed his tracks through open bush for about two hours. The tracks meandered as the buffalo had grazed and occasionally lay down to rest.

The day was becoming hot when Buanar suddenly stopped and pointed out an oxpecker rising from a clump of nearby trees. After rechecking the wind, and a hasty consultation between them in Portuguese, Derek informed me that the buffalo was probably there and that I should be ready to shoot quickly.

We proceeded very slowly and started to descend into a fairly thick and dry riverbed. I was walking about five metres behind Derek and the trackers.

The buffalo broke cover like a Spanish fighting bull up onto the opposite bank and ran to a position, looking about for us. While the buffalo was moving, I quickly found a rest for my rifle on a tree branch. He stopped, presenting a good broadside view and I quickly took aim and fired.



Sketch by Derek Littleton

Derek could not see the buffalo clearly, so he had not fired, and he had not seen the impact of my bullet. He asked me where I thought the bullet had hit the buffalo. I knew I had fired too quickly and could not confirm with any certainty where the bullet had struck the bull.

What followed is a typical hunter's nightmare. Reliving the shot that went wrong and enduring that deafening silence as Derek and the trackers moved forward to assess the situation and how we were going to get ourselves out of this possible mess.

We found the first blood about 10 metres from the spot where the buffalo had stopped. It was clearly not lung blood, but there was a good amount, and it was quite easy to follow.

200 metres on Buanar stopped again and pointed out an oxpecker. We saw the buffalo lying down in a thicket about 100 metres away. We moved in closer, and I shot it again. Derek shot it when it stood up. The buffalo fell and died.

The first shot had passed through the area of the liver and kidneys and was probably fatal. Although it was not a good shot it had obviously discouraged an immediate charge.

The bull was very old and magnificent.

When we returned to the river, the fishermen all confirmed that this was indeed the buffalo that had killed the fishermen. They had mentioned his worn-down horns and had seen no other buffalo there over the previous few months. They helped us butcher the carcass and were very happy with the meat which we shared between them and our section scout outpost. We then proceeded back to the camp downriver.

Derek noted the buffalo was very old. Despite being a very slightly old man, he had lost body condition, and his third molar was almost completely gone. We speculated that the buffalo had probably taken refuge near people because this would offer a modicum of protection from the many lions in the area. The first attack was probably accidental when the buffalo was surprised by a fisherman on the main access road. They had virtually bumped into one another, skirting a fallen tree. He had subsequently lost his respect and fear of man.



Luwire's block as situated in the Niassa Special Reserve, Northern Mozambique

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