

My first trip to Africa had been 18 months in the making. In April of 2020, we were headed into unprecedented times and trips were being canceled all over the country. This is especially difficult for outfitters in South Africa, where hunting is such a large part of their economy so many were scrambling and offering deals for 2021 to get folks interested and booked. My husband Mark had been on a trip in 2016 and had not stopped talking about wanting to return, and since October of 2021 would coincide with our 20th anniversary and “surely this pandemic will be over by then” we decided to book a trip.

Little did we know how the year would unfold, but this is a story about my first harvest of an animal, the first in my life, and the absolute joy we have in our marriage by sharing my husband’s passion with him.

Part 1 The Journey

There were definitely some challenges at the beginning of the journey; we needed a negative Covid test to be able to fly and unfortunately the friends we had planned to go with tested positive. This was devastating because they are our best friends and travel partners. Wearing a mask for 25 straight hours while we traveled 4 flights, 10,000 miles and 2 continents was awful. We had heard horror stories of flights canceled last minute, weapons being lost, etc but none of this occurred for us. On day 3 (or was it 2? I wasn’t sure) we were to arrive in camp after a short one-hour flight from Johannesburg to Kimberley. Unfortunately, the “rules” often change and the airport in Kimberley refused to accept any firearms as they no longer had a person who was licensed to check them in. Long story short, our guide Adam Bernard of 4 Aces Outfitters acted quickly, and secured a courier to drive them 6 hours from Johannesburg airport to our concession and back the day we left. Whew!!

Part 2 The Adventure Begins!

Camp Life, Animals Everywhere

By the time our rifles had arrived in camp, it was too late to get them sited in and hunt, but we were just grateful to be whole. We spent the day getting to know the Professional Hunter (PH) Geoffrey and our cameraman, Henco – both would be with us pretty much every waking moment for the next 10 days! From right off our deck of the room, there was a watering hole where we saw Waterbuck, Sable, Black Impala, and more... maybe 50 animals and at least 7 species. We took a drive in the Baki (truck) and I couldn’t help but be overwhelmed by the number of animals- especially Springbok (the national animal of South Africa) we saw. At home in the Pacific Northwest, when we go hunting, we may be out from sunup to sunset and only see three or 4 animals. It is 1am as I write this and I am tired, oh so tired but filled with so much anticipation and excitement there is no sleep in me! How will I feel harvesting my first animal? Will I emotionally be able to handle it? We shall see!

Day 1 The hunt Begins-Two in the Salt

Today started about 8am with a lot of "Spot and Stalk." Both Mark and I had specific animals on our list and he was adamant that I make the first shot, but honestly, that was a lot of pressure on me. I told him and the PH, lets see what Africa provides. I did have a Black Springbok in my crosshairs at about 180 yards, but the PH said, "let's wait... I'm sure we can do better." As you will soon find out, this was excellent advice. Only a few minutes later, we saw 2 Zebra, an animal on my husbands list. We did a fairly long stalk to the top of a small hill and Mark had a shot at about 340 yards. He pulled the trigger but the wind carried the shot poorly and it appeared he missed. Mark was very upset with himself; no hunter wants to think they may have injured an animal. As luck would have it, we found the same zebra and his pal and were able to get within 500 yards. Mark asked the PH if he would trust him to take the shot and he said yes- so Mark got prone and at 480 yards he landed a PERFECT shoulder shot and "Marty" as he will forever be known, did not go 15 yards and was down. The other animals, including the other Zebra (Stan) never even moved because the shot was so far away. It was a redemption shot and confidence booster for Mark and this was a stud of a stallion.

Once we had Marty on his way to be processed, we headed out to search for my perfect Springbok. Several hours and several stalks later we found a brilliant black Springbok positioned in such a way that he could not see us sneaking up on him. Let me tell you, these animals are almost always in groups, almost always on guard and they are FAST. At 225 yards, Geoffrey put the sticks up, I dialed my .308 savage for the yardage and took a deep breath...and I heard the PH say "whenever you are ready, mam." I placed the crosshairs on his shoulder just as I had practiced and slowly squeezed the trigger. I heard the PH say, "NICE SHOT, MAM!" I turned to him and Henco saying, "Did I get him?" They both laughed and said he dropped as soon as the bullet hit him, exactly the outcome I had hoped for. I did it! I turned and looked at Mark who had stayed back at the truck and he had his hands in a big thumbs up and I could tell he was very proud of me! My heart was racing; I had finally done it! When we got to the ram, we realized he was HUGE- an incredible example of the species. Day 1 of hunting and day 2 in camp was in the record books. I knew right then and there this was going to be a spectacular trip!



Day 2 There's the Good and then there's the Reality of Hunting

The next day we traveled to another concession about 30 miles away. Mark was able to harvest a gorgeous Nyala – one shot at very close range- with the perfect bell-shaped horns he was looking for. We made quick work of it and headed out in search of my Black Wildebeest or a Gemsbok. The PH found several groups of Wildebeest; they are difficult because they move constantly so the shots are usually a longer distance. We stalked to about 250 yards and Geoffrey through the sticks up for me. I kept having to take my eye off the scope and look with my eyes, dial up then down then look again with my eyes because the one we wanted kept changing position. I was nervous but I am confident in my shooting abilities. I finally got what I thought was a good shot, however I had not compensated for wind so it appeared my shot was further back from where I had placed it. We had to track him for about 20 minutes, and he was def not feeling well. He would not give me a broadside shot so I was forced to take a front shot and a 3rd one to make sure it was done. This one hurt my soul; I felt bad, and I committed to doing better on the next one. Maybe I rushed it? Maybe I needed to wait for a better shot? He was a TOUGH old warrior; his horns were worn and ragged and he had scars on his face and neck from years of fighting. As with Marks Nyala, these are the ones we hope for. It was only 1:30pm in the afternoon of Day 2 and we had 2 more in the salt. Time to go have lunch and then look for Marks dream animal- the Majestic Sable.

We drove around a lot that afternoon, and I kept seeing the most amazing animal called the Golden Wildebeest. This was NOT on my list and had not even been on my radar, but damn they are gorgeous (and not cheap). I could not get them off my mind.

Day 3 Always check your gear

The Gemsbok had been on my list because Mark had offered it to me- but I knew he was disappointed, so I told him I honestly wanted him to take it if we found the right one and he did. I could tell how excited he was and we knew we could leave the bushbuck for another trip in the future (yes we were already thinking about the return trip!). I also had ulterior motive- I wanted that Golden Wildebeest!

Once again, we headed back to the concession from the day before. We were able to find a stunning Gemsbok male with thick horns and Mark was thrilled. We put it away to be processed on our return to our camp, and set out in search of a Red Hartebeest for me. We had been stalking a particular group for a while. We got within about 300 yards, but the wind was not in our favor. We drove some more and managed to get good wind at 325 yards, but dammit, I could not get a decent shot! Take 3, we finally got them in an open field and at 280 yards I had a monster in the crosshairs and took the shot. He was clearly hit, he had his head down and even laid down, but his buddy kept circling him and it appeared the entire group took off. I felt a flashback of the day before as we started searching for this group of Hartebeest. We must have drove 2 hours all over in 90* heat looking but he could be anywhere. My confidence was crashing, and Mark could tell I was clearly upset. I remember he said, “you better not let this get to you- this is hunting. Do not quit.” Im not sure what caused it but Mark looked down at my rifle and said, “did you dial for wind?” I said, “no of course not I would just hold for wind” and he said ‘Look..’ only to realize

the wind dial on my scope was turned about 4 MOA. Apparently, as I was taking my rifle in and out of the soft case, it had turned the turret a bunch. I mean, a bunch. This would explain being off to the left on the Wildebeest the day before AND possibly the Hartebeest today. Finally, we decided to go back to the field and see if we could pick up a blood trail for the tracking dogs. We walked about 300 yards and suddenly the PH through his hand up and motioned me to get my gun and get up there. Here was the Hartebeest, bedded down under a bush. At about 20 yards, I put one single shot in him and it was over. When we looked at the first shot, it was nearly EXACTLY the same distance to the left as the shot the day before. I think we had figured out what happened but I wouldn't know for sure until my next opportunity. I know I am a good shot and I would never unnecessarily cause pain to an animal.



Day 4 Redemption

After a nice breakfast on a beautiful Monday morning, we headed out to look for Black Impala. The PH, Geoffrey asked why I seemed nervous and stressed so clearly the way I was feeling was obvious. We went to the range to make sure my rifle was good and it was spot on. After about an hour of scouting and seeing some very nice Rams but none that met the PH approval. We saw one that had an enormous horn on one side, the biggest Impala horns any of us had ever seen but his other horn was broke off. Then, out of the blue, a group of 2 common and one monster black impala. We stalked him for some distance then suddenly he presented a perfect broadside shot at 150 yards. Here we go; I dialed just to be safe, adjusted the parallax and took a slow deep breath. I put the target on his shoulder and as I exhaled, I said to myself "you got this, girl" and I gently squeezed the trigger. It seemed like an eternity between the sound of the shot and the very loud impact, but he took one jump in the air and came down less than 15 yards; and I knew it was a quality shot. I immediately felt myself relax. My confidence was back knowing that when something doesn't seem right, I don't need to question my ability first. Check the gear, the environment or other factors and trust myself. Now, its time to go find Marks Sable (which is proving to be a damn ghost!) or whatever else Africa may provide!



The sable has been quite elusive for Mark; we have seen several large bulls but none of them are old enough or with the right curve in the horns Mark is looking for. Over the next couple of hours scouting we happened upon a lone Golden Wildebeest in a field, surrounded by several color variations of Impala, Blesbok and of course, Springbok. Something I did not realize is that a lone male like this is usually indicative of a very mature bull or ram that has lived a long life and is no longer in the breeding pool. They are basically kicked out of the herd by the young studs and it makes these a great trophy and perfect animal to harvest. The PH was able to line me up behind a large bush barely 100 yards away and it was one and done for this guy. He went barely 50 yards. 2 clean single shots on two animals and it fully reinforced that all was well with my skills. This was not an animal on my list when arriving in Africa, but I kept seeing them and was enamored by their beauty and size so I am very grateful I had the opportunity to add this to my trophy list.



Over the next two days, I left my rifle at camp and enjoyed being an observer to a long waterhole stalk for a warthog, an amazing Steenbok ram and a well-earned, amazing Sable Bull for my husband. I will be very proud to have these trophy's added to our growing Africa collection!

We were also able to celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary with a trip to a local orphanage that housed 28 children between the ages of 4-19. I had participated in the SCI Blue Bag Program and solicited donations from friends and family, and we were able to provide some much-needed hygiene items, food and a few gifts to some very needy folks. I was humbled and reminded how lucky I am to live where I do and have all the things I have.

The last animal of the hunt, to top off the entire trip, was the beautiful Common Springbok. I attempted a shot at nearly 330 yards in howling wind right to left and missed. As luck (and Africa) would have it, another opportunity presented itself at 280 yards. I waited for the perfect broadside shot and the wind to give me a moment to squeeze the trigger, and he fell right where he stood. My Savage .308 with the custom load Mark built for me worked perfectly. The horns were not

the largest we may have seen, but they were shaped in a perfect heart which seemed fitting for the anniversary and final animal of the trip.



As the trip came to a close, I feel as though I will be forever changed by South Africa. Its raw beauty, incredible and ever changing landscape, the smells and sounds will be burned in my memory for a lifetime. I am so grateful to have had this be my first hunt and harvest. And as many people warned me the “trip of a lifetime” will be the first of many to come. “Africa is calling... I must Go.”

