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Elephant With A .50 Alaskan

by Bryan Pettet

- Outfit: Charlton McCallum Safaris
- Dates: June 1-June 8, 2007
- Area Hunted: Makuti, Zimbabwe
- PH: Alan Shearing
- Species Hunted: Tuskless elephant cow
- Rifle: custom Marlin 1895 lever gun in .50 Alaskan
- Bullet: lathe turned Punch bullet by Kelye Schlepp of Belt Mountain Base Pins, weight 460 grains, velocity from 20” octagon barrel was 1900 fps

I just returned from my first elephant hunt. Hopefully it will not be my last. I was originally scheduled to hunt 2 tuskless with Buzz Charlton and in our conversations he said I just had to bring my .50 caliber levergun.



The original plan was to use my 458 Lott but Buzz’s excitement was contagious and when I found out that all of the PH’s wanted me to bring the levergun that decided it for me. This gun was built specifically for Alaskan bears but an interesting bullet design seemed very promising (more on that later).



In all of this discussion, some things on my end required me to change to one elephant instead of two. That change messed up the safari company’s schedule a bit so I went with Alan Shearing as my PH instead of Buzz. Little did I know that these changes would take me into the finest hunt of my life.

Alan and his main tracker Taka (who has been with Alan for seven years) picked me up from the airport and we overnighted at Buzz’s house in Harare. Buzz had a change in his hunt plans unexpectedly and we missed each other by one day. He had a French doctor fly in to take a tuskless with a bow. I do not know if that hunter frequents here so I will delay the telling of his story but it’s quite interesting. Buzz will join me in Alaska for fishing next year so we will still have some good times I am sure.

The next day we loaded up the Land Cruiser and Niceson (Alan’s #2 tracker) joined us as we made the 4 1/2 hour drive to Makuti. We were stopped with the rest of traffic at two police roadblocks but everyone was courteous and quickly passed us through with no bribes being exchanged. I was pleased to see everyone treat us well in Zimbabwe.

For all of the rumors that you hear, my stay was completely painless and without trouble. One cannot help but notice this beautiful country and wonder where it is headed? While I was there the exchange rate went from \$45,000 Zim to \$62,000 Zim to one US dollar. Of course that is the black market rate. The bank has locked their exchange rate at \$250 Zim to \$1 US dollar, which is ridiculous. A comment was made that if not for the fear of contracting hepatitis, it would be much cheaper to use currency for toilet paper than to buy it. Insurance is useless as the rates and valuations will change the same week as the policy is purchased. At one point, we stopped for 2 hamburgers and 2 Cokes and paid about 1/2 million Zim for that. I asked how much that was as Alan was piling up a huge stack of \$10,000 dollar Zim notes to pay for it. He said about \$6 US. He said sometimes people do not even bother to count closely as what does an extra \$10,000 Zim matter in that kind of economy?

We saw large blocks of land that used to be productive and now they are barren and useless...lots of empty tobacco drying sheds and empty grain silos that used to employ many local peoples. What a terrible waste. I learned that my PH and the apprentice (Guy Ferreria) had both been physically removed from their multi-generational farms in Zimbabwe. Both men expressed relief that no harm had come to their families in the process. That is certainly something to be thankful for and something that is impossible for most of us to relate to.

I was in 2 different camps over the course of a week. The first one was never really seen in the daytime and the second one was shared with Charles Helm. Both camps were very nice but the second camp in particular was superbly laid out and appointed as Guy and the camp staff had rebuilt much of it this year. I am especially interested to hear how the new bone graveyard near the campfire works out. I expect there will be many night sounds around that campfire in the days to come.



I commented several times that I was impressed with the maturity and responsibility maintained by the 19 year old apprentice. You just do not see teenagers in the States handle that kind of responsibility very often. I believe that Guy is well on the way to becoming a great PH himself (if only he can survive the daily Latin and taxonomy quizzes by Alan). Not only did the apprentice rebuild several camps for Charlton McCallum Safaris but he maintains the Makuti camp and staff as well as helping on various hunts. He also videoed my hunt and did a fantastic job in obtaining a great over the shoulder angle during some intense moments...but I am getting ahead of myself.

Guy Ferreria



The first day we saw a young bull elephant in the first 30 minutes. We glassed and hiked the hills that day and saw 3 bulls but no cows. I really enjoyed the scenery and getting my legs back under me after the long flight from the States. A return to camp that night brought me into first contact with 2 Italian clients who were sharing camp with us. The husband had shot a buffalo that week and was hoping to bait a hyena but had troubles with lions stealing the buffalo ribs being used as bait. If he was hunting lion it would be hyenas stealing the bait I am sure. TIA.

To fast forward a bit, the next 3 days consisted of 12-hour hikes with no food and only what water we could carry. Tracking those elephant took us to some of the roughest country the Zambezi escarpment has to offer. At one point, Alan stated this was the roughest country he had taken clients into for elephant. That’s a meaningful statement when you understand that Alan has been guiding since he was a late teenager and he is now in his mid-thirties. I had to laugh one morning as we tracked right out of camp without starting the Cruiser and Alan said, “John Sharpe would be proud!” I was very pleased at the physical difficulty of the hunt as that is precisely what I was hoping for. I do not know if you can ever truly “earn” an elephant but we got close.

The Makuti area is a recent acquisition for Charlton McCallum and they are finding it has many elephant but much of the terrain is not easy walking (you will probably hear something about the death march of Myles and Charles). If you end up hunting there be sure that you are capable of long hikes up through terrain that will surprise you. I couldn’t believe elephants would choose that type of terrain willingly without being stressed but I was wrong...think of elk country and you will begin to understand the terrain. As many of you know too well, when elephant walk you run and when they run...well, good luck to you. We certainly could not travel with speed most of the time due to the steepness and loose rock. The end result was dozens of miles and dozens of cows and bulls but no tuskless yet. Alan was a bit tense but I had complete faith in his abilities and hard work ethic. I knew he would come through...it was just a matter of time and time was running out. The #1 tracker Taka was starting to get upset with himself. Alan said his tracker was not used to being beaten for long by the elephant and that he was determined to find a tuskless soon.

On the 5th day I saw the finest tracking I have ever seen. Taka was a man on fire and would not rest or allow us to either. This is what I had come halfway around the world to see. He tracked very fast and upon losing the track would cast out in a circle like a bird dog that backtracks to find scent. By late morning we caught up to a group of 21 elephant in a valley that none of the PH’s or trackers had seen before. It was quite steep and there was a nice spring in the bottom of it. There we found our tuskless. She was larger than the other cows but of course, not as large as the young bulls in the group. After much discussion about the wind and how to work around 21 elephant we slid 400 meters down the mountain to the valley floor and begin to work our way into them.

As we worked our way towards the tuskless, we begin to have problems. Her 6 year-old calf begin to feed out ahead of her on our right side and the bulls began to circle on our left side. It was just a matter of time until all of our hard work would be blown by the wind. Alan looked at me and said, “Let’s run” and so we ran straight towards her and into the herd.

At this point, the bulls began to trumpet and Alan stopped me and said to take her. The shot was later stepped off at 31 meters, which is about 10 meters further than they prefer for most brain shots. It was an interesting shot as she was standing in shadows and we were in the direct sunlight. This made it difficult to distinguish exact features on her head. The shot hit her directly through the gland on the side of her head as she was quartering to me. Her back legs collapsed and her head went back and trunk flew up in a classic brain shot response. Alan said she was dead and immediately started to shout at the bulls, which were still coming towards us. I kept my eyes on the downed cow and noticed her legs were still moving as she lay on her side. I put another shot into her head and then 2 quick shots to her shoulder (upon reviewing the video later, someone said you really machine-gunned her with that levergun). We backed off for a minute to allow the cows to retreat and then we ran around behind her and I put a final shot through the back of her head.

I stood there looking at one of the most magnificent animals I have ever seen.



I did not know what to think or feel except to be grateful for all of the experiences of the past week. Then I remembered what we had gotten ourselves into. We had slid down a vertical face to get to her and that was the only way back out.

The next day we brought the staff of the Lake Kariba Crocodile Farm with their lorry to help us recover the meat and skin. I have been in on some tough animal recoveries in the past but nothing like this time. I will never forget the tracker Taka carrying both elephant ears at the same time straight up the hill without resting and others carrying loads that seemed



physically impossible. These guys are tough! Even Alan and Guy would stop for water or rest but the only time these guys stopped was to light up a cigarette...rolled with magazine paper and no filter of course



We discovered that the first shot was just forward of her brain by a millimeter according to the PH and also narrowly missed her spine on the quartering shot but exited the elephant after penetrating over 4 feet through the skull and neck. Apparently, it had shocked her badly and she was unable to regain her footing. In fact, upon showing the video to Myles McCallum (partner of Buzz and Charles Helm’s PH on his trip), Myles immediately assumed it was a fatal brain shot. One of the shoulder shots also exited and the other shots were difficult to track but had over 4 feet of penetration as well. The finishing shot was the only bullet that we recovered and it fell out of her neck while removing the head. As you can see the solid has no damage and could be reloaded. Hats off to Kelye for a very fine bullet. Mushi.



I told Alan several times that there was nothing I would change about our hunt. It was exactly what I wanted and yet somehow more than I had hoped for. I am almost afraid to come back as I do not know how the experience could be improved upon. As mentioned the physical challenge on my hunt was on the high end of the scale. If I came back it would be difficult to raise the bar but in talking to Alan, we have a little seed planted about doing a backpack hunt for buffalo in the jess bush. That should up the ante a bit. I would definitely want to hunt with Alan again. How can you not like a guy who can tell you what every tree, bug and bird is in English, Latin and Shona? Here is a photo of Alan (don’t ask me what he’s doing with his hand) and the scout. If you get a chance to meet Alan be sure to tell him that he reminds you of Leonardo DiCaprio in Blood Diamond. He will really like that. 😊



The rest of the guys with Charlton McCallum Safaris (Buzz, Myles, and Rex) are superb hunters as well and highly respected. I do not know how you could go wrong with any of them. As to tuskless elephant, it was definitely the most exciting hunt of my life and I am from Alaska and enjoy hunting bears with a predator call...so I am no slouch in the adrenaline department. If you are delaying a tuskless hunt, I recommend you shift up a gear and get into the action before the world figures out how much fun we are having out there.

The only thing I would have done differently is to take more photos and spend more time doing that but when you are chasing elephant...well, who wants to stop and take photos? If you are looking for the hunt of a lifetime then I would highly recommend Charlton McCallum Safaris. I want to say a big thanks to PH Alan Shearing for the best hunt of my life. In the words of Douglas MacArthur, I shall return!



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