



Kuda's Leopard

By Karel Strydom

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While hunting plains game with a couple of clients and my apprentice PH at Tuli the previous year, we had just had our lunchtime siesta under a huge old rain tree at No. 3 windmill and had just started driving down the road to continue our search for a big kudu bull when the trackers on the back started calling "Lion, lion ahead". 30 metres ahead of us a big leopard male trotted away from us with his huge head swaying from side to side. He melted into the Mopani shrub and I brought the Landrover to a halt savouring the moment amongst much excited chatter. One of the clients named this leopard "Melon Head".

We baited eight different sites in total with zebra quarters where we had been observing leopard activity in the past, placing two baits in the area around No. 3 windmill where I had been observing Melon Head's spoor. And also three baits along the Shashe/Sinulale/Maliketwe pool region, three baits along the Burale river system and two baits along the Mankazhebe river system, close to No. 3 windmill.

Having baited the targeted sites and with no more bait left, we turned our attention to some mature



impala rams which I would need to resupply my bait sites when the leopards began to feed. One of the clients, using a .375 H&H made by Colt Sauer, topped off with a fine 3.5 - 10 VX111 Leupold scope, took a shot at an impala which collapsed, then got up again. Not wanting to spend time tracking the impala I instructed him to shoot him again. He opened the bolt of the Sauer but the spent case remained in the chamber - no matter how hard we tried we could not extract the spent round. This is a scenario you definitely would not want when facing a dangerous animal. I called for a second light rifle which I handed to him, with which he finished off the impala. This impala, weighed at camp, proved to be a staggering 159 pounds.

Later on, once I had access to a ramrod I tried to push out the spent case by inserting the rod from the front of the barrel. To my surprise I only succeeded in pushing out the bottom of the case, which had completely separated above the belt. We then had to get a piece of steel wire and fish out the remainder of the case.

The rainy season had ended very late; the last rains having fallen less than a fortnight before meant the bush was extremely thick, with water everywhere - not ideal conditions in which to hunt leopard. The leopard had no need to move far from their hideouts with water and an abundance of prey on which to feed all around them. It was going to be a challenge to get a big leopard on bait, but knowing that big males like to check on their females within their territories I felt encouraged.

On the sixth day of the hunt none of our baits had yet been visited by leopard. Early morning on the seventh day whilst checking the baits, we spotted four bushpig going up the slope of a hill. They stopped once they got to the top of the hill. I drove on hoping to fool them that we had gone and had no interest in them. When I thought we were far enough away I slowed to a stop and called for the rifles to pursue these pigs. We slowly crept up the side of the hill only to find they were nowhere in sight. Now, going up this hill was not easy as most of the time you needed to negotiate your way between rocks that are round and of a size like those used by the retired folk who play lawn bowls! Coming down was even more of a challenge; I was about 5 steps down the hill and beginning to think I needed to offer to carry one of the client's rifles down the hill for him as I am a few years younger than he, but too

late! One of those round stones had just rolled out from under his boots. Catching himself, he was not able to protect his rifle which of course fell on the scope which was now damaged beyond repair. We continued on to check the next three baits knowing we would need to return to the hunting camp to remove the damaged telescope and replace it with one that the client had generously brought along to leave with me after the hunt. Once this telescope was fitted we went to the range and zeroed the rifle again. This done we continued with our bait checking.

At about midday we cautiously approached the second bait along the Mankazhebe river from the prepared blind site. I immediately noticed through my binoculars that a leopard had fed on this bait, but I was not too excited as it had only fed on a small amount which normally is an indication of a small leopard. As I got under the bait branch I noticed that the leopard had managed to break two strands of the wire I had used to secure the bait and I was beginning to get excited as this can only be done by a big cat. The meat the cat had fed on was also still very pink and fresh, all indicating that the leopard had only found the bait late in the morning. On finding the spoor I placed my smallest finger over the spoor to measure the width of the pad on the leopard's front track - the pad showed on both sides of my pinkie: this cat was definitely Melon Head.

As the spoor was that of a big male we decided to hunt this particular leopard and proceeded to put up our blind sixty-five yards downwind on the western side of the bait, with the wind blowing predominantly from the south east.

At approximately 4 pm I entered the blind with a client and National Parks game scout. to await the leopard's arrival. Having instructed the client about blind etiquette, we sat motionless as a big bull giraffe walked within a few yards of the blind. A squirrel was within easy arm's reach at the back of the blind and was screeching at the top of his voice over his displeasure of his uninvited guests being in his favourite part of this bush. My client was trying to suppress a cough, but he lost the battle at which the squirrel made his departure and all was quiet again. At 4.55 pm my client again succumbed to a cough, and I advised him that it would be better for us to leave the blind and return the following day as his coughing would alert the leopard of our presence and that would be the end of our chances with him.

At approximately 5.15 pm the next day I suddenly noticed that the leopard was sitting in the fork of the tree. I informed my client of this and we watched as the leopard walked out on the branch and stood over the bait. I glassed the leopard through my binoculars to check that he was a male of trophy quality, and I advised the client to take the shot when he was ready, but before he could fire the leopard turned around and started walking along the branch back towards the trunk of the tree. I advised my client not to shoot. The leopard jumped down the tree and sat at the base of the tree facing the blind, and after a while he got up and approached the bait above him and started to sniff at the bait. He was broadside to us with his right leg slightly extended as if to take a step I instructed my client to take a shot when he was comfortable. As the shot rang out the leopard was knocked to the ground but it immediately got back on its feet and took off.

I called for my trackers to come to us so we could follow the blood spoor, but we only found small blood spoor and as the light was fast fading I decided to search the immediate area. We first did a 40 yard search loop followed by 60 and then 80 but we did not succeed in finding the leopard. The light was now poor and we had reached thirty minutes after sunset so I decided to abandon the search and return the following morning.

I removed the bait to hopefully minimize the smell of meat, which would attract hyenas. If the hyenas found the leopard before we did all that would be left of the trophy would be a head. This would make for a very unhappy client. We all went back to camp for a quick dinner and to get some blankets to spend the night at the bait site. On our arrival I chose a nice open piece of ground along the Mankazhebe river, instructed my trackers to build a big fire and feel free to make as much noise as they wished as I wanted all the hyenas in the close vicinity to know we were there and hopefully keep them away from the leopard which I was hoping was now expired or laying up in very thick bush if he was still alive.

That evening Africa was at its best - the lions had made a kill about a mile and a half to our north and were calling the clans, other lions were in full reply about half a mile to our south and all the while the hyenas were calling for reinforcements to mount a challenge. I was happy with this as it would keep the scavengers away from our leopard.

While we sat around the burning Mopani and ironwood fire I began to prepare my team for the morrow. I recounted past successes to encourage them, also retelling lessons we had learnt previously about wounded leopard which I wanted them to remember.

The following morning we took up the blood spoor at first light, after the normal PH speech instructing that no one was to shoot at the leopard from a distance if it was in fact on or mauling a person as one was likely to recover from a leopard mauling but would possibly not recover if shot by another hunter. If the leopard was on a person the first gunner at the scene was to press the barrel of his weapon against the leopard, check no part of the person being mauled was in the bullet's flight path, then fire. I instructed my driver and tracker Kuda to carry a spare .416 Rigby rifle as he is an ex-parks ranger with much experience.

We followed the blood spoor and the leopard kept moving away before we could catch site of him. We followed and lost the spoor on numerous occasions but at about 11.15 am I caught site of the big cat disappearing about 100 yards ahead of us. We proceeded to the place I last saw him, and followed the spoor. We entered a river bed and we spread out looking for tracks, and ahead of us on the opposite bank was some thick riverine vegetation with the river curling around the bush. Kuda, my tracker James and the two parks scouts were to our left while my apprentice and I went to the right to check for spoor and possibly cut off the leopard ahead if he would try to cross the river again. To my right were the clients.

James and Kuda followed what they thought was the spoor into the thick bush and it transpired this was where the leopard was hiding. The cat growled and James retreated back into the river; at the sound of the growl I advanced into the thicket from the right flank and the leopard turned and tried to make good his escape as he saw me approaching and branched off to the left. Kuda and a scout



The spent .375 case.

advanced to their left to outflank the leopard, but the leopard had outflanked them. The leopard charged Kuda and the scout, and Kuda fired and hit the leopard in the shoulder, bringing him down. The cat immediately got back to his feet and continued with his attack on Kuda. The leopard furiously launched himself at Kuda and with one swat of his good front paw he disarmed the tracker. The second round Kuda had chambered only found sky as the rifle left his grip. The big cat was now standing on his back legs trying to get to Kuda's throat and all the while was roaring in anger. Kuda put both his hands on the leopard's head to push it away from his face and neck. In pushing the leopard away Kuda was badly bitten on his right knee. Kuda then kicked the leopard on the nose with the bottom of his other foot and the cat let go of Kuda's knee and bit his flailing foot. As all this transpired, the one national parks scout was running away as fast as his legs could carry him.

As the leopard and Kuda fought, my apprentice and I were on the other side of the bush. We may just as well have been on the other side of the world. As fast as we could we rushed around, followed by the other scout. The leopard left Kuda and retreated back into the thick Mopani bushes just as we arrived.

We secured Kuda and made sure he was safe and I instructed the ranger to stand guard over Kuda. With my apprentice to my right and the client to my left we went in a straight line into the thick bush into which the leopard had disappeared. On our approach the leopard growled and charged. My apprentice shot the leopard in the chest, closely followed by my shot which broke the leopard's back.

After checking the leopard was dead we returned to assess Kuda's injuries and upon discovering that he had been bitten on the leg, we called and had the truck brought in to clean and dress his wounds. We extracted Kuda to the other vehicle where we administered further first-aid and dispatched Kuda to Bulawayo for follow-up medical attention.

The leopard weighed in at 165 pounds and measured in at just under eight feet in length with a skull measurement of 16 and 2/8". Points of interest were that one of the leopard's canine teeth was worn right down and that his back hips were starting to show due to loss of weight.

Kuda is currently enjoying some well-earned time off at his kamusha (rural home), he has informed me that he will be accompanying us on our next leopard hunt just short of a fortnight away. It's hard to keep a good man down! 🐾