

The demon *buck*



On the trail: Larno scans for signs of the buck, but a tracking dog will prove the most effective option

Recounting a close call in the bush, Byron Pace takes up Larno Rens's story on the trail of a wounded bushbuck

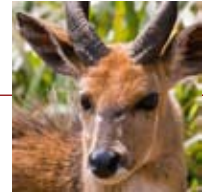
As the winter of 2007 encroached on the hard-baked days of summer, Larno Rens found himself guiding a client in Kabeljous Valley, South Africa, in search of the elusive and secretive bushbuck. Skirting the valley tops among the sparser vegetation, Larno picked up fresh spoor departing from the thickets overnight, but as yet they were still to lay optics on a ram. Knowing that they will often be found drifting back up the valley, Larno and his client stayed put, surveying the game tracks threaded through the bush below.

With the exception of bongo, I don't think any other African antelope shares the same marvel and mystique as the bushbuck. More accessible and affordable than the aforementioned animal, it has eight different sub-species, sporting markedly different colourations depending on the area you happen to be hunting. With a majestic yet piercing demonic stare, they have the shortest headgear of any of the spiral-homed antelope. That, however, detracts nothing from the proud nature of this ferocious little animal.

Since it is one of the most dangerous antelope to hunt, the quest for Africa's demon buck always carries an electric air of excitement and anticipation. It may not boast the mass of the eland, or the apparel of a gemsbok, but do not underestimate this bantamweight antelope. Any professional hunter will tell you that wounded bushbuck should be followed up with the same caution as dangerous game. Make no mistake, they will be waiting for you in the thickest, most uninviting bush – and when you come, they will be ready.

Larno's patience paid dividends, as a fine ram emerged from the thickets, the ebony glint of its horns catching the light as he crossed a gorge on the valley side. The buck hugged the shadows tight to the track





edges, weaving through obscuring patches of swaying scrub. Transecting their view 200 yards ahead, a grassy open area forced the bushbuck from cover. Steadily mooching towards them, the casually browsing buck closed the gap, prompting laboured breathing of excitement from Larno's client.

As it paused to stare back down the path, a final step froze a broadside profile, silhouetting the animal perfectly against the sandy, brown dirt. The opportunity was presented, and the shot sounded with a hollow thud. This was not good. Hunching with a stiff-legged stagger, the bushbuck regained his footing before bucking like a prize rodeo bull and vacating the exposed area quicker than a springbuck outmanoeuvring a cheetah.

At that time, Larno was relatively new to the PH game, and was short of a blood dog. Given the formidable reputation of wounded bushbuck, he decided to drive a short distance to borrow a dog from a local farmer.

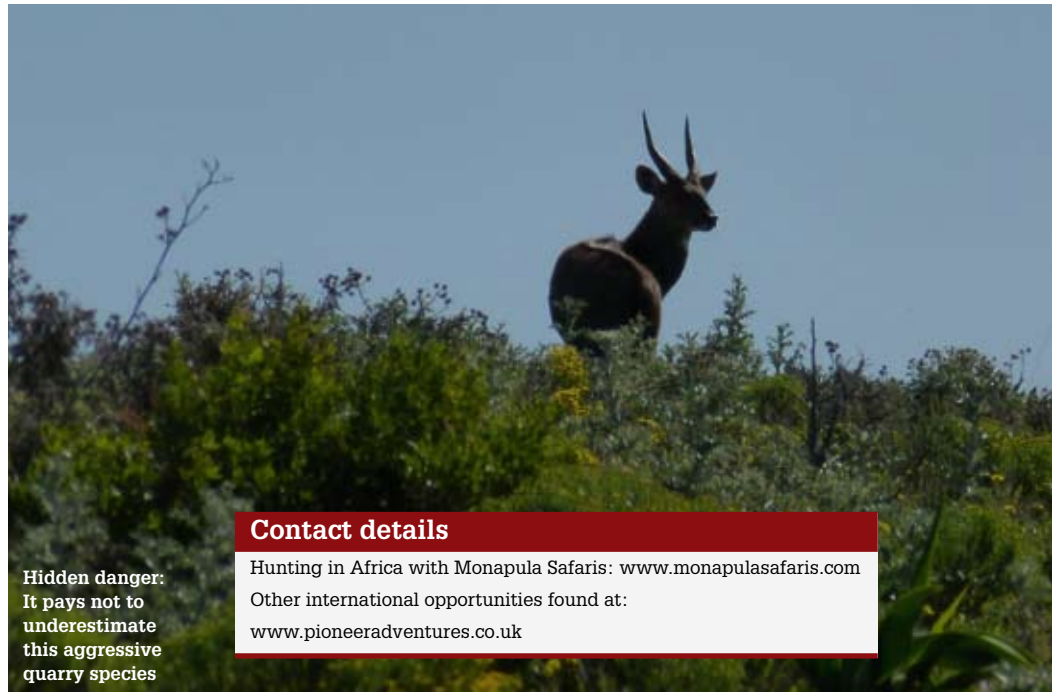
Now with dog in tow, he returned promptly to the impact point. Blood and spoor made it immediately obvious where the buck had been hit. Larno was concerned. As time pressed on, the chances of retrieving the buck from the dense thickets would become smaller and smaller. If the approaching darkness forced them to abandon the hunt, it would be an uneasy night for Larno and client alike, taunted by the knowledge that such a magnificent animal had been left wounded in the bush.

With a little encouragement, the stocky Jack Russell busied herself around the blood spoor, marching purposefully into the virtually impenetrable foliage. To describe this jesse as 'thick' doesn't really cut it. In the UK we have 'thick' undergrowth, but in Africa, it can be like stepping into another world while blindfolded. If you can see the end of your barrel, you are doing well.

The bush may have been a maze of tangled thorns, but if they were to retrieve the buck, Larno had to follow the hound. Given that the client was not the fittest of gentlemen, Larno suggested he stand guard in case the bushbuck appeared back out of the thicket, while Larno entered the labyrinth on his hands and knees.

Glimpsing the back end of the Jack Russell scurrying ahead, he pushed on slowly, hampered by thorns and the absence of any kind of pathway. Slithering under a gap just about big enough for an anorexic python, Larno paused, as the sound of breaking foliage filtered through the bush. With only his 7x57 Parker Hale for company, he was about to sample the legendary ferocity of Africa's bush devil first hand.

Frozen in a moment of acute awareness, he honed in on the escalating commotion, the *noorse* preventing any movement. Sitting up wasn't even an option. Lying on his back, Larno strained to stare at the movement ahead. Seconds later, the little dog burst through the undergrowth. Crashing through the tangled web of branches, the bushbuck swiftly followed. With Larno having zero chance of being able to shoulder the rifle the buck rapidly closed in, intent on skewering the pursuing hunter through both lungs.



Hidden danger:
It pays not to underestimate this aggressive quarry species

Contact details

Hunting in Africa with Monapula Safaris: www.monapulasafaris.com
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As the buck got close enough for Larno to make out individual eyelashes, the 7x57 kicked into life, as a shot from the hip found a lucky placement at the base of the skull. Severing the vertebrae in an instant, the 170-grain bullet dropped the beast. Slumping forward a rifle length away, the buck's momentum brought it slicing through the final obscuring branches, crashing down between Larno's legs. The twisting horns pegged into the ground, a matter of inches from ending his chances of having any more kids.

The bush fell silent. In numb disbelief, Larno absorbed the moment, flushed and beaming with adrenalin, as he watched the crimson trickle of blood running from the exit wound onto his khaki shorts.

The school of life taught Larno a lesson that day, and firmly cemented his thirst to hunt on the edge. Today, his four-legged companion is a permanent fixture on hunting trips, and as a trained hound it is the one doing the chasing. It is moments like that one that mould people into the hunters they are, and reinforce the mounting respect they gain for their quarry. ■



Worthy quarry: The bushbuck showed why hunters regard it with such fear and respect