

Frank Brophy reports on

Hunting in the Karoo.

South Africa's Karoo in the Eastern Cape was the venue for our group's April 2008 hunt. We had decided to substitute Limpopo Province's bush veldt for the Karoo's plains literally for a change of scenery. The landscape is quite dramatic with views stretching as far as the horizon, little or no development outside the pretty towns, albeit with a lesser number of species to hunt that includes Springbok and Black Wildebeest. This semi-arid region receives light annual rainfall which is a contributing factor to habitat unsuitable for the more exotic wildlife species found further north. Large herds of Springbok roam the open plains, frequently seen grazing side by side with Blesbok alongside the metal road. The area we visited is steeped in history with the nearest big town Graaf Reinet featuring hugely in Boer War times as it did in the early 1800's when Cornwallis Harris set up a base from which to explore, hunt and record the wildlife.

Travelling to the Karoo from Ireland is a long haul involving three flights – Dublin via Heathrow to Johannesburg with an internal flight to Bloemfontein followed by a five hour drive south. It's enough to test anyone's stamina and tested we were, particularly so on arrival in Johannesburg to find that two bags were missing. The Terminal 5 Bug had struck! The rifles arrived ok although mine was virtually useless because its scope was in my missing suitcase. Our onward flight and long road journey was not brightened by the knowledge that two of our number had no clothing or kit other than what we were wearing, leaving us with no alternative but to grin and bear it - which is what we did. Luckily our bags turned up on the fourth day. We were obliged to grin and bear it a second time when on our return journey a flight from Bloemfontein was delayed for over three hours causing us to miss the London connection, necessitating an overnight in Johannesburg. In between, all the rifles went missing for a period. Perhaps it's just as well that hunters are a patient breed.

Despite these before and after hitches the safari was extremely successful with everyone achieving the expectations they had set for themselves. Our 5am starts took us through countryside that had witnessed Boer commando units on horseback using the same tracks over a century ago. The Brak River meandering through the property features in the regions historical records. One British soldier left a written account of boring days of guard duty at the railway bridge which, unchanged straddles the river to this day. In fact history was all around us – our host’s Irish grandfather had participated in one of Shackleton’s expeditions to the South Pole and won a shooting contest that had been arranged to help while away the time when their vessels were locked in ice for several months. The prize was Shackleton’s own .22 calibre rifle suitably inscribed and it remained in the Ferrar family until the 1960’s. Its current whereabouts are unknown.

The first hunt, a Springbok cull, was almost a throwback to those pre-mechanised days with horse riders out on the Plains ghosting along to move the animals towards the hunters. The vast numbers of these small antelope make them difficult to hunt on foot because so many pairs of eyes are on watch at all times. The horsemen’s function was to encourage the herd in the general direction of hunters spread out over the Plains after which it was up to each individual to take whatever humane and safe shots as were possible. The cull figure was achieved on day one so we moved on to hunting in the way to which we are accustomed. Gemsbok (Oryx), were plentiful as were Blesbok and particularly Black Wildebeest. Some of the lads opted to go into the hills to hunt Klipspringer. This tiny antelope known alternatively as the “rock jumper” or “ballerina of the rocks” with amazing agility to jump from rock to rock or race up sheer cliffs is notoriously difficult to shoot and I think that the locals won that particular contest. With my slightly more senior legs and still without my baggage or boots I opted to stay on the flat and reckon that was a good decision. We also hunted a number of Gemsbok, Blesbok and Black Wildebeest and someone shot a Fallow deer, an introduced species that surprisingly thrives in semi-desert conditions. Long walks and long shots in scorching heat were the order of the day.

The week prior to our arrival had been devoted to removing forty Black Wildebeest from the property using a helicopter-borne shooter equipped with a dart-gun. The animals were tranquilised, examined by a Vet and then transported by road to another game reserve. This operation resulted from

the herd's rapid expansion whereby the numbers exceeded that which the habitat could sustain and immediate action was required. Despite the best efforts of the shooter in the sky one wily old bull escaped and disappeared into the plains where his presence became a threat to other Wildebeest herds and the planned breeding programme, so he was earmarked for culling. Old bulls don't usually get to be old bulls without a bit of luck and a lot of cunning, so hunting this fellow down in the wide open spaces was not going to be easy. Although the lads had already culled a young bull each, all went after the old boy without any success. He literally took off into the wild blue yonder when he spotted movement. On day four the luggage containing my scope finally arrived and I spent some time on the range setting the rifle up for shots out to 250 metres. I was still using my old .270 Mauser although the original plan had been to bring the new .375 rifle following the successful High Court outcome last February. Unfortunately despite having a firearms certificate for the rifle and it being entered into both my European Union Firearms Pass and PSNI Visitor's Permit, the Department of Justice prevaricated about issuing an Import Licence so we were obliged to engage Solicitors once again. The Department received an ultimatum advising that if the Import Permit was not forthcoming we would seek a High Court Order compelling the Minister to issue it. The Permit duly arrived without a covering letter or compliments slip, not in sufficient time to arrange the necessary Import Licence in South Africa.

Anyway, now equipped with my hunting clothes and a decent pair of boots I set out after the old Wildebeest bull. Accompanied by PH Mike Ferrar and his tracker John I trailed all over the place for an entire day without getting within shooting distance. It was exhausting work that involved walking across open plains or crawling through overgrown drainage gullies, many sprouting acacia thorns capable of slicing clothing or flesh. At dinner that evening the usual ribbing had to be endured for not having shot the bull. Downright cheek really, coming from guys who previously had their opportunity and did not succeed. The following morning we were out on the plains before dawn and at one point during the day having climbed a hill, had a clear view of the Wildebeest in the open several hundred metres away, much too far for a shot. He continued to elude us until finally with one hour left before dark we managed to creep up on him through a gully, getting to within 150 metres without being spotted. Well aware of the oncoming loss of light and the horror of a wounded animal running across open plains, I decided not to rely on the niceties of a one shot kill and worked the rifle's bolt as fast as possible firing three rapid shots to bring the bull down.

Forgetting our fatigue we cautiously approached, alert for a charge, but it was all over. He had been a worthy opponent and we saluted him. At this point we called up the vehicle by radio to collect both bull and ourselves and when it eventually arrived and the usual photographs were taken, I lay on the ground announcing that I was officially on strike, refusing to walk another step. Mike and John thought that I was kidding. I wasn't.