



# A change for the better?

**Helena visits Africa and sees exactly what good habitat management can do for wildlife, hunting and the local community**

In late August I swapped the damp and cool green hills of mid Wales for the parched flat, heat-filled bushveld of Limpopo Province in South Africa. The Chap had arranged to accompany a client from Luxembourg on a cull hunt and I was lucky enough to go along, too.

After 30 hours of travel via Johannesburg, Polokwane and Musina we arrived at Limpopo Safaris' beautiful River Camp on the banks of the Njelele River in South Africa's northernmost corner. Run by the twinkling-eyed and affable Mias Cronje and his vivacious wife Bella, Limpopo Safaris offers game hunting over 45,000 hectares of undisturbed land filled with acacia, mopane and giant baobab trees and dotted with high rocky kopjes.

The contrast between South Africa and Wales could not have been more marked, although the stunning scenery at home certainly gives South Africa a run for its money. What was immediately noticeable was the plethora of wildlife, much of which we could watch from the camp verandah overlooking the river.

On the opposite bank, kudu and impala strolled amid playfighting baboons, vervet monkeys, warthog and guinea fowl. A boat trip along the river on the first evening enabled us to get close to fish eagles, Goliath herons, kingfishers, red, grey and yellow hornbills and a vast crocodile that slipped soundlessly into the water the moment it saw us. Clearly the 'No Swimming' sign was to be taken seriously.

Out in the bushveld the wildlife is even more prolific and over the seven days of our trip I saw wildebeest, steenbok, klipspringer, sable and roan antelope, duiker, gemsbok, nyala, zebra, tree

squirrel, rock hyrax, elephant, hippo, Kori bustard, ostrich and, most amazingly for me, black rhino whose protection from poachers is taken extremely seriously.

The cull hunting covers the species whose populations need managing with the focus on humane shooting at sensible ranges. All hunters are accompanied by a qualified professional hunter (PH) and a tracker. Our PH, John, and his tracker, Simeon, made a formidable team, and their ability to spot and stalk game was awe-

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inspiring, as was their practical knowledge of how to retrieve a large carcass from deep in the bush.

I learnt that the money raised by both cull and trophy hunters contributes to projects such as the reintroduction and protection of rare species; for example the reserve runs a breeding programme for the rare sable antelope and protects its white and black rhino populations assiduously. Watching a black rhino being sedated by dart gun from a helicopter to be treated for a wound on its shoulder was one of the highlights of my trip.

Hunted animals, meanwhile, are skinned and

butchered at the 'skinning camp' with the meat distributed to the camp to feed visitors and the locals who work for the company, with any excess sold locally.

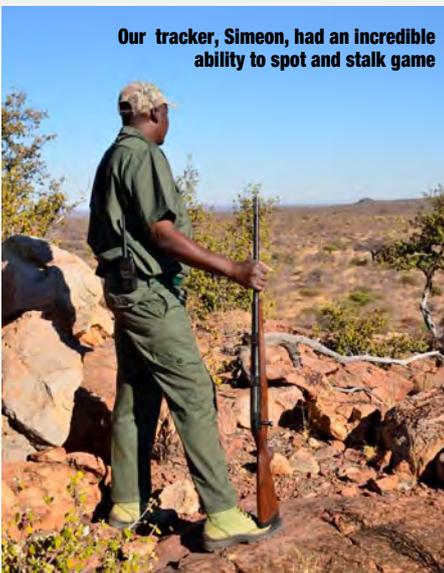
Two things struck me. The first was that hunting is hard work; climbing steep kopjes in the heat, laden with rifle, binoculars and backpack was physically demanding, as was walking deep into the thorn-filled scorching bush where one wrong step and the resulting crack of a twig meant any game fled the area in an instant.

The second was that land can be restored to support a wealth of wildlife. Some 30 years ago attempts to farm this area destroyed the local game and plant species, insecticides used to protect cattle killed wild birds, and fences and bore holes blighted the landscape. Now the cattle and fences are gone, endemic species have been reintroduced and allowed to flourish and the local wildlife provides hunting income, meat, and photo and wildlife tourism in harmony with nature.

The story here has parallels with the situation in Wales where the Welsh uplands have suffered under a monoculture of sheep grazing. Today the heather and grouse have disappeared, upland bird populations have crashed and biodiversity is much reduced.

However, initiatives such as the £6m nature fund for Wales combined with the work of the excellent Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and a new enthusiasm from Welsh government to restore the uplands, implement game management and reinvigorate wildlife should turn things around. I just hope that these plans can restore the Welsh hills to something as beautiful and vibrant as the land I have just seen in Africa. ■

**Our tracker, Simeon, had an incredible ability to spot and stalk game**



PICTURES: HELENA VENABLES

**Kudu meat is similar to venison**

