

By Magnus Pelz



ZEBRA IN THE DUSK

My heart is pounding, sweat is dripping from my brow. The dash to the tree, the only cover available in this wide-open barren landscape, isn't especially far but with an evening temperature of almost 30 degrees, it's been a real drain on the little energy I have left. I embrace my rifle, a .375 caliber H&H magazine Tikka, lean my hand holding the barrel against the tree to steady my aim and force myself to breathe deeply in an attempt to lower my heart rate, this with only partial success. My sights find the target and I slowly squeeze the trigger!

I am in Africa, Namibia to be exact, a country that most hunters would agree constitutes the best big game hunting grounds on the dark continent. I'm hunting on the Okomitundu farm located in the highlands of the Erongo region northwest of Windhoek, which is bordered by the Namib to the west and the Kalahari to the east. The landscape is very diverse, composed of high mountain ridges and wide valleys, rough cliffs as well as plains with thornbush covered terrain. A scenic countryside with a beauty of its own – the habitat of the mountain zebra.

At breakfast, while I'm discussing the means and location of today's hunt with the farm administrator and had just agreed on the most promising type of hunt at a vantage point overlooking a waterhole (last time it rained was 7 months ago in the yearly drought), we are approached by Thomas, a non-hunting guest on the farm, with the request to accompany me. As a rule I'll do just about anything to avoid taking a non-hunter along to a hunting blind. Experience has taught me that they often lack the required ambition and endurance needed to patiently wait in hiding for game to appear. This, however, is a different situation. The guest is an experienced paintball player and in my mind used to waiting undercover, so I agree to let him come along. Zebras are usually drawn to drink at the waterhole in the evening or even during the night, so I agree to meet Thomas at 4:00pm for us to drive to our

hiding spot together and stay there in wait until the onset of dusk, which is at about 7:30pm this time of year.

Not to forget, I grab the esky and load it in the Indian make Mahindra off-road pick-up truck provided by the farm; the rifle is secured in place and I've checked the ammunition. In the afternoon we're off, on our bumpy way (that the Namibians affectionately call 'pads'), to a waterhole about 4 miles away in the middle of a terrain previously used to flood an old dam that hasn't been used for decades. In this old dam structure, someone's taken a lot of time and great effort to build what can only be described as a quite roomy bunker type blind.

The zebras native to this geographical region belong to the species of mountain zebras (*Equus zebra*), which are differentiated from the prairie zebras (*Equus quagga*) of east and south Africa through somewhat longer ears, smaller hoofs and the absence of the so-called shadow stripes. The biologist classifies two sub-species of the mountain zebra, for one; the Cape mountain zebra (*Equus zebra zebra*) that is native to the Cape region of South Africa, as compared to the Hartmann zebra (*Equus zebra hartmannae*) in the mountains and hills of Namibia for the other; named after the German explorer, Georg Hartmann (1865–1946). Mountain zebras reach a height



of 1.2 to 1.5m and a length of approximately 2.2m with an average weight of 260 to 370 kilos. The Hartmann zebra is usually somewhat larger and has somewhat thinner stripes than the Cape mountain zebra.

The first hour goes by and there isn't any game to be seen. It's still too hot and the sun's burning down on the terrain in front of us, which next to the water hole only has one tree offering shade. That's to be expected and they hadn't counted on game this time of day. At 6 o'clock we notice the first movement: A kori bustard strutting slowly and majestically from the left towards the waterhole. This animal (one of the heaviest birds in the world capable of flight) is you might say an old acquaintance, because almost every time I've been on lookout at this waterhole it's helped me pass the time. Slowly it cools off with an increase in activity, more interesting. A stately warthog sow comes along, pauses for quite sometime sensing for danger and then, unconvinced with the situation, leaves quickly with its tail raised. Is there something moving on the opposite side of the open terrain? I take my binoculars and watch the bushes around 200 metres away! Matter of fact, I do see something, at first almost totally hidden by vegetation, something that's black and white. After a short while, the animal shows itself. It's an oryx (a young cow) moving slowly to the water. She proceeds very carefully, repeatedly stopping to reconnoitre, intuitively knowing that she's stalked by both the hunter and the leopard. It seems to take forever for her to reach the water, then she only takes a short drink, so as not to spend too much time inattentive in the open and to quickly retreat.

Everything's quiet again at the waterhole. The stillness is only broken by the call of ring-necked doves that have landed in the crown of the big tree. We sit and wait. The time seems to drag on forever with nothing happening. Now and again, I use the binoculars to scan the bush line stretching out opposite us in the hope of spotting game that may be hiding there, but to no avail there is nothing there that I can make out. Directly in front of our window there are several tall blades of grass, which would not really pose a problem when aiming with a scope and firing, but quite bothersome when scanning with binoculars as they tend to blur my vision, so I ask Thomas to remind me to cut them down later when we leave.

Time goes by and nothing happens, then it's 7:30pm and to the left of us the sun has swollen into a giant red ball only slightly above the horizon, ready to call it a day and hand over all further activities to nocturnal animals. We only have about 30 minutes left before we are engulfed in utter darkness.

The twilight of dusk in Namibia dissipates rather quickly and since we have



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our off-road vehicle parked some ways away, we slowly start to pack up our stuff, also ready to call it a day. One last look out of our observation window...nothing! We exit the bunker and while I relieve myself, Thomas lights up the cigarette that he's been longing for. With the esky on his shoulder we start off on our way to the truck. Thomas suddenly stops and reminds me that I wanted to remove the tall grass in front of the bunker. We hadn't gone too far, so I leave my backpack with Thomas and hustle on back to the bunker where I hectically pull up fistfull bunches of grass in front of the window. Just as I want to head back, the thought hits me. It wouldn't be a bad idea to make a quick check of the water level at the waterhole.

Not really thinking anything, I casually cross the wide open area in front of me, suddenly I freeze in my tracks: Coming towards me on the other side (also on the way to the water), a zebra. A single loner. This is most certainly an old male that's been driven from the herd by a young stallion. An outcast to wander by himself for the rest of his life. His body size and sturdy neck tend to support my conjecture. I look around and see no cover anywhere, so I slowly glide to the ground. Carefully I unsling my rifle, so happy that I didn't leave it behind with my backpack. The stallion is standing alert about 130 metres away with his head raised, checking out the area between us. Is he aware of me? I wouldn't be surprised since I'm sitting wide open. He's unsure, yet he takes a few more steps towards me. I support my elbows on my knees, aim carefully and once in my sights, I let it rip. At first nothing happens, then he sways and slowly staggers away behind a bush about 30 metres distant. I run for the only tree between me and the zebra, reach it drenched in sweat, it's still very hot even this late in the day. I lean against the tree, aim and shoot. Through the scope I see the stallion drop. All of this didn't take long and I'm totally overwhelmed from this unexpected hunt and the positive result.

Startled, I turn around to find Thomas approaching behind me. "What the hell are you doing here?" I ask. "Well, I wanted to know what's been keeping you and when I looked over the dam just as you sat down, I kept low undercover, like paintball and followed you. I didn't even see the zebra." We both laughed in the oncoming darkness with not a minute to spare. Sometimes a hunt is just coincidence with a happy end.

