



A Bad Baboon Day

By Magnus Pelz

Windhoek International Airport Hosea Kutako, Namibia, Africa. It is 7 o'clock in the morning as I disembark from the airplane of Air Namibia and casually stroll across the landing field in the direction of the small airport building. It is still relatively cool this time of day, and I'm glad that I had packed a sweatshirt in my onboard bag. Passport control is quickly left behind, even my suitcase is already waiting for me on the sparsely filled luggage conveyor belt. *In no time at all, I'm sitting relaxed by an open window in the dispatched minivan, enjoying the scenery of cultivated fields dispersed with brush thicket, on my way to the farm where I'm planning to hunt.*

Several days prior to my arrival, a group of baboons had thoroughly demolished a wind turbine used to power a water irrigation pump, so that within the course of one night, there was nothing left but strewn about bits and pieces rendering the power generator totally useless. This may not seem like such a big deal for someone from a western country, but for the Namibian farmer, it is essential to his existence because an inoperable water pump can lead to disastrous consequences during the yearly drought from March to November. It is therefore easy to understand that farmers aren't especially fond of baboons and hunt them whenever the opportunity presents itself, which is not too often. The story told by the farm workers, namely that a group of baboons were responsible for the disappearance of 6-year-old Ruusa waiting alone for the school bus, I simply had to banish into the realm of fiction.

Baboons usually appear in groups of

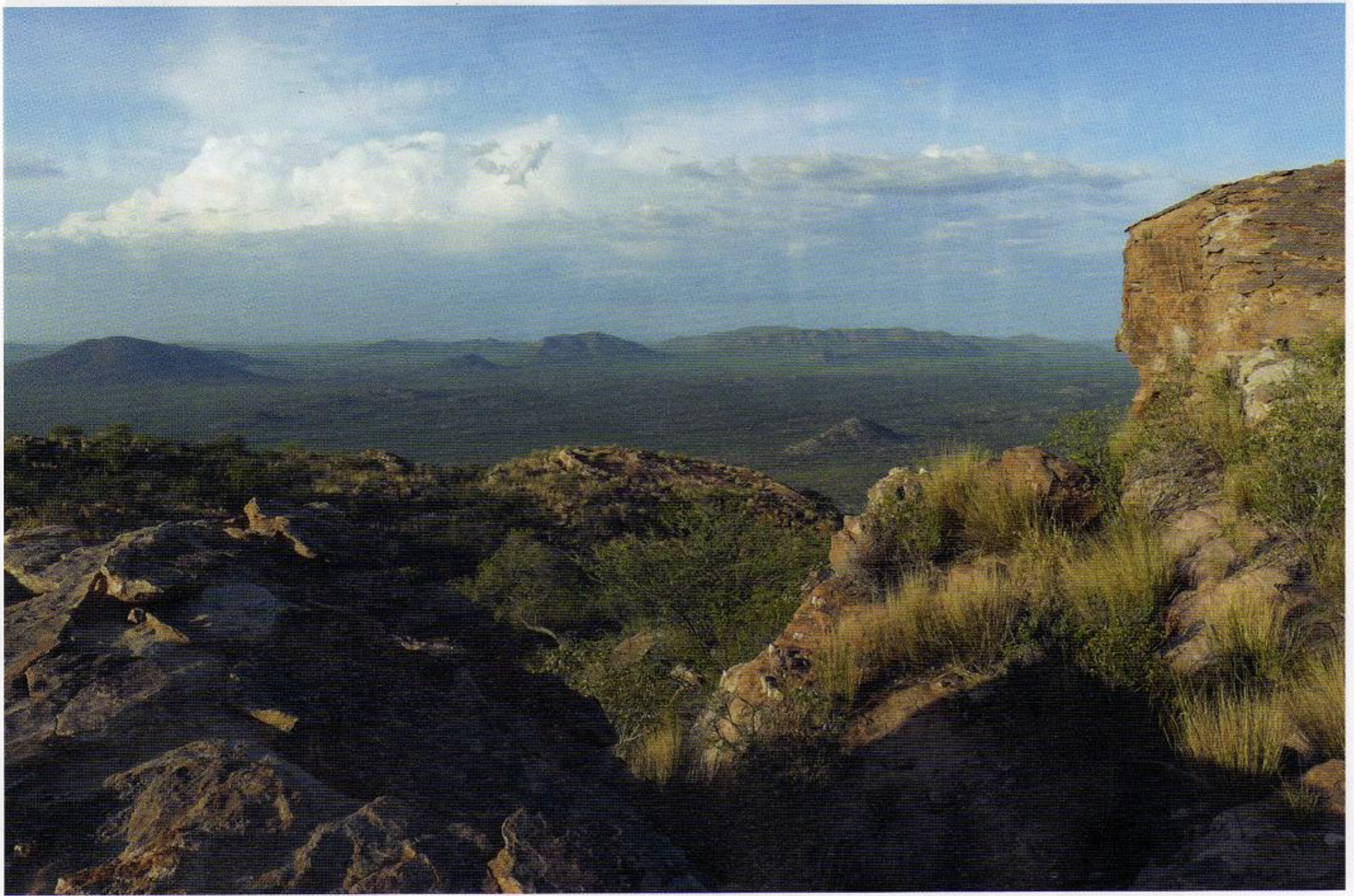
approximately 15 animals, now and then also in very large groups of up to 60 or 70 specimens, and are led by the largest and strongest baboon, the alpha male. Even the leopard, the only real predatory enemy of these primates, will seldom dare to get too close to such a hord of well-organized baboons that defend themselves and their offspring so vehemently and, most important, as a pack. The social life of baboons in a hord is in general dictated



by strict organization and there are always a number of them posted as a lookout.

A few days later I am perched at my vantage point on a waterhole waiting for warthogs. The swelling heat of the afternoon sun is relentless, and there were already a number of animals milling about at the water when I arrived. Aside from a group of kudu cows with their calves and a herd of zebras, there are three oryx standing in the shade of a tree not far from the waterhole then there was also the continuous coming and going of ring-necked doves, laughing doves, and hornbills that are stilling their thirst this time of day. Even a kori bustard, one of the heaviest birds in the world capable of flight, is strutting about. Warthogs, however, are nowhere to be seen as I watch the lively hustle and bustle from my hiding spot with binoculars.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a movement in a tree about 220 yards from the waterhole. Through my binoculars I



Beautiful Namibian landscape

can clearly recognize a half-grown baboon as he climbs the tree and then nestles in the tree top. The first instinct, namely to shoot, should at best be avoided, for one, the distance is relatively far, and, in addition, this is only a lookout who would immediately warn the entire group should he spot anything suspicious. Not to mention the most unequivocal warning the whole group would get, were he to fall dead from the tree. As difficult as patience may be in a situation like this, waiting for the alpha male and getting the drop on him may also enable the leopard the opportunity to prey on the one or other careless baboon for several weeks, because the group structure, and thereby the unity of the group, would be considerably undermined.

On previous hunts, I had often come across baboons where they would either scramble through the brush thicket ahead of me or secured the area from a lofty position at a safe distance - a shot was inconceivable every time, either because everything was happening too fast or the distance was simply too great. It almost seems to me as if baboons have an innate sense of the distance needed to be out of firing range. The hoarse barking that baboons emit to demonstrate they are aware of me long before I can see them - a fierce rumbling that echoes through the hills

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also remains unforgettable in my memory. Baboons are smart - and they have patience, a lot of patience. During the time I was in Africa, I witnessed, on several occasions, that the lookout would sit up to two hours at his observation point in the tree watching the waterhole and the surrounding terrain, before he gave his okay and the entire hord would finally proceed to the water.

My patience is also tested to the utmost today as I observe the same unchanging scene for over 90 minutes: The half-grown baboon sitting relaxed between two tree limbs in his tree about 220 yards away from me, now and then scratching his belly.

Then suddenly, as if through some hidden signal, he climbs down from his ob-

servation post, and not a minute later, the whole group appears on the scene. There are approximately 30 animals in the troop, the young, the half-grown, and the adult baboons in part with offspring clutching their belly or being carried on their back. Several adult males can also be seen, then out of nowhere, yet easily recognizable, the alpha male appears: Far exceeding the body size of the other apes he is almost as big as a warthog, with a superior gait, he slowly approaches the waterhole in the middle of his hord. Now and again, several animals come to a halt and spy in all directions, while the offspring are running around carefree playing catch me if you can. I prepare myself to shoot - slowly and very carefully, after all there are a multitude of eyes out there in front of me scanning the terrain.

The hord is drawn to the water, but I can't get a free drop on the alpha male. There is always some other baboon in the way, either in front or directly behind him, making a clean kill impossible. The baboons are moving right through the Zebra herd and then it happens - a Zebra sees some kind of motion, startles and bolts off in a gallop, drawing all other animals along with him and within a few seconds the entire area in front of me is vacant. *Damn!*

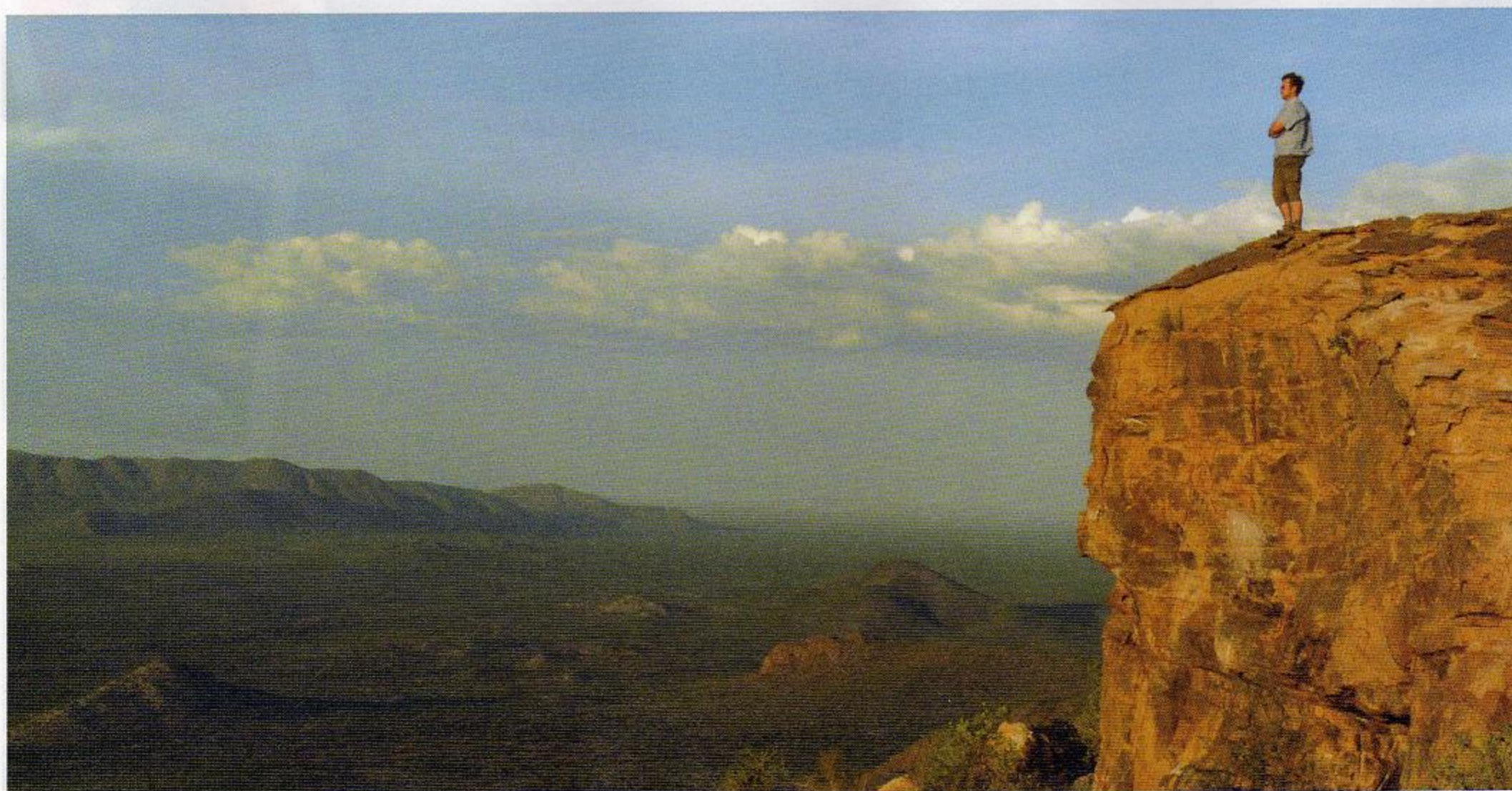
Yet, to my delight, I notice that the baboons have only retreated to the first trees of the clearing and now the whole procedure starts all over again: The lookout climbs the tree, looks around, yawns, scratches his belly. To my surprise, however, this time it only takes a few minutes before the entire group again starts moving towards the waterhole. I follow the alpha male in my scope and as the group has almost reached the waterhole he is for a moment suddenly in clear and broad view – I have him in my sights and shoot.

Through the recoil I see the ape hit by the bullet and drop dead to the ground. He is engulfed in dust from the fleeing animals scrambling to safety and it takes several minutes for the dust to settle until I can spot him again. Other than that, the area in front of me is desolate, the silence is almost spooky, even the doves and go-away birds are silent.

I leave my vantage point, collect a few stones on my way to the presumed kill, which I throw, with my rifle reloaded, from a distance of about 5 to 6 yards in the direction of the shot baboon, who stays put and doesn't move an inch. African game is very resilient and even baboons – especially such a large specimen as this one – are no exception. As I look at the size of this ape with fangs a good 3 inches long, that are absolutely equivalent to those of a leopard, I suddenly get the uneasy feeling that I may have been mistaken and that there might have been more to the story about the disappearance of six-year-old Ruusa than I was ready to admit to as feasible. UHM



Magnus with his Baboon trophy



Enjoying the magnificent view in Namibia