By John Wootters

CAPE FEAR

Following up a wounded Cape buffalo on foot promises self-discovery at every turn. You may not like what you find, but you will never forget the lessons

JOHN BAVIDGE

We spotted the *nyati* early, before the sun had begun to clang like a blacksmith's hammer on the anvil of southern Africa. They were not the first of the safari—you couldn't travel very far in Mozambique in the early '70s without seeing thousands of Cape buffalo—but those had been mere background for the intoxicating realization that we were, at long last, in Africa. It was the first safari for both my companion, Jack Carter, and me. We'd flipped a coin, agreeing to alternate shooting opportunities as they came, regardless of species...except for two.

My priority for the safari was a big spotted cat, while Jack had dreamed for years of taking a great Cape buffalo. So we agreed that the first genuine trophy bull we came across would be his and the first leopard mine, regardless of whose turn it was to shoot.

The other nyati had been a thrill to see after our years of soaking up African safari lore, but they hadn't been close enough to seem quite real...not close enough to hear their flies or smell their barnyard pungency.

But the animals we now prepared to stalk were solid muscle and horn, no longer pictures in a magazine or remote dust-

I now made a curious discovery: Suddenly, I was not at all angry at buffalo. I had no desire to molest these animals, or even to attract their attention. At that moment, the words of my friend and mentor Peter Barrett (then outdoors editor of *True* magazine and a veteran of some 12 or 13 safaris) came to mind.

"You are about to find out," Pete had said as I told him of my upcoming safari, "that everything you've ever heard or read about Cape buffalo—and didn't believe a word of—is true!"

All the blood-curdling yarns I'd absorbed since boyhood came flooding back. Tales of Theodore Roosevelt, Pondoro Taylor, John Hunter, Robert Ruark, Jack O'Connor and all the rest. Tales that made Cape buffalo out to be practically immortal in the face of gunfire—monstrous black bundles of bestial malignancy, cunning beyond belief and implacable in pursuit of vengeance. Never before in my life had I felt, with a loaded rifle in my hands, anything akin to actual fear in the presence of a wild animal, but the closeness of these nyati made the hair stir on the nape of my neck. The whispered announcement that the herd contained nothing shootable

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blurred images in a binocular, but real live Cape buffalo—and bulls, at that. Our Safrique professional hunter, Mario, had spotted their backs above the grass and counted about 15 or 18 total—all bulls. Such bachelor bands are good prospects for heavy-headed old trophies, but the tall grass prevented evaluation from a distance. So we dismounted and went in close...afoot, every man carrying his heavy rifle.

It was Jack's show, so I took the tailgunner's slot. Even at the rear of the column the realization that we were stalking one of Africa's legendary "Big Five" produced an unmistakable high! The whiff of danger made the nine-pound Browning .375 Magnum handle like a willow switch. But it felt good and solid and reassuring in my hands.

We started out walking briskly, then slowed and bent over, then duck-walked and finally crawled on all fours. All at once, it struck me that the cow-lot odor in my nostrils was not from livestock and that I was actually hearing buffalo talk—grunts and bovine mutterings and moos. They sounded (and smelled) close, very close.

Mario cautiously parted the grass and there they were—scruffy, mud-caked, tick-ridden Cape buffalo—at about 30 paces. They looked as big as Sherman tanks and just as invulnerable.

and that we would now quietly retire came as a distinct relief. Fact was, I was not quite ready for Cape buffalo.

I would, however, very shortly be gotten ready, as it turned out.

When we spotted the bull, even African greenhorns like Jack and me knew at a glance that this was Jack's lifetime dream on the hoof. The beast stood and glared at us from less than 100 yards with that patented Cape buffalo arrogance, head up and nostrils covering us like the muzzles of a .577 Nitro Express. Here was a classic "cover buffalo"—the kind editors feature on hunting-adventure magazines. Horns nearly four feet wide swept from a massive corrugated boss down, out and back up, giving from the front the impression of a closed circle on each side, ending with wicked, backward hooks. He was breathtaking. There was nothing of the startled deer in this bull's demeanor; every line of his body shouted, "If you want a fight, let's get to it...but do not dare to affront me casually; there will be consequences!"

As I gawked, Jack proceeded to affront the bull quite seriously with a 325-grain .375 Bitterroot bonded bullet. The consequences commenced at once!

The first bullet knocked the bull flat and we all began to relax. Relaxation, however, proved premature. The bull got

up, wobbly, and Jack shot again...and again...and yet again. Jack (who later founded the Trophy Bonded Bullet company) was an experienced hunter and fine game shot, and he was not shooting this buffalo around the edges. He emptied the .375, stuffed the magazine full again, and went grimly back to work as the bull turned and wheeled away. Not every bullet was perfectly placed, but enough of them were that no mortal animal should still have been breathing. But Jack emptied the rifle again, found the buffalo still on his feet and swapped the scoped .375 for his open-sighted .458 Magnum.

By now we were running through the brush, trying to keep the wounded bull in view. I kept a step behind and to one side of Jack, not wanting to shoot except in a crisis but eager to back my partner up. The whole scene got pretty confused, and the party scattered. Jack and I were with one of the trackers. Mario and the other tracker were somewhere else, and we were too busy to wonder where. Suddenly our tracker shied and whirled, grabbed Jack's arm and pointed off to our left.

There, not far away, stood the wounded bull. He had executed the classic wounded-buffalo trap—buttonhooking



downwind on his own tracks, setting up his overeager pursuers for a deadly short-range flanking charge. The tracker's wariness spared us that brutal surprise, but now the bull lumbered headlong into his attack.

Jack coolly turned to face him and slammed a 510-grain .458 solid into the buffalo's throat. That terrible blow shook the buff and knocked him off-stride but did not down him. The bull faltered, then gathered himself to resume the charge. It took Jack about as long to pull the rifle down out of recoil and rack the bolt as it took the bull to get us back in his crosshairs and come again. The second .458 went in somewhere on the shoulder and did serious skeletal damage, but you wouldn't have known it. The bull merely shook it off and lurched forward again.

The bull was in my sights all the while, but I never fired. In the excitement, I vaguely realized that the professional hunter was out of position and that mine was the only backup gun, but Jack seemed not to need help. If I had known then what I know now about Cape buffalo, I'd have been pouring lead into that bull as fast as I could shoot.

The whole sequence took on an almost surreal quality as I watched every sensational word ever written about Cape buffalo come true before my eyes. It was a macabre, slow-motion ballet of death, with the hunter firing and firing in a measured cadence, each bullet staving off the charge just long enough for Jack to reload one more time. Every successive slug rocked the bull back on his haunches and each time he took a little longer to gather himself. But his eyes never left us.

The light in those great fierce eyes was a promise to kill each and every man, even if he had to crawl on broken legs to reach us. But at last, no longer able to survive on sheer hatred, the bull slowly sagged and rolled over.

At this point, we later tallied, he had taken seven .375 softpoints and six .458 solid bullets totaling more than 5,000 grains and over 50,000 foot-pounds of kinetic energy. Even then, Mario—there beside us now—commanded Jack to step around behind the still-breathing bull and put in the coup de grace. Only then did we hear the storied death bellow—drawn-out, guttural and mournful.

It had been a war, straightforward kill-or-be-killed stuff there in the heat and dust of ancient Africa. Jack and I stood beside his awesome trophy in the gathering dusk and smoked and smiled...and found nothing at all to say. There was no high-fiving and jiving, no celebrating at all. The incomprehensible courage of this animal left us silent.

We had won the war, but neither of us would ever be exactly the same man again. No thoughtful person who tackles a Cape buffalo bull in true fair chase—on foot and on the bull's terms—ever is. If you hunt this animal honestly, you cannot fail to learn something about yourself. Perhaps you will find satisfaction in what you learn, perhaps not. But you will forget neither the lesson nor the teacher.

So it was that, when I tackled my own first nyati a week later, I was ready—a seasoned buffalo warrior, hardly recognizable to myself as the same person who'd earlier been nervous about a little herd of bulls that didn't even know we were there. My bull—gut-shot a few days earlier by a native's muzzleloader, as it turned out—didn't exactly come out with his hands up. He tried to fight, but I never gave him the chance to get up steam. He offered nothing like the drama of Jack's battle, but he died hard and made me understand that there's no such thing as a routine Cape buffalo.

Another remark Peter Barrett had made before our safari: "You'll also meet up with the only critter on earth that can make anyone but a fool think twice before he pulls the trigger the first time!"

Pete was right about that, too. ▲▲▲